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VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

A Child-Resilience Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism



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Executive summary

The current discourse on violent extremism focuses largely on young adults, thereby overlooking key drivers, influences and causal pathways that are specific to children. These include children's biological tendency towards risk taking and heightened vulnerability to polarized message content. It is also clear that when children become associated with violent extremist groups, this can reflect an age-specific psychological response to their surroundings or circumstances. For example, where children grow up being exposed to chronic marginalization, violence or social injustice, joining an extremist group can represent an act of agency, or a means to feel connected, assert power or exact revenge.

When these insights are applied to programing, a key message is the importance of children not entering adolescence with underdeveloped social bonds or socio-behavioural deficits. This is because regardless of why a child joins a violent group, once engaged, this pathway is rapid, unidirectional, often hidden, and highly resilient to interruption.

Against these challenges, strategies geared towards resilience-building in children offer strong potential. Resilience approaches can be distinguished from traditional PVE work insofar as they do not understand violent extremism as the 'enemy to defeat'; instead, they focus on giving children the skills, opportunities and tools to build a constructive, compelling and fulfilling social existence. This paper outlines four broad pillars that should underpin a child resilience strategy: building potentiality and competency; developing social interest; strengthening the social contract; and eliminating violence against children.

This paper then lists a range of interventions that can support resilience-building in children. A first body of entry points focuses on promoting social cohesion, peaceful conflict resolution and value development, including within homes, through high quality education and as part of extracurricular programs. There is particularly strong evidence supporting the reform of learning curricula to include deduction and critical thinking skills, as well as self-reflection, empathy and egalitarian values. Alongside this, children need opportunities to see themselves as connected and contributing members of society, whether through volunteerism, community service, or political activism. For many children, this will need to go beyond 'something to do', to offer modalities for them to feel a sense of control, effect change or channel their grievances in a peaceful manner.

A second body of entry points concerns good governance — in particular efforts to strength the rule of law, eliminate corruption and promote political accountability. In such efforts, building resilience and eliminating violence against children need to be seen as complementary goals in the fight against extremism. Strategies need to target violence perpetrated in homes, schools, institutions and workplaces, but also violence embedded in educational curricula, social norms, cultural mores and State security practices.

Finally, it is imperative that donor States lead by example. They must be encouraged to develop strategies for repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration that reflect juvenile justice principles, and introduce policies that protect diversity and empower people in all socio-economic brackets. Donor States also have a critical role to play in countering thought polarization and the negative externalities of modern information transfer. A key means of achieving this is by protecting 'institutions of reason' — bipartisan media, investigative journalism, think tanks and universities; empowering the arts sector to produce compelling and intellectually provocative books, films and television series; and creating opportunities that promote a free-flow of ideas and fact-based debate.

Part 1.

Reexamining the Drivers of Extremism

Starting in the early 2000s there has been renewed academic interest in violent extremism, largely focused on identifying the personal, contextual and situational drivers behind the phenomenon. Scholars came to settle on the idea of ‘push’ factors — including poverty, lack of opportunity, injustice and political exclusion, and ‘pull’ factors — such as indoctrination, forced recruitment and inducement. Following ISIS’s military defeat, the discussion moved on to more immediate concerns such as repatriation, prosecution and reintegration. While this has meant less attention focused on the factors that motivate people to join extremist groups, the research that has been undertaken has benefited from better access to persons involved with or affected by extremism, including detainees, persons who have left the organization, and the families of extremists.¹ This has allowed more nuanced linkages to be examined, and the rise of more sophisticated and instructive theories. In particular, there has been a move away from traditional explanations in lieu of a more ‘messy’ process that emphasizes intangible phenomena such as marginalization, hopelessness and experiences of violence interacting in dynamic and unpredictable ways. Four insights are particularly noteworthy.

First, there is increasing evidence linking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to future extremist tendencies. Research by UNDP, for example, highlights the role of micro-level experiences during early life, including lack of exposure to other religions and ethnicities, physical and psychological punishment, lack of parental involvement, poor access to education and low civic engagement. Their findings place particular emphasis on a person’s relationship with his or her parents, and how this influences the socialization process and formation of identity. When individuals are later exposed to challenging life circumstances, such experiences are refracted to influence a world view where extremism may present as an attractive or logical option.²

A second takeaway is the broad acceptance of the role that weak governance plays in stoking extremism, both in individuals and conceptually. For many voluntary recruits, it is clear that their grievances first manifested in feelings of frustration and powerlessness brought on by experiences of marginalization, inequality and social injustice. Joining an extremist organization was then an act of agency, a means of experiencing empowerment or a strategy to achieve

1 See for example ‘Journey into Violent Extremism in Africa’ UNDP (2017).

2 *Ibid* p.36.

emancipation. This fits with the evidence that poverty and joblessness poorly correlate with extremism; it is only when such circumstances are perceived as orchestrated by authorities or part of a wider zero-sum game, that they become causative.

Third, there has been a full transition in how experts view State-led counter-terrorism responses, from vehicles of necessary front line protection, to key drivers of extremist behaviour. Indeed, States have largely approached extremism as a security problem to be managed, replete with heavy-handed tactics and encroachments on previously enjoyed freedoms. An alternate way of looking at this is that governments have, in effect, been waging a battle of relative power — pitting State prowess against those groups perceived to be high risk. This has clear and worrisome implications; to the extent that extremism is an act of dissent, further acts of State oppression are likely to exacerbate tensions rather than assuage them. Indeed, UNDP's research suggests that events such as arbitrary arrests often act as 'trigger points' for a range of individuals.³ Such an explanation not only has logical appeal, but may explain why, among large populations of equally disenfranchised youth, only a few join extremist groups.

A fourth point is the growing consensus around what does not drive violent extremism. Early scholarship drew a clear line of causation between religious ideology and extremist goals. Today this relationship is viewed as more complicated and variable, with religion acting as a proxy or pathway enabler in a majority of cases. This is because the drivers of extremism are often opaque: they are situational, broad-reaching and have loosely identifiable targets. Religious narrative bundles these externalities into a clear operational mandate, locus of attack and an obtainable objective. The Internet is also not as potent of a driver as once imagined. Undoubtedly, it plays a role for certain individuals at certain stages, but extremist engagement is principally relational and now better understood as a form of group behaviour.

These insights have profound, and somewhat unwelcome, implications for programming. The absence of discreet drivers suggests that targeted or quick-impact interventions are unlikely to be impactful. For example, if religion and the Internet are not wholesale drivers, they cannot be wholesale responses, casting doubt onto the efficacy of efforts such as counter-messaging and alternate narratives. Identifying entry points that might be more effective is equally problematic. Violent extremism being understood as a dynamic process, driven by multiple, often intangible factors is hardly instructive. Moreover, renegotiating the role of the security sector in authoritarian States, or creating meaningful opportunity for burgeoning youth populations, strike many as unrealistic aims.

Key messages

- The discourse on drivers of extremism focuses principally on youth, and thus fails to capture some of the nuances that apply to children.
- Violent extremism is best understood as a dynamic process, where intangible phenomena such as marginalization, hopelessness and experiences of violence interact in reinforcing and unpredictable ways.
- There is increasing evidence linking adverse childhood experiences, weak governance and heavy-handed security policies to subsequent extremism.
- The role of religious ideology and internet indoctrination are now regarded as less potent drivers of extremism. In most cases, these forces or tools act as pathway enablers.

³ *Ibid.*

Part 2.

A Child-Specific Approach to Understanding Extremist Engagement

The discourse on what drives individuals towards violent extremism has focused on youth — ISIS’s principal demographic. One result is that such analysis fails to capture some of the nuances that apply to children. Indeed, when children become affiliated with extremist groups, it is not always because they are pushed or pulled. They may be forced; sometimes they follow their family or existing group; and in some cases, their engagement reflects a child-specific response to their surroundings or circumstances. The child psychology scholarship explores these latter scenarios, albeit mainly from the perspective of gang membership, juvenile criminality and competitive risk taking.⁴ One way to respond to the gaps in the extremism scholarship is thus to examine how these insights might extend and add value to current understandings of how and why children become affiliated with violent extremist groups.

2.1 Extremist engagement as a form of risk-taking

It is well established that children, particularly adolescents, are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours vis-à-vis adults. Early theories posited that this was due to a poor understanding of risk, vulnerability to peer pressure, and perceptions of invulnerability. Advances in how scholars understand brain maturation and developmental neuroscience have increasingly cast doubt on such theories, and attention has shifted towards the psycho-social factors that influence self-regulation. Today, the accepted explanation is that adolescents engage in risk taking because their increased appetite for novelty and sensation-seeking precedes the growth of their self-regulatory competence and cognitive control systems. More simply, making sound decisions on risky behaviour depends on a series of brain capacities, such as impulse control and resistance to peer pressure, that adolescents simply have not developed.⁵

4 A Tymula et al, “Adolescents’ risk-taking behaviour is driven by tolerance to ambiguity”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 109, No. 2 (2012).

5 According to this view, the temporal gap between puberty, which impels adolescents toward thrill seeking, and the slow maturation of the cognitive-control system, which regulates these impulses, makes adolescence a time of heightened vulnerability for risky behaviour; S B. Johnson, R W. Blum and J N. Giedd, “Adolescent maturity and the brain: the promise and pitfalls of neuroscience research in adolescent health policy”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 45, No. 3 (2009).

Risking-taking behaviour in adolescents: Criminalization or protection?

Adolescence is a critical, transitional period, during which time numerous neurological, physical and cognitive changes take place. Emotional and mental abilities are strengthened, identity is formed and limits are tested. Critically, norms will be challenged, rejected, transformed or solidified, and adolescents will become temporarily more open to social influence. The evidence from research into the effectiveness of status offences (where acts such as truancy or disobedience are criminalized for children but not for adults) is that preventing or punishing such acts creates more harm than good. Such regimes have little or no impact on discouraging 'boundary-pushing' behaviour and, perhaps more importantly, children penalized under such laws have higher rates of arrest, criminality and delinquency in the future.

The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty (2019)

Another phenomenon, which may operate in parallel, relates to the socio-structural components of decision-making. Society greatly extols risk takers — from early explorers, to extreme sporting personalities, military special forces and front-line humanitarian workers. It is likely that this is taken into account — perhaps even subconsciously — when children take decisions that involve risk. As noted by scholars Furby and Beyth-Marom, during a period where experimentation is age-appropriate behaviour, expecting young people not to associate risk with social return and engage in imitation is akin to 'telling Christopher Columbus to stay home'.⁶

If extremism is, even only in some cases, a form of adolescent risk-taking, then the evidence on risk contagion is a critical point for discussion. This phenomenon was first identified in research around youth suicide. A harrowing example is the spate of male teen suicides that took place in Micronesia between 1960-1980. These acts — which usually followed minor humiliations, arguments or chastisements — became a form of teenage ritual so embedded in local culture, that it expanded to increasingly younger boys. Gladwell's description of this cycle — "a contagious epidemic of self-destruction, engaged by youth in the spirit of experimentation, imitation and rebellion"⁷ — evokes clear comparisons with extremist engagement. There is also evidence that emotional or cognitive vulnerability may play a role in suicide contagion. Sociologist David Phillips explains that when a person is unhappy, depressed or susceptible to influence, reading or hearing about another individual's suicide can give 'permission' to engage in equal deviance.⁸

This has important takeaways for programming. First, to the extent that children engage with extremism as an age-appropriate form of experimentation, disconnected from self-regulation capacity, teaching them to 'just say no' or better appraise risk may have limited impact.⁹ Preferred methods of dealing with adolescent risk-taking around drugs or alcohol, however, have limited carryover. Such responses include making behaviours less harmful, or accepting that experimentation is how children learn to self-limit and distinguish between the relative satisfaction yielded by destructive versus productive behaviors. The key difference is that joining a violent extremist group is very hard to come back from, and cannot be made safer. Moreover, if joining an extremist group — like suicide — contains a contagion element, this is clearly behaviour that needs to be avoided or re-routed.¹⁰

6 L Furby and R Beyth-Marom "Risk taking in adolescence: A decision-making perspective" *Development Review* Vol 12 issue 1, 1992 1-44.

7 M Gladwell *Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference* 219-220.

8 *Ibid.*

9 L Steinburg "Risk Taking in Adolescence" *New Perspectives From Brain and Behavioural Science*, Temple University.

10 *Ibid.*; L Furby and R Beyth-Marom "Risk taking in adolescence: A decision-making perspective" *Development Review* Vol 12 issue 1, 1992 1-44.

“ *Right before he left for Syria, Youssef’s thinking became completely binary. He shut out all discussion. There was no nuance, and no convincing him that he might see things a different way.* ”

Mother describing her son Youssef who, at age 17, left Jordan to join ISIS

2.2 Thought Polarization

Today’s generation of children may be particularly vulnerable to extremism because of a confluence of two developments: thought polarization and communications innovation. Scholars such as Steven Pinker argue that we are living in a unique and specific moment, characterized by pessimism, lack of trust, and — most significantly — attitudinal polarity.¹¹ This is observable in political systems of all denominations. In authoritarian models, increasingly extreme ‘policy creep’ has long been explained as a response to geopolitical divisions and/or cracks in the social contract. Similar trends, however, are now being seen in democratic systems insofar as both conservative and progressive parties are moving to the extreme edges of their traditional objectives and values.¹² Polarization in politics feeds, and is fed by, parallel schisms in the media. Today, news, current affairs and popular entertainment increasingly cater to one side of the socio-political spectrum.¹³ But it is in the opinions and values of individuals — those who participate in elections and demand certain media content though their purchasing power — that social divisions are most observable. These fissures are so acute that they have led to significant policy interventions, for example, the European Union’s Euro11.3b Social Cohesion Fund, national social cohesion strategies, and Ministers of Social Cohesion in countries as diverse as France and Guyana. While the drivers of these trends is beyond the scope of this paper, the takeaway is highly relevant: today’s children live in a world where governance, media content, entertainment, popular opinion, and debate are not only highly polarized, but inter-linked in such a way that they create a robust and reinforcing cycle of influence.

At the same time, how individuals receive, process and internalize information has dramatically changed. Market oversupply of information means that Ipads, TV, Internet and social media all compete for our attention in short, high impact and sensationalized sound bites.¹⁴ Communication is also one-way, insofar as it does not invite or facilitate discussion or debate. This is a social phenomenon as much as it is technological. Young people largely communicate through a discreet series of statements that, on their own, do not require follow-up or engagement. They ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ but do not seek to explain, defend or justify their positions.

There are several results. One is that individuals’ attention spans and receptivity to complex or multi-layered messages have contracted, and their capacity to critically examine, unpack, relate and draw informed conclusions has decreased. Finding a fix, however, is difficult. Information today is presented in a ‘ready to use’ and ‘easy to apply’ format that removes the need for interrogation or intellectualization. Again, this is a demand-driven and self-reinforcing cycle. Messaging that is too long or too complex is quickly passed over and thus deemed market-redundant.

11 S Pinker Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and Progress (2018) 29.

12 Experts are divided on whether this is being driven by attitudinal shifts in voters, or is evidence of the democratic system’s susceptibility to elite influence and co-option by special interests.

13 F Zakaria The Future of Freedom: Illiberal democracy at home and abroad (2003) 231.

14 S Pinker Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and Progress (2018) 371; A Gore, The Assault on Reason (2007) 6-17, 250.

Some experts posit that this combination of highly polarized message content, coupled with children's weak capacity to reason through it using critical analysis may explain how groups like ISIS have so easily managed to attract such diverse recruits.¹⁵ The implications for programming are two-fold. If critical thinking is a bottleneck, then counter-messaging, advocacy and sensitization may not be effective entry points. At the same time, building critical thinking skills, healthy scepticism for media content and civic debate in a population group that doesn't see a need for it, will be difficult. An even larger challenge is how to counter attitudinal polarization, especially given how entrenched this has become in political systems, media and entertainment. In the absence of collective State and media commitment, more creative solutions will need to be found.

2.3 Extremist engagement as group behaviour

Another way of looking at child engagement in extremism is as a form of group behaviour. Indeed, the vast majority of children who left for Iraq or Syria did so with their families, in peer groups, or as part of an existing violent group that had shifted allegiance. To understand such movements, the criticality of group belonging in human psychology must be underscored. In every culture, and at every stage of development, humans have arranged themselves in groups, and used expulsion from the group as the strongest sanction for asocial behavior. Groups may also be a necessary precursor for some types of deviant and criminal behaviour. Child and adolescent crime, for example, is almost always perpetrated in packs and, depending on the gravity of the act, can only take place in a context of peer group pressure.¹⁶

Sub-group culture provides equally sound insights into extremism. In any society, a population will divide into a dominant group — generally defined by privilege, power and adherence to broadly-accepted social norms — and sub-groups, arranged by class, religion, wealth, ethnicity etc. Sub-groups are self-selecting insofar as they attract a certain typology of individuals, and their norms are reinforcing through their socialization practices.¹⁷ The most consistent characteristic of a

Abdul's story: The power of group identity and protection

Abdul was raised in London in a Pakistani family, that was not particularly religious but extolled cultural expectations. During his final year of high school, Abdul was increasingly targeted by a gang who would bully and physically intimidate boys of South Asian heritage. A rival group, Al-Muhajoun – seemed particularly sympathetic to the plight of these boys. Not having older brothers or cousins to protect him, Abdul was drawn to the protection and sense of community offered by this group. He started to visit their mosque, where he was exposed to violent ideology and encouraged to act on the grievances he attached to his life in London. Once at university Abdul joined Hizb ut-Tahrir – the 'parent organization' of Al-Muhajoun. He also began attending Finsbury Park Mosque and made plans to leave for Syria. Ultimately, Abdul came to question the logic of jihadism and rejected extremism. In retrospect, he links his choices to being in the midst of an identity crisis, and being swayed by messaging that he was Muslim and not British. He also credits the critical thinking skills he acquired studying law at university, which allowed him to evaluate the content of the messages levelled by Hizb ut-Tahrir, their compatibility with Islamic scholarship, and the virtues of extremist action.

Case study taken from R Manning's 'In and Out of Extremism', King's College London

15 A Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (2007) 12-14.

16 M Gardener and Steinburg "Peer Influence on Risk Taking, Risk Preference, and Risky Decision-Making in Adolescence and Adult: An Experimental Study" *Developmental Psychology* (2005)

17 M Bendixen, IM Endresen and D Olweus "Joining and Leaving Gangs: Selection and Facilitation Effects on Self-Reported Antisocial Behaviour in Early Adolescence" *European Journal of Criminology* (2006).

sub-group is that its members come together around a shared set of social norms, often connected to their world-view. They may be bound by religion, feel discriminated against, or adhere to a particular political ideology. As highlighted by Ginges *et al.*, in this way, the sub-groups that engage in extremist violence are fairly similar to other sub-groups; the thing that aligns them just happens to be jihadist ideology.

The relationship between sub-group culture and extremism is instructive in three ways. First, sub-groups are identity-driven. They tend to accept whichever narrative or logic confirms the legitimacy or superiority of their group. Moreover, when confronted with evidence that contradicts their beliefs, they react by becoming even more committed (terms referred to in psychology as 'identity protective cognition', 'motivated reasoning' and 'cognitive dissidence reduction').¹⁸

Second, within a sub-group, certain types of deviant behaviour become normalized. In criminal gangs, for example, theft or vandalism is an understandable and logical form of aggression that requires no explanation or deconstruction unless it threatens group cohesion. It follows that joining an extremist organization may also be regarded as rational form of dissent or self-expression, consistent with the rest of the subculture.

Third, sub-group culture explains how a relatively peaceful group may turn violent or its members undertake acts that are not wholly reflective of their ideology. Drawing again on research by Ginges *et al.*, the norms that align a sub-group can lay dormant, and only become apparent, operative or acted upon when they are questioned, threatened or attacked. When this happens, the need for group cohesion allows individual members to take more extreme positions, a phenomenon called 'extremity shift'. The result is that individuals with varying degrees of ideological commitment can be influenced by a small group subset or individual with a strong moral imperative, to commit violent acts that most would not commit singularly.¹⁹

When applied to discussions on children who engage with violent extremist groups, important programming insights can be identified. Again, the efficacy of certain, broadly favoured interventions is called into question. If extremist behaviour is consistent with the norms and practices of a sub-culture, alternate narratives are likely to be cast aside and sensitization efforts fail to resonate. In such cases it may be more impactful to offer alternate forms of expression that do not involve joining a group, or that group turning to violence to express itself. Another takeaway is that sub-group dynamics are largely hidden, rapid to transition and difficult to penetrate. This reiterates the importance of prevention, as well as governance efforts to ensure that sub-groups do not feel targeted, marginalized or threatened.

2.4 Extremist engagement as a form of juvenile delinquency

The scholarship on developmental psychology holds that juvenile delinquency — including violence, criminality and gang membership — results from an interaction of risk and protective influences across multiple domains, including the individual, family, peer group, school and community.²⁰ The antecedents of delinquency, however, usually come into play during early childhood. A common trajectory is when dysfunction within the family unit, mixes with individual child characteristics and community-level risks, to weaken social bonds, which then influence the behaviours that are taken into the school environment. Here, a child is more likely to perform poorly and encounter rejection by prosocial peers, thus driving asocial peer associations and consolidating delinquent beliefs. These linkages are interactional and strongly

18 S Pinker Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and Progress (2018) 371, 379.

19 J Ginges, S Atran, S Sachdeva and D Medin "Psychology out of the Laboratory: The Challenge of Violent Extremism" (2011) American Psychologist 66(6).

20 JD Hawkins, RF Catalano, and JY Miller 'Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: implications for substance abuse prevention' (1992).

reinforcing; prosocial choices become less available and efforts to reduce risk or extricate youths less effective. With few alternate pathways, violence, criminality and gang involvement may present as the most viable options for meeting an adolescent's immediate needs such as protection, social acceptance, belonging and purpose.

These insights underscore that efforts to address child engagement in violent extremism need to focus on early childhood experiences and the role played by families and parental engagement. This is particularly because the social bonds laid down in childhood are 'sticky'; where bonds are weak, children tend to form asocial relationships and internalize antisocial values — influences that are self-reinforcing and difficult to interrupt. By contrast, positive family dynamics and parental functionality are highly protective against the risk of future deviance, and can even cancel out the risks posed by community disadvantage²¹ and individual socio-behavioural deficits.²²

A final takeaway is the disproportionate influence of violence, and particularly violent victimization, as a predictor of deviance in young people. Violence also tends to correlate with other negative influences; disadvantaged neighbourhoods and dysfunctional families tend to produce violence, as do asocial peer groups. The takeaway for extremism prevention is that responses need to be multi-dimensional and long-term. The most success in rerouting juvenile deviance seems to accrue where a comprehensive continuum of programs target the community, home and school levels, with tools for prevention, intervention and suppression operating in concert.²³

The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. They might include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. ACEs also include aspects of the child's environment that undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding, such as growing up in a household with: substance misuse, mental health problems, instability due to parental separation or household members being in prison. ACEs can cause extended or prolonged stress, which can impact brain development and affect attention, decision-making and learning. Such children may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships. They may also have unstable work histories as adults and struggle with finances, jobs, and depression.

See further <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/aces/fastfact.html>

2.5 Extremist engagement as a response to socio-behavioural deficit

Alderian theory — which combines aspects of child development theory and individual psychology — presents perhaps the most compelling model for understanding a child's participation in an extremist group. This scholarship holds that in order to develop into functional adults, children need four capacities: capability to participate competently in life, a feeling of connectedness to one's community, self-belief, and confidence that life challenges can be overcome. When one of these capacities is missing, children engage in dysfunctional behaviour. Particularly relevant to extremism debates is that

21 E.g. concentrated disadvantage poverty, feeling unsafe, crime-ridden.

22 E.g. impulsivity, aggression, inattention. It should be noted that as children grow older and enter adolescence, family influence fades and the risk of being negatively influenced by peer groups, neighbourhood factors and violence increases. Once in adolescence, pathways become increasingly unidirectional and difficult to interrupt. This is because — like in asocial sub-cultures — deviant peer groups naturally repel prosocial alternatives and engage in norm-reinforcing behaviours which make it difficult to leave.

23 JC. Howell and A Egle, "Moving Risk Factors into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership" *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* (2005) 3: 334.

when children feel incompetent or incapable they seek ways to assert power over others; when children feel unimportant or that their actions do not matter, they seek targeted revenge.

This provides a new lens through which to view children who have been exposed to chronic marginalization, disempowerment and discrimination. In short, it suggests that joining a violent extremist group can be a response to experienced deficits —an act of agency to demonstrate power or exacting revenge against governments, authorities and others.

This ‘normalization’ of violent extremism has far-reaching implications for how the phenomenon is understood and responded to. Principally, it may be that joining an extremist group now sits among the various options when young people react to competency and self-belief deficits, alongside more traditional forms of deviance like petty crime, violence, abusing drugs, or joining a gang. In evaluating such options, extremism may be particularly attractive insofar as these groups provide a direct and effective means of feeling connected, asserting power and/or exacting revenge. To the extent that other pathways will not fill the deficits children lack quite as neatly, they will be highly vulnerable to the ideology levelled by groups such as ISIS.

Children’s exposure to violence may offer an additional explanation for why joining a violent extremist group trumps others as the more easy and logical option. During early childhood, individuals draw cues from their environment about how the world operates, and what it takes to survive and thrive in it. When this environment is violent, the conclusions formed may include that power resides in aggressors, or that individuals are powerless to the forces of conflict. These world views may make it easier to endorse extremism as a potential pathway. This is consistent with research that among the subgroups feeding violent extremism, violence in homes, schools and communities is very high.

Applying an Alderian lens also puts a cautionary spin on the tools selected to fight extremism to date.²⁴ If joining a group is an act of agency to assert power over others (to feel competent) or exact revenge (to feel relevant), then eliminating the group is unlikely to be the answer. Programs that interrupt opportunities to engage, dissuade membership, or counter-instruct may even exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and — to the extent this is interpreted as the State telling young people how to think and behave — a belief that they are being manipulated and controlled.

Reciprocally, the scholarship provides clues on how to avoid socio-behavioral deficits, or route children down alternate, non-violent pathways. These include strategies that seek to grow children’s ‘potentiality’ (positive self-belief) and ‘social interest’ (societal connectedness and kinship). The logic is that with these assets, children have no need to — for example

An epidemic in children’s mental health disorders

Every year, at least 1 billion children – half of the world’s children – experience violence. Exposure to violence is often traumatic, and can evoke toxic responses to stress that cause both immediate and long-term physiological and psychological damage. The consequences include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety, sleep and eating disorders, and suicide. Yet, few children with mental health problems receive the correct support at the right time. Young people access mental health services less frequently than any other age group because of stigma, failures to detect their needs and poor awareness of such services.

‘Violence Harms the Mental Health of Children’, Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children, 2020

24 ‘Frontlines: Young people at the forefront of preventing and responding to violent extremism’ UNDP (2019).

assert power or take revenge — and the attractiveness of joining a violent group naturally dissipates. It follows that PVE work needs to include more effective ways to combat violence against children, promote positive early life experiences, invest children with the skills needed for adult life, and provide opportunities to redirect their frustrations and use their agency in socially-minded ways.

A main takeaway from the above discussion is that the current discourse — which has understandably focused on young adults — overlooks key drivers, influences and causal pathways that are specific to explaining how children become involved in violent extremism. A further point is that viewing this behaviour as new and distinctive has been unhelpful insofar as this has prevented parallels with other child-specific phenomena from being identified. Fields of scholarship that ‘normalize’ extremist group engagement — for example by presenting it as children exercising age-appropriate decision-making or reacting in predictable ways in the face of socio-behavioural deficits — have important programming implications. These include widening the entry points available and furnishing practitioners with experiential lessons built up by child psychology and juvenile justice practitioners over decades.

In applying these insights, a key message is the importance of children not entering adolescence with asocial norms, underdeveloped social bonds and socio-behavioural deficits. This is because regardless of why a child joins a violent group — whether it is age-appropriate risk-taking, a rational choice within sub-group culture, a validated form of deviant behaviour, or a societal rebuke — once engaged, this pathway is rapid, unidirectional, often hidden, and highly resilient to interruption. Parental influence during early childhood appears to be particularly critical. Family dysfunction strongly predicts future deviance, whereas strong and positive parental role modelling can play a protective role, cancelling out other drivers such as a poverty-affected neighbourhood, social injustice or State-waged violence. This reiterates the importance of programs that emphasize family cohesion, including by promoting educational attainment, skills in conflict resolution, and by preventing early marriage, child maltreatment, abuse and neglect.

This is by no means a complete solution, however. Adolescent risk-taking, violent sub-cultures and relative disadvantage are features of every society. At the same time, the process of joining an extremist group is steered by forces and events that are difficult to predict or influence. Against these challenges, strategies geared towards resilience-building in children offer strong potential. Such approaches aim to reinforce strengths and grow positive assets rather than fix deficits or remove risk. When applied to the current discussion, a resilience approach does not see violent extremism as the focus of attention or an enemy to defeat; instead, the answer lies in giving children the skills, opportunities and tools to build a constructive, compelling and fulfilling social existence. Four broad entry points for developing such an approach are discussed in the following section.

Key messages for understanding extremist engagement involving children	Takeaways for programming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The brain capacities that regulate sound decision-making – including impulse control, delay of gratification and resistance to peer pressure – do not develop until mid-adulthood, making children highly susceptible to risk-taking behaviour. In some cases, this may include joining an extremist group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adverse childhood experiences, particularly dysfunction within the family unit and community-level violence, prevent children from forming social bonds and mastering asocial behaviours. Such norms are reinforcing, and from adolescence, pathways become increasingly hidden, rapid to transition and difficult to interrupt. This underscores the importance of prevention as well as efforts to ensure that minorities and disadvantaged youth do not feel targeted, marginalized or threatened.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children’s capacity to critically examine and draw informed conclusions from information supplied has decreased. This, combined with highly polarized message content, may explain how groups like ISIS have so easily managed to attract swathes of diverse recruits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To the extent that engaging in extremism is a rebuke, a form of sub-group behaviour, or linked to children’s inclination towards risk-taking, programs focused on counter-narratives, resisting peer pressure, or risk appraisal may not yield the desired results. Where extremist group membership is an act of agency, programs that aim to divert, dissuade or counter-instruct may even exacerbate feelings of marginalization and powerlessness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The child psychology scholarship holds when children have socio-developmental deficits, such as feelings of marginalization or social injustice, they respond in predictable ways to fill these gaps. For some, joining an extremist group may be an act of agency to feel connected, assert power or exact revenge. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where children are exposed to violence, in the home, school or community, their vulnerability to extremism is heightened. This is because the cues children have drawn from their environment about how society operates contribute to a world view where it psychologically easier to endorse extremist group ideology. 	

Part 3.

A Resilience Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism in Children

3.1 Building the skills needed to navigate life and its challenges

The child psychology scholarship underscores that while humans are born with innate socio-emotional and relational capacities, these need to be nurtured in order to become fully operative. Ideally, the vehicle for this is a safe home with parents who positively engage their children, allowing them to lay down prosocial bonds and develop potentiality.²⁵ Experts posit, however, that a minority of children receive the protection and care that is required for prosocial development. For the most part, families operate pursuant to gender-biased disciplinary models, replete with negative incentives, violence and poor conflict management.

One response has been enlisting educators to fill these gaps by acting as positive adult role models and helping students to acquire the skills required to build and maintain relationships, overcome challenges and resolve conflict. UNESCO, for example, has led significant research and advocacy geared towards expanding educational objectives to include critical thinking, conflict diagnostics, tolerance and capacity for self-reflection.²⁶ Although there are deficits in comparative and longitudinal data, their findings suggest that engaging learners in critical reflection on topical issues can increase open-mindedness about gender and ethnicity, and modify the way students respond to conflict. Pedagogical techniques such as peer-to-peer, team-based and experiential learning show equally promising outcomes, as do 'de-biasing' courses and computer games, debating (especially when students are made to take counter-intuitive positions), and programs aimed to reduce mal-attribution.²⁷ Engaging children in sport is an interesting variation on this methodology insofar as it offers a recreational (non-academic) opportunity for children to build transferable skills such as confidence, self-control and teamwork, as well as allowing opportunities to engage in stress release and connect to adult role models.

25 See further Madrid Guidelines: A practical tool for Member States to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (2016) UNSC Counter-terrorism Committee, Guiding principle 3.

26 *Ibid* Guiding principle 4.

27 Such mal-attribution is referred to technically as the 'illusion of explanatory depth'; S Pinker Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and Progress (2018) 378-80, 339.

3.2 Building social interest

There is near consensus within the child psychology community of practice that potentiality and competency — while important — are not ends in themselves. These skills must be complemented by a growth in ‘social interest’, or in layman’s terms, meaningful civic engagement that enables an individual to see themselves as a connected and contributing member of society. This is consistent with the evidence that when psycho-social intervention programs vest children with positive ideation and coping skills, but leave them in an unchanged situation, recidivism rates are high.

Providing children with opportunities for meaningful engagement has particular appeal for States battling high levels of unemployment. This is because, while many people exercise social interest through their vocation, it can equally be achieved through volunteerism, community service, or political activism. Building opportunities for social interest is also appealing insofar as extremism is understood as an act of agency. If correct, it follows that the key to effectiveness will be to offer opportunities that deliver on children’s needs and desires, more easily and effectively, than joining an extremist group. Interventions to date may not have achieved this. Programs such as sport and extracurricular activities, for example, may be ideal for building skills, but to the extent that they give children only ‘something to do’, they are not effective mechanisms in diversion. The same conclusion might befit many PVE programs aimed at engaging youth in peacebuilding, governance or strategy co-creation. An examination of these interventions shows that they are heavily skewed towards counter-messaging, advocacy and sensitization. At best, this may not ‘cut the mustard’ insofar as children are looking for a way to assert power, effect change or channel their grievances. At worst, participants may view them as further examples of the State trying to limit their autonomy or control their thinking.

The lesson is that to compete with what extremist groups are offering, children need to be meaningfully engaged, not just be distracted. Fortunately, modern society is ripe with opportunities for young people to problem solve and create. Innovation and disruptive technology, as well as global challenges such as climate change and social cohesion, are all domains where children have advantages over adults. Moreover, the world is now so connected, and the global economy so integrated, that they need little more than a computer, connectivity and ambition to create impact. In terms of how best to facilitate this, the answer may be for programming agencies to step back rather than forward. The most sustainable and responsive solutions are likely to come from young people themselves, provided that they have the tools and the

Engaging Children and Youth in Bolstering Resilience

The Tunisian organization, Youth Against Terrorism aims to reduce the influence of violence, extremist radicalization and terrorism. It has built active partnerships with the Government, using a flexible advocacy approach as well as backchannel discussion with ministries and political parties. With a view to promoting transparent engagement, the organization has staged demonstrations and awareness campaigns. A key achievement has been the revision of curricula manuals to expand their focus on the peaceful tenets of Islam and critical thinking.

In 2017, Swiss organization Terre des Hommes established its first FabLab – an innovative open space for vulnerable and difficult-to-reach youth where they can create their own projects using a variety of advanced technological and production tools. The concept was created at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2001, as part of the global ‘Do It Yourself’ movement. FabLabs work as a non-formal education tool, allowing young people to acquire practical digital skills. While the workplace is open, workshops are regularly offered, allowing young people to enhance their creativity and implement their own designs. Terre des Hommes now operates FabLabs as part of its programmes in Greece, Burkina Faso, Ukraine and Gaza.

space. This is not to suggest that there is no room for development actors, simply that their efforts may be best directed at providing tools and infrastructure, and removing engagement barriers and constraints at the State level.

3.3 Promoting good governance

A third area for developing resilience dividends is through good governance. Like prosocial bonds in children, the social contract that binds the State and citizens needs nurturing to properly develop. The opportunities are plentiful; between infancy and adulthood, a child may interface with the State via the public health system, when they are issued a driver's license or identification, when they cross a border, or when they encounter law enforcement. Where these interactions are positive, or even neutral, children receive a message that they are in a bi-functional relationship with mutual obligations. Authorities can also facilitate such interactions; public service 'open days', where police, ambulance services and fire brigades open their facilities and staff to the public, are positive experiments at building trust and mutual regard.

Demonstrations of political good governance are even more impactful; seeing people participate in elections, political parties lobby freely and representatives be held to account, signals to children that when they reach adulthood they can assert their power through their vote. For countries with a burgeoning youth population, this is a large wielding of latent power and thus potentially highly placating.

A final way that good governance builds resilience in children is in the quality of life that the State provides. The most obvious way it does this is through health, education and security services (see SDGs 3, 4, 11 and 16). The evidence, however, is that these public goods are considered obligatory; delivery results in satisfaction while denial causes unrest, but they are not enough to engender content. Instead, quality of life in diverse and unequal societies is highly influenced by access to and the quality of collective public goods. Europe has made interesting investments in this regard. Examples include high quality parks, playgrounds, camping sites and hiking trails, free book exchanges, and heavily discounted or free access to entertainment such as swimming pools, open-air cinemas, paddle boats and ice skating. One day per year, Switzerland makes all public transport — including high speed trains and lake boats — free, allowing socially disadvantaged groups to enjoy an experience usually reserved for the wealthy. These are empowering experiences, not because they create pockets of recreational opportunity for the marginalized, but because they are opportunities for all groups to pursue leisure on an equal playing field.

3.4 Eliminating the barriers to resilience

Alongside a building of resilience, the structures, institutions and practices that weaken resilience in children must be eliminated, or at least tempered. While programming has generally focused on promoting democratic reforms and stamping out corruption, the most potent vehicle for countering resilience is violence. Violence against children is global phenomenon, but most rampant in the developing world. It takes place in myriad forms, including in families, schools, workplaces and at the hand of State security and law enforcement. Where cultural norms tolerate violence, domestic abuse and corporal punishment may not be viewed as offences. Even where the legal framework offers protection, violence against children is largely hidden; power imbalances between perpetrators and victims, coupled with the fact that acts often take place within homes, means that violations are underreported.

Violence against children is also structural. This is most evident in educational curricula (which may contain violent depictions or glorify violent historical events), and learning methods that reinforce divisions around identity. Violence is equally engrained in social culture; in those depicted as heroes and the content of entertainment. These norms morph into

practice, for example in what is deemed a reasonable use of force, and how workplace harassment is tolerated. However, it is State-levelled violent victimization, such as denials of due process rights, human rights violations and abuses of power, that require the most urgent reform. As previously discussed, such abuses often act as a tipping point for disaffected youths. Such insights are a clarion call to rethink the security sector's role in responding to violent extremism, for strengthening the rule of law, and rebuilding of the relationship between young people and the State organs mandated to protect them.

Key messages in building resilience in children	Entry points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To transition successfully into adulthood, children must acquire the skills needed to build and maintain relationships, overcome challenges and resolve conflict. The ideal vehicle for this is positive parental engagement, however other adult role models such as teachers or counsellors can facilitate such learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding educational objectives to include critical thinking, conflict diagnostics, tolerance and capacity for self-reflection. Examples include debate, experiential role modelling, de-biasing games and team-based learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alongside potentiality and competency, children need to develop 'social interest', or be able to see themselves as a connected and contributing member of society. Meaningful civic engagement can take the form of employment, volunteerism, community service, or political activism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging children in sport and extracurricular activities geared towards building transferable skills around confidence, self-control and teamwork.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectively preventing extremism requires that the State offer opportunities that deliver on children's needs and desires, more easily and effectively, than joining an extremist group. For those who join as an act of agency, programs need to go beyond providing children with 'something to do', and instead offer modalities for them to feel a sense of control, effect change or channel their grievances. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widening access to film, literature and popular media that promote critical reflection, egalitarian values and fundamental freedoms.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of life in diverse and unequal societies is highly influenced by access to, and the quality of collective public goods, such as playgrounds, cultural events, libraries etc. Investment in such goods can do much to counter feelings of marginalization and discrimination, as well as promote unity and cohesion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting opportunities around volunteerism, civic service, political engagement and peaceful forms of dissent or protest.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building resilience in children and eliminating violence against children must be seen as complementary goals in the fight against extremism. Violence can take place within homes, schools, institutions and workplaces; it can also be structural insofar as violence is embedded in curricula, social norms and cultural mores. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions to promote trust and partnership between the State and citizens including by extending the reach and quality of services provision.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embedding responses to violent extremism within a broader effort to strengthen the rule of law, eliminate corruption and build the relationship between young people and the State organs mandated to protect them.

Exploring Europe's Experience with Off-Ramp Programming

Aarhus Model (Denmark)

The Aarhus Model, established in 2007, is an early radicalization prevention and exit program. The exit program "is directed at already radicalized people who have intentions and capabilities of committing politically and/or religiously motivated violent crimes and terrorism." The objective is to work with at-risk individuals to increase their trust in authorities and improve their possibilities for societal inclusion. The program works through two areas of intervention. First, raising awareness among professionals and the public, and through collaborations with mosques, cultural societies and other local community groups. Second, the program works with individuals and their immediate circle of influence, including through risk assessments, mentoring and developing contingency plans for would-be fighters and their families.

See further, "Aarhus model: Prevention of Radicalisation and Discrimination in Aarhus." Migration and Home Affairs – European Commission. February 03, 2017. Accessed October 17, 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7423_en.

Hayat (Germany)

Hayat was founded in 2011 and is based on lessons learned from the work of 'Exit-Germany' with neo-Nazis. Exit-Germany was an initiative assisting individuals who wanted to leave extreme right-wing movements and start a new life. 'Operation Trojan T-shirt' has been credited as being particularly successful. The project distributed hundreds of 'white power' t-shirts at right-wing music festivals that, when washed, altered the logo to 'What your T-shirt can do, so can you - we'll help you break with right-wing extremism'. Today, Hayat uses these and other methods, working through the families and friends of radicalized individuals - specifically young girls and boys - that want to travel to Syria and Iraq. The Hamburg De-Radicalisation Centre is a similar initiative which provides family counselling and exit programs. Importantly it offers tangible assistance in the form of apartment rentals, vocational training, and job placement services to individuals looking to leave extremist circles.

See further, <https://hayat-deutschland.de/english/>

Part 4.

Challenges to Overcome

The previous section presented a framework for building resilience in children structured around four pillars: critical analysis and values development, meaningful social engagement, good governance and violence reduction. While these entry points hold much potential, it is important to underscore that resilience is not a panacea. It cannot divert children away from or out of extremism; it can merely empower them with better tools to overcome life challenges and take advantage of alternate life pathways. Resilience should thus be understood as one of the components needed to build a comprehensive response, along with livelihoods programs, justice processes, security strategies, geopolitical engagement and others.

Operationalizing a resilience approach will also not be easy. While cohesion at the family level is clearly important, interventions such as family counselling, advice hotlines, parental skills-building, and the case management of at-risk

Evaluating cognition-based interventions for impact and cost-effectiveness

There is increasing evidence that cognition-based therapies yield high impact and are cost-effective, including when rolled out in low-resource settings. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF-CBT), for example, is a structured, short-term treatment model designed for children and parents who have been exposed to traumatic life events. Treatment generally consists of 8 to 16 sessions lasting from 60 to 90 minutes, during which children learn coping skills geared towards helping them to manage their emotional responses to traumatic memories. Universal socio-emotional learning (SEL) is a further intervention found to generating savings through better health outcomes and reduced spending on the criminal justice system. SEL interventions promote children's social and emotional functioning, such as improved self-efficacy, and reduce the incidence of risky behaviours, including smoking and teenage pregnancy. SEL interventions can be integrated into curricula, or delivered as standalone programs by peers, teachers or counsellors. The most effective interventions use a whole-of-community approach, with SEL supported by a school ethos and a physical and social environment that promotes good mental health, and the involvement of staff, students, parents and the local community.

'Violence Harms the Mental Health of Children', Office of the SRSO on Violence against Children, 2020

children are all sensitive, incremental interventions that require highly trained professionals. Indeed, the experience of specialist agencies is that donors are often reluctant to fund such work due to its resource intensiveness, unclear outcomes and potential for political backlash. Even where funding is available, professionals with relevant psycho-social intervention experience are rare, both at the international and national levels.

Programming to develop skills around critical analysis, self-reflection, tolerance and conflict resolution is another unfamiliar area for agencies, and one that may be challenged by those who consider it an importation of Western influence. Violence reduction programs may be equally resisted, especially where norms around corporal punishment, discipline and authority are deeply embedded in the social fabric.²⁸

The most significant challenge, however, relates to the area of resilience-building with the strongest potential. Creating opportunities for meaningful social engagement, especially when this implies political participation or civic activism, may be deemed high risk for governments whose security model depends on political exclusion. The same applies to rolling back the power and autonomy of security services, upholding human rights and due process guarantees, and ensuring accountability for abuse of power. Especially in States where the social contract is fragile, any move that is likely to give young people more power and freedom is likely to be resisted. Such concerns must be taken seriously. Advocating for, funding or implementing projects aimed at ends that governments have little interest in pursuing is not a good use of the international community's resources, time and political capital. Moreover, where the risk of spill-overs in security is high, the outcomes need to be cautiously balanced against likely returns. An important task is thus to investigate where a balance might sit. Indeed, for States with volumous, disenfranchised youth populations, moderate concessions in political freedom may be what is needed to avert a more serious demonstration of discontent. What those concessions might be, and how they can be rolled out without violence, should be the subject of extensive and careful research.

Within these challenges also lies opportunity. The idea that effective counter-terrorism on the one hand, and protection of human rights and the rule of law on the other, are complementary and mutually reinforcing goals may prove to be a critical juncture in development programming. For decades, protection agencies have experienced the limitations of relying on human rights frameworks and international good practice to effect change in practices around children's rights. Evidence then, that violence against children, State abuse of power or political exclusion plays a key role in propagating violent extremism, may be what is needed to overcome obstacles around political economy and garner the commitment needed to make tangible progress.²⁹

Key messages

- Resilience is not a panacea; it can effectively empower children but must be complemented by other responses including legislative reform, security policy and livelihoods.
- Specialist agencies need to collect better evidence around the impact of psycho-social intervention programs, and particularly their cost-effectiveness.
- Specialist agencies should invest in professionals with relevant psycho-social intervention skills and experience, both at the international and national levels.
- Evidence linking good governance and reductions in violence against children, to violent extremism, need to be collected and capitalized upon in advocacy and strategy development.

28 Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups UNODC (2017), 31.

29 *Ibid* 19-20.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Children who become affiliated with violent extremist groups are exposed to a full spectrum of violent acts and norms. In many cases this begins well before group membership, by way of domestic abuse, at the hand of educators, or through State-perpetrated rights violations. To enter a group, children might be abducted, forcibly recruited, taken by their families, groomed or financially enticed. In theatre, violence is multidimensional, including psychological indoctrination, sexual abuse, forced labor and/or participation in armed conflict. The risks to children do not end when they dissociate. Arbitrary revocation of citizenship and statelessness, justice processes that abrogate due process rights and community stigmatization, pose threats to many.

Against these evolving risks, governments, international organizations and academic institutions have invested significant resources into better understanding the factors that drive individuals to join extremist groups. It is now broadly accepted that linear or single factor theories such as religious indoctrination, poverty or unemployment do not provide complete or reliable explanations for why such a large and diverse group of young people have turned to organizations such as ISIS. Instead, violent extremism has come to be understood as a dynamic and variable process, driven by multiple, often intangible and interacting factors, some of which may date back to early childhood.

Against this progress made, it is somewhat puzzling that the nuances that relate to child engagement have received less attention. With research concentrated principally on youth, children have mainly been viewed as victims of abduction, forced recruitment or family relocation. Now faced with questions around repatriation and judicial process, States are being forced to reconcile two opposing schools of thought. On the one hand, it is argued that children should be treated as victims of forced recruitment, and priority be given to approaches that uphold their rights as set out in international law. Others contend that — irrespective of how they came to be associated with an extremist group — indoctrination and exposure to violence renders them potential security threats, the containment of which must be prioritized in the interests of public safety.

These narratives largely overlook that some children act independently and with agency when joining a violent extremist group. Unlike in the case of youth and adults, however, children's agency is impacted by age-specific factors around cognitive development, heightened malleability, competence for interpreting complex information, and incompletely formed social bonds. Failing to investigate these nuances has left gaps in our understanding of children's relationships with extremism and how best to prevent it.

In response, this paper presents an alternate framework for examining how and why some children engage with extremist groups. It concurs with the existing scholarship insofar that this is often driven by feelings of marginalization, exclusion and hopelessness, perhaps then 'tipped' by State-perpetrated rights violations or other social injustices. It emphasizes, however, that young adults do not simply 'arrive' at the gates of extremism; these are complex and incremental processes that begin well before adulthood. As highlighted in the child psychology scholarship, when basic socio-cognitive capacities are not developed, children adopt a range of asocial norms and behaviors that self-reinforce over time and crowd out prosocial influences and pathways. When faced with difficult life circumstances, these individuals lack the skills to navigate the situation constructively, and often react by seeking ways to assert power or take revenge.

It follows that, rather than a novel, unusually toxic form of ideologically-driven violence, a more likely explanation is that

when children trapped in toxic environments decide to join an extremist group, they are exercising age-appropriate and predictable socio-behavioral responses. In the past, such children may have turned to criminality, civic deviance, gang membership or drug abuse. Today, however, joining a violent extremist group sits among the options available to them. Groups like ISIS have also made this option easy, by opening its membership doors to anyone, regardless of locality, age, gender, ethnicity or wealth. The world of extremism may also offer a particularly satisfying choice. For children who feel disempowered, unimportant, and have perhaps been unusually exposed to violence — extremist group membership neatly and efficiently fills their unmet needs and desire to contribute to something they perceive as meaningful.

The takeaway is that current approaches to prevention are built on a misunderstanding of why certain individuals engage, with important implications for effectiveness. For children who turn to extremism as a rebuke against a heavy-handed State, or when the choice is logical and consistent within the context of their sub-culture, counter-messaging, alternate narratives, or skills to resist peer pressure may not be enough to dissuade or divert.

A more impactful response might be to build children's resilience, by instilling in them the values and analytical skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and polarized modern world, seek out opportunities for meaningful social engagement, and overcome adversity in non-violent ways. The complement to this is addressing the structures and forces that counter resilience in children. Examples include violence edification in schools and entertainment, violent victimization at the hand of State law enforcement and security apparatus, and social structures that marginalize, discriminate against and deny opportunity to sub-culture populations.

Despite the potential in such approaches, in some cases, they may be met with resistance. Authoritarian States, where the needs for resilience-building are most acute, do not particularly want a generation of children armed with critical thinking and analytical skills, nor do they wish to open up space for greater political expression, engagement or protest. They may be equally reticent to strengthening the rule of law, accountability and human rights entitlements, insofar as this is inimical to the strategies they employ to maintain stability.

Against these challenges, there are a number of recommendations that policy makers should consider. First, where States welcome it, resilience programming should be a principal tool within PVE agendas. Interventions should prioritize social cohesion within homes, critical thinking and value development through high quality education, and opportunities for meaningful social engagement, particularly those geared towards political activism and peaceful protest. Initiatives around sensitization and alternate narratives might take a more evidence-based approach, preferencing conflict analysis that examines the quantitative impacts of war and its success,³⁰ and genuine, sustained dialogues that bring together youth, leaders, professionals and community leaders. To facilitate this, donors and programming agencies will need to become more comfortable with long-term engagement strategies, coordinating multi-stakeholder approaches and interventions that target sensitive areas with loose and difficult-to-quantify outcomes.

Where States are not open to such engagement, less controversial entry points might be used as starting points. Examples include reforming learning curricula to include basic deduction and reasoning skills, engaging children in volunteerism and community service, reducing violence in homes, schools and the media, and governments doing more to provide accessible, quality public goods in diverse communities. Programming agencies should also invest in developing stronger evidence on the linkages between weak governance and violence, instability and extremism; and reciprocally how moderate concessions in political freedom and expression might form part of a broader strategy to overcome the challenges associated with a large, increasingly frustrated, youth population.

30 S Pinker Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and Progress (2018) 405.

How donor States approach these challenges is equally critical. They must align their policies with the evidence, and develop strategies for repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration that reflect juvenile justice principles. The evidence on how best to facilitate reintegration and avoid recidivism should also form part of a public sensitization campaign. It must be remembered that voters are a powerful group, highly invested in positive long-run security outcomes.³¹ This is particularly important because when rolling out programs, tragic incidents like the 2019 London Bridge stabbing attacks will inevitably occur. When they do, it is critical that policy makers do not turn inwards and revert to securitized responses; an educated populous will make resisting such reactions easier. Donor States likewise have to lead on resilience-building, by protecting diversity, empowering sub-cultures, and investing in opportunity and quality of life for people in all socio-economic brackets. Finally, especially given the world's interconnectedness, the West has a particularly critical role to play in pushing back against thought polarization and the negative externalities of modern information transfer. It can do this by protecting 'institutions of reason' — bipartisan media, investigative journalism, think tanks and universities; empowering the arts sector to produce compelling and intellectually provocative books, films and television series; and creating opportunities that promote a free-flow of ideas and fact-based debate.

Summary of Recommendations

- The policy discourse on violent extremism needs to pay greater attention to key drivers, influences and causal pathways that are specific to children. These include their biological tendency towards risk taking, and heightened vulnerability to polarized messaging. Policy-making also needs to take into account that extremism can reflect a child-specific psychological response to chronic marginalization, social injustice and/or violence.
- Regardless of why a child joins a violent group, once engaged, this pathway is rapid, unidirectional, often hidden, and highly resilient to interruption. As such, resilience-building in children should be a key pillar in the fight against violent extremism. Such approaches focus on giving children the skills, opportunities and tools to build a constructive, compelling and fulfilling social existence.
- Programming needs to reflect the importance of children not entering adolescence with asocial norms, underdeveloped social bonds and socio-behavioural deficits. Children need to acquire skills to build and maintain relationships, overcome challenges and resolve conflict, including critical thinking, self-reflection, empathy and egalitarianism.
- Children need opportunities to see themselves as connected and contributing members of society, whether through employment, volunteerism, community service, or political activism. Such programming needs to go beyond providing children with 'something to do', to offer modalities for them to feel a sense of control, effect change or peacefully channel their grievances.
- Promoting good governance is a key means to counter feelings of marginalization, especially in diverse and fragile societies. Strengthening the rule of law, eliminating corruption and promoting political accountability should be prioritized.
- Eliminating violence against children must be seen as a key goal in the fight against extremism. Programs should target violence within homes, schools, institutions and workplaces, as well as violence embedded in curricula, social norms, cultural mores. The most toxic form of violence is that levelled by the State, including due process and human rights violations and abuses of power.
- Programming agencies should invest in developing stronger evidence on the linkages between poor governance and violence, instability and extremism; and reciprocally how moderate concessions in political freedom and expression may form part of a broader PVE strategy.
- Donor States must lead by example, including by developing strategies for repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration that reflect juvenile justice principles; introducing policies that protect social diversity and empower all socio-economic groups; and protecting 'institutions of reason' such as bipartisan media, investigative journalism, think tanks and universities.

31 *Ibid* 380.

Toolbox of Useful Resources

International legal instruments

- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002)
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPACCRC.aspx>
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Key Principles for the Protection, Repatriation, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children with Links to UN Listed Terrorism Groups (2019)
<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/43/a43r173.htm>

UN Information Resources

- Journey into Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment UNDP (2017)
- Frontlines: Young people at the forefront of preventing and responding to violent extremism UNDP (2019)
- Youth-Led Pathways from Extremism, UNESCO (2015)
- Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups UNODC (2018)
- Desk Review on Sport as a Tool for the Prevention of Violent Extremism UNODC (2018)
- A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism UNESCO (2017)
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The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is an independent global advocate in favour of the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children, mobilizing action and political support to achieve progress the world over. The mandate of SRSG is anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments and framed by the UN Study on Violence against Children.

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