BRITISH COUNCIL

BUILDING RESISTANCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A cultural relations approach

Sheelagh Stewart

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FOREWORD

'For every case of religious or ethnic or linguistic difference erupting in communal violence, there are innumerably more cases around the world of people and groups of different cultures and backgrounds living harmoniously side by side; for every group economic grievance that erupts in catastrophic violence there are innumerably more that don't; for every instance of economic greed – for control of resources or the levers of government – generating or fuelling outright conflict, there are innumerably more that don't.'

Gareth Evans[1]

Throughout history, violent extremism has surfaced in different forms in every country and culture. It poses an existential global threat. Terrorist incidents leave distress and fear in their wake. But they also threaten the global economy, rolling back development gains and making trade more expensive. Security-based responses deal with the immediate threats. They restore security and provide space for governments and communities to find durable solutions by addressing the underlying grievances that are fuelling the violence. But to work out these longer-term solutions, we need to first understand what drives people to join violent extremist groups.

The route to extremism is a deeply personal pathway – the main motivation for one person may not even register for someone else. And it cannot be predicted by one factor alone. The evidence for what drives violent extremism is multi-faceted, complex and sometimes contradictory. But there is little doubt that almost any offer – even one where there is a strong possibility of dying young – can look attractive in a world where increasing unemployment and reduced opportunities and services pose a double whammy for many young people.

The international community has recognised the need to take a more holistic approach to countering terrorism. Significant progress has been made in investing in 'soft' interventions that tackle the root causes of discontent, and in developing strategies to prevent violent extremism. The UN's launch of its Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2016 and the EU's Resilience Strategy in 2017 provide strong frameworks to help the transition from crisis containment responses to durable, long-term solutions. Countries from Canada to Jordan and Somalia are creating their own prevention of violent extremism strategies and institutions, to address the underlying grievances and build trust between state authorities and society.

One approach which has real promise in this area is cultural relations. By building young people's ability to survive and thrive in the face of real pressures and hazards, well-targeted and resourced engagement using culture and education can help them ignore calls to violence and strengthen their ability to choose and create positive alternatives for themselves and their communities. As the quotation above illustrates, for every young person that responds to the siren call of violent extremists, many more do

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[1] Evans, G. (2005). Conflict or Co-existence? Keynote address to Forum 2000 Conference, Prague.

not. Since our foundation in 1934 to help fight another form of extremism – fascism - we have seen how cultural and educational exchange can transform the lives of young people, creating opportunity, broadening their horizons, and building long-term relationships based on trust and understanding.

I am pleased to introduce this new paper by our Senior Conflict and Stability Adviser Sheelagh Stewart as a valuable contribution to the debate on the role cultural relations can play in international efforts to prevent violent extremism. As former head of the UK government's Stabilisation Unit, Sheelagh brings extensive expertise and field experience to bear on the subject. Her thinking as outlined in this paper is an important part of our ongoing process to explore and evaluate the best theories of change and evidence that explain the relevance of our programmes in contexts where violent extremism is a particular risk.

Based on a review of British Council programmes, the paper argues that a young person's ability to resist violent extremist narratives can be increased when education that builds skills related to resilience (such as critical thinking, the ability to listen, empathise, and manage ambiguity) is combined with an opportunity to apply the new learning in community projects, social enterprise and other real-life settings. It also shows how cultural relations can rebuild trust between young people and governments by helping them work together to co-create or negotiate solutions to the specific local issues that extremists exploit in their call to violence. The paper concludes that this approach, based on dialogue and mutual exchange, creates immediate opportunities for reducing distrust, mitigating grievances, and provides positive pathways for young people living in areas where violent extremism is a high risk.

We hope that this paper will help further the international debate on the prevention of violent extremism, not only in the Middle East, but other areas of the world where young people feel excluded with little hope of change. The road to defeating violent extremism is a long one, but viewing young people as part of the solution, not the problem, is a critical first step.

Sir Ciarán Devane,
Chief Executive, British Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism and its consequences – mass migration and humanitarian disasters – remain a major and increasing threat to global security.[2] In response, the main focus of the international community has been the building of effective institutions that are seen as the foundation of future peace and stability.[3] In practice, this has meant supporting institutional reforms, which eventually create states that enjoy stability and prosperity. This is an important, but long-term endeavour[4] and, in a number of significant instances, it has been overrun by the rapid mobilisation of violent resistance that has eroded the anticipated stable reform and development.[5] The speed, violence and persistence of such mobilisation means that, while long-term institution building remains critical, we need to pursue interventions that yield faster (while still strategic) impact in the shorter term. This response needs to i) look beneath structures and institutions to individuals targeting groups of young people where the risk of recruitment is high; and ii) disrupt the sophisticated and specific narratives that extremists use to recruit young people as fighters and supporters.

Based on its long track record engaging young people across the world through cultural relations[6] the British Council has developed an approach that draws on its experience of i) building young people's resilience and ii) supporting young peoples' ability to engage positively with social and public institutions. The British Council also works with states and through these twin experiences has developed a model that brings together the vital long-term institution-building objective with the shorter-term focus on building individual and community resistance to narratives which argue that violence is the only route to social change. This twin approach has the potential to deliver immediate results and can be taken to scale. Moreover, by increasing the trust between civil society and the state, it buys time and lays a strong foundation for longer-term structural change and institutional reforms. The approach has been tested successfully in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and is being rolled out in a range

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[2] The Global Risks Report notes 'the emergence of a new status quo [in 2016] with geopolitical risks – such as interstate conflict or terrorist attacks… at the forefront'. In addition to the risk of conflict, the related risks of 'large-scale involuntary migration and profound social instability' have increased, as has the likelihood of 'unemployment and underemployment'. The Global Risks Report 2016, page 1. Available online at: http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2016/part-1-title-tba/

[3] This is a well-rehearsed argument. These institutions both protect openness to democracy and prosperity, which is key, and prevent and punish the infractions that threaten them. The rule of law, for example, regulates the open access states that demonstrate consistent growth and high income over long periods. See North, D, Wallis, J and Weingast, B (2009) *Violence and Social Orders A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (page 4 in particular). Francis Fukuyama, writing in 2010 imagines 'Denmark', an imagined society which is prosperous, democratic, secure and well-governed and demonstrates the ways in which this state is connected to effective institutions, Francis Fukuyama (2010), *The Origins of Political Order*.

[4] The World Bank estimates 25 years or a generation. World Bank (2011) *World Development Report 2011, Conflict, Security and Development,* page 10.

[5] The World Bank notes that '… insecurity … has become a primary development challenge of our time. One and a half billion people live in areas affected by fragility, conflict or large scale organised criminal violence, and no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country … achieved a single United Nations Millennium Development Goal'. World Bank (2011) page 1

[6] A cultural relations approach emphasises transnational people-to-people engagement based on dialogue and mutuality, aimed at building long-term relationships based on trust and understanding. Some see cultural relations as characterised by the 'absence of governmental presence' as opposed to cultural diplomacy (see ivera, T (2015) *Distinguishing cultural relations from cultural diplomacy: the British Council's relationship with Her Majesty's government*. Los Angeles: Figueroa Press page 11).
This distinction is not adopted here as supporting positive state–society relationships is a key element of British Council's approach in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

of contexts in MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The British Council's core cultural relations[7] business – engaging with young people, through language, culture and education, including across the state–society divide – is relevant. However, the exact combination, prioritisation and sequencing of activities within programmed responses needs to be determined by the specific way in which violent extremism manifests in each context.

The British Council strategy is to work simultaneously on i) increasing young people's ability to resist violent extremism through educational inputs with opportunities to apply the learning to real-life challenges; and ii) rebuilding trust between governments and people by focusing on developing co-created or negotiated solutions to the grievances and issues that extremists use to fuel the call to violence. This is done by building the capacity of government and civil society organisations to work together to produce realistic solutions to those grievances. Reducing distrust between governments and people is also important to ensure that such innovative solutions are sustainable. These approaches are developed locally, but can have broader impact and/or be taken to scale through i) concentration in vulnerable areas; ii) use of communications strategies that magnify their impact in the wider populations; and iii) prioritising larger-scale reform activities so that they focus early on vulnerable areas.

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[7] A cultural relations approach is focused on improving the way in which individuals and groups relate across different divides in society. In this context 'culture' is defined as 'the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society'. 'Relations' is defined as 'the way in which two or more people or things are connected'. Cultural relations works to restore connections which are broken or do not function as they should – as happens, for example across religious or ethnic divides and between citizens and the state. It is therefore directly relevant to the distrust which results from different push factors.

BUILDING RESISTANCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM – WHY RESILIENCE?

More resilient individuals cope better, whatever stress they have to manage.[8] There is little doubt that young people at risk of violent extremism are under severe pressure, in particular, because of unemployment (faced by many young people globally)[9] and because of the extremist threat itself in the MENA region. Young people in these communities typically have few economic opportunities and are trapped in a state between childhood and adulthood because of this. This condition has been called 'waithood',[10] where growing up (for example, through marriage and having a family) is suspended through unemployment. In this context, personal resilience is linked to an improved ability to i) take opportunities that do exist; and/or ii) self-start – that is create positive opportunities and pathways. This is not about levels of educational achievement[11] – extremists often target better educated young people – but rather the focus is on driving a combination of critical thinking alongside a set of soft skills that equip a young person to manage better under pressure.

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[8] Flint-Taylor, J., Stewart, S. (2016), Can education protect communities from violent extremism by building personal resilience? Paper presented at Wilton Park Conference Citizenship and Building Resilience to Violent Extremism.

[9] The International Labour Organisation notes a significant decline in youth labour force participation in most regions since 1991. ILO, (2015). Global Employment Trends for Youth. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_412015.pdf.

[10] For a discussion of this 'waithood' phenomenon in Egypt see http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/egypt/egypt-youth-in-perpetual-state-of-waithood-1.1 620733. One of the respondents in a programme we are running in Tunisia referred to himself as a 'stopped project' who had finished being a child but could not progress towards being an adult with a family and a marriage without a job.

[11] It is now clear that poverty alone is not a driver of extremism. In addition, it is also clear that young, well-educated people are often targeted by extremist recruiters. Ghosh, A, Jamal, A, Fair, C, Rassler, D and Shoeb, N (2013) The Fighters of Lashkar-e-Taiba: Recruitment, Training, Deployment and Death. https://www.propublica.org/article/terror-group-recruits-from-pakistans-best-and-brightest.

WHAT IS A RESILIENT INDIVIDUAL?

More resilient individuals typically have strengths across four dimensions (see Figure 1). They are more confident and purposeful. Staying fit and flexible, both physically and mentally means they are more adaptable. They are also better able at building and drawing on strong supportive social networks.[12] In contexts that are vulnerable to conflict and violent extremism, such individuals are the self-starters who use their networks to build positive collective action or new businesses, rather than resorting to violence.

CONFIDENCE

Building realistic, positive beliefs and attitudes about yourself and your ability to influence things for the better.

Positive emotions

Optimism

Positive attitude and beliefs

Self-belief and confidence

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Building a strong network of mutually supportive relationships and learning to seek help when you need it.

Self awareness

Awareness of others

Empathy sociability

PURPOSEFULNESS

Building a clear sense of purpose and values, working out what really matters to you now and for the future.

THE FOUR PERSONAL RESILIENCE RESOURCES

Self control

Conscientiousness

Meaningfulness

Sense of purpose

ADAPTABILITY

Developing your ability to flex your approach and generate new ideas and solutions.

Intelligence and problem solving

Adaptability

Ability to improvise

Figure 1: Building resilience: the four personal resilience resources[13]
© Cooper, Flint-Taylor and Pearn, 2013 (adapted with permission)

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[12] This approach is drawn from an in-depth literature review, which has grouped attributes and characteristics related to resilience into four main, overlapping clusters of personal resilience resources: 'Confidence, Purposefulness, Adaptability and Social Support', (Cooper, C Flint-Taylor, J and Pearn, M, 2013).

[13] Cooper, CL, Flint-Taylor, J and Pearn, M (2013) *Building resilience for success: a resource for managers and organizations.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN RESILIENT INDIVIDUALS AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES?

The diagram in Figure 1 provides an overview of what a person can do to build his or her own individual resilience capacity. It's also important to understand how individual resilience relates to the external context, situational influences, and what others can do to support this capacity building.[14] Consequently, when evaluating improvement, two things matter. The first is whether young people's internal resources (their confidence, purposefulness, adaptability and ability to reach out for help) have strengthened.

The second is whether this personal growth has resulted in the ability to engage more positively with and influence the world around them. The ability to engage in or build collective action responses illustrates the link between resilient individuals and resilient communities. Resilience is developed through constant feedback between individuals and their community. For example, increasing someone's confidence often helps them to be less defensive in difficult situations. This in turn improves their ability to build strong relationships, leading to more positive interactions with their friends, family and wider community, with the overall outcome being the ability to work together for common goals and therefore increased community resilience to a variety of threats and pressures. Resilient individuals utilise the opportunities that exist – and create new ones – which develop social networks and benefit the community at large. They and therefore their communities are i) less likely to conclude that violence is the only option; and ii) when confronted with problems, can draw on a wider skill set to manage them positively.

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[14] Integrating the two perspectives is central to the objectives of Michael Ungar and his colleagues, leading them to take a constructionist view that defines and measures the resilience of individuals using a social ecological approach. Ungar, M (2004) A constructionist discourse on resilience: Multiple contexts, multiple realities among children and youth. *Youth and Society* 35/3: 341-365.
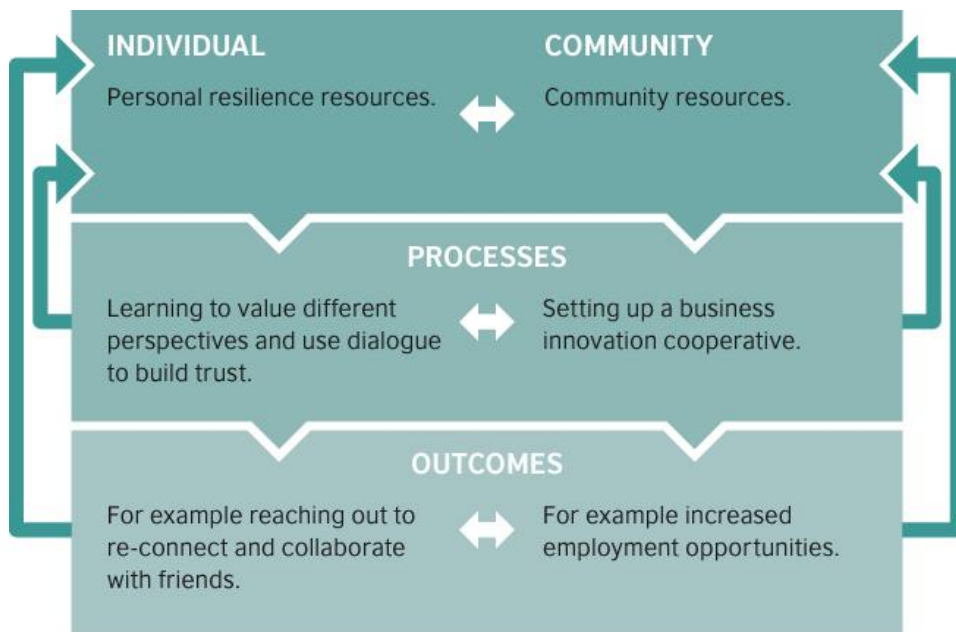
Figure 2: Individual and community resilience – interaction and outcomes[15]
Davda, Flint-Taylor, 2013 (adapted with permission).

CAN RESILIENCE BE DEVELOPED OR INCREASED?

The evidence about individual resilience suggests that individuals can *develop* the skills and attributes associated with individual resilience. This is related less to what is taught than to *the way* in which students are engaged in the education process. British Council education programmes (both formal or informal) alongside support to the education system through wider capacity building and reform programmes have student engagement at their core.[16] For example, this approach characterises the core skills theme that runs through British Council's and DFID's Connecting Classrooms programme.[17] The skills and attributes related to resilience include, for example, the ability to listen, empathise, manage ambiguity, and to understand and negotiate immediate issues within a wider environment. Skills like these can collectively provide the basis for enhanced resilience. They can also provide a basis for resisting extremist narratives, in part because they facilitate critical evaluation, a clear and positive sense of purpose, and the development of mutually supportive connections. In turn this 'in-group belonging and the chance to effect social change can meet the same needs that drive extremist groups appeal'.[18]

YOUNG ARAB VOICES DEBATE CLUBS IN TUNISIA

Young Arab Voices[19] is a grant-funded activity in the Arab World run by the British Council. It is not focused on countering violent extremism, but has resonance because of the critical thinking and engagement skills it enables. The core of the programme is the teaching of debating skills which includes the ability to frame an argument, but also a set of soft skills – for example understanding of the rules of the debating game and the ability to listen, respond and adapt an argument in response to other's views. In Tunisia, over 5,000 students have been trained in debating skills and 720 debate clubs have been formed across the country since the programme's inception in 2012. Its reach includes Sousse the scene of the 2013 and 2015 terror attacks.

The experience of 'S' is illustrative. She eventually became a debate club trainer but started in a high school debate club in tunisia. She said, 'When I first discussed polygamy with this boy at school I could not argue with his points and I was so angry I wanted to hit him. Then I joined debate club. One of the things I had to do was debate in favour of polygamy. I really didn't want to do this, but once I did, I understood all the arguments in favour of polygamy – and understood their weaknesses. The next time I saw that boy I was able to have a calm discussion with him and counter all his points. And I did not get angry or feel violent.'

www.youngarabvoices.org/about-young-arab-voices

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[16] This approach is typically associated with what are variously called 'student-centred', 'learner-centred' or 'child-centred' approaches. These have not been successful in contexts where group learning and teacher centred models are common. However, recent work suggests that it is possible to draw together the effectiveness of teacher-centred approaches with the benefits delivered through student engagement. For a discussion and literature review see Clifford, I and Htut, K (2015) 'A Transformative Pedagogy for Myanmar', paper presented at the 13th International Conference on Education and Development *Learning for Sustainable Futures – Making the Connections*, University of Oxford, September 2015.

[17] British Council, accessed on February 2018. Unlocking a World of Potential
https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/core_skills_brochure_british-council_2016-17_1.pdf
[18] Search for Common Ground, accessed February 2018. Summary: addressing violent extremism - How can we do better?, page 1.: https://www.sfcg.org/tag/publications/

[19] The Young Arab Voices programme was expanded in 2016 and is now operating as 'Young Mediterranean Voices'.

WHY EDUCATION?

Education is a key vehicle for engagement because, very simply, this is the way to reach more vulnerable young people, most efficiently.[20] Moreover, evidence suggests that education can build resilience,[21] which in turn is related to resistance to violent extremism. However, efficacy depends on a consistent emphasis within the educational context on the protective factors related to resilience. These have been variously described as 'connectedness, opportunities for participation and contribution, high self-expectations',[22] 'self-esteem, agency, perspective-taking skills, and empathy',[23] as well as the ability to network and negotiate. These are all life skills known to be closely associated with resilience. The focus on 'protective' factors matters. This is because, although intellectual skills (like problem-solving) and mental states (like confidence) **can** be achieved through achieving qualifications, building resilience is also about *how* students are taught as well as *what* they are taught. In addition, it is likely that this educational approach when linked to application towards real community action or problem solving, can build students' ability to establish social support networks, which provide a sense of belonging and positive identity. This in turn helps to establish social capital and give psycho-social support when confronted with pressure.[24]

Lastly, there is evidence that the wrong sort of education can reduce resistance to violent extremism. In short, where education fails to encourage questioning or allow alternative points of view, debate or critical thinking, this can foster a particular mindset, which is attracted to simple solutions and absence of ambiguity, nuance or debate and that can lead to vulnerability to radicalisation for similar reasons.[25]

All this reinforces the conclusion that education and more particularly the nature of education and pedagogy, is central to strengthening – or undermining – personal resilience.

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[20] Schomerus et al. (2017) note that beneficiaries and participants for preventing violent extremism programmes may be 'difficult to access or engage' Schomerus, M, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, S with Sandhar, J 'Countering violent Extremism GSDRC Topic Guide', March 2017, page 20. Available online at: www.gsdrc.org/topic-guides/countering-violent-extremism/.

[21] Flint-Taylor, J and Stewart, S (2016) 'Can education protect communities from violent extremism by building personal resilience', paper presented at Wilton Park Conference *Citizenship and building resilience to Violent Extremism*, 13–15 December 2016.

[22] Brown, J. Accessed on 27 February, 2018. Resilience from Program to Progress: http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF03340910?no-access=true.

[23] Feddes, AR, Mann, L, and Doosje, B (2015) Increasing self-esteem and empathy to prevent violent radicalization: a longitudinal quantitative evaluation of a resilience training focused on adolescents with a dual identity. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, March 2015.

[24] International Alert in a study of Syrian refugees argue that 'holistic' education 'can also provide young people with positive adult role models and mentors whom they can trust with difficult choices, such as whether to join an extremist group'; Why Young Syrians Choose To Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria. *International Alert*, May 2016. Available online at: www.international-alert.org/publications/why-young-syrians-choose-fight, p.48.

[25] Martin Rose argues that 'the step of embracing violence may be connected to education in certain subjects failing to encourage questioning received ideas or alternative arguments and points of view.' Martin Rose, *Immunising the Mind: Education and Extremism*. Available online at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/insight/immunising-mind-%E2%80%93-education-and-extremism. See also *Search for Common Ground Summary: addressing violent extremism - How can we do better?*, page 1. Available online at: https://www.sfcg.org/tag/publications/

CONNECTING CLASSROOMS: PROTECTIVE FACTORS, RISKS AND HAZARDS

Connecting Classrooms is a global education programme focused on supporting teachers and developing teaching practice. Its ultimate objective is to ensure that students develop the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to manage today's complex world. It is delivered by

the British Council in partnership with the DFID. Here is an example from our Connecting Classrooms material about how a teacher works with students as they process a violent extremist attack:

Let's consider a morning at school following another appalling terrorist incident. Pupils have seen the news; they follow social media; and they can relate some of the words and images they see to communities they know or people they have heard of. They are curious, worried and confused. How should teachers react when it comes up in class? What if pupils draw naïve conclusions or it affects their perceptions about other nationalities or ethnicities? What if the teacher tries to mediate but inadvertently offends someone? What if they are scared of their own prejudices? One way to react is via the safe option. Teachers carefully condemn the attack, reiterate the safety provided by institutions there to protect people, and then move on. After all, the teacher is there to teach a lesson. Children should be advised to follow up with their parents if they must, and will be reprimanded if they bring it up again. It's too risky to do anything else, isn't it? Alternatively, the teacher puts the lesson plan to one side and facilitates a discussion about the incident. The teacher reassures the children that it's natural to be scared and that everyone else is too. When they ask why it happened, the teacher tells the truth: we don't know; or at least, it's very complex. What do they think? Why might people be driven to violent actions? What could have happened in their family and cultural life for such extreme actions to seem logical? And if a pupil pre-judges, it isn't condemned. Instead an alternative way of seeing things is introduced.

This is what could be referred to as a safe space, in which pupils can show and talk about powerful emotions and confusing feelings while they try to make sense of the world. Children are innocent and should be reassured, but their reactions should not be suppressed, rather they should be explored. And in their questioning, political decisions may be deconstructed, self-interest uncovered, and banal law-breaking revealed for what it is. This kind of dialogic approach to practice considers the ways of thinking and being which learners bring to class, and values how they interpret the world. It is open and fair and arguments can be made, discussed, retracted or strengthened under the guidance of a responsible adult.

www.schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/about-programmes/connecting-classrooms

WHAT HAPPENS IN UNREFORMED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS?

However, early discussions about this thinking have elicited questions from agencies implementing education programmes as to whether it is deliverable in the context of education systems that have resisted reform and fail to deliver even basic numeracy and literacy skills. We argue that, with carefully designed education interventions and the right follow-up opportunities, it is possible for learning to become embedded. There are two critical success factors. First, the learning needs to include the kind of personal development that enables empathy, self-esteem, agency, perspective-taking, critical evaluation and problem-solving – 'life skills' known to be closely associated with resilience. Second, there need to be associated activities for embedding these skills in the form of social, political or economic opportunities.

Both of these conditions can be achieved to scale in vulnerable contexts.[26] The evidence to date suggests that specific locations – wards or neighbourhood areas and particular communities – act as 'hubs' for recruitment by violent extremists. This in turn means that it is possible to focus national reform programmes, specific educational inputs and targeted opportunities to allow the chance of embedding learning in these locations. Specifically, this means the sequencing and prioritisation of national reform programmes so that they are rolled out early in areas and communities known to be vulnerable to radicalisation. In such contexts we have demonstrated that it is possible to deliver short-term resilience-building educational inputs based on citizenship, sports or arts platforms. These respond to specific audiences, and operate alongside systemic reforms in a way that builds personal and community resilience and increased trust between citizens and the state. Consequently these short-term responses do not undermine (and may even support) long-term national reform programmes.

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[26] Lang and Al Wari, (2016); The Flow of Foreign Fighters to the Islamic State: Assessing the Challenge and the Response. The Centre for American Progress. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/17132821/ForeignFighters-report.pdf

CONSOLIDATING RESILIENCE – EDUCATION ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

While personal resilience enables individuals and systems to cope with pressure, the *experience* of pressure is central to how resilience develops. Educational inputs alone, no matter how excellent, are insufficient to build resilience. The management of pressure is integral to both the *process* and the *outcomes* of building resilience.[27] Our resilience-building programmes start with educational inputs but seek to provide testing opportunities through which resilience to pressure is consolidated collectively.

Consequently, the second component of programming is the provision of a range of opportunities for groups to work together on small-scale micro-level projects, which take the form of social action or social enterprise. These are initially supported with grant-supported challenge funds. However, sustainability is only achieved if the state is drawn into supporting these opportunities and state actors understand why working with civil society is so important in ensuring that a wider range of opportunities exists for young people. Current responses to the growing concern over young people's lack of opportunities tend to focus on long-term ambitious governance reforms. These are important but often likely to have effect too late – or be in the wrong place – to counter the speed of mobilisation on the part of violent extremists. Nor are they focused on harnessing the capacity of young people and the state to work together. By contrast, the British Council has had success in drawing citizens and the state together to deliver innovation both on the social action and the social enterprise front (see below for discussion).

INTERVENTIONS THAT MEET THE REAL PRESSURES CONFRONTING YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

Providing opportunities also assists with a critical question: 'will this intervention survive the real world the students need to operate in?' No matter how good the educational inputs and the learning; we cannot underestimate the bleakness of the situation of young people in vulnerable contexts. To counter this, young people need opportunities to use and consolidate the skills acquired. And, given the lure of the 'in-group belonging' offered by extremists, skills need to be practised in groups.

A broader view of the problem suggests that young people are not radicalised so much as 'recruited' into organisations that, very simply, provide community and a sense of direction. Any work on preventing violent extremism must therefore seek to operate in the same emotional space by working in vulnerable communities to sustainably increase the range of activities offering young people community and direction.[28]

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[27] Flint-Taylor, J and Davda, A (2017) 'The resilient person and organization', in Cooper, CL and Leiter, M (eds). Routledge Companion to Well-Being at Work. Abingdon, Routledge.

[28] A recent study in Iraq reported: 'The issue is not one of youth radicalisation, as conventional wisdom suggests. Young Iraqis are not radicalised so much as recruited into organisations that provide community and direction, regardless of ideology. The solution lies not in deradicalisation programs, with heavy emphasis on counter-narratives, as if the problem was addiction, requiring detox, but in giving them viable alternatives that can reduce fighting groups' ability to attract them in the first place' International Crisis Group, (2016). Fight or Flight: the desperate plight of Iraq's 'Generation 2000'.

PROVIDING VIABLE ALTERNATIVES THAT REDUCE THE ATTRACTION OF FIGHTING GROUPS

The backdrop against which recruitment by violent extremists operates is usually a combustive combination of i) weak governance[29] and ii) the separate but related pressures of joblessness faced by young people today, globally but especially in the MENA region.[30] Discontent in relation to poor employment prospects is increasing,[31] as is a heightened sense of inter-generational unfairness. However, the immediate attraction of extremist narratives is that they use specific local examples to reflect and focus discontent and to animate calls to violence. Local examples, which appear to have the most resonance, focus on examples of brutality on the part of police and security forces,[32] as well as corruption, particularly when that means opportunities are not fairly distributed. In short, no matter how resilient, young people in areas vulnerable to violent extremism face real external constraints. It is the use of specific local examples emphasising these constraints, rather than grand narratives or complaints about poor national governance, which lends violent extremist narratives their immediate resonance for individuals and their communities. These subtle and carefully targeted narratives, plus the provision of something to do and a sense of purpose, can build tacit or active support for extreme tactics and movements.

In such contexts, long-term reform programmes remain critical because they will eventually improve governance and deliver opportunities, including for young people. However, they are often too temporally or spatially distant to have an effective impact on the immediate problem. In contrast, programme responses can be constructed that work with state and other institutions locally, to rapidly mitigate the most immediate or corrosive grievances, so that they build the trust and provide opportunities for community engagement, which is key to the success of long-term reform programmes.

The British Council's cultural relations approach is built on dialogue and mutuality in fostering transnational trust and understanding and it has proved effective in resetting the relationship between relevant parts of government and civil society. It has used this 'reset' as the basis for building immediate opportunities to i) reduce distrust; ii) mitigate grievances; and iii) provide positive economic and political pathways for young people. The British Council does this by convening safe spaces where 'actors with power' (usually federal or local government or state officials) can meet and work with agents on the 'frontline', who understand why violent extremist narratives are attractive, have ideas about how to tackle

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[29] Royal United Services Institute, (2015). Drivers of Violent Extremism, Hypotheses and Literature Review, London.: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf

[30] International Labour Organisation (2017) *World Employment and Social Outlook Tends 2017*: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_541211.pdf. For a table illustrating youth unemployment see page 17.

[31] The International Labour Organisation's social unrest index, which seeks to proxy the expressed discontent with the socio-economic situation in countries, indicates that average global social unrest increased between 2015 and 2016. In fact, between 2015 and 2016, eight out of 11 regions experienced increases in the measure of social discontent, most notably in the Arab States. See ILO *World Employment and Social Outlook Tends 2017*: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_541211.pdf. p.2

[32] OSCE, (2014). Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism, page 36: www.osce.org/atu/111438?download=true. Search for Common Ground (SfCG) notes that '**…** state responses, when emphasizing hard-force approaches, can abuse human rights … and alienate those who otherwise could be allies to state-led efforts.' SfCG 'Transforming Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilder's Guide': https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Transforming-Violent-Conflict.pdf 2017, page 36. See also *Summary: addressing violent extremism – How can we do better? op. cit.*

the corrosive grievances which underpin them, and who have the community credibility to engage citizens in developing solutions to the problems posed.[33] Once convened, these groups have proved adept at producing locally owned, sustainable and creative responses – both political and economic – to the draw of violent extremism.

RESETTING THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Our experience suggests that the *design* of these processes is critical. First, because distrust between the state and civil society is often part of the problem, the reset of this relationship needs to be brokered by an actor trusted by both parties. The British Council is able to play this role highly effectively because it is a neutral party that has gained trust by virtue of having been a consistently supportive presence in many such fragile contexts for as long as 80 years. The British Council is *neither* civil society *nor* is it government, yet in many contexts it is closely linked with and trusted by both. The British Council is adept in facilitating the neutral spaces within which state-society partnerships can thrive. And, as a cultural relations organisation, it does not dictate solutions but merely enables the conditions under which local actors can search out and broker effective solutions.

It is the *process* of working together to solve a *specific* problem that cements the partnership, builds respect across the state–society divide and results in the embedding of processes and structures that make the approach sustainable. Neither the appointment of a citizen adviser to a government ministry, nor reliance solely on top down consultative structures, can deliver the same impact. By contrast, one of the really important aspects of the cultural relations approach is that the process itself *creates* political will. Enabling officials from government and specialists from civil society to work together in a safe space to create shared solutions, generates a commitment to delivering these new approaches, particularly when preventing violent extremism is a mutually desired side effect. Evidence from our programmes suggests that this is not over-ambitious. Small changes in local regulation or management can make a significant difference to citizens' perceptions and can even impact on their ability to earn a living. Once politicians understand the benefits of positive community relations and local media reporting, they too are more likely to seek positive engagement in the future. While it is clear that these coalitions may change rapidly, because they are based on small changes and because the focus is immediate and short term, they nevertheless can buy sufficient time to effect medium-term institutional change and sometimes longer-term structural change, which together can make a difference in achieving sustainable stability and security.

Moreover, these 'resets' of relations between state and communities also make longer-term reform processes more likely to succeed. When communities see the inclusion of credible voices and the results that follow rapidly from a joint focus on specific problems, their trust in the willingness and ability of government to co-create solutions increases. The result is that violence is no longer seen as the only way forward and there is greater likelihood of individuals and communities to at least wait, and at best to work positively towards supporting reform. The creation of such local reform processes can, in addition, provide opportunities for the practice and embedding of resilience skills.

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[33] For a detailed discussion of this see Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock *Escaping Capability Traps through Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation* (PDIA) June 2012. Available online at:
https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/publications/faculty-working-papers/cid-working-paper-no.-240

THE NIGERIA STABILITY AND RECONCILIATION PROGRAMME

The Nigerian Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) is a DFID funded, British Council-managed programme, which supports federal, state and community actors to address the drivers of conflict and extremism. An early focus was improved management of the threat from Boko Haram. The NSRP supported government of Nigeria research into the drivers of extremism in Northern Nigeria. This demonstrated that elements of the security response to the Boko Haram insurgency increased citizen distrust and had alienated large parts of the public and potentially radicalised others, thereby increasing the scale of support for extremism rather than reducing it.

One problem identified in Kano State (which has been the target of serious attacks from Boko Haram) was the frequency with which community members were harassed and asked for bribes at security checkpoints and the distrust that resulted. In response the programme supported the creation of the Kano State Conflict Management Alliance (SCMA) - the first in Nigeria. The Alliance developed an action plan which prioritised key security issues for the state. Security agencies instituted a complaints line – which both documented and responded to complaints and put notices security providers and citizens that extortion is a crime. This activity led to a reported reduction in people being asked for bribes, increased confidence in the security agencies and decreased the distrust that facilitates violence.

https://www.britishcouncil.org.ng/programmes/society/justice-security-conflict-resolution/nsrp

GOING TO SCALE

Strategies in response to violent extremism need to be focused on individuals and communities at risk. The choice of how activities are sequenced and prioritised needs to be determined by the way in which extremism manifests in different contexts. Building resilience particularly requires face-to-face engagement with relatively small groups of targeted individuals. As such, in a context where violent extremism is a threat the approach does not lend itself to reaching the whole country. It is more likely to be about reaching saturation point through spatial focusing of a set of mutually reinforcing activities in an archipelago of very vulnerable areas. It is in this way that scale is achieved.

The building of individual and community resilience can be enhanced when face-to-face engagement is combined with strategic communications campaigns, which have 'reach' that travels beyond the local level confines of direct engagement with young people. When delivered in concert, together the two approaches can play a critical role in achieving scale. In particular, strategies that communicate positive visions of potential futures for ordinary people, alongside the other interventions, can contribute to increased community resilience. However, neither approach is likely to work if designed without the active involvement – and preferably the leadership – of young people.[34]

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[34] Search for Common Ground notes that 'Strategies aimed a pacifying youth do not recognize their legitimate aspirations for social and political change and personal development. Such strategies can alienate and stigmatise youth, particularly the poorest and minorities by treating them as potential weapons for mass destruction that should be, at best defused, rather than as potential drivers of social change who with support, can channel their aspirations through constructive, non-violent activism. Counter-narrative programmes often seek to contradict claims by extremist groups by presenting alternative facts, authoritative theology, or rational argumentation. This underestimates the degree to which participation in [or support for] violence is spurred by emotional experiences and yearning, not rational calculation. Search for Common Ground *Summary: addressing violent extremism – How can we do better?, op. cit.* [Author's words]

CONCLUSIONS – ESTABLISHING A THEORY OF CHANGE

A core assumption underpinning the British Council's work in fragile and conflict-affected regions is that violent conflict is not inevitable and can be prevented if individuals, communities, civil society and the state can be supported to develop the skills for managing conflict, including the wider pressures that both emanate from and contribute to a state of conflict. These assumptions can be extended to apply to violent extremism when the resilience skills involved include critical thinking, combined with an appreciation and understanding of the perspectives of others, alongside opportunities to embed individual and community resilience. This can be achieved by way of social action and co-creation of solutions to immediate perceived unfairness or grievances, through enhancing state-society relations. Scale can be achieved by targeting areas vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists and by combining the face-to-face development of individual and community resilience with broader communications strategies developed with and by young people and governments.

The analysis and examples above lead to the following broad theory of change that can inform but also be flexed to fit the specific circumstances of different countries and/or areas vulnerable to violent extremism.

THEORY OF CHANGE

IF we develop a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the problem of violent extremism in different contexts…

…THEN we can build individual and community resilience to violent extremism through a combination of educational inputs plus the opportunities which allow individuals and communities to use and embed the skills and attributes related to violent extremism.

IF in those areas we identify **WHICH** grievances about state action and inaction are the most corrosive…

…THEN we can strengthen national reform programmes in relevant areas – (education and possibly justice) to respond to the problem…

… AND we can use the cultural relations approach to bring together appropriate state officials with credible civil society organisations and citizens to work on mitigation of the most corrosive grievances. By demonstrating the state's intention to *ACT* on grievances with locally trusted interlocutors the corrosive effect of local grievances can be immediately reduced.

If we use local and national digital and communications campaigns to communicate i) positive citizen and state initiatives; ii) alternative positive messages about the wider society; and iii) specific campaigns focused on shifts to the most corrosive grievances…

…THEN this will magnify the resilience work, and increase general and local trust in the state's intent…

…THEN overall we will have reduced the attraction of extremist narratives and ideology…

… AND increased trust in the state and the preparedness to wait for longer-term reforms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Last year we reached over 65 million people directly and 731 million people overall including online, broadcasts and publications. Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.

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