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Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism

A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective

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Content

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1 Introduction

This response to Mohammed Abu-Nimer's *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* is focused on the question of what makes prevention of violent extremism approaches effective. It will explore in more detail some of the points raised in the lead article related to an insufficient understanding of structural drivers of violent extremism (VE), the limited evidence base and research in relation to the 'prevention' or 'countering' of violent extremism (P/CVE), unrealistic donor expectations, and weak and externally imposed programme designs. It specifically responds to the encouragement of Abu-Nimer's request to "delve deeper" into analysing structures of violence, not only the symptoms (Abu-Nimer 2018, 17).

This article will explore how to maximise the potential for positive peace impacts of different approaches to preventing violent extremism by applying principles from the peacebuilding field and a systems perspective.

The article does not focus on the debate whether P/CVE initiatives should exist or not. Neither does it engage more deeply with the question of what role interreligious aspects play in this area. Rather, it takes a practical approach, based on the premise that political extremism and rapidly changing forms of violence have been a concern in the peacebuilding field for a long time (Steenkamp 2014)), and that we need to understand the phenomenon of 'violent extremism' alongside other forms of violence. Violent extremism has received renewed attention in recent years, often with a focus on extremist groups operating in the name of Islam, and in this guise often lacks the 'sincere engagement' of religion and its identity components that Abu-Nimer talks about, thereby steering close to the unhelpful 'Islamisation of CVE/PVE' he critically highlights.

The perception that P/CVE is establishing itself as a distinct 'field' makes many peacebuilding organisations uncomfortable as the understanding of what constitutes effective 'P/CVE' engagement remains blurred within and across policy fields. Many fear a securitisation and instrumentalisation of established development, governance or peacebuilding approaches. There is also the question of what is different in P/CVE programming, compared to other established peacebuilding, conflict prevention or development approaches that intend to address structural drivers of violence.

In any case, at least for the foreseeable future, significant levels of policy attention and funding will be focused on P/CVE programming. The peacebuilding community has much to offer to positively influence this debate and practice, from two perspectives: (i) by applying key peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity principles to the P/CVE debate and how policies and programmes are shaped, and (ii) by applying its learnings from effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding engagement to ensure that the modalities in which P/CVE initiatives are designed and implemented actually increase their potential to become transformative interventions in the contexts and communities in which they are applied (see also Search for Common Ground 2017).

The principles and practical lessons of what constitutes effective and relevant peacebuilding (an approach characterised by principles of Do No Harm as well as 'listening' and a local ownership and accountability approach to international assistance (Anderson et al. 2012) are highly relevant for the P/CVE debate. If adopted and taken seriously in policy and implementation, they could significantly influence P/CVE approaches.

At the same time, the peacebuilding community has learnt that examining the effectiveness of individual projects and programmes is not enough if the objective is to strive for broader impacts on conflict systems at the 'Peace Writ Large' level – the broader societal-level peace, beyond results in specific sectors or regions. Achieving systemic impacts requires a significant shift in how engagements are strategically conceived at policy levels, designed, monitored and evaluated, and funded. As has been explored in various contributions by the Berghof Foundation over the years (Körppen et al. 2011, Körppen et al. 2008, Wils/Unger 2006), a systems approach to peacebuilding requires a very different level of commitment and

engagement amongst donors, implementers and local partners to understand how organisations can move beyond measuring project outputs to understanding the broader impacts on the conflict context systems in which they operate – and how they can collaborate with others to achieve collective impacts. This approach seems highly relevant as we grapple with the P/CVE challenge.

2 On Terminology

To clearly lay out one's use of terms is of more than academic importance in the often heated debates about VE. This article uses 'prevention and countering' of violent extremism (abbreviated to 'P/CVE') as a combined framing to describe initiatives that intend to address the structural drivers of violent extremism – as opposed to security-focused counter-terrorism efforts (often aimed at addressing manifestations of extremist violence) or specific 'deradicalisation' efforts focused at the individual level.

The distinctions laid out in the table below are important in this regard:[1]

Prevention or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)	≣ Address the structural drivers of the conflict and of extremist tendencies. ≣ Create resilient communities, by building immunity to recruitment by violent extremists, by catalysing community-based cohesion. ≣ Deter and disrupt recruitment or mobilisation and assist with reintegration of former violent extremists.
Counter-Terrorism (CT)	≣ Deter, disrupt and isolate groups that use terror. ≣ Train and equip state security forces to fight terrorist groups. ≣ Increase the state's capacity to prepare, prevent, protect and respond to terrorism. ≣ Interdict and prosecute through law enforcement.
Deradicalisation Counter-radicalisation	≣ Counter-radicalisation/Deradicalisation is a cognitive transformation of behaviours away from extremist ideological positions and from the aspiration to use violence as a means to achieve specific goals. ≣ Actions by which radicalised individuals and processes are contained and minimised, and radical messages are co-opted and/or refuted.

The response article discusses P/CVE initiatives that focus on drivers of violent extremism, while drawing some conclusions about common counter-terrorism approaches from a systems perspective.

1 See also Alliance for Peacebuilding 2015.

3 How can a Peacebuilding Systems Approach help to increase Effectiveness of P/CVE Initiatives?

This section will explain how a systems approach has the potential to address many of the conceptual and ethical flaws and challenges found in current P/CVE practice, including those pointed out in the lead article.

3.1 Analysis

It is now well understood in the peacebuilding field that conducting thorough conflict analysis is critical to designing peacebuilding engagements that are relevant and address key drivers of conflict in a given setting. At the same time, the understanding and available literature on the drivers of violent extremism have also significantly developed over the years. Recent work from the Royal United Services Institute (Khalil/Zeuthen 2016) offers the following typology for understanding patterns of violent extremist behaviours, all of which vary depending on the specific context:

- **Structural motivators** can include repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination, a history of hostility between identity groups, external state interventions, etc.
- **Individual incentives** can include a sense of purpose (which might be generated through acting in accordance with perceived ideological tenets), adventure, belonging, identity, acceptance, status, material enticements, fear of repercussions by violent extremist entities, expected rewards in afterlife, etc.
- **Enabling factors** can include the presence of radical mentors, access to online radical communities, social networks with extremist associations, access to weapons, a comparative lack of state presence, an absence of family support, etc.

Most conflict analyses focus on structural conflict causes of violence, and many of those might also be drivers of violent extremism, depending on the context. At the same time, there are specific drivers of violent extremism, mainly at the level of individual incentives and specific enabling factors, which most 'regular' conflict analyses can overlook when they focus on socio- economic and political dynamics rather than analysing the behaviour of individuals or social networks**.** *Understanding the relationships and dynamics between structural drivers, individual incentives and enabling factors* is a key requirement for the design of relevant P/CVE interventions.

> "*Nothing can justify violent extremism but we must also acknowledge that it does not arise in a vacuum. Narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored and aspirations are being crushed*." (UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism 2015)

In many contexts, however, the understanding of how structural conflict dynamics interact with individual incentives and enabling factors is limited. In many conflict settings, other dynamics, e.g. around organised crime (as in the North of Mali), play into the already complex mix of conflict and violent extremism – and these relationships and dynamics need to be analysed and understood. An understanding based solely on individual incentives to join extremist groups, without insights into the broader political economies and conflict systems in which those incentives are embedded, will likely lead to poor programming that addresses symptoms rather than structural drivers.

Systems analysis can be particularly useful to understand the relationships between structural motivators, individual incentives and enabling factors, as well as the dynamics between such drivers of violent extremism and broader socio-economic and political conflict drivers in each context. A systems model identifies interactions in multiple directions, and can reveal causal connections amongst all associated factors, whereas traditional approaches to analysis often consider linear cause-effect relationships. This kind of analysis permits a wider understanding of multiple causes, rather than a single 'root' cause, as well as more complex chains of attribution that can take into account multiple efforts by different actors.

Abu-Nimer in his lead article puts forward key P/CVE programmatic challenges, including the (sometimes questionable) real added value of P/CVE initiatives compared to structural factors: "The question to ask is what the added value is of these programmes, considering factors such as collapsing educational institutions, corruption, discriminatory governance and lack of a national vision, lack of policies to ensure the basic collective and individual freedoms, control and censorship of media and territorial occupation systems" (Abu-Nimer 2018, 6/7). In his assessment, current P/CVE initiatives sometimes ignore the "deep-rooted infrastructural factors driving violent extremism" (ibid.). As an example to concur with and illustrate this point further, the following macro-level systems analysis of national-level conflict dynamics in Syria from 2015/2016 shows how dynamics around non-state extremist actors interrelate with other core conflict dynamics in Syria (ARK 2016).

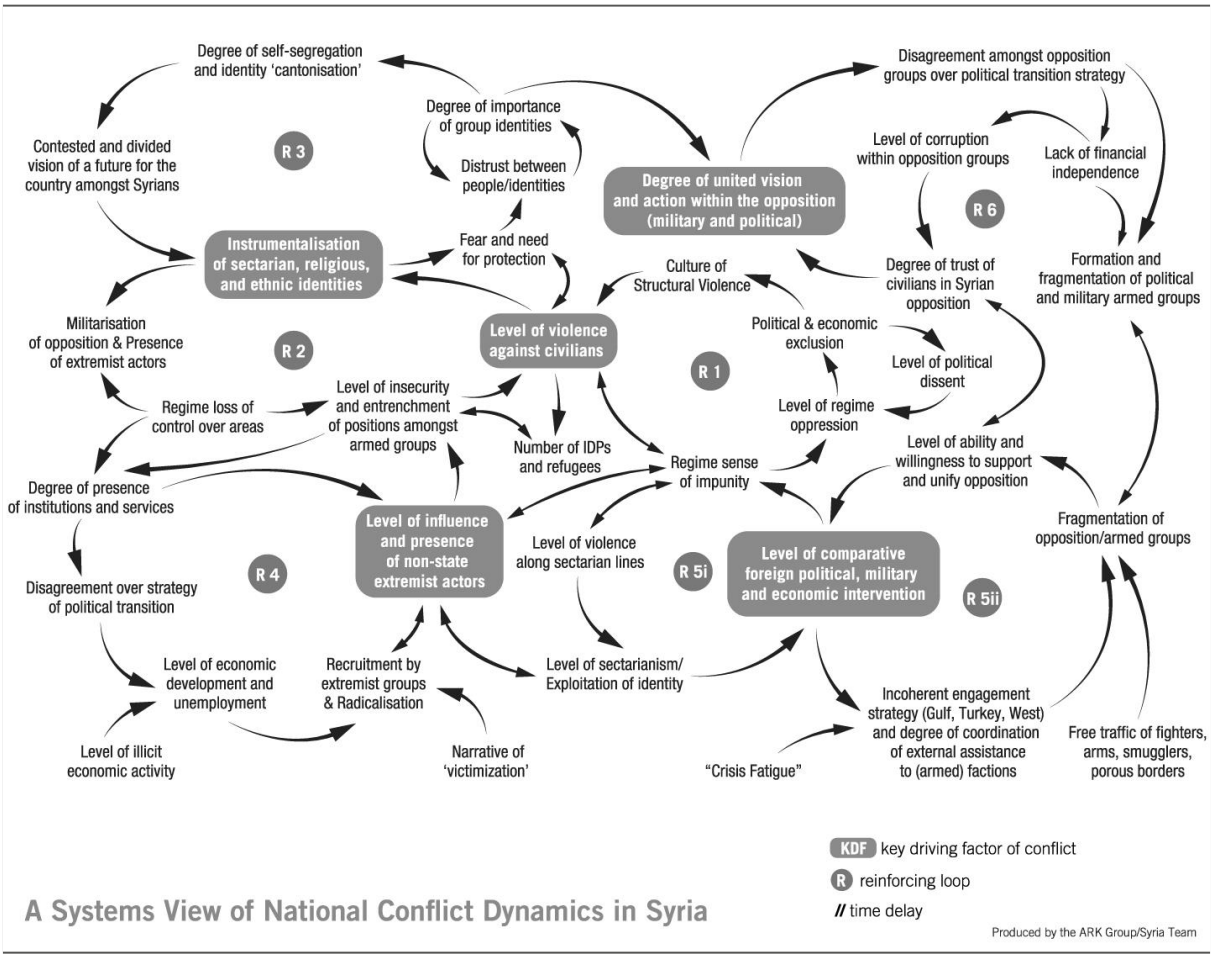


Figure 1: A Systems View of National Conflict Dynamics in Syria[2]

2 *Disclaimer:* To illustrate some of the points made in this article, elements of a national-level systems analysis on Syria, which was produced with the ARK Group DMCC, will be used. CDA facilitated the participatory workshop in 2015 that led to the initial analysis, which was then further refined by the ARK team and published in 2016. The content of this analysis does not represent the author's or CDA's views or position on the Syrian conflict.

This systems map, developed through a participatory analysis process initiated by the ARK Group Syria and facilitated by CDA, shows interlocking vicious circles ("reinforcing loops" in systems thinking terminology), organised around five key drivers of conflict[3] (highlighted in green) – the level of influence and presence of non-state extremist actors being one of them.

It should be noted that this analysis was not produced with the explicit intention to focus on the linkages between structural drivers, individual incentives and enabling factors of violent extremism. The starting point was to understand the bigger picture, macro-level conflict dynamics in Syria, with violent extremism dynamics as one important element – but with a focus on understanding how the various conflict factors connect and relate to each other. As this is a macro-level analysis, it should be noted that the various dynamics in relation to different groups active in Syria were summarised in the map as one group. This map cannot be fully understood without the accompanying narrative in the report itself, which also spells out in much more detail the different dynamics within and amongst the various Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups, as well as ISIL.

A further P/CVE programmatic challenge that hinders lasting results, as Abu-Nimer points out, is the "securitisation of CVE/PVE and the question of whose security" (Abu-Nimer 2018, 6). Many P/VE initiatives are in fact concerned with 'fighting' specific groups and reducing the role and influence of violent extremist groups. As the above systems map shows, however, directly trying to address the 'level and influence and presence of non-state extremist actors' (as one of the key drivers of conflict) will necessarily result in rather short-term approaches. They will likely focus on rule of law or security – 'addressing the symptom' but neglecting the underlying structural dynamics.

The ARK team conducted a detailed stakeholder analysis of local, national and international stakeholders to understand how particular stakeholders and groups drive or counterbalance these dynamics. The team also produced an analysis of possible positive balancing dynamics (not represented in this map, but available in the full public report).

As illustrated in this example, good systems analysis helps to challenge some common assumptions found in P/CVE programming, and helps to move beyond some of the common analytical, conceptual and ethical shortcomings found in many – certainly not all – P/CVE approaches. These assumptions and shortcomings include the following:

- In most contexts, violent extremism is not the only expression of violence. Violent extremism is part of a wider system of violence or organised crime, which takes many forms – both physical and structural. Some P/CVE initiatives, for example counter-messaging and deradicalisation programmes, are very focused on individual-level change and aim to address violent extremism as though it were the only type of violence that matters. Systems analysis will help to understand the relationships between drivers of violent extremism, individual motivations for recruitment, and other drivers of violence in a given context.
- Similarly, 'Islamist extremists' are not the only actors perpetrating large-scale violence, even though much of the current P/CVE debate seems to convey that impression – and hence ignores that extremist violence is a problem across different faith groups. Abu-Nimer rightly speaks about the limited media coverage and recognition of programmes that address violent extremism motivated by Jewish settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, white supremacist groups in the US, Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism, or Indian Hinduism in Gujarat or Kashmir (Abu-Nimer 2018, 11). These complex systems of violence involve many different actors and perpetrators. The P/CVE (and even more so the counter-terrorism) field is disproportionately fixated on non-state and Islamist actors and rarely pays sufficient attention to the role of governments (internal and foreign influences) in enabling violent extremism. Again, systems analysis will challenge those assumptions and provide a more holistic and comprehensive picture of important dynamics.

3 A key driver of conflict is a conflict factor without which the overall conflict situation would be significantly different – or would not exist.

Finally, the key drivers of violent extremism and conflict are not all found within a particular country's national borders. Many of them originate or are significantly influenced from the outside. P/CVE and counter-terrorism efforts are often prone to point towards other countries and cultures as the sole source of the problem. Systems analysis will help to identify the role of internal as well as external actors in driving and fuelling conflict and violent extremist dynamics. Going back to the analysis of systems dynamics in Syria, the different roles of external actors (such as the US, Russia, Turkey or the Gulf countries) and their political, economic and military influence become visible as playing a fundamental role in the conflict dynamics in Syria – and in relation to supporting, maintaining and undermining specific dynamics around violent extremism.

> "*The disparate and, at times, divergent interests, motives, and perceptions of conflict dynamics of the opposition's main external backers (Turkey, US, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) has resulted in weak strategic coordination of [...] international and regional assistance to armed factions, which in turn has played a significant role in weakening and fragmenting the more moderate of the armed groups backed by these foreign states*." (ARK 2016, 46)

Systems analysis helps to understand possible leverage points to change such conflict systems, and to better understand intended and unintended impacts of programming. A key challenge for peacebuilding practitioners in this regard is the question of how to engage, with whom and to what extent, given the proscription by governmental counter-terrorism laws – and the finding in the peacebuilding field that it is critical to engage the '*hard to reach*' for sustained peacebuilding progress.[4]

The following two sections will explore in further detail how systems analysis can help to design more relevant and effective P/CVE interventions, including thoughts on how to avoid and mitigate unintended negative impacts.

3.2 Programming

The above systems map shows the shortcomings of past counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency approaches and how they address the symptoms, and often target specific individuals, rather than the structural drivers of conflict and violence. Understanding how the presence and role of extremist actors and behaviours, in the case of Syria, are influenced, for example, by the instrumentalisation of religious, sectoral and ethnic identities, structural violence, the absence of governance institutions and rule of law, access (or lack thereof) to economic development opportunities, or the influence of foreign powers clearly points to the limitations of an approach that focuses on 'fighting' specific groups, rather than addressing structural drivers and motivators. Furthermore, such counter-terrorism approaches can undermine efforts focused on addressing these structural conditions.

> *"Abandoning a comprehensive strategy in Syria, however, and engaging with Russia in the fight against Nusra and ISIS without explicitly making that cooperation contingent on a clear, defined process of political transition in Syria, would have major shortcomings. It would do little to address underlying sources of radicalism, further compromise prospects for a negotiated transition, and virtually guarantee that Obama will bequeath to his successor an open-ended Syria conflict that continues to destabilize the Arab east and Western Europe."* (Heydemann 2016)

A peacebuilding approach to P/CVE, on the other hand, has the potential to leverage existing positive dynamics in conflict situations, grounded in local knowledge and approaches that are often missing in most counter-terrorism strategies. As part of the Syria systems mapping, the team identified various 'factors for peace': for example, effective governance approaches at local levels (such as the presence of 'local councils' in some areas), or the influence of local civil society initiatives (see above graphic from AKR

4 See, for example, Dudouet 2010 on engagement with proscribed armed groups.

Most critical Factors for Peace /against Conflict

Level of local governance actorss' commitment to public interest — Degree of presence and effectiveness of local administrations and public provision institutions (e.g., local councils)

Level of citizen engagement with civil society organisations in regime and opposition held areas — Existing civil society initiatives (education, women's participation, capacity building, awareness)

Group 2016). Understanding how P/CVE interventions can support such positive local dynamics, rather than undermine them, is a critical condition to make such efforts effective. At the same time, many P/CVE and especially counter-terrorism efforts do not follow a conflict transformation or peacebuilding logic, but a security-policy logic. Abu-Nimer highlights this by proposing that methods based on peace, dialogue and forgiveness are essential for CVE/PVE to become transformative interventions (Abu-Nimer 2018, 17).

A further programming challenge is that while there is some research on why certain communities decide not to join violent acts in the middle of ongoing civil wars but to 'opt out' of violence (Anderson/Wallace 2013; Hancock/Mitchell 2007), there is currently very limited knowledge of why certain communities are more resilient to *violent extremism* than others. This could be an exciting and important area of investigation to further inform P/CVE approaches. It might also significantly challenge perceptions about the roles of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. 'Local solutions' to P/CVE may look very different from what externals can offer – or be willing to accept.

A systems approach to effectiveness also helps us to move beyond the *'attribution' versus 'contribution'* challenge from a monitoring and evaluation perspective. Rather than asking whether a different 'end-state' at the macro level has been created (and can be attributed to a specific programme), it asks whether and how change (facilitated by a specific programme) in one part of the system influences – or fails to influence – other parts. This focuses the question of accountability for impact not on the achievement of a planned end-state, but rather on whether and how programmes have leveraged change in the system, and therefore are likely to affect how the system behaves – hopefully in positive ways (Woodrow/Chigas 2011). In that sense, systems analysis is also a unique foundation to understand broader impacts beyond individual projects and programmes towards achieving *collective impacts*. At the same time, peer learning and sharing experiences, and gathering and sharing impact evidence amongst organisations, remain more challenging in the P/CVE field than in others, due to high levels of sensitivity and risk awareness around this topic.

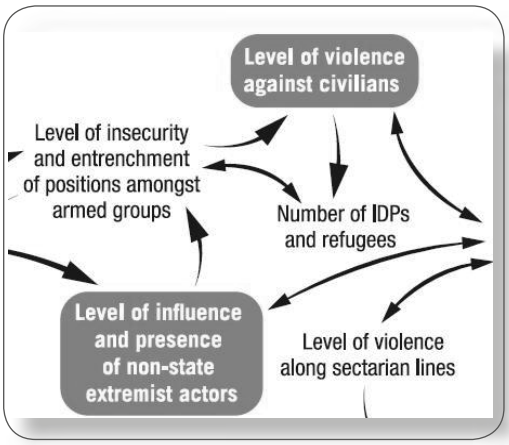
3.3 Understanding and mitigating unintended impacts – the need for conflict sensitivity

Systems analysis helps to understand intended and unintended impacts on the conflict dynamics from a macro-level perspective, important for all violence prevention work, including prevention of extremism. First and foremost, it helps explain how external actors and actions become part of the system itself – and how they can influence existing dynamics positively and negatively. Development and peacebuilding initiatives *can* have a positive impact on the structural drivers of violent extremism if the key drivers are properly understood, if programming corresponds with the key drivers identified, and if the engagement is implemented in a conflict-sensitive way.

> *"An important practice of the peacebuilding and development worlds is the do-no-harm methodology, which helps practitioners think through the short- and long-term effects of certain initiatives or programs on a community. […] Such consideration would add value to the implementation of CVE projects, especially those – such as community policing efforts – that are borrowed from and tested in more developed contexts […]."* (Holmer 2013)

For P/CVE initiatives, the same 'Do No Harm' principles should apply as in other violence prevention or peacebuilding interventions, from conflict-sensitive individual actions to organisational processes and behaviours ideally influenced by the RAFT principles: Respect, Accountability, Fairness and Transparency (CDA 2016).

Often, conflict sensitivity comes into play at the project and programme level, once policy and macro-level strategic decisions have been taken. However, for conflict-sensitive P/CVE programming to be effective, it is paramount that conflict sensitivity principles are applied early on during policy and country strategy planning.



We can refer to the systems map in *Figure 1* to illustrate this point. Much of the international assistance for Syria is concentrated on assistance to Syrian IDPs and refugees in neighbouring countries. Humanitarian assistance needs to consider the broader conflict dynamics and, from a violent extremism perspective specifically, needs to understand the types of influences that extremist actors exert at different levels. Failure to do so is likely to produce sub-optimal results of assistance, or potentially harm partner and beneficiary populations – as well as the staff of aid organisations. This also points to the need for more holistic intervention strategies.

It is important to be aware of certain ethical and practical tensions between conflict sensitivity and many P/CVE approaches. Conflict sensitivity aims to take an impartial approach to the parties in conflict. It recognises that all interventions in a conflict context interact. Therefore, no interventions in a conflict context can be neutral. Rather, programmes aim to be as impartial as possible. On the other hand, the violent extremism debate forces policy-makers and practitioners to label individuals or groups as 'extremists', which implies a judgement about the legitimacy of that individual or group as well as a distinction in terms of the tactics such individuals or groups employ. A conflict-sensitive approach is concerned with not worsening tensions or violence, and with finding opportunities to contribute to peace and justice, which applies to all parties in a conflict. P/CVE is concerned with one or more specific groups in a conflict – the violent extremist or terrorist group. Even though in some contexts there might be efforts to find negotiated agreements with such groups, very often the aim is to undermine their existence or disrupt recruitment. It is important to understand these nuances and distinctions to effectively implement conflict-sensitive programming in contexts with high levels of violent extremism.

4 Conclusions

The peacebuilding community is currently divided in its positioning and approach to P/CVE. There are those who condemn the P/CVE agenda and framing, given all its related and perceived risks for staff and the perceived securitisation of development and peacebuilding work. Then there are those who creatively 'reframe' some of their programming approaches to qualify for P/CVE funding at country level – with varying degrees of scrutiny on related go/no go decisions. Furthermore, there are organisations which try to find a middle ground, by influencing the P/CVE policy debate in a practical way to make the available funding more likely to have a positive impact, applying principles and learning from peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity practice over many years. One could argue there is a moral obligation for peacebuilding practitioners to influence P/CVE policy and practice to avoid risks and threats to the same communities in which many peacebuilding organisations already operate.

Peacebuilding actors will need to work together very closely if they want to influence the P/CVE discourse and programming according to peacebuilding and conflict-sensitivity principles. No single peacebuilding actor will be able to do this alone. The systemic approaches outlined in this article might provide a useful entry point to discuss strategic cooperation between funders, policy-makers, and implementers at both the policy and the programmatic level.

For this purpose, much more evidence on what constitutes effective P/CVE programming is required. While there are emerging efforts to increase the evidence base on drivers of violent extremism and the emergence of effective approaches (Allan 2015), there is currently no systematic evidence base on what works and what doesn't (and why and how and for whom), shared between organisations engaged in this space. There is much to be learned from the peacebuilding field, but there are also independent learnings required on the specifics of P/CVE engagements and related policy coherence and programmatic effectiveness questions. This will need to include applied research, more systematic, systemic and shared analysis across international and local stakeholders, and more evaluations and assessments that go beyond 'project effectiveness' and really analyse the impact of P/CVE interventions on conflict and country systems. The impetus for such a larger, systemic focus cannot come from project and programme levels alone: including such thinking and approaches at the level of decision-making on policies, country strategies and funding will be essential 'to move the needle' on P/CVE. Needless to say, all of this will only be useful if there is real willingness to learn from past and ongoing engagements, and possibly to adapt current P/CVE approaches.

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