

RESILIENCE TO RADICALIZATION ASSESSING COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

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**Abstract**

*In the Countering Violent Extremism strategy, Pakistan had to change its conventional militarized and intelligence approach to counterterrorism and embrace a more subtle approach of working with communities where traditional CVE is promoted. They comprehend that violent radicalism is not only a security problem rather a complex sociopolitical issue caused by ideological, financial, and complaint-based pressures. This study examines how to explore the growth, implementation, and effectiveness of the community-based approaches to CVE in Pakistan, otherwise known as grassroots mobilization, ideological counter-narratives, and youth mobilization, gender work, and internet literacy. It is worth noticing that the relevant state and civil society initiatives at the higher ranks of the state and in the civil society itself that pertain to efforts in the religious fatwa called Padgham-e-Pakistan, endorsed by the country as a whole in an attempt to condemn violence contaminated by Islam are brought into critical assessment in the article. It singles out the newfound role of young people as fragile subjects and essential stakeholders of peacebuilding, the risks of online radicalization using social media, and the underutilized ability of women in CVE initiatives. Government reports, academic research, and program reviews have been utilized in qualitative content analysis in shaping up major strengths and weaknesses of the CVE ecosystem in Pakistan, as the research highlights. Experience has shown that CVE programs which are accompanied by community-based approach in Pakistan have been forming a consistent pressure towards the development of resilience, religious tolerance, and civic awareness among disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Explosion of interventions is also a problem besides its sustainability, enhancement of collaboration between the agencies, and integration of such activities into greater national security policies. The article draws the conclusion that localization, inclusiveness, and context sensitivity of the CVE in Pakistan should become the priority, with a focus on preventing rather than responding and the longer social cohesion as a priority.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Pakistan is one of the countries that has had to deal with the ongoing risk of violent extremism that is

predominantly enabled by a combination of domestic feebleness and unprecedented geopolitical

demands. Since the beginning of the 2000s, violence extremism occurred in Pakistan in mass form due to ethnic insurgency, sectarian trends, and religious militancy and spill-over of the regional conflict, i.e., the Afghan war. Stretching and spreading violent extremism targeting the Pakistan minorities communities, their schools, police, and non-combatants are some of the irreparable gaps in the Pakistan sociopolitical system. Traditionally, the Pakistani state has highly relied on conventional counter-terrorist strategies being spearheaded by military actions, kinetics, and intelligence-based spycraft. Militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as well as the Swat can be driven away due to Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad operations. These initiatives were strategically successful in addressing the radicalization phenomenon in the short run, but they could not stop effectively the causes of radicalization. The most effect that the use of coercion, in the majority of cases, had was on the contrary actually promoting the emotions of mistrust and alienation within the local communities, particularly among the poor and conflict-affected ones. Because of the inadequacies of hard security solutions, policymakers, thinkers, and civil society have come to support an anticipatory and joined-up CVE strategy to a larger extent. This has generated efforts in the community-based CVE strategies aimed at preventing radicalization through questioning, inclusion, education and empowerment. These are supposed to de-legitimize the process of extremist ideological attraction due to mobilization of the community itself to active efforts, reinforcing the civic sense of identity, and developing local capability to neutralize radicalizing influences. CVE via community leadership operates on the local social domain where extremism can occur i.e. identity, marginalization, trauma, economic poverty, and destabilization of the mainstream status. It operates on the premise that extremism is a socially ailment more than a police matter. To such an extent, it tries to transform the space of radicalization into the areas of peace, tolerance and coexistence. Through this paper, the growth, scope, and impact of such community-based CVE initiatives in Pakistan is discussed about. It is a critical examination of the contribution of state-led policies like Paigham-e-Pakistan and non-state and bottom-up

action to the changing resilience in the community and de-radicalization of thought. To this end, the study notes the significance of quasi-local, participatory, and sustainable actions in the direction of reducing one of the worst security and social problems in Pakistan.

## 2. Literature Review

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is not that kind of global post-9/11 policy objective that may be achieved within from one to other cultural and national boundaries like a pendulum. Violent extremism in the case story of Pakistan is neither new nor aberrant but a progression well enshrined in the history, politics and ideology of the country. The assumption of the plural reality in learning based on geopolitical interests, sectarianism, socio-economic disparities, failure of government and religious identity politics has been based on the learning from Pakistan.

### Global Strategies to CV

All over the world, authors such as Neumann (2013), Horgan (2008) have argued that effective CVE is not de-radicalization but condition setting of the level whereby the perception of radicalization will fail to root itself at all. They are prescriptions that have been embraced by the United Nation and other multi-lateral players who have expanded the role of civil society, education, and community in peacebuilding and counter-extremism missions. CVE is therefore growingly being thought of in addition to preventative, development-based approaches and rights-based apprehensions, alternatively than securitized policy per se. These are some policies that will enhance social cohesion and prevent grievances which otherwise will be a source of recruitment to extremism. Mainstreaming of the youths and women considered marginalized into the CVE interventions is also emphasized by Global Center on Cooperative Security (2015) as a means of ensuring sustainability and acceptability of the interventions.

### A Multidimensional Phenomenon of Violent Extremism in Pakistan

The only history and sociopolitical development have made Pakistan vulnerable to all types of violent extremism. The Afghanistan war against Russia and

the war in Afghanistan that followed 9/11 in Afghanistan allowed the radical ideology and networks to take root all over Pakistan. The local as well as transnational extremist movements were also boosted by internal sectarian conflict, ungoverned religious seminaries, and open borders and religious politics. As some writers like Abbas (2005) and Rashid (2008) have noted, lack of inclusion of governance and half-way investment in economic opportunity and education creates fertile grounds of radicalization of certain quarters- i.e., in the periphery constituencies and the young people in the rural, tribal, and urban peripheries.

### **Ideology and Religious stories**

The Pakistani solicitations of extremist ideology will more often be based on the misinterpretations of the teachings of Islam which are informed by the accounts of victimhood, injustice and martyrdom. The indecisiveness of the state to take steps against extremist language and in advance of the 2014 APS Peshawar attack provided, physically and online, space to extremists. In contrast with this, Paigham-e-Pakistan-style mobilization was restructured into state action against reinstitution of religious narratives by extremist actors. It is a pure fatwa of the highest religious representatives of all establishments which condemn terrorism and violence on religion grounds and promotes peace and pluralism. However, its top-down approach has been criticized as not being anchored into the grass-roots to enable the most vulnerable to fall weak to easily turn radical. It was established that religious counter-narratives are crucial, but require becoming rooted in the locality within the education and culture arena in such a way that they would be in the best possible position to balance the ideologies of extremism (Khan & Akbar, 2021).

### **Youth engagements in radicalization**

Youths form over 60 percent of Pakistan citizens and the target group in the issue and solution of violent extremism. The identity crisis of youths, a non-access to quality education, the inability to achieve, unemployment, political frustration and low self-esteem have exposed youths to identity, sense meaning and heroism-based messages of extremist ideology. Study conducted by Pak Institute for Peace

Studies (PIPS) shows that most extremists who have been recruited by the extremist groups during the last decade were aged between 15 to 30 years. Meanwhile, young people are resiliency and peace agents as well. The presence of youth networks such as Bargad and Youth Advocacy Network (YAN) or youth programs such as Sabaoon in Swat offers us an idea of what can be achieved by engaging young people in CVE through exercising leadership, dialogues, and civic engagement. The programs have enabled the reintegration of ex- militants, vocational skills development as well as social integration.

### **Digital Radicalization**

The cyber reality is increasingly becoming a battle ground in the war against violent extremism. With the increase in availability and usage of phone and the internet, the extremist groups have found their lifestyle online and use the online social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram to recruit members, the spread of the message and through coordination of the operations. The overall cyber leadership policy in Pakistan under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 has proven to be rather preoccupied with censorship and surveillance activities and largely less preoccupied with the establishment of strong counter-narratives or digital literacy programs to date. It is this gap that civil society organizations like Soch Pakistan and Peace Lens tried to address by creating counter-narratives, building towards a narrative of peace, and awareness of the dangers of digital extremism. They do not have, however, much influence and impact as there is no common national policy on digital CVE.

### **Gender Aspects of CV**

Women role in violent extremism has been understated in the past as agents and victims. Whereas women are basically the victims of extremism both as mothers and wives to the extremist militants or victims to violent extremism (in general) there are growing indications that women have a role to play and can be recruiter as well as influencer and most likely in the closed societies. It is through this that women are also endowed with special capability to become peace builders. Established measures through organizations such as Paiman Alumni Trust and Aware Girls have

turned women into trained mediators, peace educators and early warning systems. Patriarchal institutionalization, cultural inhibition, and inadequate suitable funding make gender participation in CVE symbolically strong in Pakistan. Good gender-sensitive CVE is very much more of women yet women at higher levels also making decisions.

#### **Community resiliency and Local property ownership**

The ability to absorb, recover, and respond to shocks allocated solely to households, citizens, and communities owing to violent extremism is referred to as local ownership and community resilience. In CVE, it is vigorous civic identity, civic networks and civic leadership. It has been proved that there had been evidence that can prove that the local leadership, trend and tradition of CVE interventions has a high probability of success and to be self-sufficient. It is necessary to be owned locally. Any action taken to appear extrinsic or intelligence operated will also not be believable by the locals. Local religious leaders and social trust-based community-based organizations (CBOs) are the most appropriate in instituting dialogue, detecting early warning signals, and building resilience over the long run.

#### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspective of the research is the model of radicalization ABC that explores the intersection between Affect (emotions), Behavior (action) and Cognition (ideas) in the context of radicalization. The model has a very broad application when it comes to the situation in Pakistan as extremist leanings will most probably increase using a combination of emotional gripes, behavioural alienation and ideological misrepresentation. To this end, community-based CVE should tap into these aspects simultaneously, such as targeting youth, developing counter-narratives along religious lines, and online awareness campaigns to prevent radicalization. The model brings into light also the significance of the affective care of, behavioural empowerment of, and cognitive and corrective interventions, which are local, grass root and participatory in whereabouts and manner

and therefore reinstates the relevance of the comprehensiveness, community-based response to the fight against violent extremism.

#### **4. Methodology**

The talent has adopted qualitative content analysis methodology, whereby different sources are scanned, including policy papers, NGO reports, and media reports as well as scholarly publications between the years 2015 and 2024. Specific key sources include government initiatives like Paigham-e-Pakistan, organizational reports like the ones given by PIPS, UNDP Pakistan, USIP, and ICG and individual case studies of regions like the one of Swat, Karachi, Quetta, and South Punjab. Thematic coding of information was used to establish the pattern of planning, implementation, and impact of community-based CVE programs and what role the same programs played in addressing violent extremism.

#### **5. Descriptions and Results**

##### **Paigham-e-Pakistan Impact**

The Paigham-e-Pakistan fatwa endorsed by the government denouncing violence and terrorism in the name of Islam has been implemented into the Pakistani school curriculums and the government media campaigns. This may best be used as a counter-narrative religious account of an extremist ideology. Although it has been relatively effective in its propagation of the message by virtue of the mosques and media, it has not been to the extent of making deep cuts in the sense that it has not reached the grass root as is most evident through the religious seminaries (madrasas). The majority of religious clergy have justified the fatwa but opponents think that clergy are just doing it robotically and they are putting too little importance in the manner such that it is not even opposing the radical ideologies that are prevailing in the institutions. The argument is one which is yet to be used to argue the cause of sectarian differences and intolerance toward religious minorities in most of the madrasas. Hence, whereas Paigham-e-Pakistan offered a counter-narrative, its effect on deradicalization at its working level and more particularly in the religio-centric strongholds, has been dismal.

## Young Outreach Groups

Grassroots involvement by youths has also been very critical in the CVE policy in Pakistan especially in the majority of the regions that are suffering extremism effects. The initiatives to engage the young people like Sabaoon (rehabilitation effort in Swat) and young people network have recorded straightforward success in de-radicalization. All this and more as a result of the vocational skills training, community service, and resolutions to issues in the communities have fulfilled the alternative stories, positive socialization, and purpose to these communities and has kept away the dangers of young people being recruited by the extremists ideologies. As an example, the ex-militant and vulnerable youth who had been exposed to the program were less confrontational (Sabaoon). Although they are achievable, such programs are limited when it comes to up-scaling due to issues such as lack of funds, logistical challenges, as well as political reluctance to up-scale such programs in the entire country. In addition, most of the youth in the vulnerable populations lack access to these preventive measures thus putting them at risk of being radicalized.

## Cyber CVE Solutions

It is in the cyber world that Pakistan has encountered different social media movements aimed at enhancing tolerance and counter-violent extremism. Soch Pakistan and Peace Lens are two projects which employ the usage of digital stories, awareness and education materials to ensure to address the extremist narrative, altering it to stimulate peaceful dialogue amongst the young generation. They spread their tolerance and unity messages on social media sites such as Facebook, twitter and YouTube among others, especially on the internet platforms where radicalization is prominent. Although these programs have been initiated on a large scale and have caught humongous praises regarding their uniqueness and appropriateness, they still fail due to the fact that the government cyber agencies are disconnected. This approach to the absence of coordination of a single, government-sponsored digital CVE blueprint will leave such campaigns in magnificent seclusion with one another and it is hard to gauge their lasting impact. There is also the current law on cybercrime in Pakistan (PECA 2016),

which is pro-surveillance and pro-censorship while encouraging digital literacy and counter-narration preventing measures (Christensen 6). This has helped them in sealing a loophole in the national capacity to maximize the digital platform in CVE.

## The women are the Role of CVE.

The contribution that women make to CVE has been considered as a goldmine. Women led local forms of peacebuilding in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) or the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by engaging in local activism and neighbourhood peace groups. In most of the cases, women associations come in the form of brokers, who provide other social networks to the youth and also the vulnerable women who are at the risk of turning into extremists. They are highly tokenistic in the regard of providing spaces to women in CVE projects. There is the grave issue of women being asked to represent as stakeholders but never to sit at the decision table. They are blocked by their culture, political exclusion and patriarchy to be members of the pool that says how CVE projects are to be undertaken. The gender inequality is keeping the projects under the leadership of women unable to stand against the extremist thinking and introduces more lasting and more just peace processes.

## Community ownership and Trust

Maybe the most frequent outcome of effective CVE in Pakistan is ownership at the community level. The most successful projects are where there is an active NGO-led activity and where it empowers the local people involved in the process, i.e. the clerics, teachers, and elders are involved in it. Residents will most probably use these because they do not seem to be imposed by foreigners but part of the society. Any initiatives that can be viewed to be government-led or foreign-sponsored will be suspicious and have a lukewarm response to. An example of CVE initiatives like in Quetta and South Punjab have failed in these cases because they were locally perceived as forceful by the government and also top-down. The active participation of local stakeholders in the programs creates, implements, and evaluates CVE programs is, therefore, fundamental to a program. Locally-based efforts build a better

stakeholder involvement, on-ground interventions, and developed something like a localized institutionalized we are responsible (and they are responsible) in fighting extremism.

## 6. Discussion

A community-based approach such as CVE in Pakistan is an interactive positive measure, but it can only work on the premise of a structure of major determinants. Perhaps, its strength lies in this aspect since it is a component that can be incorporated to support the implementation of the long-term cultural and ideological change, which shall be achieved mainly through solving the root causes of violent extremism, i.e., identity crises, marginalization, and deprivation. Directly deployed to the population, such initiatives can indeed slice their way through the beginnings of the process of radicalization, which typically begins with alienation and suspicion. However, the sustenance of these activities on long term basis at the grass root level remains one of the major issues. Among the most necessary conditions is the fact that CVE initiatives are established and sustainable due to the local legitimacy. The programs should be designed and performed as much as possible with the local actors so that local leaders and religious ulama as well as opinion leaders will be at the centre stage in the development process. Such CVE programs would be termed as foreign-led or external and consequently unproductive unless attended by buy-in or input of the local actors. Successful initiatives such as Sabaoon and NGO actions led in the area have indicated the dependence on local ownership to build trust and support the local acceptance of such actions. It is also a major concern how to coordinate the federal, provincial, and NGO CVE programs. Although agencies against violent extremism are diverse (both governmental and non-governmental), the coordination of efforts does not occur. There is a silo between Government and civil society and there is minimal transfer of resources and coordination between the government and civil society. Fragmentation will definitely lead to redundancy, loss of resources, and inefficacy particularly in more risky provinces like Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and South Punjab. Enhanced interaction between local communities, civil societies

and government departments would facilitate the effectiveness of CVE programs. The sector of CVE projects that is underdeveloped is monitoring and evaluation of Pakistan CVE projects. The fact that impact evaluations were contained in the majority of the CVE projects, however, makes it hard to identify whether the latter were successful or not, find out accidentally what works best and impossible to replicate successful programs without difficulties. It can also be described as overdependence on anecdotal data or skin measurements, i.e., amounts of participants or actions taken, as opposed to careful examination of deep change in behavior or ideology after a considerable amount of time. With no conclusive, measurable results, scaling up successful programs is very hard or acquiring long-term funding is not possible. It further has built-in tensions between the securitized methods of counter-terrorism, on the one hand, and preventive methods of community-based CVE on the other hand. In Pakistan, security activities and intelligence collection are more popular at some point than building community discourse and confidence building. Even where greater use of military strategy has been applied to an area, like in FATA or in urban centers such as Karachi, the urge by the government forces to be regarded rather as enemies rather than allies can wreck the confidence within society and abhor cooperation among the groupings. This practice in CVE securitization, as well, always ends up disabling the partnership approach required to make CVE work, since the communities will not be interested in participating in state-funded initiatives nor will they be willing to view it as anything but a component of some bigger plan toward control or surveillance. Lastly, under Pakistan based CVE in community level, they have to move on the prudent middle-ground between need security and preventive-mindedness. Local early investment in voice and point of view inclusivity within CVE processes through creation of local initiatives, construction of better coordinating designs, and the development of design and measurement assessment as well, has potential to not only make voice and point of view inclusivity within CVE processes more sustainable, but also more effective in Pakistan. Otherwise, however, there is a good deal of doubt (in the CVE long-term impact).

## 7. Conclusion

The replacement of individual-focused with community CVE in Pakistan is a vital way of responding to the root causes of violent extremism. As powerful as it has been in the short term, however, the security approach has been hobbled in preventing radicalization because it fails to target the basic sociopolitical and ideological incentives behind it. As a more holistic and sustainable instrument of combating extremism, community CVE interventions help deconstruct ideology, empower youth, mainstream and empower females, and digital literacy. These efforts aim at action against the causes of radicalization, namely ideological manipulation, marginalization, social disintegration, and exclusion of Muslims through local initiatives. CVE programs have been successful in Pakistan based on its ability to ensure social resilience and take the community as an agent that prevents violence extremism. Answers to this began taking a step forward in the form of Paigham-e-Pakistan, and other similar initiatives, and mobilization within the community against high-risk sectors, presenting the people with a broader, more inclusive vision of religious and social identity. Youth interventions have also managed to give the youths the audacity to be the changers to be the drivers of alternatives to violence and also feel that they own the society. However, all the possibilities of intervention activities, they face a series of problems. In order to be sustainable in the long run, the community-based CVE would require greater involvement and meaning of participation of the marginalized groups, women, and youth who remain outside of the decision-making structure. Sustainability of such activities would also lie in the coordination of the activities among the government agencies, community leaders, NGOs and the communities. Unless these interventions are massively scaled and made sustainable, a great investment in local capacity, in form of training, equipment, and institutional capability, will be needed. Without these conditions, the CVE efforts at the grass roots level will never stand a chance of keeping up with the dynamics of extremism in Pakistan. The future is bleak, but there remains extraordinary potential with regard to community-based CVE in assisting to overcome the complex situation of violent extremism in Pakistan. Pakistan

can pursue the establishment of a vibrant society by building on these initiatives and expanding them to a large scale that they will ultimately be able to eradicate and prevent extremism through a locally-based, participatory, and sustainable fashion.

## 8. Recommendations

- To create sustainable resilience of the society to extremism-related movements, the notion of countering violent extremism (CVE) should be introduced to a Pakistani educational system. This will involve the addition of the pillars of peace studies, religious understanding, critical thinking and civic education in all levels of education including the madrassas and the mainstream schools as well. The curriculum should be reformed in such a way that it promotes pluralism, interreligious dialogue, constitutional values which will enable the students to internalize the various usefulness of diversity and struggle against radical elements.
- Young people are the most susceptible population group to radicalization and, at the same time, the most powerful force capable of changing the situation positively, that is why this group should be invested in term of their social, economic and political inclusion. It could be achieved by means of providing opportunities of leadership training enhancement, vocational programs, forums of civic action, and entrepreneurial endeavors. Local and participants: Their CVE interventions should be local and inclusive which offers alternatives to the young people sources of identity, agency and community involvement.
- Substantial rather than merely symbolic inclusion of women should be incorporated in every inch of planning, implementation and leading of CVE. This would involve the appropriate funding, organizational capacity development and access to decision making platforms to organizations headed by women and peace networks. Women as a party may be considered as targets and vehicles of change on the verge and the only way through which paradigms of comprehensive peacebuilding could be achieved is by acknowledging their functions in relation to violent extremism.
- The internet threat to radicalization is a newer form of menace in Pakistan in the social networked society. As a response tool, a comprehensive multi-

stakeholder digital CVE solution should be developed, in which government cyber departments, civil and societal organizations, teachers and influencers should be included. It must also concentrate on digital and media literacy as well as creation of appealing, instead of attractive, value-devoid counter-narratives to disruptive extremist content that can protect vulnerable internet users.

- The mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation are also significant to sustainability and efficacy of CVE interventions. Indicators that have already been set out that measure the effect of a program, the change in behavior and ideological inclination should be adopted. Data-informed adaptive learning and policymaking should help decision-makers be more responsible, increase resource allocation, and enable the efficient community-based approach to be applied to other jurisdictions and replicated.

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