

C O U N T E R I N G VIOLENT EXTREMISM — I N A F R I C A —

A case study of the Kenya Community Support Centre

By PHYLLIS MUEMA, executive director, Kenya Community Support Centre
Photos by Kenya Community Support Centre

Violent extremism is a prevailing security threat to Kenya, a major strategic, political and economic player in Africa. The country has suffered numerous terrorist attacks, including the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi and the 2002 bombing of the Paradise Hotel on the Kenyan coast. Various terrorist groups target Kenya, including al-Qaida affiliate al-Shabab, which declared war on Kenya after its military forces went into Somalia in 2011 to flush out al-Shabab.

With its challenging mixture of land disputes, religious tensions, and a nascent separatist movement, Kenya's coastal region has emerged as a hot spot for political violence and extremist ideologies. Culpability for much of the violence rests on nonstate forces, such as the Mombasa Republic Council, al-Shabab-affiliated groups and tribal militias. Failure by the Kenyan government to implement land reform and recommendations of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission report have exposed the communities to potentially violent reactions. Kenya lacks a national counter-violent-extremism strategy that would provide policy direction and create room for ad hoc reactions toward terrorism and violent extremism.

The Kenya Community Support Centre (KECOSCE) is a national nongovernmental organization established in 2006 with a mission to mobilize, organize and empower citizens to participate effectively in social, economic and political processes that impact their

well-being. KECOSCE works with citizens 15 to 35 years old, students, women, clerics and local government security agencies, including the police, the civil administration and national commissions, to address underlying conditions that give rise to violent extremism.

Over the past five years, KECOSCE has introduced diverse initiatives, including:

- Mentoring and empowerment programs for in-school and out-of-school youth;
- Mobilizing and supporting women against violent extremism;
- Training and discussion forums to aid understanding of religious teachings and narratives commonly misinterpreted by extremists to woo ignorant youth under the guise of religion;
- Managing policy and grievance discussions with government institutions, advocating for the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and sustaining the coordination of national efforts to reduce the threat of violent radicalization, deterring terrorists from recruiting and operating within communities;
- Messaging and countermessaging — broadcasting victims' testimony in the media through radio and print;
- Educating and teaching youth employable skills; this is a developmental intervention aimed at addressing poverty, unemployment and marginalization;
- Empowering the marginalized through civic education and awareness, and promoting constitutionalism, citizenship and leadership.



KECOSCE empowers Kenyan communities to resist violent extremism and radicalization through dialogue and community outreach.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Listed below are some of KECOSCE's achievements.

- Women Against Violent Extremism networks support female terrorism victims. The networks provide solidarity for women whose children have joined violent extremist groups. The networks also empower women to challenge the ideology that promotes violence, including monitoring activities of “guests” brought to homes under the guise of religion, some of whom have been found to be among the most wanted criminals.
- Kataa Kutumiwa, meaning “refuse to be used,” is a youth program that has provided a platform for youth to talk with elders, religious leaders and government officials about issues related to religious ideology and narratives that are misinterpreted by recruiting agents to sanction violence. This has empowered youth to engage radicalizers in debate and challenge their viewpoints and victim ideology. The project has educated youth on the constitution, leadership and patriotism. It has opened channels of communication between youth and government officials to discuss issues related to arrests, marginalization and unemployment with government security officials, scholars, elders and imams.
- Using multimedia has helped facilitate conversations among target communities. Youth discussion forums via radio, social media, discussion boards and billboards enable moderated debates between nonviolent extremists and moderates and can promote good governance and participation in leadership.
- KECOSCE Director Phyllis Muema was awarded the Head of State Commendation, a presidential award in recognition of her work and that of KECOSCE in promoting peace and security on the coast of Kenya.
- Joint mapping and training workshops between law enforcement and community leaders, including women, youth and religious leaders, facilitate a closer partnership and collaboration that promotes peace, security

and respect for human rights. Addressing the challenges of information sharing and law enforcement response with respect to cultural and religious practices, these workshops have opened alternate communication channels between the police and peace monitors.

CHALLENGES

KECOSCE's projects require a rigorous and costly proposal and decision-making process. The organization relies on money from donor agencies, whereas violent extremists often have huge financial and technological means at their disposal. Donor agencies provide ready resources to produce messages and sustain the group's recruitment drives.

Historically, Kenyan security agencies have conducted arbitrary raids and profiled communities when investigating violent extremists. This has left the community feeling like victims of police harassment and feeds the potential for further radicalization, creating a spiral effect that can render KECOSCE's interventions ineffective.

Kenya lacks a national coordination center and a policy framework for countering violent extremism. That leaves the country without a platform for coordinated approaches that could leverage preventive and hard security measures. There are large gaps at operational levels between various government departments, including intelligence, the national counterterrorism center, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and the military, rendering the work of nonstate actors difficult.

The government of Kenya does not provide financial resources for prevention measures to complement its tactical approaches. Despite initiatives such as community policing, the government project Nyumba Kumi that requires citizens to know their neighbors, and public expectations for support, KECOSCE must seek funding from other governments to support its work. Only by these means can it continue its work to stem extremism. □