



Interactive Dialogue Series

**Unemployment,
Youth and
Violent Extremism**

Position Paper No.2

2020

SOCIAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

www.spdc.org.pk

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Unemployment, Youth and Violent Extremism

The views expressed in this paper are primarily based on discussion held in the Interactive Dialogue conducted by Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) and cannot be attributed to SPDC.

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Introduction

Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) is undertaking a series of informed and interactive dialogues, on various topics covering a range of the drivers of violent extremism (VE) in Pakistan. The aim of the project is to increase understanding of violent extremism related issues among government representatives and different stakeholders, besides increasing the capacity of civil society to organize and advocate for countering violent extremism (CVE).

One strategy for doing so is bridging the gap between practitioners who grapple with its ubiquitous manifestations, and analysts who theorize societal trends without necessarily interacting with those engaged in VE. Such interactions provide the otherwise infrequent opportunity for civil society stakeholders to network and develop linkages, which necessarily precede developing a shared understanding and consensus on related issues.

The project involves holding four interactive dialogues and develop position papers on the following topics:

1. Nexus between intolerance and violent extremism
2. Unemployment, youth and violent extremism
3. Institutional/governance failure and violent extremism
4. Linkage between corruption, elite impunity and violent extremism

Each of the four dialogues will lead to a follow-up meeting with relevant stakeholders and dissemination of key findings by publishing position papers on all four identified topics. The project culminates with the convening of a provincial level conference where policy recommendations for CVE will be presented.

The second dialogue on “Unemployment, Youth and Violent Extremism” was held in Karachi on January 15, 2020. The participants included government representatives, journalists, religious leader, youth leaders and representatives from non-government organizations. This position paper is based on the literature review and discussion held in the dialogue. Some of the areas it intended to explore include:

- Correlation between education patterns and violent extremism
- Correlation between employment trends and violent extremism

- New grievances resulting from economic changes and link with extremist group membership
- Reintegration possibilities after involvement in violent extremism

Background

The literature on violent extremism struggles to establish causality and has a marked lack of clarity on how people transition from being frustrated and excluded to becoming radicalized and using violence as a form of political struggle, and why some make the transition whereas others in the same situation do not. There are various approaches/schools of thought on violent extremism and responses to it. Some centralize economic conditions (unemployment or poverty), whereas others consider it ancillary.

The common diagnosis refers to the ‘greed versus grievance’¹ spectrum to explain the two most commonly posited personal motivations. ‘Greed’ refers to the benefits or rewards VE can offer such as money, status, deference, control over others, and over territory. ‘Grievance’ indicates that people turn to VE to assert or defend identities; whether religious, ethnic or class, rather than to fulfill economic needs.

Perceptions of VE and interest in participation also varies at different points of the life cycle of militant movements. As people pay increased costs of VE, they may come to regard VE as a threat and conduit to increased suffering and not as a solution to their initial suffering. In multiple conflicts, the poor suffer the direct consequences of VE more than others and have fewer safety nets for coping with the fallouts. A study conducted in Pakistan² found that the poor suffer more as they live and work in densely populated urban areas targeted by militants, cannot move to more affluent and less violent areas, are more dependent on daily functioning economies of labor and trade, and more dependent on public health and infrastructure, concluding that poverty reduces support for militant groups.

Most of the theoretical frameworks in use are more oriented towards the discipline they emerge from, rather than on empirically tested primary data and interactions with violent extremists. These frameworks broadly summarized by the Counter Terrorism and Technology Centre³ are:

- Rational Choice theory, where people conduct cost-benefit analysis and see the end objective they fight for as a public good to be shared by all
- Social Movement theory, which posits that VE is a radical form of collective action, the underlying trigger of which is frustration with status quo – aggression becomes a means of negotiation

The poor suffer the direct consequences of VE more than others.

- Psychological theories focus on the mental functioning and personality of individuals involved in VE, looking at personal inclinations, the way their minds work and how their formative experiences shape their worldview and actions
- Ideological approach theories, which examine the ideological framework which VE groups prescribe to, whether political or religious, and accept those ideologies as prime motives in and of themselves, and not as justifications for violence rooted in other malaise
- Socio-Economic Structures, an approach which diagnosis that poverty, wealth inequality and concentration, and economic stagnation or decline combine with feelings of helplessness make people susceptible, and VE actors step in to ameliorate situations through charity work and service provision, taking over the role of the state
- Relative Deprivation theory, where people perceive they are unfairly deprived in comparison to others, and socio-economic frustration creates susceptibility to radicalization and well-adjusted individuals with better education, stable jobs, social mobility and married status would not indulge in crime

The dialogue conducted by SPDC focused on the nexus between unemployment, youth and violent extremism mostly examined diagnostics and solutions within the last two categories of theories, the socio-economic structures and perceptions of relative deprivation as being primary generators.

Correlation between employment trends and violent extremism

The link between poverty, socio-economic conditions and terrorism has been a highly contested one. While earlier analyses pointed to it as a decisive factor, empirical studies based on interviews of VE actors have demonstrated that this was not the case by showing plethora of counter-evidence.

The United Nations Development Programme UNDP (2016)⁴ maps several factors which lead to radicalization, in which economic exclusion is one among many others. Listed factors include political exclusion, perceptions of injustice and discrimination, rejection of current socio-economic and political system, weak state capacity and failing security, changing global culture/globalization, and rejection of diversity. As per UNDP findings, these factors are compounded by individual psychological and emotional factors, turning radicalization towards violent extremism.

Economic exclusion is one of the many factors which leads to radicalization.

A World Bank study⁵ on Daesh foreign recruits concludes that lack of economic opportunities, specifically unemployment, is a driver of radicalization. However, it leaves an open-ended question as to whether this does so by lowering the opportunity cost of VE or by exacerbating feelings of exclusion.

Youth unemployment is widely regarded as a threat to social stability. Urdal (2006)⁶ has suggested that ‘youth bulges’ are associated with a rising risk of civil war, supporting this with statistical evidence, arguing that it is related to youths’ lack of employment opportunities. A number of other studies conclude that joining armed groups (whether on the government or opposition sides) can be an attractive option in the absence of other opportunities (Justino 2010, Keen 1998, Walter 2004)⁷.

An expansive review of counter-terrorism conducted by the defense research arm of the Australian government³ notes that much of such literature is based on an acceptance that youth unemployment is an important push factor leading to political violence and criminality. However, a review conducted by Idris (2016)⁸ concluded, “While numerous reports and papers claim youth unemployment is a factor in youth participation in violence, few, if any, studies provide concrete proof of this.” Vaillancourt and Boyd (2007)⁹ dispute the causal relationship between poverty and extremism/terrorism arguing there are more poor people than there are terrorists or acts of terror.

Frances Stewart studying post-conflict situations for UNDP makes the case that the link between employment and sustainable peace is not simply about creating jobs but about a) the distribution of formal sector jobs by groups in a way that horizontal inequalities in job distribution do not become a new or reiterated grievance, and b) the conditions of employment in the informal sector are improved, whereby work in the informal sector actually translates into livelihood opportunities. “Simply supporting job creation, without consideration for the distribution of jobs across groups and without improving informal sector livelihoods, is likely to do little for peace building.”

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Stewart notes that the World Bank’s prescriptions for addressing employment in post-conflict areas suggests private sector employment, capacity building and training for unemployed youth, i) without creating demand by employers and simplistically improving supply measures, ii) without looking at horizontal inequalities and how providing opportunities will impact grievances that result in conflict, and iii) without syncing with other macroeconomic policies such as privatization and increased competition which actually reduced employment.

The same discussion emerged in the dialogue in the context of Pakistan and more specifically Sindh, on how central poverty and employment were in the gravitation towards radicalization. On one hand, the law enforcement personnel and community activists felt it was one of the primary reasons, on the other hand, economists and researchers said that field data did not substantiate the claims.

A panelist mentioned that a study conducted by UNDP on the youth¹⁰ in Karachi found no connection between violence and unemployment. It was found that the youth does not turn to violence because they are unemployed. They could be employed and still turn to VE groups because the employment doesn't allow them a livable wage and security. There is no evidence to suggest that VE groups recruit only from the absolutely unemployed versus the marginally employed.

However, the law enforcement personnel had a different vantage point from researchers. They pointed out that VE recruits, especially suicide bombers, get paid a fixed amount and their families get taken care of. According to them, deprivation is always a factor in criminality. In hundreds of interrogations, they say young men invariably confess monetary incentives and jobs being promised in return for violence undertaken.

The issue of definitions: unemployment/under-employment

Exclusionary labor markets consist of not just unemployment but also – more pervasively in Pakistan – underemployment. The underemployed do not have decent work or livable wages and barely eke out a living in menial and part time jobs.

The issue of definitions of employment and decision to use unemployment or to include under-employment has implications for redress policies. Job creation will address a small number of unemployed persons and not those in marginal activities.

The category of unemployment as a metric of dysfunctional economy emerged in the West after wars. Western societies started marking unemployment as an indicator to track macro-economic directions because of different realities, where formal employment and unemployment benefits were a norm. We started using this category for our statistics and for our economy without the two requisites. In Pakistan, the majority of employment is informal, and there are no labor-based safety nets. There are usually no contracts, arbitrary hiring and firing, high turnovers, all

characteristic of labor surplus societies. Employment in these cases does not deliver a livable wage and is therefore not a safeguard against poverty and deprivation.

Unemployment is not a feasible indicator, and a more relevant category is labor force participation. The concept captures those who are willing to work. For the youth, labor force participation is 42% country-wide¹¹.

Another important economic indicator related to employment is the level of investment. In Pakistan, investment to GDP ratio remained, on an average, 16% during the past two decades. In contrast, other similarly situated countries have an investment to GDP ratio of about 30%¹². Because the investment rate is so low, the basic condition of job creation is not being met. The combined evidence so far suggests that the youth bulge is expected to be more of a liability than an opportunity.

The UNDP study found that across Karachi, the main demand of young men was for public sector jobs. The usual perception is that the demand for public sector employment is primarily in rural areas where the economy provides few options. Considering Karachi is the financial hub of the country with a dominant private sector, dissatisfaction with the terms and conditions offered by private sector in terms of job insecurity and low wages is evident.

While unemployment and under-employment create specific vulnerabilities, these cannot be countered by simplistic youth training and capacity building initiatives.

The police personnel who participated in the dialogue also recognized that unemployment may not in itself be a useful analytical category, a broader concept of economic stress or financial deprivation is more relevant in this case. He also gave the example of three youth recovered who were recruited as suicide bombers, all three from Awaan Colony in Karachi, who belonged to financially comfortable, relatively well-off, religiously inclined families.

The question of whether unemployment or underemployment provides a causality or a vulnerability cannot be resolved without adequate primary research on the issue in the local context. The two, however, do have different implications.

Overall, while unemployment and under-employment create specific vulnerabilities, these cannot be countered by simplistic youth training and capacity building initiatives. Supply side efforts need to be in tandem with job creation and demand enhancement, and hence cannot be kept outside macroeconomic considerations. And, even where such efforts are instituted, it is critical to focus on who avails opportunities and who benefits, in order to ensure grievances are not strengthened and horizontal inequalities are not reproduced and perpetuated.

Understanding violent extremism

Schmid (2013)¹³ includes economic conditions in socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion as a push factor, but place equal primacy on a) lack of future perspectives, b) reaction to prior experience of violence, c) anger on injustice and discrimination, and d) unresolved political conflicts. Schmid argues that ideological radicalization, where it happens at all, generally follows after individuals join VE groups.

Rana (2018)¹⁴ points out that while militant groups usually have broad objectives and revolutionary manifestoes, in daily functioning their issues remain confined to narrow, territorial frameworks. He raises the question whether ambitious stated objectives are actual targets or mere rhetoric to attract others, and whether it is a systemic approach to initially focus on immediate challenges and gradually expand operations.

One research study¹⁵ maps a class analysis of the manifestations of VE, finding that in poor and low income groups radicalization is sectarian in nature, in middle income groups it stems from political issues such as occupation of Afghanistan and Indian-held Kashmir, whereas in the upper strata the motivation is pan-Islamist causes such as revival of Islamic laws, setting up an Islamic state or restoring a caliphate. While this postulation is not presented with empirical data, it may well be valid. It may be possible to do a similar assessment for other forms of VE which are not based on religion, namely ethnic violence, gang violence and various mafias.

Most donor-led work on violent extremism usually tracks religious extremism only, whereas in Karachi, for instance, the issue is more of secular forms of violence. Violence in Karachi usually pivots around i) issues of ethnicity, ii) on issues of migrants, and iii) engineered by formal political parties. One major line of thought was that there is no spontaneous violence in Karachi – that it was always organized, funded and generated. A better understanding of who perpetuates violence and how needs to be developed.

To understand why violence is a recurring phenomenon, a deeper understanding of the political economy of violence needs to be developed. Given the general environment of informality and resultant resource grabbing, and given that the local governance does not deliver for citizens and remains a site for political wrangling, violence becomes a way of mediating claims to scarce resources.

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Correlation of education levels to violent extremism

In the early years following the ‘War on Terror’, the focus remained on religious seminaries as a prime site for generating VE. While there is some evidence linking certain madrassahs to VE groups in Pakistan, it has not held as a paradigm for religious seminaries as a whole, and in any case, enrolment in madrassahs is lesser than initially assumed. According to recent researches, the focus on the nexus between VE and madrassahs was misplaced and overstated.¹⁶

Over the years, significant evidence has emerged that VE recruits also emerge from institutions of higher education. Extremists have been found in students of professional colleges and even university teachers. Banned groups, Hizb-ul-Tahrir and Ansar-ul-Sharia reportedly targeted campuses and well-educated young men for recruitment. VE groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) reportedly had a local cadre who completed intermediate education, could speak multiple languages, published their own magazines and were social media savvy. One of the main forms of TTP propaganda circulation in the tribal belt was production of pamphlets in Urdu, indicating they were reaching out to literate people who knew Urdu and not just the vernacular.¹⁷

Political observers point out that radicalism is not the domain of those with lower education levels because the mainstream education system is itself imbued with intolerant teachings. The regular curriculum also entrenched discrimination and extremist or regressive mindsets are perpetuated in the mainstream government education system.

The level and kind of education may play a role in the kind of place and responsibility given within VE groups, but it is not an indicator of being drawn to VE groups in the first place. A World Bank study on violent extremist in the MENA region¹⁸ found no evidence of higher education being a deterrent from joining VE groups, and instead found that different levels of education create different roles inside VE groups: administrators are likely to have tertiary education, suicide fighters likely to have secondary education and frontline fighters likely to have only primary education. They found religious knowledge to be low and present only in the more highly educated recruits. The effect of education in this case impacts the role and function individuals have in VE groups, and not on whether they join VE groups in the first place.

Different levels of education create different roles inside VE groups.

However, not enough empirical research has been done on Pakistan's context to establish whether there is a variation between those joining different kinds of VE groups (faith-based, organized mafias, street crime, gang wars, ethno-political violent groups) and education levels, and there is a dearth of comparative work.

One clear recommendation that emerged from the dialogue is the need for the youth to be given civic education, knowledge of constitution and citizenship, citizen/state obligations and responsibilities and functions. The youth needs to be made an active stakeholder in the system.

Education consistently emerges on the list of top solutions to all societal problems, including for redress of violent extremism. But there is a need to further qualify this prescription, to not just provide for education but to focus on the kind of education which should be provided.

Moreover, Ford (2017) urges a precautionary note about 'weaponizing education'¹⁹. The near universal focus on education as a panacea changes its purpose. Securitized education becomes fixed on 'transforming mindsets', blurs the distinction between the uneducated and the extremist, making uneducated people the frightening and threatening 'Other', while the ones getting educated get recast as soldiers fighting extremism, creating other sets of insecurities.

In Pakistan, several peace education (PE) programs have been launched post 9/11. However, no comprehensive study has been conducted to assess the impact of such programs. A research study by Zahid Ahmed²⁰ attempted to fill this gap, and found that peace education was not institutionalized and limited to NGOs; constrained by the lack of capacity; implemented in ad hoc manner; missed targeting critical beneficiaries; remained led by westernized models; and further suffered by the government's increasing distrust of NGOs. It noted that while good pedagogical material has been developed in local languages, much of it is based on the western model of interpersonal conflict management and not on collective societal conflicts, and neither do they critically analyze wars to understand the financial and human costs of conflict, nor do they address disarmament, environmental security and structural violence. Ahmed (2018) emphasizes the need to revamp and institutionalize peace education through curriculum reforms. This would overcome another barrier identified in this study; conflict-sensitive approaches limit and compromise the outreach of PE programs to safer areas, outside the control of VE actors and consequently beyond relevant target groups.

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Exit and reintegration

A wider political and social debate is required to discuss and identify a strategy to facilitate an exit from VE. There has been no national level political discussion or consensus of what to do with those who attempt to or are made to exit VE groups. It has not been debated in parliament or assemblies, and hence has no political ownership or even involvement – the issue remains securely in the ambit of the military’s discretion.

The police personnel in Karachi further added that reintegration should not focus only on those leaving militant groups but those on the furthest margins of urban society; street children and orphans must be considered as well. They are outside the system and there are no workable solutions for their supervision and wellbeing – adoption is not legally possible, there is no foster system in place, so they end up either as victims to crime or perpetrators of crime and VE.

Currently there are no programs for rehabilitation, no jobs, the stigma of violent criminality or jail term or both. While senior leadership of VE groups remain in either prisons or safe-houses or have fled, the police points towards the issue of lower cadres which are far higher in number. Many of them were not directly involved in the violence according to the police, and have now become a social burden – the extremist label becomes their entire identity with no reintegration possibilities.

Looking into the question of reintegration of militants in Pakistan, Basit (2017) compared the models used in Egypt and Indonesia to suggest urgent steps to reshape Pakistani policies. Like in the former two countries, judicial trials and prison sentences should precede the reintegration process, without which the legitimacy of the justice system will get undermined. Basit shows that authorities in both countries sought ideological transformation of militant groups and not just behavioral changes, and that the change be communicated downstream, by top leadership to lower cadres. However, in asking whether the VE actors in Pakistan would agree to these changes, he concludes that they most likely would not, as it would take away their legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. He cautions that “If the reintegration strategy is not carefully thought out, the reintegration of these militant groups will be fraught with dangers of bringing the extremist narrative into the mainstream.”²¹

Reintegration should not focus only on those leaving militant groups but those on the furthest margins of urban society; street children and orphans must be considered as well.

An expert on Pakistan’s militants, Muhummad Amir Rana concludes his study on behaviours of militant groups finding little prospects of their reintegration and mainstreaming into society, though he suggests it is still worth exploring with conventional militant groups (Rana, 2018).

Bjorgo and Horgan (2009)²² note that DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) are core elements in moving from civil war towards stability, which are usually absent from counterterrorism strategies and in research on terrorism. Noting the general lack of distinction between cognitive and behavioral aspects, they point out what they consider a flawed assumption that changes in values precede changes in behavior, that people's values must be changed before their actions change. They find evidence that individuals do not always join extremist groups because they hold extremist views, but that joining groups for other reasons has a radicalizing effect. They conclude that it is more important to change violent behavior than change radical attitudes.

Key messages

1. Youth employment policies should aim at improving the quality of life rather than merely job creation

Recommendations

- Equal employment opportunities for youth should be guaranteed to ensure that grievances are not strengthened and inequalities are not reproduced
- In addition to increasing employment opportunities, better working conditions and living wages should be ensured as well

2. Reintegration of youth who had engaged with violent groups needs to be addressed as a social concern

Recommendations

- The issue of reintegration should be debated in the parliament and provincial assemblies to develop and implement an actionable framework
- Law enforcement agencies should work with provincial and local governments to create a surveillance mechanism to ensure there is no lapse back

3. Education system should respond to the needs of young people for adapting to a plural and democratic polity and society

Recommendations

- Peace-building, conflict resolution and critical thinking should be integrated into educational institutes through curriculum reform
- Youth should be given practical knowledge of the constitution, legal rights and means of interface with state institutions

NOTES

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Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) is a policy research think tank. Since its establishment in 1995 as a private non-profit company, SPDC has made significant intellectual contribution in placing issues of pro-poor growth and social development on Pakistan's policy-making agenda. With a focus on issues related to poverty and inequality, governance, social service delivery, gender, and pro-poor macro-economic policy, it contributes to the national goal of social development through research, policy advice, and advocacy. Being an independent and non-partisan research organization, the centre collaborates and cooperates with organizations working on issues relevant to its mandate both at home and abroad. It determines its own agenda and has successfully maintained its independence and balance between responsive and proactive social sector research. SPDC is governed by a voluntary Board of Directors.



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