



POLICY BRIEF

Preventing violent extremism The role of communications

Isel van Zyl

Activities designed to prevent violent extremism in Africa aim at addressing the drivers of violence in communities and regions. However, given challenges like the inaccessibility of rural communities and a lack of participation by the beneficiaries, how can civil society organisations and governments use communications campaigns to reach their target audiences?

Key findings

- ▶ Poverty and unemployment are believed by the respondents in the study to be the biggest drivers of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin and Côte d'Ivoire.
- ▶ The majority of communications campaigns implemented by local actors target young people and women as the most vulnerable and easily exploited by extremist groups.
- ▶ Communications strategies should be relevant to the age and gender of the target group.
- ▶ Challenges persist regarding the development of relevant indicators that measure the outcomes of communications strategies.
- ▶ The lack of capacity to develop relevant content and the dearth of knowledge regarding the best medium to use remain significant challenges for local civil society organisations (CSOs).
- ▶ Radio and face-to-face meetings remain the two main methods of communication in local settings.
- ▶ Developing counter-narratives requires expertise that most CSOs do not have. Positive narratives, as well as vocational training and psycho-social support, should be considered acceptable and complementary approaches to other activities developed for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE).
- ▶ The majority of practitioners engaged in P/CVE operate in rural and low-tech environments and are often unable to reach the communities by road. This emphasises the need for bespoke communications campaigns in order to reach these rural communities.
- ▶ There is a need for governments to develop a communications strategy for P/CVE practitioners.

Recommendations

- ▶ Given that poverty and unemployment are believed by the respondents in the five countries participating in the study to be the biggest drivers of violent extremism, CSOs and governments should design their communications campaigns to address these grievances.
- ▶ CSOs and practitioners should consider including messages regarding gender roles into their communications campaigns, while making efforts to remove the stigma around women and young people joining the discussions and being given a place at the table.
- ▶ Logistical support to CSOs can include the provision of translators and interpreters to assist with the translation of texts and dialogue into local languages.
- ▶ International organisations should consider providing training to local CSOs regarding the development of communications campaigns. This will also provide them with the skills to optimally evaluate their activities.
- ▶ Governments should consider including a communications strategy within their P/CVE national action plans to guide the CSOs when developing their content. This will also allow for uniformity regarding the message, where necessary.
- ▶ Governments should consider including positive messaging as part of the school curriculum and children should be exposed to positive narratives from a young age.

Introduction

Communications strategies play a vital role in violence prevention and peace building initiatives.¹ The term 'communications strategies' covers a variety of activities including messaging campaigns, theatre shows, dialogues, group discussions and preaching by religious leaders.²

There are numerous initiatives designed for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) currently being implemented in the Lake Chad Basin, many of them aiming to raise awareness on various issues around the prevention of violent extremism and the dangers associated with terrorist groups. The majority of these awareness-raising campaigns aim at strengthening resilience.³ Considering Africa's developing status and the high number of rural communities across the continent, the study found that local civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the field of P/CVE are increasingly considering including more formalised communications campaigns in the projects in order to reach more people. Because of developmental challenges, innovative ideas are required to reach rural communities with the right sort of messaging, which could play a vital role in addition to the organisations' other P/CVE activities.

If local CSOs can adapt to using more approaches that include communications campaigns as part of their P/CVE initiatives, it may save time and reduce logistical difficulties. Given that most of the CSOs in West and Central Africa aim at reducing vulnerability by raising awareness, this can be more easily achieved through multiple online mediums when the communities are unable to be reached physically.

CSOs working in regions such as the Lake Chad Basin, especially the ungoverned regions, face numerous challenges. Firstly, rural areas generally have connectivity difficulties or a complete lack of a network, or the network is turned off by security forces. Given the general poverty of rural communities, individuals are often unable to afford credit; and the cellphones they use are rarely smartphones. Rural areas also usually do not have a high level of literacy as compared to urban areas. Thus, CSOs need to find more innovative ways to contact their illiterate and hard-to-reach target audiences.⁴

This policy brief will discuss the role of communications in the prevention and countering of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin and in Côte d'Ivoire.

Methodology

During a capacity-building workshop in Abuja, Nigeria in August 2019, a semi-structured questionnaire was disseminated and participants were asked to contribute to the study. The participants were representatives from local CSOs working in the ungoverned border regions of the Lake Chad Basin (including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger), as well as in Côte d'Ivoire. The CSOs are working to prevent violent extremism in their countries and in the region.

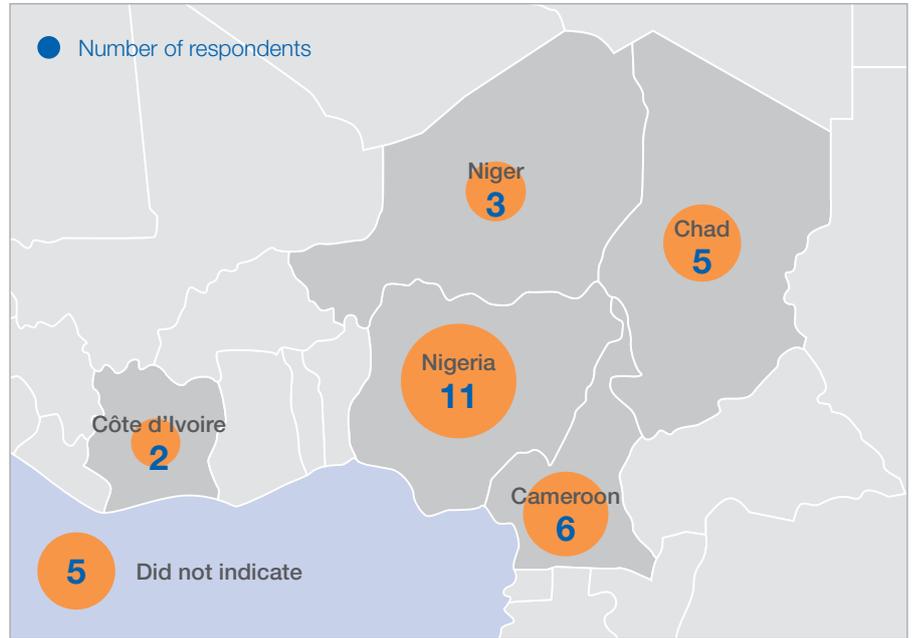
Positive narratives aim at reducing vulnerability by spreading accurate information regarding violent extremism

Debates during the workshop surfaced regarding the difference between counter-narratives and positive narratives and the sustainability of these activities. Counter-narratives are usually compiled and developed by religious leaders, imams and clerics who have extensive knowledge of the Qur'an.⁵ Positive narratives usually refer to messages of peace, messages promoting tolerance and multiculturalism and messages that inform the communities. Positive narratives, apart from offering constructive and productive messages, also aim at reducing vulnerability by spreading accurate information regarding violent extremism. One respondent shared that, for example, they ask former combatants to openly discuss their experience within the group and the disillusionment they were facing before they decided to defect. Given that local CSOs often have limited expert capacity, they should be encouraged to develop positive and alternative narratives, rather than counter-narratives.

Limitations of the study

Questionnaires were used because the high number of respondents did not allow for one-on-one interviews. This may have limited the quality of data gathered, because there was no time to ask any follow-up questions. Some respondents declined to indicate their country of origin and some respondents declined to answer certain questions.

Figure 1: Country distribution among participants

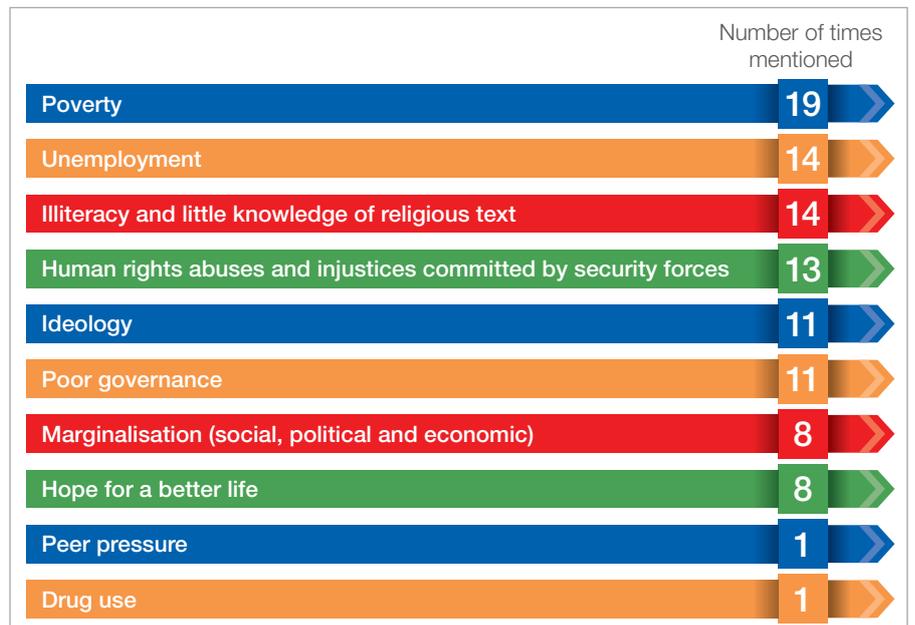


What drives violent extremism in communities?

The respondents were asked what they would consider the biggest threat to peace in their communities. The respondents listed violent extremist groups (like Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province), criminal groups and armed gangs, intercommunity violence, violence caused by the loss of natural resources and lastly, military and security forces.

Respondents were also asked what they would consider the three main drivers of violent extremism in the communities they operate in, or alternatively, the three main factors that make individuals vulnerable to recruitment.

Figure 2: Drivers of violent extremism



COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGNS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN THE PREVENTION AND COUNTERING OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

If a communications strategy aims at building resilience and raising awareness, the first step would be to identify the drivers of violent extremism in the communities in the region. The most frequently listed driver of violent extremism is poverty, followed by illiteracy and unemployment. Equally notable is the fact that human rights abuses, marginalisation and poor governance together account for nearly as many drivers mentioned by participants. The concern this raises is how a communications strategy could be designed to address these factors, especially since factors like poor governance, marginalisation driven by political leaders and human rights abuses are not within the control of local CSOs.

The most frequently listed driver of violent extremism is poverty, followed by illiteracy and unemployment

One respondent from Nigeria said that the manner in which they try to address poverty and unemployment within their limited capacity is to promote the idea and dream that everyone can be successful: ‘The image of a young boy that portrays a progressive move from being just a farm boy to getting education, graduating and becoming a leader will challenge others.’⁶ Another respondent said that if they were given the funding to develop a communications strategy he would target both men and women and attempt to inform them that ‘there are many ways to earn a living that are not tied to money. The objective will be to have a youth group that will contribute positively to society and the community.’⁷

The respondents made it clear that communications campaigns are only one of the facets of the work they do to prevent violent extremism. Some of the drivers listed in figure 2 cannot be addressed by positive messages and awareness-raising campaigns alone. Physical (complementary) interventions are also needed, such as vocational training and psycho-social support.⁸

Strategic communications in P/CVE

The respondents were asked whether communication is a facet of the work they do to prevent violent extremism. Thirty respondents said yes and only one said no. The respondents were asked on a scale of one to 10 (10 indicating that all respondents agree) how

important they believe it is to include communications campaigns as part of their work. The majority of the respondents agreed that communications campaigns play a vital role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism.

‘Strategic communications is the most effective way of building resilience in the community.’⁹

Aims and objectives

Figure 3: Objectives of communications strategy



In the questionnaire, the respondents were given options (see figure 3) as well as a box for ‘other’ in case the list did not include the specific aims of their organisation. The most frequently mentioned ‘aim and objective’ was promoting peace between communities, followed closely by raising awareness on P/CVE issues, and encouraging participation in discussions. This encouragement of participation stems from groups like youth and women who are often excluded during discussions within communities, causing feelings of frustration and injustice.

Another answer under ‘aims and objectives’ that was mentioned frequently were ‘positive narratives’, which suggests that local CSOs are more comfortable

developing messages that do not require expertise from a religious scholar. Factors like climate change and the decrease in herding grounds and watering holes for herders and farmers, as well as ethnically and religiously fuelled hate, remain major drivers of violence in the Lake Chad Basin, Côte d'Ivoire and local CSOs aim to address this factor by promoting peace and tolerance towards other communities. Despite proven studies that the promotion of peace and tolerance alone will not undermine Boko Haram and other groups' recruitment, the CSOs believe that this will substantially alleviate the existing tensions that could lead to conflict.¹⁰

Woman-to-woman

Youth and women were the most frequently mentioned target groups to be exploited or recruited by violent extremist groups because of their status of vulnerability.¹¹

Respondents indicated that they would approach women in the community setting and experience has shown that women prefer discussing problems and solutions with their female peers. Respondents shared that on the contrary, men would feel uncomfortable sharing their fears and emotions in a group and therefore the respondents would address men via mediums like radio or television.

'It must be acknowledged that exchanges with women are faced with an obstacle. Traditionally, women do not sit alongside men. That is why they must be met separately from men.'¹² This quote suggests that in cases where dialogue is being facilitated by CSOs, that there be women allocated to other women. The statement also means that CSOs need to keep in mind that cultural norms would prevent women from feeling comfortable enough to speak in front of men.

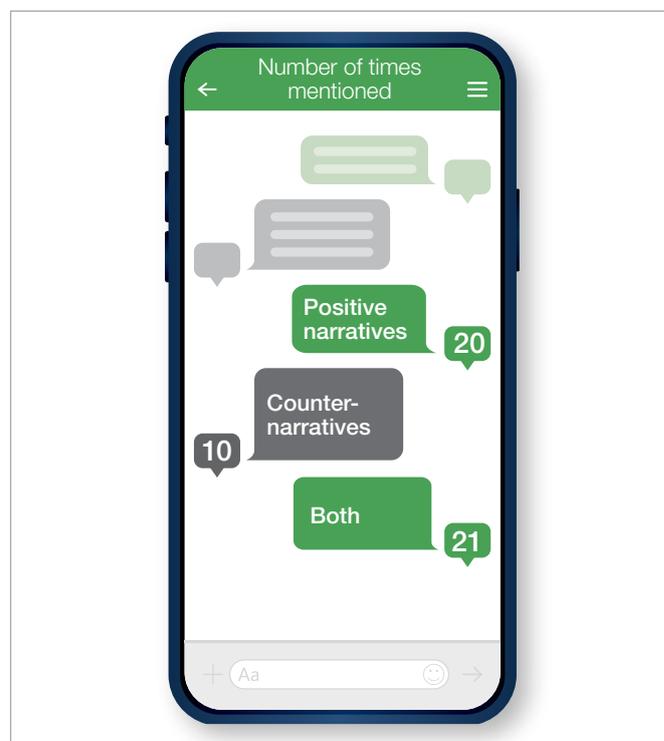
Traditionally, women do not sit alongside men. That is why they must be met separately from men

The respondents were also asked whether they believe their communications campaigns should

be adjusted according to a person's gender and the majority of the respondents answered 'yes'. Many male respondents spoke about cultural and traditional norms as the major challenge regarding communicating to different genders. Some respondents said that women tend to feel uncomfortable talking in public and cultural norms often prohibit them from attending the same meeting as their male counterparts. Another point mentioned by respondents was that women often do not travel by themselves and would be frowned upon if they left their homes and families for too long.

Crafting the message

Figure 4: Message



The majority of respondents said they believed that communications campaigns should include a combination of both counter-narratives and positive and alternative narratives.

Counter-narratives, as research from the Global Coalition Against Daesh has proven, can attract negative attention from violent extremist groups. Religious leaders who spoke out against Boko Haram's second leader, Abubakar Shekau, were killed by the group several years ago and mosques continue to be targeted.¹³

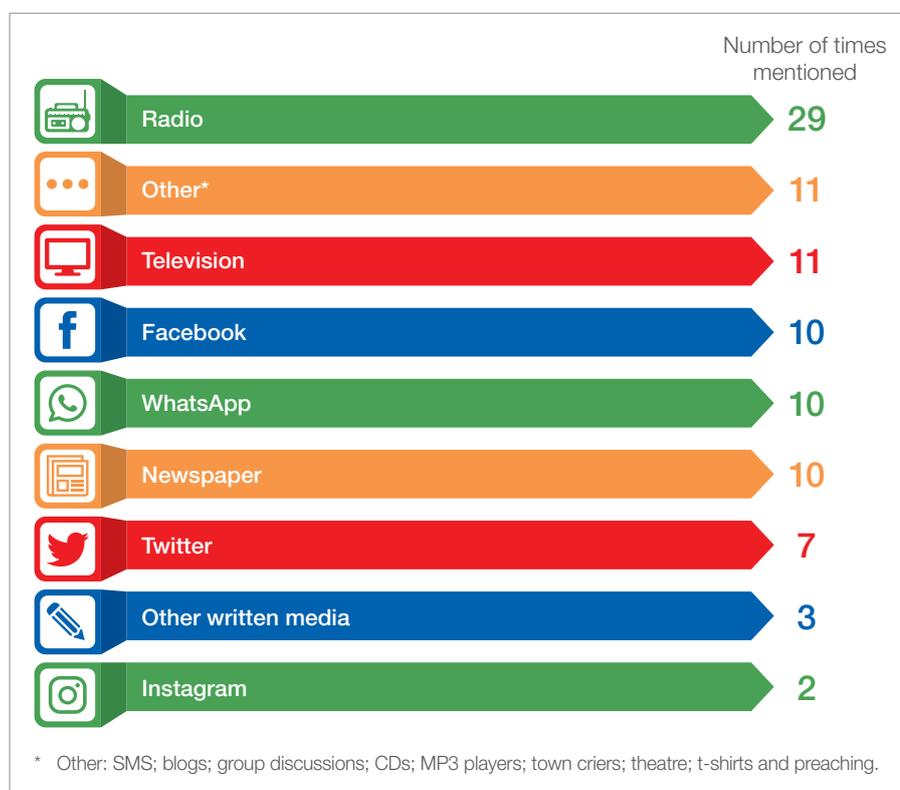
Thus, positive narratives should be considered the more sustainable option given that religious expertise is not necessarily needed and that it does not draw negative attention from violent extremist groups.

Spreading the message

The majority (19) of respondents said they are operating in low-tech environments, which refers to environments where people have limited access to modern mobile technology but do have access to radio, newspapers and television.

Platform/medium

Figure 5: Platform for communicating



The majority of respondents use radio as a means of communicating. This medium for reaching a target audience is supported by research that shows more than 90% of adults in Africa own a short-wave radio.¹⁴ Additional mediums of communicating that surfaced under the ‘other’ category were text messages, street theatre and town criers.¹⁵

Even though this question was aimed at establishing a medium of communication that did not require bringing target audiences together physically, the respondents still listed these as among the most important methods of reaching people. This can become problematic when considering that many people are reluctant to travel and leave their livelihood activities to attend a meeting.¹⁶



MORE THAN 90% OF ADULTS IN AFRICA OWN A SHORT-WAVE RADIO

A range of challenges

Figure 6: Challenges



Most of the respondents admitted to the lack of capacity when it comes to developing relevant content and adapting it for the appropriate target groups. Regarding the lack of support, one respondent from Nigeria said ‘Access to the so-called “red zone” is difficult. The government often limits this access.’

Challenges like the language barrier and acceptance from the community raises questions around the legitimacy of the messages

The language barrier remains a main challenge and the fact that some CSOs operate in communities where they do not speak the local language.¹⁷

Lack of funds was also mentioned as a challenge, which is supported by the fact that only 0.5% of development funding goes towards media development.¹⁸

Inopportunately, challenges like the language barrier, cultural and religious differences and acceptance from the community raise a question around the legitimacy of the messages and whether they have an impact, regardless of whether they reach their audience. Most of the challenges listed by respondents cannot be addressed by CSOs alone.

Evaluating the campaigns

The majority of respondents said that their method of evaluating their communications campaigns was by counting, for example, the number of people who called to discuss issues on the air or the number of people who attended the meeting. Many respondents also admitted to ‘behaviour changes’ as a method of evaluating their progress. However, this becomes difficult when no outcome indicators had been previously developed. Evaluating the message

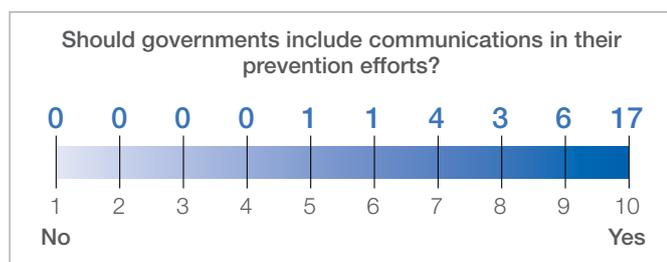


ONLY 0.5% OF DEVELOPMENT FUNDING GOES TOWARDS MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

with regards to a medium such as radio remains difficult. Whereas counting the number of people who liked a video on a Facebook page may be easier, it doesn't necessarily mean that the message reached the intended audience nor that it achieved the intended goal.¹⁹

Government's role in communications campaigns

Figure 7: Governments and communication



The majority of respondents believe that governments should include communications campaigns in their prevention efforts. One respondent from Cameroon stated that the government could 'restore trust by addressing people's problems and communicating through the radio, the television, putting up posters in villages, awareness-raising in traditional chiefdoms.'²⁰ Another respondent from Chad wrote that their government does not have a communications strategy in place '...by taking military action and by disseminating messages of peace and living together through the media. In Chad, I have not seen any message from the state promoting living together.'²¹

Communication by itself will not address the threat of violent extremism in the five countries

There is a communications component in Nigeria's Policy Framework and National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, but one respondent from Nigeria shared the need for increased guidelines regarding communications campaigns: 'If the government of Nigeria, especially at the state level, can come up with a strategic communications aspect within their P/CVE strategy, such that [it] is easily accessible, it helps local P/CVE practitioners know where and how best to plug in and contribute to the attainment of the government-designed broader PVE strategy.'²²

In agreement, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism lists 'strategic communications' as one of the seven pillars of addressing the threat worldwide. Another international agency, the Global Counterterrorism Forum's (GCTF) Zurich-London Recommendations on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online, states that governments should support local civil society to use counter- and alternative narratives online and offline.²³

Additionally, given the role that human rights abuses, injustice and marginalisation by the government can play as a driver of violent extremism, experts believe it is imperative that governments consider the role that communications campaigns can play in their P/CVE efforts. Governments' communications campaigns can be especially helpful when it comes to stating their commitment in addressing the threat of violent extremism in their countries.²⁴

Conclusion

Considering the various challenges CSOs face in reaching rural communities as well as target groups belonging to different genders and different age groups, communicating messages remotely, for example by radio, may be the suitable alternative. However, despite the communication efforts taking place in the Lake Chad Basin as well as in Côte d'Ivoire, it remains clear that communication by itself will not address the threat of violent extremism in the five countries. A thorough and well-developed communications campaign will contribute greatly to other activities. It remains a vital aspect of P/CVE because it will allow practitioners and local organisations to reach communities in rural areas where no roads exist.

Findings

- The biggest drivers of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin and Côte d'Ivoire remain poverty and unemployment, according to local actors.
- The majority of communications campaigns implemented by local actors target young people and women as they are considered the most vulnerable groups and are thus easily exploited by violent extremist groups. Cultural norms prevent women from joining discussions within the community.

- Challenges persist regarding the development of relevant outcome indicators that measure communications strategies.
- The lack of capacity to develop relevant content as well as the knowledge regarding the best medium to use to disseminate the message remain significant challenges for local CSOs.
- Radio and face-to-face meetings are the two main methods of communication in local settings.
- Civil society representatives believe that communication strategies should be relevant to the age and gender of the target group.
- Developing counter-narratives requires expertise that most CSOs do not have and thus positive or alternative narratives should be considered an acceptable and complementary approach.
- The majority of P/CVE practitioners operate in rural and low-tech environments and are often unable to reach the communities by road. This emphasises the need for bespoke communications campaigns in order to reach these rural communities.
- Local CSOs discussed the need for the government to develop a communications strategy which they could use as a guideline for P/CVE practitioners.

Recommendations

Given that poverty and unemployment are believed by the respondents in the five countries to be the biggest drivers of violent extremism, CSOs and governments should design their communications campaigns to address these grievances.

CSOs and practitioners should consider including messages dealing with gender roles into their communications campaigns, while making efforts to remove the stigma around women and young people joining the discussions and being given a place at the table.

Logistical support to CSOs can include providing translators and interpreters to assist with translating texts and dialogue into local languages so that the message can reach even more audiences.

International organisations should consider providing training to local CSOs regarding the development of communications campaigns so they can reach a larger

audience, also providing them with the skills to evaluate their activities.

Governments should consider including a communications strategy within their P/CVE national action plans as a guide for the CSOs when developing their content. This will also allow for uniformity regarding the message, where necessary.

Governments should consider including positive and alternative messaging as part of the school curriculum and children should be exposed to positive narratives from a young age.

Notes

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