



## **Roundtable Discussion on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society Engagement in Efforts to Prevent Violent Extremism—Lessons Learned from Civil Society Efforts to Promote Human Rights, Democracy, and Freedoms**

20 June 2017  
New York

### **Informal Meeting Summary**

1. As part of its ongoing effort to facilitate greater collaboration among NGOs in New York around the preventing violent extremism (PVE) agenda, [The Prevention Project](#), together with the [Global Center on Cooperative Security](#), convened a roundtable under the framework of the [Global Solutions Exchange \(GSX\)](#) for NGOs with experience engaging the United Nations on a range of issues related to preventing violent extremism (PVE), e.g., peacebuilding, gender, and human rights. The purpose was two-fold: 1) to share experiences on how and discuss the ways in which civil society space is shrinking and strategies for preserving this space in the context of PVE and 2) to brainstorm ways to strengthen the UN's engagement with civil society on PVE, particularly in the context of the recent establishment of the [UN Office of Counter-Terrorism](#) (OCT).
2. Participants acknowledged the political and structural obstacles to increasing civil society engagement in PVE. It was pointed out that even during the global CVE initiative of President Obama, civil society still faced difficulties in a number of countries. Now, NGOs are feeling pressure from the U.S. Administration in the other direction, as the White House appears to be strengthening and prioritizing relations with authoritarian leaders across the globe. The challenge now, which extends beyond the PVE sphere, participants underscored, is how CSOs can best confront that trend globally. To date, over 100 governments have introduced restrictive laws limiting the work of CSOs, with the restrictions taking multiple forms and justified to ensure more accountability and transparency. Participants examined the lessons that can be learned from NGOs with a different thematic focus that have been confronted with similar challenges in the past and present, such as those active in the promotion of human rights, freedoms, and/or democracy.
3. Participants discussed the importance of making the case to senior policy makers in national governments and the UN as to the security benefits that will accrue as a result of more CSO engagement in PVE, i.e., security-framed arguments for preserving the space for CSOs. For example, it was pointed out that a vibrant and independent civil society sector that provides opportunity for interactions between and among diverse populations and a space for constructive critical engagement with the state and thus potentially addressing grievances, is an essential pillar of preventing violence and conflict.



Moreover, it was noted that civil society actors are often the first to see and feel the impact of rising extremism and thus initiate preventive measures. Following most attacks, civil society is often the first responder. They along with other community-based organizations and leaders also have the trust and authenticity to engage most effectively locally with individuals being targeted by terrorist propaganda or those returning from conflict zones who don't pose a security threat. It was also pointed out that because violent extremist groups are generally trying to target certain local communities and civil society actors for recruitment, investing in building the resilience and social cohesion of these stakeholders should be seen as a critical element of security. Finally, the point was made that CSOs and security sectors actors, particular at the local level, often have shared priorities. However, challenges can arise when diplomats, who are often focused on larger geo-political issues, involve themselves in these discussions. Participants thus underscored the value of having the GSX produce and disseminate to senior policymakers a one-page document that clearly enumerates the security benefits of increased engagement with CSOs on PVE.

4. Participants highlighted the need for CSOs working on PVE to deepen their collaboration at the UN and learn from existing peacebuilding and other relevant networks that have been seeking to influence the UN for many years. They also spoke about how CSOs working on PVE and related fields should more regularly share their research and best practices with one another. The need for further engagement between CSOs working in the PVE and peacebuilding spheres and media, social media, and technology companies, as well as nonprofit mission driven technology organizations, was highlighted.

5. Participants recognized that a new field in PVE is emerging, which involves the potential role of new technologies in empowering communities against radicalization. Participants expressed concern for how social media has become a tool for pitting communities against each other and thereby inciting hate and furthering the isolation of people susceptible to radical ideologies. Participants suggested that technology instead be an ally by meaningfully connecting communities and creating experiences through which users can build the attitudes and awareness to prevent extreme ideologies from taking root. It was acknowledged that new collaborative media technologies are being created that can significantly increase and scale access to social and emotional learning, meriting further discussion among all stake holders including the UN OCT.

6. Participants also discussed the need to improve upon the current *ad hoc* approach of engagement between CSOs and multilateral organizations and national governments and how the GSX is attempting to facilitate more systematic and sustained interactions among these stakeholders, as well as the private sector.

7. In addition to recent GSX thematic and regional workshops, participants cited a May 2017 [letter](#) to the Secretary General (SG) signed by a group of more than 45 civil society actors from around the world expressing CSO concerns regarding the -proposed UN CT reforms. As a follow-up, it was



suggested that the GSX coordinate another letter to the SG, this time emphasize the importance of ensuring that the new UN OCT and first-ever Under-Secretary General for CT include engagement with civil society, and not simply government-friendly CSOs, as one of their priorities. To facilitate this engagement, the letter could propose an ongoing dialogue between the OCT and GSX and/or asking the Secretary-General to form a civil society advisory group dedicated to PVE and CT. Other suggested items for the letter included 1) encouraging the SG to ensure the new OCT recruits experts with experience working in or with civil society and ones with expertise on a diversity of issues including, peacebuilding, technology, media, democracy promotion, human rights, and gender; 2) proposing the formation of a civil society advisory group to the newly established UN OCT; 3), the need for UN country visits on CT or PVE to include meetings with a representative group of CSOs that are not selected exclusively by the host government, and 4) ensuring the new Under-Secretary General raise issues related to the role of CSOs in PVE and CT in his dialogues with relevant national government officials. In addition to this letter to the SG, participants also proposed sending a similar letter to the new UNDP Administrator, given UNDP's increased focus on PVE and its country-level work on this issue.

8. In terms of next steps, the GSX co-chairs (Prevention Project and [International Civil Society Action Network](#)) committed to draft and circulate for inputs and endorsement from a wide range of CSOs the above-mentioned one-page brief on the role of CSOs in PVE and the letters to the SG and UNDP Administrator.