<u>Connecting the Dots: Strengthening National-Local Collaboration in Addressing Violent Extremism</u>

By Eric Rosand, Rebecca Skellett

In 2014, scores of countries saw their citizens traveling to conflict zones in Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State and other radical groups. In the years since, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has featured prominently on the global policy agenda. The recent opening of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which brought together leaders from around the world, is no exception. The more than half-dozen P/CVE UNGA "side-events" featured predictable calls for more, and more inclusive, P/CVE national action plans (NAPs), additional contextualized research on violent extremism, an increase in locally led and owned solutions to the problems of violent radicalism, more on- and off-line counter-narratives, and more effective ways to measure the impact of P/CVE programs. They also included what has become standard fare in P/CVE conferences and workshops: the participation of diverse civil society and other local actors to present on their own P/CVE projects. While much of this was familiar, a promising innovative trend in the P/CVE space was also highlighted: increased attention to strengthening collaboration between the diverse national *and* local actors within each country working in the P/CVE space.

Obstacles to Stronger National-Local Cooperation

Bridging the divide between national and local P/CVE policies and programs has been a persistent problem. Attempts to work together have run into obstacles, including barriers to trust, poor information-sharing and collaboration on policymaking and programming. But limited attention has been dedicated to identifying and addressing these issues, which have stood in the way of effective implementation of international P/CVE best practices and NAPs at the local level. This is starting to change.

Cities have a comparative advantage in identifying and steering individuals away from extremist and other forms of violence, and tackling social polarization to prevent extremism from taking root. They are closer to and often better understand the relevant groups and individuals, and are generally more practical, more nimble, and less risk adverse than their national counterparts. But too many cities and other sub-national authorities lack the mandate, expertise, and resources to implement effective P/CVE programs. Many national governments remain reluctant to consider them as partners in addressing violent extremism or to relinquish control or resources over what they perceive to be national security concerns, and local government and civic groups are often excluded from policy and programming discussions about P/CVE.

Consultation between national governments and provincial or municipal authorities, let alone civil society, in the development and implementation of NAPs is the exception rather than the rule, even when many of the traditional prevention capacities (such as mental health professionals, teachers, and social workers, who can intervene with individuals showing signs of

turning to extremist and other forms violence before they commit a crime) are concentrated at the sub-national level. (When these capacities are centralized in capitals, the challenge of ensuring that local authorities have the resources required to be effective P/CVE players is heightened even further.) Mechanisms to promote greater involvement of sub-national authorities in P/CVE, such as elaborating a clear division of labor and facilitating sustained information sharing, remain few and far between.

Connecting the Dots

The good news is that national-local P/CVE cooperation is starting to receive more attention. There are a few promising approaches and lessons learned that address specific challenges to national-local cooperation. Many of these experiences were highlighted during the July 2018 Strong Cities Network (SCN) Global Summit and in UNGA meetings in September in New York.

Kenya offers a good example of how sub-national authorities can catalyze improved national-local cooperation around P/CVE. In this case, a number of county governments, together with local civil society organizations, developed sub-national P/CVE plans that reflect local priorities, such as the uneven provision of government services or heavy-handed police actions. These tailored, local plans have been used to inform national-level policies and approaches, including soon-to-be announced revisions to Kenya's 2015 NAP. The 2015 plan was criticized for not capturing the concerns or priorities of local communities, but is now being updated to reflect local advice. Kenya also offers an excellent example of how sub-national governments can help build trust between the national government (and, in particular, security agencies) and local civil society groups working on P/CVE and facilitate the development of mechanisms to coordinate P/CVE efforts among national and sub-national actors and donors working in a particular locality. For example, the Kwale County Commissioner recently launched a multi-stakeholder P/CVE forum involving 50 youth and human rights-focused agencies and organizations, as well as representatives from the National Counter-Terrorism Center and local donor embassies. The forum meets quarterly to discuss implementation of the county P/CVE plan.

Decentralization efforts in Jordan, as in Kenya, are helping to catalyze stronger national-local connections around P/CVE. Jordan's Ministry of Municipal Affairs is playing an increasingly important role in P/CVE in the country, including by encouraging the private sector to work with newly-elected municipal and local councils to address youth unemployment. By doing so, it is helping to address one of the main drivers of violent extremism in the country. The Ministry is also exploring ways to create a role for local, non-law enforcement stakeholders in P/CVE with plans to extend a model for local prevention already running in three Jordanian municipalities (Irbid, Karak, and Zarka) with support from the Danish Government and the Strong Cities Network (SCN). These local prevention networks act as a central coordinating body for local P/CVE efforts. They bring together a diverse multi-stakeholder group of professionals, including local government officials, social services, teachers, and faith and community

institutions already working with local communities. These coalitions design and coordinate effective prevention and resilience strategies at the local level through a wide range of activities, such as developing teacher training manuals, conducting community and youth dialogue sessions, and running social cohesion activities, all with an emphasis on preventing violent extremism from taking hold in their municipalities.

Similarly in Lebanon, one of the nine pillars of the government's recently adopted [National Strategy on PVE](#), which was developed by a cross-ministerial working group, focuses exclusively on the role of municipalities and communities. This, too, identifies SCN [local prevention networks](#) in Lebanon as key models for local implementation. Recognizing the important role such local networks can play in translating national policies into action, Lebanon's national PVE coordinator hopes to replicate this approach across Lebanon.

In Tunisia, democratization is creating more opportunities to strengthen national-local linkages. After holding in May its [first municipal elections](#) since the democratic transition, the national government is now looking to newly empowered municipal authorities to develop and implement local P/CVE projects linked to the implementation of the national P/CVE plan. Since most of the institutions in Tunisia remain in the capital, the [National Counter-Terrorism Commission](#) has asked each relevant national ministry to develop a mini-P/CVE action plan that includes a strategy for reaching the local level through local ministry representatives. Many of the challenges Tunisia faces are shared across the Middle East: limited capacities of municipalities and community-based organizations, the diffusion of hundreds of donor-funded P/CVE projects across the country, and limited connectivity between national and local P/CVE stakeholders. This has made aligning national policies and local actions difficult so far, but the lessons learned in Tunisia will be applicable elsewhere.

In Pakistan, the national P/CVE [guidelines](#), which were developed in the aftermath of the December 2014 terrorist [attack](#) at the Army public school in Peshawar, allocate roles and responsibilities for a wide range of national and sub-national authorities and non-governmental actors. This program creates an elaborate, "bottom-up," multi-stakeholder consultative process that involved more than 300 representatives from different levels of government and parts of society in the country. Challenges to implementation remain, however, including a lack of clear division of labor and resources between the federal and provincial governments, and shifting institutional and cultural preferences for kinetic (versus non-kinetic) measures. Another sticking point has been the preference in some provinces to developing their own P/CVE plans that better reflect local concerns and priorities; this is exacerbated by the fact that the severity of the threat of violent extremism varies significantly from province to province, limiting the effectiveness of a one-size-fits-all national plan.

The recent [experience](#) in Switzerland that led to the elaboration of its 2017 [NAP](#)offers another example of a national government recognizing the importance of ensuring systematic national-local cooperation in the P/CVE arena. Switzerland, too, took a "bottom-up" approach to developing its NAP; this makes sense in a country in which prevention institutions and capacities sit outside the national government and reside at the local and canton level. The

national government's P/CVE role is limited primarily to facilitating cooperation and information-sharing among local actors to ensure that good ideas and lessons learned in one canton are shared with others. The result is a federally-financed incentive fund to support locally-led implementation of the NAP, monitoring and evaluating NAP implementation across all cantons in the country. Yet, as in virtually every country, operationalizing vertical cooperation presents a range of challenges. These include ones related to information sharing between law enforcement and non-law enforcement actors, both at the local level and between cantons; this is complicated by the need to reconcile the different data protection laws in the country, with each canton having its own legislation in this field.

The approach being taken in Canada also deserves mention. There, the federal government created a center in 2016 to support and network existing P/CVE initiatives and develop new ones at the sub-national (both provincial and city) level. These initiatives include a wide range of activities, including a number of city-level multi-agency "situation tables" that identify and intervene with individuals showing signs of radicalization to violence. The center primarily focuses on connecting "with all levels of governments, not-for-profit organizations, communities, youth, frontline practitioners, academia, law enforcement, and international organizations." This emphasis on fostering program development and networking recognizes that, given how resources and authorities are allocated under Canada's federal system, the primary P/CVE role of the national government is as a facilitator and supporter (with both grants and guidance) of locally-driven initiatives.

National government-driven multilateral fora are also beginning to recognize the importance of vertical cooperation. For example, last month's meeting of the Global Counterterrorism Forum's (GCTF) Coordinating Committee eschewed its traditional approach of focusing on national and UN officials and included a first-ever session featuring perspectives from a diverse group of local officials from Australia, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their message was clear: National government-led P/CVE approaches need to invest in local service provision, emphasize local consultation and information sharing, and more broadly, prioritize building trust and cooperation with their cities and civil society. Hopefully, this will lead the GCTF and the United Nations itself to make strengthened vertical cooperation a priority as they expand their P/CVE efforts.

Emerging Best Practices

This recent concerted attention to integrating P/CVE programs has resulted in a few emerging best practices.

First, strengthening national-local cooperation around P/CVE, and effectively identifying and targeting local risks and concerns, involves overcoming a number of bureaucratic impediments. These include: identifying and overcoming jurisdictional and capacity challenges at the municipal or state level that can inhibit sub-national P/CVE contributions; understanding where sub-national and prevention capacities and resources lie; and ensuring that any P/CVE roles and

responsibilities in a NAP align with municipal and other local-level prevention capabilities, and building those capabilities where they are weak or non-existent.

Second, engaging in a consultative, multi-layered, national dialogue on countering violent extremism is essential. The dialogue should include the full range of stakeholders—national and subnational, law enforcement and non-law enforcement, civil society and government, and, where relevant, donors—and be attuned to their needs, context, and resources. This engagement should inform the drafting of a NAP, or can provide revisions to an existing plan.

Third, sub-national authorities can play a bridging role between national government and civil society actors, facilitating bottom-up and top-down information sharing around P/CVE issues. Civil society groups, when given the space and resources to operate, can play an important role in implementing NAPs at the local level, including by connecting national-level actors to municipal authorities.

Finally, regardless of the mechanisms or structures that may exist to facilitate national-local P/CVE collaboration, poor information sharing between jurisdictions and between law enforcement and non-law enforcement actors can be a significant obstacle to strengthened vertical cooperation. There are many reasons for this disconnect, including concerns about data privacy and other legal reasons, but overcoming this blockage is critical.

Civil society organizations, city authorities, and other sub-national stakeholders have a considerable comparative advantage when implementing a range of P/CVE efforts, from prevention to intervention to rehabilitation and reintegration. But their role has often been neglected in national-level P/CVE planning and implementation. For those interested in maximizing the impact of the global P/CVE agenda in communities around the world, sustained attention to strengthening national-local cooperation is essential. This will mean focusing less attention on the individual P/CVE stakeholder groups, and their often divergent goals, and more on enhancing their ability to work together towards shared objectives.