BEYOND PARTICIPANTS: THE EFFECTS OF P/CVE PROGRAMMING ON MENTORS

Understanding successes, challenges, and perceptions through a case study of the CREATE program in Kenya

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Introduction

This report outlines the learning, impacts, and challenges of a mentorship program seeking to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) on the mentors who delivered the work. The Collective Resilience to Violent Extremism (CREATE) program operated in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Mozambique from August 2019 to July 2023. Funded by United Kingdom (UK) Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), CREATE deployed an intensive mentorship model that sought to engage high-risk individuals in actions, initiatives, and processes that reduce risk to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

The report captures the experiences of CREATE mentors in Kenya and shows that a mentorship-centered model can have positive and transformative effects on mentors, as well as the mentees they are working to support. Positive impacts enable mentors to be more effective and motivated in how they support at-risk participants, while also leading to significant impacts on mentors' own lives. Negative effects experienced by mentors were largely able to be mitigated, including through applying lessons from skills training or the receipt of appropriate support from the CREATE implementing team.

These findings suggest how targeted interventions for at-risk individuals can both reduce their risk of radicalization and recruitment while also having longer term benefits on members of their wider support system—providing solid and actionable insights for investing in P/CVE mentorship-centered models.

Purpose of the study

Mentors form the backbone of many youth-focused interventions, including a large number of P/CVE programs. In P/CVE programs centered on a mentorship model, at-risk individuals are paired with community-based mentors. Mentors are often older youth or adults who provide support, guidance, and referrals to vulnerable youth participants to address their complex needs.

CREATE, one such program, developed an intensive mentorship-centered model that involved personalized engagement with high-risk individuals to explore what interventions might be effective in reducing risk of recruitment by VEOs. Program evaluations have found that participating in a mentorship program significantly reduced at-risk participants' vulnerability to violent extremist (VE) recruitment and increased their resilience.

Despite the centrality of mentors to many P/CVE programs, little attention has been given to the question of what makes for a "successful" mentor and the effects participating in these programs has on them. Mentors themselves constitute a discrete set of participants who may experience significant transformation as a result of the capacity strengthening and experience, they gain in their role. Understanding these pathways can inform mentor selection criteria, shape curricula designed for building mentors' capacity, and inform adaptations to program design needed to mitigate less desirable effects mentors may experience.

Finally, a gap in existing research exists regarding the potential effects that capacitated mentors can or have had on the institutions, community, and broader system that can sustain P/CVE gains into the future. This study seeks to address some of these gaps by gathering and analyzing feedback and data from mentors and other key CREATE program stakeholders.

CREATE's Mentorship-Centered Model: An Overview

CREATE worked with government and non-governmental organizations across its countries of implementation to support vulnerable community members towards three outcomes:

1. Targeted at-risk individuals in VE hotspots are less at risk of radicalization and recruitment by VEOs;
2. Key non-state influencers and partners are better able to respond effectively to prevent or counter radicalization and recruitment by VEOs; and
3. Government actors have increased capabilities to constructively engage other stakeholders to prevent radicalization and recruitment by VEOs.

CREATE's work with at-risk individuals built off previous programs and research to tackle five risk factors that, if addressed, could transform into resilience. These were: (i) diversification of social networks, (ii)

strength of life skills and access to livelihood opportunities, (iii) sense of agency or self, (iv) sense of one's position in society, and (v) ability to participate in governance processes. The program centered its delivery through mentors, who provided foundational psychosocial support, customized networking, referral opportunities, and skill building and guidance to youth participants.

Mentors were identified through an influencer mapping exercise based on a defined selection criterion. Mentors could be male or female and were required to be from the same community as the at-risk youth (approachable, having emerged from the challenges of that geographic area and achieved something positive. Mentors should also be young but older than the mentees (relatable); have influence within the community and the ability to network and link mentees with opportunities (credible); have no criminal past (trustworthy) and possess basic literacy.

Once selected, mentors received an initial orientation on the role of a mentor, how to conduct one-on-one and group sessions, and key factors to consider such as confidentiality, boundaries, and managing expectations. Ongoing mentor training covered topics such as life skills, self-esteem, anger management, critical thinking, and constructive communication. This was conducted over several months, with reflection and debriefs built in. Over time, and in response to the mentors' reflection of additional skills required, CREATE provided further capacity development on subjects such as addressing radicalization and drivers of VE, de-escalation and communication trainings, and psychological first aid.

As seen in the graphic above, mentors were part of a network of actors engaged under the program. This included local Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Champions/Influencers (defined as leaders in the community who could identify at-risk individuals and support problem-solving), Mercy Corps (MC) team members, and technical experts from partners such as the Global Trauma Project (GTP), which provides trauma-informed capacity support for community providers.

Selected mentors provided tailored support to up to five mentees each. This included holding weekly one-on-one sessions with each mentee and biweekly group sessions. Mentors tracked each mentee's progress,

supported attitudinal change and skill development, helped mentees develop life plans that they could work towards, and provided psychosocial support through individual and group counseling sessions. The mentor role was considered a volunteer position and mentors received a small stipend to cover transportation, airtime and mobile data, and other basic expenses.

CREATE's highly tailored and personalized mentorship approach required significant time and investment from the mentors. For example, mentors met in locations identified as most comfortable and accessible for the mentees, often requiring mentors to travel to the mentees' preferred meeting location. Due to the high levels of trust and connection generated as the program advanced, mentors were often contacted by their mentees to provide additional support outside of programmatic activities.

Study Design

This study seeks to answer three primary questions related to gaps in knowledge around mentors in P/CVE programs:

1. **What are the characteristics of a successful mentor?** Which of these characteristics are inherent, or fixed, and which can be acquired or enhanced through training and support?

2. **What effects or impact has the CREATE program had on mentors?** Effects may include capacities, attitudes, behaviors, and networks or relationships, both positive and negative.

3. **What effects or impact have CREATE mentors had on the broader supportive systems for at-risk individuals?** In what ways do mentors continue to apply their skills and competencies strengthened through CREATE when engaging with other stakeholders? To what extent do said stakeholders recognize mentors as an asset to the community and to P/CVE objectives?

This study draws on original research and analysis by MC and research partner Wasafiri Consulting during the final months of CREATE's third cohort of at-risk participants. Focus geographies included hotspot locations on Kenya's coast in Kwale, Mombasa, Kilifi, and Lamu counties. Field data includes 48 structured interviews with mentors and 20 focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders deemed relevant to understanding the program's community level impact. This includes parents of mentees (nine groups) and Champions/Influencers (11 groups).

FGDs/KIIs were completed in KiSwahili, where notes and transcripts were translated into English. Research participants gave informed consent, detailing their participation as voluntary and confidential.

The timing and study approach might have influenced the results in two ways that are important to note. First, the mentors interviewed included only those who remained in their role through the end of the program. Mentors who elected to drop out or were asked not to return for subsequent cohorts did not participate, a plausible reason why few negative impacts were reported. Second, response bias may have influenced the findings as respondents knew the goals of the program. They may have wanted to report and emphasize positive outcomes to the Wasafiri team members and consultants who facilitated the interviews and FGDs.

Findings

What are the characteristics of a successful mentor?

While CREATE used the selection criteria outlined above as a framework, its criteria for identifying mentors evolved across the three cohorts. This allowed the program team to refine their definition of qualified mentors and for particularly successful mentees from earlier cohorts to 'graduate' into a mentorship role. Finessing one's understanding of what enables a mentor's success can help future programs design the criteria used to identify mentors, including the characteristics, experience, skills, attitudes, and networks a prospective mentor should bring. Teams may also select capacities which can be built through training and additional support.

Fixed Characteristics

Among those characteristics deemed important for success, three 'fixed' criteria—those that cannot be changed or developed through training and support—were identified as valuable. These include (i) previous experience in civil society or similar roles, (ii) previous exposure to traumatic events and hardship to enable them to identify with mentees, and (iii) context-specific age and gender factors.

Previous experience in civil society or peacebuilding roles was central to how mentors perceived their success. This was typically connected to specific skills and information gained through professional outlets. For example, one respondent felt more prepared to take on their role as a mentor as they already had experience working with at-risk groups in "hot spots" in Mombasa.

Having shared life experiences, including past exposure to traumatic or challenging life events, was associated with allowing mentors to better connect with mentees. Experiencing personal challenges and persisting despite a difficult background reportedly increases a mentor's ability to empathize with a mentee's experiences. This was notable when mentors could recall specific moments when they made a specific decision to avoid situations that might have increased their willingness to engage in violence.

> *"I had close social networks of at-risk groups because I used to frequent their maskanis (social spaces) …My father had lots of traumas that affected my well-being. My turning point [was] when I made a big decision to reduce my time in the maskani. In my view, no one was born a mentor. I believe [good] mentors have gone through personal challenges, and difficult backgrounds."*
>
> - *Mentor, Kilifi*

Finding gender- and age-appropriate matches for mentees was likely important for building trust and acceptance among mentees and their families in most locations. The program attempted to pair male mentees with male mentors and women mentees with women mentors, in recognition of cultural sensitivities and norms. While few respondents specifically noted the importance of gender matching to their success, we expect this was because it was given in the design. Similarly, the program sought to place mentees with mentors who were slightly older than themselves, noting traditional norms around age, respect, and perceptions of experience.

Cases where gender and age matches were not possible did lead to some tensions. In the minority of cases where mentors were unable to overcome this, the local program team matched mentees with a different mentor. In other instances, mentor-mentee pairs collaborated to build understanding and confidence in

those expressing concern. For example, multiple parent respondents appreciated hearing firsthand about the value of a mentor's support and the program's purpose. As one parent from Lamu said, *"When I saw the mentor to my son for the first time, I found him to be very young but out of the feedback I would get from my son, I gained confidence in him and I think he is doing ok now."*

Depending on the specific norms of a program location, gender and age matching might be important for success. In others, demographic differences between mentors and mentees could present positive opportunities to reduce bias and challenge preconceived expectations about other demographic groups.

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Non-Fixed Characteristics

Understanding influenceable factors that make a mentor successful can aid in the design of capacity strengthening approaches and the forms of support most likely to induce positive change and enable mentors' success. **Many non-fixed characteristics, or those we define as factors that can be developed over time, seem to increase a mentor's reported success.** Five characteristics mentioned during the FGDs are particularly notable: (i) motivation, (ii) socioemotional skills, (iii) creative problem solving, (iv) trustworthiness, and (v) strong referral networks. While mentors ideally came into the program with some foundation in these areas, capacity building activities plus one's experience of being a mentor could strengthen them over time.

1) Motivation

Motivation is extremely important in mentoring because the problems mentors are attempting to solve are complex, often difficult to address, time consuming, and without a clear formula for success. Making the choice to mentor requires motivation in and of itself. In the case of CREATE, this motivation is likely tied to one's personal belief about what is to be gained from preventing violence in their community. Similar to findings from Grant et al., 2007, **a key motivator for some mentors was 'seeing' their impact on the beneficiaries and being recognized for their work.**

> *"It is when a parent of one of the mentees came to me and thanked me for helping his child…Upon joining the CREATE program…the mentee completely changed as narrated by the*

father who stated that he got back his child. This gave me the urge and morale of wanting to touch the lives of many vulnerable youths positively."

- *Mentor, Lamu*

Mentors also experienced a drive to serve their community, which we define as **mission driven motivation** (Honig, 2022), and to help confront the challenging experiences mentees face.

"The current mentees are truly at risk, most have issues around gender-based violence (GBV), most are orphans, they depend on mentors for financial, emotional, and psychological support. This has led mentors to creating more opportunities and time for the mentees outside the program allocated time. This is not forced but mentors feel it is only right to help, because you also reflect what you have gone through."

- *Mentor, Mombasa*

And, while the provision of a stipend provided a small financial incentive to serve as a mentor, the respondents indicated this was not the only motivation to continue for most. Mentorship required a substantial commitment of time and a number of mentors noted voluntarily using personal financial resources to support engagement with mentees outside of the formal program structure. It is unlikely they would dedicate these resources if financial benefits were their primary motivation for participating.

In fact, those designing P/CVE activities should also take care when determining the size and frequency of monetary incentives to right-size the prospect of financial compensation with intrinsic motivation.

2) Socioemotional Skills

Socioemotional skills refer to a person's abilities to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behavior. While less studied in adults and older youth than in children, socioemotional skills are known to be malleable. **Skills such as emotional regulation, patience, and perseverance were perceived as making mentors more likely to serve as a strong role model and ensure their mentees persisted within the program activities.**

As a mentor in Kwale said, '*perseverance*' is extremely important because "*as mentors, we handle difficult people and situations, and if you don't persevere, you will run away from the work*."

Both parents of mentees and champions recognized how previously held by the mentors or enhanced due to CREATE activities, led mentors to contribute positively to community development.

"[Mentors must be] patient because these children have been stubborn with their parents. If they aren't patient [the mentees] might end up leaving them."

- *Parent, Mombasa*

As with other non-fixed characteristics, many of these socioemotional skills were grown and reinforced through the program and are noted below in the positive effects the program had on mentors.

3) Adaptability and Creative Problem Solving

Mentors consistently stressed that their work was far from 'rote' and required them to be adaptive and actively seek outside resources to solve problems. This aligns with the idea that solving VE is a 'wicked' problem (Head, 2019), in which actors need a high degree of creativity and autonomy to solve at the community level, including recognizing that the benefits of mentorship may not be immediately realized.

> *"Mentorship is a journey, and a mentor has to be able to handle challenges from the mentees as they come. It needs personal initiative to follow up on the mentees' path and offer support they will need from time to time…Trusting the process gives you lots of creativity, that way, you can be more resourceful out of that."*
> - *Mentor, Mombasa*

To meet the unique challenges posed by working with at-risk individuals, mentors needed to actively engage with one another and with additional outside resources. As one mentor in Mombasa said, *"The mentees can...refuse to respond. If you choose to go by the book, you may never gain anything. Sometimes you have to introduce activities different from the book."*

Another Mombasa-based mentor discussed drawing on other mentors to support their mentee noting how *"...addressing GBV and marriage issues was a challenge. I had not handled such cases before and the ones the mentees had were beyond control. We got the other mentors involved, and helped the mentee get peer support."*

Putting adaptability into practice when facing a challenge seemed directly related to a mentor's increased confidence in their decision-making abilities. Even when operational challenges put their motivation at risk, mentors reported on how creatively mitigating obstacles led them to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, traveling to meet mentees in person was a common logistical challenge faced by multiple mentors. Arranging meetings in a way that allowed them to travel together helped address some of the time and financial costs that could have impeded one's ability to follow through on their intentions to engage their mentee meaningfully.

4) Trustworthiness

Because CREATE worked with people most vulnerable to VE recruitment and radicalization, many mentees had never previously participated in organized activities or benefited from community or NGO interventions. Because their deep distrust of others in the community was part of this vulnerability, it was essential to find mentors who could reach them effectively and 'break through'.

Mentors had to be trusted if they were to have a strong working relationship with their mentees and the community. Mentors observed that visible behaviors such as confidentiality and being nonjudgmental were crucial if mentees were to open up to them. Trust from mentees was observed as likely to stem from a baseline level of community trust and recognition. If a mentee perceives their mentor as an adversary or unqualified, resistance is all the more likely.

> *"[A good mentor] needs different skills like communication skills, listening skills. He needs to be trusted by the community then the mentees will easily trust you."*

Mentor, Lamu

Some noted how role modeling strong moral character helps signal trustworthiness as well.

> "*CREATE has made me realize how [confidentiality] reduces exposure risks to mentees and mentors too…Mentees open up on their trauma therefore the need to observe confidentiality and adherence.*"

Mentor, Mombasa

Feelings of trustworthiness can undoubtedly grow over time, the result of a mentor's signaling of their attitudes and character. It also aligns with some of the immutable characteristics noted above, such as coming from the same community and sharing similar experiences and matching the mentee's gender and age needs.

5) Strong Referral Networks

Lastly, to succeed in their role, mentors require more than just knowledge but also **strong networks to ensure resources and alternative opportunities become accessible to mentees**. This was the most frequently mentioned way that mentors impacted mentees' long-term outcomes, as reported under this qualitative study.

> ❯ **SUMMARY: CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL MENTOR**

This study revealed a set of fixed, or those that cannot be changed or developed through training and support, and non-fixed, or factors that can be developed over time as increasing a mentor's likelihood of success.

Fixed Characteristics include:

- Previous experience in civil society or similar roles
- Previous exposure to traumatic events and hardship
- Context-specific age and gender factors.

Non-fixed characteristics include:

- Enhanced skills and capabilities
- Improved networks and opportunities

The most successful mentors either had strong networks at the start of the program or expanded them and gained the ability to leverage them as a result of the program activities. While referrals were not initially central to CREATE's mentorship model, their value became apparent within the earlier cohorts, guiding recruitment criteria of mentors and activity design within the program's later years.

Relationships with government, civil society, or private sector stakeholders meant mentors could better shepherd mentees towards programs, services, and opportunities. As a mentor in Kwale said, *"A good mentor is one who goes the extra mile to link the mentee to ideas, programs, and influential people/spaces who can help the mentee. So a good mentor should have a good network of potential support for the mentees."*

Parents of mentees reported valuing the mentors and expressed eagerness for more programming of this type. For example, **parents observed that their children had found greater purpose, motivation, and agency to seek a new life trajectory** following their engagement with CREATE's mentorship model and related livelihood opportunities. One parent in Mombasa felt that their daughter's emotional and financial wellbeing had improved since her mentor connected her to livelihood opportunities. Not only did this

increase her financial independence, but it also led to what her parent referred to as *"hope for her future"*. If similar opportunities remain accessible, parents felt their children would be more likely to resist VE and seek alternative opportunities due at least in part to their mentor's contributions.

What positive effects did CREATE have on mentors?

Overall, mentors reported strong positive effects of their participation in CREATE, supporting them to further nurture characteristics and success factors they possessed at the outset and to develop new ones. This study identified two core areas where mentors felt positive impacts from participating in the program: (i) enhanced skills and capabilities, and practical application of these skills, and (ii) improved networks and opportunities.

Many positive effects on mentors mirrored the program's most important impacts on the high-risk mentees. For example, enhanced skills and capacities of mentors directly supports the increases in sense of agency, position in society, and effective participation in decision-making seen among mentees. Similarly, mentors leveraged their expanding network to enhance their mentees' diversification of social networks and access to livelihoods. In cases where mentees graduated to become mentors in subsequent cohorts, this progression along the risk-to-resilience dimensions was particularly notable. Links between the mentors' transformations and mentees' increases in resilience indicates that the program influenced and affected the mentors in highly relevant ways for promoting long-term resilience of communities to violent extremism.

1) Enhanced Skills and Capabilities

The strongest perceived personal effect of participation as a mentor was an increase in both cognitive and technical skills and capabilities. While aware that their role as mentors was to imbue certain skills and behaviors on mentees, mentors reported substantial personal skill growth as well. Mentors seemed to benefit from practice applying these new skills in their day-to-day environment and when setting an example for others through the mentorship process.

For example, **in spite of their own challenging pasts, mentors reported enhanced confidence in their abilities to help others, to act as a community facilitator, and to improve their community.** They reported an increase in knowledge about how to respond to new challenges and existing pressures by applying skills gained under CREATE, including leveraging an increase in self-control, emotional regulation, and executive functioning.

> *"I have behavioral changes in myself. I am now identifying myself as a leader. I have to be very civilized and walk with a lot of integrity so that respect is maintained…I have to present well for my image and reputation."*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

> **"***I used to feel judged because we are poor. Out of the skills and experience I have acquired as a mentor, I am now social. I engage with even stakeholders I never thought I would like politicians, security agents and administration officers. I am not ashamed to address people's problems and offer them solutions. I never used to be like this."*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

"My self-confidence has been boosted; I am more proactive, I uphold self-care. I relate with people better; I am a keen listener."

- *Mentor, Mombasa*

Parents confirmed these changes in mentors' agency and confidence.

"They have changed from ordinary persons to professionals…[The mentor] used to be childish, he had anger issues and was very rowdy but now he has grown up. He is responsible and he even advises people who are older than him."

- *Parent, Kilifi*

Respondents also noted how an expanded understanding of how and when to mediate conflicts helped them serve as stronger community advocates. Mentors began to play a role in sensitively mediating local disturbances and disputes using both skills and credibility gained through training under CREATE. As one mentor said, "*I have become moderate in how I give advice to, for example, couples.*" And, though reported less frequently, receiving training or advice regarding technical skills fed into both personal growth and the mentors' abilities to best support their mentees. This included time management and strategic life planning.

Trauma healing training was central to personal growth for mentors. **Many noted that attending the trauma healing sessions and gaining trauma-awareness enabled them to reassess their perspective of trauma in a new light.** Many mentors reported a history of experiencing traumatic events and/or encountering traumatized people in their communities. The training led by GTP under CREATE created the space for mentors to build new mental models, defined as the causal assumptions and worldviews that shape one's understanding about how the world works. For example, having a better understanding of the consequences of trauma on one's behaviors can positively influence a mentor's perspective of trauma-affected persons and set realistic expectations for the healing process. As a mentor in Mombasa noted, "*I thought [helping youth to reform] was easy. I did not know they [were] facing traumatic experiences…I was no longer judging youth who engage in crime.*"

Mentors reported deep shifts in their opinion of at-risk youth generally, leading to a more positive experience and perceived success from their time as a mentor. This shift indicates the value of having a growth mindset, defined as when people believe one's abilities and perspective can develop and change over time. Growth mindset is tied to persistence and resilience in the face of challenges (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Mentors consistently described CREATE training as transformative—in that it fundamentally shifted how mentors engage with and understand at-risk populations.

"I used to look at the at-risk youth as cruel people and hardcore criminals, but I came to realize that they are trying to hide pain, heartbreaks and their vulnerability."

- *Mentor, Lamu*

This gave them hope for the results of the mentorship process and insight into how past experiences might influence one's choices towards or away from VE. The same mentor reflected higher expectations for youth due to an enhanced understanding of an at-risk person's background, adding that "*...some were drunkards/drug users simply because they are trying to forget their problems and traumas, I now realized that they are capable of changing when given the chance to be listened to and guided towards desirable change*".
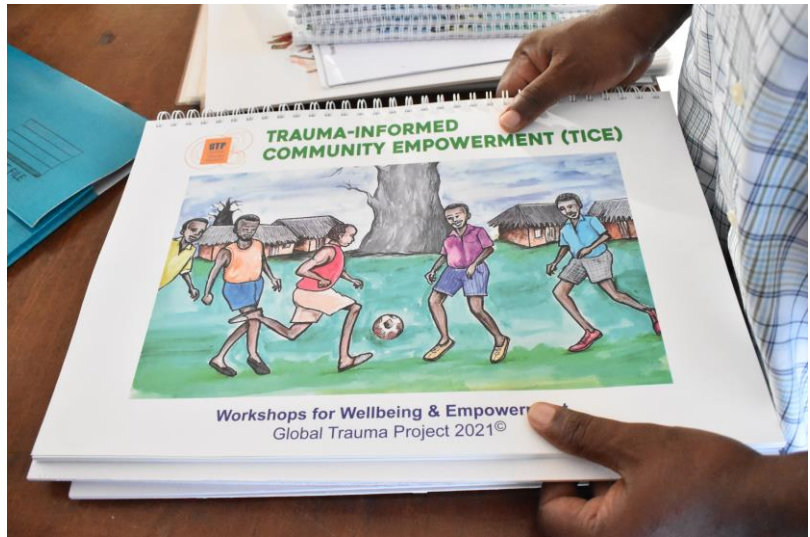
Mentors also reported the value of tools to support at-risk individuals, including GTP's Trauma-Informed Community Empowerment (TICE) framework. FGD respondents referenced valuing specific skills from TICE including *"how to measure trauma levels"* and reinforce *"coping skills"* during mentoring sessions.

This practical skill building enabled mentors to reflect inwardly as well. Considering their own experiences and better regulating their own emotions or mental health had positive spillovers for their relationship with their mentees and others around them. Mentors characterized themselves as being more resilient and better able to navigate life's challenges as a result of exposure to these methods.

> **"***When I first joined the project, my mental state was not good. When I did trauma healing training it really helped me as a person…I am even thinking of going back to study counseling at Management University of Africa. I have now become ambitious. I can now cope with my emotions. I am calmer and I understand things. This is something that has also brought peace in my house with my spouse.*"
>
> - *Mentor, Kwale*

> **"***The trauma healing sessions also helped me to heal the traumas I was living with that I didn't even know about. It played a big role in self-awareness and resilience…I am a leader and can do a lot more than I used to. I can now handle stress very well unlike before.*"
>
> - *Mentor, Kwale*

2) Improved networks and opportunities

Mentor-to-mentor and mentor-to-community connections were emphasized throughout this study. **Mentors felt that they became a valuable support system for other mentors in their geographic area, as well as to others in their networks and community beyond CREATE.**

> **"***[Before CREATE] I was feeling guilty that I could not help my friends and myself as we had lost close people to VE…I use trauma healing skills in churches and schools to create awareness on*

mental health. People here have trauma but didn't know that they were suffering from it and now that they know it, they come to us, and we help them. I have helped two people outside of the program who were almost [attempting] suicide."

- *Mentor, Lamu*

A number of mentors noted that formal activities, including group debriefs facilitated by program partners, provided valuable and essential spaces for reflecting on their mentees' challenging experiences. The fact that community influencers, including religious and local leaders, participated in debrief sessions was also deemed to be helpful, especially when mentors and champions were appreciated for their observations and supported to seek strategies for how to support particularly challenging mentees. For example, an Influencer in Kwale noted the value of using the debriefs to bond with the mentors and understand how to assist in "*some gray areas,*" such as specialized support to female mentees. This support extended to leveraging connections to improve relationships with other local officials.

"I also involve the chief in other non-CREATE activities and he always honors my invitations."

- *Mentor, Kwale*

"I have used networks of strong champions and mentors to build more trust and relationships with key actors. Before CREATE, I had not engaged the informal and private sectors, but through the referral component of the program, I have built more contacts with these sectors. Examples include butcheries, bakeries, etc."

- *Mentor, Mombasa*

CREATE also supported the development of referral pathways beyond mentors' personal networks, such as organizing meetings with county leaders. Mentors noted that stakeholder forums under the project led duty bearers to better understand the challenges at-risk youth faced in accessing opportunities—helping set the mentors up for further success as they made more connections, increased trust, and created additional mechanisms for collaboration.

"Even if we have been engaging them through referrals, we used to do this on [mentees'] behalf, putting in our credibility and using a lot of effort to convince them of how much they have changed. However, a few local administration structures such as village elders and chiefs are embracing these groups acknowledging their transformation journey as a result of the program."

- *Mentor, Mombasa*

Mentors also reflected on access to future opportunities for themselves, typically stemming from meaningful expansion of their networks due to CREATE. This includes establishing connections with government, private, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Connections were established as part of the regular program activities but also in deliberate effort to facilitate future opportunities for the mentors during CREATE's final year. This near-universal experience allowed mentors to pursue both public good, such as building stronger referral networks for their mentees and community, and personal gain, such as seeking employment and business opportunities.

Multiple mentors referenced specific career and income generating opportunities they believe they accessed due to the networks and skills accessed under the program.

> *"[CREATE] has helped me in growing career-wise. Currently I am a facilitator for the Aga Khan Foundation on values-based education. I also am the team leader of youth driven solutions to accountable governance in the county, a project being implemented by [an NGO]."*
>
> - *Mentor, Mombasa*

> *"I have been connected to opportunities and organizations. Through referral to SwahiliPot, I managed to get a facilitating role under Kadzandani [Creative Youth Organization's] Women in Leadership project.*
>
> - *Mentor, Mombasa*

> *"My involvement in the program helped me leave my comfort zone. I started being proactive to look for a job, which led me to the area chief who gave me a job as supervisor in the Kazi Mtaani program.*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

Champions also reported observing or facilitating connections for mentors. For example, one noted that a mentor *"was taken as a clerk in Lamu and is doing well"* and another supported mentors to register their efforts *"as youth groups and CBOs"*. A Champion in Mombasa reflected on supporting mentors to engage in youth-focused election research and local communications and media, leading to *"entry points to the community"* that enhanced their impact as a mentor.

Finally, **mentors reported enhanced visibility and feeling more 'seen' and respected after participating in CREATE.** This was something they noted, sensing **amongst duty bearers and community members alike.** We interpret this as a marked increase in <u>social capital</u> (defined as the norms, relationships and networks that enable people to act collectively), often linked to positive development outcomes and more sustainable peace.

This manifests as an enhanced role as problem solvers and mediators for local-level conflicts.

> **"***We have 30 parents who have seen what we do and recognize the good work we have done for their children and they spread the news. Out of this relationship, the community trusts us more, we get referral of other cases from them and they trust the solutions we are offering to them. They also rely on the linkages and the networks we have created out of this program."*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

> **"***Everywhere I go I am known…The community can now rely on my advice and [guidance]."*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

Other mentors reported that they had become more recognized specifically among community leaders. A mentor in Mombasa noted, for example, that they used to have a difficult time engaging with the area chief.

Now that their relationship has improved, the mentor reported *"I have become the bridge between the chief and youth."*

> *"CREATE has made me most trusted now and more recognized…Before I used to confront the chief and speak bad about him, I was never given the mic to speak, but now I engage positively with the chief and now consult with him on youth issues. I am involved in any event, and I was recommended by the chief, I am in security meetings in my area, planning for govt functions."*
>
> - *Mentor, Mombasa*

These positive effects on mentors and their status in the community translate directly into mentors becoming a sustained community resource to continue building a positive environment for youth at risk of VE. These impacts are noted below under the final research question.

What negative effects did CREATE have on mentors?

Participation as a CREATE mentor was not without its challenges for respondents. Areas identified within this study are: (i) financial and time pressures, (ii) emotional exhaustion, and (iii) tensions between mentees and mentors. Understanding these challenges means future mentorship and P/CVE programs can be designed in an anticipatory way, building in mitigation efforts to combat risks such as stress and trauma.

1) Financial and Time Pressures

Mentors described sources of financial strain resulting from their involvement in the program that led some of them to experience challenges or stress. Typical costs incurred included cellphone airtime to communicate to their mentees and transportation expenses to meet their mentees in person. In some cases, mentees expected and requested financial support from their mentors. While these concerns were serious, no participants reported long-lasting negative effects, such as taking on long term debt. In some instances, such as mentees' requests for airtime, CREATE stepped in to offset some of the financial burden. Future activities might elect to increase budgets for these types of expenses at the start, if deemed appropriate within a program's model and goals.

It was also common for mentees to have unrealistic expectations for what the mentors could do for them. Some expected support beyond referrals, where mentees assumed their mentor could guarantee them employment. Some mentees also had high expectations for the amount of time mentors could spend with them. In many cases, mentors recognized the many challenges mentees faced that caused this, including a lack of family support. Mentors reported being contacted at all hours for assistance.

> **"***Mentees calling at night and off working hours for urgent matters, yet you have your personal stuff to handle has been challenging...Mentees are used to me and they know I like helping out if there are issues but this affects me sometimes."*
>
> - *Mentor, Mombasa*

2) Emotional Exhaustion

Another common issue was emotional exhaustion from engaging with very difficult situations over many months. Some mentors called this secondary trauma, where they felt overwhelmed while engaging with a deeply vulnerable population who had experienced significant traumatic issues. Nearly everyone who brought up this issue also noted the importance and impact of peer support among the mentors and of program partners, such as GTP, in helping them establish and maintain healthy boundaries. This pressure from mentees was seemingly more demanding in the beginning of implementation, after which CREATE program partners built in more regular debrief and decompression sessions for the mentors.
.

In a small number of instances mentors reported feeling unsafe due to their role in the program, often due to rumors or misinformation about the role of the mentors. **The most commonly reported reason for this insecurity was community members (who were not included in the program) directing their feelings of anger towards the mentors.** For example, a mentor in Lamu remarked that parents who were frustrated that their children were not benefiting from the program did not understand that the mentorship model was focusing on at-risk youth. Community leaders and religious influencers were called on to intervene to resolve these tensions, such as publicly explaining the selection criteria. Where possible the program team made a deliberate effort to enroll people in follow-on cycles who had expressed interest previously, met the diagnostic criteria, and had not yet had the chance to participate.

One of the most common suggestions from community respondents was to increase program resourcing to allow for the recruitment and support of more mentors and, in turn, mentees.

In a few cases, mentors felt that others were jealous of their leadership position and perceived esteem and favoritism resulting from their role as mentors.

> **"***People feel you are being favored because you have become popular and recognized. They have openly complained that I am being given all opportunities.***"**
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

3) Gender Dynamics between Mentees and Mentors

A final commonly reported challenge arose as mentors navigated complex social and cultural norms around gender. These challenges were often noted to have arisen from mentees' families and peers and were typically prevented by matching mentors and mentees by gender at the start or alleviated by providing transparent information about the purpose of the program and the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship.

> "*The other day I called a lady mentee and her husband picked the call and asked me very many questions.*"
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

> "*One time a father of a female mentee picked up the phone and he was concerned [about a Christian male calling his daughter]. During inception the mother had attended so she explained to the father and he understood.*"
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

"[The community] is conservative, so during the one-on-one mentorship, it was somehow difficult to sit with a female mentee in a hotel. The community had already set perceptions that when a boy and a girl sat alone in a hotel they were dating and, in some instances, I was questioned by some friends who thought I was on a date."

- *Mentor, Lamu*

Though reported in just a handful of cases, some male mentees reportedly sought a romantic relationship with their female mentors, leading these mentors to carefully manage their interactions.

"Considering at-risk groups are young people, you need to approach them differently because they hint to want a relationship with you…Those who have made these moves, I managed to divert them saying I am married to keep off and be respectful.

- *Mentor, Mombasa*

What effects have CREATE-supported mentors had or may continue to have on the broader supportive systems for at-risk individuals?

Mentors demonstrated near universal agreement in their desire to continue working on P/CVE. They perceive themselves as better equipped to benefit the wider community following their participation in CREATE activities and plan to continue practicing the skills developed through the program activities on a consistent basis, including leveraging their existing and improved networks.

Respondents noted believing that Kenya may *"lose a generation"* (Mentor, Lamu) through VE recruitment but they can *"save the community"* (Mentor, Kilifi) and lower patterns of violence through mentorship. Mentors view themselves as public resources, specifically trained to engage with the most vulnerable in society to confront VE. This may involve mentors initiating new projects or programs, some of which are already taking place. For example, **mentors referenced establishing a mentor association to connect mentors to one another, lending mobilization skills to other organizations, and mentoring outside of the program to support GBV survivors or motivate youth to return to school.**

Mentors seemed to greatly value the perceptions of others regarding their value as a mentor. Given this, we expect that these perceptions can significantly influence their likelihood of remaining involved in P/CVE activities in the future." Aspects of the program's value are expected to continue further due to investment in social capital and networks. For instance, Champions believe their role connecting the mentors to additional resources will continue to benefit both the mentors and the community even as the CREATE program concludes. This was especially true regarding establishing improved referral pathways.

"During dialogue sessions we…helped [the mentors] in hearing the mentees' interest thus you know how to help the mentor offer the relevant referral or help. Out of the good relationship, the mentees also could come back to us for guidance on the referrals or opportunities they are being provided."

- *Influencer, Kwale*

Plus, as the program facilitated engagement with sectors that they do not typically work with, mentors reportedly grew to better understand levers of influence within their communities. **One particularly relevant relationship to P/CVE is improved interaction with the government and security forces** that is reported as likely to continue when ways of working have been established. Mentors often reported strongly distrusting these groups prior to CREATE, including personally feeling alienated from the state and unable to trust their response.

> **"***I used to fear [the] police and now I can negotiate and address them when I meet them. When there is tension because of violence or any suspicion of some attack, police patrols increase and there are usually many arrests and harassment. Out of this training, I have been able to talk to them when I see someone is being harassed and they listen.***"**
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

> *"I have built new networks as I have gotten to be known by other organizations. I have good connections with security agencies. I can call the County Commissioner, Deputy County Commissioner and Assistant County Commissioners…and report something and [the] security team will be dispatched with immediate effect. This is beneficial to me and the community"*
>
> - *Mentor, Lamu*

Still, despite positive observations of the mentors' progress and strength of relationships, interview participants expected some risks to the wide supportive system tied to whether or not mentors will continue filling this role to the same degree.

The **loss of professionalization and institutional support** could lead mentors to lose legitimacy when, as one Champion said, "the organization [that] is giving them authority" goes away. Respondents noted that less oversight could mean mentors are less likely to maintain confidentiality or simply may not have access to the physical spaces and resources to ensure it, **putting the essential element of trust between mentors and mentees at risk.**

KII respondents also expected that a **loss of salary and financial resources** may restrict mentors and mentees from continuing their engagement. While financial incentives were a surmountable stress, the program stipend was essential to meet basic operational needs, such as airtime and transport costs. Respondents also expected that mentors may seek alternative forms of employment, making sessions difficult to "carry out as they will be busy doing something else to make ends meet". Relatedly, **brain drain** was

viewed as a plausible concern. Should mentors migrate to other areas for work, they will no longer be available to directly support youth in the target counties or indirectly serve as role models.

Parents of mentees provided additional valuable perspectives, as they were best positioned to observe regular changes in mentees. Parents best understood what it was like to engage their children prior to their participation in the program and provide a first-person perspective on how the visibility of and trust in mentors grew over time. One marker of success may be increased trust from the wider community in the value and role of the mentors, which could continue after the program should mentors continue their support to at-risk individuals.

"Our views have changed as before we used to think they [mentors] were only normal people but now we have realized that they are very important in the community."

- *Parent, Kwale*

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study of CREATE's mentor-centered model produced several key insights and recommendations for P/CVE practitioners, donors, and government actors.

Recommendations for P/CVE Practitioners and Donors

- **Design P/CVE programs that deliberately seek to transform and influence mentors as key participants**. The design and implementation of mentorship-centered P/CVE activities like CREATE should acknowledge mentors as an important set of participants likely to experience positive and negative impacts within their role supporting at-risk youth. It should account for and nurture the potentially significant role mentors can play in advancing an enabling environment for youth to increase their resilience to VE.

- **Recruit mentors whose professional and personal experiences enable them to relate to participants' lives while adding value**. When recruiting a cohort of mentors, program teams should begin by recruiting those possessing three inherent or already developed experiences including (i) previous experience in civil society or peacebuilding roles, (ii) previous exposure to traumatic events and hardship to enable them to identify with mentees, and (iii) to be older (therefore more experienced) and, where possible, the same gender as their mentees. While this study's findings do not place significant emphasis on the value of matching mentors based on demographics, this is likely because this decision was part of the program's design from the start. We suggest similar programs align with an understanding of local norms and the available pool of members while considering the potential value of individual differences, which may lead participants to reduce biases towards persons different to themselves. In these cases, activities must provide appropriate support, including leveraging community-level Champions and Influencers who understand the program, to transparently inform a mentee's support network about the program's purpose and provide pathways to fill gaps a mentor may have.

- **Identify key non-fixed characteristics to guide recruitment and ongoing development of mentors**. In addition to fixed skills, the most successful mentors were deemed to possess skills that

can be developed over time, which we refer to as 'non-fixed' skills. A baseline level of these characteristics at the start of a mentorship model can set a mentor up for greater success. In their absence, mentors could be recruited based on other demonstrated socio-emotional competencies. For example, expressing the belief that at-risk youth have potential for positive change is a meaningful characteristic for a mentor but openness to challenge one's perspective could serve as a proxy if necessary. CREATE's emphasis on training and learning-by-doing shows that it is possible to develop relevant skills over time, where mentors actively applied skills gained during the program to confidently confront the challenges they reported facing and creatively problem solve.

- **Provide opportunities for mentors to expand their networks around civic, social, and economic opportunities.** Expanded networks enabled mentors to better connect mentees with the civic, social, and economic opportunities needed to increase and sustain their resilience. They also increased the mentors' status in and relationship to the community, supporting them to be more effective agents of an enabling environment and broader systems change to support vulnerable youth. P/CVE programs should map out the networks that mentors enter the program with and support them proactively to grow those networks and contacts so they become more influential in communities and more effective for the youth they mentor in the future.

- **Invest in extensive support systems for mentors, including around mental health.** The program found that mentors struggled to meet the demands of some mentees whose situations were particularly challenging and who needed additional time and support. P/CVE programs should reiterate with mentees what they can expect from mentors, and also ensure people who sign up as mentors are aware of the ways their work might deepen over time. At the same time, building on CREATE's work to create mentor peer networks, programs should create opportunities to provide mentors directly with psychosocial support. They should build in appropriate debrief and decompression sessions, encourage and facilitate inter-mentor support and engagement, and provide linkages to professional counseling support for particularly challenging cases.

- **Facilitate post-program opportunities with mentors to solidify their sustained role in P/CVE and improve the broader supportive system.** Programs should harness the enthusiasm displayed by mentors such as in CREATE to continue contributing to P/CVE outcomes in their communities after the program has ended. Throughout the course of the program, program team members and others in the CREATE ecosystem helped many mentors secure additional opportunities. By the end of the program, many mentors knew their next steps as influential leaders in CSOs or government organizations. Programs should deliberately work with mentors to ensure they can continue to apply their skills and influence by supporting them to develop plans and connect with opportunities. These plans can also include ways to mitigate potential barriers to sustainability and ensure mentors have the financial and social resources to continue their important work.

Recommendations for Local Government, Civil Society, and Leadership Structures

- **Elevate mentors in P/CVE and youth-centered initiatives and programs.** As noted, many formal and informal leaders, as well as local CSOs, recognized the immense skill and influence of mentors from the CREATE program. These actors ultimately partnered with, hired, or continued to liaise with these mentors after the program ended, and they should continue to see and utilize mentors as a valuable resource for working with vulnerable youth. Other actors should do the same, both to improve their outreach across a range of sector programs to vulnerable individuals, and to continue to mainstream P/CVE thinking, conflict sensitivity, and youth-centered work across government and

civil society interventions in high-risk areas. This goal of mainstreaming P/CVE approaches and sensitivity across government and civil society work was a key objective of CREATE and should continue to be a focus of future P/CVE programs, even those that also work with individuals.

- **Incorporate lessons and reflections from mentors on successful approaches to working with at-risk youth across sectors.** In other programs in high-risk areas, whether focused on P/CVE or other outcomes, government and civil society actors should learn from the successful ways mentors were able to reach and support at-risk individuals. They should recruit staff and community outreach members with some of the same characteristics that made mentors successful, and deliberately support them to grow their skills to be more effective in outreach, psychosocial support, and connecting individuals to opportunities. Many of the lessons about successful mentors and impacts on mentors are not limited to P/CVE programs, but rather should be applied to any program that intensively engages with a high-risk population.

Findings and lessons from this and other CREATE studies make clear that mentors can play an essential role in reducing risk among individuals vulnerable to VE recruitment and influence. Indeed, mentors can serve as the bridge between the individuals on the cusp of recruitment and the broader system that can prevent it.

Zeroing in on mentors' development and transformation and supporting them to become even more influential in achieving broad systems change, will be invaluable for achieving P/CVE outcomes in both the near term and into the future.

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