



Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso | *Dandjinou Josiane for Mercy Corps**

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES, COLLECTIVE RESPONSE

Mercy Corps’ Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

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As an international humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding organization, Mercy Corps works to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) in the world’s most challenging conflict contexts. We recognize that reducing violent conflict is essential to enabling short-term assistance and long-term development, and that violent extremism is increasingly part of complex conflict dynamics.¹ Therefore, we partner with local actors across three programming pillars:

¹ “Violent Extremism refers to advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, political, or religious objectives.” The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy, 2011 (usaid.gov). Mercy Corps considers VE a type of political violence, with the key distinguisher of VE being it denies other worldviews.

* Photo: Youth in Fada N’Gourma, Eastern Region of Burkina Faso, invite their peers to be peace actors through song during a civic engagement training as part of the USAID-funded Youth Connect/Kombiss Yam program in 2023.



- **Tackle the drivers and enablers** of violent extremism (VE) and conflict at **societal and community levels**;
- **Strengthen the resilience of individuals**, particularly young men and young women, to the influence, recruitment, and radicalization of non-state armed actors, including violent extremist organizations (VEOs);² and
- **Mitigate the impact of VE** on communities and individuals through reintegration and (re)building of the social fabric, especially in complex conflict contexts.

Our approach to PVE is propelled by this working theory of change: **IF** we support communities, institutions, and societies to tackle the structural, political, social, and economic drivers of VE, **AND IF** we identify and address factors that lead individuals, often young men and women, to be at risk of recruitment into, support for, or recidivism into VEOs, **AND IF** we support peacebuilding and reintegration to address and mitigate VE impacts on communities and individuals, including women, men, and male and female youth; **THEN** we strengthen the ecosystem of resilience and resistance to violent extremism and promote long-term peace.

Recognizing the multiple state and non-state actors in P/CVE, we operationalize this theory of change through our whole-of-society approach, including through interventions with youth, their families, the wider community, civil society, and local and national government and security actors to strengthen prevention-focused, holistic initiatives in P/CVE.

Key Principles

Reflection on our practice in P/CVE at the nexus of humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding has led us to the following principles:

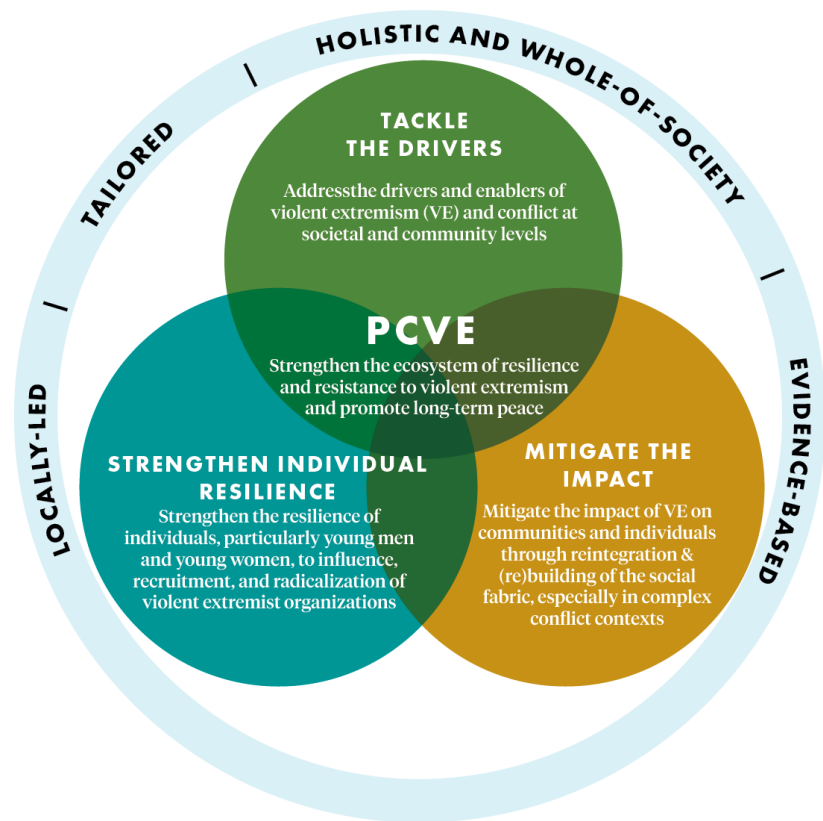


Figure 1. Mercy Corps' P/CVE Approach

² Our definition is further informed by a consideration of violent non state armed (VNSA) group typologies to clarify how VEOs differ from other VNSAs: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jacob Zenn, Terrorists, Insurgents Something Else? Clarifying and Classifying the "Generational Challenge", the Lawfare Blog, January 15, 2017.

Locally led

- **Place community members at the center** of design and implementation, supporting them to apply their capacities toward sustainable solutions. This ensures interventions integrate conflict, gender, and age sensitivity based on deep local knowledge.
- **Partner with credible local organizations and leaders** to drive forward P/CVE work, including supporting leaders within the same communities, identity groups, and geographic contexts most at risk of VE activity and influence.

Tailored

- **Draw on highly localized, up-to-date context analysis**, based on conflict analysis and research – including analysis of digital conflict dynamics- to inform iterative programming.
- As young men are often a primary target for VEO recruitment, and young women play key roles in VEO activity, **ensure P/CVE programs are gender-sensitive and youth-centered**. This includes analyzing how intersecting identities, including ethnicity and religion, link to gender- and age-specific roles and ensuring programs respond to the different concerns and resilience capacities of men, women, young women, and young men.

Holistic and whole-of-society

- **Adopt whole-of-society approaches** that seek to prevent not only VE, but other forms of conflict and structural violence, such as marginalization, injustice and other governance failures that contribute to VE.
- **Find sensitive, productive avenues for engagement and collaboration with government actors**, including security agencies, that ensure security and protection of our participants. Complement this by engaging relevant informal authorities and traditional laws and customs.

Evidence-informed

- **Apply rigorous, innovative measurement and learning**. We employ impact evaluations to test what works and does not and for which individuals and communities, given the particularities of each context. We measure if our programs actually reduce VE risk, not just address hypothesized VE drivers.

Pillar 1: Addressing Community- and Society-wide VE Drivers

Mercy Corps draws from our peacebuilding toolkit to address drivers of violent extremism and conflict at the community and society levels. Our foundational technical approach is also called **primary prevention, which means identifying areas at-risk of violent extremist organization (VEO) recruitment, radicalization, and influence** and then working with both the most marginalized and leaders to address key drivers of VE across communities, societies, and systems.³ Recognizing that a foundational driver of VE is exclusion—often fueled by government neglect or marginalization and systemic socioeconomic inequality—



A participant in Mercy Corps' P/CVE programming in Amman, Jordan, participates in a Nature Club climbing session to build confidence and teamwork skills. Photo credit: Mercy Corps

³ Mercy Corps has adapted the notion of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention from gang violence prevention practice to the practice of P/CVE. See USAID/Mercy Corps/FHI 360 report [Transferable Lessons: Cross-Learning between CVE and Gang Violence Prevention](#).

our P/CVE work centers good governance practices and works to increase horizontal social cohesion, across communities, as well as vertical social cohesion, between communities and governance actors.

Outcomes for Addressing Community + Society Drivers

Illustrative Activities

Increased social cohesion within and across identity groups ⁴	Connector projects uniting identity groups, joint dialogues, peace sports events, digital peacebuilding activities, initiatives promoting increased leadership roles of young women in communities
Improved relationships between communities and government at all levels , including security agencies	Town hall meetings and forums, joint development planning exercises between women’s peace councils and government, community policing
More equitable, responsive, and accountable service delivery to address grievances	Complaint mechanisms, joint needs assessments, training government actors in feedback collection



Mercy Corps’ USAID-funded PEACE program in Niger facilitated joint projects, such as natural resource management and cultural events, to strengthen social cohesion along ethnic and citizen-government lines and make it more difficult for VEOs to exploit divisions. Evidence from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) found interventions were more effective in increasing social cohesion when they engaged many people, required deep coordination between groups, and addressed shared needs or promoted meaningful exchange. While PEACE didn’t improve all measures of VE, it reduced support for political violence, signaling a promising growth area for P/CVE.

Photo: Debere Gatti, Niger | Mariama Souley for Mercy Corps
Community members in Say, Tillabéri region of Niger, participate in a general assembly to test research tools for the PEACE program.

Pillar 2: Enhancing young people’s resilience to VE

Recognizing that young people can be—and already are—leaders of peace, we focus on young men and young women as important P/CVE actors. When contextually appropriate, we take a **secondary prevention approach, which means identifying and working with individuals, often young men and young**

⁴ For more information on Mercy Corps’ Approach to measuring and strengthening Social Cohesion, see [Strengthening Social Cohesion for Violence Prevention: Ten Lessons for Policymakers and Practitioners](#)

women, who are most at-risk of recruitment by or support for VEOs from in-person and online influence and providing intensive support to increase their resilience to VE and rejection of violence.⁵

Using a [Positive Youth Development](#) framing, we partner with youth, their families and circles of influence, and their broader communities to enable youth to address grievances and reach their full potential to contribute to their communities in peaceful and productive ways. Our programs aim to facilitate social and economic alternatives to joining VEOs, strengthen support networks, and help youth address chronic psychological stress in fragile contexts. We specifically leverage the capacities of and facilitate opportunities for female youth and women to lead in P/CVE. Our strategies for working with at-risk individuals are founded on conflict sensitive principles so we can avoid stigmatization and other harms to participants—for example, by working with lower-risk individuals alongside more vulnerable youth.

Outcomes for Enhancing Youth Resilience to VE Illustrative Activities

Increased sense of belonging and stronger social bonds between systemically marginalized and other groups	Mentoring, establishing peer support networks among youth, and facilitating sports and other recreational activities, youth-friendly spaces for young women and young men
Increased individual and collective agency and assets , including youth leadership, to engage in decision-making	Training youth and women in advocacy and negotiation skills, empowering their engagement in decision making, civic engagement opportunities, and digital analysis and communication trainings
Strengthened enabling environment for youth resilience , including families’ and institutions’ role in prevention	Parent training in VE warning signs, support to intra-family communication specific to mothers and fathers, support to security and other actors in youth-centered approaches
Expanded meaningful employment and financial opportunities	Vocational training, apprenticeships and internships, work with private sector
Improved individual and collective agency in psychosocial health	Referral services, group psychosocial sessions to heal from violence exposure, cognitive behavioral therapy

Our youth programs that have combined interventions to address multiple youth needs had a significant impact on violence prevention outcomes. For example, through our Somali Youth Learners’ Initiative, young people in Somalia who attended program-supported schools as well as civic engagement activities were [65 percent less likely](#) than non-engaged youth to demonstrate moral or material support for political violence. In Mercy Corps’ INVEST program in Afghanistan, we found that a combination of vocational training and cash transfers resulted in a [17 percent reduction in willingness to engage in pro-armed opposition group](#) actions six to nine months post-intervention.

⁵ Mercy Corps globally adopts the UN definition of youth as those persons between ages 15 and 24 years. However, in each country where we work, we adjust to the country’s own definition of youth, in some cases going up to the age of 35.



The FCDO-funded Collective Resilience Against Extremism (CREATE) program in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda aims to understand what works to address drivers of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs at all levels. CREATE works with community-based organizations to identify individuals, primarily young men and women, at high risk of joining a VEO and then tailors intensive intervention packages that include mentorship, trauma counseling, networking, dialogue and access to information, and personalized referrals to economic and other opportunities. An impact assessment found that this mentorship package approach helped high-risk individuals achieve 22 percent reduction in the likelihood of justifying the use of violence, and reduced vulnerability to VE.

Pillar 3: Mitigating the impacts of VE through peacebuilding and reintegration

Mercy Corps also works to help communities rebuild and peacefully reintegrate former associates of VEOs through select programming in **tertiary prevention**, which entails working holistically with current or former VEO members on disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) in countries where formal DDRR programs are in place. Our work generally zeroes in on seeking to **improve community acceptance of former members or affiliates of armed groups**, including VEOs, and strengthening reintegration to reduce recidivism and promote reconciliation. Our peace and conflict experts partner with protection experts to ensure that those associated with VEOs, including those who have experienced trauma and gender-based violence, receive the group and individual support they need to reintegrate back into society.

Outcomes for Mitigating VE Impacts

Illustrative Activities

Increased community acceptance and support of former members and associates of VEOs	Local influencer-led radio, TV, and social media messaging, facilitating inter-identity group dialogues, supporting women-led groups or youth-serving organizations to lead community reintegration discussions
Strengthened psychosocial and economic support to returnees from and survivors of VEOs	Apprenticeships, financial literacy and business development training, mentoring for young people and other returnees, safe spaces and trauma healing for survivors of VEOs, including GBV survivors
Inclusion in civic and social opportunities for returnees and other community members	Community projects dialogues and peace events, joint advocacy forums across government actors and community members



In Northeast Nigeria, Mercy Corps implemented US Department of State-funded programming to increase the return and reintegration of ex-combatants as well as reduce stigma surrounding adolescent girls who were associated with and victimized by VEOs. It helped build support networks and safe spaces for survivors and supported religious leaders to promote messages of tolerance and peaceful reintegration. An [RCT of piloted messages to community members](#) found that trusted authorities, in particular religious leaders, could increase the acceptance of returnees and willingness to interact with ex-fighters of Boko Haram by up to ten percent.

Photo: Gombe, Nigeria | Ezra Millstein for Mercy Corps

Generating evidence on what works in P/CVE

Mercy Corps uses cutting-edge [evaluation and conflict-sensitive research](#) methods to understand conflict and VE dynamics and measure what works to prevent and address them. These include randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental designs at the individual and community levels, household surveys and econometric analysis of primary and secondary data, and qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews with former combatants and participatory inquiry tools with affected communities.

We actually measure the effects of our programs on people's support for or engagement in political violence, including violent extremist movements. We do this to avoid the circular logic trap of many P/CVE programs, in which agencies identify drivers of VE, implement programs to address those drivers, measure the change in those drivers, and then claim to have reduced the risk of VE, without verifying their original assumptions.

To examine highly sensitive topics such as VE, Mercy Corps uses a range of innovative outcome measurement tools. We measure support for and engagement in violence directly and indirectly using conflict-sensitive survey experiments, such as list experiments and endorsement experiments, which reduce the likelihood that participants will provide only socially desirable responses. It also allows us to examine different types of VE- and violence-related outcomes, from support for specific violent groups, to willingness to work with or welcome them, to support for political violence (or the use of violence for other purposes). In other sector programs that may affect P/CVE outcomes, Mercy Corps has used proxy indicators and corresponding questions, such as the percentage of people who report satisfactory government services at the local level, critical thinking scores, or impulse control scores.

Our evidence feeds into a learning process internally—across global programs—and with key stakeholders at the local level. We share context-specific programming lessons, research findings, and evaluation results with communities and governments to help them strengthen their P/CVE programming. We seek to incorporate youth- and community-led participatory research methods, in which local researchers themselves close the feedback loop and support community ownership of evidence, conclusions, and resulting P/CVE actions.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Promising Ways Forward for Effective P/CVE

Years of research and programming on VE and P/CVE have underscored the necessity of a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing as many drivers of VE as possible, including tackling social, political, economic, ecological, and governance components together. For example, increasing economic opportunities can be an important part of increasing self-efficacy, as well as reducing unequal access to employment and status, both of which are linked to increased resilience to VE. However, on their own, and without a context-specific theory of change linking economic outcomes to P/CVE outcomes, income-generating programs are unlikely to be successful and can even cause harm through exacerbating conflict dynamics or increasing individual harm, such as gender-based violence.⁶

Increasingly across contexts, a combination of online and offline approaches is important to address both enablers of the spread of VE as well as reduce recruitment. While recruitment is often based on in-person social networks, social media and digital/online spaces can amplify and distort messages, making social media analysis and response an important part of P/CVE.

Finally, our programs reflect the fact that violent extremism, crime, and inter-group conflict are often interlinked -- and need to be addressed in concert. We nest our P/CVE work within our broader peace and governance programming, which includes an increasingly necessary focus on climate security. Our work in P/CVE also links to other key sectors, such as technology for development and economic opportunity, underscoring the need to tackle VE within the broader context of fragility. Our evidence points to clear implications for practitioners and policymakers: violent extremism should continue to move from being predominately in the domain of state-based security action and more in the realm of peacebuilding and development. In practice, these peacebuilding and development approaches can and should be increasingly led by young women and men and other leaders in affected communities, who are themselves the most effective drivers of P/CVE outcomes and long-term peace.

⁶ See more in Mercy Corps' companion document, [Overcoming Misperceptions about Violent Extremism](#).

CONTACT

BABU AYINDO
Senior Advisor | Peace and Conflict
bayindo@mercycorps.org

TED HOLMQUIST
Director | Peace and Conflict
cholmquist@mercycorps.org

MAURICE AMOLLO
Senior Director | Peace and Governance
mamollo@mercycorps.org

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842
mercycorps.org