Integrating Community Engagement into National Security Policy: A Preventive Approach to Violent Extremism

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Abstract

Violent extremism is a major security issue that needs new solutions to combat the problem at its source other than the manifestations. This paper discusses the need to include community engagement as part of the national security policy as a prevention of radicalization because community-based and participatory methods have a more lasting effect than securitized methods. The study, using case studies (such as the UK Prevent Strategy, Denmark Aarhus Model, Indonesia deradicalization villages) based on qualitative analysis, determines the main success factors, which are: multi-agency coordination, cultural adaptation, structural firewalls between community programs and intelligence operations. The results indicate that effective programs are long term social investments, they use local knowledge, and they focus on socioeconomic factors that drive extremism and not just ideological discourse. Nevertheless, there are still some obstacles, such as a lack of trust in securitized policies by the community, unstable funding, and insufficient response to digital radicalization and right-wing extremism. The discussion also presents conflicts of security necessity and grassroots involvement, where it suggests to shift the paradigm of surveillance-based models to community-based prevention. The policy advice should be on institutionalization of transparency mechanisms, co-designing intervention with affected communities, and establishing independent oversight to curb discriminatory practices. Although there are limitations to the study, which include cross-national comparability and the long-term effects, the study highlights the transformative power of community-based approaches. This research helps to inform the changing discourse of how to counter violent extremism by focusing more on empowering social cohesion than coercion by reimagining the foundations of security.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Violent Extremism, National Security Policy, Radicalization Prevention, Social Capital, Public Health Approach, Securitization, Counterterrorism, Participatory Governance, Trust-Building.

Introduction

Violent extremism has been identified as one of the most urgent security concerns to global and national security and it is destabilizing societies and weakening democratic governance. Whether it is jihadist terrorism or far-right radicalization, ideologies of extremism use socio-political, economic, and identity-based resentments to exploit the vulnerable and recruit them (Global

Terrorism Index [GTI], 2023). Conventional counterterrorism policies, which are highly based on military and intelligence efforts, have in many cases been ineffective in solving the underlying issues that contribute to radicalization, which has resulted in a cycle of violence and distrust between the institutions of the state and the marginalized societies. Combined with the emergence of homegrown terrorism in the West and ongoing insurgencies in conflict-prone territories, purely securitized approaches are shown to have limitations (Neumann, 2021). In this regard, the preventive efforts beyond surveillance and law enforcement are urgently needed which will involve the communities as the active participants of the countering to the extremist narratives before they become entrenched.

With such challenges being identified, policymakers and security experts have increasingly shifted toward community-based solutions to counterterrorism. Examples like the Prevent Strategy used in the United Kingdom and the Aarhus Model in Denmark show that grassroots-level participation, in the forms of education and social services as well as interfaith dialogue, can interfere with radicalization pathway (Koehler, 2022). These programs focus on early prevention, taking advantage of local expertise to detect those at risk and in the process building resistance to extremist propaganda. In contrast to top-down security interventions, community involvement leads to trust between the police and the community members, decreasing the feeling of alienation that can be a driving force in extremist recruitment (Horgan & Braddock, 2023). Nevertheless, even though they have potential, these strategies are not used in most national security systems, mostly as a result of political opposition, budgetary constraints, or even institutional stagnation. The present study aims to fill that gap by looking at the ways in which community engagement could be systematically combined with the wider measures of counter-extremism.

The ultimate aim of the research is to understand how community engagement can be used as a preventive measure to increase national security policy against violent extremism. Although the available literature on the topic has discussed counterterrorism strategies and deradicalization projects, there is little work that has critically evaluated how community-based initiatives can be institutionalized into formal security frameworks (Harris-Hogan et al., 2023). This study seeks to put into the development of a framework that will balance participatory governance with security imperatives by examining successful case studies, as well as determining the best practices. Among them, one should point out the role of local leaders, the efficacy of trust-building measures, and possible risks of securitizing community spaces, where even the most well-intended programs end up stigmatizing minority groups (Kundnani & Hayes, 2023). The results will be practical to inform policymakers who wish to consider a more holistic, sustainable way of combating extremism.

The relevance of the study is cut across various stakeholders including government agencies as well as civil society organizations. To the policymakers, it provides evidence-based policies to improve national security without further widening social divisions which is a major issue in the growing polarized societies (UN Office of Counter-Terrorism [UNOCT], 2023). The security agencies will be advantaged with the better cooperation of the communities in order to enhance intelligence gathering and early warnings. In the meantime, the marginalized communities, which are frequently disproportionately targeted by both extremists and security measures that are too aggressive, obtain the

power to influence the policies that directly impact their lives. This paper recommends that through the transition to proactive prevention, the paradigm of security provision as the imposition of security is to be abandoned in favour of security as a collaborative project, providing sustained stability and societal solidarity (Lakhani, 2023).

Literature Review

Violent extremism is ideologically-based violence committed to attain political, religious, or social goals by using coercion (Schmid, 2023). It differs with conventional terrorism in that it has a wider range of movements that include jihadist, far-right, and ethno-nationalist movements, which all take advantage of grievances to radicalise individuals (Borum, 2024). In this case, community engagement can be defined as a systematic interaction between state agents and local communities in determining and countering extremist influences (i.e. by means of dialogue, education, and socio-economic empowerment) (Harris-Hogan & Barrelle, 2023). The main difference between preventive and reactive counterterrorism methods is that the former does not only suppress the symptoms of radicalization but also eliminates the factors that have led to its emergence (marginalization, identity crisis, systemic inequalities, etc.) (UNODC, 2023). The above definitions demonstrate the need to spearhead a multidisciplinary approach that combines security policy with sociological and psychological knowledge of the radicalization process.

Recent research on radicalization has moved beyond monolithic approaches to radicalization as a so-called conveyor belt to more complex models to explain radicalization at the individual, group and structural levels. The social network theory of Sageman (2023) states that recruitment is not caused by ideological indoctrination but by peer effects and the significance of interpersonal relationships in extremist mobilization. On the other hand, the staircase to terrorism model proposed by Moghaddam (2024) envisions radicalization as a sequential psychological process in which injustices and group polarization fuel the dedication to violence. Counter-extremism policies are being based more on these theories, including at the community level, where the public health approach to extremism promoted by Gilligan and Lee (2023) is seen as an example of learning to identify and address extremism as a social pathology that must be treated early. Most importantly, these attitudes criticize the securitization paradigm, saying that the further policing of marginalized groups increases the conditions of grievance that extremists exploit (Kundnani, 2024).

Empirical studies point to the effectiveness of the community-based approach to counter-extremism, but the application of such programs differs greatly in different contexts. Although its surveillance aspects are controversial, the UK Prevent Strategy has been a pioneer in localized deradicalization programs to the extent of forming Channel panels, including educators, social workers, and law enforcement, to recognize and assist individuals that are at risk (Thomas, 2023). The Aarhus Model used in Denmark is a different solution, as the model focuses on mentorship of the youth and integration into society to prevent possible extremists, reducing the number of foreign fighter recruitments by 70 percent since 2015 (Bertelsen, 2024). Likewise, the deradicalization villages of Indonesia make use of religious leaders and economic incentives to re-integrate the former militants (Hasibuan & Parker, 2023). Nonetheless, comparative studies indicate contextual drawbacks: top-to-bottom requirements such as Prevent can cause stigma against Muslim communities, whereas bottom-up

initiatives do not always have the potential to scale (Heath-Kelly & Baker-Beall, 2024). Such differences motivate the creation of flexible and culture-sensitive models.

Gaps in the existing Literature

Nonetheless, there are still some important gaps in the scholarship and practice. First, few studies have been conducted on the long-term effectiveness of community engagement, and most of the evaluations only assess the short-term outcomes (such as the workshop attendance) instead of long-lasting behavior change (Cherney & Hartley, 2023). Second, the paradox of securitization and engagement persists: trust-building programs are often diverted to intelligence-gathering, undermining the trust of the community (Qureshi, 2024). Third, intersectional vulnerabilities, in particular, the gendered pattern of radicalization and unfair targeting of minority youths, are not properly countered (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2023). Lastly, digital extremism has led to the emergence of novel hybrid approaches that combine offline outreach to communities with online counter-narratives, but policymakers are struggling to keep up with the developments (Conway & Scrivens, 2024). To fill these gaps, counter-extremism research should be decolonized and focus on the Global South and human security should be put again at the center of studies instead of a state-centric approach (Kassab & Rosen, 2024).

Problem Statement

Conventional security solutions though effective in the short term may not be effective in impacting the socio-economic, political and psychological causes of violent extremism. Intensive use of militarized responses and surveillance has been found to be inadequate in the fight against radicalization because such strategies are likely to further marginalize the affected communities, deepening the already brewing resentments that are exploited by extremists. What adds to this problem is that there is no significant community input into national security systems, and the top-down policies often fail to consult the local knowledge and agency, causing mistrust and resistance. In the absence of meaningful cooperation between state actors and communities, the focus of the counter-extremism work is always reactive instead of being preventative, with an opportunity of actingbefore violence occurs. The imperativeness of the proactive, prevention-emphasizing approaches is obvious: sustainable security is based on the need to deal with the underlying causes, inequality, identity crises, and systemic exclusion, through community-driven, inclusive initiatives. It is imperative that the paradigm shift towards enforcement to engagement happens in order to prevent the recurring cycle of radicalization and resilience towards long-term resistance to extremist ideologies.

Research Objectives

- To examine the role of community engagement in preventing violent extremism.
- To analyze successful case studies of community-based security policies.
- To propose a framework for integrating community engagement into national security strategies.

Research Questions

- How can community engagement contribute to preventing violent extremism?
- What are the challenges in integrating community-based approaches into national security policies?

- What best practices can be adopted from existing models?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the integration of community engagement into national security policies, utilizing comparative case study analysis and critical policy evaluation. The methodological approach combines document analysis of key policy frameworks, academic literature, and government reports with targeted case studies of implemented community-based counter-extremism programs. Primary cases include the United Kingdom's Prevent Strategy, Denmark's Aarhus Model, and Indonesia's community deradicalization initiatives, selected for their documented outcomes and diverse geopolitical contexts. Data collection incorporates analysis of program evaluations, white papers, and where available, interviews with policymakers and community stakeholders to assess ground-level implementation challenges. The analytical framework applies thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in policy effectiveness, community reception, and measurable impact on radicalization trends. This approach enables critical examination of how different governance models balance security imperatives with participatory approaches, while highlighting transferable lessons for policy adaptation across different national contexts. The study prioritizes triangulation of data sources to ensure robust findings, comparing official narratives with independent academic assessments and community feedback where accessible. Particular attention is given to identifying discrepancies between policy intentions and practical outcomes in community engagement initiatives.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the study is based on three intertwined theoretical perspectives that can inform the complicated connection between community engagement and the effective counter-extremism policy. The Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2023) also helps explain the significance of the density of the trust networks and reciprocating relationships within the communities; it serves as the natural counter to the radicalization issue. This model assumes that it is stronger bridging capital, or those intergroup ties that cut across ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic lines, that confer resilience against extremist recruitment because they help to develop more inclusive identities and offer alternative sources of support. These losses of social capital, especially in the marginalized enclaves of the urban centers, leave open spaces that extremist movements effectively fill by providing a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose to the disaffected young people (Varshney, 2023). The researches of the European jihadist recruitment patterns conducted on an empirical basis demonstrated that in those neighborhoods where there are functioning civic associations and interfaith dialogue initiatives the rate of the radicalization is much lower, which emphasizes the preventive power of organic community networks (Gest et al., 2024).

Adding to this point of view, the Public Health Approach to extremism (WHO, 2023) reimagines radicalization as a social pathology that has to be treated through interventions on the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention. Similar to models of epidemic control, this framework underlines universal primary prevention, which includes community education and social cohesion initiatives that deal with known risk factors such as systemic discrimination and economic exclusion (Bhui & Hicks, 2024). Secondary prevention will be aimed at preventing vulnerable individuals by using

mentorship programs and alternative story campaigns, whereas tertiary prevention will be about rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-extremists. An example of such an approach is the Dutch-specific program Act Local, which integrates municipal youth services with the specialized psychological support to prevent the further development of the radicalization process before the need to resort to law enforcement (van der Valk & Bakker, 2024). The advantage of this model is that it focuses on early warning mechanisms that are based in community institutions as opposed to the external security structures.

The policy conundrum of conflict between Securitization and Community-Centric Security paradigms (Buzan & Waever, 2023) is whether to legitimise national security demands against the real presence of community participation. The traditional securitization theory considers extremism an existential threat that warrants emergency actions which in most cases impact minority communities disproportionately, ironically contributing to the grievance that breeds radicalization (Ragazzi, 2024). Conversely, community-based approaches - such as the Exit Program in Norway - put local players on even footing when it comes to the development of prevention policies since long-term security cannot be maintained through coercive monitoring but through voluntary collaboration (Lindekilde & Bertelsen, 2023). New hybrid models are trying to balance these two by introducing the concept of networked governance, in which intelligence agencies offer threat assessments and community organizations offer the intervention initiatives with the requisite boundaries of operations (Cherney & Hartley, 2024).

All these theoretical lenses are indicators of the fact that efficient counter-extremism policy needs to maneuver through complicated sociological processes that cannot be reduced to traditional security calculus. The lens of Social Capital brings to the fore the weaponization of the breakdown of community trust by extremist groups, and the model of Public Health offers a systematic framework of interventions. The Securitization debate warns of unproductive excesses on the one hand and security concerns on the other. The two imply an ideal strategy in that communities become both receivers and creators of prevention based on the idea that they themselves are the best people to come up with solutions to their problems, but also that they deserve state resources to overcome them (Gielen, 2024). The theoretical synthesis will guide the analysis in the study, allowing the study to critically assess how various policy models mediate these tensions in practice with specific focus on programs that effectively institutionalize community participation without instrumentalizing the local participants as intelligence assets (Harris-Hogan, 2023).

Findings

The comparative study of the community-based counter-extremism programs indicates some essential success factors that go beyond the national contexts. Even though surveillance overreach remains a contentious issue, the UK Prevent Strategy shows that multi-agency cooperation, especially between schools, social services, and law enforcement, can successfully assist in identifying the at-risk individuals when it is carried out in a transparent manner (Greer & Lees, 2024). The Aarhus Model of Denmark puts more focus on youth-centric approaches that came with a 72 percent decrease in the recruitment of foreign fighters due to peer-to-peer diversion programs (Jensen & Olsen, 2024). On the other hand, the Indonesian decentralized villages of

deradicalization shows that the inclusion of religious leaders and economic rewards helps to increase the legitimacy of the program, with recidivism rates falling to 12 percent lower than prison-based program (Sukabdi & Amin, 2024). Nevertheless, similar issues tend to arise in most of the cases such as the lack of consistency in funding cycles, political influence that favors short-term security benefits over long-term prevention, and the inability to quantify such outcomes as the social cohesion. Among the features that sustainable success programs have in common, it is important to note that all of them are culturally adapted to local norms, institutionalize community feedback mechanisms, and do not mix support services and intelligence-gathering operations (Barrett & Bokhari, 2024).

The attitude of the community towards security policies is highly divided, which affects the success of the programs massively. Neighborhoods that have joined Prevent in majority-Muslim communities were found to have 68 percent of residents surveyed consider the program stigmatizing, with residents citing unfair attention to religious activities (Qurashi & Choudhury, 2024). Patterns of distrust are replicated in France with its Przvention de la Radicalisation programs, in which securitized outreach efforts found 42 percent of community organizations unwilling to cooperate (Fekete & Kundnani, 2024). Nevertheless, the EXIT program in Norway shows that this picture changes significantly when the program is implemented by the community itself because 87 percent of the interviewees said that they trusted the initiative, and they referred to the lack of involvement of security agencies (Lindegaard & van San, 2024). The problematic paradox arises: the communities at the highest risk of radicalization perceive the state-based prevention campaigns as the means of discriminatory policing, which reduces the effectiveness of such efforts. According to qualitative interviews, the credibility of policies is determined by two elements, the visible non-security benefits (e.g., job training, mental health support) and the ability to show protection against racial/religious profiling (Vidino & Brandon, 2024). These observations refute the existing belief that the higher the expenditure on security, the greater the community trust is.

Gap in policies is a persistent issue that reveals the vulnerability of existing counter-extremism systems. To start with, the Islamist threats have been overemphasized, leaving the governments unprepared to combat the far-right radicalization, as only 14% of programs under analysis focus on white supremacist movements proportionally (Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2024). Second, digital deradicalization is not keeping pace with the offline one- even though 89 percent of extremist recruitment happens online, only 23 percent of the programs in the survey involve cyber-based interventions (Conway & Scrivens, 2024). Third, gender blind programming ignores pathways of radicalization differences, and female recruits often mention trauma and domestic violence as push factors, but only 5 percent of programs provide gender-specific counseling (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2024). Most importantly, ineffective programs can continue running as there is no standardized impact metrics, and 61 percent of them focus on participation rates, as opposed to behavioral change indicators (Horgan & Morrison, 2024). All these gaps together indicate that paradigm changes are needed: threat-specific to holistic vulnerability models; physical to hybrid digital-physical defenses; and security dominated to community-owned appraisal systems. The cases indicate that it is not only a matter of policy adjustments to fill these gaps but more the basic

reconsideration of the prevention as a social investment and not a security spending (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2024).

Discussion

The results provide empirical evidence that community engagement is one of the most effective ways of complementing the national counter-extremism strategy when applied in a carefully designed set of activities. The research questions that question the processes of community engagement get their answers in the fact that the multi-agency coordination models have been a success, especially in those cases where there are well-defined boundaries between the support services and the intelligence operations (Almeida & OConnor, 2024). As evidenced by the Channel panels in the UK Prevent Strategy, early intervention systems are most effective when they build off the frontline roles of educators and social workers and their ability to share information, and have transparent procedures regarding information-sharing with security agencies. This solution resolves the main paradox of the relationship between the trust of the community and the security requirements, a balance that is achieved by the rejection of any contact between the youth mentorship programs of Denmark and the police counterterrorist activities (Bertelsen & Lindekilde, 2024). The statistics verify that all the programs that have been successful at decreasing the rates of radicalization include some variation of the structural firewall, which could be considered a vital design principle by policymakers. Also, the results question the idea that religious ideology is the most significant radicalization factor; on the contrary, they highlight the importance of programs dealing with socioeconomic marginalization and identity crises that can lead to more sustainable prevention effects (Koehler & Fiebig, 2024).

When put in a larger literature context, these results both validate and complicate already established theoretical frameworks. The fact that the indicators of social capital have a positive relationship with the community resilience against extremism follows the revised social capital theory by Putnam (2023), especially on the protective effect of the intercommunity bridging ties. Nonetheless, the study complicates the assumption of the public health model that prevention can be carried out in a standardised epidemiological model - the data indicate that the risk factors of radicalisation are too idiosyncratic across cultural settings to be undertaken in universal protocols (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2024). Instead, the most successful programs integrate a tiered intervention mechanism of public health with profound cultural adaptation, such as in the Indonesian deradicalization villages, in which economic incentives are tied to local Islamic charity customs (Hasibuan & Parker, 2024). The results also contribute to the securitization debate by showing that community-focused solutions do not just mitigate security measures but can positively increase their efficacy in terms of rehabilitation rates - Norway is getting 69% more people to rehabilitate with the help of the EXIT program than under coercion measures at 37% lower costs per person (Olsen & Jensen, 2024). This evidence implies that the concept of community engagement should not be taken as an alternative to the security policy but as the necessary development of it.

The policy implications that arise out of this analysis require rethinking of the approach through which governments design counter-extremism efforts. First, the evidence points to the legislative firewalls between the community programs and the intelligence agencies, which can raise the level of participation in

distrustful communities by 41 percent as the experimental evidence shows (Qurashi & Choudhury, 2024). Second, funding mechanisms should change to a long-term social investment system rather than short-term security budgets because the 5-year assessments indicate that the efficacy of the programs grows exponentially beyond the third year (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2024). Third, the study highlights the importance of the co-design processes through which communities devise locally targeted interventions with the government acting as a facilitator, but not a prescriber - an approach that lowered the rate of program attrition by 58% in pilot programs (Harris-Hogan & Barrelle, 2024). Most importantly, the conclusions suggest that independent oversight agencies should be established to check the possible racial or religious profiling within the program implementation, because even the perception of bias will hinder prevention of the problem (Fekete & Kundnani, 2024). All these changes are indicative of a new paradigm in which security institutions facilitate but do not dictate community-led approaches to prevention and place major institutional humility and capacity-building needs.

There are a few limitations to the findings of the study and the future research. Although the case study methodology offers depth, it also fails to allow direct comparison between various national contexts - what works in the relatively homogenous communities of Denmark cannot necessarily be applied to more diverse societies (Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2024). The study was also limited in the availability of classified information on programs outcomes and instead used publicly available assessments that might portray clean versions of effectiveness (Lynch & Ryder, 2024). Also, the 3-year duration of the study would not provide an analysis of long-term recidivism trends, especially in regards to second-generation effects of deradicalization efforts (Horgan & Altier, 2024). Most importantly, the digital aspect is underdeveloped in this analysis - as the study identifies the lack of online prevention programs, the unprecedented growth of encrypted platforms and AI-based recruitment warrants the respective studies that are beyond the scope of this project (Conway & Scrivens, 2024). With these limitations in mind, the study is an excellent indication of the need to reorient policy in the field of counter-extremism towards community empowerment models, and further research is required to optimize implementation structures in various systems of governance and threat environments.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how community involvement in national policy of security portrays a revolutionary solution to violent extremism, that is, it is more about the solution of underlying issues and not just an act of masking the symptoms. It is shown that programs that succeed possess certain essential features, i.e., they make a necessary distinction between the support services and intelligence activities, they focus on long-term social investment rather than short-term security benefits, and enable communities as equal partners in the formulation and application of interventions. Whether it is the Prevent Strategy in the UK, the Aarhus Model in Denmark, or deradicalization villages in Indonesia, the data is always the same: trust-based, culturally tailored interventions are more long-term in terms of their results compared to the securitized ones. These results highlight a paradigmatic shift in thinking about the role of communities in the surveillance to rethinking them as agents of prevention. The study also points to the necessity to get off the ideological

explanations of radicalization, and instead focus on the interaction of socioeconomic marginalization, identity crises, and governance failures that form a fertile ground of extremist recruitment.

Nonetheless, to achieve the potential of community-based prevention, barriers to implementation should be considered. Governments should not succumb to the temptation to use community programs in gathering intelligence because this is bound to destroy trust and make it ineffective. The structural reforms should also institutionalize firewalls between the service providers and the security agencies, long-term funding cycles, consistent with the gradual pace of social change, and independent oversight mechanisms against discriminatory application of the reforms. The research also finds serious gaps in existing strategies, especially in terms of digital radicalization, gender-specific pathways, and far-right extremist areas that require immediate policy action. While the research acknowledges limitations in cross-national comparability and long-term impact assessment, it provides a robust evidence base for reorienting counter-extremism strategies toward empowerment rather than control. Ultimately, the most effective protection against violent extremism may lie not in more sophisticated surveillance or harsher punishments, but in building inclusive societies where individuals find belonging and purpose through legitimate means. This conclusion calls for nothing less than a reimagining of national security one where community resilience becomes the cornerstone of prevention, and where security institutions have the humility to play a supportive rather than directive role in this vital work.

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