



CIVIL SOCIETY AND EXTREMISM IN GHANA

Dr. Mustapha Abdullah

Senior Researcher at the Kofi Annan International Training Center for Peacekeeping Operations, Ghana

Over the last decade, efforts by the Ghana Police Service (GPS) and allied security and intelligence agencies to prevent and counter violent extremism (PCVE) have yielded limited results. Consequently, the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) has become increasingly instrumental in complimenting the efforts of law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Using both primary and secondary data, and focusing on selected CSOs— (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and West Africa Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE), this paper examines the role/contribution of CSOs in preventing and countering VE in Ghana. It also examines the challenges they face. The paper argues that, suspicion and the attendant lack of synergy between CSOs and law enforcement agencies has contributed to slow progress in PCVE in Ghana. The paper thus concludes, recommending the need for increased collaboration between the two entities in fighting extremism in Ghana.

Efforts of Civil Society Organizations

Although there are varied conceptualizations of what constitutes a civil society organization, for the purpose of this paper, it is understood to mean watchdog or advocacy groups that seek to provide information on the evolving threats of VE in Ghana. They thus play a role in sensitizing, educating, training and raising awareness of people about the dangers of VE. They also contribute to research, advocacy and policy analysis on PCVE in Ghana. WANEP, for example, engages in early warning, data analysis and reports intelligence information to the relevant security agencies for quick response. In 2019, WANEP's early warning and data analysis revealed that extremists exploited the weak Northern Ghana-Burkina Faso border and came into the country. This assertion is corroborated by the arrest of a fifty-five-year-old Burkinabe.

Moreover, CSOs undertake research in vulnerable communities to understand the drivers and dynamic of extremism, especially in vulnerable communities in Ghana. WACCE has undertaken research and organized series of workshops in Nima, Mamobi, Ashaiman—all in Accra and Damongo and Bolga—in Northern part of the country. The aim of these engagements is to uncover the drivers of extremism with the view to contributing to PCVE. In the five Northern regions for example, over 350 cases of unresolved chieftaincy conflicts exist, constituting as key drivers of radicalization and extremism.

Consequently, both WANEP and WACCE have undertaken to develop de-radicalization programs as an important measure for countering VE in Ghana. Mutaru, the Executive Director of WACCE, in an interview noted that, a radicalized individual who was due to join ISIS was deracialized through a weekly Islamic program on TV 3 called 'IQRA'. After watching the programme, the said individual called and shared his experience and the processes that led to his radicalization. This particular incident was used as basis to further explore other vulnerable individuals, leading to dissuading 21 additional persons, who had been radicalized and about travel to join ISIS.

Among the CSOs in Ghana working on issues of security and peace and combating violence and extremism include the West African Peacebuilding Network, the West Africa Center for Combating Extremism, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center, the Regional Advisory Information Systems, the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa and the Association of the Development of Ghana Communities.

Challenges and Obstacles

Although CSOs in Ghana are generally viewed as playing critical watchdog roles, with regards to PCVE, the security agencies view them through a 'film darkly'. In other words, CSOs are seen with suspicion by state security agencies partly because they expose their weakness and lack of professionalism in maintaining law and order generally. Consequently, state security agencies often do not create collaborative space with CSOs to discuss and implement PCVE programs. On the other hand, while local communities trust CSOs more than the security agencies, an interview with WANEP indicates that, some communities are still reluctant to open up and share relevant information necessary to help CSOs uncover the true drivers of extremism in the country. This was attributed to suspicion of the motives of CSOs.

Funding was identified as another challenge for the CSOs. Unlike state institutions such as the police and Bureau of National Investigation, that receive regular funding from government for preventive and counteractive activities, CSOs such as WACCE, WANEP and WACSI depend largely on external funding to implement projects. This leads to external hegemony or influence and harms local initiatives to prevent and combat violent extremism.

Although WACCE for instance has benefited from United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and Canada's funding support, it is inadequate to implement the key program activities. This assertion was confirmed in 2015 published works by West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) on the state of CSO sustainability in Ghana. The Report indicated that, many CSOs grapple with acute shortage of funds due to donor fatigue and lack of diversified funding. This is likely to be compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic as most donor countries in Europe are among the hardest hit.

Moreover, CSOs face the challenge of human resource, who are well-trained and can constitute research team to undertake empirical research in the area of extremism. In most cases, chunk of donor funding is allocated for the implementation projects rather than for hiring qualified personnel. Such external control or influence jeopardizes local initiatives in PCVE initiatives.

Conclusion

Partly as a result of the failure of the security and intelligence agencies, CSOs have gained significant currency in PCVE in Ghana. Through early warning, data analysis, research and the organization of workshops, they have contributed to preventing and de-radicalization over 20 Ghanaian youth who were due to join ISIS and other terrorist affiliates across the globe.

Although they continue to face challenges such mistrust between them and the security agencies, funding and human resource challenges, they remain important actors in PCVE in Ghana. State security agencies cannot continue to work in silos. Without collaborating and eliciting intelligence information from the CSOs, most of their combative responses will lack empirical direction and as consequence remain counter-productive.