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**Lived realities and local meaning-making in defining violent extremism in Kenya:  
implications for preventing and countering violent extremism in policy and practice**

# **Lived realities and local meaning-making in defining violent extremism in Kenya: implications for preventing and countering violent extremism in policy and practice**

Violent extremism is an ambiguous and politically loaded concept, and – at the national level – the parameters used to define it are usually framed by the state, powerful ruling elites, and members of the international community, either directly or indirectly through donor-funded projects. Although different types of violent extremism and extremist movements exist in Kenya, donors and the state often focus on religion-inspired groups such as Al-Shabaab; the Islamic State; Al-Qaeda; and affiliated networks such as the Al-Muhajiroun, Al-Hijra, and Jaysh Al-Ayman. However, at a community level, participants in our body map workshops highlighted gang violence, police brutality, ethnically motivated violence, marginalisation, discrimination, and gender-based violence as priorities in defining violent extremism. We conclude that constructions of violent extremism at the local level are shaped by lived experiences of everyday insecurities influenced by gender, ethnicity, social status, location, and interactions with the state. To effectively address violent extremism in Kenya and beyond, its definition needs to be contextualised in ways that take into consideration local perspectives and everyday experiences of violence and insecurity.

Keywords: violent extremism; everyday security; identity; participatory methods; Kenya.

## **Introduction**

Walid, a 25-year-old man from Kisauni,<sup>i</sup> explained that his gang affiliation had almost cost him his life. In 2014, he was detained in Tanzania as a suspected member of the Al-Shabaab network during a visit to meet friends.<sup>ii</sup> Grappling with his everyday life in Kisauni, he argued that young people in his locality have to navigate different forms of violence, including gang violence and drug-related danger (interview with Ahmed,

Mombasa).<sup>iii</sup> Youth joining extremist networks was a normal everyday occurrence in his neighbourhood:

We perform the life – we don't rehearse it. In my environment, there is a lot of peer pressure. Sometimes, you do things that are not safe for you to sustain hope and confidence about living in this place. There is so much violence here [Kisauni]. So, in our place, extremism is a way of life. I cannot escape from it. People are being robbed in the street and in their houses. They are attacked by *pangas* (machetes) and slaughtered! There is so much drug abuse too. In my family, my brother is a drug addict. He wants to quit. He was jailed for seven years for the same drug menace. He is out, but worse. The gang members in my area know me and treat me well. I feel safe because, when you stay with gangs, no-one can gang up on you, but I would not feel safe in other areas. (interview with Ahmed, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa, Kenya)

Walid's perspective on violent extremism, which drew on his everyday encounters with violence, differs from expert opinions on violent extremism provided by the Kenyan government and security services. Local communities derive interpretations of violent extremism from emerging security threats specific to their localities, and the local insecurities which frame violent extremism are embedded in the socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical contexts of particular locales and affected community groups. Neglect of "local voices" therefore undermines the study and conceptualisation of violent extremism and related policies (Ahmadi and Urwin 2018). While this does not mean top-down expert opinions have no place in defining violent extremism, a bottom-up research agenda is needed to create and hold space so that distinct, diverse voices can help shape conceptualisations of violent extremism.

This article shows how important the concepts of "everyday life" and "vernacular security" are where local insecurities and violence are being conceptualised at community level. When violence is embedded in people's day-to-day activities and explicitly linked to their insecurities and survival, then "everyday life" plays a vital role

in how they make meaning about violence. Jarvis and Lister (2012) argued that everyday lives shape how different communities articulate definitions of insecurity, and they noted that local sites are spaces where politics are produced or reproduced. A vernacular security perspective gives marginalised people opportunities to define security (Bubandt 2004) and creates space for affected individuals to articulate their worldviews (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2016). This article challenges the elite-centred, top-down strategies that have traditionally been used in the study and conceptualisation of violent extremism; instead, it explores the local nuances that emerge when people define violent extremism in relation to their everyday lives.

The concept of “violent extremism” emerged in the lexica of United Nations counter-terrorism bodies in 2014 when Security Council resolution 2178 (UNSC 2014) described it as “conducive to terrorism” and called for the development of strategies to counter it, including engagement with relevant local communities and non-governmental actors. However, the term had been in use since 2001 within terrorism-focused Anglo-American security frameworks focused on radicalisation and Islamist extremist religious ideologies (Sageman 2004, Laquer 2004, Horgan 2009). Kundnani (2012) expressed concern about how scholars, analysts, industry professionals and media experts construct narrow definitions of Islamist radicalisation, extremism, and/or terrorism that influence public policy decisions. A mainstreamed new focus on “violent extremism” emphasised prevention and the need to address the root causes of violence, shifting focus away from the heavy-handed militarised responses of the 1990s and the 2000s. A softer approach, focused on winning hearts and minds, provided the backdrop for the evolution of the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) mandate. This normative, discursive shift over the last decade has produced unprecedented global growth in PCVE programmes and policies.

At the UN level, the focus on PCVE has certainly become part of the UN's mainstream work on human rights, development, peacebuilding, and even gender (Altiok and Street 2020). The agenda's expansion creates significant challenges, partly because there is no global consensus about what "violent extremism" is. In a bid to gain operational support from diverse actors and partners for the PCVE agenda, the former UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, avoided defining the phenomenon in the Plan of Action, opting instead for "strategic ambiguity" (Thiessen 2019, 121) about PCVE. This approach was particularly dangerous because, over the previous two decades, counterterrorism had become the main pretext used by many states to justify both violating human rights in the name of national security and portraying minority groups as security threats. The failure to define violent extremism allowed room for states to manipulate the PCVE concept, labelling conflicts and enemies, defining response strategies, and laying claim to resources according to their interests (Altiok and Street 2020).

Like many other countries, Kenya grapples with the threat of "violent extremism" and terrorism. The Kenyan government's National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE) (*Beyond the Lines* 2016), defined violent extremism primarily in terms of Islamist extremist ideologies in line with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and counterterrorism policies and priorities in the West (Mogire and Agade 2011). The centring of the concept on Islamist extremism and terrorism in Kenya has since influenced policies, programmes, and funded projects aimed at preventing or countering violent extremism. Given that Kenya has a large Muslim minority, particularly around the coast and the north-east, the association of Islam and Muslims with terrorism and violent extremism is undoubtedly problematic, and one of its effects

has been the construction of suspect communities aligned with religious and ethnic enclaves (Badurdeen 2018).

This article arises from an 18-month qualitative project that explored local understandings and experiences of violent extremism in Kenya using the lenses of gender and intersectionality. Our study sought to interrogate and problematise international, national, and county-level narratives about violent extremism that have developed in the absence of a clear definition, and it focused on how the communities most affected by violent extremism and counter-measures feel about and understand this phenomenon in their own localities. To enable bottom-up reflections and make sense of everyday experiences and local understandings of violent extremism, we used a participatory, arts-based, visual method called body mapping with communities in areas formally identified by law enforcement agents and non-governmental organisations as hotspots for violent extremism.

The article is divided into four sections: first, it discusses our research methodology, focusing on the body-mapping process; second, it evaluates the evolving context of violent extremism in Kenya; third, it analyses local definitions of violent extremism, and finally it synthesises the implications from our study for research and policies on violent extremism.

### **Conceptualising violent extremism in everyday life**

When the “global risk society” (Beck 2002), particularly in the post-9/11 security arena, focused its political imagination on the need to thwart attacks, the uncertainties linked with terrorism meant that security efforts went far beyond government law enforcement structures to encompass contributions from private industry, NGOs, multinational organisations, and local community networks. As early as 2005, Bubandt (2005) argued that lower-level analysis would have considerable capacity to influence and improve the

workings of top-down security politics, yet definitions of security threats influenced and shaped by elites continued to disregard local perspectives. Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2016) argued that the exclusion of local voices meant the vernacular turn was missing in security politics, while Stanley and Jackson (2016) noted the “methodological elitism” of security and terrorism research. The growing recognition of vernacular securities resonates with the everyday experiences of security as it is encountered and understood by local communities in the context of their daily lives (Jarvis 2019).

The omission of local knowledge from efforts to conceptualise violent extremism forms the backdrop for this article and informs its research approach and contribution to knowledge. We explored how local community members construct and describe experiences and acts of violent extremism in their own words, drawing on their personal knowledge and everyday experiences. Our study parallels the work of Jarvis and Lister (2013) who explored public conceptualisations and understandings of security threats in the UK and underscored the importance of learning from ordinary people and the conditions of (in)security they experience in their everyday lives. It is vital to understand how non-elite knowledge, understanding, and experiences of violent extremism relate to or disrupt official knowledge and priorities as reflected in documents like Kenya’s National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (2016). Local community members and the government often differ in how they conceptualise, negotiate, or accept security threats such as violent extremism (VE). Elite-centric conceptualisations of VE in local communities often vary and can be disrupted or even contradicted by local communities’ conceptualisations, which are based on everyday lives and experiences (See Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2015). In this study, we created opportunities for local actors – the communities who inhabit heterogenous spaces – to navigate the process of giving meanings to violence and extreme acts,



situating “everyday actions” as “sites of practice” (Stanley and Jackson 2016, 229–30).

The study also takes into consideration specific type of actors or groups in these localities who are affected by the phenomenon of VE.

The difficulty involved in ensuring a uniform shared understanding of violent extremism poses a key challenge (Peace Direct 2017). When academics, governments, donors, civil society organisations, and potential extremists define the phenomenon, their efforts tend to be influenced by subjective perceptions that shape responses and interventions aimed at curbing violent extremism (Streigher 2015). The centring of the notion on Islamist extremism and terrorism has shaped discourse in Kenya about violent extremism, and projects aimed at preventing or countering violent extremism are shaped accordingly. Some organisations value clear and specific definitions because they allow objectives to be set and facilitate the evaluation of policies and programmes aimed at mitigating violent extremism (interview, NGO personnel, Mombasa). Others prefer a broader definition that encompasses different types of violent extremism and allows for assessment of varying, underlying causal factors specific to demographics, time periods, neighbourhoods, spaces, and vulnerable locals’ conceptualisations of violent extremism.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of men and women from communities affected by violent extremism. Our intent was to learn more about how individuals understand and make meaning from these experiences and how they frame violent extremism and try to resist it. The 18-month study involved two stages of data collection in Kenya. The first research phase was designed to help us understand the key issues and support preparation for phase two. We conducted interviews and focus-group discussions with 67 male and female participants over the age of 18 from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The participants were members of local communities and community-based and/or civil society organisations

from Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kwale, and many were from areas that were affected by violent extremism and counterterrorism operations. During this phase, we conducted a consultation with the participants to identify a culturally appropriate, arts-based method for our research.

The second stage of the study involved conducting two, participatory, arts-based workshops in Mombasa in November 2019. The workshops involved body mapping as a co-creative visual method to explore and illustrate how violent extremism is experienced and resisted at local community level. Each workshop lasted five full days and involved 10 Muslim participants from coastal areas known as hotspots for violent extremism. Due to the sensitive topics being discussed, we held single-sex workshops, and, to enable an understanding of violent extremism through the lenses of intersectionality and gender, we involved both male and female participants from different ethnic groups. The research team consulted community-based organisations and informal networks in areas considered as hotspots for violent extremism before selecting participants. The body mapping process we employed has been explored by Aroussi et al. (2022).

Body mapping is a form of embodied storytelling that allows participants to reflect on their experiences and feelings physically through the body, visually through the arts, verbally through storytelling, and relationally through their connections with other participants and the researcher (Dew et al. 2018). Participants may encounter difficulties in verbalising their feelings and talking about their own experiences of violence and resistance. Body mapping is a tool of personal self-discovery and exploration that allows participants to tell their stories and express their feelings and views using non-verbal visual and creative tools in a safe and supportive environment. On a canvas, choosing their own colours and styles of expression, participants drew

outlines of their bodies and depicted their stories of living in areas prone to violence and extremism. Guided questions helped participants to draw their life stories and the pain and emotions attached to what they considered to be violent extremism.

By its very nature, body mapping reduces reliance on verbal communication, which makes it particularly useful for exploring sensitive and controversial topics (Dew et al. 2018). The technique gave us innovative means to engage with a potentially difficult topic, allowing us to focus on personal perspectives and everyday embodied experiences of violence. Even though individual decisions are critical to the successful implementation of PCVE programmes, empirical findings rarely examine the processes through which individuals make meaning of violent extremism. Body mapping provided a tool for the participants to articulate and explore the wide array of acts that they defined as violent extremism.

### **Contextualising violent extremism in Kenya**

Kenya is a very diverse African nation, with a population of 47.6 million. It is divided administratively into 47 counties with diverse cultures linked to more than forty tribes, the largest being the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, and Kalengin. Christianity is the country's main religion, practised by 83% of the population, and Islam is adhered to by 11% of the population, clustered mainly around the coast and the northeast, with the remainder of the population affiliated with Hinduism, traditional religious beliefs, or no religion.

Throughout Kenya's history, ethnic clashes motivated by struggles over power, land, and resources have shaped the colonial and the post-colonial discourse on violence (Shilaho 2018). Since independence in 1963, Kenya has maintained relative stability in regional terms, but the constant ethnicisation of politics along tribal lines has become a source of violence and insecurity. Ethnically mobilised violent eruptions have been

exacerbated by vigilantes and militias deployed by politicians. The regime of Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002) was known for its dictatorial tendencies and human rights abuses, and state-sponsored vigilantes and militias, such as the Mungiki vigilante groups, peaked during this era (Kagwanja 2003). Violent groups are frequently mobilised during elections to terrorise civilians and commit mass atrocities, including gang rape and sexual violence (Kimani 2016). State- or party-linked violent movements, radicalised ethno-politically, were active during successive elections in 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2013, and 2017. In 2007, this type of violence brought the country to the brink of civil war, causing the deaths of 1,133 people and the displacement of 600,000 others (Barkan 2013). Ethnic and religious clashes in Kenya include rifts between the police and supporters of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in Mombasa in 1992; the Wagalla massacre in Wajir (1984); the 1997 Kaya Bombo killings in coastal Likoni; and street and gang violence associated with the emergence of groups such as Mungiki, Kamjesh, Jeshi la Mzee, Sungu Sungu, and the Baghdad Boys controlled by different political interests during successive elections. Today, ethnic clashes are still visible in different parts of the country in the form of tribal or clan conflicts, often fuelled by cattle rustling in the north-eastern regions or even farmer-herder clashes motivated by ethnically driven ideologies in Tana River that have severe socio-economic consequences. Looking at state-led political or election-related violence reveals a landscape of brutality which can be defined as violent extremism because it is marked by the presence of an extremist ideology to legitimise the subjugation and domination of the other, political attempts to build new institutions and structures of governance either by destroying existing structures or reforming them, and the use of violent acts and mobilisation to terrorise (Bak, Trap, and Liang 2019).

Since the 1980s, Kenya has been the scene of several terrorist attacks linked to international networks, most notably the attack on the Jewish-owned Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); the 1998 bombing of the United States embassy by Al-Qaeda; the 2002 Kikambala Hotel bombing in Mombasa; and the anti-aircraft missile fired to down an Israeli-chartered passenger jet at Moi International Airport in 2002. But, since 2011, Kenya has also experienced an increased number of attacks sponsored by Al-Shabaab, a militant group based in Somalia, including the Westgate attack in 2013, the Mpeketoni attacks in 2014, the Garissa University attack in 2015, and the DUSIT attack in 2019, as well as terror attacks in Mandera and Lamu. Some scholarly literature links increased Al-Shabaab attacks on Kenyan soil to the Kenyan military operation in southern Somalia (Muibu and Cubukcu 2021).

Globally, Kenya is pivotal in the East African region due to its relatively stable economic and political standing compared to its neighbours. Particularly since 9/11, it has been committed to counterterrorism and has become a significant ally of the West and especially of the United States. Since the 1990s, these allegiances have helped to designate the country as an anchor state on the front line in the Global War on Terror (Mogire and Agade 2011).

Kenya's allegiance to the GWOT has influenced its counter-terrorism measures and policies, which have often been externally driven and lacking in domestic support (Oando and Achieng 2021). Martini and Njoku (2017) note that two factors have shaped responses to terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya: first, the haphazard development and dissemination of Western countries' foreign policies geared towards Islamist extremism, which have normalised imperialistic approaches to the development of counterterrorism strategies; and second, the clear demarcation distinguishing

terrorism from other acts of political violence. Accordingly, the interplay between Anglo-American and national policies focused on Islamist extremism has shifted focus away from all other forms of violent extremism and concentrated collaborative efforts on thwarting Islamist extremism. The present National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (*Beyond the Lines* 2016) and Kenya's county action plans are major steps aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism domestically. The NSCVE (*Beyond the Lines* 2016) describes violent extremism in Kenya in terms of "radicalized individuals prepared to engage in or actively support acts of violence in furtherance of radically illiberal, undemocratic political systems or ideologies", a definition that conceptualises VE as both ideology and action. Increasing concerns about Al-Shabaab have been used by justify the Kenyan state's adoption of excessive security responses targeting mainly Muslim and particularly Somali communities (Breidlid 2021). Mwangi (2019) has condemned what he called Kenya's "Somalinisation" of terrorism and counterterrorism. One example of the aggressive security measures targeting Muslims and particularly ethnic Somali communities in Kenya is Operation Usalama Watch, conducted by the Kenyan government in April 2014 in Eastleigh, an ethnically Somali majority neighbourhood in Nairobi. This operation involved house-to-house searches, arbitrary mass arrests, inhumane treatment, harassment, extortion, deportation, relocation, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearances in an overtly militarised and hard security response to Al-Shabaab that has been likened to "killing a mosquito with a hammer" (Lind, Mutahi, and Oasterom 2015).

This analysis reveals that violent extremism is essentially a political term derived from the top-down perspective of political elites who determine which activities are morally, ideologically, or politically incorrect in accordance with written legal and constitutional frameworks or the state's implicit norms. The core of violent extremism

is that those who subscribe to it are intolerant towards the other and reject democracy as a means of governance and problem-solving, as well as the existing social order (Sotlar 2004). However, there is always a diverse political and socio-economic environment that shapes the phenomenon of violent extremism, or the actions ascribed to it, and this encompasses how it is conceptualised, defined, detected, and observed locally. In this study, our approach to understanding violent extremism via an “everyday life insecurity analysis” or a “vernacular security perspective” enabled us to explore the local terms used to understand violence, radicalisation, extremism, and violent extremism, and participants’ experiences, emotions, and responses helped us to construe the local-level meaning-making processes involved in conceptualising and/or defining violent extremism.

### **Local meanings for violent extremism**

The research focused on areas known as hotspots for violent activities, including radicalisation and recruitment for Al-Shabaab, ISIS, and Daesh, yet even in these localities, no single term for violent extremism was in use. Vernacular narratives varied between individuals, localities, and regions, and our research findings revealed that, while the term “violent extremism” was widely used by the NGO members and members of donor communities we interviewed, locals themselves were not employing it in their everyday lives (field notes, interviews in Mombasa and Kwale). When the research team explained the term and generated discussions about local terms and insecurity acts that could be attributed to violent extremism, participants associated different forms of violence with it. For example, some participants associated violent extremism with Islamist or religious extremism (FGD participant, male, Mombasa), while others associated it with the gang syndicates prevalent in their localities (interview with Hindu, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

*Violent extremism as Islamist extremism:* The term “violent extremism” was used synonymously with “Islamist extremism”, associated with terrorist groups such as the Al-Shabaab, Islamic State, and Al-Qaeda, or its affiliated networks such as Al Muhajiroun, Al Hijra, and Jaysh Al-Ayman in Kenya. Incidences and memories attached to terror events came to mind for some of those who tried to explain the meaning of violent extremism. Exposure to traumatic events that are experienced and felt publicly, such as terror attacks in familiar places, ruptures people’s lives, their neighbourhoods, and the society they inhabit, and the public nature of these frightening memories strongly influences individual and collective identity (Hirts et al., 2009). When Hunter (interview, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa), a youth from Kilifi, explained violent extremism, he based his explanation on the memories and feelings he attached to the terrorist event at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. He described his grief, the feeling of being unsafe in Kenya, and his hatred of the men who carried out the act in the name of being “Muslims”: “We saw what happened on TV as there was a video from the CCTV cameras of the mall. The four people [attackers] really made the country unsafe. This is violent extremism (interview with Hunter, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

Violent extremism was also identified with the process of Al-Shabaab or ISIS recruitment, whereby radical recruiters focus their attention on vulnerable alienated groups in society and manipulate their feelings of frustration and anger, and their experiences of discrimination, to recruit them to a violent extremist cause. Salim (interview, Mombasa), a youth participant, explained that “Violent extremism to me doesn’t start abruptly. One has to be radicalised by the recruiter until he or she gets saturated to the point of action”.



Spatial factors, and particularly youth gathering points – including Maskanis (bases where youth get together), mosques, schools, and madrasas where recruitment for Al-Shabaab is thought to take place – were also referenced in efforts to define religiously driven violent extremism. Spaces such as maskanis were especially highlighted as locations where youth are mobilised into participating in varied forms of violent extremism associated with political violence and criminal gang syndicates. While some maskanis were considered as spaces for criminality, others were regarded as spaces for disseminating positive messaging about preventing and countering violent extremism in the community (interview with Dhahabu, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa). Nevertheless, everyday experiences associated with spatial features contribute to local definitions of insecurity (Jarvis and Lister 2012) and influence local definitions of violent extremism.

Figure 1 shows the body map drawn by a mother during the workshop. Her view of violent extremism and its impact was based on her son’s recruitment into Al-Shabaab in what she saw as the “evil” maskani. She blamed peer influence there for her son’s behaviour. She also condemned the maskiti (mosque),<sup>iv</sup> where certain individuals brainwashed her son to embrace extremist ideology. She



Figure 1. Body map section where a mother depicts her anguish in relation to the peer-led recruitment of her son to the Al-Shabaab network at the maskani.



violent acts that locals experience as the most pressing forms of violent extremism. Hence, a vernacular security perspective opens up avenues for those marginalised or stigmatised as a consequence of counter-terrorism strategies to become part of and inform the security discussions that define or conceptualise VE (See Bubandt 2004; Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2016).

Often, local people associated procedural justice by state authorities with injustice. If the police and the authorities treat individuals unfairly or without dignity and respect, locals feel mistreated and wronged. Procedural justice theory assesses why people conform to the law and points out that controls can be weakened by incorrect institutional responses (Tyler 2006). Studies have highlighted that those who distrust authorities are more likely to commit crimes, including acts of political and religious violence (DeWaeles and Pauwels 2014). In our study, individual memories linked to the impacts of CT strategies, such as mosque raids at Masjid Musa, arbitrary arrests, and detention, were described as violent extremism (interview with Ali, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

Government failure to provide security for its citizens, coupled with experiences of abuse at the hands of the state's security apparatus (e.g. the police and armed forces), undermines trust in government and state institutions. PCVE policies and interventions have led to Muslim communities being treated as suspect communities, and angered individuals and communities have become a conducive base for a new cycle of hatred and violence towards the police or the government (FGD Youth, Mombasa). An in-depth probing of how those affected or aggrieved by VE can assist in delivering timely PCVE interventions could help to prevent cycles of radicalisation and re-radicalisation.

*Violent extremism as criminal gang syndicates:* Gangs were prevalent in all the locations selected for this study, and varied types of gang violence (criminal, juvenile,

and street gangs, and gangs associated with Al-Shabaab) were mentioned as forms of violent extremism (FGD Youth, Nairobi). Growing up in neighbourhoods at high risk of organised crime and violence made everyday survival “uncertain”, and socio-political changes led to street gangs and criminal gangs emerging in these localities and influencing the everyday security of individuals (interview with Walid, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa.) Participants living in these localities described criminal gangs and their impact as violent extremism. Some of the participants had bruises and traumatic memories of violent encounters with gangs, which were designated as the major type of violence prevalent in their local contexts. Rambo, a woman who is a village elder, and Dee 001, a female participant from Mombasa, both saw violent extremism as synonymous with criminal gangs due to their personal encounters with gang-related violent acts:

For me, violent extremism is violent groups such as Wakali Kwanza [gang group], because I have been a victim of these groups. Where I stay, gangs are rampant. Due to surveillance, these gangs move from Majengo and Old Town to our side that is Kisauni. They create havoc in the place. Killings, stabbings and thefts are common in this pangas-carrying [machete-carrying] lifestyles. Innocent people become victims as they are robbed or mugged on their way back to their houses after work. (interview with Dee 001, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa)

*Secessionist movement activities as violent extremism:* Some participants labelled localised social movements, such as the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), as forms of violent extremism. The MRC is a secessionist movement, outlawed by the government in 2010 (Kisiangani and Lewela 2012), that gained momentum in the coastal region, and particularly the Mijikenda tribes, due to existing governance faultlines and underdevelopment (McGregor 2012). Violent extremism is a politically loaded concept when power politics come into play and specific groups, such as the

MRC, are classified as outlaws or violent extremists. CVE strategies become difficult when the term violent extremism originates in top-down government policies rather than drawing on lived experiences or scholarship. The conceptualisation of violent extremism informs how counter-strategies are developed and implemented (Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011), and so a top-down approach enables and favours particular responses while reducing or excluding others that may cause issues for those in power.

Definitions of violent extremism, like the term “terrorism”, depend entirely on subjective viewpoints. For example, some participants from the coast described the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) as a coastal political movement with a secessionist ideology, while others viewed it as a violent extremist network in line with the government’s classification (open circle discussions, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa.) Likewise, and to a greater extent, definitions are determined by intersubjectivity (Gillespie and Cornish 2010), because violent extremism is contextualised in terms of relationships within specific groups, communities, or spatial settings. These shared meanings are constructed during individual interactions in people’s everyday lives, and individuals interpret and give meaning to violent extremism based on their attribution of feelings, emotions, intentionality, experiences, and beliefs to each other. Awareness of the inherent power dynamics of knowledge production, and the elevation and subjugation of different types of knowledge, is vital. As Oando and Achieng (2021) argue, colonial continuities, western frameworks, and state-led elite constructions of knowledge production overshadow African indigenous knowledge in counter-terrorism approaches, and these factors cascade into definitions of violent extremism. However, it is important to note that non-elite conceptualisations of violent extremism threats do not necessarily challenge dominant policy frameworks. Often the state version of violent extremism is reproduced in everyday PCVE strategies

and trickles down to communities where it can influence how local meanings are made about violent extremism (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016).

*Political violence attributed to tribal electioneering was regarded as violent extremism:*

Elections are often coupled with ethnic tensions during, before, and after election periods (ISD 2022), when youth groups or gangs are mobilised by political actors to engineer violence and create havoc, either through radicalisation or lures including tribal political ideals, money, or other opportunities (interview with Rambo, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa). Alian, a 27-year-old youth participant, based his explanation of the phenomenon of violent extremism on his lived experience of violence in Kenya's coastal region, before, during, and after the 2007 election. According to Alian, violent extremism is closely linked to tribal power struggles (whereby a particular tribe tries to dominate another using either false claims or glorification of the tribe and its origins) or local tribal grievances and marginalisation, where political propaganda is framed to incite hatred of the other (interview with Alian, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

*Drivers of violent extremism were regarded as forms of violent extremism:* The participants considered most drivers of violent extremism, such as marginalisation, discrimination, poverty, and abuse, to be contributing factors for, or identical with, violent extremism. State-led marginalisation of the coastal region, resulting from lopsided colonial- and post-colonial-era policies, impacted development and was regarded as a form of structural violence. Individuals felt they were treated unfairly by the government, when, for example, state-led development planning that affected particular coastal communities resonated with MRC slogans, and structural injustices were equated with state-sponsored violent extremism (open circle discussion, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa). Perceived injustices become key factors in creating discursive environments that are conducive to socialising violent extremist messages

(McCauley and Moskalenka 2008). Malenga, a youth from Likoni, described marginalisation as a strong driver for violent extremism.

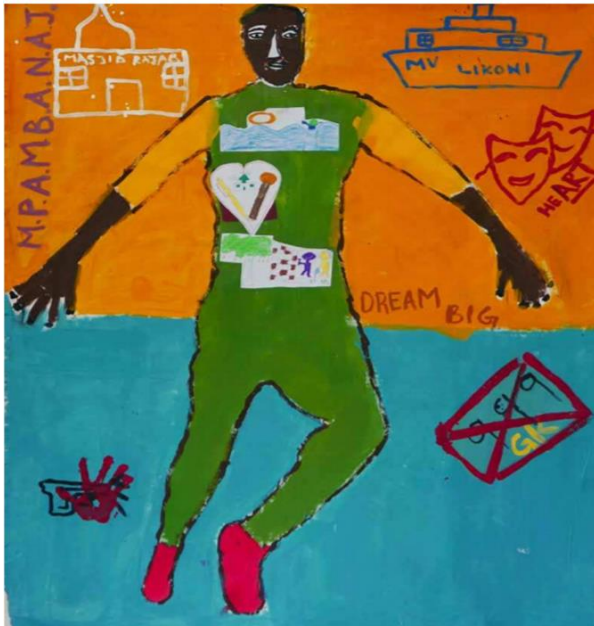


Figure 3. Body map depicting marginalisation in the coastal region as a major contributor to violent extremism.

Marginalization for me is when certain regions of the country receive more favours than others from the central government. For me, this is marginalisation which is a big contributor to violent extremism. [...] Kenya Ferry Services is the best example because it is in Likoni. But youths from Likoni do not benefit from Kenya Ferry Services. You find that the employees are from outside the county, and not from the coast. So what do we do as youths from Likoni? The coastal youths are suffering from unemployment and poverty. Even after devolution, we in Likoni people [sic], do not benefit much from the devolved opportunities. (interview

with Malenga, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa)

Drivers of violent extremism are always context-based, location-specific, and embedded in each region's socio-political history. Political grievances, often discussed in terms of discrimination and the marginalisation of peripheral communities by central government, shape how structural violence is defined in communities. Political or economic grievances prompted by state failure, weak infrastructure, poor governance, unequal resource distribution, and limited political and civil liberties or repression can eventually increase the likelihood that affected communities will use violence to resolve grievances (Mirahmadi 2016). Participants' accounts reflected their sense that they did

not feel they were part of Kenya and had been left out of post-colonial development (interview with Nour and Muzammil, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

Young people are drawn to violent extremist networks due to prevailing poverty in their families or lack of employment opportunities (Krueger 2007). The relationship between these factors and VE is complex (Piazza 2011) and – combined with other factors such as marginalisation, religious discrimination, poverty, and unemployment – they have significant capacity to thrust youth towards violence. Al-Shabaab recruiters often use poverty, discrimination, or religious marginalisation to frame their narratives. A participant explained that “the Al-Shabaab recruiter might say ‘I will give you money to look after your family’, and you will be lured to go as you are the breadwinner for the family. You may not refuse as you can’t see your family in hunger” (FGD Youth, Mombasa).

The drivers for Al-Shabaab may be the same for other political extremist groups. In the coastal region, extremist entrepreneurs thrive by using local narratives of marginalisation and poverty to mobilise their supporters (interview with NGO personnel, Kwale). Supportive relationships between violent extremism networks, such as the alleged MRC link with Al-Shabaab or neighbourhood competition between Al-Shabaab and Isis support bases (open circle discussion, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa), can also spur recruitment (Badurdeen 2021).

*The role of gender and other intersectionalities in defining violent extremism:*

This study’s analysis strengthened efforts to ascertain the role that gender (Aroussi 2020) and intersectionality play in how violent extremism is defined and understood. In discussions on violent extremism, women are generally considered either as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of terrorist actors or as vulnerable victims of terror attacks, and their views remain marginal in security policies and frameworks (Ní Aoláin



2013). Our study found that gender and other identity markers influenced the way in which participants understood and defined violent extremism. For example, a Kwale woman's experience of violent extremism may vary from that of a young Nairobi man. While profound similarities emerged in definitions of violent extremism based on related experiences of gang violence or Al-Shabaab attacks, for example, the causes and impacts attributed to VE varied because structural drivers of violent extremism are gendered and culture plays a pivotal role. Female participants highlighted other acts of violence such as domestic violence, sexual- and gender-based violence, female genital mutilation practices, and early marriages both as instances of and contributing factors to violent extremism in their respective localities (open circle discussions, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa). Personal security concerns, such as the fear of domestic violence or abandonment, are factors that can drive women's support for extremist networks with which their husbands are affiliated (interview with NGO member, Mombasa).

Sympathies for extremist ideologies, like that of Al-Shabaab, become hegemonic within patriarchal family and community setups and serve as powerful cultural drivers for radicalisation and recruitment. This finding supports the argument that women's quest for personal security and protection is a powerful driver of female radicalisation or recruitment for extremist networks (Badurdeen 2020). Personal security concerns such as the fear of becoming victims of physical attacks by gangs or the police are important determinants of female recruitment and radicalisation based on the need for protection in environments prone to violent acts and incidents (interview with Hindu, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa).

The prevalence of violence in women's environments also affects the likelihood that they will engage in violent extremism, either by growing up in, getting married

into, or being supported by extremist families (Badurdeen 2020). As Didge explained, violent extremism is tied to beliefs and traditions upheld in family settings:

I see violent extremism as beliefs and traditions imposed on you against your will. Things that you as a person don't feel as is right [sic] but you don't have any choice to say "no" to them because you're a girl. For example, women are denied education or denied the right to express themselves. Let's say, as a girl you grow up in an environment imposed with strict religious beliefs in your family that doesn't make sense – like when you are asked not to talk to your neighbours because they are Christians. You are told to view your neighbours as Kafirs. You learn to abide by your family rules as you can't question your father or brothers. (interview with Didge, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa)

Embedded structural issues tied to culture and laws can further affect gender relationships and ultimately contribute to gang violence or extremist networks. An Imam from Likoni explained how the implementation in communities of Islamic marriages and divorces, and particularly early marriages, is having dire consequences and leading to greater injustice against women and children, including escalating domestic violence rates (open circle discussion, Body Map Workshop, Mombasa). Easy divorce for men through repudiation leaves young single mothers to fend for their families, and some of their children can end up in juvenile gangs and violent extremist networks as a result of the neglect and poverty that follows, as the Imam explained:

Often the young couple, with the lack of external support find themselves trying to grapple their everyday issues in marital lives. They are often left to themselves and [this] often ends up with physical and mental abuse. Here in this community, girls go through separation or divorce at an early age of thirteen to fifteen. They are often stranded with kids. The girl is under-age and may end up with a small kid. Parents often encourage the girl to get married again due to their poverty-stricken environments. Some kids often have bad experiences with their stepfathers, or with grandparents who may lack the capability to look after them, or are left to the streets to fend for themselves where some end in criminal gangs or extremist

networks as gangs and extremist networks become their family to look forth to.  
(interview with religious leader [Imam], Likoni)

These divorced young girls often become second or third wives to older men and sometimes fall victim to recruitment, becoming the Jihadi wives of Al-Shabaab members, because remarrying is not an option for divorcees in their community (field notes, discussions, Kwale).

### **Navigating the way towards defining “violent extremism”**

The fluid nature of violent extremism means it shifts in accordance with evolving security threats at local level. Existing definitions focused on Islamist extremism alone are insufficient to meet the challenge of newer forms of extremism and are unable to keep up with shifts in or the reification of local threat perceptions. National security framings of violent extremism in Kenya, which remain reactive when they need to be proactively engaged with understanding vernacular expressions of extremism, risk the return of historical atrocities such as election-related violence or other forms of communal conflicts with a tribal inclination.

This study navigated between broad and narrow definitions of violent extremism. A vernacular security perspective supports a broader definition that encompasses all types of violence identified by locals themselves, including efforts to achieve socio-political goals through violent means; however, some locals identified violent extremism narrowly, in line with the Islamist trend, a pragmatic definition supported by governmental and county-level strategies such as the NSCVE, local county action plans, and donor-led interventions. The lack of an internationally agreed definition of violent extremism creates difficulties when it comes to designing, implementing, and evaluating appropriate interventions, but a focus on a narrower definition focused on Islamist extremism can fail to prioritise people’s security needs or

address violence in their localities. A narrow focus on Islamist extremism also has the potential to stigmatise exactly those communities whose support is vital in PCVE.

Operating within a broader, neutral understanding of violence and its causes enables engagement with a large range of stakeholders. From a strategic standpoint, focusing on the prevention of violence can circumvent definitional constraints and the ambiguities that arise when lawmakers and enforcers may be part of the problem. This expansive approach both paves the way for a nuanced understanding of causes of violence specific to different localities and supports the design of contextually relevant interventions. Often stakeholders shy away from broader approaches because they can be time-consuming, not least because of the donor-specific criteria that often accompany targeted funds aimed at PCVE. Research on how local communities understand, perceive, act to prevent, contain, or resist violent extremism has mapped the different roles of diverse local actors such as teachers, local police, families, village administrators, religious leaders, community-based organisations, local businesses, and community mobilisers. Their roles and skills in trust-based networks (Dalgaard-Nielsen and Schack 2007) can aid in understanding, mitigating, and preventing VE in local contexts.

The vernacular terms and contextual meanings articulated by participants support scholarly claims about the uncertainty and lack of consistency in characterising violent extremism (Bak, Tarp, and Liang 2019). The participants articulated words and phrases that defined the act, process, and root causes of violent extremism. Discussions about violent extremism in everyday life conflated terms such as “violence”, “violent acts”, “ideology”, “fear”, “threats”, “political tactics”, and “religious extremism”. Occasionally, structural cleavages such as regional or religious marginalisation; discrimination; stigmatisation; injustice or tribal markers; and political grievances were

also described as violent extremism. Gendered meaning-making around violent extremism incorporated other acts of violence, such as physical or domestic abuse, harassment, and inequalities embedded in marginalised, patriarchal, and violence-prone environments. Men were inclined to describe forms of violent extremism from a public perspective, whereas female participants associated it with physical and psychological violence and loss felt in the private sphere because of family or community members' association with VE. Failure to use the lenses of gender and intersectionality to interpret and respond to violent extremism leads to neglect of early warning indicators for rising extremism. Extremist networks propagate narratives that offer desirable resolutions to people's grievances, tapping into the aspirations of youth and women (Anderlini 2018). A holistic approach to PCVE entails conceptualising violent extremism through an intersectional lens, taking into consideration gender, age, tribe, religions, and other markers, which shape the discourse on VE. Kenya's existing local county action plans are commendable. However, plans and implementation efforts need to maintain persistent focus on intersectionality, asking, for example, how PCVE interventions will differently affect a male youth in Likoni or a woman in Kwale. Age, gender, and local dynamics are important factors in naming and framing the concept of "violent extremism", and so interventions must take these intersectional factors into account to ensure effectiveness.

The forms of violent extremism most emphasised by participants in this study were associated with terrorist movements and networks, secessionist movements, gang syndicates, and extremist movements that react against counter-terrorism strategies. The agents of violent extremism they identified included transnational extremist networks such as Al-Shabaab; Al-Shabaab's domestic extremist networks, including the Jaysh Al-Ayman; international extremist networks, such as the Islamic State; secessionist

movements, such as the MRC; and counter-terrorism strategies. Specific community members also highlighted criminal, juvenile, and/or street gangs as violent extremist groups due to the terror they generate in specific communities. In the studied localities, most extremist movements co-exist side by side, opposing each other or even collaborating. Vernacular expressions embedded in spatial dynamics are necessary to understand violent extremism (Darden 2019). It is therefore vital that the state-centric focus on Al-Shabab or ISIS as violent extremist organisations should involve assessing each organisation's links to other forms of extremist movements or local drivers. Questions need to be posed about why, for example, more young people engage in violence in a particular place or the layers of context that surround a young person's actions. In this study, a multitude of drivers of extremism and types of exploitation were explored based on spatial factors, which are often tied to peripheral marginalisation and associated political grievances, histories of violence, locations of crimes, and the VE nexus. No forms of violent extremism happen in a vacuum. Vulnerabilities can open a person up to many forms of exploitation, and the challenges that leave someone exposed to exploitation by extremist groups are very often identical or parallel to those exploited by criminal gangs, human trafficking networks, and non-ideological attackers (Makarenko and Mesquita 2014).

Our analysis revealed that most CVE interventions are focused on reducing violent extremist acts and the number of those joining VE networks. Participants noted that while a reduction in the number of VE cases is used as an indicator for success, it does not necessarily tell us whether key drivers were addressed. The reduction can simply indicate that activities such as joining Al-Shabaab were temporarily suppressed due to fear of heavy-handed CT responses. Underlying structural issues may remain neglected and un-prioritised in later interventions, which mainly concentrate on

equipping men and women associated with VE or in at-risk communities with skills designed to prevent future involvement with VE networks. Structural, cultural, and relational forms of violence embedded in communities require different types of locally led interventions that must be undertaken cautiously to avoid stigmatising communities.

Communities' definitions of VE change over time, and interventions need to be shaped accordingly. Immediately after a terror attack by Al-Shabaab or ISIS, people will talk about their threats as violent extremism. Close to political elections, people will shift to discussing political or election-based violence as violent extremism. Violent extremist movements and trends can be fostered or manipulated by political entities, particularly during election periods, and locals may even justify these movements or trends as motives for violent actions. In some coastal localities, violent extremist networks and criminal gang syndicates are closely intertwined. An in-depth assessment of vernacular expressions of the menace posed by local criminal gangs can be a vital tool in addressing other forms of violent extremism in a region. Additionally, actions to counter these movements by the authorities can further complicate the context, with those victimised defining VE as state abuse of power. In these complex environments, a broader approach to understanding VE, emanating from a vernacular security perspective, can enable a nuanced analysis of local causes and types of VE, as well as cast light on how local people understand VE in their everyday lives, aiding the design of contextually relevant CVE interventions.

Attitudes to PCVE are dependent on local contexts, media, political culture, and/or the CVE initiatives floated by donors and governments. Interventions to counter or prevent violent extremism need to address root causes and drivers of violent extremism, such as marginalisation, socio-economic issues, discrimination, poor governance, citizenship rights, human rights violations, collective grievances, and other

psychological factors (UNDP 2017). A careful gender analysis needs to be conducted so that gender can be integrated into CVE programming, but gender, along with other important intersecting factors, must inform sustainable PCVE initiatives (Asante and Shepherd 2020). Acknowledgement of class, ethnicity, race, religion, tribe, locality, and other identity markers that shape experiences of oppression and access to potential opportunity are essential to building a comprehensive understanding of violent extremism.

## **Conclusion**

Constructions of violent extremism at the local level in Kenya are shaped by lived experiences of insecurity and influenced by gender, ethnicity, social status, location, and interactions with the state. The framing of violent extremism by the participants in our study must be understood in the light of experiences of insecurity in their everyday lives. Due to the Kenyan government's focus on mitigating Islamist extremism, these vernacular expressions of everyday "violent extremism" not only go unaddressed but are exacerbated by governmental counter-terrorism measures. This study demonstrates that the Kenyan government's focus on countering the threat of Al-Shabaab and other Islamist extremist groups has led to a failure to understand and respond to sources of insecurity that local communities experience in their everyday lives. The government's heavy investment in countering violent extremism and the focus on Al-Shabaab as the main source of insecurity need to be challenged using bottom-up and community-led approaches that can re-centre the experiences of violence and exclusion that women and men from local communities face in their everyday lives.

If PCVE policies are to be developed that efficiently target the root causes of violent extremism (VE), a re-conceptualisation of the violent extremism paradigm along vernacular securities is required. This must involve engagement with unconventional



stakeholders, such as at-risk communities and other marginalised groups including women and youth, alongside elites, policymakers, and law enforcement professionals. A broader approach to PCVE will facilitate a multi-perspective, multi-layered approach to addressing VE based on local contexts in communities prone to radicalisation. Local accounts define violent extremism in ways that include a range of location-specific everyday insecurities, which may or may not be considered as violent extremism by the state. Meanwhile, subjective elite perspectives and state-led expert definitions advance the significance of immediate threats, which are prioritised on the basis of political positionalities.

Often, elites recognise broader security threats, but they rarely communicate about them, particularly when addressing them will go against the political order and challenge the status quo. The fear is that the prevailing VE focus on Islamist extremism – which arguably only serves short-term elite interests and addresses national rather than local security threats – becomes normative and is therefore more likely to be reproduced at the local level. This in turn will gradually shift local expectations and priorities about violent extremism without improving people’s everyday security. A broader, reformed PCVE agenda entails taking into account the full range of vernacular expressions used by different communities to characterise “violent extremism”. This approach can be challenging, due to the varied types of violence and acts involved, and it may even seem impractical when conceptions of VE encompass state violence or violence attributed to those in power and where the state or the power-holders need to be held accountable. The inherently political nature of state-led, problem-solving approaches to security minimises options for broadening and deepening the VE concept to reflect local nuances and it also contributes to stakeholders ignoring or downplaying existential “non-Islamist” threats.



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<sup>i</sup> Kisauni is a coastal town in Mombasa, Kenya. Selected locations in Kisauni were identified as hotspots for criminal activities, violence, and Al-Shabaab recruitment. See the Mombasa County Action Plan (2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Al-Shabaab is a transnational extremist network originating from Somalia. The organisation has been responsible for many terrorist attacks in Kenya, where youth are radicalised and recruited to carry out their activities.

<sup>iii</sup> This study uses pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity. All interviews and field notes referenced here resulted from our study.

<sup>iv</sup> This does not mean all mosques were labelled as spaces for recruitment or radicalisation. Recruiters used specific mosques for their sermons and dawa (religious invitation) programmes (field notes, 2019).