Policyweekly

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria
The State of Community Engagement

Policy Recommendations

1 The community focus of the National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism must be given policy attention.

2 Local Governments in the regions with cases of violent extremism should set up coordinators to support activities in the communities.

3 The media should report any growing extremist or radicalising messages.

4 The National Orientation Agency should work with NGOs and think tanks to develop guide notes on violent extremism.

Introduction

In 2017, the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) produced a National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in conformity with a presidential directive. The document, in terms of core objectives, guiding principles and core constituencies and action plan contents, provide a rich policy basis for engaging with the challenges of violent extremism in Nigeria. The document is quite comprehensive in identifying the core constituencies to focus on, including women and girls, families, schools and school teachers, community leaders, and faith-based organisations (FBOs). Others include health and social workers, civil society organisations, media and social media influencers, artists and social mobilisers, political leaders, private sector (and markets), policing and civil-military relations. This suggests mindfulness of the relevant stakeholders on which to focus actions to prevent, counter violent extremism and promote security.

Similarly, among the priority components, the third one is engaging communities and building resilience. While every other component is important, community engagement is crucial. Despite this document and its

rich policy provision, deaths related to terror, banditry and extremism since 2017, when the document was published, have not been mitigated significantly. This suggests gaps at the implementation points, especially the community-level engagement. The rich potential of the community as the core point of action for the prevention and countering of violent extremism is yet to be fully harnessed. Hence, the edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly interrogates the state of community engagement in the light of the policy framework for preventing and countering violent extremism.

The Value of Community in the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Taking a simple sociological meaning of community as a locality, it refers to people who share a common soil and common way of life and, above all, a sense of belonging. Although communities normally classified in the planning sense as urban, suburban and rural communities have the shared feature of a common territory and spatial belonging, they vary in some ways with security implications. For instance, rural and suburban settings appear more cohesive; members know one another and are less likely to have the cover of anonymity when they commit crimes or breaches of security. Equally, the cohesion in such communities supports information-sharing networks among various groups such as women, groups, men, youths, students, families, neighbourhoods, places of worship, schools, and market. Indeed, an interview respondent who lives in Mafa Local Government Area in Borno State noted in the case of Boko Haram members that "we know them, we live with them because they are our brothers." According to the respondent, this enabled the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) to effectively track the terrorists (Personal Communication, May 31, 2022). Communities can know who spreads what message about religious beliefs and who listens to them. They harbour the structures through which messages could be spread to counter anti-social tendencies, propaganda, and radicalising content. This positions the community as a core point of implementation for any programme of prevention or countering of violent extremism. Incidentally, the level of community involvement, which ought to be the centre of actions to prevent and counter-extremism, is inadequate despite the National Action Plan. With such a lack of action, it is no surprise that violent extremism is increasing across the country. It has moved from known religious leanings to economic, political, cultural, and even extreme ideological positions.

The community engagement component of the plan advocates participatory strategies with civil society and local communities. This is to prevent the emergence of violent extremism, protect the community members from recruitment, and promote confidence-building measures by setting up platforms for dialogue and early identification of grievances. In addition, its contents include the setting up of local hubs for early warning and intelligence to foresee extremist behaviours to follow it up with coordinated responses. What exists at best are counter-measures to violent extremism, which have evolved to the level of terrorist attacks or even banditry. The most effective counter-measures are the community-led non-state kinetic security responses such as the CJTF and hunters' groups. However, systematic prevention through coordinated intelligence sharing and safe spaces for discursive interaction still lacks policy support. The point being made is that spaces of conversation that build on local contexts of dialogue such as women's groups, youth groups, elders forums, teachers and schools, and religious groups and with adequate training on the need for preventive action

against violent extremism would be more persuasive to the local communities. Effective preventive actions against extremism can be socially embedded and extended with such engagements.

Another community focused component of the National Action Plan is developing the civic education programme and peace education to promote tolerance and respect for diversity. Schools and other learning platforms are to promote a culture of peace. In this aspect, we note the efforts of civil society organisations, especially the international non-governmental organisations, in reaching out to the communities. The participatory programming and use of strategic communication tend to come from this civic sector, but the best way to qualify their coverage on the matter is that of few labourers amidst plentiful harvests. In effect, wider coverage is still expected due to the problem of the expansive geography of Nigeria. Many hard-to-reach areas have yet to be mainstreamed in existing civil society programming.

Therefore, this area's civil society activities are still largely urban-focused programmes. More importantly, there are altercations between the civil society groups and security agencies due to mutual accusations. With other parts of the country like Southern Nigeria witnessing a rise in such violent extremism that are non-religious, the need to expand the reach and the messaging is becoming very important.

In framing roles and responsibilities, the National Action Plan encouraged state and local governments to develop their inclusive local framework for preventing and countering violent extremism. In this regard, what local governments do is at best hazy and at worst non-existent. That level of governance should have supported community processes for preventing violent extremism. Here again, we reckon that some non-state security outfits in the North East, North Central, North West and South East are being supported with stipends from local governments (Personal Communication, May 31, 2022). Thus, the predominant mindset about solving the problem of violent extremism is a reactive one which prefers to counter rather than prevent violent eruptions supported by extremism.

As important opinion moulders in the communities, systematic engagement of school teachers on contents of instructions, how to observe changes in their pupils, how to debrief children who show signs of extremism and report to community discussion hubs for action have yet to be reported in the country. Besides, community networks of relations such as families, districts, traditional rulers, faith-based organisations, health and social workers, the media artists and influencers are either under-utilised or not used.

Improving Community Involvement in the Preventing and Countering Violent

Since there is a National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria and the policy document integrates community programming, the essential steps for improving community engagement in PCVE lie in actuating and proactively implementing the policy with a clear focus on areas that relate to community engagement. Specific steps that may be taken include:

1. The community focus of the National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism must be given policy attention. In particular, the aspects that require coordination with and between community stakeholders such as school

teachers, women groups, youth groups, and faith-based organisations should be given attention. In addition, a safe space should be created for a conversation about encounters with extremist messages among the stakeholders. Finally, the outcomes should be responded to subtly, emphasising more corrective actions.

2. The National Action Plan also provides state and local government coordination of the processes. On that note, Local Governments in the regions with cases of VE should set up coordinators to support activities in the communities which target the prevention and countering of violent extremism. These coordinators should quietly work with and among community groups to track intelligence on extremist and radicalising messages. Such a local government coordinator should be the link to align efforts at the community levels with governmental efforts at the local government, Ministries, Departments, and Agencies relevant to security.

3. The media should report any growing incidence of extremist or radicalising messages. Relevant government agencies should follow up on such red flags on message contents to explore chances of defusing the extremist messages, and where corrective approaches are not sufficient, sanctions could be explored.

4. The National Orientation Agency should work with NGOs and think tanks to develop guide notes on VE. This will help people on social media platforms notice when a member is becoming a violent extremist or trying to radicalise others.

Conclusion

By properly identifying the stakeholders to drive the prevention of violent extremism, the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism has laid a background for mitigating a major source of security menace. However, this document is poorly implemented in the community. Thus, there are major gaps in community engagement. By refocusing the community thrust of the policy document to prevent the proliferation of violent extremism, communities feel integrated and better persuaded to more actively participate in the prevention and countering of violent extremism.

Authors:

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Weekly Update

Revitalising Nigeria's Primary Healthcare System

Tuesday June 21st 2022 | **10:00AM - 12:00PM** West African Time

📍 Zoom, Teams, Facebook, and YouTube

Registration Link | https://bit.ly/3sGmuu4

HEALTH
Universal Health Coverage
A Nextier Health Dialogue Series

Nextier

This Event will:

- Highlight the major challenges affecting primary healthcare centres (PHC).
- Identify key strategies and explore pragmatic interventions to optimise the Primary Healthcare System.
- Identify the relevant parties to the solution and their core deliverables.

Moderator
Dr. Kasarachi Aluka-Omitiran
Assistant Director, National Primary Healthcare Development Agency

Panelist
Prof. Chima Onoka
Head of Operations, Health Policy Research Group

Panelist
Dr. Sam Agbo
Senior Health Adviser, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, Nigeria
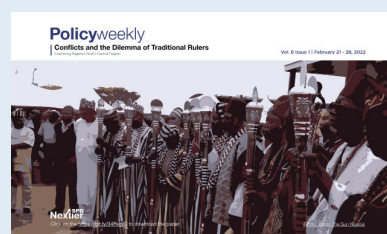
Panelist
Dr. Emmanuel Okpetu
Director, Primary Health Care, Kuje Area Council Health Authority

Nextier Sample Publications

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Jihadist Violence and Military Resurgence:
The Crisis of Fragile Democratisation in Africa

In just over six months in 2021, coups made a rude comeback in Sudan, Mali, Chad, and Guinea.

Policyweekly | Conflicts and the Dilemma of Traditional Rulers | Vol. 6 Issue 1 | February 21 - 28, 2022

Conflicts and the Dilemma of Traditional Rulers:
Examining Nigeria's North-Central Region

The North-Central Zone has been in the eye of the storm of Nigeria's multiple conflicts for several years.

Policyweekly | A Resource Conflict Perspective | Vol. 5 Issue 25 | February 15-21, 2022

A Resource Conflict Perspective:
Questioning the Lingering Zamfara Crises
The conflict in Zamfara is one instance of the festering conflicts in the North West of Nigeria with its peculiar grisly tales and very dim prospects of resolution in the near future.
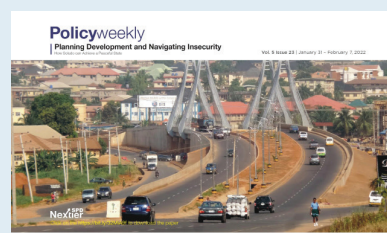
Policyweekly | Beyond Farmers and Herders | Vol. 5 Issue 24 | February 7 - February 14, 2022

Beyond Farmers and Herders:
Natural Resource Conflicts in the North-Central

Resource conflicts have remained intractable in the North-Central Zone of Nigeria.

Policyweekly | Bloodletting Gold in Zamfara State | Vol. 6 Issue 2 | February 28 - March 7, 2022
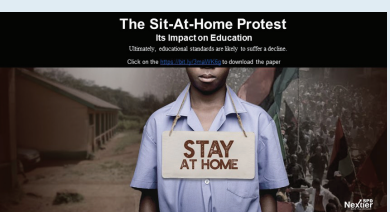
Bloodletting Gold in Zamfara State:
Reflecting on Illicit Mining and Violence

Zamfara State has gained infamy for bloodletting connected to illicit gold mining activities.

Policyweekly | Planning Development and Navigating Insecurity | Vol. 5 Issue 23 | January 31 - February 7, 2022
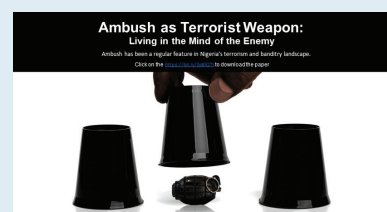
Planning Development and Navigating Insecurity:
How Soludo can Achieve a Peaceful State
As Anambra State Governor-elect Prof Charles Soludo prepares to take the mantle of leadership on March 17, 2022, a flurry of dreams and great expectations reverberates across the State and beyond.

The Sit-At-Home Protest
Its Impact on Education

The Sit-at-home Protest:
Its Impact on Education

Ultimately, educational standards are likely to suffer a decline.

Ambush as Terrorist Weapon:
Living in the Mind of the Enemy

Ambush as Terrorist Weapon:
Living in the Mind of the Enemy

Ambush has been a regular feature in Nigeria's terrorism and banditry landscape.