



## Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) Working Group on Preventing Violent Extremism by Educating for Rights, Peace and Pluralism

### Concept Note

30-31 March 2017

#### Summary

On 30-31 March 2017 the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), OPEN ASIA/Armanshahr, a founding member of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), will convene an expert working group meeting on the nexus of education and the prevention of violent extremism with a gendered lens, as part of the Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) thematic working group series. The meeting will take place at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France, co-hosted by the Permanent Delegation of the Kingdom of Norway to United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and organized in coordination with the Permanent Mission of the United States to UNESCO.

The meeting will build on the leadership role of UNESCO in this sphere and draw upon the pioneering work of women-led civil society organizations active in communities most affected by extremism and violence. The 2-day meeting will bring together innovative civil society and national level educationalists, and global education experts together with government and multilateral counterparts to discuss the state of the art in education policy and curricula development to inform policy making and PVE national action planning particularly with attention to addressing two interrelated factors:

- a) The prevention and countering of extremism and related violence, and
- b) The promotion of positive values pertaining to rights and equality, peace and respect for pluralism in curricula as well as related life skills fostered in the classroom and wider educational environments.

The Working Group will build on the findings of the UNESCO September 2016 PVE conference, and draw upon the gendered analysis and women-led efforts of members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), who have hands-on experience in assessing the role of education in fostering or mitigating extremism, and developing curricula tailored to their contexts to counter the messages of violence and foster respect for peace and pluralism.

The GSX is a new mechanism for structured and systematic engagement of civil society with governments and multilateral organizations, on critical topics related to the prevention of violent extremism through the promotion of rights, peace and pluralism. We are grateful to the





governments of the UK and Norway for their support of the GSX and the thematic working groups specifically.

This and other meetings in the series will help determine the scope for more meaningful interaction between civil society and state entities, and the development of shared strategies to realize a “whole of society” approach to preventing violent extremism. Thematic working group meetings will inform other GSX activities and be reported to the annual high-level GSX to be convened in September 2017.

## Context

In 2015, the phenomenon of violent extremism<sup>1</sup> emerged as a major security concern for the international community, though it has been spreading throughout many societies for at least three decades. Driven by a range of factors from poor governance to inadequate economic policies, violent extremism is exacerbated by military interventions and armed conflicts as well as the fragmentation of the mainstream and social media through which extremist movements have targeted vulnerable individuals and communities, able to connect across geographic distances and tailor their messages to each context.

While prevalent forms of violent extremism are rooted in identity-based politics and exclusionary ideologies demonize “the other”, they are also fueled by the rise of extreme pluralism around the world. Urbanization, globalization, and migration have contributed to this pluralism, which is at its best a source of creativity, innovation, and understanding among peoples. Exposure to diversity through personal and professional relationships is fostering greater empathy and respect for multiculturalism. Yet, at its worst this extremism pluralism is fueling mistrust and misunderstanding between and within communities, and causing internal crises for people, especially youth, struggling to find a sense of belonging and a place in the world that acknowledges their layered and complex identities. Countervailing forces perceive this diversity to be a threat to social cohesion, a dilution of hegemonic national or religious identities and threat to the values of their states and societies. In recent decades, these social processes have taken on religious and geopolitical dimensions, as certain schools of thought promulgating more exclusionary and extreme beliefs have been disseminated deliberately through financial, political, and educational systems.

In every context, the rise of identity politics has dovetailed with the deliberate spread of exclusionary ideological teachings through formal and informal educational spaces to become a key contributor to societal conditions conducive to the rise of violent extremism, including intolerance and militarism. The international Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda has sought to address this dynamic by engaging the educational sector to determine effective means of not only preventing and mitigating the threats, but also providing viable positive alternatives.

<sup>1</sup> Agreeing on a shared definition of ‘violent extremism’ is itself a challenge. The Australian Government has one of the most succinct definitions defining it in brief as the “beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals.” For a more detailed discussion see: <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/aboutus/Pages/what-is-violent-extremism.aspx>.





As Gwang-Jo Kim, Director of the UNESCO Bangkok office noted on behalf of the UNESCO Director-General at the September 2016 International Conference on the Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education”:

“If we rely exclusively on hard power to find solutions, we will not tackle the many underlying conditions that breed violent extremism and drive youth to join violent extremist groups. We need soft power as well, and this means education. *Not just any education: relevant, inclusive and equitable quality education [emphasis added].*”

These sentiments resonate across the world in communities most affected by violent extremism and related violent conflicts. From Iraq to Syria, Pakistan to Nigeria, educationalists and civil society organizations—particularly women-led organizations—have long identified the importance of inclusive and quality education for boys and girls. They have been developing innovative materials, curricula, programs and pedagogy to both increase resilience among youth and others against extremist messaging and offer positive alternative narratives, knowledge, and opportunities that elevate and encourage respect for pluralism and diversity, peace and justice, rights and equality. ICAN has been privileged to support such efforts through its Inclusive Challenge Fund grant mechanism. For example in Iraq, a grant to the Al-Amal Foundation enabled them to develop and pilot a civic and peace education programs in communities affected by war and displacement. The success of the pilot schemes in building greater understanding among diverse sects, ethnic groups and among young men and women, has resulted in a commitment by the Iraqi government of a nationwide roll out of the curriculum. In Nigeria, a small grant to peacebuilder Hamsatu Allamin, enabled her to develop a 15-week radio call-in show that enabled local populations to talk directly to Islamic scholars. The scholars spoke about the importance of education in Islam and debunked the messages of Boko Haram. As a result, enrollment in schools in the area rose by 40%, Allamin also developed a peace curriculum which teachers in Islamiyyah schools are keen to use. She like others is promoting religious literacy and alongside it the tenet of respect for diversity, rejection of violence and the importance of gender equality.

Since much of the P/CVE resources dedicated to research and programming have focused on the ‘push and pull’ factors towards radicalization. These areas of work have received less attention globally. Indeed far less has been dedicated to investigating and supporting the “whole of society” or “healthy society” initiatives that exist and options for institutionalizing these. Yet as noted above in the communities where such proactive programs are under way, the impact is evident. They are implicitly building up the capacity of youth to not only be ‘resilient’ against the lure of extremist rhetoric and promise, and actively resist and reject the ideologies, but also embrace and value critical thinking, respect for differences and curiosity about faith and cultural norms in the world beyond.

We propose framing preliminary discussions around the following four interrelated areas:

- a) Policies and programs designed to impart guidance and capacity for teachers, community leaders, and other educators on effectively preventing and mitigating violent extremism. Such approaches include developing sensitivity to the signs of radicalization among youth and the development of requisite skills and personnel to help interrupt





this process, as well as efforts to bolster the resilience of individuals, their cohorts and their communities.

- b) Educational approaches to assist and support children, youth and adults who have suffered trauma and/or are coping with the impact of violence in and around their communities. Such approaches have both healing and prevention elements given that unaddressed trauma contributes to vulnerability to radicalization whether for vengeance, to assert lost personal power, and/or to enable protection of self and family. Exposure to sustained or extreme violence can also result in desensitization that increases societal tolerance for violence and normalizes it as a means for solving problems.
- c) Educational approaches to address tensions between different groups or against particular subsets of the population (e.g. minorities, women), exacerbated by increased proximity to difference resulting from displacement, urbanization, and the dissemination of extremist rhetoric and ideologies that emphasize differences and promote exclusion.
- d) Pedagogies, curricula and philosophies that actively promote positive pluralism, rights and peace, through imparting a mix of skills and substantive knowledge that enables young people to respect and value cultural diversity and view historic events from multiple perspectives, while recognizing shared humanity and common human experience. Such approaches implicitly address the contemporary phenomenon of rising extremism, impart a clear alternative vision for society that is rooted in multiculturalism and inclusivity in effect inoculating youth against messages of intolerance, bigotry and incitement to violence.

In addressing these issues, a breakdown of the different pathways and challenges need to be considered. For example:

- The role of teachers and teacher training: if teachers are not equipped to tackle the problems or, are themselves, conveying negative stereotypes or practices. Thus, teacher training and the necessary financial and political resources to address such sensitive issues is an additional factor to consider;
- The sources of knowledge and influence: Children and youth are exposed to information and influences from a variety of sources ranging from the family to school, community, religious institutions, mainstream and increasingly social media. From the KPK region of Pakistan to the banlieues of Paris, it is evident that extremist movements seek to enter and occupy all of these spaces. To defy this force and offer a robust positive alternative requires presence and attention in all these spheres;
- Addressing the gendered dimension throughout: While there are some common factors that draw young men and women to extremist ideologies, there are also critical differences. It is thus essential to have a strong gendered analysis of the contexts and communities at risk, and determine effective strategies for tailored outreach to men, women, boys and girls.





While the challenges are significant, it is also critical to ensure a balanced and realistic perspective on the existing contexts. In most contexts, the clear majority of the population—youth or otherwise—are not engaged in, or attracted to the extremist ideologues and the drive towards violence. A key focus of the discussions must thus be to value and celebrate the peaceful majority and better understand the push and pull factors and experiences that enable young and old alike to fully reject extremism and violence, and embrace pluralism, equal rights and peace. In other words, as much we need to address and uproot the breeding ground for extremism, we must also better understand, sow and seed the grounds for inclusivity and acceptance.

## Forming a Working Group on Education and Extremism

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Given the complexity of the issues and need to address them at the policy and programmatic levels, ICAN proposes the establishment of a GSX Working Group on Education and Violent Extremism to provide a safe space for discussion of the role of education policy and practices in the fueling and prevention of violent extremism, with a fully gendered lens and a focus on the promotion of rights, peace and pluralism

The goal of forming a GSX Working Group on Education and Violent Extremism is to inform and influence policymaking and PVE action plans at the global, national, and local levels through gendered policy and situation analyses and formation of practical recommendations pertaining to the education sector. This preliminary meeting of the experts working group will help focus our analysis and approach to cross-sectoral engagement around these issues, including prioritization of necessary research, advocacy, and programming agendas.

The working group should include individuals and organizational representatives from key fields of expertise including peacebuilders, activists, educationalists, academics and education policy experts, and where relevant the private sector. The group will engage relevant government counterparts (e.g. Ministries of Education) and other multilateral organizations (e.g. UNICEF) to ensure that findings and recommendations emerging from its deliberations are heard and considered by states, as well as inclusive of their concerns and insights.

To this end, and in light of UNESCO's early attention to the nexus of education, violent extremism and pluralism, we propose UNESCO and WASL to co-convene a brainstorming meeting to explore the possibilities for such a collaboration to sustain and amplify existing initiatives, and identify opportunities, challenges and ways to address these through ongoing strategic intersectoral collaboration.

## Objectives of an Experts Brainstorming Meeting

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- Review findings and analyses of existing initiatives including:
  1. The “International Conference on the Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education” convened by UNESCO in September 2016.



2. Consultations with the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership in November 2016 in the form of a forthcoming discussion paper.<sup>2</sup>;

- Explore the entry points for developing a shared conceptual and analytical framework for understanding the education/extremism nexus, bearing in mind the gendered dimensions and the need to focus on positive alternatives;
- Determine potential next steps for collaboration in the policy realm and the related challenges and opportunities;
- Identify specific technical steps moving forward including attention to the development of tools or resources that offer practical guidance on educating for peace and pluralism in the context of rising extremism;
- Determine the necessary financial and logistical next steps to continue this area of collaboration; and
- Map actors, challenges and opportunities to advance this area of policy and practice together with additional key stakeholders;



<sup>2</sup> Read the brief in full at [www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WASL-Brief-No.1-Full.pdf](http://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WASL-Brief-No.1-Full.pdf)



2016–2017 Implementation Timeline: GSX Thematic Working Groups on Critical Issues Related to Extremism

GSX Working Group on Security Interventions	GSX Working Group on Neoliberal Economics	GSX Working Group on Education	Projected Dates
Working Group meeting at RUSI in London	Circulate working paper on Neoliberal Economics and Extremism	Preparatory phase/development of concept note	February 2017
	Working Group meeting in New York	Circulate preliminary discussion paper and convene Working Group	March 2017
	Outreach event parallel World Bank meetings in Washington D.C.		April 2017
MENA regional workshop and launch of Arabic translation of "Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms: Women's Perspectives on Violent Extremism & Security Interventions".		Publish policy brief	May 2017
			June 2017
Review of progress	Review of progress	Review of progress	July 2017
Review of progress	Review of progress	Review of progress	August 2017
Input to high-level GSX	Input to high-level GSX	Input to high-level GSX	September 2017

## Annex: Core principles informing ICAN's approach to extremism

From the outset, by prioritizing the experiences of our local partners and taking a holistic gendered and peace approach that upholds the importance of preserving, protecting and promoting equality and human rights, we articulated a series of core principles that anchor and guide our work on addressing extremism. These principles also inform our advisory and advocacy work and include the following:

- a) It is not enough to focus on 'violent' extremism. Ideologies that foment hate and bigotry must be tackled too. Extremist ideology that spreads into the mainstream provides the space for violence to take root and become normalized. We fully understand that if the focus is broadly addressing 'extremist ideas and expressions' it can be used to threaten freedom of speech and expression. Indeed, many states are already using the P/CVE agenda to shut down civic engagement and civil society organizations that critique state policies. But our partners' experiences also demonstrate that the spread of bigotry and intolerance through words and ideas – that is often first directed at women and minorities – creates an environment where violence can fester and erupt. In democratic countries, the tensions regarding such issues are addressed on a continuous basis. There is an understanding of the lines between 'hate speech' and 'freedom of speech', and how the former is not tolerated.
- b) The framing of this agenda as 'countering' or 'preventing' violent extremism is too limited and ineffective. Extremist movements recruit by promising desirable alternatives to people's grievances. They also tap into the aspirations of youth and women. Simply being against them is not enough. The international community must articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote dignity, rights, peace and pluralism as positive, non-violent and practical alternatives. Local actors are leading this work.
- c) A vibrant and independent civil society is vital to PVE, as they provide space for moderate and constructive critique, dissent and voice. The role of local actors is critical and women's movement is potentially the most powerful counterweight to the rising extremist movements, because like them, women's organizations are locally rooted and authentic, yet globally connected. They also offer a strong alternative vision and values rooted in rights, peace and pluralism.
- d) The gender lens is a very effective 'early warning' indicator of rising extremism – because the violence it condones against women and sexual minorities is often either invisible or deemed to be 'cultural,' yet it is the same phenomenon that metastasizes and spreads into society and becomes 'terrorism' or 'violent extremism.'
- e) The extremism phenomenon cannot be addressed simply through security, governance or other siloed approaches. Reform is needed in the economic, education and social spheres too in a holistic manner.
- f) Significant policy changes are needed. It is not enough to call for support to women's NGOs, youth or other civil society on the ground, and implicitly put the burden on their shoulders. It is essential to listen and heed their advice regarding urgent policy and programmatic changes needed in the efforts of states and international actors – because the problems are multi-faceted and relevant at the macro and micro levels.

