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CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract
This study examines the challenges civil society organisations (CSOs) face in combating violent extremism (CVE) in Nigeria. Data is derived from a thorough analysis of United Nations conventions, resolutions, declarations, and existing literature on the subject matter. The roles and challenges faced by civil society organisations in countering violent extremism remain understudied, despite frameworks such as the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy providing a roadmap. Based on frustration, aggression, and structural-functional theories, the paper underscores the essential role of civil society organisations in amplifying the voices of marginalised and vulnerable individuals, specifically those who are victims of terrorism. Furthermore, CSOs serve as a productive platform for addressing grievances. The paper argues that civil society organizations have significant roles in activism, education, advocacy, advisory services, research, community engagement, legal matters, and even as potential assistance and service providers. Moreover, they are instrumental in ensuring that counterterrorism measures (CTMs) adhere to human rights and the rule of law while also fostering awareness regarding diverse strategy-related concerns. The findings suggest that a significant challenge to the involvement of CSOs in CVE is the belief that counterterrorism is primarily a matter of national security and should be solely managed by the military. CSOs substantially provide alternative perspectives and approaches to CVE, contributing to a more comprehensive and sustainable strategy. They can help address the root causes of radicalisation and build community resilience against violent extremism. The paper concludes that active participation by civil society organizations can enhance the battle against violent extremism.

Keywords: Civil society organisations, Counterterrorism, Extremism, Terrorism, Nigeria

Introduction

> Preventing acts of terrorism necessitates not just enhanced security measures but also more effective efforts to tackle the fundamental factors that contribute to the emergence of violent extremism. Resolving conflicts, ending foreign occupations, overcoming oppression, eliminating poverty, promoting sustainable development, empowering marginalized groups, safeguarding human rights, and advocating for good governance are all crucial in the fight against terrorism. However, these challenges become more difficult due to the application of repressive counterterrorism policies (Cortright, 2011)

The above extract raises thought-provoking questions about the traditional assumption that countering violent extremism (CVE) falls solely within the military's domain. The extract challenges the prevalent belief that because non-state armed groups primarily orchestrate violent extremism, disregarding the laws of armed conflicts, it is appropriate for civil society to support counter-terrorism efforts. This prompts a critical examination of the long-held belief that the armed forces should exclusively undertake counter-terrorism efforts (Hughes, 2011). The central argument in the above thesis is that the rigorous strategy of combating violent extremism, which primarily relies on the deployment of armed security personnel, has, in certain instances, unintentionally exacerbated the conditions that foster the spread of terrorism. The kinetic approach to CVE is characterised by (Manigart, 2006) militarisation, securitisation, human rights abuses, fear, displacements, and the disruption of economic, health, social, and educational services. Although this approach may address the symptoms of violent extremism, it fails to address the root causes, such as poverty, exclusion, alienation, under development, unemployment, oppression, marginalisation, and general criminality (Cortright, 2011). These underlying factors can contribute to a context that makes individuals more prone to engaging in violent extremism. The active involvement of civil society actors in combating violent extremism can mitigate the climate of fear resulting from these detrimental forces. Global attempts to combat violent extremism through non-kinetic means further reinforce this fact.

The 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States and the consensus that no country is safe from such an attack informed the need for a collaborative strategy for countering violent extremism. The adoption of the United Nations (UN) Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) in 2006 by the General Assembly (GA) (Schindler, 2020) is the culmination of the collaborative strategy. The expansion of the GCTS to cover issues such as human rights, development, prevention of extremist actions, and capacity building inadvertently captured the relevance of CSOs in CVE. The expanded nature of the GCTS makes provision for salient issues that are way beyond the mandate of the armed forces. CSOs possess competencies in areas such as development, human rights, deradicalisation (Ginkel, 2012), rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and capacity building. However, the United Nations agencies exclusively implement the GCTS, excluding CSOs. Despite not having a formal role in the GCTS, CSOs possess familiarity and knowledge of the context that can aid in addressing factors that contribute to the spread of terrorism.

In Nigeria, especially in the northern region, various conflict elements have converged, creating a predisposition toward violent extremism. Poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, limited access to high-quality education, healthcare, and cultural resources; restricted access to agricultural opportunities; religion; values; and ideological influence are among the contributing causes. The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy structures the efforts to combat violent extremism in Nigeria. (Ginkel, 2012) bases the GCTS around the following four basic elements:

- Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.
- Measures to prevent and combat terrorism
- Measures to strengthen the UN system's

role in preventing and combating terrorism.
✎ The fight against terrorism is fundamentally based on measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law.

The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) emphasises the vital role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in driving long-term progress toward countering violent extremism. The four pillars of the GCTS align with the competencies and strengths of civil society, underscoring the restricted role of the military in situations where non-kinetic approaches are paramount. The Nigerian Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police, along with multinational armed forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, formed a joint military task force (Muhammadu B., 2018), to combat the threat of violent extremism. Boko Haram, the main extremist group in Northern Nigeria, initially posed this threat. However, with the emergence of the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) or the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), which has internationalised terrorism, the approach to countering violent extremism needs to undergo significant changes. Furthermore, various groups such as the Boko Haram splinter group, Ansaru, bandits, Lakurawa and Fulani herdsmen, identified as the fourth most lethal terrorist organisation globally (Buchanan, 2024), have contributed to the creation and maintenance of an atmosphere of terror in Nigeria. This atmosphere is characterised by extremist violence, disruption of economic, social, and agricultural activities, and significant loss of life.

The use of military force, characterised by the indiscriminate harassment, arrest, torture, and execution of suspected extremists (Akinrinde, 2020), often leads to violations of fundamental human rights. This approach exacerbates the very problems that fuel extremist violence. Military strategies leave a void that civil society organisations are well-positioned to fill. Considering this, it becomes crucial to ask: How can civil society contribute to the implementation of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Nigeria? What challenges do CSOs face in their efforts to counter violent extremism in Nigeria? These are the central questions of this paper, which aims to help craft a comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study employs a desk-based review of pertinent literature, encompassing United Nations conventions, regulations, and electronic resources. The analysis focuses on objectively evaluating the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) and its application to mitigating violent extremism in Nigeria. It examines GCTS within the context of the contributions and difficulties encountered by civil society organizations in aiding the fight against violent extremism in Nigeria. The study also references regional counter-terrorism frameworks such as the Organisation of African Union (OAU) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, the 2002 African Union (AU) Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, and the 2004 Additional Protocol to the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. It specifically examines the role of civil society organisations in tackling conditions that foster terrorism, implementing measures to prevent and combat terrorism, enhancing state capacities to counter-terrorism, and upholding human rights.

Theoretical leanings

Both the frustration-aggression and functionalist theories offer significant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears first proposed the frustration-aggression theory in 1939 (Dollard, 1939), a psychological concept that explores the connection between frustration and aggressive behaviour. The idea postulates that unmet demands give rise to a psychological condition that actively seeks a means of expression, frequently transforming into aggressiveness. This aggression may manifest in various forms, including physical, direct, or indirect actions (Berkowitz, 1989).

The thesis revolves around five hypotheses. The catharsis hypothesis (Cherry, K. , 2023), posits that the act of expressing aggressiveness reduces feelings of frustration, suggesting that the alleviation of frustration serves as a

motivation for individuals engaged in violent extremism. However, (McQueen, 2023) questions this notion, arguing that catharsis does not reduce aggression. The displacement hypothesis according to (Valkenburg, 2007) explains how individuals channel their frustration-induced anger toward various targets, a phenomenon known as aggression transfer. Extremists usually direct their anger onto soft targets rather than those they consider responsible for their problems (Hall, 2018). The aggressive cue hypothesis asserts that frustration heightens the perception of aggressive stimuli, prompting aggressive reactions, regardless of their direct connection to the initial frustration. The situational hypothesis acknowledges that variables such as social norms, values, and culture can influence whether irritation escalates to aggression. Finally, according to the modern perspective hypothesis, violent behaviour may arise as a combination of frustration, personality traits, and acquired habits (Berkowitz, 1989).

The frustration and aggression theory is significant because it enhances our under standing of extremist behaviours by examining unmet expectations and needs. This idea facilitates our understanding of how social and environmental factors can contribute to the escalation of aggression in individuals Berkowitz, 1989). By acknowledging the influence of frustration in provoking aggressive behaviours, we can strive to tackle fundamental problems and discover more productive methods to manage feelings of resentment and frustration. The frustration-aggression theory underscores the significance of fostering a society that esteems empathy, communication, and conflict resolution abilities to halt the perpetuation of the aggression cycle.

Evolution of Violent Extremism in Nigeria

While we can trace the evolution of extremism in Nigeria back to pre-colonial days (Ikedimma, 2017), this section focuses on pockets of extremist acts in post-independence Nigeria for brevity. It identifies the five phases of the evolution of violent extremism, which include early occurrences (1960s-1970s), the emergence of Boko Haram (2000s), escalation and global attention (2010s), sustained violence and new threats (2020s), and recent developments.

In the immediate aftermath of Nigeria's independence, the events that led to the 1966 military coup contributed significantly to the rise of extremist tendencies in the country (Makai, 2024). During this period, Northern Nigeria experienced the coup (Wikipedia, 2024), and the subsequent anti-Igbo riots, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 30,000 people (Wikipedia, 2024). Despite ongoing efforts at reconciliation and nation-building, the nation continues to feel the devastating effects of division and conflict. The civil war that followed the coup, lasting from 1967 to 1970, claimed the lives of over one million (Wikipedia, 2024) individuals and exacerbated extremist tendencies in the 1960s. This conflict laid bare Nigeria's deep ethnic and political divisions, setting the stage for further instability and violence in the years to come.

The formation of Boko Haram in Maiduguri, Borno State, in the 2000s, marked the commencement of a new era of extremism and instability in the nation. The group perpetrated brutal attacks and spread terror and chaos throughout the region. In 2009, a significant uprising and ensuing military crackdown on Boko Haram in Maiduguri occurred, culminating in the untimely death (News, 2009) of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. A more violent and relentless campaign against both civilians and security forces was the result of this event, which fueled further radicalization within the group. Mohammed Yusuf's death did not fully suppress the insurgency; new leaders emerged to continue the struggle in his honour. Boko Haram's first suicide assault took place in Bauchi in 2010 (Onuoha, 2012). This initial suicide explosion in Bauchi in 2010 represented a bold statement about Boko Haram's extremist behaviour.

The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram (News B. , 2017) significantly deepened the internationalization of extremism and received widespread condemnation. The kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok ignited global outrage and renewed

attention to the group's brutal tactics. The rallying cry of the international community became #BringBackOurGirls, demanding the safe return of the abducted girls. Sadly, numerous girls remain unaccounted for, despite these ongoing efforts. The situation was further complicated when Boko Haram became ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) in 2015 after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (Project, 2024). This shift represented a dangerous escalation in the group's extremist activities, aligning them with the notorious Islamic State. Boko Haram was responsible for a series of high-profile attacks, including the bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja in 2011 and the attack on the Kano State Government House in 2014.

As the 2020s began, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continued to carry out acts of terror and violence across West Africa, further expanding its influence and reach (Project, 2024). The emergence of new extremist groups, such as Ansaru, as well as bandits, herders, and Lakurawa, led to an increase in sophisticated attacks targeting not only government institutions but also civilian populations. Their indiscriminate and brutal assaults exacerbated the fear and insecurity already felt by the people in the region, prompting renewed calls for international intervention to address this escalating threat (Makai, 2024). The Nigerian government faced substantial challenges in its efforts to curb the rising violence. Reports of attacks on schools, raids on villages, and the abduction or murder of innocent civilians were widespread. The extremist activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in southeastern Nigeria, along with banditry and kidnappings in north-central Nigeria, militancy in the South-South region, and kidnapping and ritual killings in the Southwest, highlight the peak of extremism in the country. The ongoing cycle of violence and instability induced by these groups underscores the urgent need for a coordinated and effective response to put an end to the extremist reign of terror. The nature of violent extremism in Nigeria is complex and evolving, shaped by various political, socio-economic, religious, and environmental factors.

Conceptual Issues: Understanding Violent Extremism

Violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of individuals or groups that support or engage in violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals (LivingSafe Together, 2023). It is characterized by intolerance, radicalization, and the justification of violence. Examples of violent extremism include terrorism, hate crimes, and insurgency. Here, we examine some composite ideas to enhance our understanding of the issues under investigation.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Counter-violent extremism is a realm of policy, programs, and interventions designed to prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups (Holmer, 2013). The field of countering violent extremism (CVE) deliberately focuses on countering the pull of terrorist recruitment and influence by building resilience among populations vulnerable to radicalisation. This domain, which addresses the root causes of conditions that facilitate the spread of terrorism, clearly surpasses the capabilities of the armed forces. The state, civil society actors, or related institutions use Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) interchangeably with counterterrorism to define activities and initiatives aimed at mitigating terrorism. This position acknowledges the ongoing debate on whether to use CVE as a synonym for counterterrorism or as a subset of it. To stay focused, it is, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper to engage in this debate.

Significantly, after 9/11, it became clear that self-radicalised small groups and lone wolves could decentralise and execute acts of terror, leading to the conception of CVE as a broader counterterrorism strategy. Evidence suggests that military-style counter-terrorism measures unintentionally foster conditions that facilitate the spread of terrorism. The understanding that radicalisation is a fluid, nonlinear, highly individualised process (Holmer, 2013) seems to inadvertently place efforts toward deradicalisation within the sphere of civil society.

The factors that may lead a young man to join Boko Haram are primarily contextual. The interplay of such enablers may include push factors like structural conditions, such as poverty; grievances, such as a lack of access to political processes or justice; individual psychological and emotional characteristics, such as the need for belonging, dignity, meaning, or revenge, or the continuation of cycles of violence brought on by chronic conflict; the influence of socialisation and group dynamics by family, peers, and schools; and the pull of active recruitment to include extremist messaging that inspires violence (Project, 2024). Some scholars have identified common social psychological motivations for participating in terrorist groups and movements, such as a need for belonging and validation (Sageman, 2004); others have pointed to emotional drivers, such as a desire for revenge and responses to perceived humiliation, especially in the case of suicide attacks (Stern, 2004).

A sense of thrill-seeking and adventure can also play a part in pushing others toward engagement in violence (Venhaus, 2010). Understanding the dynamics of radicalisation and countering violent extremism from a push-and-pull perspective requires expertise not only from the military but also from the civil society sector. In this regard, CSO activities broaden their scope to encompass advocacy on the counter-narrative of terrorists' recruitment strategies, as well as development initiatives aimed at mitigating the factors that may predispose individuals to terrorist recruitment. A complex mix of factors provides an incentive for recruitment into extremist groups. Illiteracy, joblessness, indoctrination, ignorance, and poverty constitute some of the potent factors. The process of countering violent extremism occasioned by these factors must fundamentally consider measures of addressing these predisposing core issues. The Nigerian armed forces have made significant efforts to counter violent extremism through various initiatives, including Operation Lafia Doyle, Operation Safe Haven, Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Diran Mikiya, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, and Operation Tura Takaibango. However, these efforts have yielded little result due to the armed forces' inability to transform the context, actors, and conditions that initially created incentives for extremism.

The civil society sector must actively mobilize and engage to win the war against terrorism. This review recognises that the military and related institutions should directly engage terrorists in combat. Still, civil society can play a subtle but important role in building resistance against extremism. However, countering violent extremism is dangerous work (Holmer, 2013), whether it means directly challenging the recruiting narratives and messages of terrorist groups or working to teach tolerance in a highly polarised and fragile environment. It is crucial to determine the appropriate timing, location, and level of intervention, keeping security and safety in mind, particularly when interacting with civil society.

Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism involves the strategies, tactics, and measures employed by governments, military forces, and law enforcement agencies to prevent, combat, and respond to terrorism (Crenshaw, 2007). The main goals of these efforts are to minimise the threat from terrorist activities, protect civilians, and uphold national security. Counter terrorism measures can include preventive actions, legislative initiatives, military operations, diplomatic efforts, capacity building, addressing the root causes of terrorism, and safeguarding human rights (Heymann, 2003). Counterterrorism involves a unique combination of both kinetic (military) and non-kinetic (civilian) interventions. Overall, the objective of counterterrorism is to create a safer environment by reducing the occurrence and impact of terrorist activities while promoting peace, stability, and respect for human rights. These measures indicate that relying solely on military options cannot achieve the objectives of counterterrorism. Central to these efforts is the importance of civil society actors (Obi, Civil Society Organisations and Peacebuilding: A Functional Perspective, 2018a).

The phenomenon of terrorism has assumed centre stage in policy debates in the last two decades as a result of the aftermath of 9/11, which inadvertently conditioned countries to forge a common strategy for countering terrorism. In 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) as a comprehensive strategy to combat global terrorism (Counter-Terrorism, n.d.). This strategy, in contrast to other measures initiated by the Security Council, expanded the focus of counterterrorism to include issues related to human rights and development. Created to enhance national, regional, and international efforts in counterterrorism, the GCTS is a unique global instrument (Porret, 2020). At the regional level, the framework for counterterrorism derives from the 1999 OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism supplemented by an additional protocol and the 2002 AU Action Plan for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (OAU, 1999). The UN GCTS and the OAU Convention set the standard for counterterrorism in Nigeria.

The four broad objectives of the GCTS (Counter-Terrorism, n.d.) include addressing the conditions that facilitate the spread of terrorism, preventing and combating terrorism, building states' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental foundation of the fight against terrorism. Therefore, counterterrorism measures encompass a diverse range of policies with varying impacts, broadly classified into the good, the bad, and the ugly (Holmer, 2013). Good measures are those that enhance international cooperation and encourage support for equitable development and human rights, as recommended in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Counter-Terrorism, n.d.). In the bad and ugly categories, some measures are often overly militarized and have led to extrajudicial killings, intensified state repression, and human rights abuse. Also in this category are policies that curtail universally recognised human rights, including fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly and that restrict the funding and operational space of charities and civil society groups. Repression against civil society activists has intensified in dozens of countries, according to Freedom House (Repucci, 2020). Political freedom has steadily eroded in recent years, as measured by the organisation's annual ratings, making this the longest period of consecutive worldwide setbacks in nearly 40 years.

Gaps in GCTS

The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) provides overarching guidance on measures to combat global terrorism. It places a greater emphasis on the kinetic (military) components than on the non-kinetic (civil) components of countering extremism. This approach contrasts with the foundational principles of the GCTS, which are based on the four Ms.

Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism;

Measures to prevent and combat terrorism;

Measures to build states' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism; and

The fight against terrorism fundamentally relies on measures to ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Civil society organizations primarily possess the competence to execute these measures, but they lack significant empowerment. (Holmer, 2013) describes the kinetic military option of counterterrorism as "bad and ugly" measures that are often excessively militarized, resulting in extrajudicial killings, heightened state repression, and violations of human rights. These measures have frequently deepened and further entrenched extremism by radicalizing its actors. The GCTS specifically limits its implementation to United Nations agencies, leaving no specific role for CSOs. The kinetic (military) approach to counterterrorism inadvertently creates conditions that are conducive to the spread of terrorism. The kinetic option cannot address the underlying drivers of terrorism, such as poverty, unemployment, alienation, injustice, lack of access to quality education, health, and

underdevelopment. Despite not having a formal role in GCTS implementation, CSOs possess contextual knowledge and can assist in addressing the factors that contribute to the spread of terrorism.

Why civil society?

Civil society organizations are voluntary associations formed by citizens beyond their families, friends, and workplaces to promote their interests, ideas, and ideologies. These organizations include professional associations, social movements, indigenous people's organizations, religious and spiritual groups, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations that benefit the public (Obi, Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding in the Niger Delta: Towards a Partnership for Effective Civic Engagement, 2018). For decades, the United Nations has acknowledged its crucial role in advancing the objectives of the UN Charter. People view them as "the prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to address emerging global threats" (Eric Rosand, 2008). However, it is important to note that other UN resolutions related to countering terrorism, whether in general or specifically regarding the protection of human rights during counter-terrorism efforts, do not emphasise the importance of collaborating with civil society or recognising the role of civil society actors in addressing terrorism.

The UN Strategy specifically encourages "non-governmental organisations and civil society to engage, as appropriate, on how to enhance efforts to implement the Strategy." Several General Assembly (GA) Resolutions relating to the Global Strategy stressed the role of civil society in the fight against terrorism in 2020. Resolution 60/288 on adopting the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy stated the ambition to further encourage non-governmental organisations and civil society to engage, as appropriate, on how to enhance efforts to implement the Strategy. Resolutions adopted at the 2008 and 2010 reviews of the Global Strategy included similar references, along with additional references to the interaction with Member States and the UN System. The 2008 and 2010 reviews invite CSOs to support measures to counter-terrorism.

Alongside the General Assembly (GA), the Security Council (SC) has commenced referencing civil society in many resolutions and involving them in practice through the (Committee, 2005) Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED). This represents a substantial enhancement in establishing a relevant framework for the engagement of civil society organizations in combating terrorism (Counter-Terrorism, n.d.). CTED, for example, solicited civil society organizations to engage in the regional implementation workshops for Resolution 1624, which occurred in November and December 2011 in Nairobi and in July 2012 in Rabat. The preamble of SC Resolution 1963 (2010) acknowledges the significance of local communities, the private sector, civil society, and media in enhancing awareness of terrorism threats and addressing them more effectively. In addition, paragraph 7 of the same resolution asks the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (Committee, 2005), to work with civil society and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as needed after consulting with the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and relevant member states. This aids the CTC in monitoring the implementation of resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1624 (2005). Moreover, the Global Survey on Member States' Implementation of SC Resolution 1624 (2005) evaluates various forms of involvement and collaboration between states and civil society (Committee, 2005).

Governments, the United Nations system, and civil society organisations (CSOs) must be more cognizant of the distinctive contributions that CSOs make, particularly in the context of long-term endeavours to mitigate the conditions that facilitate the proliferation of terrorism. Governments and the United Nations must acknowledge that CSOs, with their extensive experience working alongside local actors and communities, can provide valuable insights into the specific conditions in a country or region that require attention. Moreover, both governments and the United Nations must recognise that a strong, independent, and vibrant civil society is essential not only for

democratic governance and sustainable development but also for effectively countering and preventing terrorism in the long run. Without the involvement of civil society in counter-terrorism initiatives, a significant void would persist. Augmenting the legitimacy of counter-terrorism programs via civil society engagement will undoubtedly improve their efficacy.

Snapshot of CSOs in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Nigeria

This section provides an overview of several civil society organisations that are helping the state tackle the challenges posed by terrorism in Nigeria. The role of these non-governmental organisations is significant in fostering peace and tolerance and enhancing community resilience to counter radicalisation. They frequently operate at the grassroots level, interacting with communities to tackle the underlying factors of violent extremism and offering assistance to at-risk individuals. The identified civil society organisations include International Alert, Amnesty International, Search for Common Ground, the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the CLEEN Foundation, the Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP), the North-East Regional Initiative, the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre, Pastoralist Resolve, the Peace and Security Network, the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, the Civil Organization Research Advocacy and Funding Initiatives, and the Centre for Women, Youth, and Community Action. These organisations engage in systematic efforts to enhance peace and security through the facilitation of dialogue, deradicalisation, reconciliation, and the cultivation of understanding among diverse groups. Furthermore, they provide essential resources and assistance to individuals who are susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist organisations. They strive to create a society characterised by peace and stability, thereby effectively reducing the risks associated with terrorism and extremism. We should not overlook their significant dedication and commitment to building a safer future for everyone.

Role of CSOs in CVE

Civil society organizations have played important roles in tackling the challenges posed by terrorism in Nigeria. Several of these roles focus on capacity building, advocacy, research, education, community engagement, psychosocial support, advisory functions, and legal responsibilities (Obi, Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding: A Functional Perspective, 2018). The role of these organisations has been significant in enhancing communities' ability to prevent and respond to terrorist activities. By employing advocacy and conducting thorough research, they have successfully highlighted the underlying factors contributing to terrorism and advocated for essential policy reforms (Wara, 2020).

Organisations such as the International Alert, CLEEN Foundation, the Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP), the North-East Regional Initiative, the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre, Pastoralist Resolve, and the Peace and Security Network have implemented training programs aimed at equipping community members with the skills to identify and report suspicious activities, along with strategies for responding in the event of an attack. Furthermore, they have analysed the socio economic factors that contribute to radical isation (Enakemu, 2023) and used this data to support the case for government investment in education and job creation initiatives within at-risk communities. Their roles in education and community engagement have contributed to increasing awareness and building resilience among communities. The psychosocial support and advisory roles they offer have delivered essential assistance to individuals impacted by terrorism. A community organisation in a high-risk area has established workshops and training sessions aimed at providing residents with the necessary knowledge and skills to recognise potential threats and respond effectively. The collaboration with local authorities (Obi, Civil Society Organisations and Peacebuilding in the Niger Delta: Towards a Partnership for Effective Civic Engagement, 2018) has led to the formulation of a detailed response plan for potential attacks, clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved parties.

The organisation has effectively promoted peace and stability within the community by addressing the underlying factors of radicalisation and offering support to those impacted by terrorism. Concurrently, their legal roles have focused on ensuring justice and accountability for acts of terrorism. An illustrative example of their efforts involves the coordination of workshops and training sessions aimed at identifying indicators of radicalisation and the proper channels for reporting suspicious activities to relevant authorities (Enakemu, 2023). Furthermore, organisations such as the North-East Regional Initiative, the Inter-Faith Mediation Center, Pastoralist Resolve, and Peace and Security Network often conduct a community-wide emergency response drill to evaluate the response plan in a simulated attack scenario, thereby ensuring that all residents are adequately prepared for any potential threats. In Nigeria, civil society organisations have played a crucial role in addressing terrorism. Their involvement has been instrumental in connecting the government with local communities, enhancing trust and collaboration in the fight against terrorism. Through public engagement and the provision of valuable resources and support, CSOs like the Research Advocacy and Funding Initiatives and the Centre for Women, Youth, and Community Action have contributed to the development of a more resilient and informed society, enhancing its capacity to prevent and respond to terrorist threats through funding and gender-based training. Their commitment and relentless work have played a crucial role in enhancing the nation's security and stability.

The civil society faces challenges in countering violent extremism.

The role of civil society organisations in countering violent extremism is yet to gain traction because until recently, counter terrorism was considered an exclusive sphere for the armed forces. This is not unconnected to the evidence that terrorists' tactics have taken on the appearance of warfare, necessitating the deployment of military tactics to counter them. While the military's counterterrorism strategy has its strengths, it has also created gaps that only the civil society sector can fill. Unintended consequences such as harassment, indiscriminate arrests, militarisation, and securitisation of the environment, as well as the narrowing of space for effective civil society operations, reflect the gaps created by military counter-terrorism options. In response to this, (Eric Rosand, 2008) asserts that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) engage in a variety of activities that directly and indirectly aid in the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (UN Strategy). However, these activities often receive little or no recognition for their role in implementing the Strategy or combating terrorism in general. It is not necessary to corral those efforts under the banner of counterterrorism, but rather to recognise that a diversity of activity helps contribute to that long-term goal. Several factors have challenged the effective operation of civil society in counterterrorism.

However, there is a growing consensus that civil society's efforts to support counter terrorism processes have faced several challenges. Fundamentally, the assumption that terrorists' tactics have taken on military dimensions, involving the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), bombs, and high-grade military rifles and ammunition, logically creates an unsafe environment for civil containment efforts. However, military counterterrorism options rarely address the issues that contribute to the spread of terrorism. Consideration of(Cortright,2011) declarations, which assert that governments have curtailed political freedoms and imposed restrictive measures against human rights defenders and civil society activists in many countries, deepens these challenges. They further declared that repressive counterterrorism measures (CTMs) have undermined civil liberties and contributed to a climate of suspicion and hostility toward non governmental groups. Specific challenges include insufficient funding, the perception of counterterrorism as a strictly security-focused domain; the intimidation, harassment, and arrest of civil society actors; the constriction of operational space for non-state actors; and the view that civil society organisations represent foreign interests.

Evidence shows that the state frequently portrays certain civil society organisations (CSOs) fighting extremism as tools of particular politicians or as representing foreign interests, undermining the government's credibility. The Nigerian government has repeatedly dismissed Amnesty International's reports about human rights abuses by the Nigerian military in counterterrorism operations in the northeast, characterising the organisation as an entity serving foreign interests aimed at undermining the Federal Government's counterterrorism initiatives. The efforts of civil society to mitigate social and political marginalisation contribute to reducing grievances that may result in extremism. Counterterrorism measures that restrict the political activities of certain groups, therefore, hinder efforts to tackle the underlying conditions that contribute to terrorism. Understanding and countering violent extremism involves addressing its root causes, such as social inequality, discrimination, and lack of opportunities while promoting tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

How can we enhance the counter-terrorism efforts of CSOs?

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are essential for addressing violent extremism in Nigeria, despite encountering considerable challenges. To improve effectiveness, the following actionable recommendations are essential:

Civil society must be actively involved in the development of all Security Council resolutions related to counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). To ensure the decision-making process takes into account the rights and needs of communities, their input is essential. Civil society organisations offer valuable insights and expertise that can help create more effective and sustainable policies. By engaging with civil society, the Security Council can make its resolutions more comprehensive, inclusive, and ultimately more successful at addressing the root causes of terrorism and violent extremism through the meaningful involvement of these organisations.

We must urgently address the criminalisation and repression of civil society to create enabling conditions for the full and unhindered involvement of CSOs in supporting counter-terrorism efforts. Civil society organisations are crucial to tackling the underlying factors of extremism and radicalisation by fostering discourse, tolerance, and inclusivity among communities. By suppressing their views and limiting their actions, governments merely obstruct effective counter-terrorism efforts. Governments must acknowledge the significance of civil society organizations and strive to create a supportive environment for their operations to flourish.

CSOs must diversify their funding sources, including exploring international grants, local donations, and private sector contributions to ensure sustainability and reduce dependency on a single funding stream. This is because financial stability is essential for the long-term success of CSOs.

CSOs need to amplify their advocacy efforts to influence policy-making processes. By engaging in policy dialogues, producing evidence-based research, and leveraging media platforms, CSOs can push for policies that address the root causes of extremism and support preventive measures.

CSOs should actively seek partnerships with government agencies, international organisations, and the private sector. Collaborative efforts can pool resources, share best practices, and create a unified front against extremism.

Building trust within communities should be a priority for CSOs, ensuring the inclusion of local voices in the design and implementation of counter-extremism strategies. Regular dialogues, community-based programs, and inclusive decision-making processes can achieve this.

The UN Security Council must reinforce the understanding that humanitarian protection and assistance must never be seen as support for terrorism. The international community must collaborate to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those in need without interference from

terrorist groups. Maintaining neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian operations is crucial to prevent any misuse of aid for terrorist activities. By establishing a clear distinction between humanitarian assistance and support for terrorism, the Security Council can help protect vulnerable populations and uphold the integrity of humanitarian efforts worldwide.

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