



Recommendations on Donor Engagement With Civil Society on Preventing Violent Extremism

OVERVIEW

This GSX document outlines recommendations from civil society to donors that fund or are interested in funding preventing violent extremism (PVE) programming domestically and/or through development or other foreign assistance. The document reflects input received from a diverse group of international and local civil society organizations (CSOs) and CSO networks, including organizations led by women and youth, from Africa; Europe; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; and the Middle East. These organizations and networks work on preventing violent extremism through approaches including peacebuilding, conflict resolution, youth, gender, or economic empowerment, building resilience, and rehabilitation and reintegration. In addition, this document reflects some of the lessons learned from the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), the Geneva-based multilateral PVE fund.

The recommendations have been structured to reflect the grant-making sequencing adopted by many donors during the typical lifecycle of funding to support PVE programming. This structure is designed to enable government donors to reflect on civil society perspectives across each of these core areas of work, including: how governments determine their funding priorities; how they design their programming; how they identify which CSOs to support; how they disperse their funding; and how they evaluate and then communicate to the public the programming that they fund.

Key recommendations include:

1. Ensuring that independent, data-driven research and analysis inform decisions about which locally led PVE programs to support and how best to meaningfully involve civil society and other relevant local actors during the lifecycle of PVE programming to promote transparency, partnership, and shared responsibility.

¹The GSX seeks to bring policymakers and practitioners from different sectors and perspectives together to share knowledge and solutions. The GSX Steering Group consists of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center), the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) spearheading the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), the Prevention Project, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and Search for Common Ground (SFCG). Its overarching purpose is to provide CSOs, including women-led organizations and other local actors, with a structured space to interact and share ground realities with policymakers, and exchange actionable recommendations and workable solutions, to collectively inform and improve practices in the PVE realm. While GSX steering group members welcome this diversity of opinions as a means of reaching better outcomes, the views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of all such members and partners.

²There is no internationally agreed definition of PVE or countering violent extremism (CVE), or, for that matter, "violent extremism." For purposes of this document—and drawing upon the definition used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—"violent extremism" is defined as "promoting views which foment and incite violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, and foster hatred which might lead to politically or ideologically-motivated or inter-community violence." PVE includes non-kinetic measures to prevent and counter violent extremism.



2. Facilitating more involvement of local donor representatives and other local actors in all aspects of the PVE programming lifecycle.
3. Heeding the advice of local grassroots organizations that are often at the frontlines of PVE efforts and witnessing the adaptive and fast-changing tactics of violent extremist movements active in their setting.
4. Balancing the need to ensure host government buy-in for donor-supported PVE projects, which can be critical to the success and sustainability of CSO-led PVE initiatives, with the goal of supporting actors that have the greatest credibility and potential impact in marginalized communities.
5. Striking the appropriate balance between supporting CSOs with the relevant expertise, experience, and networks, with special attention to engagement with a diversity of CSOs, including those that are often overlooked or marginalized, such as organizations focusing on women, youth, and minorities.
6. Avoiding silos by pursuing an integrated approach to programming around PVE that addresses all relevant drivers.
7. Supporting more long-term programs to ensure flexibility during the design and implementation phase, giving CSOs more opportunities to address challenges and obstacles they confront during the project period.
8. Providing a range of technical and other capacity-building support to local CSOs across the entire lifecycle of a PVE project, with a dedicated sustainability plan.
9. Sufficiently funding learning, monitoring, and evaluation (M&E) at all stages of the project.
10. Being mindful of risks associated with the term “PVE” and avoiding potentially stigmatizing language that can turn away potential CSO partners and endanger communities and practitioners.
11. Ensuring that donor funding for PVE programs is matched with the use of appropriate diplomatic and political tools.



THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Determining PVE Programming Priorities

- 1. Local analysis should drive funding strategies:** Program design should be informed by independent, qualitative, and data-driven research that demonstrates that proposed activities address drivers of radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism in the specific geographic locations. Donors should co-invest in, share, compare, and regularly update such local risk and needs analyses to inform their strategic funding priorities. This analysis should be shared with existing or potential implementers whenever possible. Donors should avoid making decisions, without data, based on assumptions or theories on what is driving violent extremism locally.
- 2. Ensure meaningful involvement of civil society:** Donors should ensure that local actors and civil society are meaningfully involved in the development of PVE funding strategies, acknowledging that local, independent civil society actors are often best positioned to define the needs of their communities. This might be achieved through regular consultation processes or permanent platforms with local stakeholders to ensure donors receive inputs from civil society beyond simply the “usual suspects” or “donor darlings” when reviewing their funding priorities.
- 3. Ensure systematic consultation and inclusion of women- and youth-led organizations:** Donors and other international actors should consistently engage women- and youth-led organizations active in communities to obtain their context assessment, analysis, and guidance regarding interventions, and to support these local organizations. Identification of such entities can be done through local outreach and via existing global networks and alliances.
- 4. Facilitate involvement of field-based donor representatives:** Donors should seek input from local representatives when determining strategic funding priorities, and should facilitate ongoing involvement with local representatives and local implementing organizations. This should not be limited only to the bureau or agency providing funding or the recipient organization; coordination and collaboration should be fostered widely to prevent duplication and promote synergies. For example, government donors should strengthen coordination with local embassy officials to ensure that approaches are informed by identified needs of their experts on the ground. By extension, this coordination may help to avoid delays in the implementation of grant activities, which may sometimes arise because of embassies not being socialized to new projects that have been independently approved by their capitals.
- 5. Improve coordination with host government officials and partner agencies:** Where appropriate, donors should ensure that funding priorities are coordinated with the governments of beneficiary countries to build buy-in and local government capacity. In some instances, host government officials are not included in or informed of the design or implementation of programming, leading to additional barriers to implementation and missed opportunities for local insight. The extent of any such coordination will be influenced by factors including the host government’s support for a “whole of society” approach to PVE and for the important role that independent CSOs should play alongside government in its implementation.



- 6. Improve coordination with other donors and partners:** Donors should develop appropriate information-sharing mechanisms to assess the current state of PVE assistance, where the gaps lie, and which activities are likely to be duplicative. In instances where such efforts do not already exist, local representatives of donors should convene regular “PVE Coordination Meetings” to de-conflict their funding and to maximize the potential for programmatic synergies. The conveners of such meetings should not limit participants to self-identified “PVE” actors, thus taking into account the lack of a common definition of PVE and inconsistent use of the PVE label among donors and implementers.

Identifying Local Partners and Civil Society Implementers

- 7. Make the proposal process more user-friendly to attract new, innovative partners:** Donors should publicize Calls for Proposals (CfPs) through a range of networks and platforms to reach a diversity of prospective applicants. At the government level, this could include sharing the CfP with a variety of agencies/ministries (e.g., education, arts/culture/sports, women/youth) to circulate to their networks, and sharing with relevant embassies. When possible, donors should hold bidders’ conferences in-country to answer questions and foster discussion. They should also share relevant evaluations, analyses, and/or programmatic reports when publishing a CfP, so that all applicants, rather than only the incumbent, can be informed by past learning. Donors should consider allowing applications in local languages for small grants, and reducing burdensome administrative requirements that small or youth-led organizations might not meet. Donors should also consider that not all CSOs have ready access to the Internet and thus some might be excluded from an exclusively online application process. Moving beyond an exclusively web-based application process, for example, by inviting local CSOs to pick up paper applications at and submit them to local embassies, will expand the reach of the donors during the application process.
- 8. Strike the appropriate balance between support to CSOs with the relevant expertise, experience, and networks, and ensuring engagement with a diversity of CSOs, particularly those led by and working with women, youth, and minorities:** An increasing number of CSOs are identifying themselves as PVE actors in an environment where the perception exists that there are increased PVE funds available in a broader environment of diminished resources. This is encouraging a proliferation of local and international partners keen to tap into these resources that may not have the knowledge, skills, experience, networks, and credibility necessary to deliver PVE activities effectively. Donors should favor mission-driven CSOs and other groups with a clear mandate and constituency to be working on the relevant PVE issues.

Where appropriate, donors should work through existing community-based programs, structures, and organizations with strong ties in or with the relevant community. This recognizes that in some instances, including for political, security, or perception reasons, CSOs may be reluctant to lead stand-alone “PVE” initiatives, or the level of priority to the community may not justify a stand-alone PVE initiative. In these cases, they should encourage the integration of PVE into a broader, perhaps already existing entity that addresses higher priorities of the community (e.g., violence, drugs, mental health, and education).



When identifying which CSOs to support, donors should look beyond those with the most visibility and traditional power, and those managing existing community-based programs, to those representing key sectors of society (e.g., women, youth, religious or ethnic minorities). They should provide support to CSOs with relevant experience working in different areas, not necessarily associated within the violent extremism context (e.g., those working on peacebuilding or violence prevention). Donors should also encourage engaging creatives, journalists, and entrepreneurs, as they can provide fresh insights and access to untapped constituencies and new methodologies

- 9. Utilize and support existing independent CSO funding mechanisms:** There are many cases where donors are unable to manage small and medium-size grants to local CSOs. Similarly, there are instances when such CSOs benefit from administrative assistance from a third party to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E), financial reporting, and even proposal development in a second or third language. Donors should support existing, independent funds as a means of diversifying the flow of resources to local organizations for innovative PVE work.
- 10. Don't provide host governments with a veto on which local CSOs should receive donor support:** Partnership with or at least acquiescence by the host government can be critical to the success and sustainability of CSO-led PVE initiatives. However, donors should recognize that giving national capitals a veto could make it difficult to fund those groups most likely to have the greatest credibility in marginalized communities. In this context, donors should intensify support for mechanisms that provide small grants to local actors without necessarily having to seek the approval from the national government for each such grant.

Program Design

- 11. Design programs to address specific local drivers:** Donors should ensure the proposed programming specifies how, in light of the identified drivers and threat analysis, it intends to address those drivers or specified threat through a set of defined activities. For example, donors should avoid funding programming that focuses exclusively on “counter-narratives” or “counter-messaging” in such contexts where the primary drivers of radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism are socioeconomic.
- 12. Support and encourage programs that provide positive alternatives to communities and individuals vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment:** Many of the most effective local initiatives succeed because they provide program beneficiaries with positive and peaceful understandings of their faith through serving their community, generating income, addressing their grievances, and promoting respect for others. By articulating what they are “for,” such programs foster social cohesion and pluralism, build resilience against violent extremism, and empower individuals to reject the ideology of groups that condone violence and bigotry.
- 13. Avoid program silos and pursue a more integrated approach to programming around PVE:** Donors should pursue a more integrated approach to PVE programming. For example, donors should include a gender perspective in all program design, implementation, and M&E. Gender analysis reveals important power dynamics, potential for marginalization, and otherwise unseen dimensions of personal identity and purpose that intersect with the drivers of radicalization. By incorporating a gender perspective, donors can access information and include missing stakeholders critical to a comprehensive understanding of and effective solutions to violent extremism.



- 14. Invest more resources in long-term programs that foster positive relationships between civil society and local authorities, including law enforcement, to help prevent violent extremism:** Trust is a key ingredient for effective and sustainable local PVE programs, but it is often lacking as a result of human rights abuses, corruption, and repressive counterterrorism regimes. Donors should emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach to PVE programming, building, institutionalizing, and sustaining long-term positive relationships beyond the project period.
- 15. Include PVE tools and other PVE resources for CSO implementers and local communities:** Activities that raise awareness of violent extremism (e.g., training mothers and other family members how to recognize the signs of recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism) should, where appropriate, include the provision of information and resources that beneficiaries/participants can access, if and when they have a relevant challenge or problem.
- 16. Frame programs around the concerns of the relevant community:** Programs should be framed around concerns as viewed by the community, rather than by donors, national authorities, international organizations, or international NGOs. PVE activities designed to empower and/or build the capacity of particular beneficiaries/participants should, where possible, be designed and implemented in partnership with them.
- 17. Avoid imposing unrealistic expectations on CSO grantees:** Donors should offer flexibility commensurate with the different security, political, social, and organizational contexts in which CSOs are operating. Donors should be more cognizant of the logistical and operational constraints CSO grantees face, the demands of recipient communities, and the security concerns of individual practitioners. Awards should include adaptive management, both on the donor and grantee sides, and streamline approval processes to make changes to awards as needed.
- 18. Support more long-term programs:** Because of the long-term nature of much PVE work, donors should move away from short-term contracts and support longer-term PVE programs for CSOs, and where possible they should provide them with core funding to develop their organizational capacity. This will position them better to become self-sufficient entities and agents of change. To help ensure sustainability and long-term impact, donors should consider setting aside funding and providing some degree of assurances to CSOs that adequate follow-up funding (especially for pilot initiatives) will be made available should activities/outputs/outcomes prove to be successful and can be up-scaled and/or replicated.
- 19. Fund translations and interpretation into local languages:** This simple addition to PVE programs ensures that resources and activities (e.g., research, data, good practices, policy documents, media content, conferences, workshops) are available in the relevant local language and are therefore accessible to marginalized groups who may not speak majority languages.
- 20. Offer technical and other capacity-building assistance to civil society implementers:** Donors should prioritize developing the capacity of CSOs to engage effectively in PVE work



beyond the life of a single, ad hoc project. More CSOs need to be adequately resourced (both administratively and organizationally) so they are in a position not only to effectively access, implement, and monitor the impact of donor grants, but also to engage, as appropriate, in policy discussions around PVE at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

Such efforts could include training CSOs on research and analysis, proposal writing, M&E, theories of change, communications and branding (given the sensitivities around “PVE”), and management. In addition, donors should support the provision of tailored PVE training to CSOs that are new to the PVE sphere, but have experience in related fields (e.g., democracy promotion, women or youth empowerment, dialogue, human rights, peacebuilding, or community engagement), to better position them to integrate PVE into their related, ongoing programs and secure new PVE grants, as well as to inform PVE policies and agendas with their respective experience and expertise.

Funding

- 21. Avoid securitization of CSOs by using development and diplomacy (rather than security) funds to support PVE work:** Donor government funding for community-based programs aimed at building social cohesion or resilience to violent extremism involving CSOs should, wherever possible, come from outside counterterrorism and security agency budgets.
- 22. Expand support for sub-granting, in-kind support, and other partnership activities mechanisms:** Donors should recognize that the most credible local PVE actors can be groups that want to safeguard their independence from governments and thus will be reluctant to receive funding directly from any government. Donors are encouraged to expand their support for funding mechanisms that allow for sub-granting by larger CSOs, which can disburse and oversee the funding (to include reporting and M&E) to smaller CSOs, while at the same time helping them build their own capacities.
- 23. Pursue more multi-donor-funded initiatives:** Donors should more often pursue “pooled funding” arrangements, recognizing that they create more opportunities for longer-term projects and upscaling through sustained economies of scale. Multi-donor funding further reduces the political burden on CSOs by reducing the possible impression of being tied to one government’s foreign policy or agenda. Donors should train CSOs on how to justify projects to more than one donor. Support from several donors also reinforces the financial and logistical security of a program.

Strategic Communications and Branding

- 24. Invest in PVE outreach programs that inform local communities of PVE activities in a transparent manner to distinguish them from “hard” counterterrorism measures:** To avoid stigmatizing specific groups, PVE programs should be oriented toward the entire community of a given geographic area. Individuals with experience in security, PVE, and local languages and cultures should, where possible, deliver these outreach sessions.

³ Examples include the Innovative Peace Fund, which is managed by the International Civil Society Action Network.



- 25. Avoid language that stigmatizes communities:** Donors should refrain from associating violent extremism with a particular religion and/or its adherents to avoid reinforcing divisive stereotypes and the implication that there is an ideological justification for criminal acts of violence. Similarly, PVE actors should consider using more value-neutral terms such as “inclusion,” “nonviolence,” “peace,” and “pluralism” rather than value-based terms such as “moderate” when describing their PVE programs. Should donors seek to use value-based terms, the boundaries of such terms should be explicitly specified by the donor.
- 26. Frame communications around local drivers:** Programs can be highly successful without using the label “violent extremism,” provided they contain activities that challenge the local drivers of recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism. Openly and publicly discussing “violent extremism” in certain communities/contexts could be polarizing, sensitive, or taboo; in others, it could be highly counterproductive, unintentionally deepening divisions within a community, driving already marginalized community members underground, or distracting resource-constrained government and community actors from addressing more pressing challenges to human rights and human security. Community outreach should adopt appropriate language to describe issues and activities that is specific to and resonant with the local context rather than defaulting to “PVE” labels.
- 27. Enable CSOs working on PVE to have access to independent CSO support (on-line and off-line) platforms:** It is important for CSOs to have access to such platforms in order to, for example, share both positive and negative experiences working with individual donors or international NGOs and learn lessons from other CSOs on how best to manage relationships with these external PVE stakeholders. The GSX platform and other existing relevant regional CSO support centers or hubs could be leveraged for this purpose. In addition, a multilateral actor—e.g., United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or GCERF—could be encouraged and resourced to collect data from CSOs around the globe on their perceptions concerning donor and international NGO approaches to working with local organizations.

Risks

- 28. Be aware of the spectrum of risks associated with the PVE terminology and the field of practice more broadly:** Donors should be mindful of the sensitivities within civil society and communities and the broader spectrum of risks around using terminology such as CVE, PVE, or violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism (VERLT). In addition to the risks common to development actors, there are specific risks that reflect the unique nature of PVE as a field of practice. These include: a) reputation—alienation, loss of credibility, and legitimacy; b) operational safety/security—targeting by violent extremists and other violent actors; c) political—government restrictions; and d) social—stigmatization.

Thus, donors should, *inter alia*, be careful about over-promoting their involvement in programming, particularly when the funding is coming from defense or diplomacy budgets. While it is important not to withhold information related to the sources of funding from local beneficiaries, donors should provide more discretion to local CSO partners in choosing to highlight how the financial contribution of the donor is acknowledged throughout the implemented activities.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and Measuring Success

- 29. Prioritize the development of robust, tailor-made M&E frameworks:** Donors should provide adequate financial support for M&E within grant-making mechanisms and push implementers to include external evaluations in their project design. However, they should also recognize that factors such as “trust” and “local ownership” that are integral to effective access and sustainability of programs require qualitative measures and can be intangible; thus M&E mechanisms must be adapted to ensure relevance to the context and issues being addressed.
- 30. Promote more flexible and adaptable engagement with CSOs around M&E:** Donors should be flexible and adaptable, especially toward CSOs operating in sensitive and volatile areas. They should ensure flexible reporting schedules to allow CSOs the space to carry out their activities without devoting a disproportionate time on reporting. For example, a six-month project should not require more than one mid-term report and a final report. Further, donors should ensure that the performance measure frameworks or M&E methodologies designed to assess the project’s impact are proportionate to the level of funding allocated.
- 31. Avoid “one-size fits all” M&E frameworks and limit harm:** The M&E framework for CSO-led PVE projects should be appropriate to grant size, grantee capacity, and specific contextual constraints inherent to working at the community level, while at the same time manage the risks associated with innovative approaches. This includes the risks to PVE grantees who are often undertaking highly sensitive work for which they could be attacked or targeted. In addition, asking explicit questions about attitudes and behaviors regarding violent extremism and PVE may not be appropriate in all circumstances and could, in some cases, be counterproductive.
- 32. How to measure “success”?** In the absence of direct causality between a PVE program and a reduction in such sympathy and support for violent extremism, donors should encourage CSOs to identify other ways to measure “success” or “impact.” These include:
 - A.** Changes in access, attitudes, behaviors, relationships, and/or status/positioning (i.e., how actions/activities influence or affect focus communities);
 - B.** New relationships formed (i.e., bringing together people who do not usually engage with and may not even trust each other to develop cooperative solutions, new networks, and positive relationships);
 - C.** Improved sustainability and capacity of grantees and sub-grantees;
 - D.** Elevation of community engagement and resilience efforts;
 - E.** Inclusion of civil society and gender mainstreaming in inclusive national, regional, and international PVE and counterterrorism policies, programs, action plans, and strategies;
 - F.** Increased consensus, consultation, coordination, and information-sharing among PVE stakeholders (e.g., law enforcement and community leaders) in beneficiary countries or communities;
 - G.** Increased accountability to addressing the systemic issues that must change in order to prevent violent extremism; and
 - H.** Development and sharing of good practices, lessons learned, and research that contributes to the professionalization of PVE.

- 33. How to measure impact?** Potential interrelated methods CSOs may wish to use for measuring impact include: a) baseline assessments; b) data analysis (including social media); c) focus group discussions; d) pre- and post-activity surveys, including those related to views toward violence or other religious or ethnic groups; e) one-on-one interviews; f) evolution of the dynamics of violent extremism; and g) evolution of local conditions that contribute to radicalization or recruitment.
- 34. Consider broadening the focus of M&E efforts to look beyond micro-level, single-program evaluation and include a macro approach that involves measuring the overall resilience of a specific community or geographic region to the lure of violent extremism.** This would involve looking at the impact that a wide range of interventions (both programs and policies) have on levels of resilience. Currently, the search for better data on what “works” in order to justify PVE spending is narrowly focused and does not take into account the need to expect some failure in a field where it remains difficult to demonstrate the impact of an isolated program.
- 35. Don't just seek feedback from program targets/beneficiaries.** It may be informative to incorporate feedback from individuals who are not involved in the program itself to assess the wider impacts on the community. In some areas, the program beneficiaries/participants may benefit from the program; however, the efficacy of the program could be limited if surrounding actors feel differently.

Don't Forget About PVE Policy

- 36. Match political, diplomatic, and technical support with funding:** Donors should ensure that their support for PVE programs is matched with the use of appropriate diplomatic and political tools to ensure that host governments prioritize providing access to opportunities, justice, and services to and building trust with marginalized and vulnerable communities. This approach includes reinforcing with host governments the importance of safeguarding the political and legal space for CSOs to operate. It also involves acknowledging the crucial role CSOs play in providing both opportunities for interactions between and among diverse populations as well as a space for constructive critical engagement with the state.
- 37. Check to ensure the relevant policy environment is consistent with human rights and fundamental freedoms.** For example, donors should seek to ensure that the PVE policy framework in the relevant country is based on an objective and unbiased assessment of the drivers of violent extremism in all of its forms; does not focus disproportionately on a particular religion, racial, or ethnic group; avoids associating particular religious or political practices or beliefs with a risk of violent extremism; has been developed and adopted democratically, and in consultation with civil society; and is subject to parliamentary oversight and review.