

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention from Below: Civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia

Report written by The Asia Foundation
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Introduction

This short note contains recommendations for policymakers, donors, and practitioners on support for civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism. The recommendations are drawn from the study *Prevention from Below: Civil society initiatives to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia*.

Since September 2001 there has been significant growth in the number of actors, the variety of approaches, and the body of research in the fields of countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE). The Southeast Asia region is relatively poorly covered by the global literature on CVE and PVE; of the 253 studies across 15 regions noted by the Royal United Services Institute in 2018, only 18 focus on Southeast Asia, placing it seventh in a regional ranking.¹ Valuable opportunities exist for learning, adjustment, and stocktaking in this region.

Violent extremism takes many forms in Southeast Asia, from local variations on global jihad to intercommunal unrest. Violent groups often connect preexisting local conflicts, and grievances such as feelings of injustice and marginalization, to global ideological movements, blurring the lines between types of violence and making it difficult to isolate causes and identify effective entry points for prevention and mitigation.

Because of this uncertainty and the sensitivity of the issue, governments and donor agencies have looked to foster the roles of civil society organizations (CSOs), whose community ties allow them to devise locally grounded interventions to help their communities and society more broadly resist the allure of violence and extremism. It is widely recognized that interfaith dialogue, community mediation, community policing, and programs that address radicalization in schools can deter the spread of extremist ideas and recruitment. These and similar initiatives can also impede extremist attempts to use local grievances to radicalize individuals and build support for violent global ideologies. Despite these advantages, however, the work of CSOs in Southeast Asia has not received the same attention as in other parts of the world.

In light of this deficit, the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) commissioned The Asia Foundation to conduct a study on the work of CSOs implementing PVE activities



Early warning network meeting, Solo, Indonesia

in four Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The study reviewed how PVE was conceptualized and operationalized in the four countries, in order to discern practical considerations and opportunities for future engagement. A team of researchers collaborated with 17 civil society organizations to examine the challenges and successes met by their initiatives to tackle violent extremism. In each country, the team was coordinated by a lead researcher and supported by national researchers and specialists from The Asia Foundation. Further information was sourced from the academic and grey literature.

¹ Eric Rosand, Emily Winterbotham, Michael Jones, and Franziska Praxl-Tabuchi, *A Roadmap to Progress: The State of the Global P/CVE Agenda* (The Prevention Project and Royal United Services Institute, September 2018), http://www.organizingagainste.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/GCCS_ROADMAP_FNL.pdf.

The nature of civil society work on preventing violent extremism in Southeast Asia

Interventions designed to tackle violent extremism in Southeast Asia occupy a broad spectrum of approaches, with counterterrorism at one end, PVE occupying the middle ground, and peacebuilding and traditional development activities at the other end. Within this spectrum, clusters of approaches can be found in each of the four countries in this study. Some initiatives follow approaches seen internationally (e.g., targeting the rehabilitation and reintegration of released prisoners), although most reflect specific local or national conditions. While the modest size and diversity of the samples in this survey limit the scope for generalization, programs generally follow one of three broad approaches, as shown in the figure below.

Programming levels, theories of change, and relative numbers of people affected by psychological, social, political, and economic factors influencing radicalization
(drawing on RUSI, 2016. ToC = Theory of Change).



Approach number one (macro level) consists primarily of programs that address **underlying structural inequalities** and related issues such as poor governance, poverty, and marginalization. These challenges are most likely to be addressed by development programs or political reforms intended to have a broad impact on a large sector or all of the population. Relatively high levels of investment are likely to be required, even for programs that are targeted geographically or towards historically marginalized groups.

Approach number two (meso level) typically involves programs that address **social-cohesion issues**, like social and political marginalization, in conjunction with other dimensions such as perceived persecution or lack of justice. These programs target those who are susceptible to violent messaging and who may use violence in future.

Programs under approach number three (micro level) are targeted more narrowly towards **at-risk communities and individuals**. They tend to promote ideological counternarratives, moderation of extremist views, or tailored rehabilitation and reintegration schemes such as those aimed at prisoners, returning fighters, and jihadists. These programs are normally tied to the scale and frequency of violent incidents or the number of individuals or groups involved, and tend to be the ones most closely associated with government security agencies.

Research Findings and Recommendations

The research discovered that Southeast Asian countries share many common features and trends with other parts of the world, while certain findings are specific to a particular context or country rather than to Southeast Asia as a whole .

Overall, the assessment found that when CSOs understand their specific context and the variation within it, they can contribute effectively in the PVE/CVE sector, which is otherwise typically dominated by security-oriented state actors. Strong, context-specific analysis is needed to design and implement PVE interventions that achieve maximum effectiveness and avoid doing harm. Building on this basis, we offer the following recommendations:

A more comprehensive and grounded analytical approach to understanding local contexts

Civil society initiatives to address violent extremism in Southeast Asia take place in varied and complex environments, whether it be a specific sector or a particular locale. The CSOs involved in PVE have diverse fields of expertise and use a wide range of approaches, making it difficult to adduce universally applicable guidelines.

Existing guidance already suggests what the essential components of sound analysis in the sector are.² It can be difficult to turn the results of such analytical tools into effective programming, however, partly because they can easily miss important contextual nuances and sensitivities that are vital considerations when developing a deeper PVE baseline. The following steps should be considered:

² See, for example, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Development approaches to countering violent extremism (DFAT, 2017), p.3, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/aboutus/publications/Pages/development-approaches-to-countering-violent-extremism>.

- **Understand the policy and legal frameworks that shape the enabling environment for addressing violent extremism.** It is important to understand the legal factors that may cause ambiguity or erect barriers to civil society responses. These frameworks usually define the parameters of civil society engagement and the space in which they can operate. They also shape government counterterrorism approaches and define which organizations qualify as “violent” or “extremist.” New legislation on terrorism and extremism in the four case-study countries gives strong powers to authorities and has been or is being updated to accommodate new situations and events.
- **Identify context-specific sensitivities and their implications for safely navigating the political environment.** For instance, the terminology of radicalization, terrorism, extremism, and related risk factors varies greatly across Southeast Asia. Consider ways to address risks such as the possibility that collaborating with government will instrumentalize civil society for security purposes, or that governments may exploit ambiguous language to designate groups that simply oppose their policies as “enemies of the state.”
- **Nuanced analysis should guide the focus of interventions.** Canvass the views of local CSOs and community leaders regarding what drives violent extremism. Their proximity to their communities and their knowledge of local grievances can provide essential insights. For example, civil society leaders and activists in The Philippines emphasise the importance of collaborating with religious leaders, and cite cases of religious bodies or figures taking the lead against the violent extremist agenda. Grasping the combined effects of multiple factors, and recognizing differences across a population by gender, status, class, and identity, are critical to formulating appropriate responses.
- **Identify existing government and civil society initiatives, and consider the relationships among them** (e.g., the tensions, potential clashes, and gaps between government and civil society programs). Identify complementarities and potential collaborations that can be further developed.



For more detail, go to Lesson 3 of the main report

Taking a broader view: linking prevention approaches with development and peacebuilding approaches

Many nongovernmental organizations active in this field approach the issue of violent extremism indirectly. Sometimes this allows them to avoid being associated with security services or other government agencies. Other times it enables them to maintain a core, long-term development approach without being swayed by donor demands. More importantly, a broad perspective enables CSOs to address local causes of extremism rather than concentrating on its symptoms. Examples of an indirect approach to violent extremism include efforts to build a strong local identity around pluralism and tolerance in Malaysia, and development initiatives addressing entrenched rural poverty in the Philippines.

In addition to “zooming in” and identifying specific country or local-context characteristics, it is important to “zoom out” and consider violent extremism from a holistic perspective to assess the relative importance of structural drivers and their influence in any one place. This finding is consistent with global research showing that violent extremism is driven by multiple causes at three different levels: (1) the macro or structural level, (2) the meso or social/community level, and (3) the micro or individual level. It is also important to account for existing development and peacebuilding interventions as part of the appraisal process. With this in mind, PVE stakeholders should:

- **Adopt a “strategic portfolio” approach**, assessing the extent to which the existing range of counterterrorism, peacebuilding, development, and PVE initiatives are proportionate to the relative importance of the various drivers and grievances of identified populations or geographic locations. This approach requires functional coordination within and among donors across sectors, as well as with national governments.

- **Back initiatives to improve governance and reduce conflict.** Given the reported impact of misgovernance, conflict, and other structural drivers of violent extremism, consider bringing multiple stakeholders together to address them, or at least to exchange grassroots experiences of nonviolent responses to grievances. One option is local, multistakeholder programs, involving joint trainings and workshops for government and civil society, that normalize the concepts and approaches of peacebuilding and a common vocabulary for discussing violent extremism in a local context.
- **Respond to high-priority problems with a comprehensive and concentrated approach.** First, build strong relationships across the ecosystem of organizations working in the identified sector. Second, develop a range of initiatives among these organizations that complement each other within the sector and will incrementally build a critical mass of effort. For example, a set of complementary initiatives—to reform the prison environment, work with male and female prisoners who have been convicted on terrorism charges, and rehabilitate returning jihadist fighters and reintegrate them into society—might draw on the special competencies of several CSOs, but would work in synergy. This approach, which has been followed in Indonesia, may benefit from simultaneous investments at different levels: upstream policy reform, individual case-management work, downstream community-level work, and follow-up support to individuals through livelihood assistance or economic opportunities to prevent recidivism.
- **Recognize that legislation alone will not prevent violent extremism.** In all countries, the grievances that drive violent extremism are rooted in entrenched structural problems. Focusing on understanding these problems, and finding ways to address them, makes more sense than pursuing legal approaches exclusively.
- **Mainstreaming prevention.** In addition to focusing on specific threats, consider mainstreaming PVE into ongoing governance and other interventions in areas where push/pull factors and vulnerabilities to violent extremism are evident—for example, in areas affected by conflict. This approach can address important issues without calling unwanted attention to specific initiatives or labeling them in unintentionally counterproductive ways.
- **Proportionality, balance, and targeting considerations.** Consider the relative balance of initiatives and investments in PVE at each of the three levels—macro, meso, and micro. This will help to fill gaps and prioritize the areas most in need of investment, whether building new initiatives, scaling up existing work, or extending support for ongoing programs.
- **Sector funding decisions.** If a donor or government has a budget allocation specifically for tackling extremism, ensure that it is focused mainly at the meso level, addressing clearly identified, context-specific drivers of violent extremism within at-risk groups or localities. Civil society organizations are well situated to engage at this level, for example through community-based paralegal training on residents' rights in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Support for micro-level assistance targeting identified, at-risk individuals or communities may also be covered. But broader macro, or structural, issues such as livelihoods, governance, and conflict reduction should be funded through development, peacebuilding, or other fund allocations whenever possible.



For more detail, go to Lesson 1 and 2 of the main report

Building civil society capacity: an ongoing need

CSOs in remote and conflict-affected or marginalized areas have often developed valuable local relationships and earned the trust of their community, yet they may still struggle with shortcomings in professional contacts and experience, recruitment, and government relations. Much-needed opportunities for capacity building and development can be hard to find for such groups, and carefully designed support programs can do much good. This could mean, for example, translating existing resources or adapting them to local conditions, developing new materials, or building carefully identified technical skills.

Local authorities in these areas would also benefit from support, especially where suspicion or gaps in understanding or communication exist among the pillars of society—government, civil society, religious institutions, and the media. Given the sensitive nature of the issues at hand and the power relations among these institutions, it is important to find neutral venues and convenors that allow for dispassionate discussion. These observations lead to the following recommendations:

- **Support targeted capacity building for CSOs and government stakeholders in marginalized areas.** In conflict-affected parts of Thailand and The Philippines, donors have encouraged CSOs to devise their own ways of carrying out in-service training as a part of funded projects. In Malaysia and Indonesia, national NGOs and think-tanks help to build the capabilities of local community-based groups.
- **Support efforts to improve mutual understanding between civil society and government actors, including security agencies, and avoid reinforcing traditional divisions between them.** Donors should look to convene diverse stakeholders and practitioners to discuss issues, roles, and responses to violent extremism. They should develop and support neutral forums, create alternative spaces, and strengthen the role of existing “bridge mechanisms,” as CSO approaches often depend in practice on links with government to function, advocate, and implement their programs. The state may have a varied presence and mixed impact in Southeast Asia’s hotspots of violent extremism, but it rarely has no presence at all.
- **Support the development of holistic, coordinated approaches across identified high-priority sectors.** While they are challenging to implement, and donors must be realistic about what CSOs and government can actually achieve in this regard, such approaches are critically important, particularly given current trends towards authoritarian government and dwindling space for civil society. Such engagement requires donors to tolerate risk, to learn from failure as well as success, and to back the role of CSOs under challenging circumstances.
- **Support more online prevention efforts.** Online media are an increasingly important influence on violent extremism, yet the field remains under-covered by civil society in Southeast Asia. Several international NGOs are already enabling local CSOs across the region both to use online media themselves and to address its effects on violence, but much more could be done.
- **Gender differences need more attention.** Gender roles and interactions are important, complex factors in violent extremism. They need to be fully considered in program approaches and in capacity development. CSOs currently have limited capacity to address the gendered aspects of violent extremism, such as the role of women and girls in extremist movements or the structural impact of associations between masculinity and violence. Gender roles vary significantly across Southeast Asia and more locally, so integrating gender analysis into local research and practice is essential. CSOs should be encouraged to employ female staff and to explicitly include women in their target groups. Women-led CSOs should be supported directly where possible.



For more detail, go to Lesson 4 and 5 of the main report

Adaptive aid approaches: coping with unpredictable change

Support for CSOs operating in complex and politically sensitive areas, especially those working to address violent extremism, is constrained by various aspects of current aid-delivery systems. These limitations include short-term project timeframes, inflexible project plans, and a focus on externally driven deliverables. Given the importance of relationships, trust, and sensitivity, there is a particularly acute need for PVE work to be adaptive and process-oriented. This observation leads to the following recommendations, which particularly apply to donors:

- **Iterative, flexible approaches.** Donors and governments should apply lessons and approaches to CSO PVE programming gleaned from their support for sectors such as peacebuilding, where the critical importance of flexible or process-oriented approaches, and of adaptive management techniques, is recognized and accepted.
- **Increase the use of qualitative monitoring and evaluation.** PVE monitoring and evaluation should be both strengthened and deepened through the use of qualitative approaches to data collection in conjunction with traditional quantitative approaches. Examples of qualitative approaches include ethnographic studies, outcome harvesting, and combination metrics or indices. Proxy indicators can be used to assess complex and important dimensions such as levels of trust between stakeholders.
- **Adopt pragmatic approaches to civil society sustainability.** Donors should recognize that the development of promising and successful CSO PVE programs in vulnerable countries will continue to require some degree of external support for the foreseeable future. Alongside these efforts, they should also advocate for broader recognition by governments of the important role that CSOs play, and for the development of independent national support mechanisms suitable to assume some of the financial burden without distorting the nature of civil society and its relationship with government. In responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, some governments have looked to control civic space, further underscoring the need for external support and protection.
- **Develop a more rigorous evidence base on PVE impact.** All actors should invest in developing a sound research evidence base that reflects the role of CSOs in PVE. There is an ongoing need to demonstrate the impact of interventions, and to identify foundations on which to build and promising approaches that can be scaled up. Better national data on the prevalence of violent extremism is also needed.



For more detail, go to Lesson 6 of the main report



Civil society organizations can build social cohesion with carefully targeted local events such as this street-soccer tournament for youth, hosted by Saiburi Looker in Thailand's Pattani Province.

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