

The UNCCT's Strategies in Preventing Violent Extremism in Kenya

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Abstract: This study analyzes the role of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) in preventing violent extremism in Kenya between 2015 and 2024. The research adopts a descriptive survey design, drawing on interviews with government officials, civil society actors, and community members, as well as document analysis. The findings reveal that UNCCT initiatives have shifted from state-centric, securitized approaches to more inclusive, community-led strategies that prioritize trust-building, capacity-building, and addressing root causes such as poverty and lack of opportunity. Key strategies include youth engagement, economic empowerment, strategic communication, and multi-agency coordination. The study highlights the effectiveness of localized, participatory models in building resilience, especially in urban informal settlements, and underscores the importance of involving local leaders, women, and former extremists in program design and implementation. However, challenges remain, including limited resources, poor coordination between national and county governments, and the need for more robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The research concludes that UNCCT's holistic approach has contributed to Kenya's evolving counter-extremism landscape, but ongoing refinement and inclusive participation are essential for sustainable impact.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Global counter-terrorism (CT) has long been a lightning rod for competing state interests, normative commitments, and institutional design. Romaniuk (2010) offers a foundational account of how CT cooperation among states and international organizations oscillates between collaboration and contestation, arguing that multilateral approaches are shaped by power asymmetries, strategic interests, and the diffusion of expertise across security, legal, financial, and diplomatic domains. This perspective helps explain the emergence and resilience of a burgeoning UN-centered CT complex that seeks to harmonize member state actions while managing divergent capacities and political motives. The literature assembled here traces a parallel trajectory: from the theoretical grounding of multilateral CT cooperation to practitioner-focused evaluations of the UN CT architecture, and finally to contemporary assessments of coordination, capacity-building, and human-rights implications in the UN's CT ecosystem. Across these works, a central claim emerges: the UN CT complex embodied in bodies such as CTED, CTC, CTITF, and UNCCT/UNOCT has become the principal arena where norms, procedures, and technical assistance converge, even as questions about effectiveness and rights protections persist.

Romaniuk frames CT cooperation as a global politics where states "cooperate or compete" across a spectrum of activities from intelligence sharing and militarized action to financial controls and diplomacy. This systemic view illuminates why a consolidated UN CT complex could gain legitimacy and operational reach: states trust a universal platform to codify norms, coordinate practices, and mobilize resources for cross-border threats. Yet Romaniuk also emphasizes the fragility of multilateral CT when power dynamics leak into practice, producing uneven implementation and shifting alliances that can both bolster and hinder coordinated responses. The result is a paradox in which multilateral institutions provide a shared vocabulary and governance mechanisms for CT, while the actual reach and impact depend on political will and domestic capacities. The trajectory toward UNCCT/UNOCT can be read as a response to these tensionsan institutional attempt to standardize CT capacity-building, promote best practices, and facilitate cross-country cooperation under a centralized mandate. This synthesis underlines the role of the UN and allied bodies as pivotal nodes where technical expertise, legal norms, and political commitments converge, aligning member states' CT efforts within a recognized international framework. The enduring question, however, is whether these arrangements can outpace state-level strategic competition and deliver consistent human-rights protections alongside security gains. Romaniuk (2010).

Baage and Stoffer (ICCT Perspective, 2017) focus on how the UN especially UNCCT/OCT could refine strategy and alignment across CT capacity-building initiatives. They argue for clearer strategic objectives, better alignment with field realities, and more systematic coordination among CT bodies to avoid duplication and gaps in assistance. The emphasis on coherence reflects a practical concern: CT capacity-building is most effective

when it is demand-driven, context-sensitive, and integrated with broader peace-and-security efforts. Their prescription implicitly supports Romaniuk's broader argument about the contestation and cooperation dynamic by suggesting that improved coordination can reduce redundancies, close policy gaps, and foster more credible, rights-respecting CT assistance. In sum, Baage and Stoffer illuminate the operational side of multilateral CT, offering concrete prescriptions for how UN structures can organize and deliver capacity-building in ways that reinforce legitimacy and effectiveness. Stoffer (2017).

The 2021 briefing on the rise of CT at the UN offers a concise historical arc: the CT/PVE framework has evolved through the creation and expansion of UNCCT/UNOCT, enhanced prosecutorial and prevention instruments, and ongoing debates about coordination, effectiveness, and human rights. This synthesis suggests that the UN's CT architecture increasingly positions itself as a hub for policy coherence, cross-border cooperation, and technical assistance, while grappling with political sensitivities around sovereignty, civil liberties, and the risk of securitization of development programs. The briefing implies that the UN's CT trajectory is marked by a gradual institutional consolidation aimed at improving strategic alignment among CT components, but the degree to which this consolidation translates into measurable improvements in rights protections and on-the-ground outcomes remains contested. This narrative aligns with Romaniuk's emphasis on the double-edged nature of multilateral CT: institutions provide legitimacy and coordination, yet their effectiveness depends on how well member states' practices harmonize with overarching norms. UN CT (2021).

Shulika's 2024 case study of the Lake Chad Basin offers a timely empirical lens on UN CT efforts, focusing on capacity-building and P/CVE programming in a regional context. The article evaluates the effectiveness of UN-supported initiatives, highlighting how local dynamics, governance structures, and cross-border challenges shape CT outcomes. This empirical grounding is essential for understanding how UNCCT/UNOCT policies translate into concrete field results and how regional contexts mediate the success of capacity-building and preventive programming. By situating UN CT activities within a specific regional security landscape, Shulika contributes to a more granular understanding of what works, what doesn't, and why, complementing the more macro-level analyses of Romaniuk and the rights-centered critique from FIDH. Shulika(2024).

Edited by Alex P. Schmid, the Handbook assembles chapters on prevention, P/CVE, strategic communications, and capacity-building, connecting scholarly theory with practical policy considerations. The volume discusses UNCCT/UNOCT within UN policy links and identifies gaps where research can inform more effective strategies. The handbook's synthesis highlights the need for evidence-based, context-sensitive approaches to CT and CVE that balance security imperatives with civil liberties, and it emphasizes strategic communications as a core lever for preventing radicalization while preserving rights. This resource thus functions as a bridge between academic theorizing and UN operational practice, illustrating how research can illuminate the design and implementation of capacity-building programs that UNCCT/UNOCT may champion. Schmid (2020).

The Lake Chad Basin case study offers empirical clarity on how UN CT programming interacts with local governance, cross-border security, and community resilience. It demonstrates the importance of aligning capacity-building with regional dynamics, including state capacity, legitimacy, and human-rights protections. The case underscores that effective CT work in regional contexts requires attention to governance at multiple levels and sustained engagement with communities and civil society to ensure that P/CVE initiatives are responsive and rights-respecting. Such regional analyses feed back into the broader theoretical debates about coordination, legitimacy, and the political economy of CT assistance. Baage (2024).

1.2 Rationale

The study is necessitated by the persistent, transnational, and evolving nature of the global threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism (TVE). Despite significant international efforts coordinated under the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, terrorist groups continue to adapt their tactics, exploit new technologies, and leverage socio-economic vulnerabilities, demonstrating a critical need to assess the efficacy of the current multilateral response. The UNCCT, as the primary UN entity for providing capacity-building and technical assistance to Member States across the four pillars of the Global Strategy (addressing conditions conducive to terrorism, prevention/combating, capacity-building, and human rights/rule of law), plays a pivotal role. The sheer complexity and diversity of its programs ranging from border security and countering terrorist financing to youth engagement and rehabilitation demand rigorous scrutiny. This study is crucial for determining which specific interventions are most impactful, adaptable to local contexts, and cost-effective, thereby guiding UN policymakers and donor countries in prioritizing resources to strengthen the global security architecture against TVE.

A primary rationale for this research is the critical need for evidence-based policy-making and enhanced accountability within the UN's complex counter-terrorism apparatus. Concerns have been raised regarding the

potential for some CT/PCVE measures to be instrumentalized by Member States to suppress dissent or violate human rights, underscoring the necessity of evaluating the human rights compliance and rule of law integration within UNCCT-supported strategies. Furthermore, the effectiveness of UN coordination a key challenge given the multiplicity of UN entities involved in counter-terrorism (UNOCT, UNCCT, UNODC,) must be thoroughly examined to ensure coherent and synergistic delivery of assistance. This study seeks to generate empirical data on the strategic and operational gaps in the UNCCT's approach, particularly concerning emerging threats like the exploitation of cyberspace and the nexus between terrorism and other transnational organized crimes. By providing an independent assessment of success factors and implementation challenges, the research will directly contribute to making the UNCCT's programs more agile, impactful, and aligned with both the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and fundamental human rights standards.

1.3 General Objective

The General objective of this study was to analyze the role of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) initiatives in preventing violent extremism in Kenya between 2015 - 2024.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Strategies of UNCCT Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Terrorism and violent extremism are one of the major threats to long lasting peace and security in the African continent. The continent has in the recent years seen a rise in terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Northern parts of Kenya, Boko Haram and ISWAP in Nigeria, and insurgent groups in the Sahel and Mozambique. In response to this growing danger, African nations together with international support, have come up with various counter-terrorism strategies that aim at curbing the rise of terror relate activities. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCTC) has played a very important role in not only coordinating these efforts but also supporting it in its entirety. This analysis reviews all the existing academic works on the UNCTC's key role in African counter-terrorism strategies, focusing on its involvement in different situations across the African continent and identifying key areas that will require further research.

In its duty, The UNCTC has a broader mandate that includes capacity building in the member countries, championing for regional and international cooperation, and addressing some of the underlying causes of terrorism in the communities. Various studies have shown the roles played by the UNCTC in helping African countries solve their own problems through provision of training and tools. For example, Naidoo (2019) discusses how the UNCTC helped strengthen and improve South Africa's counter-terrorism capabilities through trainings and implementation of good policies. Similarly, Alhaji (2020) and Zenn (2019) discuss how the UNCTC's supports Nigeria's efforts against Boko Haram and ISWAP, with a keen focus on areas like information sharing among agencies and cooperation between law enforcement agencies and other stakeholders in the country. In Somalia, Kemp (2020) in his research discussed the connection between reforms carried out in the security sector and counter-terrorism, noting that the UNCTC's was involved in the training of staffs and provision of equipment for security force to use in the fight against Al-Shabaab.

Apart from capacity building, the UNCTC has been a great champion of regional cooperation. Jones (2022) examines how terrorism is not just a single country's problem but a problem that affects the entire region and stated the importance of regional teamwork coordinated by the UNCTC. Baron (2020) shows the effects of regional efforts to counter terrorism in the horn of Africa where the UNCTC plays a coordinating role between all the participating member countries. The UNCTC's engagement in Mozambique, as explored by Dube (2022) and Fraser (2021), shows how the organization tries to facilitate collaboration between national and regional actors in addressing violent extremism in the region.

The UNCTC has also shifted its focus to tackling the root causes of terrorism, they have concluded that a military-only approach isn't enough to solve this existing and ever-changing challenge. Several studies have highlighted the need for a complete strategy that addresses socio-economic issues, improves governance in countries, and most importantly counters radicalization. For example, a study by Lutalo (2021) links youth empowerment with countering violent extremism in South Africa, pointing out the UNCTC's support for programs that give young people alternative livelihoods and skills therefore removing them from violence related activities. In Somalia, Menkhaus (2020) studied the impact of initiatives that aim at targeting counter-radicalization, while Burke (2021) explores the connection between social unity and counter-terrorism. In Mozambique, Smith (2020) in his study emphasized the importance of dealing with the deep causes of extremism, such as poverty, inequalities in the community, and poor access to education and healthcare, not just the surface level causes. He suggested that the UN and the UNCTC play an important role in addressing these issues. Kamau (2020) and Wanjiku (2021) make similar arguments when it comes to Kenya, they focused on counter-radicalization and the role of local communities in preventing violent extremism.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In order to carry out the research, the study adopted theory Liberalism theory by Immanuel Kant (1795).

2.2.1 Liberalism theory

Liberalism theory, particularly as articulated by Immanuel Kant in his 1795 work "Perpetual Peace," emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, human rights, and democratic governance in promoting global peace and stability. In interpreting the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) and its Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) initiatives, Liberalism offers a valuable framework by highlighting how global cooperation through institutions like the UN effectively address the root causes of extremism, such as socio-political inequalities, lack of education, and authoritarian governance. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) works to make the world a safer and more peaceful place by protecting everyone's rights, encouraging countries to work together, and following the set global rules that make peace and stability easily achieved. This approach is based on the belief that well planned and coordinated governance, working legal systems, and democracy can maintain social order. However, this view overlooks the emotional and psychological aspects that influences violent extremism, such as the increased frustrations caused by social and economic inequalities and in other cases political exclusion. This is where the Frustration-Aggression Theory now comes in. The theory directly connects frustrations like being denied opportunities or political inclusion with aggressive and violent behavior. Applying this theory to the UNCCT's work in Kenya helps to explain the psychological motivations that lead to radicalization and violent extremism. It goes beyond liberalism's institutional focus to show that aggression is in most cases as a result of personal and collective anger stemming from blocked aspirations. This broader understanding is crucial, and help in developing effective prevention strategies in Kenya.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive survey design was chosen for this study, this is because it allowed for a comprehensive overview of the UNCCT's initiatives, its strategies, and the perceived impacts on preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Kenya. Given the complex nature of the dynamics of the UNCCT's interventions, a descriptive approach made it possible to collect detailed data, and contextual information from various groups, including the officials in the government, members of the civil society organizations, and also the local community members (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This method helped the research map out the UNCCT's activities, identify key challenges it faces and strategies it uses, and provides important insights for future PVE programs to be carried out.

3.2 Study Area, Target Population

Kenya is an important location for this study because it has a unique social and political situation. The country has a long history of radicalization and recruitment of its citizens into extremist groups, which makes it a relevant case for understanding why violent extremism happens and how effective PVE programs and strategies are. The target population for this study came from a diverse group of key stakeholders involved in, and those who have been affected by PVE initiatives in way or the other. This included individuals from the UNCCT, government agencies that are involved in the national security front, and key representatives from civil society organizations working on PVE at the local and community levels. The study also involved the leaders in the communities and residents from areas that are highly vulnerable to violent extremism, and where ethically possible, individuals who are former members of extremist groups or those that have been impacted by extremism. By Including these varied perspectives, a full picture of the UNCCT's impact and the effectiveness of PVE strategies was achieved. Each group came with unique knowledge and experiences that were relevant to answering the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.3 Sampling Technique, Sample size, and Instrument of Data Collection

The study used both purposive and stratified sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of key individuals with specific expertise in counter-terrorism and PVE efforts, such as the government officials, NGO representatives, and community leaders who are directly involved in UNCCT-supported programs (Etikan 2016). Stratified sampling ensured that the research regions and communities across Kenya were involved. This allowed for a more thorough analysis of how UNCCT interventions were carried out and received in various contexts across different regions (Sharma, 2019). For the qualitative part of the study, a smaller sample of 40 individuals was enough because in-depth interviews were carried out. This size was chosen to achieve data saturation; this means that conducting more interviews in this context would not provide any important new information (Guest 2006). For qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was

the primary instrument that was used. These interviews allowed researcher to explore the standpoints and practices of key stakeholders, including government officials involved in counter-terrorism efforts, NGO representatives implementing PVE programs, community leaders, and individuals directly or indirectly affected by violent extremism. The semi-structured format provides a framework that is very flexible thus allowing the researcher to dig deeper into specific topics and follow emerging themes while ensuring that the key targeted areas of inquiry were covered consistently across interviews.

3.4 Piloting, Validity and Reliability.

A pilot study for this research was conducted in Northeastern Kenya. This region, includes several counties such as Mandera, Wajir, and Garissa. These counties have historically been vulnerable to violent extremism due to their proximity to Somalia, where the influence of groups like Al-Shabaab is relatively high. Conducting a pilot study in these areas allowed the researcher to test the effectiveness and reliability of the research tools and also correct the errors in the questionnaires. To ensure the study's validity and reliability, keen attention was given to the research design and implementation. To establish the validity of the content, experts were called upon to review the research tools and give feedback on the areas to improve so that the research tools accurately capture the key ideas of PVE and UNCCT interventions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A more complete understanding of the topic was achieved by the use of triangulation, this involves the collection of data from different sources such as interviews, documents, and observations. This in the long run improved construct validity. (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To enhance the reliability of the study, strict data collection procedures were used and a well detailed record of all research activities was recorded. For the qualitative data, interviews were transcribed word for word, the context of the data collection was recorded and a clear record of all the analytical decisions were maintained. The study used a mixed-methods approach to collect data. Qualitative data was gathered through a semi-structured interviews with key individuals that were selected, including government representatives, representatives from NGOs, leaders from different communities, and people who had been affected by violent extremism in different ways. These interviews were conducted in person or via secure video conferencing, depending on participant availability and logistical considerations, and audio-recorded with informed consent.

3.5 Data Analysis techniques

Data analysis for this study involved a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data, gathered from interviews with UNCCT officials, Kenyan government representatives, civil society actors, and community members, as well as from relevant documents were analyzed thematically. Which involve coding the data for recurring themes related to UNCCT strategies, community engagement, regional cooperation, and perceived impacts on VE. Quantitative data, were presented in form of tables and figures with their analysis and interpretation.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Strategies Employed by the UNCCT to Counter Violent Extremism (PVE) Within the Kenya

This study analyzes the how the UNCCT counters violent extremism (VE) in Kenya. The research focused on how these strategies address the basic causes of radicalization in order to promote long-term peace and security.

UNCCT Strategies for Preventing Violent Extremism in Nairobi, Kenya

Strategy Category	Specific Strategy/Intervention	Target Group/Stakeholders	Expected Outcome	Status/Findings
Capacity Building	Training of law enforcement and judicial officials on human rights-based counterterrorism	Police, judiciary, prosecutors	Improved rule-of-law and reduced abusive practices	Implemented through NCTC; improved collaboration observed
Youth Engagement	Support for youth forums, entrepreneurship and vocational training programs	At-risk youth in informal settlements	Reduced youth recruitment into violent groups	Active in Eastleigh and Majengo; limited reach in Mathare

Strategy Category	Specific Strategy/Intervention	Target Group/Stakeholders	Expected Outcome	Status/Findings
Community Resilience Programs	Community dialogue platforms, local peace committees	Local leaders, religious and civil society actors	Strengthened local resistance to extremist ideologies	Effective in Majengo; weak participation in Kibera
Media and Counter-Narratives	Development of counter-narrative campaigns through social media, radio and local influencers	General public and online audiences	Disruption of extremist propaganda	Ongoing; challenges in content localization noted
Education & Awareness	Civic education in schools and madrassas; integration of PVE content into local curriculum	Teachers, students, school administrators	Increased youth resilience and civic responsibility	Pilot programs launched in select schools in Kamukunji
Multi-Agency Coordination	Support for Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) inter-agency collaboration mechanisms	Government agencies, security actors	Improved intelligence sharing and operational coordination	Considered a best practice model in the region
Gender-Inclusive Approaches	Inclusion of women in community policing and CVE programs	Women leaders, local CSOs	Recognition of women's roles in both prevention and resilience	Moderate uptake; often sidelined due to cultural dynamics
Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)	Support for development of M&E frameworks for CVE programming	Implementing partners, NGOs, government	Data-driven policy and improved program adaptation	Weak capacity; needs strengthening according to field interviews

Source; Field Data 2025

Based on the provided information, the UNCCT uses different of strategies to fight violent extremism in Nairobi. These strategies have produced mixed results, depending on the specific community targeted and the level of institutional support received. In areas like Eastleigh and Majengo, strategies such as youth engagement and multi-agency coordination with the NCTC have been very successful. This is likely because there's already a high level of local cooperation and growing trust in these programs. However, other strategies like gender-inclusive approaches and media-based counter-narratives have faced challenges. These obstacles are linked to sociocultural resistance and content that isn't relevant to the community, which highlights the need for more customized messaging that is better informed by the community it's meant to serve. Additionally, weaknesses in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks hinder evidence-based adjustments to program design, suggesting a critical gap in UNCCT's strategic execution (UN Women, 2020). These findings confirm that while UNCCT's strategies are comprehensive, their effectiveness depends on how they are implemented at the local level, whether all stakeholders are included, and if there's strong institutional follow-through.

Community Engagement and Grassroots Dialogue

From the table above it emerges that one of the strategies was Community Engagement and Grassroots Dialogue, these was central strategy employed by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) in preventing violent extremism in Kenya. This approach underscores a broader trend toward the localization of counter-extremism efforts, with a marked shift from top-down, securitized interventions to bottom-up strategies that prioritize trust-building and community ownership. According to UNCCT Data Analyst

Key Informant illustrated that between 2013 and 2024, Kenya's counter-extremism landscape has evolved from heavy-handed, government-centric operations toward more inclusive and participatory frameworks. These frameworks intentionally involve local leaders, youth groups, women's organizations, religious figures, and community-based actors in both the design and implementation of PVE initiatives. (KII Nairobi 27th May 2025)

The data reveals a big change in how Kenya has approached preventing violent extremism (PVE) between 2013 and 2024, it shows a shift from state led strategies that focused on security agencies to community inclusive approaches. This change comes after assessing the effects of militarized counter terrorism strategies and the benefits of community led counter terrorism strategies, the later won. This participatory model aligns with UNCCT's emphasis on including those most affected with extremism in decision making. By including non-state actors and local leaders, trust, ownership and long-term resilience is fostered.

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the UNCCT's 2022 *East Africa PVE Framework* confirm that the UNCCT training over 1500 community stakeholders in Kenya's high-risk areas between 2016-2022 as part of its capacity building initiative. These programs have empowered the locals to come up with their own plans on how to prevent radicalization and extremism based on their community needs. According to a 2023 report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Kenya has become a model to learn from in the region on how local PVE frameworks, can be used to build trust, manage tensions between locals and police and prevent radicalization if they are properly supported by international organizations. This shows that the UNCCT's strategies have been central in moving Kenya's PVE efforts towards more sustainable models that are community led.

The UNCCT, working together with Kenyan authorities and civil society organizations, has played a significant role in this change. It has funded and supported most local peace dialogues, interfaith forums, and youth mentorship programs in Nairobi's informal settlements and other marginalized areas.

Localization of Counter-Extremism through Community Trust-Building

The localization trend has emerged as a strategy since it is particularly evident in areas like Mathare, Kibera, and Eastleigh, where extremism narratives have historically increased due to neglect by the state, poverty, and a breakdown in trust between citizens and law enforcers.

A key informant, shared in an interview: "We started attending these programs only after our imams and chiefs participated directly, only started trusting these programs when we saw our local imams and chiefs involved directly. Before that, it felt like a foreign agenda." (KII 2nd June 2025)

The data reveals a critical dimension in the effectiveness of PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) interventions in Kenya that is its local legitimacy and trust. A youth leader from mathare shared that for communities to cooperate in PVE programme, the local leaders and respected members in the society such as imams and pastors need to be involved, if the programs lack such people, it is perceived to be something imposed by outsiders. In contrast, by including trusted members of the community, participation increases and the people will be more open to share their thoughts. This shift shows the importance of localizing strategies to fit community needs.

A 2022 evaluation report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UNCCT, titled *Community Engagement in PVE: Lessons from East Africa*, showed that programs in Kenya that involved religious leaders and community leaders are three time more effective in building trust, being accepted and in achieving its goals compared to those that just involve government officials and foreigners. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) further suggests that programs that are perceived to be credible among the locals are key in achieving long term deradicalization especially in urban informal settlements like Mathare.

This shows the role played by culture and messengers in shaping public views with regards to countering extremism programs. Involving respected local leaders in PVE initiatives has increased the acceptability rates of the initiatives and facilitate the creation of safe spaces where people can channel their voices without fear. By creating strategies grounded in cultures, the UNCCT has created trust, relevance and enriched community engagement. Such conversations help to break down the feelings of alienation that often drive extremist recruitment in high-risk areas, particularly among disillusioned youth.

From responses in Kibera, more than half of the participants (68%) of people agreed that community forums have reduced youth involvement in extremist networks. therefore, the community sees these local forums as effective in preventing youth radicalization. This finding highlights the importance of community-based dialogue, education, and engagement in countering violent extremism (CVE). These forums likely act as safe spaces where people can voice their concerns, correct misinformation by asking questions, and promote positive messages about peace to counter violent messages, foster inclusion, and civic participation. The high

agreement rate suggests that community ownership and participation are not only vital but are also producing positive results.

A 2023 study by the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) found that youth forums in informal settlements were very effective in reducing the risk of radicalization. The report also shows that initiatives which combined several programs such as skills training, and mentorships reported a 32% decrease in reported extremist recruitment attempts. Similarly, the UNCCT's 2022 East Africa Programmatic Review documented that local interventions mainly those that encourage and nurture dialogue and trust were crucial in limiting how extremist groups recruit. These findings support the views of the Kibera residents and show how community forums supported by the UNCCT, are very effective more so when they are inclusive and consistent.

This statistic shows there is a change in how the locals perceive PVE efforts indicating that the models which are community led are more successful in stopping radicalizations than those just led by the government. These forums allow individuals to express their underlying grievances through storytelling, afterwards they are trained on different skills, receive trauma counselling among other things. They also help create a sense of togetherness, especially among young people who previously felt shut out in the decision-making and also in the civic life.

The UNCCT's strategy is supported in two theoretical frameworks: Liberalism and Frustration-Aggression Theory. From the liberalism theory, this strategy empowers the communities to participate actively in solving their own challenges, the bottom to up approach use in this strategy aims at creating trust between the citizens and the state in marginalized regions. Based on the Frustration-Aggression Theory, it addresses psychological needs in the community such as poverty, lack of opportunities and feelings of being sidelines, factors that could lead to violence if left unchecked. These strategy offers the youth avenues to express themselves, participate in decision-making and opportunity to form good identities with the community. These two theories both show the importance of inclusive governance and creation of psychological resilience in preventing radicalization.

4.1.1 Capacity Building for Local Security Actors

The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) has contributed to the improvement of the Kenyan police operations by training them on professionalism, human rights, and effective community engagement. As a result of such trainings, there is a shift in how the police in high-risk areas such as Garissa and Mombasa engage with the locals, the security efforts in these places are now people centered and are perceived as a collective responsibility.

These training programs have improved the technical skills of the security force, ethical conduct, and how they engage with the locals. They also provide local forces with the tools and resources they need to improve their understanding of the social and political contexts of the communities they serve.

According to Wabwire (2020), one of the main achievements of the UNCCT's strategy has been a shift in the relationship between the military and community members at the community level. Instead of viewing youth from marginalized and Muslim-majority communities as suspects, trained officers now see them as partners in peace and security.

A key informant in Nairobi confirmed this change, stating that officers were trained "not just to detect threats but to engage youth as potential partners, not suspects." (KII, Nairobi 2nd June 2025)

This highlights a significant move away from the aggressive profiling and heavy-handed tactics previously used against Somali and Muslim communities in high-risk urban areas like Eastleigh. This transformation shows how human-rights-based policing and community engagement are being integrated into CVE strategies. By prioritizing tools like dialogue, building trust, and collaboration, the training, through the support of the UNCCT and other international partners is slowly reforming institutional mindsets and creating more inclusive relationships between security forces and the vulnerable populations. A 2022 study by the Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies (CHRIPS) supports these findings noting that by implementing such trainings in eastleigh, there has been a decline in confrontations between the youth and police officers. This shift towards community policing has increased trust and improved security in informal settlement.

Research by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UNCCT showed training the police on PVE has improved how the youths and the police relate. 60% of police officers who attended these trainings have reported a decreased tension between them and the locals and also an increase in security related information by the locals. Since law enforcers shifted to proactive engagement rather than reactive ones, there has been reports of reduced panic among locals during patrols, increased reporting of suspicious activities and increased in the number of youths participating in security matters. Police now bond with locals by participating in community meetings as collaborators and not enforcers in the security sector.

The positive shift in public perception is further reflected in the primary data gathered through respondent.

According to Opondo, P. (2020). in a survey conducted in Eastleigh and parts of Garissa, 74% of local residents responded that they *“felt safer interacting with police now than five years ago.”*

This is a substantial indicator of changing trust dynamics between the public and law enforcement institutions. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of UNCCT’s capacity-building programs in bridging historical gaps rooted in ethnic profiling, heavy-handedness, and institutional mistrust. The improved relationship between civilians and police is critical in detecting early signs of radicalization, especially in communities where extremist recruiters often operate under the radar.

According to Mkutu, K, (2020). The growing public confidence in police officers has led to increased community engagements that bring together all stakeholders to discuss on strategies that will improve safety.

The strategy of the UNCCT to improve the operations of the Kenya police is supported by both Liberalism Theory and Frustration-Aggression Theory. As per the liberal view, this approach is centered in the creation of strong institutions that follow the law and with the help of collaborations with the international organizations. By doing so, the UNCCT supports good governance by improving Kenya’s police force. these trainings not only improve operations; they also increase state presences in marginalized areas. This strategy also conforms with the frustration aggression theory which states that inequality and injustice can lead to aggression and consequently violence. When security officers show empathy, respect the culture of locals and respect human rights, they help counter the emotional triggers that may lead to violence.

By providing modern work tools and training models on how to engage with youths and effective communication strategies, the UNCCT addresses operational weaknesses that have lasted for decades. These skills are important to the police especially in this online age radicalizations start online before reaching the communities. Over the past decade, these capacity building efforts has created a security sector that is trusted, responsive and effective in executing its mandate to the people of Kenya. As Kenya fights new and evolving terrorism related threats, the strengthened relationship between locals and law enforcers plays a role in building lasting peace and resilience towards radicalization.

4.1.2 Economic Empowerment and Youth Employment Initiative

Economic empowerment and youth employment has been identified as the most impactful programs for PVE in Kenya by the UNCCT. This is because, both of this program directly addresses the underlying causes of radicalization, that is poverty an lack of opportunities. In communities in the urban informal settlements the UNCCT has partnered with local NGOs and vocational training institutions to equip youths with skills they can monetize and live independent lives. This strategy shows that to fully tackle issues to with extremism and radicalization, a more holistic approach should be used.

According to, Respondent who is a UNCCT Official in Nairobi. Over the last ten years, the UNCCT's has grown significantly in implementing its strategy and mandate. Starting as small pilot projects in areas like Garissa, Eastleigh, and Kibera, the economic empowerment programs have expanded far and wide across the country and among most vulnerable communities. They now mostly include technical skills training, easy microfinance access, small business support, and job placement services. These initiatives are designed to meet local needs, and ensure that participants learn relevant and sustainable skills that they can monetize.

Over the last ten years, UNCCT has improved consequently grown in its mandate on empowerment and helping people in marginalized areas earn a living through skills training. This change shows that UNCCT now better understands how poverty and unemployment among the youths can be associated with radicalization. By designing programs that fit the local economical situations, UNCCT makes sure the help they offer is useful and also sustainable into the future. This helps people build stronger resilience and protects them from being drawn into extremist groups that take advantage of financial struggles among marginalized communities with a promise of big financial compensation.

This shows how important and effective these programs are. A 2023 report by UNDP and UNCCT called *“Preventing Violent Extremism Through Livelihoods: Lessons from East Africa”* shows that participants of the UNCCT’s programs related to economic empowerment in Kenya were 45% less likely to support extremist ideas than those who didn’t. Also, a 2022 report by GCERF showed that young people in places like Eastleigh and Kibera who joined training and business programs felt more hopeful, got more involved in their communities, and trusted local leaders more. These results prove that giving people economic opportunities that match their local needs is a strong way to prevent violent extremism and a key part of UNCCT’s long-term plan in Kenya.

These programs often include mentorship, where trained young people are encouraged to become role models either as security ambassadors or peer educators. This helps spread the program’s positive effects even further.

One young person from Kibera shared how the program changed his life: "I joined a welding course through this program. Before that, I was one foot into crime. This saved me." (KII Nairobi 3rd June 2025)

The provided data shows that economic empowerment programs, such as vocational training, have a major impact on at-risk youth in informal settlements like Kibera. The youth participant's reflection on how welding skills changed their life highlights the personal and broader community benefits of these initiatives. These programs, supported by the UNCCT, play a crucial role in disrupting cycles of poverty and violence. By giving young people in demand skills and a renewed sense of purpose, they promote social integration and economic freedom. This, in turn, helps to build community resilience against violent extremism by reducing conditions which make individuals more vulnerable to radicalization.

A 2022 study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and UNCCT found that youths living in the high risks areas in Kenya who participated in trainings and workshops were 57% less likely to engage in criminal acts. Similarly, the African Union Commission's 2023 report showed that by empowering people economically especially the youths, they were less likely to join extremist groups. These reports are in line with testimonies from youths in Kibera who said that by acquiring skills and monetizing them, they no longer consider crime as a means of getting a livelihood like before, they now live contented lives with a purpose.

83% of the youths felt they were less likely to be recruited into extremism as they are busy with their hustles, this shows that the initiatives have made the youths less vulnerable to radicalization therefore thwarting the efforts of extremist recruiters who rely on economic disadvantages to sell their narrative. These efforts together with community engagements will ensure long term resilience in the grassroots.

The UNCCT's strategy is supported by Frustration-Aggression Theory which claims that inequality and poverty can lead to aggression which will further lead to radicalization and extremism. In marginalized areas within Kenya, people become vulnerable to radicalization due to weak state authority, poor government services, ethnic discrimination and poverty. The UNCCT economic empowerment drive directly addresses most of these challenges so that extremist recruiters will not fuel emotional despair to sound attractive.

In informal centers in urban areas such as Mathare and Kibera, programs usually focus on equipping the youths with digital skills, entrepreneurship skills and trading skills, this is because they are close to ready markets when they start self-employment journey. By adopting programs to local needs, its effectiveness is felt. Also, when reformed extremists take up roles to mentor their peers, their personal experiences give hope to others in that, one can change and be accepted back to the society. These personal narratives are very powerful in deterring their peers from being radicalized.

Apart from their primary objectives, these programs have produced unexpected positive results. In areas where these programs are active, there has been reported a decline of petty crimes, ethnic tensions and a marked increase in the number of people actively participating in communal activities. The youths who once felt left out are now taking up leadership roles and are actively participating in decision making, these ripple effects show that economic empowerment goes far beyond just money but contributes to the regeneration of the society's social fabric.

4.1.3 Strategic Communication and Counter-Narratives

The findings have shown there is a shift under the Strategic Communication and Counter-Narratives pillar by including efforts to combat extremist ideologies both online and offline. Globally and even locally, the approach to countering violent extremism (CVE) has moved from the normal censorship to more proactive solutions such as creating of positive counter narratives. This shift acknowledges that blocking extremist narratives alone is not effective but doing so while countering their messages will lead to positive results. In Kenya, particularly the high-risk areas, social media influencers and digital activists have been used to spread counter narratives, this is because the youth tend to react more with what their peers say than what the government says.

Respondents reported the increasing use of digital activists and social media influencers with youth following to counter extremist narratives, this works since youths are the main targets of radicalization, also, the messages by these online activists are relatable with the youths unlike those contents disseminated by the government. In Kenya, this has led to partnership between the government and these actors with one goal of disrupting the spread of extremist ideologies and radicalization.

As a digital activist in Eastleigh put it during interview: "We use TikTok and Facebook to tell real stories of those who left al-Shabaab. That hits harder than government warnings." This insight captures a central truth in modern counter-narrative strategy stories of personal transformation and disillusionment with extremist groups offer a visceral, humanizing counterpoint to propaganda that glorifies violence and martyrdom. (KII Nairobi 5th June 2025)

By foregrounding the voices of returnees, survivors, and community champions, these digital campaigns emphasize the real costs of radicalization and present credible, emotionally resonant alternatives.

Digital activism is playing an important role in countering extremist propaganda especially at the community/ grassroots level. In communities that have been historically targeted by extremist groups, localized online campaigns are now being used to counter the narratives they spread. By use of social media sites to share stories of victims and reformed terrorists, the youths get to know the negative side of engaging in such activities hence they choose to disengage. This strategy has worked since personal stories shared is relatable unlike those run by the government that involves acting.

A 2023 study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that digital counter narratives that involves former militia members who are reformed or victims who have suffered directly or indirectly from terrorism were more effective than ones that are just generic. This report showed that twice the youths are likely to disengage from extremist ideologies after watching such emotional videos. The UNCCT strategy has been reviewed and now highlights the importance of supporting local digital activists since they are the ones that craft counter narratives that resonate with their community. These findings show the importance of using digital activist in enhancing community resilience in the face of extremist ideologies.

Furthermore, the evolution of CVE communication has increasingly leveraged localized content tailored to specific cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts. In the case of Nairobi's informal settlements areas like Eastleigh, Kibera, and Mathare the narratives promoted by digital campaigns often reflect the lived experiences of marginalization, police brutality, and economic disenfranchisement. Counter-narratives are most effective when they do not merely denounce extremism but also acknowledge and respond to the legitimate grievances that often fuel radicalization. Government-affiliated programs and NGOs have worked in collaboration with local artists, poets, youth leaders, and former radicals to craft content that balances prevention with empowerment. These initiatives emphasize dignity, civic engagement, and positive identity formation, often drawing from Swahili proverbs, urban street culture, and popular music to embed anti-extremism messages in familiar and culturally resonant formats.

Importantly, this strategy's effectiveness is supported by emerging empirical data that reflects a growing level of youth engagement with anti-extremist messaging. Respondents targeting urban youth in estate in Nairobi 61% of respondents reported "engaging with anti-extremism content" at least monthly (Mkutu, K, (2020). This finding not only underscores the reach of strategic communication efforts but also suggests a shifting cultural terrain in which anti-extremism narratives are becoming more normalized and integrated into the digital lives of young people. Such engagement is not just passive consumption; it often entails sharing content, participating in online discussions, and even producing user-generated messages that reinforce counter-narratives. This participatory element reflects a significant departure from earlier, more hierarchical communication strategies, where audiences were treated as passive recipients of state messaging.

According to Opondo, P. (2020). the impact of strategic communication extends beyond the digital sphere. Offline, many of the same actors' and digital activists, participate in localized community dialogues, educational school-based programs, and mosque/church outreach initiatives. These forums unlike the online ones allow for deeper engagement and provide a space for questions to be asked and individuals to critically reflect on the knowledge they have gained. By using both online and offline activities, messages that counter extremist narratives are reinforced across a young person's social life. For example, a TikTok video that features a former extremist might first spark curiosity among the viewers, which is then followed by an engaging discussion led by a facilitator or peer mentor. This collaboration helps build a strong system of resilience that fills the gap left through prolonged isolation, lack of purpose and identity crises that often lead to radicalization.

However, this strategy faces some challenges. The same platforms used for counter-narratives are also used by extremist groups who constantly change the techniques they use in recruiting people. Some of the Challenges faced in countering Extremism Online include; The extremist groups are very quick in bypassing content moderation and take advantage of trending conversations, making it difficult to keep up with their tactics. Also, the effectiveness of counter-narratives can be undermined more so if they are perceived to be closely related to government agendas. To maintain trust, local messengers need to be transparent, authentic as possible, and autonomous in their undertakings. Finally, Grassroots organizations bear the heaviest burden when it comes to frontline communication work yet these programs remain underfunded. To ensure they are effective, its funding should be consistent and capacity building continuous.

4.1.4 Institutional Collaboration and Policy Advocacy

According to Opondo (2020), the way Kenya prevents and counters violent extremism has significantly change. The strategy has shifted from being fragmented and isolated interventions to a more robust strategy that involves multiple sectors in achieving the same goal. This shift comes from the after the understanding there is no single group that can manage violent extremism alone. The focus has now shifted to collaborations and

creation of an inclusive policy that unites different partners both locally and internationally. This new approach has now improved operational understanding, good resource sharing, and has led to the creation of solutions that are context specific and grounded in reality.

According to a UN official, Kenya is working more closely together to fight terrorism. Groups like the P/CVE Steering Committee and a stronger role for the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), with help from international partners like the UNCCT, show that different organizations are teaming up. This means that instead of working alone, government agencies, communities, and other sectors are starting to rely on each other and cooperate more to stop extremist threats. (KII Nairobi 6th June 2025)

The official from the UN said that there is a significant shift in how Kenya approaches PVE issues. By establishing the preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) committee and expanding the role played by the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), Kenya has moved away from its latter approach that saw many agencies working alone and adopted the approach that requires cooperation among several agencies in tackling PVE. This shift acknowledges that the efforts needed to tackle radicalization and prevent violent extremist cannot be done independently but can be successful if different stakeholders come together and work towards one shared goal.

A policy brief by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and a review by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) both support the UN officials' words on Kenya shifting P/CVE its strategies to a more collaborative approach. Lutalo (2021) said that the recently started committee on P/CVE is so good that it can be used as a model to other countries in the region since the committee has got almost 50 members who were selected from various different organizations. The GCTF's 2022 review praised the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) for expanding its programs in the country to include approaches that are gender sensitive and community led. These platforms have achieved so much since its inception, but most notable is the strengthened coordination and trust among all stakeholders, something that is key in ensuring the sustainability of all programs.

In Kenya, this is seen by the efforts made to hold forums both in national and county governments that involve all stakeholders working in initiatives that support PVE efforts. These platforms have allowed the stakeholders to exchange ideas, voice their concerns and come up with unified strategies that will be used in achieving their shared goal. These collaborations ensures that the responses made with regards to PVE is solid, acceptable, coordinated and all inclusive.

An official from the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) confirmed this, "With support received from the UNCCT we now have a roadmap that brings together NGOs, youth groups, and even faith-based networks. This indicates a shift towards a more collaborative approach to countering violent extremism." (KII Nairobi 8th June 2025)

The NCTC official's word shows a great shift in Kenya's national counter-terrorism strategy. With the UNCCT's support, the National Counter Terrorism Centre has formulated a more inclusive roadmap, that brings together players from NGOs, youth groups, and faith-based networks into its P/CVE strategy. This new approach that includes the all players and actors in this field, ends the over reliance on state security organs. The approach recognizes the important role played by civil society groups, religious leaders, and youths in countering radicalization. By including these groups, the UNCCT and Kenyan authorities are making their counter-extremism efforts to be more legitimate and acceptable, reach more targets countrywide, and achieve sustainability, particularly in communities that have historically been reluctant to participate in government initiatives.

The UNCCT's 2022 Annual Report shows that Kenya was an important country during the piloting stage of the "Multi-Stakeholder Action Planning" model in East Africa. This model created ways that will incorporate local/grassroots actors into Kenya's national security dialogues and PVE programs. According to the report, the inclusive approach that Kenya has taken has led to a successful implementation of local action plans in areas such as Mombasa and Garissa. In these areas, the religious leaders played a very important role such as facilitation of community engagement activities. The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), in its 2023 report that was reviewing Kenya reported that this model centers on collaboration between different stakeholders strengthened the trust of communities by simply involving their local community leaders in the program implementation. This has led to more projects being locally accepted and therefore sustained in the long term.

The growing collaborations in Kenya has already produced some notable successes. The P/CVE has now been included in the country's broader development plans and in the counties, it has been included in the county integrated development plan. This collaboration has also led to an increased in information sharing between local actors and national agencies, the information gathered has been used in creation of early warning systems

that would detect and prevent radicalization and terrorism. Moreover, these collaborations have addressed an important aspect that makes people susceptible to radicalization, their psychological needs. Mental health services and counselling have been enhanced in high-risk areas.

Collaboration is widely seen as the cornerstone for the success in the fight against Violent extremism, members of the public have also supported this view since they believe that a united front with shared goals achieves more than individual agencies working together. The public has also demanded that security issues and development issues should be a shared responsibility. These views align perfectly with the frustration aggression theory which argues that neglect and lack of representation can lead to aggression, therefore, by collaborating with everyone, community resilience and reduced vulnerability to radicalization will be achieved successfully.

To achieve its initiative of implementing its collaborative approach in PVE strategies, Kenya has received help from international partners. Their support has come in form of finances, expertise, capacity building and provision of technical assistance in areas the country lacks its own talents. These organizations have also championed for accountability and respect of human rights while implementing PVE strategies. As Kenya struggles with constant human rights violations majorly among security forces, international collaboration has offered help in formulating policies that would address such. In example, the UNCCT helped develop Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism to fit the international best practices and also align with the local needs in order for it to be successful.

Innovation in policy formulation has been seen as a result of collaboration among different institutions, the recent innovation attributed to such in the inclusion of P/CVE strategies in the county action plans. These county action plans are usually developed with inputs from the locals, county governments, national government and various development agencies, as a result the strategies formulated reflect the situations in the ground. The county action plans in high-risk areas have included community dialogues and empowerment programs in their plans, a move that will counter terrorism and radicalization.

Despite its promising future, the collaborative approach has its own set of challenges. A growing competition among government agencies to show power, lack of financial resources and overlapping roles in both the county governments and national governments is just but among the challenges. Such issues have systematically weakened teamwork and stakeholder engagements. The county governments have also relied heavily on donations and fail to finance their own strategies even though they are included in the county plans, this has limited the long-term sustainability of programs.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The evidence that has been gained in this research shows that in Kenya, the UNCCT has changed how the country use to carry out its PVE strategies and initiatives. Instead of only focusing on security officers, Kenya now promotes a more holistic initiative that involves the civil societies, locals and even church leaders, this improves the effectiveness of the strategy. However, these efforts are affected by limited resources available, poor coordination between the two levels of government (National and County governments), and also limited community engagement in matters that affect them. The evidence also shows that there is need for constant refinement of the strategies employed by the UNCCT so that they can fit the ever-changing grassroots challenges and promote fair and inclusive participation.

5.2 Recommendation

The UNCCT should focus on changing how it funds its operation, it should rely less on donations and more in creating self-sustained programs. It should also improve coordination among the partners who are carrying out the plan so that tactics and policies don't get repeated, which might cause confusion. Finally, structured participation of local actors, such as women, religious leaders, and former extremists, together with frequent monitoring and feedback methods to measure impact and change strategies, will greatly improve the organization's ability to carry out its mission.

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