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# Preventing violent and hateful extremism: comparing the experiences of domestic Swedish and international humanitarian-development NGOs

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## ABSTRACT


In Sweden, local authorities are encouraged to cooperate with civil society to promote resilience to violent extremism. However, some (mostly Muslim) organisations are approached with suspicion and sometimes accused of not subscribing to basic democratic principles. Along with cooperation and resilience, suspicion seems to be a recurrent and global theme in the relationship between the prevention of violent and hateful extremism (VHE) and civil society. This paper builds on empirical research by the author and others, which examined how NGOs and FBOs operating within Sweden conducted and were challenged by preventive work. The paper compares results from the Swedish study against findings from international humanitarian-development NGOs via a scoping study to examine the similar and different dynamics around cooperation, resilience, and suspicion in prevention of VHE. Results will help progress the discussion on the challenges that civil society faces in its attempts to promote resilience to VHE.

## KEYWORDS

Faith-based organisations; non-governmental organisations; resilience; suspicion; violent and hateful extremism

## Introduction

Preventing violent extremism (PVE) has been a pressing issue on the Swedish political agenda for at least ten years. In government policy, violent extremism is defined as ideologies movements, or environments that reject democracy and promote violence for the purpose of achieving their goals.<sup>1</sup> According to the Swedish Security Service (Säpo), right-wing, left-wing and Islamist violent extremists are active in the country. When it comes to preventive work, the local (municipal) level has been identified as crucial. Local authorities are encouraged to draw up action plans and cooperate closely with civil society in efforts to promote local resilience to violent extremism. However, the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) in preventive work has also been challenged and questioned. Some (mostly Muslim) NGO/FBOs are regarded with suspicion and accused of using civil society space and resources to forward goals that run contrary to democratic values and – at times – promote extremist agendas.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, along with cooperation and resilience, suspicion seems to

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be a recurrent and global theme when it comes to the relationship between preventive work and civil society. When security policy frames dominate, civil society actors around the world – including those who promote human rights and development in their work against extremism – risk finding themselves accused of extremism.<sup>3</sup>

In a previous study that focused on local resilience to violent Islamist extremism, I interviewed Swedish NGOs and FBOs with colleagues to analyse the preventive work they do.<sup>4</sup> In 14 interviews with representatives from secular, Christian, and Muslim NGO/FBOs, we explored how they perceived their role in prevention and resilience building. Our analysis showed that the NGO/FBOs approached and understood resilience in similar terms. We also found that in contrast to Christian organisations, Muslim ones were often met with a lack of trust and with suspicion from public actors, which made cooperation difficult. Furthermore, interviews showed that representatives for the organisations were convinced that they best contributed to resilience building by doing what they usually do, reaching out to people, building trust, and promoting participation in social life rather than framing their activities in relation to PVE-programmes. In that study, we briefly noted that the experiences of Swedish NGOs and FBOs seemed to be similar to those of counterparts in other countries, but we did not pursue this comparison further.

The purpose of this paper is to compare results from our earlier Swedish study with data from international humanitarian-development NGOs, to identify similarities and differences between the Swedish NGO/FBOs and international experience. How is resilience perceived, how is cooperation experienced and to what extent are international humanitarian-development NGOs – or the partners they work with – met with suspicion not only from local, regional, or national authorities, but also from local communities? To answer this, a scoping study has reviewed research from 2001 until 2021 covering international humanitarian-development NGOs and responses to violent extremism.

The paper is organised as follows: first is an account of the results from the earlier Swedish study, which revolves around the themes of resilience, cooperation, and suspicion. This is followed by a description of how the scoping study was carried out. The paper then identifies and discusses the experiences of international humanitarian-development NGOs and compares these to Swedish NGOs and FBOs. The paper ends with concluding remarks that address challenges for civil society in relation to preventive work globally.

It should be noted that it is more common to refer to *violent extremism* than *violent and hateful extremism* in Sweden. However, in this paper I also use the latter understood as actions that can ‘incite and amplify hate’<sup>5</sup> and are underpinned by antagonistic beliefs that can cause harm to a particular group. This is in keeping with the theme for this special issue and as pointed out by Sonrexa, Kelly, Barton, and Ware (2022), expressions of hatred and intolerance must be taken into account when extremism is conceptualised.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prior research: Swedish NGO/FBOs experience – resilience, cooperation, and suspicion**

In Sweden and elsewhere, resilience is a political buzzword. It is used in many policy contexts but often without much clarity or precision. This has led local authorities in Sweden to wonder what exactly is expected of them in relation to PVE; what are they

supposed to do and why? Resilience is also a contested concept in several academic fields; it is approached, defined, and measured in different ways. When it comes to the relationship between PVE and resilience, literatures seldom inform or build on each other. To address this, synthesise findings and not only contribute to developing our understanding of what local resilience means in relation to PVE, but to help build a knowledge-based platform for local preventive work, we<sup>7</sup> reviewed research in social work, public health, crisis management and community policing. Resilience is frequently featured in these fields and used to understand how individuals and communities prepare for, bounce back from and manage adversities, challenges, and crises, including violent and hateful extremism.

Our results showed that resilience was largely understood both as a process and a capacity involving trust, community networks and resources. There was an emphasis on strengths and assets rather than problems and risks in all literatures. However, literatures also agreed that there are no universal protective factors valid in all places. Local authorities that want to promote resilience must therefore start by mapping existing strengths and resources in a specific community by engaging in dialogue and partnership with local civil society actors and give them ample space to express their views.<sup>8</sup>

Building on the findings from the review, we then interviewed 14 NGOs/FBOs about their preventive work in relation to Islamist violent extremism. On the national level there were two NGOs engaged in aid and civil defence, two Christian FBOs and two Muslim FBOs. In two local contexts we interviewed four secular youth and cultural NGOs, two Christian FBOs and two ethnic (as well as Muslim) NGOs (the latter do not define themselves as FBOs).

To the interviewed representatives, resilience revolved around participation in community activities, trust, and social inclusion. There was widespread agreement that a community is resilient to violent extremism when people feel a sense of belonging, not just to a group, but also to the whole of society. They need, so the representatives argued, a positive and socially supportive context.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the best way to build resilience to violent extremism was, interviewees thought, within the framework of the community work they already did rather than in specific projects or programmes aimed explicitly at preventing violent extremism. According to some interviewees, the key here was to build interpersonal trust and help increase trust in Swedish institutions and government agencies among new Swedes, especially in what the Swedish police refer to as *vulnerable residential areas* in larger Swedish cities. These are areas with low socio-economic status, low trust in institutions, relatively high crime rates and a high proportion of new Swedes. Interviewed representatives were convinced that NGOs and FBOs have unique capacities, skills, and resources in this regard. Staff often speak multiple languages and have a cultural competence that might be lacking among public actors. Furthermore, they work where people live; they are present in people's lives and neighbourhoods and able to design activities intended to bring people together.<sup>10</sup>

Interviewees also emphasised building on existing community strengths and resources. Muslim and Christian FBO representatives stressed that their experiences of supporting individuals and families in crises was an asset that would be useful in relation to preventing violent extremism. Muslim FBOs portrayed Islam itself as a protection against extremism. Representatives clarified that those who were attracted to violent

extremist Islamist organisations had misunderstood and misconstrued what Islam really has to say about how to live your life and how to respect the lives of others.<sup>11</sup>

Asked about what activities they believed were preventive, interviewees stressed that everything the organisations did; from democracy promotion workshops to organising soccer practice, from language cafés (often arranged by secular NGOs and Christian FBOs to help new Swedes improve their skills in Swedish while having a cup of tea or coffee at the same time) to arranging leisure activities for children was preventive. Such activities contributed to making people engaged and invested in meaningful contexts which in turn were believed to build individual and community resilience to violent extremism.<sup>12</sup>

Among the interviewees, representatives for Muslim organisations shared the view that the focus on radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism in the news and in political and public debate over the last two decades had increased prejudice against Swedish Muslims. As individuals they were sometimes asked to explain gross violations of human rights committed for instance by the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq, the underlying assumption being that there was something inherently violent and uncompromising about Islam. Representatives for Muslim FBOs described how they felt they lived under constant public audit which rested on a lingering suspicion on the part of the majority society that some Muslims did not really subscribe to the values and principles of Swedish democracy.<sup>13</sup> One representative accused Swedish social scientists and some government agencies of being absorbed in a continuous mapping, description and analysis of Swedish Muslims and their activities, often stoking fear among the public.<sup>14</sup>

Other consequences were difficulties in establishing dialogue and cooperation with local authorities. The general feeling was one of not being trusted and therefore not allowed to, for instance, reserve municipal conference halls for workshops or other activities.<sup>15</sup> Some representatives of Muslim organisations expressed the perception that they were met with a deep-seated lack of trust by local officials. They also argued that Islamophobia and racism had seeped into public conversations about violent extremism making it difficult to establish platforms for constructive discussions.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously though, they agreed with other interviewed representatives of secular and Christian NGOs/FBOs that cooperation between civil society and public actors in resilience building efforts was necessary.

In sharp contrast to Muslim FBOs, Christian FBOs described how they often were invited by public actors to local meetings and networks to discuss, for instance, crisis preparedness issues and how violent extremism could be prevented. These representatives noted that expanding existing networks seemed to be difficult. They also noted that public actors were hesitant to contact Muslim organisations, often because they were afraid of accidentally insulting them, or that reaching out would be interpreted as an accusation or suspicion that Muslim organisations were extremist.<sup>17</sup> In general, Christian and Muslim FBOs agreed that such insecurities stemmed from a lack of knowledge about religion among public actors, making cooperation or even initiating cooperation somewhat of a struggle.

In sum, views on what local resilience was and how it can be built were, overall, very similar. There was also a considerable overlap between these views and what we found in the literature review on local resilience; notably, a focus on local strengths, resources and

assets, promotion of social networks and the building of interpersonal trust and trust in relation to public institutions and government agencies.<sup>18</sup> Cooperation was considered necessary for resilience building but sometimes Muslim organisations felt that the suspicion they were met with complicated cooperation attempts.

Even if *violent extremism* rather than *violent and hateful extremism* is the terminology used in Sweden, hate is, I would argue, a distinct part of both Islamist extremist and Islamophobic rhetoric. Research has for instance shown how a network of Salafi imams has expressed, spread, and explicitly supported anti-Semitism and homophobia.<sup>19</sup> This network provides advice to Swedish Muslims on how to live and how to navigate Swedish society. Isolation from Swedes is a theme and by some of these imams, people are encouraged not to make Christian or Jewish friends because Christian and Jews should be ‘hated’ for not believing in Allah.<sup>20</sup> As far as Islamophobia is concerned, a report published in 2021 by the Swedish Agency for Crime Prevention (BRÅ), explored Islamophobic hate crimes. Based on interviews with Muslims and analysis of hate crimes, the report showed that Swedish Muslims face not only prejudice, discrimination, and verbal abuse but physical harassment as well.<sup>21</sup> To some extent then there is a mix of hateful ideas about who ‘Swedes’ and ‘Muslims’ are in the Swedish debate, and this makes it difficult for everyone who looks to promote tolerance, understanding and dialogue.

It should be emphasised that our results discussed above emerge from a limited empirical study and that interviewees were selected using snowball techniques. However, we noted that findings were echoed in studies of how NGOs and FBOs respond to violent extremism in other countries. For instance, in a German study, Said and Fouad 2018 show that the honesty of Muslim FBO’s PVE efforts were sometimes called into question. Moreover, interviews in Indonesia show that many NGOs do not think that the PVE label is helpful.<sup>22</sup> Like their counterparts in Sweden, they argue that their everyday work is preventive. However, these are local NGOs and FBOs, thus the question is to what extent the themes of resilience, cooperation and suspicion are found also in how international humanitarian-development NGOs have responded to violent and hateful extremism and to international and national policies and regulations aimed at preventing extremism?

### Notes on the scoping study

Drawing on Arksey’s and O’Malley’s (2005) suggested methodology, a scoping study, covering the period from 2001 until 2021, was carried out to map existing research focusing on international humanitarian-development NGOs and responses to violent extremism. A scoping study is a technique to ‘map relevant literature in the field of interest’.<sup>23</sup> In comparison to a systematic review, a scoping study has a less narrow focus and is less interested in assessing the quality of research. Scoping studies have different aims, the aim of the one undertaken here is to summarise research findings and compare and assess them against the Swedish study. Arksey and O’Malley suggest that a scoping study should proceed in several stages. After having identified the research question, relevant studies should be identified, a selection made, data charted, and results summarised and reported.<sup>24</sup>

In this study, advanced searches of peer reviewed articles in English were made in two databases, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) and Academic Search

Premier (ASP). Systematic searches first combined the search terms *international humanitarian-development NGOs* and *responses to violent extremism*, and then *international humanitarian-development NGOs* and *prevention of violent extremism*. To make sure relevant articles were not missed, searches were also expanded to focus specifically on *international humanitarian NGOs*, *international development NGOs* and *international NGOs* in combination with *responses to violent extremism* and *terrorism*. Taken together the total number of articles was 774 but that number includes quite a few duplicates. All titles were reviewed, relevant abstracts read, and articles were included that either in general terms discussed international humanitarian-development NGOs and responses to violent extremism or more specifically addressed the experiences of international humanitarian-development NGOs in relation to international and state policies and strategies on PVE or counterterrorism measures. The great majority of articles turned out to address topics that were not relevant for the scoping study. Reference lists were therefore also reviewed and as a result, a total of 24 articles, reports, and position papers were read (although not all are referenced in this paper). Analytical attention was paid to ideas about resilience and experiences of cooperation, and suspicion.

### **The experiences of international humanitarian-development NGOs**

A couple of general observations can be made to begin with. First, the scoping study identified very little research that explicitly addressed international humanitarian-development NGOs' own responses to violent and hateful extremism in terms of projects or programmes. Far more studies covered the consequences, for instance on how programming was affected, for example, by international and national Counterterrorism Measures (CT), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and PVE strategies. Quite a few studies discussed how the merging of aid and development agendas with security agendas in some cases challenged the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

Second, suspicion was indeed a recurring theme and visible in EU, UN, government, and donor approaches to INGOs, but also in the attitudes of local communities. As a result, horizontal and vertical cooperation was sometimes very difficult. INGOs, much like local NGOs and FBOs, are seen by global and national policymakers both as tools by means of which extremism can be prevented, and as potential partners – by manipulation, accident, or choice – to violent extremist movements. Third, when resilience was discussed or referred to in the reviewed literature, it was almost exclusively as part of an EU, UN, or government programme rather than part of INGO programming. In what follows, these observations are discussed in detail. First, however, a few words are warranted on the various understandings and definitions of CT, CVE and PVE.

### ***From counterterrorism measures to countering and preventing violent and hateful extremism***

The reviewed literature shows how international and national CT over time has been complemented by CVE and PVE. However, the Norwegian Refugee Council (2017) notes that since there are no universally accepted definitions of terrorism or violent extremism, international organisations and states use the terms in different ways. To some, PVE is an

aspect of CVE while others choose to refer only to PVE.<sup>25</sup> According to Pierobon (2021), prevention of violent extremism is indeed an explicit policy goal but one that is poorly understood and defined. Still, UN Security Council resolution 2178 encourages states to engage local communities and NGOs in developing strategies to counter the narratives of violent extremists and the United Nations' *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (2015) recommends that member states develop national preventive plans.

Not only are CVE and PVE sometimes conflated, international organisations and states also link them to other complex processes as well; Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and peacebuilding are two examples.<sup>26</sup> Regarding peacebuilding, it is interesting to note that the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), understands PVE as:

initiatives that are framed with the ambition to contribute to stability, inclusiveness and accountability by transforming the drivers of violent extremism and reintegrate those that have already engaged. PVE is therefore a broad concept that can be translated into programming options that address both grievances at the individual and community level, as well as state-centered initiatives. The concept thus has clear linkages to, and sometimes, overlaps with broader peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>27</sup>

Studies and reports that specifically discuss and take an analytical approach to hate are not very prevalent in the reviewed literature, hate is referred to more in passing and as a component of ideas that underpin extremist rhetoric. However, the significance of hate speech in relation to escalating the risk for mass atrocities is problematised in one of the articles; Maynard (2015) analyses the role of ideology in this regard and argues that it is critical but complex.<sup>28</sup>

As noted in the introduction, in policy as well as research terms, increased attention is being paid to violent and hateful extremism and to how extremism outside of terrorism can be countered.<sup>29</sup> This reflects yet another shift in thinking about, approaching and researching different forms of extremism, a shift that emphasises the need for evidence-based policies, for strong political leadership, for engagement by civil society and for counter narratives.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Responding to PVE strategies and to violent extremism – encountering suspicion and experiencing cooperation difficulties***

Some of the articles included in the scoping study, particularly those written more than a decade ago, contain accounts of how the global securitisation of aid and development has affected civil society all over the world.<sup>31</sup> Some governments have used and continue to use CT and PVE to clamp down on internal opposition and employ anti-terror laws to silence protests. Studies from the early 2010s also observed how governments in the Global North partly had transformed development from an end to a means and co-opted aid to serve security agendas. For instance, Fowler and Sen 2010 note a 'significant shift from aid disbursement for advancing human security to aid disbursement for protecting northern national security interests'.<sup>32</sup> This shift clearly produces suspicion in many shapes and forms and Fowler and Sen list 'Loss of freedom from suspicion when working with communities' among the consequences of CT for INGOs.<sup>33</sup>



In a similar vein, Williamson (2011) shows how cooperation between military and humanitarian actors in conflict zones can create problems. In a 'winning the hearts and minds' strategy, military actors are keen to be associated with aid and development efforts, but the result could be that local communities have difficulty distinguishing between military activities and humanitarian relief, which compromises the independence and impartiality of international humanitarian-development NGOs. One example concerns 16 INGOs involved in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan who, in a letter to NATO in April 2009, urged troops to clearly 'distinguish military actions from humanitarian activities, as a means of protecting Afghan civilians and aid workers'.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, reviewed literature shows that there is suspicion towards INGOs also on the part of governments. In a study of how INGOs were viewed by the US, UK, German and Canadian governments, Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire (2011) conclude:

All four governments publicly praise the important roles played by civil society, but also view INGOs with increased suspicion, and this is reflected in their counterterrorism regulations. INGOs are subjected to increased surveillance, financial reporting, and penalties for violations without intent or even knowledge. The ability of governments to change INGOs status or dissolve them by interpreting their behaviour as aiding and abetting terrorism has also increased.<sup>35</sup>

As indicated by the studies referred to above, CT and PVE strategies affect humanitarian and development organisations through international and national legislation, donor conditions and what has become known as financial de-risking. The latter occurs when banks refuse to transfer funds to relief agencies because they are concerned that regulations on counterterrorist financing will be breached.<sup>36</sup> Legal instruments involve United Nations Security Council resolutions requiring member states to adopt laws to combat terrorism and make the financing of terrorist acts as difficult as possible. The reviewed literature includes many examples of how regulations have affected banks and donors who have become increasingly interested in including clauses that concern measures to help prevent extremism and terrorism in agreements with INGOs. There are penalties for not fulfilling obligations of donor agreements and INGO staff worry about not complying with all the rules.<sup>37</sup> As a major consequence, so the Norwegian Refugee Council argues, the needs-based approach in humanitarian work is challenged, programmes are suspended, and projects blocked.<sup>38</sup>

After the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, Swedish Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, tweeted that not a single Swedish krona (literally 'inte en spänn' or 'not a single buck') should go to the Taliban but that Sweden would continue to support the Afghan people through humanitarian and development organisations in the country.<sup>39</sup> It is probably safe to say that Linde's tweet captures a sentiment shared by many governments. Aid budgets are scrutinised in many countries and governments are under increasing pressure to make sure that money does not fall into the wrong hands. But how does this affect the work of international humanitarian-development NGOs? To start with, and as indicated earlier, financial de-risking makes the transfer of money complicated and many humanitarian INGOs have had to resort to other solutions, such as cash-carrying or unregulated methods.<sup>40</sup> Eckert (2021) describes how financial institutions have grown reluctant to provide INGOs who work in specific areas with banking

services. Transfers have been delayed, it is difficult to open an account, increased documentation is required and there are limitations in making payments.<sup>41</sup>

The position paper of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2017), its report *Principles under pressure* (2018) and several articles in the *International Review of the Red Cross*<sup>42</sup> offer valuable and recent examples of the impact of CT and PVE policies on principled humanitarian action. The NRC makes the point that CT and PVE apply tools ‘commonly used in development – education, training, economic empowerment, civil society promotion’.<sup>43</sup> A whole range of efforts to prevent violent extremism initiated by the UN, the EU and governments are non-coercive or ‘soft’. These efforts are intended to address root causes and therefore often include activities that are typically associated with humanitarian and development organisations.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the SIDA lists education on critical thinking, the promotion of social cohesion, service delivery improvements and building state-citizen trust as examples of PVE relevant programming options.<sup>45</sup> Activities prioritised by for instance The European Union, the UN and states might be similar or at least overlap with those of INGOs, but the underlying principles are different, and the NRC warns that humanitarian programmes could be co-opted by security agendas.

The United Nations *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (2015) links preventive efforts to development by advocating for an alignment of national development policies with the Sustainable Development Goals. The NRC rejoins: ‘At a time when humanitarian and development actors are increasingly discussing the means of bridging the humanitarian and development divide, such alignment could impact principled humanitarian action’.<sup>46</sup> In its report *Principles under pressure*, research from Somalia, Nigeria and Iraq also shows that CT and PVE strategies ‘limit the ability of organisations to implement programmes according to needs alone’.<sup>47</sup>

Other studies point in the same direction. According to O’Leary (2021), the needs in certain conflict affected areas are not met as humanitarian organisations concentrate activities to government-controlled territory to ensure they comply with donor conditions as specified in agreements with INGOs.<sup>48</sup> Some donors explicitly link funding of humanitarian activities to prevention of violent extremism. According to the NRC, this implies that the humanitarian response should not exclusively or perhaps even primarily be concerned with alleviating human suffering but with PVE. Additionally, funding might be conditioned in a way that prohibits organisations from providing support to people who could be associated with terrorist groups.<sup>49</sup> In the words of O’Leary:

In 2018, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) inserted a standard clause in its agreements with grantees in northeast Nigeria obligating funding recipients to obtain written approval before providing assistance to individuals known to have been “formerly affiliated” with Boko Haram.<sup>50</sup>

The terminology ‘formerly affiliated’ included individuals who had been kidnapped and held for more than six months.

The reviewed literature gives many examples of how INGOs, based on risk assessments, have had to call off projects, alter programmes and spend significant time ensuring that donor conditions are met. The latter sometimes includes screening and vetting of local partners and beneficiaries.<sup>51</sup> In fact, donor insistence on vetting has resulted in some humanitarian organisations turning down funding.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear from the scoping study that humanitarian and development organisations have had to adapt to donors who are increasingly interested in linking funds to programmes that aim to help prevent violent and hateful extremism. In its position paper, the NRC writes that NGOs take at least two different approaches to humanitarian and development work in relation to CVE and PVE. One approach is to think of CVE and PVE in terms of opportunities. Funding is available to those who are interested in integrating CVE and PVE agendas into their community work. Another approach is to proceed with caution and to, as the NRC's position is, prioritise 'a principled humanitarian response' and 'assess each funding opportunity based on its respect for humanitarian principles'.<sup>53</sup> The NRC observes that competition for funding is getting tougher and when donors increase funding to P/CVE programmes, some organisations 'reframe activities or alter their programming to fit with this agenda. Decisions are being made without considering the political objectives of some P/CVE programmes and the implications this has for principled humanitarian action'.<sup>54</sup>

When programmes are initiated on the basis that some communities must be targeted because they are vulnerable or at risk in relation to violent extremism, impartiality is compromised. External aid actors operating in places that international PVE policies consider vulnerable to extremism might also raise problems related to the integrity of their engagement with local communities: 'If communities are aware that combatting extremism is the motivation for the agency's engagement, this will distort the relationship and make community ownership and partnership more challenging'.<sup>55</sup> The NRC warns that in the eyes of some communities, lines between security and humanitarian actors are blurred to an extent that makes it difficult to distinguish between the two. In some instances, humanitarian organisations have been targeted by terrorist organisations because they are seen as partners to enemies.<sup>56</sup>

### **Resilience – a policy goal**

When resilience is referred to in the reviewed literature, it is almost exclusively as an international or national goal to be achieved through various plans, instruments, activities, and policies. Kundani and Hayes 2018 describe the strategic development from 2001 onwards in terms of going from 'decapitation', that is the use of military violence to combat terrorism, to prevention and a focus on drivers and root causes of violent extremism. It is in that preventive context and strategic shift that resilience has gained prominence. The EU and the UN as well as governments want resilient individuals, neighbourhoods, communities, and societies and spend a lot of time and money on developing projects, programmes, plans, and measures aimed at promoting resilience. Pierobon (2021) describes how the EU development agenda has a strong focus on empowering civil society and ties programmes and projects to PVE objectives. One program is STRIVE (Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism), which is applied in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and has a focus on awareness-raising, building platforms for dialogue and establishing counter-narratives to extremist ones. According to Pierobon, resilience is becoming 'a new guiding principle in the EU's external efforts'.<sup>57</sup> In a similar vein, USAID has initiated SCORE (Strengthening Community Resilience Against Extremism) and uses aid for projects designed to prevent violent extremism.<sup>58</sup>

To summarise, the scoping study identified a number of consequences of CT, CVE and PVE policies and strategies for INGO activity. Several studies and reports are concerned with challenges to principled humanitarian action. Donor conditions, UNSC resolutions and national legislation sometimes clash with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Projects and programmes are affected, called off or reframed to include PVE. Suspicion is a running theme. International organisations and governments need INGOs but are also suspicious that their activities will play into the hands of violent extremists. The scoping study shows examples of suspicion on the part of local communities as well, they are sometimes left wondering if INGOs are doing the biddings of others. It is apparent that suspicion impacts on cooperation between field offices and INGO headquarters, between INGOs and local NGO partners and communities and between INGOs and international organisations, governments, and donors.

As for resilience, it might very well be that many international humanitarian-development NGOs do design projects and programmes based on ideas of what promotes individual and community resilience; the scoping study did not identify any examples but that could be an effect of the design of the study. Other search terms and other data bases might have identified such examples. In addition, in-depth empirical case studies of INGO programming could have provided insights into how they think about, approach, and define resilience to violent and hateful extremism.

### ***Comparing Swedish NGO/FBO and international humanitarian-development NGO experiences***

At the outset it could be argued that the experiences of Swedish NGOs and FBOs to a considerable extent mirror those of INGOs. The scale is different of course but the themes are familiar. To be met with suspicion and experience continuous public and political scrutiny is a significant similarity. In Sweden, some NGOs and FBOs are approached with scepticism and distrust which makes cooperation with local public actors difficult. No local politician wants to be responsible for inviting or having association with an organisation that is perceived to support extremist imams for instance. Interaction and cooperation are therefore characterised by risk assessments. For international humanitarian-development NGOs, risk has become institutionalised in donor conditions, UNSC resolutions, financial restrictions, and national legislation which complicates cooperation. The scoping study showed that INGOs are sometimes met with suspicion not only from donors, banks, and governments, but also from local communities. The first are concerned that INGOs will become entangled with violent extremists and directly, indirectly or unintentionally support them if funds fall into the wrong hands or projects and programmes somehow benefit extremist agendas. Local communities are concerned that development projects, aid and human rights work are just clever disguises for serving Western security interests.

We have argued elsewhere that violent and hateful extremism is a quintessential *wicked problem*.<sup>59</sup> The urgency surrounding it demands action but those who are expected to 'do something' are not sure what to do. There is no grand theory to turn to. Root causes are a complex mix of individual and structural factors. This is probably

why resilience emerges as a global, regional, and local policy goal, one that frames all the activities that policymakers want to fund and initiate. This intractability is likely also part of the explanation to why Swedish NGOs and FBOs think that the best they can do, in preventive terms, is to calmly carry on rather than reframe what they do in PVE-terms. For international humanitarian-development NGOs, funding is at stake and choices must be made.

The reviewed literature does not deeply examine how international humanitarian-development NGOs think about the root causes of violent and hateful extremism or unpack these NGOs' ideas around what a good response on their part might be. However, the literature does show that some humanitarian actors are concerned about PVE agenda alignment with their principles. International efforts to prevent violent extremism – such as civil society promotion and education – often overlap with INGO activity. To address the drivers or root causes of violent extremism engaging with civil society is deemed pivotal. There are educational programmes, youth mentorship projects, critical thinking training, initiatives to increase trust in institutions or improve service delivery and much more. It is the logic behind these activities that is different. For policymakers activities are a means to prevent violent extremism, for international humanitarian-development NGOs activities are ends in themselves. Some of the INGOs do experience that their core work and principles are difficult to reconcile with being involved in PVE; and the question is if they can do the latter without compromising the former? To explore this more in-depth, studies based on interviews with INGO leadership and staff are called for. Such studies would also benefit from drawing on a broader literature on how NGOs maintain their values and principles while managing pressure and demands from donors.<sup>60</sup>

### **Concluding remarks: challenges for civil society going forward**

In relation to the prevention of violent and hateful extremism, some scholars refer to the development-security nexus, others to the securitisation of aid and development and yet others to the merging of peace, security, and development agendas. Regardless of how it is conceptualised, from a local, national, and global policy perspective, the result is a whole-of-society, whole-of-government, and all-of-UN approach. Everything is assumed to be connected to everything else. This may seem intuitively reasonable but involves challenges for civil society. One challenge revolves around the perceptions of civil society actors this policy context produces. As shown in this paper, INGOs and local NGOs are described by governments and international organisations like the UN and the EU as making valuable and unique contributions to PVE. Conversely, governments and international organisations are also suspicious of them.

In terms of challenges, the scoping study also revealed increased administration and financial difficulties for INGOs. Vetting and screening take time and INGOs must adhere to donor clauses and financial regulations. When it comes to funding, an interesting parallel in Sweden is an ongoing debate on state funding of NGOs and FBOs. Agencies that supply such funding have been criticised for not having evaluated the extent to which recipients comply with democratic norms.<sup>61</sup>

When the results of the Swedish study were presented earlier, resilience was described as a buzzword, and it was noted that there is no consensus on what it entails. However,

reviewing research on local resilience in social work, public health, crisis management and community policing, we showed how resilience is understood both as a process and a capacity that revolves around community strengths and assets rather than problems and risks. It could be argued, however, that state and agency funding of PVE activities aimed at promoting resilience also involve making the communities impacted by violent and hateful extremism responsible for combatting them. This is not unproblematic given what is known about the complex root causes of extremism. Such causes also concern structural injustices and inequalities that demand long term efforts and investments on the part of governments. In that regard, promoting local resilience risks becoming an excuse for not addressing structural issues such as poverty and marginalisation.

Where do local NGOs and INGOs go from here? Reflecting on the scoping study and on interviews with Swedish NGOs and FBOs, it seems like many are conflicted between managing external pressure and internal principles. These difficulties have – at least to some extent – been addressed in stakeholder dialogues at various levels.<sup>62</sup> Such dialogues provide opportunities for INGOs to discuss the (unintended) consequences of PVE policies and strategies. In the Swedish case, interviewed representatives for NGOs and FBOs think that what they already do is preventive and resilience building. From a PVE perspective, they argue, the best is therefore to keep up that work without specifically labelling it as PVE. With regard to carrying on in the INGO context, van Broekhoven and Goswami 2021, make an interesting reference to a blog post by a World Bank employee. The employee reflects upon restrictions affecting INGOs and comments on the irony that such restrictions might in fact be harming the actors who are best placed to address root causes of violent and hateful extremism.<sup>63</sup>

## Notes

1. SOU 2017:110, *Värna demokratin mot våldsbejakande extremism*.
2. Ismail and Thengborg, 'Inga bidrag till extremister'; Helmersson, 'Sponsra era antidemokratiska budskap med egna pengar'.
3. Cortright, Lopez, Millar and Gerber-Stellingwerf, *Friend not Foe*.
4. Wimelius, Eriksson, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'They think of us as part of the problem'.
5. Commission for Countering Extremism, *Challenging Hateful Extremism*.
6. Sonrexa, Kelly, Barton and Ware, 'Perspectives on violent extremism'.
7. Wimelius, Eriksson, Kinsman, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'What is Local Resilience Against Radicalization'.
8. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
9. Wimelius, Eriksson, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'They think of us as part of the problem', 136–138.
10. *Ibid.*, 138.
11. Wimelius and Strandh, *Lokal resiliens mot våldsbejakande extremism*, 44–45.
12. Wimelius, Eriksson, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'They think of us as part of the problem', 139–140.
13. *Ibid.*, 137.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 140–141.
16. *Ibid.*, 140.
17. Wimelius and Strandh, *Lokal resiliens mot våldsbejakande extremism*, 46, 48.
18. Wimelius, Eriksson, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'They think of us as part of the problem', 142, 145.

19. Ranstorp, Ahlin, Hyllengren and Normark, *Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism*.
20. Ranstorp, Ahlin, Hyllengren and Normark, *Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism*, 136.
21. BRÅ, *Islamofobiska hatbrott*.
22. Sumpter, 'Countering violent extremism in Indonesia'.
23. Arksey and O'Malley, 'Scoping studies', 20.
24. *Ibid.*, 22.
25. NRC, *Countering violent extremism*, 1.
26. Kelly, *Evidence on the Indirect Contribution*; SIDA, *Preventing Violent Extremism*.
27. SIDA, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, 2.
28. Maynard, 'Preventing Mass Atrocities'.
29. Commission for Countering Extremism, *Challenging Hateful Extremism*.
30. Commission for Countering Extremism, *Challenging Hateful Extremism*, 8–11.
31. Fowler and Sen, 'Embedding the War on Terror'; Williamson, 'Using humanitarian aid'; Miles, 'Deploying Development to Counter Terrorism'.
32. Fowler and Sen, 'Embedding the War on Terror'. See also Miles, 'Deploying Development to Counter Terrorism'.
33. Fowler and Sen, 'Embedding the War on Terror', 16.
34. Williamson, 'Using humanitarian aid', 1044.
35. Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire, 'International NGOs and National Regulation', 166.
36. NRC, *Principles under pressure*, 7.
37. Romaniuk and Keatinge, 'Protecting charities from terrorists'; Eckert, 'Counterterrorism sanctions and financial access challenges'; Weizmann, 'Respecting international humanitarian law'.
38. NRC, *Principles under pressure*, 4.
39. Linde (tweet, no title).
40. NRC, *Principles under pressure*; Eckert, 'Counterterrorism sanctions and financial access challenges'; Weizmann, 'Respecting international humanitarian law'.
41. Eckert, 'Counterterrorism sanctions and financial access challenges', 434–435.
42. Wynn-Pope, Zegenhagen and Kornade, 'Legislating against Humanitarian principles'; O'Leary, 'Politics and principles'; Eckert, 'Counterterrorism sanctions and financial access challenges'; van Broekhoven and Goswami, 'Can stakeholder dialogues help solve financial access restrictions'; Weizmann, 'Respecting international humanitarian law'.
43. NRC, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 1.
44. NRC, *Principles under pressure*, 12.
45. SIDA, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, 4.
46. *Ibid.*, 4.
47. NRC, *Principles under pressure*, 7.
48. See also McKeever, 'International Humanitarian Law and Counterterrorism'.
49. NRC, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 5.
50. O'Leary, 'Politics and principles', 465.
51. *Ibid.*, 466.
52. *Ibid.*
53. NRC, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 5.
54. NRC, *Principles under pressure*, 9.
55. NRC, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 4.
56. O'Leary, 'Politics and principles', 467.
57. Pierobon, 'European Union, civil society and local ownership', 14.
58. Aroussi, 'Strange Bedfellows'.
59. Wimelius and Strand, *Lokal resiliens mot våldsbejakande extremism*, 57–60.
60. See for instance Parks, 'The rise and fall of donor funding for advocacy NGOs'.
61. Wimelius, Eriksson, Strandh and Ghazinour, 'They think of us as part of the problem'.

62. van Broekhoven and Goswami, 'Can stakeholder dialogues help solve financial access restrictions'.
63. Ibid., 732.

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