

CONCEPT NOTE

Regional Forum

“Youth employment and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Central Asia”

20 - 22 December 2022

Antalya, Republic of Türkiye

"If we are serious about prevention, and particularly about preventing conflict, we need to be serious about engaging with and investing in young women and men."

-- UN Secretary-General António Guterres remarks at "Investing in Youth to Counter Terrorism" on 12 April 2018

Context

Young people under the age of 29 make up more than 50% of the population in Central Asia. Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) measures aim to create an environment where, young people can be in control of their own lives, free from manipulation by violence, propaganda, and hate speech. Young people, as important stakeholders, can play a vital and irreplaceable role in efforts to build social resilience, bring societies together, generate prosperity and employment, and resolve personal, community and large-scale conflicts and grievances, many of which drive radicalization.¹

Youth is, however, especially vulnerable to the lure of violent extremism if they are marginalized, excluded, unemployed and frustrated. Foreboding indicators from the International Labour Organization highlight how, despite substantial progress in reducing youth unemployment among both women and men during the first half of 2022, “youth unemployment rates across the region are projected to range from almost 20 per cent in Central Asia – with a significantly higher prevalence among young women”.²

Evidence shows that, rather than focusing on maximizing short-term security efforts, long-term community-based development initiatives that address the complex push and pull factors causing youth to engage in violence can actually increase youth voices, contribute to PVE and, in general, strengthen youth participation in peacebuilding. Naturally, not all young people with grievances are prone to radicalization to violence; however, being young is both, a factor of vulnerability, but also an opportunity to build resilience, technological and legal literacy and enhance youth engagement within the greater community.³ When their resilience is high and authorities trust them, youth can become agents of change, engage in civic action and find other ways of lobbying for their interests.

Youth leaders are potentially the actors with the most extensive influence over youth demographics. Their voices can be particularly powerful in challenging extremist propaganda. However, young people need to be empowered to speak up and make their voices heard. They need to be equipped with the necessary mobilization and communication skills to channel their energy, activism, and innovative ideas constructively and confidently express their public views.

¹ Extremely together (2017). *Countering violent extremism: A guide by young people for young people*. Kofi Annan Foundation. P.7

² [Report, wcms_853326.pdf \(ilo.org\)](#)

³ UNGA, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism; and General Secretariat of the Council, Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Counter-Terrorism” (Brussels, 19 June 2017)

To this end, private sector actors are specially situated to offer dynamic opportunities to youth and contribute to important PCVE programming within Central Asia. Youth have expressed clear interests in starting small businesses and see entrepreneurship or employment as a pathway for social mobility.⁴ However, there are presently significant challenges with integrating motivated youth into the labor market. For instance, the private sector presently has limited engagement and recruitment efforts in educational institutions that could connect businesses to youth and promote meaningful employment opportunities.⁵

Partnerships with government, international organizations, and other non-government organizations as part of the whole-of-society approach will be essential to fostering robust platforms for youth engagement with the private sector at this critical stage of development. Central Asia is a vast region with significant economic opportunities across numerous industries and expanding youth access to recruitment, promoting sustainable long-term employment and improving social mobility opportunities will substantially assist other PCVE activities and reduce the risks of radicalization.

Rationale

Since the adoption of the UN Global Counter - Terrorism Strategy (UNGCTS) and the Central Asia Joint Plan of Action (JPoA) in 2011, all Central Asian countries have developed new strategies at the national level on countering terrorism and violent extremism, many with the support of international organizations. The national strategies and action plans developed by Central Asian countries combine a whole-of-government approach to counter-terrorism with a whole-of-society approach to PCVE priorities.⁶

Effective PCVE strategies need to engage youth, not only as beneficiaries of development interventions, but as a force that can help design appropriate strategies and participate in their implementation.⁷ Youth, as positive agents of change and the future generation of leaders, are critical to PCVE efforts worldwide. Therefore, national officials and the public, as well as private sector, should view youth as a key partner in the prevention of violent extremism.⁸

The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020) on Youth, Peace and Security and emerging literature highlights the need to switch the narrative to recognize youth as positive agents for security and peacebuilding, rather than stigmatizing them as risks. Resolution 2250 encourages governments, international organizations, and civil society to actively engage youth populations as partners in shaping peace and security processes and implementing promising practices related to comprehensive, community-based solutions.

Having considered the importance of engagement of youth of Central Asia in the implementation of UNGCTS and the National Action Plans (NAPs) of each Central Asian country, UNOCT-UNCCT, jointly with International Labor Organization (ILO) and UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) will organize a three-day regional forum (20-22 December, 2022) to discuss the role of economic empowerment and employability in creating a holistic approach to building youth resilience to extremism in the framework of EU-UN STRIVE Asia initiative. The event

⁴ Maddalena Honorati and Alicia Marguerie. *Youth Employment in Uzbekistan : Opportunities and Challenges*. N.p.: World Bank Group, 2021. 35 <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36589>.

⁵ Maddalena Honorati and Alicia Marguerie. *Youth Employment in Uzbekistan : Opportunities and Challenges*. N.p.: World Bank Group, 2021. 35. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36589>.

⁶ "Ten Year Review of the Joint Plan of Action", UNOCT-UNCCT and UNRCCA progress report, 2011-2021.

⁷ *A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for Central Asia*, Published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Vienna, March 2020

⁸ *Developing National and Regional Action Plans to Prevent Violent Extremism*, Reference Guide, 1st Edition, 2019

will use a whole-of-society approach to build multi-layered resiliency for youth in preventing violent extremism.

This three-day regional forum aims to empower Central Asian youth by offering them platform for discussions on challenges and opportunities, as well as networking and cooperation. This dialogue is aimed at promoting the balanced implementation of their respective National Action Plans to prevent violent extremism, particularly enhancing youth's employability and resilience. It will bring together Central Asian youth and organizations, experts on preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), UN agencies, civil society and the private sector.

The event will be carried out within the framework of the UN-EU initiative Strengthening Resilience Against Violent Extremism (STRIVE Asia) and regional joint UNOCT-UNCCT and UNRCCA project, "Towards the Implementation of the Joint Plan of Action for the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia".

The STRIVE Asia Program, a joint EU-UN partnership, contributes to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Central, South and Southeast Asia as the spread of violent extremism poses a significant threat to the international community's efforts to promote peace and security.

This event will be the first regional engagement of youth with private sector and CSO in Central Asia to encourage its stronger engagement in the prevention of violent extremism in the framework of the whole-of-society approach. The regional forum aims to empower Central Asian youth by offering an opportunity to enhance strategic labor policies endorsed by national governments, promote resiliency and new ways of thinking to create job opportunities for youth that stimulate entrepreneurship and encourage investments into youth-led small and medium sized youth businesses.

On the last day of the event, it is planned to draft a roadmap or a set of recommendations for further actions. The roadmap aims to highlight the key actions youth need to undertake to support the implementation of the National Action Plans (NAPs), including employment and resilience, access to credit facilities, financial services, and funding; engagement with private sector partnerships to expand internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training opportunities for women and youth; building youth entrepreneurial skills; and encourage investments in sectors with high job-multiplier effects.

Objective

The objective of the proposed regional forum:

- i) To raise awareness of Central Asian youth, national youth structures and networks on youth employment opportunities to facilitate their employability, build their resilience and prevent youth engagement in extremist groups;
- ii) To identify best practices and opportunities for replication with focus on PVE;
- iii) To empower young leaders, including young women, to support the implementation of National Action Plans in Central Asia;
- iv) Deliberate on the ways how youth, private sector and CSOs can contribute to the development, implementation and M&E of comprehensive National Action Plans (NAPs) in Central Asia;
- v) Draft recommendations or a draft roadmap with possible actions to be taken to improve youth engagement in NAPs implementation in Central Asia;
- vi) Initiate the establishment of a network of young leaders of Central Asia (Community of Practice), connecting global, regional, national and local youth-oriented and youth - led organizations that are active on the issues of counter - terrorism and PVE particularly in relation to human rights, gender and youth.

Outcomes

The regional forum's discussion will produce the following key outcomes:

- Raised awareness of Central Asian youth, national youth structures and networks on youth employment opportunities to facilitate their employability, build their resilience and prevent youth engagement in extremist groups;
- Empowered young leaders, including women, to support implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs), their design and implementation;
- Discussed key challenges and gaps in the National Action Plans' (NAPs') implementation in Central Asia and ways of enhancing youth engagement;
- Drafted recommendations or a roadmap with possible actions to be taken to improve youth engagement in NAPs implementation in Central Asia;
- Initiated the establishment of a network of young leaders of Central Asia (Community of Practice), connecting global, regional, national and local youth-oriented and youth-led organizations that are active on the issues of counter-terrorism and PVE in relation to human rights, gender, and youth.

Scope

The event will be targeted towards:

- Youth from 5 Central Asian States, including participants of UNRCCA Youth Preventive Academy; (*3 participants from each country*)
- Representative of Youth Committee from 5 Central Asian States (1)
- Representative from the Ministry of Labor from 5 Central Asian States (1)
- National focal point on NAPs implementation from 5 Central Asian States (1)
- CSO, non-profit organizations and private sector representatives from Central Asia

In cooperation with ILO and UNRCCA

Geographic coverage

The Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Republic of Uzbekistan