

Open Meeting of the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee

Building resilience of communities to prevent radicalisation to terrorism

Remarks by Annabelle Bonnefont, Senior Legal Analyst and Human Rights Advisor, Global Center on Cooperative Security

Check Against Delivery

Dear excellencies, colleagues, and partners,

Thank you for inviting me today to discuss whole-of-society approaches to building community resilience against violent extremism. My name is Annabelle Bonnefont, and I am a Senior Legal Analyst and Human Rights Advisor at the [Global Center on Cooperative Security](#), a nonprofit organization that advances human rights-centered responses to political violence and violent extremism and the injustices that drive them, in partnership with community groups, governments, and international organizations, such as the United Nations.

Partnerships are at the heart of what the Global Center does, and our work has consistently shown that the most effective measures to advance peace and security are anchored in meaningful collaboration between [diverse stakeholders](#), including policymakers, practitioners, the private sector, and, especially, civil society. However, civil society actors expose themselves to a lot of risk in order to engage with governments and international organizations, including the United Nations. Despite these risks, civil society continues to dedicate and commit itself to improving lives and livelihoods in the communities they serve.

The reality for civil society is that it is not just terrorism that poses a threat to them; it can be counterterrorism measures [themselves](#). Violations of human rights and the rule of law under the auspices of preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism are widespread and well-known. The lack of a universally agreed definition of terrorism allows governments to apply this term broadly, often to the detriment of the most vulnerable communities. Measures intended to combat the financing of terrorism – intentionally and unintentionally – constrict freedoms of association and expression, hinder access to financial services, and disrupt and discourage critical charitable and humanitarian activities. The potential for abuse only becomes greater and more complex as we see the evolution and widespread adoption of new and emerging technologies across different sectors. The proliferation of counterterrorism measures and investments over the past two decades has had a substantial impact on the internal dynamics of civil society as well. These measures have transformed the civil society ecosystem, affecting peacebuilding, governance, and development priorities.

The Many Benefits of Civil Society Engagement in P/CVE and Counterterrorism Efforts

[The positive contributions of civil society](#) to peace and security have been well documented, including their delivery of a more context-sensitive, community resilience- and human security-driven approach to preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism. Increased references to their many roles can be observed in successive reviews of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Security Council resolutions. To capitalize on the many benefits that civil society engagement can offer, governments and international organizations like the United Nations must provide adequate protections and support to ensure that civil society actors are safe and make sure they are meaningfully included in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of P/CVE and counterterrorism efforts.

Civil society is not a monolith, which is one of its strengths. Civil society actors often are better positioned than governments to understand and alleviate factors driving violence and insecurity, including in conflict-affected contexts. Civil society actors, including grassroots organizations and human rights defenders, have a deeply nuanced understanding of the local contexts in which they operate and the needs of the people most impacted by violence, conflict, and injustice.

Greater civil society engagement within counterterrorism interventions would give governments and international organizations a fuller, more accurate picture of the facts in their communities while enabling groups to raise the profile of the issues they are confronting and seek human rights-promoting action from the United Nations.

If counterterrorism policies, norms, standards, and related programs have a better basis in the lived realities of affected communities, they would be more likely to achieve a positive impact.

Furthermore, an open civic space and diverse and active civil society provide critical avenues of dialogue, problem-solving, and de-escalation through which discontent and conflict can find peaceful resolution and accountability for harms can be achieved. Civil society also frequently provides avenues of participation for and amplifies the voices of marginalized communities.

Indeed, engagement and dialogue among civil society, governments, and intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations are often prerequisites to the successful design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of effective peacebuilding, security, and violence prevention efforts.

Civil society groups and the United Nations itself increasingly articulate a view that this engagement should not be one-sided or extractive, with the United Nations and individual governments reaping the benefits of civil society expertise, know-how, and credibility without offering anything in return. As stressed in the 2020 UN Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, the UN system has a critical role in [promoting and protecting civil society and civic space](#).

Scoping Study on Independent Civil Society – UN Counterterrorism Engagement

Over the last two years and based on global consultations, the Global Center and Rights & Security International undertook a scoping study to better understand the need and potential avenues for, viability of, and interest in, independent engagement between diverse civil society and the UN counterterrorism architecture. Despite the many risks civil society faces when engaging with the United Nations and its member states, there is a common desire to continue to engage with the United Nations and national governments. However, the Scoping Study also revealed the many existing barriers for continued engagement, including the risks civil society actors assume when speaking out against governments' human rights violations and addressing the UN's response to repression by states; a willingness to acknowledge and alter power dynamics; and above all, a demonstration that diverse civil society can actually have a substantive impact on UN counterterrorism decision-making and action. We look forward to launching the final report on May 29, here at UN headquarters in New York and online, but I will give you some insights into several of its findings and recommendations relevant to today's discussion.

Civil society perspectives on the barriers to meaningful engagement with individual governments and the United Nations on counterterrorism and human rights issues coalesced around seven central issues or so-called necessary "preconditions".

1. Individual governments and the United Nations must put in place more robust and effective measures to protect civil society from repression ostensibly justified under counterterrorism and P/CVE measures, as well as reprisals and intimidation before, during, and after engagement on counterterrorism and P/CVE issues.
2. Individual governments and the United Nations must establish and mainstream oversight and accountability practices that ensure its counterterrorism and P/CVE norms, guidance, and programs adhere to—and demand member state compliance with—human rights standards.
3. Individual governments and the United Nations must provide clarity about existing avenues, conditions, and procedures for civil society engagement within its counterterrorism architecture—and expand them.
4. Individual governments and the United Nations must explain at the outset what impact civil society actors can expect from their engagement and refrain from taking an extractive or tokenizing approach.
5. Individual governments and the United Nations must adopt more robust practices to ensure that information on its counterterrorism policies and programs is accessible.
6. Civil society must be materially compensated and otherwise supported.
7. Policymakers and practitioners must engage with a diverse group of civil society and make distinct efforts to engage with local, grassroots groups.

Recommendations

Addressing these preconditions requires sustained and concerted effort to ensure civil society

can safely and effectively engage in building community resilience, preventing violence, and demanding accountability and justice. Among other actions, this involves:

1. **Putting in place more robust and effective measures to protect civil society** from repression ostensibly justified under counterterrorism measures and from reprisals and intimidation before, during, and after engagement regarding counterterrorism and related issues.
2. **Prioritizing engagement with diverse civil society** and ensure representatives from grassroots and local levels are included in all P/CVE and counterterrorism efforts at all stages.
3. **Actively removing barriers to participation;** P/CVE and counterterrorism efforts are only as inclusive as they are accessible. The participation and leadership of boys, men, girls, women, and people of diverse gender identities can vary significantly depending on when and where activities, meetings, and consultations are being held.
4. **Duly compensating local and civil society experts.** In many countries, civil society's labor and expertise in general, and that of women in particular, are undervalued across the board, including in government, civil society, and academia. This trend is more acute among women with subaltern intersecting identities. This disparity encourages an environment where women, far more so than men, are expected to speak and write without compensation to establish and maintain credibility in their field. When women, men, and people of diverse gender identities are invited to participate in activities as expert speakers or panelists or to author or consult on a written output, they should be equally compensated.
5. **Ensuring accountability is a prerequisite for engagement.** Many peace and security programs, particularly P/CVE and counterterrorism efforts, are built on the assumption that communities owe their trust to and should feel safe engaging with governmental security actors, such as law enforcement. These assumptions persist even in the face of countervailing evidence that these institutions are a substantial source of insecurity and violence to many and often disproportionately impact people based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and other intersecting identities. The maintenance of strong, independent institutions of oversight and accountability over the justice and security sectors to prevent, investigate, and punish abuse and corruption is a crucial prerequisite for equitable, inclusive community engagement.

Thank you for your time.