



Celebrating 25 years of the Training for Peace programme

Mitigating violent extremism in Southern Africa



Time to harness the power of the youth

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Summary

Violent extremism is a leading threat to Southern Africa's peace and security. The success of efforts to mitigate this hazard largely depends on whether regional policy- and decision-makers are able to leverage the peace-making potential of the youth demographic. As both victims and perpetrators of the insurgency in Mozambique, the youth should be afforded the opportunity to lead in silencing the guns and preventing the spread of violent extremism to other countries in the region.

Recommendations

To the government of Mozambique:

- Independent assessments and analysis are required to identify key entry points for youth-led interventions.
- Using interfaith dialogue to help decipher the roots causes of youth radicalisation and recruitment should be explored.

To the Southern African Development Community (SADC):

- SADC must urgently develop a formal integrated youth, peace and security agenda that explicitly maps out youth responsibilities in peace and security issues, including preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in line with its Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

To the African Union (AU)

- The AU should initiate a continental youth and P/CVE lessons-learnt initiative.
- The AU should utilise existing youth, peace and security structures.

Introduction

Violent extremism represents a significant threat to human security in sub-Saharan Africa, and has increasingly emerged in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique, in Southern Africa.¹ The region's youth, peace and security agenda has not kept up with this complex challenge. The youth in Southern Africa are more preoccupied with issues of governance, which shapes their perspectives of solutions to peace-and-security challenges. Broadly speaking, their approach to regional peace and security is informed by the perceived absence of an active armed conflict. Recent research has revealed that as the region's youth look at peace and security through the lens of governance deficits, they become highly vulnerable to increased violent unrest, as both victims and perpetrators.²

It is crucial that Southern Africa's young peacebuilders should expand their peace and security activities to include preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The P/CVE discourse speaks to early detection and the use of varied responsive measures to reduce behaviours and ideologies that condone and sanction violence.

It is crucial that Southern Africa's young peacebuilders should expand their peace and security activities to include preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

The main objective of this policy brief is to explore how youth groups in Southern Africa,

particularly in Mozambique, can not only adjust to this contemporary form of conflict, but also play an influential role in mitigating the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. Informed by extensive desktop research, it proposes a more nuanced discussion on the role of youth in the insurgency as victims, extremists or peacebuilders. The brief also examines the roles that the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) can play to bolster the youth's contribution towards ending the insurgency. The analysis in this brief also draws on the findings of a study mandated by the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC), titled, 'The Roles and Contributions of Youth in Peace and Security in Africa'. Producing the study involved extensive field work across the five regions of the continent, which included field visits to Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa as well as a regional consultation meeting held in Botswana with youth groups from across the region in May 2019.³

Southern Africa's youth, peace and security arena⁵

One of the key fieldwork findings of the aforementioned AU study in the region is that the youth aged between 15 and 35, engage in peace-and-security activities in distinct ways: as part of voluntary-membership networks/groups; as solo activists; or, as part of established entities such as political party youth leagues/wings and non-governmental organisations. Youth activism has focused on certain socio-economic and political issues, which are summarised in the following diagram.

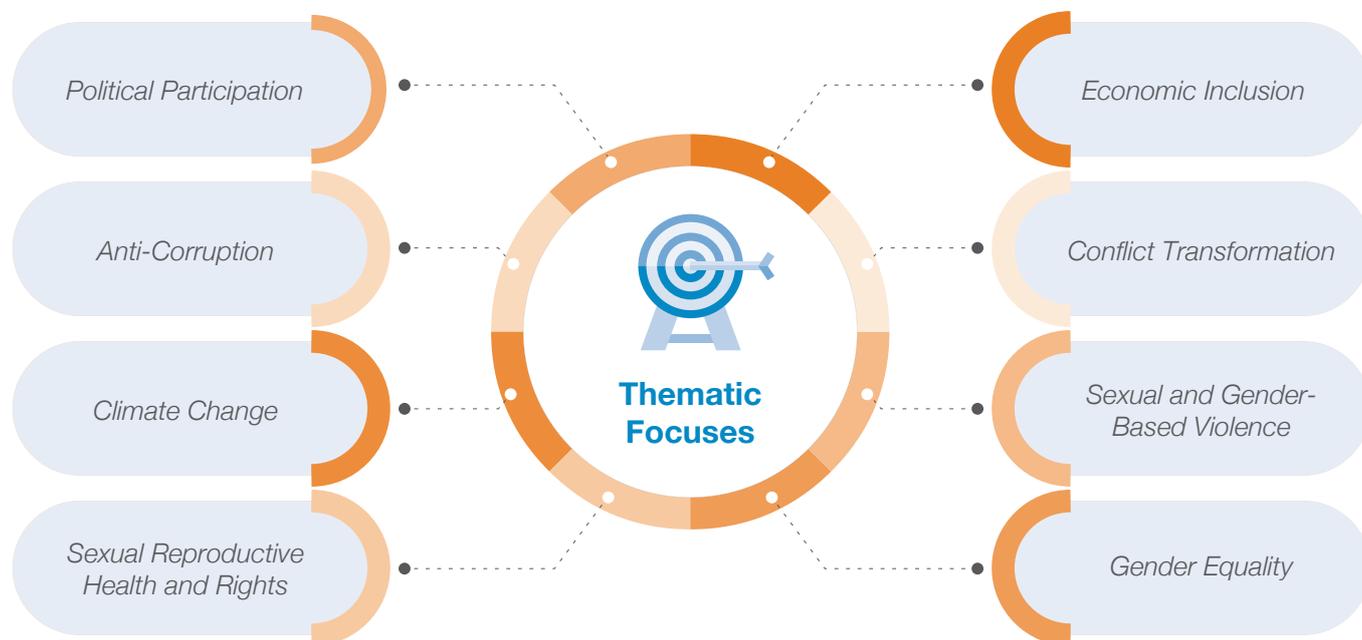


Figure 1: Examples of common thematic focuses for Southern African Youth Groups/Networks and Activists⁶

Fieldwork research conducted for the AU study revealed that most young people in the region are not familiar with the peace-and-security terminology used by inter-governmental entities such as the AU and SADC. For example, terms such as ‘peace support operations’ and ‘post-conflict reconstruction and development’ mean different things, which are not aligned to the AU or regional economic communities’ (RECs’) definitions, to the youth in Southern Africa. This contributes to their less visible participation in discourse surrounding these terms. However, this does not imply that young people in the region are lacking in their contribution to peace and security. Instead, it reveals that they are less exposed to these terms because they are currently not applied to the communities in which they operate. More significantly, their work in the thematic areas illustrated in Figure 1, which

reveals the extent to which there is a focus on peace and security, has contributed to the stability of the region.⁷

As Figure 1 shows, Southern African youth groups/networks have predominantly focused on activities that contribute to preventing full-scale armed conflict, while building bridges between policymakers and disgruntled civilians in general. For instance, one such group/network, called Africa Unite, is made up of over 200 young human-rights defenders who work with African refugees in South Africa to foster resilience amid existing tensions within communities.⁸

Furthermore, fieldwork research revealed that there is a strong link between peacebuilding priorities and the prevalence of dissatisfaction with governance in the region.¹⁰ Governance

deficits in Southern Africa mostly occur when the state falls short of delivering key services, particularly socio-economic necessities, for all citizens. This results in poor standards of living, poverty and, at times, oppression – thereby threatening the political and economic stability of the region. Habitually, for Southern African youth, as elsewhere on the continent, disgruntlement is often overtly demonstrated by disrupting and undermining public order. Most times, the goal is to be heard by policymakers and to influence them to act favourably on their grievances. As one Mozambique-led youth group explained in 2019: ‘When we, as young women march in these streets, they try to shut us down. That’s how we know we struck a nerve.’ In 2018 for example, figures show that governance deficits, such as a lack of service delivery, were at the heart of violent protests in South Africa.

However, with the aim – among others – of countering a growing perception that young people are violent and a menace, youth groups/networks and activists in the region are working to stimulate economic and political reform to prioritise youth needs. This in turn, would be expected to prevent or lessen the violent occurrences that young people often participate in or lead.

The region’s youth also call on those in power to accept and speed up youth inclusion and participation in structural and operational conflict-prevention mechanisms.¹¹ (For example, their expectations include youth quotas on transitional justice and reconciliation initiatives, as well as increased opportunities to be part of electoral processes such as election observation missions.) These demands are driven by a need to partner not only in policy and decision-making, but also in the establishment and implementation of interventions. At the local, national and regional levels, youth want to be increasingly engaged in conflict responses such as dialogue, mediation and negotiation.

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Youth and the advent of violent extremism in Southern Africa

Geographically, Southern Africa is the region of Africa that is the least affected by violent extremism and terrorism. However, this has not insulated the region's youth from engaging in these threats, as they have been vulnerable to being recruited into local and international terror groups. This phenomenon is not entirely new. In 1996, a South African group called People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) was formed in Cape Town. Although its objective was to rid the coastal city of drug-dealing gangsters, the group established strong links with Qibla, a militant Shi'a and Sunni Islamist political organization and paramilitary group based in the same city. The group, led by Abdus-Salaam Ebrahim, orchestrated a string of bombings and acts of arson, with youth affected both as victims and perpetrators.¹²

Additionally, the region has had verifiable links to terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). Prior the emergence of the insurgency in Mozambique in 2017, there was a perception that South Africa was a safe haven for members of extremist organisations. This was reinforced by reports that the country has been used as a base or transit point for terrorist cells.¹³ For instance, Al-Qaeda member Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, was arrested in the country in 1999 for his role in the bombings of the United States of America's (USA) embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.¹⁴ Furthermore, from 2008 to 2010, the so-called 'White Widow', Samantha Lewthwaite, lived and worked in the country using a false South African passport. Lewthwaite was the widow of one of the orchestrators of the London 7/7 bombings. Also, she was a fugitive for her alleged Al-Qaeda membership

and role in a 2012 grenade attack on a bar in Mombasa, Kenya.¹⁶

Additionally, there have been multiple allegations linking South African youth to violent extremism. In 2016, then 24-year-old twins, Brandon-Lee and Tony-Lee Thulsie were arrested on suspicion of planning to detonate explosives at the USA embassy in Johannesburg, as well as at several 'Jewish institutions' in the country.¹⁷ Media reports also claimed that they had been in communication with ISIS members.¹⁸

ISIS is alleged to have recruited members from South Africa, some as young as 15 years. In 2014, the organisation posted a video of foreign recruits in Syria, featuring a young South African man.¹⁹ At that time, media reports suggested that up to 140 South Africans had been successfully recruited by the organisation to fight in Iraq and Syria.²⁰ A 2015 study by the Institute for Security Studies revealed that South Africa was a cost-effective recruitment ground for ISIS. Most youth recruits came from average-income families, and were able to pay their way to Syria or Iraq. And at the time, a South African passport, did not raise immediate suspicion with most immigration officials.²¹

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Further north, Mozambique has continued to experience an alarming escalation in violent extremist attacks since 2017. The majority of these have occurred in its northern province of Cabo Delgado, which locals have nicknamed '*Cabo Esquecido*' ('Forgotten Cape'). A local group named Al-Sunna wa Jama'a has repeatedly claimed responsibility for atrocities in

the impoverished province.²² The group claims to be linked to IS.

This insurgency is deeply rooted in the governance-deficit grievances that affect the region's youth on a daily basis. These include perceptions of deprivation and marginalisation. The youth in the province, with their shared religion, ethnicity and all-round experience of neglect, are an easy target for recruitment and radicalisation by extremists. Fieldwork research among youth groups in Mozambique revealed that young people are highly active in the insurgency. The fieldwork found that this is directly linked to government's inability to develop the region, which is rife with poverty despite being endowed with natural gas, gold, rubies, graphite, gold and timber.²³

Foreign influences are also at play in this insurgency, linked to insecurity in East Africa and porous borders. There have been reports of incitements by weathered extremist fighters from Kenya, Somalia, Uganda and Tanzania.²⁴

Can the AU and SADC bolster youth-led solutions?

It is evident that Southern Africa has recorded some serious cases of violent extremism, however there is no visible effort to harness the youth demographic in crafting effective responses to this conflict.

Mozambique filed a formal request of support from SADC in 2019, almost two-and-a-half years after the first attack in Cabo Delgado.²⁵ The regional body has a Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which advises member states to engage in collective security against violent extremism. The strategy encourages member

states to formulate national CVE strategies, and to establish or intensify campaigns that raise awareness of radicalisation and violent extremism. It also advises that states should address social and economic marginalisation through poverty-reduction programmes and the creation of employment opportunities for vulnerable groups, specifically youth.

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In May 2020, Zimbabwe hosted an extraordinary Summit of the Troika of the Organ on the issue with the heads of state of Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana.²⁶ Tanzania is the only country that shares a land border with Cabo Delgado, and is also a member of SADC. The country was invited to take part in the deliberations, but was not present in Harare.²⁷ The outcome of the meeting remains unclear. This is of concern, as the insurgency poses a regional threat that begs for an urgent regional response. Mozambican security forces are overwhelmed, and the inaction of the regional bloc allows the extremist attacks, and resulting displacements, to continue.

Despite Mozambique currently being one of three Southern African countries on the AU PSC, the AU only formally acknowledged the crisis in February 2020, during its 33rd summit, two years after the insurgency begun. The AU has indicated that it could help Mozambique with intelligence as well as P/CVE equipment and training.

However, the organisation cannot take action before SADC acts, in line with its guidelines on AU–RECs relations and conduct.²⁸

As the conflict continues, greater consideration is being given to high-level engagement. Yet little regard is given to youth inclusion and participation, despite their important role in the conflict. Young people are alleged to make up the majority of the extremist fighters on the ground in Cabo Delgado. As perpetrators, they have been instrumental in attacks and in the further recruitment and radicalisation of additional local youth. Young people also make up a significant portion of the victim population, especially young women who have either been killed or forcefully displaced. To prevent violent extremism from erupting in other parts of the country and region, and to truly suppress the insurgency, it is vital to recognise the role of youth and the need to engage meaningfully with young people in strategies to tackle the menace. There are youth and youth networks – both at the local and regional levels – who are competent enough to contribute towards preventing and countering the insurgency, and efforts to restore stability to northern Mozambique, the rest of the country and the region. These are young people from faith-based groups, civil society, academia and even the media.

Youth advocacy structures play a significant role in the AU’s ability to bolster the potential of youth as peacebuilders in response to the insurgency. The AU iDove initiative emphasises the role of youth-led interfaith dialogue in P/CVE. Other initiatives include the Youth for Peace Africa programme, and the designation of a special youth envoy and five regional youth ambassadors for peace. These young leaders and programmes can leverage their platforms to address the plight of youth and the insurgency, and can play a leading role in advocating for

an AU–RECs emergency plan that capacitates the youth demographic in P/CVE. Inter-regional approaches can be crafted from lessons learnt, and can be initiated for the benefit of Southern African youth more broadly.

Harnessing the efforts of youth

To effectively combat the rise of violent extremism in Mozambique and stop it from spreading to the rest of the region, the Mozambican state, SADC and the AU should move away from sole reliance on high-level planning and military action, and urgently focus on augmenting governance, health, education and employment for communities in the north. Such government-initiated efforts may be met with weariness, and could threaten to become counterproductive. This would pose a critical opportunity to partner with the youth.

Local youth-led groups present an opportunity for the state to work with organisations that know the needs of vulnerable and youthful communities on the ground, including those at risk of being recruited into extremism. Basing responsiveness on familiarity is crucial, but may easily be overlooked.

In harnessing the potential described above, youth-led groups can play a significant role in P/CVE in five key ways:

- i. Promoting interfaith dialogue. Youth-led groups can encourage interfaith dialogue across Muslim, Christian and traditionalist groups in Cabo Delgado, other parts of Mozambique and the Southern Africa region. Though religious differences are not the sole or even legitimate foundation of the conflict, it is essential to create a platform

that draw perspectives from each group. Youth-led groups can achieve this by bringing together leaders of each faith to engage in dialogue on policy, and ensuring that Maputo prioritises homegrown solutions to ending the insurgency, and initiating sustainable peace and development in the region.

- ii. Advocating for improved policies for youth empowerment in the north. Youth – whether individually or in groups – have the power to rally behind a common cause. In Mozambique’s 11 provinces, young people can launch indigenous campaigns to ensure that the administration in Maputo implements policies to eliminate the marginalisation of Cabo Delgado’s youth, and to ensure they benefit from the extraction of natural gas and other key resources in the region. This rather recent discovery of gas reserves in one of the country’s poorest regions can change the fate of the struggling local population and must be leveraged to mitigate, rather than fuel the insurgency.
- iii. Engaging local youth. Violent extremists prey on disgruntled youth for recruitment. Economic hardship related to high levels of unemployment has the potential to draw countless young men and women towards extremist groups for financial reasons. Youth-led groups can establish peace clubs for youth, as well as civic-engagement conversations. They are also in a position to encourage and lobby for vocational skills

training for local youth to harness their non-formal education related innovativeness.

- iv. Preparing for disengagement, demobilisation, reintegration and the reconciliation of former youth fighters. It remains to be seen when extremists will begin to put down their arms and offer themselves up for rehabilitation. However, when that happens, youth-led group should be in place to support tailor-made efforts for their socio-political reintegration into society, as well as their reconciliation with communities and victims. Youth-led organisations need to identify avenues of engagement with the state or established civil society groups with expertise in post-conflict reconstruction. This type of engagement would ensure their financial and human resources remain sufficient for the task.
- v. Reporting on violent extremism and its impact on local communities. Youth-led groups can task themselves with telling the story of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. The insurgency is under-reported at a time when the region needs increased awareness on violent extremism. Despite the heavy crackdown on the media and researchers working on reporting on the insurgency, youth-led groups can cautiously and innovatively make use of traditional print media, radio and social media to share information with key stakeholders both in and outside of Mozambique.

Key challenges to youth contributions in CVE

For the youth to be visible in countering an insurgency, they need to operate within a conducive environment. The table below identifies some crucial external and internal challenges that youth groups and networks have to overcome. These challenges were emerged during interviews with youth groups operating in Mozambique:

External challenges	Internal challenges
<p>State monopoly over response to the insurgency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government of Mozambique is currently working in isolation with little involvement from external partners; There have been reports of travel bans to Cabo Delgado, particularly for researchers and the media. This affects not only the movement of people, but also the flow of information; Press censorship is at a high in Mozambique. The government and the military repeatedly clamps down on people who attempt to report on the insurgency.³⁰ <p>Societal barrier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-led groups face the challenge of overcoming the reputation of youth as being perpetrators of violent extremism, and not partners for peace. Trust issues might arise from a portion of the community who does not believe in youth leadership. 	<p>Capacity limitations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several youth-led groups in the country are in need of contemporary P/CVE training for their staff members. They are relying not on government, but other civil society organizations and development partners to provide this. <p>Funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Like most youth-led groups in Africa, youth groups in Mozambique are threatened by inadequate and short-term funding. This directly affects their programming and staffing needs.

Conclusion

The violent extremism in northern Mozambique puts a strain on a continental youth, peace and security agenda that did not plan for an impending Islamist militancy in Southern Africa of this magnitude. The severity of the situation is accentuated by the fact that large groups of youth form part of the insurgency. The need for P/CVE in Mozambique and elsewhere in the region is urgent.

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Currently, Mozambique might draw on the existing SADC Regional Counter Terrorism Strategy in its response to the insurgency. There is a fundamental lack of investing in youth in a way that aligns with the strategy's recommendations, despite the alarming number of youth participating in and leading the insurgency. However, youth-led groups, in their quest for the cessation of the insurgency, can

still build on pre-existing roles as conveners of peace and interfaith dialogue, while advocating for development in the northern province. It must urgently be acknowledged that state-level, predominantly military responses are insufficient, and that ending the insurgency will crucially require including young people. Additionally, response options must be diversified in a way that tackles the structural factors that drive and sustain violent extremism.

This policy brief highlights the need to harness the pre-existing expertise of youth groups to combat the Islamist insurgency. It is unwise for the state to continue monopolising the response to an insurgency with security implications both for the region and, indeed, the continent, and to partner only at the level of external state-to-state cooperation. The prevalence of youth fighters is likely to challenge the potential of local youth-led efforts. It is therefore the obligation of not only the state, but also SADC, the AU and civil society groups to recognise and harness the potential of youth inclusion in P/CVE. Without this, the insurgency could spread to other provinces of Mozambique and other countries in the region.

Notes

- 1 Research was done on countries geographically located in the Southern African Region. Therefore, this research does not include some SADC member states such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Seychelles and Tanzania.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The PSC at its maiden Open Session on Youth, Peace and Security held on 8 November 2018, requested the AUC to conduct a study to ascertain youth contributions to peace and security on the continent. This study was carried out in 2019 in all five geographical regions of the continent in interviews with youth groups/networks and activists, and five regional consultations.
- 4 Analysis from interviews with youth groups in Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa, as well as views shared during the Southern African Youth consultations on Peace and Security, Gaborone, Botswana, in May 2019.
- 5 According to the African Youth Charter of 2006. Available at <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-youth-charter>
- 6 Thematic areas are based on recorded responses from youth groups who participated in the AU study.
- 7 Key finding of the AU Study of the Roles and Contributions of Youth for Peace and Security.
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