

Call: H2020-SC6-GOVERNANCE-2019  
Topic: SU-GOVERNANCE-10-2019  
Funding Scheme: Research and Innovation Action (RIA)



## **Deliverable No. 8.6**

# **Preliminary Policy Brief on key recommendations from the project**

**Grant Agreement no.:** 870769

**Project Title:** Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA

**Contractual Submission Date:** 30/11/2020

**Actual Submission Date:** 30/11/2020

**Responsible partner:** Berghof Foundation (Berghof)



*PAVE has received Funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 870769.*

<b>Grant agreement no.</b>	870769
<b>Project full title</b>	PAVE - Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA

<b>Deliverable number</b>	<b>D8.6</b>
<b>Deliverable title</b>	<b>Preliminary Policy Brief on key recommendations from the project</b>
Type	R
Dissemination level	PU
Work package number	8
Work package leader	Berghof
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Keywords	Cumulative extremisms, religious institutions, online radicalisation, community resilience, prevention of violent extremism

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870769.

The author is solely responsible for its content, it does not represent the opinion of the European Commission and the Commission is not responsible for any use that might be made of data appearing therein.

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## 1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) is committed to safeguard its citizens from arising threats. On the occasion of the recent attacks in Nice and Vienna the heads of state have again reiterated the importance of preventing and countering radicalisation dynamics in order to achieve this objective (Boukanoun 2020).

The 2016 EU Global Strategy stated that security at home depends on peace and stability beyond the EU's borders. One of the major identified threats was violent extremism – within the EU,<sup>1</sup> in its neighbourhood and also globally. In June 2020, the new Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism re-confirmed the EU's commitment to act against all forms of violent extremism. In accordance with the security-driven perspective of this policy document, its conclusions are largely focused on security measures such as inter alia preventing undetected movement of foreign fighters, anticipating sleeper-cells and lone actors, surveillance, combating terror financing, or protecting critical infrastructures and public spaces. The document also outlines complementary ('soft') approaches to addressing the spread of religious and politically-motivated violent extremist ideology. This latter dimension represents a societal challenge that must be addressed through a "comprehensive whole-of-society approach including consistent outreach to vulnerable populations" (EU Council 2020, 12), to tackle underlying conditions conducive to violent extremism. This holistic approach also underlines the need to mainstream preventive measures within development assistance programming. Finally, the document stresses the need to develop country-specific and regional strategies. A particular focus is placed on regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as well as countries in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA).

These formulated priorities resonate well with the PAVE research project, funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Work programme, under the call "SU-GOVERNANCE-10-2019: Drivers and contexts of violent extremism in the broader MENA region and the Balkans". This project aims to complement existing knowledge on individual (micro-level) and structural (macro-level) factors fuelling, mitigating or preventing violent extremism, by paying specific attention to the meso-level of socio-political community dynamics. By generating new insights on the role of local communities impacting, and impacted by, violent extremism, the project will provide valuable lessons learnt about the tools and mechanisms that EU and other stakeholders can use in addressing the factors and contexts of radicalisation and violent extremism.

This short policy brief aims to outline preliminary policy insights and recommendations arising from past research conducted by members of the PAVE consortium, a state-of-the-art review of existing research compiled in three baseline studies (Kortam 2020, Lorenzo, Nilsson and Svensson 2020, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies et al. 2020), and complementary findings gathered from related H2020 projects.<sup>2</sup> The recommendations offered at the end of the paper will be cross-examined during the data collection and analysis and will be refined and expanded in a revised version in 2022.

## 2 Brief overview of existing knowledge and remaining gaps

This section presents selected insights gathered in three baseline studies published by the PAVE consortium in September/October 2020 (see D2.2 – D2.4), which take stock of existing research on three overlapping topics: cumulative extremism, the interface between state and religious institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> In the implementation plan of the renewed EU Internal Security Strategy 2019, presented in February 2020, the first priority is "Countering terrorism and preventing radicalisation and violent extremism". <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/feb/eu-council-iss-implementation-report-5618-20.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The H2020 projects DARE, BRAVE, GREASE and PERICLES have been particular sources of inspiration for this policy brief and we draw on many of their relevant findings. See: <http://www.dare-h2020.org/>, [www.brave-h2020.eu/](http://www.brave-h2020.eu/), <http://grease.eu.eu/> and <https://project-pericles.eu/>.

and online vs offline (de)radicalization narratives. We conclude the section by delving into the concept of community resilience which underpins this research, and its policy relevance for the PVE community.

## 2.1 Cumulative extremisms

There is a wide consensus among experts and practitioners that violent extremism can be associated with any political or religious ideology. However, since the rise of transnational armed organisations such as Al Qaida and ISIS, the term has become primarily equated with religiously-inspired non-state violence. Indeed, most research and policy approaches to the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) focus primarily on understanding, and countering, the patterns through which certain individuals become radicalised into joining Salafi/Wahhabi-inspired violent organisations (either as ‘home-grown terrorists’ or as foreign fighters, especially in Iraq and Syria). While this is certainly a significant phenomenon that merits ample attention, it is equally important to **recognise and uncover the mutual interactions between Islamist violent extremism and other forms of (ethno-political, sectarian or ideological) extremism**, which contribute to their reciprocal radicalisation – especially in societies with a long legacy of inter-group violent conflict. As highlighted by Holmer and Bauman (2018, 18), “macro-level tools that examine violent extremism organisations without considering their relationships to other conflict dynamics run the risk of informing narrowly conceived P/CVE interventions that lack impact and sustainability”.

In the Western Balkans, societies still struggle with the legacies of the war in the 1990s, which continue to fuel ethnic polarisation through divergent interpretations of history, selective forms of remembrance and different and contested notions of victimhood. Marginalised individuals were (and are) fed narratives of victimisation of their own ethnic group through media controlled by the ethnic elites. In divided cities for example, inter-ethnic tensions contribute to increased support for religious-inspired radicalisation (Turčalo and Veljan 2018). In the MENA region, socio-political and ideological/religious drivers of extremism tend to reinforce each other. In Lebanon for example, local violence rooted in socio-economic disparities, local political dynamics and sectarian polarisation seems to be fed by, and to feed into, transnational violent extremism drawing on radical interpretations of religion. Gender also plays another important dynamic in how extremism is promoted, as women’s rights, for example, are often the first to be targeted and withdrawn in these radical interpretations of religion. Violent extremist movements manipulate and use gender stereotypes and norms in their propaganda to enhance recruitment (OSCE 2019).

Therefore, as Lorenzo, Nilsson and Svensson (2020, 8) write in their baseline study on cumulative extremism: “One important point of departure for the PAVE project is the recognition that extremism should not merely be studied in isolation and that several forms of extremism can be present at the same time”. Our project uses the term cumulative (or reciprocal) extremisms (*in plural*) to describe reciprocal relationships between antagonistic movements on opposite side of an ideological spectrum, for example, far-right movements versus jihadist movements. These interactions may occur on three levels of analysis: individuals (increasing number of followers); organisations (increasing contentious or violent tactics), and communities (increasing polarisation). They are also located at the interface between radical ideologies and violent tactics/behaviour – while recognising that not all extreme groups are violent, and not all violent groups are promoting extreme ideas. Cumulative extremisms may refer to either ideological interactions (such as extremists referring to other extremists and feeding each other’s rhetoric), tactical interactions (such as revenge attacks), or both.

While there is a wealth of empirical evidence on the various (and often common) drivers of religious, political or ethno-nationalist extremisms, **there is still a significant knowledge gap on the specific drivers of cumulative extremism**. Existing research, which predominantly focuses on the interaction between far-right and Islamist extremisms in Western Europe, has identified a few factors contributing to reciprocal extremisms. These include revenge dynamics (violent acts perpetrated in reaction to events perceived as provocative); physical proximity with one another (e.g. during demonstrations and

counter-demonstrations); and political opportunities (e.g. whether there are available alternative mechanisms for channelling extremists' frustration, aspirations, and political energy). A key potential driver to cumulative extremism which has received little attention so far is the role of the state, i.e. how its reaction to extremist groups influences their reciprocal interactions and (counter-)reactions (Carter 2019).

Among the plethora of initiatives funded by governments or international donors (including the EU) to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), especially in the MENA and Western Balkans, **few programs are explicitly designed to address cumulative extremisms**. Many projects seek to address one particular identity marker or source of mobilisation – for example by promoting moderate narratives on Islam – but fail to account for the interaction between Islamist extremists and other extremist groups beyond religion. As noted in the PAVE baseline study on cumulative extremisms (Lorenzo, Nilsson and Svensson 2020, 39), locally-rooted PVE initiatives located at the community level appear to be best well-suited to address specifically cumulative extremisms. Examples include inter-group dialogue efforts increasing cohesion and tolerance across ethnic, sectarian and/or religious lines, while paying particular attention to addressing the drivers of reciprocal radicalisation – such as cycles of revenge or dehumanising narratives towards out-groups.

## 2.2 Interface between state and religious institutions

In the baseline study on the interface between states and religious institutions, Marie Kortam (2020) maps the formal and informal religious institutions in the fieldwork countries and explores the diverse elements of vulnerability vs. resilience to violent extremism. The interaction between religious and state institutions is complex and variable based on the political system, constitution, and context. There appears to be a strong overlap in the influence of religious and political or state institutions, which interact with one another based on independence, coexistence, collusion, co-option, or replacement dynamics. For example, religious institutions might be the only sources of education available to young people in regions where state schools are absent or do not provide equal access to all communities.

The mapping also revealed that **in cases where formal religious institutions are weak, informal religious leaders have taken up the surrendered space to play a political role**. Informal religious institutions are harder to control than both formal religious and state institutions. Further, the distinctions between the religious and political sphere is not always clear cut, as a grey zone exists where governmental and formal religious leaders participate or create an informal space to discuss politics through religion.

On the **drivers of vulnerability**, all the case study countries face complex challenges in mitigating the spread of violent extremism. As Kortam writes (2020, 28): “Common social, economic, and political issues were triggering factors for the increase of radicalisation in those five countries.” For instance, communities strongly affected by violent extremism experience a deep polarisation along cultural identity, religious or ethno-political lines. Violent extremism is also more prevalent in areas suffering from inequality and marginalisation. Although factors like high socio-political inequality, poverty, disenfranchisement and marginalisation alone have been found to be insufficient in explaining radicalisation, these are conducive to subjective perceptions of victimisation and injustice that exacerbate vulnerability to radicalisation (DARE 2019). Hence when communities experience injustice and the absence of state institutions and development policy, it may open a space for informal leaders to fill the gap in service provision for these populations, and to spread extremist ideas among community members, leading to their enrolment in different armed groups.

When it comes to **drivers of resilience**, these are shaped not only by the state and religious institutions but also by civil society organisations (CSOs) – acting as bridge-builders between them, and between public authorities and citizens. Collaboration among these three actor types varies across the contexts, and is also shaped by international donors. This can result in national P/CVE strategies at government

level, or in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina a non-government religious institution taking on the lead, while in Iraq and Tunisia, CSOs often work on PVE programs in the complete absence of the state.

Examples of **relevant initiatives that seek to strengthen the role of formal and informal institutions in the prevention of violent extremism** are those that collaborate with religious authorities to promote a culture of tolerance, and to develop a contemporary religious discourse in line with civic values such as citizenship, national unity, and co-existence. Another approach is to strengthen the constructive role of state institutions and to improve state-society relationship at the local level, which is pursued for example through ‘community policing’ programmes. For both strands of exemplary resilience initiatives, collaboration with CSOs and a focused engagement with the community is central. For example, the project “Building Resilience: Communities against Violent Extremism” conducted by the Dutch Embassy in Kosovo seeks to empower local communities by targeting women and youth to mobilise informal resilience networks against violent extremism (KCSS et al. 2020, 20). Cooperation among community members might also be enhanced through the establishment of community relations committees, bringing together different stakeholders to detect early signs of radicalisation and establish early action mechanisms (Morina, Austin, Roetman and Dudouet 2019). External actors can support such resilience-building initiatives inter alia with capacity building programs, facilitating and promoting inclusive dialogues, or conducting training on human rights values or international humanitarian law.

### 2.3 Online and offline (de-)radicalisation narratives

The third baseline study explores existing research on offline and online (de)radicalisation in the Western Balkans and MENA region, through the cases of Kosovo and Tunisia. The authors highlight the **dominance of offline de-radicalisation initiatives by government agencies in comparison with online de-radicalisation efforts**, which are still very limited (KCSS et al. 2020). Many offline de-radicalisation programs are focused on educational or rehabilitation work in prisons. Such efforts either aim to disrupt patterns of radicalisation (for example by rotating radicalized individuals between prisons in order to preventing further spread of extremism narratives) or to prepare (mostly male)<sup>3</sup> inmates for life post-release by introducing vocational trainings on social inclusion or technical job skills. Such social reintegration programmes can support disengagement from radical ideology by addressing personal challenges and ideally supporting the inmate’s re-definition of his/her identity towards nonviolence (RAN undated).

Non-governmental actors such as CSOs have also neglected the role of online de-radicalisation in their PVE engagement. This state of play stands in sharp contrast to the current research state of the art which implies that **the internet is the preferred means of individual radicalisation**, especially among youth. The internet penetration is high in both in the Western Balkan and MENA regions; therefore it is important to explore the question of media literacy and to scrutinise the comparative effectiveness of offline and online radicalisation processes.

The baseline study indeed notes a **lack of research on the impact of narratives on radicalisation processes, and in turn, on the effectiveness of counter-narrative programmes**. Counter-narratives aim to offer a positive alternative to extremist propaganda or to de-construct and de-legitimise extremist narratives. Nevertheless, this approach has been criticised for its insufficient theoretical and empirical foundations (Glazzard 2017, Reed 2018). This underscores the need for de-radicalisation programmes to apply rigorous standards and methodologies to ensure their effectiveness, including a clear theory of change, monitoring and evaluation provisions, and the extraction of past research findings and lessons learnt for their application in future counter-narrative campaigns.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the PERICLES project, in the European context, prison inmates convicted for violent extremism are generally male, under 30 and married, with prisons described as ‘sites of recruitment for ‘angry, isolated, young men’ (Kudlacek et al. 2020, 26).

Finally, it should be noted that although the PAVE project focuses on local community dynamics, it will also consider the important **transnational and transregional dimensions** of the phenomenon. Violent extremist organisations, social movements and foreign states are among the main transregional actors that affect the trends and factors of radicalisation – including in the preparation and implementation of attacks and the recruitment of radicalised persons outside of the above mentioned regions, the promotion of conservative and radical interpretations of Islam and Islamism by activist movements, the involvement of foreign states to influence religious institutions and actors, and the role of transnational actors such as foreign fighters, cells and hit squads (Armakolas and Karatrantos 2016; McMillan, Felmler and Braines 2020). This research initiative will enable stakeholders and decision makers to situate various hotspots of violent extremism and their possible transregional spillovers.

## 2.4 Preventing violent extremism by building community resilience

The role of local communities in building resilience to the threat of violent extremism is a central cross-cutting topic across all thematic clusters addressed in PAVE project.<sup>4</sup> It aims to explore which factors or dynamics drive vulnerability to radicalisation in a community, and in response to those, how collective resilience can be effectively built up.

Resilience has become a buzzword in academic and policy discourses on violent extremism – as a positive mirror image to the ‘prevention’ of violent extremism. In the past decade, the concepts underpinning policy approaches to the phenomenon have evolved from the securitised lenses of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) that were found to be ineffective and sometimes counter-productive, to a more holistic paradigm labelled Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). Like CVE, PVE has a problem-solving orientation that seeks to mitigate threats from occurring, and in its broad conceptualisation subsumes a large variety of policy programming approaches ranging from educational, youth and economic development initiatives to prisoner rehabilitation schemes.

‘Strengthening resilience’ has become the latest step in this line of conceptual and policy developments. Focused on enhancing the positive features of societies, communities or individuals, this approach is at the forefront of current reflections and agendas in the continuing effort to push back on a global security threat. Overall, this is a commendable effort, but as with all things new we should carefully consider the lessons already learned from existing analysis on this trendy but fuzzy concept. Policy planning requires sound understanding of how and where in a system an intervention creates impact and what factors shape the result. Developing our conceptual thinking and increasing the knowledge base is not a purely academic exercise but essential for effective interventions.

In the PAVE project, **we define resilience as the ability of political systems and (in)formal governance arrangements at the community level to adjust to changing political and social conditions**. More specifically, the concept of resilience underscores the structural and agency-based capacity of a community to react to the threat of violent extremism, and places a particular emphasis on the roles of social connections, social bridging and belonging (Carpenter 2006, Ellis and Abdi 2017). Research has identified ‘good practice’ interventions that purposefully contribute to resilience, such as inter-ethnic and inter-faith dialogue initiatives that aim to foster religious tolerance and multiculturalism, and to reinforce inclusive and multidimensional identities.

From a peacebuilding perspective, the concept of resilience has also been critically assessed, especially given the risk of “resilience [becoming] a powerful depoliticizing and naturalizing scientific concept and metaphor when used by political actors” (Olsson et al 2015, 9). Resilience is often understood in relation to its original meaning in natural sciences, as the ability of a system to return to its previous state after a negative shock. This can be deeply problematic in societies where the status quo ante is part the problem, for instance when the actions (or inaction) of state institutions are part of the root

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<sup>4</sup> Communities here refer to “women, men, social groups, and institutions based in the same geographical area and/or on shared interests” (Turčalo and Veljan 2018, 27).

causes (i.e. push factors) of radicalisation. A recent publication on resilience promotion in Palestine has put it starkly: “the manner in which the language of resilience has permeated the NGO sector in Palestine is ethnocentric, with the inference that Palestinians should learn to “cope” rather than reject the status quo particularly problematic. Designating notions of resilience paradoxical to that articulated by Palestinians themselves further highlights the manner by which the development and humanitarian sector is culpable in bolstering the occupation” (Keenan and Browne 2020). Accordingly, if resilience (mis-)directs efforts towards maintaining stability in contexts of severe power asymmetries, it can de-legitimise and dis-empower efforts to build a more equal and inclusive society. In Lebanon already, the concept of resilience is severely discredited for similar reasons; it puts the burden in individuals to adapt to systemic disfunction, rather than focusing on institutional and structural dysfunctions.

By contrast, our approach to resilience in the PAVE project stems from the basic assumption is that **community agency greatly matters in the prevention of violent extremism, while being mindful of the need to contextualise this meso level of analysis within a broader framework that accounts for the role and responsibilities of the state, as well as transnational dynamics**. This emphasis on local agency echoes research findings that PVE interventions are unlikely to be impactful and sustainable if local actors are not deeply involved in the processes (Morina et al. 2019). According to previous publications by PAVE consortium members in the Western Balkans, a community moves up along the resilience spectrum following the “intervention or active engagement of various stakeholders of the community vested with some authority to either prevent or counter violent extremism. Therefore, resilience assumes awareness of the problem by various stakeholders in a community and their aggregated action to act against a certain phenomenon. It also includes the community’s attitude toward such a phenomenon and their reaction in the wake of the emergence of the violent extremism activity, or events perceived as leading up to its appearance” (Jakupi and Kraja 2018, 9). Resilience hence encompasses three dimensions of stakeholder agency: awareness, attitude and action (Morina et al. 2019).

Given the primacy of agency in building community resilience, and in contrast to aforementioned approaches of resilience prioritising a return to the ‘status quo ante’, the PAVE project considers **community resistance as an important facet of resilience – understood as purposeful nonviolent action against the root causes (e.g. state disfunction or social exclusion), the drivers (e.g. recruiters and preachers) and the manifestations of violent extremism**. Past research on the role of trade unions in preventing violent extremism in Tunisia (USIP 2019, 22) or civic action against ISIS in Mosul, Iraq (Svensson, Hall, Krause and Skoog 2019) shows that civil society can lead the way in preventing or resisting violent extremism organisations from taking roots in communities.

Based on these various considerations, national and international policy-makers need to carefully assess the context of any intervention to increase resilience, and their own interests in the process. They should be made aware of the potential for adverse unintended results and political trade-offs. If the aim of the intervention is indeed to strengthen resilience, understood as the ability of a community ‘system’ to adjust to changing political and social conditions and to increase its capacity to react to emerging threats of violent extremism, then community stakeholders should be equipped with the tools and support necessary to engage with conflict constructively, and to address the structural and cultural sources of radicalisation and violent extremism.

### 3 Preliminary recommendations to the European Union and its partners

#### 3.1 Recommendations for future EU policy engagement – Look/engage beyond well-known actors and factors

- ***Pay more attention to the complexities of cumulative extremism dynamics and invest in efforts to uncover and address these dynamics.*** Nascent research on cumulative extremism points out the need for PVE programmes to be anchored in an in-depth understanding of the relational dynamics between different drivers and forms of violent extremism. This will enable stakeholders to better anticipate potential trigger events or to identify effective entry points for violence de-escalation or prevention. PVE policies and action plans also need to avoid stigmatising certain communities; they can do so by adopting a holistic approach that explicitly recognises all possible forms of extremist tendencies, and that integrates reciprocal dynamics between them as part of their prevention programmes.
- ***Invest in local, regional, national and international cooperation to promote effective prevention mechanisms.*** Within EU countries, cooperation and intelligence-sharing are relatively well developed for counter-terrorism, but less so when it comes to the prevention of violent extremism (DARE 2018). Such cooperation should also be enhanced beyond the EU, in order to better understand the complex and diverse dynamics of transnational and transregional radicalisation between the MENA region and the Western Balkans, and between those regions and the EU. Furthermore, EU institutions such as EUROPOL and EU member states should invest more on network analysis and intelligence sharing in order to identify all these linkages, and to include transregional actions in PVE action plans. This collaboration should extend to state and non-governmental partners in the Western Balkans and MENA region, including by collaborating with local leaders and civil society organisations (such as women and youth-led organisations) as strategic allies in the common struggle against violent extremism.

#### 3.2 Recommendations for sound programming design – Focus on agency

- ***Strengthen and increase cooperation among community leaders.*** Resilience is so context specific that the need for local-driven programme design cannot be overestimated. To promote strong communities that are resilient to violent extremism, there is no way around strengthening the actors who can play a proactive role in either fuelling or mitigating radicalisation dynamics in their communities – including religious institutions and authority figures. Supporting joint engagement among political and religious leaders for a shared purpose can help foster a common understanding of the challenges they face, and promote mutual exchange on viable solutions (Morina et al. 2019). Given that religious institutions are often themselves targeted by extremist violence in EU and elsewhere, community resilience program should also seek to strengthen their capacity for preparedness and protection.
- ***Promote open discussions and space for pluralism as part of resilience programmes.*** Fostering pluralism, critical thinking and a “culture where people can disagree better” (GREASE 2020) can effectively pick up grievances (both legitimate and perceived) that violent extremist narratives appear to offer solutions for, in order to offer alternative, nonviolent ways of addressing these grievances directly within the community. This requires the creation of a safe space that is open for all, by addressing sources of structural (socio-political or economic) inequality which might limit access for certain social groups, and promoting inclusivity in decision-making processes, as part of designing community resilience programmes. External actors can also help train trusted community members as skilled facilitators, to steer open

discussions on difficult issues, and to formulate constructive approaches to collective resistance against the driving factors and dynamics of violent extremism.

- ***Invest in (or strengthen existing) programmes fostering civic values and social bonds among all community members.*** Strengthening cross-cutting identity markers that foster a shared sense of community belonging can limit the appeal of extremist narratives. PVE programmes should support locally-grounded inter-ethnic encounters or inter-faith dialogue, which can help establish active bonds across group identities, but also promote respect for diversity and tolerance. As youth are particularly targeted for radicalisation by violent extremist actors, socialising youth towards multidimensional identities and civic engagement is of particular relevance.
- ***Take agency-limiting power structures into account.*** The power to act and proactively resist extremist tendencies is conditioned by existing power structures relating to a person's position and role within a community. For example, women might not be able to overcome the barriers to action that result from their gendered status in the community. The design of local programs ought to consider, and mitigate, such agency-limiting power dynamics in order fruitfully promote community resilience. This is recognised by UNSC Resolution 2242 (2015) which recommends interventions that challenge exclusionary patriarchal power dynamics and empower women's roles in communities and families in countering violent extremism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://peacewomen.org/SCR-2242>

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