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## Measuring Peace and Violent Extremism Voices from the Afghan Village

### Summary

- One of the few points of consensus in global debates about violent extremism is the problem of measurement. There are no agreed-upon metrics for what success in countering violent extremism (CVE) might be.
- When designing CVE programs in Afghanistan, policymakers and practitioners have often engaged in a top-down approach, consulting religious leaders, elders, local politicians, and other elites. Ordinary citizens at the village level are rarely consulted in a systematic way about the metrics to determine success or failure of programming.
- As policymakers and practitioners struggle to determine metrics for CVE, it is important to understand what indicators citizens use in their everyday lives and how they compare to measurements of peace and violence traditionally used by policymakers.
- In USIP's effort to identify the "everyday indicators" of peace in villages in two of Afghanistan's highly insecure provinces, the most frequently cited ones related to the ability of women and girls to move about safely in the community. The most frequently cited indicators of violent extremism were unemployment and gender-based violence.

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### Introduction

The Taliban now control or contest roughly a third of Afghanistan, and large-scale attacks, particularly in Kabul, are increasingly attributed to the Islamic State's Khorasan affiliate. In some areas, the Taliban has increased recruitment of child soldiers; yet even when children are not being used as soldiers, fighting between the Taliban and government forces has turned many of their schools into barracks.<sup>1</sup> In many parts of the country, violent extremism appears to be on the rise, threatening both security and development and disrupting the fabric of Afghan society.

The story behind these developments is not easy to understand. Peacebuilders and policymakers often struggle to define and delineate concepts such as insecurity, extremism, and violent extremism. Not surprisingly, they also frequently struggle to measure the effects of efforts to counter them. Many countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives are based on assumptions and theories of change that have not been tested in the real world, designed by experts importing theories from their respective fields.

Most of all, policymakers and peacebuilders are often unsure of exactly what to measure. Outcomes are frequently measured using proxy indicators such as “community cohesion,” “public

trust,” or “support for the use of violence,” which are then compared to a baseline value. Policymakers typically have very little insight into a community’s actual experience with violent extremism before designing a program to counter it, and do not take into consideration how *they* are measuring outcomes for *themselves*.

The problems with this kind of top-down approach suggest a question: What kind of approach to CVE might we come up with if we allowed ordinary people—the people directly affected by violent extremism and who benefit from programming to counter it—to determine what metrics should be used to measure the level of peacefulness or insecurity of their communities?

## A New Type of Metric: Everyday Peace Indicators

Pamina Firchow of George Mason University and Roger Mac Ginty of the University of Manchester developed an approach that identifies community-sourced indicators of change.<sup>2</sup> The Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) framework uses community-generated indicators to measure peacefulness based upon each community’s own standards of what constitutes peace.<sup>3</sup>

While traditional indicators of peace and conflict dynamics—for example, the number of violent acts committed, measurements of militarization or criminal activity, data on arms transfers and expenditures—are important for understanding macro-level changes, they may not accurately reflect local realities. In order to complement the picture gleaned from traditional data, the EPI framework asks people in affected communities to reflect on the conditions of peace and to identify the indicators they use to track changes in their everyday lives.

Participants in EPI focus groups frequently cite specific, personal indicators drawn from their everyday experiences: the ability to walk safely from a bus stop, the ability to sleep at home without fear of rebel attack, or the ability to access specific public services. Taken together, these indicators tell a story of what daily activities or events people reflect on when assessing the peacefulness of their community. Tracked over time, Everyday Peace Indicators can be used not just as a tool for measuring peace in a community but as a diagnostic tool for designing and implementing peacebuilding programs and for monitoring and evaluating those programs.

## EPI for CVE

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) adapted the EPI framework to work with roughly one thousand residents in eighteen villages in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. In focus group discussions with separate groups of men, women, and youth, participants discussed what peace and violent extremism meant to them and their communities. Participants then went on to brainstorm what indicators they use in their daily lives to determine whether their communities are more or less at peace or whether there is more or less violent extremism.

International organizations, constrained by an inability to reach an entire population, often rely on input from religious leaders, elders, local politicians, and other elites to understand the causes of violent extremism and to gauge the effectiveness of programs to counter it. The USIP project, by contrast, drew on the input of villagers—farmers, drivers, students, housemakers, traders, and local business owners. The project sought to understand what kind of picture emerges when the metrics are not subject to elite capture—that is, when villagers themselves instruct our understanding of the local dynamics of violent extremism. What we found was a nuanced picture. For example, in one district of Nangarhar, the Taliban erected roadblocks to extort travellers and dismantled educational facilities; thus, they were perceived by locals as generating insecurity. In another

district, however, the Taliban levied taxes and provided security to the community, ensuring that schools remain open and penalizing teachers for absenteeism.

Traditional CVE programs typically rely on a variety of quantifiable metrics—from the specific (such as “views” and “likes” a propaganda video gets online) to the broad (the number of terrorist attacks and the number of casualties from violent acts). Yet, in the communities where we conducted our research, villagers were more likely to derive their sense of peace and security from the visibility of relevant symbols—seeing the Taliban flag atop a neighboring mountain or TV antennas erected on village rooftops (both the Taliban and ISIS prohibit television in many of the areas they control). The metrics used were substantively different, and may provide a new way to measure impact.

A common community indicator for peace across districts in Nangarhar and Kunar was the visibility of women and girls—especially seeing them going to school and traveling to the market. This indicator was universally prioritized by men, women, and youth interviewees, implying that women’s mobility is equated with feelings of security across demographics. Similarly, the visibility of government officials, aid workers, and their families was an equally important and recurring indicator. Almost unanimously, participants in the EPI focus groups wanted to see government and aid workers carrying out their work and conducting their affairs without interruption. Interruptions of these activities particularly stood out as a top indicator of deteriorating security. Villagers were often able to identify who the family members and children of government officials were, and their ability to attend school and move about unharmed correlated with villagers’ own feelings of security. As one participant noted, “When senior government officials don’t visit our district frequently, that to me means the district is unsafe.”

One of the findings from USIP’s focus groups was that the concept of “violent extremism” is not really used by villagers in their daily lives. Instead, villagers tended to conflate other types of violence with violent extremism, and it took a lot of discussion and explanation in order to get them to the point of being able to identify indicators of violent extremism. For example, some villagers associated violent extremism with religious extremism and distorted interpretations of religious texts. These distortions were generally attributed to mullahs and other religious actors who were perceived as taking advantage of villagers who rely on them to translate Quranic verses and the Ahadith from Arabic into local languages.

Unemployment was raised repeatedly as an indicator of potential violent extremism. This result was particularly fascinating given the body of CVE research that debunks this correlation. For example, a 2015 Mercy Corp report found that “increases in employment and income did not lead to significant changes in youth support for armed opposition groups.”<sup>4</sup> Other reports, however, have raised concerns about the consequences of youth unemployment on security, with the United Nations Office for West Africa declaring that the problem “may well provoke instability.”<sup>5</sup> One potential theory to explore further is that the relationship between unemployment and different types of violence may exist, but the relationship is more nuanced than a simple economic correlation. Obviously, this dynamic does not manifest at the national level, or we would see the highest levels of violent extremism in the world’s poorest nations. USIP’s research in Nangarhar and Kunar found that where there is ongoing fighting and the presence of numerous armed groups, it appears that foot soldiers are more often hired than “radicalized,” suggesting that unemployment may represent a key driver of vulnerability for youth recruitment. Our application of the EPI framework in Afghanistan suggests it is worth revisiting the relationship between these variables.

Women in the focus groups were likely to identify domestic violence as an indicator of potential violent extremism. However, there was often disagreement as to which way the causality ran. While some interviewees attributed violent behavior, including domestic violence, to violent extremism, others suggested that domestic abusers were more likely to join armed groups. The causal link

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief presents observations from a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) project that applied the Everyday Peace Indicators framework to understand how ordinary Afghans assess peace and security in their communities and to identify factors that lead to violent extremism. Eliza Urwin is a former senior program officer at USIP, and Belquis Ahmadi is a senior program officer in USIP's Afghanistan program.

between domestic violence and violent extremism is underexplored. Intuitively, it is easier to use violence to resolve conflict and to dehumanize others when one already has a history of both. The broader link between gender-based violence and violent extremism is one that warrants further scrutiny.

Finally, one of the promising aspects of applying the EPI framework to formulate effective CVE programming is to identify ways in which local populations are already successfully countering violent extremism. In these villages where we conducted our research, younger and older men are overcoming Afghanistan's significant generational divide to work together in community watch groups to identify early signs of radicalization in vulnerable youth and to provide them with cultural and religious narratives to deal with their grievances. Within the watch groups, elders often have the wisdom of experience while youth have the specific understanding of how they are being recruited by violent groups and what their own points of vulnerability are.

## Conclusion

In its efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism and effectively address its citizens' security needs and concerns, the Afghan government needs to do more to consider the benchmarks and indicators of violence and violent extremism that are defined by locals, at village and district levels. Local governments must also include citizens in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of PVE (preventing violent extremism)/CVE programs and build upon successful existing and past local initiatives.

Countering violent extremism requires a multisector intervention—and that includes recognizing the influence and capacity of key stakeholders and credible voices. While this idea receives a great deal of attention in CVE circles, the question of who are key stakeholders and credible voices does not get its share of critical attention. Many programs partner almost exclusively with elites or those advised by elites. Religious scholars, cricket players, pundits, and elders have built careers as interlocutors to the international community and its many interventions without our understanding of their real impact locally. The importance of the EPI approach—beyond the metrics and granular understanding of locally effective mechanisms already in place—is that it provides insight into whose voices are truly effective at changing conditions for the better on the ground.



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## Notes

1. Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Events of 2016," in *World Report 2017* (New York: Seven Points Press, 2017), [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/wr2017-web.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf).
2. See Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, "Including Hard-to-Access Populations Using Mobile Phone Surveys and Participatory Indicators," October 3, 2017, *Sociological Methods & Research*, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0049124117729702>; Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, "Measuring Peace: Comparability, Commensurability, and Complementarity Using Bottom-Up Indicators," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017), 6–27.
3. For more on the Everyday Peace Indicators Project, see [www.everydaypeaceindicators.org](http://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org).
4. Mercy Corps, "Does Youth Employment Build Stability: Evidence from an Impact Evaluation of Vocational Training in Afghanistan" (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, January 2015), [www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps\\_AfghanistanINVEST\\_ImpactEvaluation\\_2015.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_AfghanistanINVEST_ImpactEvaluation_2015.pdf).
5. United Nations Office for West Africa, "Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurities in West Africa" (Dakar, Senegal: United Nations, December 2005), <http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00010742:8de28423f6ac2b75b046035fbd5f643f.pdf>.