

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Excerpt from the
UNDG Guidance Note on Human
Rights for Resident Coordinators
and UN Country Teams

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Human Rights and the Prevention of Violent Extremism*

Key points and messages that the Resident Coordinator should know about the issue

- While there is no universally accepted definition of ‘violent extremism’ any definition must be consistent with Member States’ obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law.
- To be effective, national PVE measures, including strategies and plans, must respect the principle of non-discrimination and address injustices.
- Member States should address the circumstances in which violent extremism may flourish, including a deeper appreciation of the linkage between a lack of respect for human rights and the conditions conducive to violent extremism.
- Adopting gender-sensitive approaches is a prerequisite and entails an analysis of how women’s human rights are impacted by terrorism/violent extremism and the responses to these phenomena, as well as the role that women can play in prevention efforts. Any engagement should be defined by interventions that promote and protect women’s human rights, utilizing the international human rights framework and the women, peace and security agenda.
- Restrictions to the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief need to strictly comply with international law. The complex issue of drawing the demarcation line between freedom of expression and incitement to violence, hatred and discrimination needs to be taken into account, in particular in legal frameworks and criminal justice.
- Responses ought not disproportionately impact particular racial, ethnic and religious groups, and racial or religious profiling in policing or law enforcement must be avoided, as it is not only counter to human rights laws, but undermines preventive efforts. Understanding and addressing endemic discrimination, particularly within judicial systems and law enforcement/policing, is critical. Poverty and a lack of economic opportunity fuel violent extremism, therefore efforts are needed to combat social exclusion and marginalization while enhancing respect for economic, social and cultural rights.

Relevant international standards

- The international community has committed to adopting measures that ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism through the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by the General Assembly in its resolution 60/288 (2006). Member States have resolved to take measures aimed at addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, including lack of rule of law and violations of human rights, and ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with their obligations under international law, in particular human rights law, refugee law and international humanitarian law. Biennial review resolutions have confirmed and strengthened this commitment and added the importance of the gender dimension in these efforts.[\[1\]](#)
- The 2016 Secretary-General Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (A/70/674, 2015) emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to countering terrorism and violent extremism that goes beyond “law enforcement, military or security measures to address development, good governance, human rights and humanitarian concerns”. That approach includes addressing conditions conducive to violent extremism and terrorism and the human rights and gender dimensions of that issue.[\[2\]](#)
- Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/RES/30/15[\[3\]](#) on human rights and preventing and countering violent extremism, Member States contains human rights guidance for the UN on the subject. The related Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and preventing and countering violent extremism (A/HRC/33/29, 2016) provides examples of relevant issues and approaches.[\[4\]](#)

- The UN’s work in the area of countering violent extremism, human rights and gender is also guided by Security Council resolutions 1624 (2005), 2178 (2014), and 2242 (2015).[\[5\]](#)

Role that the Resident Coordinator and UN Country Team can play in promoting the issue

- Support to Member States in bringing their PVE efforts in line with Member States’ obligations international human rights law, including by engaging with the UN human rights mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review, human rights treaty bodies and special procedures. Country teams could focus on facilitating dialogues on preventing violent extremism rather than on defining terminology per se. They can work with Member States to avoid the use of sweeping definitions or conflating words with action.
- If support is provided, the RC and UN country teams need to ensure that responses to violent extremism, terrorism and related threats do not unduly restrict legitimate activities and adversely impact on legitimate activities of persons within their jurisdiction, including journalists, human rights defenders, women’s organization and civil society in general. In promoting human rights standards and the rule of law, and analyzing the potential negative and differential impact on different parts of society, they can support Member States to work to reframe the narrative on PVE to a more positive agenda focused on fostering inclusion, peace and tolerance.
- The UN country teams can use their convening power to encourage Member States to ensure public participation when legislative and policy measures to prevent and counter violent extremism are developed. This includes engagement of local communities and non-governmental actors, national human rights institutions and independent oversight bodies and it entails building capacities of such actors and empowering youth, families, and women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and others, to participate in such efforts and in countering recruitment to commit acts of violent extremism and promoting social inclusion and cohesion. UN country teams should actively support the preservation of civil society space in general and, in particular, in efforts of PVE. Effective avenues for civic participation contribute to societal cohesion and give voice to people including minorities and those at the margins of society.
- RCs and UN country teams may need to advocate that any restrictions to the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief must strictly comply with international law, and the need to draw a human rights based demarcation line between freedom of expression and incitement to violence, hatred and discrimination must be taken into account, in particular in legal frameworks and criminal justice
- Given that poverty and a lack of economic opportunity fuel violent extremism, UN country teams can help shape discourse and action that working jointly to combat social exclusion and marginalization while enhancing respect for economic, social and cultural rights is an effective prevention measures require that all pillars of the UN work closely together and that UN actors sharpen their policy framework and analytical tools for understanding conditions on the ground.
- UN country teams will need to ensure that PVE measures integrate a gender-sensitive approach, including analysis of how women’s human rights are impacted by terrorism/violent extremism and the responses to these phenomena, and give specific attention to the powerful role that women can play as advocates against violent extremism. The women, peace and security agenda is an important framework to address root causes of violent extremism as it is founded on the importance of women’s participation, leadership and empowerment in conflict resolution, peace building and reconstruction efforts, and aims at demilitarization, disarmament and the prevention of armed conflict.
- The UN in country will need to establish clear messages on the UN’s “red line” issues when it comes to PVE efforts and be cautious about relabeling development work as PVE. Although this stream of work

is attracting a lot of resources, such labeling can be counter-productive, and may do more harm if certain groups or individuals are stigmatized.

- The UN System – both at HQ and in countries – will need to enhance their analytical capacities and expertise for the development of more comprehensive strategies that can address the root causes of violent extremism, including by engaging with the UN human rights mechanisms and national human rights actors, e.g. NHRIs. They should build better information management systems that act as early warning on closing of political space and escalations of human rights violations and develop strategies anchored in joined up analysis such as the HRuF Regional Quarterly Review to address underlying causes.

Support and tools available from the United Nations system

- [OHCHR Fact Sheet No. 32. Human Rights, Terrorism, and Counter-Terrorism](#)
- [OHCHR website on violent extremism](#)
- [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism](#), in particular A/70/371 (civil society) and A/64/211 (gender)

[1] See http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/288.

[2] See http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

[3] See http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/30/15.

[4] See http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/33/29.

[5] See http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/33/29 for all Security Council resolutions.

**This two-pager was developed by UN Women & UNDP based on the “Frontier Dialogues” on emerging human rights issues launched in 2016 by the former UNDG Human Rights Working Group with members taking the lead on specific issues. These messages were approved by the UNDG and have been incorporated into the UNDG Guidance Note on Human Rights for Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams.*