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## **Journey of young Africans into violent extremism marked by poverty and deprivation: UNDP**

***Based on hundreds of interviews with extremists, first-of-its-kind study pinpoints key factors triggering decisions to join violent extremist groups in Africa***

*New York, USA, 7 September 2017* – Deprivation and marginalization, underpinned by weak governance, are primary forces driving young Africans into violent extremism, according to a comprehensive new study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – the first study of its kind.

Based on interviews with 495 voluntary recruits to extremist organizations such as Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, the new study also found that it is often perceived state violence or abuse of power that provides the final tipping point for the decision to join an extremist group.

*Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* presents the results of a two-year UNDP Africa study on recruitment in the most prominent extremist groups in Africa.

The study reveals a picture of a frustrated individual, marginalized and neglected over the course of his life, starting in childhood. With few economic prospects or outlets for meaningful civic participation that can bring about change, and little trust in the state to either provide services or respect human rights, the study suggests, such an individual could, upon witnessing or experiencing perceived abuse of power by the state, be tipped over the edge into extremism.

“This study sounds the alarm that as a region, Africa’s vulnerability to violent extremism is deepening,” said UNDP Africa Director Abdoulaye Mar Dieye at the launch today at the United Nations headquarters. “Borderlands and peripheral areas remain isolated and under-served. Institutional capacity in critical areas is struggling to keep pace with demand. More than half the population lives below the poverty line, including many chronically underemployed youth.”

“Delivering services, strengthening institutions, creating pathways to economic empowerment – these are development issues,” Mr. Dieye added. “There is an urgent need to bring a stronger development focus to security challenges.”

The study distills the conditions and factors that shape the dynamics of the recruitment process, prompting some individuals to gravitate toward extremism, where the vast majority of others do not.

### **ELEMENTS OF A JOURNEY**

Participants in the study were asked about their family circumstances, including childhood and education; religious ideologies; economic factors; state and citizenship; and finally, the ‘tipping point’ to joining a group.

Based on the responses to those questions, the study has determined that:

- The majority of recruits come from borderlands or peripheral areas that have suffered generations of marginalization and report having had less parental involvement growing up.
- Most recruits express frustration at their economic conditions, with employment the most acute need at the time of joining a group. Recruits also indicate an acute sense of grievance towards government: 83 percent believe that government looks after only the interests of a few, and over 75 percent place no trust in politicians or in the state security apparatus.
- Recruitment in Africa occurs mostly at the local, person-to-person level, rather than online, as is the case in other regions – a factor that may alter the forms and patterns of recruitment as connectivity improves.
- Some 80 percent of recruits interviewed joined within a year of introduction to the violent extremist group – and nearly half of these joined within just one month.
- In terms of exiting a violent extremist group, most interviewees who surrendered or sought amnesty did so after losing confidence in the ideology, leadership or actions of their group.

### **GOVERNMENT ACTION AS THE TIPPING POINT**

In one of the study’s most striking findings, 71 percent of recruits interviewed said that it was some form of government action that was the ‘tipping point’ that triggered their final decision to join an extremist group.

The actions most often cited were government action including killing or arrest of a family member or friend.

### **RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR EDUCATION AS RESILIENCE**

The study also sheds further light on the nuanced role of religion as a motive for extremism.

The data shows that contrary to popular narratives, those who join extremist groups tend to have lower levels of religious or formal education and less understanding of the meaning of religious texts.

Although more than half of respondents cited religion as a reason for joining an extremist group, 57 percent of respondents also admitted to understanding little to nothing of the religious texts or interpretations, or not reading religious texts at all.

Indeed, the study suggests that actually understanding one's religion can strengthen resilience to the pull of extremism: among those interviewed, receiving at least six years of religious schooling was shown to reduce the likelihood of joining an extremist group by as much as 32 percent.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS, RULE OF LAW, LOCAL INTERVENTION**

The study calls on governments to reassess militarized responses to extremism in the light of respect for the rule of law and human rights commitments.

Among the study's key recommendations is intervention at the local level, including through support to community-led initiatives aimed at social cohesion, and amplifying the voices of local religious leaders who advocate tolerance and cohesiveness.

However, the study cautions that these initiatives must be spearheaded by trusted local actors.

“What we know for sure is that in the African context, the counter-extremist messenger is as important as the counter-extremist message,” said Mr. Dieye. “That trusted local voice is also essential to reducing the sense of marginalization that can increase vulnerability to recruitment.”

### **SURVIVORS BOOK**

To underscore awareness of the human cost of violent extremism, a new book and photo exhibit have been produced to accompany the study, a reminder of the devastating final consequences of the journey to extremism.

*Survivors: Stories of survivors of violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa* features photographs and stories documented in 2016 across six African countries that have been directly affected by violent extremism – Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda.

UNDP estimates that some 33,300 people in Africa have lost their lives to violent extremist attacks between 2011 and early 2016. Boko Haram's operations alone have resulted in the deaths of at least 17,000 people and contributed to the displacement of a further 2.8 million people in the Lake Chad region. Violent extremist attacks have also impacted tourism and foreign direct investment in countries such as Kenya and Nigeria.

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**On Twitter:** @UNDP, @UNDPAfrica, #PVEAfrica, #PreventVE, #EndExtremism

*All materials are available at [journeytoextremism@undp.org](mailto:journeytoextremism@undp.org),*

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#### **ABOUT THE STUDY:**

***Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment** is a product of the UNDP programme Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in Africa: A Development Approach. Launched in 2015, the programme aims to contribute to preventing and responding to the growth of violent extremism across the continent through a development lens.*

#### **ABOUT UNDP:**

*UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in some 177 countries and territories, we offer a global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations.*