

Abu Dhabi Memorandum on Good Practices for Education and Countering Violent Extremism

Background

This non-binding good practices document¹ focuses on the ways in which education can be used as a resource and a tool by policymakers, teachers and educators, community-based and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and families and parents to prevent and counter violent extremism. Education can be leveraged as a tool to achieve both beneficial and harmful results in the context of violent extremism. Therefore, governments, civil society, and the private sector should work together to identify the myriad ways in which education can be utilized to build resilience and reduce recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism.

The starting point for the effective role of education in countering violent extremism (CVE) is access to and protection of schools as a safe space - both physically and intellectually. Because education is a universal value, educational environments can be a space for CVE interventions that are effective across cultures and contexts. As with any CVE programming, CVE educational interventions are only relevant if they address the local push and pull factors leading to radicalization and recruitment. Quality education alone is not sufficient

for CVE, but it can broadly enable results-based CVE efforts in the education sector.

The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) identified education as one of its priorities in the GCTF CVE Working Group inaugural meeting in April 2012 in Abu Dhabi. Since that time, Hedayah and other GCTF partners have organized a number of experts' workshops, training sessions, and other activities which focused on the role of education in CVE.

The good practices in this document draw from the discussions and recommendations that emerged from these activities, the existing literature related to CVE and education, and in consultation with relevant experts. The primary focus of this document is on how CVE policies and programs can be developed at the primary and secondary school levels, with limited references to higher education. Although it has been widely recognized that educational institutions can be utilized as a radicalizing tool, the purpose of this document is to provide concrete options for how education can be utilized in a positive way to prevent and counter violent extremism without securitizing the education sector. The list below is not meant to be an exhaustive one, but rather a starting point to

illustrate various education approaches to CVE.

GCTF members will support the implementation of the following good practices with the subsequent development of an Action Agenda to provide guidance to interested States on tailored application and implementation.

Good Practices

General Practices for CVE and Education

Good Practice 1—Use a multi-sectoral approach to enhance the effectiveness of CVE interventions through education.

CVE and education involve multiple sectors of society, including government, the private sector, NGOs, media, civil society, families, and communities. Encouraging dialogue between educational institutions and these stakeholders on CVE programming—from the conduct of needs-assessments, design of programs, implementation and evaluation—helps ensure sustainability of effort.

Good Practice 2—Promote dialogue and collaboration between the education and security sectors to increase political attention and resources devoted to CVE and education.

Where appropriate, the security and education sectors can work together through educational programming² National CVE strategies, which include an education component, may help to

promote the necessary dialogue to achieve this cross-sectoral collaboration.

Good Practice 3—Consider semantics when labeling educational programs as “countering violent extremism” to avoid securitizing the education sector.

Labels are important for how a program is perceived. Integrating CVE activities into existing educational programming may help to overcome this stigma.

Good Practice 4—Initiate CVE interventions through education as early as possible.

Primary and secondary school years are an appropriate time to consider such interventions; many cognitive skills relevant to value formation, critical thinking, and tolerance are developed in early childhood. Parents and family members may be relevant actors in early CVE interventions, particularly those that shape values related to prejudice, hatred, or violence.

Good Practice 5—Use existing empirical evidence to provide the basis for educational curricula development that addresses violent extremism and conduct further research to identify the gaps in knowledge on how education is relevant to studying conditions that lead to violent extremism.

Relevant empirical studies from the fields of psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience, as well as crime and violence prevention, theories of learning, the development sector, and conflict resolution, offer useful lessons applicable to CVE interventions. These studies also indicate

the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to CVE and education. Universities, private research institutions, NGOs, and civil society actors may also have access to data and studies that are useful to curricula development or as evidence for justifying curricula reform. Further baseline research, such as needs-assessments, perceptions' studies, analyses of existing education literature and statistics, and the development and assessment of pilot programs, is important for program design, particularly monitoring and evaluation, and ultimately to demonstrating results and impact of interventions on students.

Educational Approaches

Some of the following approaches to educational curricula development for CVE may already exist in certain educational systems for reasons unrelated to CVE. On the other hand, the existence of such curricula does not always mean that recruitment and radicalization into violent extremism are reduced in all contexts.

Good Practice 6—Emphasize in curricula the concepts of problem-solving and the examination of issues through a “gray” lens as opposed to a black-and-white lens.

Such critical thinking skills are useful for challenging violent extremist messages because they reveal the multiple ways of approaching an issue other than the use of violence. These skills are most effective when integrated at an early age—university level engagement is often too late.

Good Practice 7—Increase and

expand on curricula that emphasize civic education, civic responsibility and human values.

Civic education provides youth with a framework for a collective civic identity and therefore fosters tolerance and the willingness to negotiate and compromise. To be most effective, civic education and its related values must be relevant to the local context and culture. It is also important to consider how best to highlight the value of civic education in light of a greater demand for math, science, engineering, and medicine rather than social sciences and humanities.

Good Practice 8—Offer opportunities for vocational and technical training and emphasize the development of life skills.

In places where economic motivations to radicalization to violence are operative, vocational and technical training can build resilience in youth who may be recruited or radicalized to violence. This training can build their self-confidence, empowering them to choose a positive, productive alternative using their technical skills. Life skills can also build resilience by bolstering individuals' ability to solve problems, think critically, make decisions, communicate, and build interpersonal relationships. These skills all help students identify and implement peaceful solutions to conflict while resisting the lure to violence.

Good Practice 9—Relate CVE issues to existing social issues already included in educational curricula.

Linking the issue of violent extremism

to other issues already being discussed in curricula, such as gang violence, drugs and alcohol, trauma, and bullying, may make it more relevant and accessible to students.

Good Practice 10—Address the role of trauma and ways to build resilience to it in an educational setting.

Traumatic experiences, especially those involving violence, have been shown to be a destabilizing catalyst that can create vulnerabilities and render traumatized individuals susceptible to recruitment and radicalization to violence. Addressing trauma may especially be relevant in the context of refugee populations or conflict/post-conflict situations.

Institutional Approaches

Schools

Good Practice 11—Incorporate experiential, hands-on learning opportunities in regular classroom curricula.

Schools can provide opportunities for students to apply critical thinking and civic education lessons in real-life settings such as volunteer opportunities or other school projects. Development of skill sets that build resilience to violent extremism can be more effective if the learning comes from direct experience.

Good Practice 12—Provide mechanisms for addressing grievances of students in an open and safe way.

Schools may also consider training their teachers on how to effectively engage in debates with students on sensitive topics

in ways that do not further radicalize an individual, or leave them more susceptible to recruitment. Schools may also instruct students on strategies for controlling emotions and channeling anger in constructive ways. Appropriate strategies for managing anger may help individuals express grievances non-violently.

Good Practice 13—Consider providing incentives for parents for ongoing school enrollment, and ensure all children have access to education.

In many contexts, youth who do not have access to education or formal schooling, or who choose to forgo education, may be susceptible to recruitment and radicalization to violence. Providing incentives to parents to ensure school enrollment and address dropout rates, where locally relevant, may help in reducing the number of susceptible individuals that could be recruited into violent extremism.

Government

Good Practice 14—Train teachers on how to understand and manage their own inherent biases.

Teachers and educators should be made aware of the messages they are conveying to students, including unintentional messages. Training teachers on behaviors, words, and practices for reducing violence in the classroom may also help reduce violent extremism.

Good Practice 15—Train teachers to detect early signs of radicalization to violence.

When trained and equipped with the tools to counter violent extremism, teachers can be important partners in preventing recruitment and radicalization to violence. It is important to provide educators with a point of contact with appropriate authorities if they detect signs of radicalization to violence among their students. However, it is important to ensure that schools do not become information-collecting institutions. This may also undermine the teacher's standing and relationship with students, genuine efforts to protect students, and broader community trust.

Good Practice 16—Structure educational institutions to integrate segregated communities and educate children of different communities together.

Feelings of marginalization and alienation can render individuals vulnerable and make them more susceptible to the sense of belonging that a violent extremist group may offer. Integrating educational institutions can enhance cross-community trust, thereby helping to alleviate marginalization, raise awareness of diversity, increase tolerance, and allow students to overcome tensions fostered by unfamiliarity with other communities.

Private Sector

Good Practice 19—Engage the private sector through relevant corporate social responsibility mandates and emphasize how violent extremism can negatively affect profits while highlighting the benefits of educational opportunities for youth.

The private sector has a range of tools and resources it can use to support the government and schools in their endeavor to reform school curricula and to build resilience to recruitment and prevent radicalization to violence. It may be of use to emphasize the link between unemployment and violent extremism, and highlight the positive effect of increasing the vocational and technical capacities of youth and encouraging entrepreneurship.

Media and Technology

Good Practice 20—Engage the media to offer ways of advancing educational approaches to CVE in a formal and informal setting.

The media can offer youth alternative ways to receive educational lessons, such as through TV shows, movies, cartoons, games, comic books, radio, and SMS services. In a formal setting, such as schools, the use of media can be a powerful and effective tool to help impart values and can supplement teacher lectures with engaging material. In an informal setting, they can likewise be an effective means of amplifying key narratives and values while still offering engaging, yet innocuous, programming. Media programs and platforms for CVE should also be well-researched in terms of the local values, culture, and methods to reach the target audience effectively and appropriately.

Good Practice 21—Consider adapting existing gaming technologies and tools that build skills to countering violent

extremism.

Current online and video games can help build positive skill sets that assist with character-building and can help mitigate violent tendencies; such techniques can be adapted to the context of building resilience to violent extremism.

Family-Based and Community Approaches

Good Practice 22—Involve youth in the development of educational programming related to CVE.

Youth are often perceptive of the conditions that lead their peers to radicalization and recruitment, and can shape CVE programs creatively and in ways that are relevant to their cohort. Research also shows that youth often listen to their peers as much as or more than adults.

Good Practice 23—Engage community leaders in education to raise awareness of violent extremism and effective techniques to counter it.

Community leaders can be broadly influential beyond schools. Such figures can help to amplify and coordinate narratives to counter violent extremism in their communities, leveraging various platforms, with the lessons that are taught in formal educational settings.

Good Practice 24—Offer opportunities for families to receive training on countering violent extremism and ways in which to build resilience in their families. When possible, it can also be useful to train

parents on identifying the early warning signs of radicalization to violence so that they can help counter it at home. Where feasible, schools can be physical settings for educating families and parents directly via other existing programs such as literacy and vocational programs. It is important to provide families with a point of contact with appropriate authorities if they detect signs of radicalization to violence.

Good Practice 25—Interact with families to reinforce lessons learned in formal educational settings that build resilience to violent extremism.

Raising awareness of school lessons with families can help to reinforce the same concepts at home, and provide opportunities for practical application. This might be done through the formation of parent-teacher organizations within schools.

Sports, Arts and Cultural Approaches

Good Practice 26—Incorporate sports, arts, and/or cultural programs in order to build secondary effects of CVE programs, especially in a youth population.

Sports, arts, and culture can provide students opportunities to work within local groups and teams, and develop constructive goals and skills. There are many good practices that can be derived from existing peace building initiatives working on conflict transformation, mediation, youth empowerment, that show how sports, arts and cultural programs can be powerful and effective tools for building resilience. This

is especially the case when such programs are integrated into broader, comprehensive programs for CVE and education, utilize deliberate strategies and theories of change, and are carried out with certain professional standards. Arts and cultural programs can help build cross-cultural understanding and trust. When using sports as part of CVE programming, it is important

to avoid the potential negative effects of sports, however. Competition inherent in some sports programs may have negative effects if this competition leads to violence. CVE programs may address these potential negative effects through coaching and mentoring strategies incorporated into program design.

Endnotes

1 This document was drafted and developed in cooperation with Hedayah.

2 Other opportunities for collaboration include community-oriented policing efforts, good practices on which are further elaborated in the *GCTF Good Practices on Community Engagement and Community-Oriented Policing as Tools to Counter Violent Extremism* and in the *GCTF Doha Action Plan for Community-Oriented Policing in a CVE Context*.