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In the Eye of the Storm: Building Resilient Communities to Resist the Operations of Violent Extremist Organisations in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which local communities in Ghana are resistant to the activities of violent extremist groups. In order to situate the discussions in community resilience, we first provided a catalogue of the country's external and internal sources of vulnerabilities from the activities of violent extremist groups. Subsequently, we examined the unique roles of various actors and existing structures at the community, national and regional levels and their potential contributions to building and maintaining resilience. Overall, our main goal is to shed some light on the risk factors that have the potential to predispose the country to violent attacks as well as community structures for establishing and strengthening resilience in order to inform strategies that enhance community resilience and promote inclusive, sustainable approaches to preventing violent extremism.

Keywords: violent extremism, community resilience, women, youth, Accra Initiative.

Introduction

While the central Sahel remains the epicentre of terrorism globally¹, the influence of violent extremist organisations continues to grow across coastal West African countries. In Nigeria, Benin and Togo, which are the hardest hit countries across coastal West Africa in terms of recorded incidents of attacks from violent extremist groups², it is reported that the activities of Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), in particular, 'presents a deliberate and strategic expansion rather than mere spillover'.³ These operations of violent extremist organisations (VEOs) continue to undermine the capacity of states in West Africa to govern. This is because VEOs are not only emboldened by their political, military and economic interests, they have also formed reciprocal, and in some instances, symbiotic relationships with their support bases in local communities. The combined effects of the activities of these violent extremist organisations and their local support bases have contributed to the creation of vulnerable environments conducive for extremist activities to thrive. In Ghana, some border communities have come under some strain from the activities of violent extremist groups operating in the region. There is a strong suspicion that some extremists might have infiltrated through the country's borders, while others may be using some border and other nearby communities as transit points, safe havens and for sourcing and transporting logistics such as arms, recruits and funds.⁴ Though Ghana has been spared attacks, vulnerabilities exist which have the potential to predispose the country to violent attacks. What is the country's national response strategy? How resistant are local communities to the activities of violent extremist organisations? What groups contribute to building and maintaining resilient structures? This paper discusses the issue of community resilience from two angles: (a) reference to national mechanisms and, (b) groups and institutions and the extent of their contributions to the establishment and deepening of community resilience.

Sources of Potential Vulnerabilities to Violent Extremism in Ghana

Ghana's resistance and status as one of the countries within the sub-region with no record of violent extremist attacks may be tested by several potential sources of vulnerability. These factors could undermine Ghana's stability and security if left unaddressed.

Violent Extremism Risk Mapping for Ghana

Threat Area	External Sources	Internal Sources
Cross-border extremist groups	Spillover from violent extremist groups (VEGS) based in the Sahel often using porous borders for infiltration, migration of refugees, cross border socio-cultural, economic and political ties	Reports of Ghanaians trained or recruited with terrorist groups, and returnee recruitment in the Sahel and ISIS ⁵
Cross-border criminal activities	Cross-border trafficking of SALW from conflict zones in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger	Local manufacture and proliferation of arms and light weapons (SALW)
Socioeconomic grievances	Strains on host communities from the inflow of migrants fleeing extremist attacks from neighbouring countries, creating friction between host communities and migrants	High youth unemployment, poverty, and unresolved inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts
Propaganda	External propaganda, ideological outreach via digital platforms, regional narratives for violent extremism across West Africa	Localised misinformation (Bawku), social media mobilisation through WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok
Governance and institutional weakness	Weak border security coordination in ECOWAS, underfunded cross-border intelligence sharing	Distrust in police/policing, chieftaincy political corruption, citizen reliance on vigilantes, weak justice delivery system

Authors' Compilation, 2025.

Geopolitical Factors

The Institute of Economics and Peace's 2025 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) indicates that the Sahel accounted for over 50 per cent of all deaths from terrorism globally making it the most affected region globally. Burkina Faso remains the country most impacted by terrorism. This is because a fifth of all terrorism deaths globally occurred in the country.⁶ Meanwhile, violent extremist groups such as JNIM continue to expand their activities across coastal West Africa. Togo, for instance, recorded its worst year of terrorism in 2024, with 10 attacks and 52 deaths.⁷ Due to Ghana's proximity to the core Sahelian states (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and coastal West African countries such as Togo, Benin and La Cote d'Ivoire who all experienced attacks from violent extremist groups, the spillover of the threats from that part of the region has intensified the risk of violent extremism in Ghana. JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are reported to be operating some 50 km from Ghana's border with Burkina Faso.⁸ The GTI also indicates that attacks from these two

¹Institute for Economics & Peace. (2022). *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the impact of terrorism*. Sydney.

²Eizenga, D., & Nguangnon, A. (2024, July 22). *Recalibrating Coastal West Africa's Response to Violent Extremism*. *Africa Security Brief* (No. 43). Retrieved from <https://africacenter.org/publication/asb43en-recalibrating-multitiered-stabilization-strategy-coastal-west-africa-response-violent-extremism/>

³Nsaibia, H. (2024, December 12). *The Sahel and Coastal West Africa*. *Conflict Watchlist 2025*. Retrieved from <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/sahel-and-coastal-west-africa/>

⁴Aning, K., & Amedzrator, L. (2022). *Beneath the Seeming Resilience: Assessing Ghana's Vulnerabilities to Threats from Violent Extremist Groups*. KAIPTC.

⁵Muqthar, M. M. (2022). *The Threat of Violent Extremism to Coastal States: Ghana's Exposure to Violent Extremism*. WACCE. Retrieved from <https://waccegh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Ghanas-Exposure-to-Violent-Extremism-WACCE-May-2022.pdf>

⁶Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025, March). *Global Terrorism Index: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Retrieved from <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>

⁷Ibid.

⁸The Signal Room. (2023, April 21). *Ghana – Let's talk about Bawku*. Retrieved from <https://www.thesignalroom.com/ghana-lets-talk-about-bawku-236056119-1842092068/>

groups are concentrated along the borders.⁹ These reports have raised questions about the extent to which violent extremist groups could infiltrate the numerous unapproved borders and entry points of the border communities in the country in order to perpetrate their violent activities.

Research by Small Arms Survey reveals that Ghana is making efforts towards border surveillance 'by permanently deploying the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons staff at key border posts to enhance cooperation with security agencies such as immigration, customs, the Economic and Organised Crime Office (EOCO), and national security while ensuring immediate notification of weapons seizures'.¹⁰ Yet, weak patrol capacity, limited surveillance infrastructure, poor security architectures have compounded the risk of infiltration¹¹. Additionally, violent extremist groups are known to exploit on social capital established through cultural ties with local communities in order to advance their strategic goals. In Ghana, familial and ethnic ties exist across the country's borders. For instance, the Fulbe cut across the Sahel, Maghreb and parts of Ghana, there are the Mossis in Ghana and Burkina Faso, the Konkombas in Ghana and Togo, the Ewes in Ghana, Togo and Benin as well as the Kanuri people in Nigeria and Niger. Due to these pre-existing ties, residents in these border communities move across the borders to engage in social and economic activities such as funerals, marriage and naming ceremonies. Cross-border movements across unmonitored border routes are also used to facilitate transnational criminal activities such as arms smugglings and human trafficking¹².

Further, the increased population displacement from the Sahelian countries and the movement of migrants has heightened the country's vulnerability. The country's relative stability, proximity and cultural ties have facilitated the movement of migrants from different parts of the Sahel across its borders to host communities especially in the five northern regions of Ghana. Statistics from UNHCR's Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa reveals that as at December 2024, there were about 17,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Sahel who are staying in Ghana¹³. A 2023 report¹⁴ also shows that some 4,000 Burkinabes

have fled their country to seek asylum in Ghana due to violent attacks by violent extremist groups. It is believed that these migrants entered the country through border towns in the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana.¹⁵

The movement of people puts enormous pressure on the availability of arable land, which is becoming increasingly scarce due to demographic pressure, land grabbing, and the adverse effects of climate change. There is the tendency that the settlement of these migrants will exacerbate simmering resource-based conflicts related to land access and the migration of farmers and herders in the North (Ghana). The converging factors, such as poor monitoring of the country's borders, cultural ties and cross-border movements have raised suspicions about the infiltration or external penetration of the country's borders of not only refugees and asylum seekers but also suspected criminals. These threats are, however, being countered through Ghana's efforts in actively enhancing its counter-terrorism capabilities, particularly through the establishment of specialised units and the procurement of surveillance equipment for border security.¹⁶ The Ministry of National Security plays a central role in coordinating these efforts by developing a comprehensive national security strategy and overseeing intelligence agencies.

Internally, a clear manifestation of vulnerabilities that can be exploited by violent extremist groups to drive their operations exist. This next section will focus on factors such as inter-ethnic tensions, poverty, youth unemployment and marginalisation, institutional weakness and resource-based conflicts.

a. Inter-ethnic Tensions

In Ghana, pockets of inter-ethnic tensions exist in different communities. The current spotlight is on the tensions between the Mamprusis and Kusasis (referred to as the Bawku Conflict) which dates back to the 1980s. The conflict was reignited in 2021 following sporadic shooting by both camps (Kusasi and Mamprusi) resulting in a number of deaths, the destruction of properties and the displacement of some sections of the population. Recent clashes were sparked by plans by the Mamprusis to: (a) perform the final funeral rites of the late Tampuri Alhaji Adam

⁹Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025, March). *Global Terrorism Index: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Retrieved from <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>

¹⁰Chounet-Cambas, L., Henry, A., & Joly, J. (2025, April). National Action Plans As Tools For Effective Small Arms Control: Lessons from West Africa. *Briefing Paper*. Retrieved from <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-2025-West-Africa-NAPs-EN.pdf>

¹¹Interview with official of a civil society organization in Tamale, June 2024

¹²Ibid.

¹³UNHCR. (2025). *West and Central Africa: Ghana*. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/ghana>

¹⁴Ministry of Interior. (2023, February 23). *High-level dialogue on Burkinabe Refugees in Ghana held in Accra*. Retrieved from <https://www.mint.gov.gh/high-level-dialogue-on-burkinabe-refugees-in-ghana-held-in-accra/>

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Ministry of national security,(2022) Annual report for the parliament of Ghana, available at <https://ir.parliament.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/3152/Ministry%20of%20National%20Security%2C%20Ghana%20Annual%20Report%20for%20the%20Parliament%20of%20Ghana%201st%20January%20to%2031st%20December%2C%202022.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=1>

Zangbeogo [recognised by the Mamprusis as the Bawku Naba (overlord)] and, celebrate the Damba Festival. The Kusasis refused to allow the Mamprusis to perform the funeral rites because they maintain that the intention of the Mamprusis is to enskin a new regent, which will mean two overlords laying claim to the skin.

Compared to previous conflicts, the current confrontations between the two ethnic groups which started in 2021 has raised concerns about the use of sophisticated weapons such as automatic, high-calibre rifles by both conflict parties.¹⁷ Other concerns include the possible infiltration of criminal actors such as violent extremist groups, the number of fatalities recorded so far and the duration of the confrontations, which has lasted for more than a year compared to previous ones, which lasted a few days.¹⁸ The persistent perception of the State or other groups being hostile or indirectly discriminating against some communities exposes them to narratives and ideologies that can escalate tensions and support extremist radicalisation and recruitment.

b. Poverty, Youth Unemployment and Marginalisation

Persisting internal vulnerabilities such as poverty, high youth unemployment rates and politics of exclusion and marginalisation in Ghana, predispose the youth to radicalisation and violent extremism.¹⁹ A 2022 UNDP report²⁰ indicated that across all five regions, poverty and unemployment are ever-present and considered critical factors and causes for possible violent extremism. This report further states that due to unemployment and high poverty levels, even for those with education, people are willing to accept anything that is offered, and the sense of frustration can lead to seduction and incentives to think otherwise.²¹ Economic deprivation and marginalisation in the northern parts of the country breeds frustration and resentment that make individuals more susceptible to extremist ideologies that promise change or offer financial support.²² Another key area of focus

regarding vulnerabilities to violent extremism in Ghana is that of adventurism or youth radicalisation. Social media and other online platforms have enhanced the vulnerabilities of young people by providing easy access to extremist narratives and facilitating the process of radicalisation. In the Ghanaian context, these compound the vulnerability of young people, who may then pursue alternative paths, such as joining extremist groups, and finding a sense of stability, security and significance or purpose.

c. Institutional Weakness

A 2024 Afrobarometer survey indicates that key public officials, the Police, the Presidency, tax officials, members of Parliament (MPs), judges and magistrates are most widely perceived as corrupt.²³ The survey also reveals a decline in public confidence to report corruption for 'fear of retaliation or other negative consequences'.²⁴ The seeming shielding of corrupt officials from prosecution while 'petty' criminals are imprisoned for offences such as 'stealing a fowl' has worsened these perceptions.²⁵ In the past, there have been some attempts to gag people who want to go on demonstrations to vent their frustrations by sometimes taking them through long procedures.²⁶ Perceptions of a weak justice delivery system are rife, sometimes leading to people taking the law into their own hands. These perceptions, coupled with the proliferation of SALW, could make people feel emboldened to perpetrate crimes.

d. Resource-based Conflicts

In Ghana, chieftaincy conflicts and conflicts over resources, from land, water and minerals, create vulnerabilities to violent extremism. Conflicts over resources arise from land dispossession, environmental degradation, or unequal distribution of resource benefits. The National Peace Council estimates over 400 chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana.²⁷ These conflicts often grow into social tensions, displace people, and result in violence or social unrest. In these contexts, extremist groups can exploit the grievance issues and frustrations of aggrieved communities, positioning themselves as protectors. Therefore, preventing

¹⁷The Signal Room. (2023, April 21). *Ghana – Let's talk about Bawku*. Retrieved from <https://www.thesignalroom.com/ghana-lets-talk-about-bawku-236056119-1842092068/>

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹United Nations Development Program. *Vulnerability assessment on the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation in northern regions of Ghana*. (n.d.-b). <https://www.undp.org/ghana/publications/vulnerability-assessment-threats-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-northern-regions-ghana> - :~:text=This report focuses on an assessment of community

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Youth unemployment is the most common driver of vulnerability to violent extremism and radicalisation in Northern Regions of Ghana – New UNDP Ghana Report*. West Africa Centre for Counter Extremism. (2024, April 15). *Violent Extremism Drivers in Northern Ghana – WACCE*. <https://waccegh.org/ve-drivers-in-northern-ghana/>

²³Afrobarometer. (2025, February 14). *News Release: Ghanaians' decry widespread corruption, Afrobarometer survey shows*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/R10-News-release-Ghanaians-decry-widespread-corruption-Afrobarometer-14feb25.pdf>

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Interview with community leader in June 2024 in Tamale.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Djanie, S. A., & Impraim, K. (2024, August 28). *The threat of violent extremism to Ghana's peace and security: A reality or denial?* The Ghana Report. <https://www.theghanareport.com/the-threat-of-violent-extremism-to-ghanas-peace-and-security-a-reality-or-denial-4/>

violent extremism in Ghana based on chieftaincy or resource-related grievances should prioritise conflict management frameworks and processes for more effective conflict management and resolution based on participatory and transparent processes.

National Response Strategies for Preventing Violent Extremism

In this section, the paper discusses Ghana's response strategy to the activities of violent extremist groups and how it is being operationalised. The paper highlights the National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism, the 'see something say something' campaign, the country's contribution to the Accra Initiative, and how these efforts and structures fit into the overarching domestic approach to reducing threats from violent extremist groups.

a. The National Framework for the Preventing and Countering of Violent Extremism and Terrorism

The National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NAFPCVET) in Ghana was promulgated in 2019. The framework provides the architecture for coordinating the country's domestic response to the activities of violent extremist groups. The NAFPCVET makes provision for a multi-faceted approach to confronting the threats from violent extremist groups. This involves interagency collaboration, vulnerability assessment of critical national infrastructure, public and virtual spaces. The framework is hinged on four pillars: Prevent, Pre-empt, Protect and Respond. Under these pillars, the country is able to gather real-time intelligence to detect, deter and disrupt potential attacks.

Additionally, NAFPCVET makes provision for a National Counterterrorism Fusion Centre. This Centre, which was officially inaugurated in January 2020, is a coordination and analysis centre that helps to gather and share information and intelligence in a timely manner. The National Counterterrorism Fusion Centre has representation from all state security agencies. These agencies include the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI), Ghana Immigration Service, Customs Division of the Ghana Revenue Authority, Narcotic Control Authority, Ghana Police Service, and other agencies.

Unlike other mechanisms, the NAFPCVET delineates a clear role for civil society groups in public education and awareness creation; however, implementation remains an issue.

b. 'See Something Say Something' (SSSS)

The 'See Something Say Something' initiative is a public awareness campaign led by the Ministry for National Security (now merged into the Ministry of the Interior). The objective of this initiative is to provide education and sensitisation on security threats including the activities of violent extremist groups in order to ensure vigilance and provide a platform for citizens to volunteer information about suspicious characters and their activities. Due to its role in providing early warning signals and deterring banditry and violence, thwarting potential terrorist threats, it feeds into the prevent and pre-empt pillars of the NAFPCVET. In a proactive effort to bolster community involvement in counter-terrorism measures, the Ministry of the Interior, through the 'see something, say something' campaign, has, as of February 2024, engaged over thirty-six (36) basic schools across various districts in the Greater Accra Region.²⁸ By targeting basic schools within these communities, the Ministry of the Interior aims to instil a sense of responsibility and awareness among young students, empowering them to actively participate in safeguarding their neighbourhoods against the activities of violent extremist groups. Through interactive sessions, workshops and educational materials tailored for school-aged children, the initiative seeks to equip students with the knowledge and confidence to identify and report potential security threats effectively.²⁹

The SSSS campaign appears to be providing some dividends. In the northern part of the country, it is reported that the campaign has contributed to the arrest of suspected criminals, deportation of some people and the destruction of sleeper cells³⁰ of violent extremist groups. Some accounts reveal that sensitisation of residents at border communities led to the arrest of two individuals allegedly connected to the activities of violent extremist groups from neighbouring Burkina Faso.³¹ There are, however, reports of drawbacks with the feedback process, as it appears that the person who reports an incident has to provide proof. Besides, some communities are out of reach due to a lack of infrastructure in those areas, so by the time they report the incident, the harm may have already been done. There is also a need for the

²⁸CitiNewsroom. (2024, February 17). *National Security Ministry takes 'See Something Say Something' campaign to schools*. Retrieved from CNR: <https://citinewsroom.com/2024/02/national-security-ministry-takes-see-something-say-something-campaign-to-schools/>

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Members of a violent extremist group who assemble in a target country to plan and carry out attacks while awaiting attack orders.

³¹UERCC. (2024). *See something, say something' campaign is impactful – Minister*. Retrieved from UPPER EAST REGIONAL COORDINATING COUNCIL: <https://uercc.gov.gh/see-something-say-something-campaign-is-impactful-minister/>

introduction of a response and recovery mechanism. This mechanism will provide a clear-cut procedure or system for intervention when violent extremist groups attack a community. This should include the installation of cameras in schools for monitoring purposes.

c. The Accra Initiative

In response to growing insecurity linked to violent extremism in the region, the Accra Initiative (AI) was launched in September 2017 by five members, namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. Mali and Niger were first admitted in 2018 as observers due to their closeness to the coastal states and owing to demonstrable experience in combating violent extremism in the Sahel, and subsequently recognised as full-fledged members in 2019.³³ Nigeria is currently an observer state.

The initiative is anchored on three pillars: information and intelligence sharing; training of security and intelligence personnel; and conducting joint cross-border military operations to sustain border security.³⁴ Meetings are held at three levels: heads of security and intelligence services; ministers in charge of security; and heads of state and government. Heads of security and intelligence meetings are held on a quarterly basis and are followed by ministerial meetings.³⁵

Despite the efforts invested and being invested in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in West Africa and the Sahel, there are issues that constitute major challenges to the prevention of VE. The ensuing section will attempt to provide an analysis of these challenges.

Challenges in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Ghana

The three pillars of the Accra Initiative - information and intelligence sharing, training of security and intelligence personnel, and conducting joint cross-border military operations to sustain border security - do not directly reflect the role of building community resilience against violent extremism. The heavily inclined kinetic approach of the initiative raises certain

challenges that limit its capacity to build and promote community resilience in its member states.

a. Exclusion of Major Stakeholders

As a multilateral initiative, member states of the Accra Initiative (AI) are expected to complement the regional efforts with non-security interventions at the national level. In the Ghanaian context, however, the seeming exclusion of major stakeholders – such as religious institutions, women, youth, and civil society organisations (CSOs) – from preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) initiatives hinders their active participation. Ghana's preparedness to prevent the infiltration of VE groups into the country remains a great concern to national security, citizens and all stakeholders. Although Ghana is considered one of the most resistant countries in the sub-region, lessons and experiences from Nigeria and other affected nations indicate that no country is immune to the threat of VE.

The introduction of the Accra Initiative is considered an important political, strategic, and diplomatic tool for addressing security concerns arising from the progressive infiltration of the VE groups in West Africa and the Sahel. This initiative, however, in its implementation in Ghana appears to have excluded major stakeholders such as religious institutions, traditional authorities, youth, women and civil society organisations in the conception phase.³⁶ The responsibility for PVE/CVE has 'traditionally been placed on governments, security officials and private corporations'³⁷ which largely undermines the role of the community in building resilience against VE.³⁸ The youth, women, traditional and religious leaders, as well as CSOs play vital roles in building community resilience. Excluding these groups from the core pillars of the Accra Initiative tends to reduce their role in strengthening the community against the threat of VE.

CSOs play an important role in P/CVE. Their role is however barely highlighted in the Accra Initiative. CSOs are engaged to provide educational services aimed at deconstructing terrorist rhetoric in formal schools and madrasas, de-radicalization programmes for ex-terrorists, facilitating inter-religious dialogue,

³²The jihadist threat in northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and prospects for containing the expansion' *Regional Programme Political Dialogue in West Africa*, Konrad Adenauer- Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrica/publikationen/einzeltitel/-/content/the-jihadist-threat-in-northern-ghana-and-togo-2>

³³Kwarkye, S., Abatan, E. J., & Matongbada, M. (2019). Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states? *Institute for Security Studies*, 30, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>

³⁴Birikorang, E., Abdallah, M. (2023). The Accra Initiative: An Old Wine in a New Bottle? *KAIPTC Occasional Paper 51*, <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/occasional-paper-51.pdf>

³⁵Kwarkye, S., Abatan, E. J., & Matongbada, M. (2019). Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states? *Institute for Security Studies*, 30, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>

³⁶Interviews held with religious and traditional leaders in Tamale in June 2024.

³⁷Quilliam Foundation (2015) 'Mothers & wives: women's potential role in countering violent extremism', Quilliam Foundation, May 8, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/blog/mothers-wives-womens-potential-role-in-countering-violent-extremism/>

³⁸Interviews with CSOs in Tamale in June 2024.

promoting socio-economic development, and offering various forms of aid —such as healthcare, food, and temporary housing—for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps.³⁹

Furthermore, the seeming exclusion of CSOs from the Accra Initiatives, may reflect a broader shift in state-CSO relations following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States,⁴⁰ after which many governments began perceiving CSOs as national security threats or as vulnerable to terrorist exploitation, particularly as conduits for financing terrorist activities.⁴¹ In the Nigerian context, Njoku⁴² argues that in formulating counter-terrorism laws and policies, the government views an over-emphasis on human rights as counter-productive. Consequently, CSOs have been excluded from shaping CVE strategies due to their political advocacy.⁴³ Could this suggest that the apparent exclusion of CSOs from the Accra Initiative may be intended to limit their oversight of human rights violations potentially associated with CVE initiatives?

b. Unresolved Grievances and Ethnic Conflicts

The effectiveness of the Accra Initiative is constrained by ongoing security challenges in the member states. Increasing intercommunal conflicts are facilitating and fuelling the activities of VE groups. In Ghana, protracted and unresolved intercommunal conflicts in communities such as Saboba and Chereponi, the Kusasi-Mamprusi ethnic violence in Bawku, the separatist rebellion in the Volta region, and farmer-herder conflicts⁴⁴ heighten the country's vulnerability to extremism. These conflicts persist with the use of automatic, sophisticated, and high-calibre rifles, which is a departure from previously prevalent locally manufactured guns and small arms.⁴⁵ Such conflicts exacerbate tensions within communities and attract extremists whose activities thrive in such environments. The management and resolution of such conflicts must be prioritized within the Accra Initiative framework.

c. Permeability of Borders

Another challenge to the success of the Accra Initiative is the impact of porous borders and the proliferation of small arms. In Ghana, the growing influx of irregular and labour migrants into the country from Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and the Middle East constitutes a major challenge to the prevention of VE in the country. The presence of Burkinabe migrant labourers in the Upper West Region of Ghana has, for instance, exacerbated chieftaincy and intercommunal violence related to land access and the migration of farmers and herders.⁴⁶ Communities such as the Doba and Kandega, Kologo and Navrongo, and Bavungnia and Wusungu along the borders with Burkina Faso have all experienced disputes.⁴⁷ These disputes create fertile grounds for the infiltration of extremist ideologies and radicalization. This vulnerability also increases the trafficking of arms across borders.

Despite the security operations and efforts through the Accra Initiative, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) continues to fuel criminal activities, conflicts, and the activities of violent extremist groups. Arms trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel continues to fuel instability and violent extremist activities. These arms make their way to the Sahel through legal weapons transfers, black markets, grey markets, as well as through theft of national stockpiles or individuals' weapons caches.⁴⁸ Ammunition manufactured in a Bamako factory for instance, has been found throughout West Africa suggesting that cross-border trade and smuggling supports distribution of ammunition produced in the region.⁴⁹ Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria are also regional producers of SALWs.

³⁹Njoku, E. T. (2021). State-oriented service-delivery partnership with civil society organisations in the context of counter-terrorism in Nigeria. *Development Policy Review*, 39(5), 757-772.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Hayes, B. (2017). *The Impact of international counterterrorism on civil society organisations: Understanding the role of the Financial Action Task Force*. Bread for the World Protestant Development Service Protestant Agency for Diakonie and Development.

⁴²Njoku, E. T., op. cit.

⁴³Njoku, E. T. (2018). Strategic exclusion: The state and the framing of a service delivery role for CSOs in the context of counterterrorism in Nigeria. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344583275_State-oriented_service-delivery_partnership_with_civil_society_organisations_in_Nigeria_in_the_context_of_counter-terrorism [accessed Dec 13 2024].

⁴⁴Aubyn, F. (2021). The Risk of Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Coastal States of West Africa, *ACCORD, CONFLICT TRENDS* 2021/3. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-risk-of-violent-extremism-and-terrorism-in-the-coastal-states-of-west-africa/>

⁴⁵ACCORD, Understanding armed violence in Bawku: Exploring links with terrorism and its drivers, *CONFLICT TRENDS* 2023/4, APRIL 25, 2024, peace and security, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/understanding-armed-violence-in-bawku-exploring-links-with-terrorism-and-its-drivers/>

⁴⁶Aubyn, F. (2021). The Risk of Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Coastal States of West Africa, *ACCORD, CONFLICT TRENDS* 2021/3. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-risk-of-violent-extremism-and-terrorism-in-the-coastal-states-of-west-africa/>

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Jesse, G. (2021). Fueling Conflict in the Sahel. *International Affairs Review*, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f2ed301da84567c22edd5bf/t/6140bc63289bb62f9f55e273/1631632488026/IAR_SpringSummer_2021.pdf

⁴⁹Jouve, Arnaud, "Sahel: d'ou viennent les armes et les munitions?", RFI, April 9, 2020.

d. Financial Constraints

Funding constraints in sustaining the initiative are limiting the effectiveness of the Accra Initiative. The Accra Initiative is funded by member states who view ownership of the initiative and non-dependence on external funding as important.⁵⁰ Despite this good intention of ownership through financing, the financial challenges and political crises in some member states prevent them from fulfilling their financial obligations and contributions. Despite the Initiative's quest to be self-sustainable, there is indication that foreign support is being received in different ways towards the initiative. This was indicated during the Heads of State Summit of the Accra Initiative, held on 23rd November, 2022 that Germany is supporting an Accra Initiative Centre by working with the Ghana Armed Forces (GAF) in the provision of relevant equipment and the construction of required facilities in the most vulnerable areas.⁵¹ This move by Germany added impetus to the objectives of the Accra Initiative to exchange intelligence, build capacity, and provide logistics to augment Ghana's actions against terrorist forces in the Sahel that threaten the Sahelian region and coastal West Africa. This, however, contradicts the purpose of ownership of the initiative that safeguards the interest of the initiative against strings attached to external support.

Leveraging Local Community Structures to Build Resilience

This section explores the role of various local institutions and mechanisms in resisting and disrupting attacks by violent extremist organisations (VEOs). We examine how the contributions of women, youth groups, regional and district security councils, district peace councils, and civil society organisations in Ghana can be harnessed to build and strengthen resilient community structures.

a. Women

Stereotypical assumptions often portray women as inherently "vulnerable," "passive," or "peaceful." However, these assumptions overlook the diverse and evolving roles that women play during both war and peace times—whether as agents of change or, at times, as perpetrators. Violent extremist organisations frequently exploit these roles to their advantage. Because women are generally perceived as weak

and non-threatening, VEOs tend to deploy them to facilitate illicit activities. For instance, women are sometimes embedded within communities to gather intelligence since they can access sensitive areas without arousing suspicion. This partly explains why women may be involved in cross-border criminal activities, such as arms smuggling, given the lower risk of detection.⁵²

But how do the unique roles and responsibilities of women contribute to building and maintaining community resilience? Data gathered from a 2024 field research conducted in Tamale, Ghana⁵³, indicates that women play a crucial role in early warning systems. Through their income-generating activities and other routine tasks such as fetching water, collecting firewood, going to the market, farming and socialising with other women, they often obtain first-hand information about the presence and activities of suspicious individuals. Our findings also reveal that some women report their partners when criminal behaviour is suspected, especially after a relationship deteriorates. Similarly, mothers may raise alarms when they notice negative changes in their children's behaviour. For example, if a child becomes unusually isolated or turns aggressive when provoked, mothers can often monitor the situation and determine its cause. These early warning signals can help disrupt threats posed by violent extremist groups. However, it is important to note that some women may withhold information if they suspect that family members are involved in criminal activities, often due to fear of embarrassment or social stigma.

b. Youth

Young people form a significant part of Ghana's population, and their energy, vulnerability, and potential can be exploited by violent extremist groups to advance their agendas. In areas that are buffeted by the activities of violent extremist groups, young people are deemed to form the majority of recruits.⁵⁴ Our research, however, explored how to channel the energy of young people to serve positive ends. Firstly, in different areas in the five northern regions in the country, youth centres exist in ten operational districts. As platforms for learning and sharing ideas, these centres assemble young people of varied educational and cultural backgrounds and youths with physical disabilities. These youth centres are also safe spaces

⁵⁰Kwarkye, S., Abatan, E. J., & Matongbada, M. (2019). Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states? Institute for Security Studies, 30, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>

⁵¹MFA, (2022), Germany's participation in Accra Initiative Summit reinforces strategic partnership with Ghana. <https://mfa.gov.gh/index.php/germanys-participation-in-accra-initiative-summit-reinforces-strategic-partnership-with-ghana/>

⁵²Interview with research participant, 29 May 2024.

⁵³Interview with research participant, 29 May 2024.

⁵⁴Darden, J. T. (2019, May). *Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth*. Retrieved December 18, 2024, from UN: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/report/tackling-terrorists-exploitation-of-youth/Tackling-Terrorists-Exploitation-of-Youth.pdf>

for young people to explore their ideas and thoughts on creating economic opportunities for themselves and their communities. The centres then help young persons to build their own business models, building on the ideas they are able to develop. Hence, the centres have a big facilitative function, because eventually young people are empowered to continue their businesses without the help of the hubs. The youth centres do so through different phases, like formation, incubation, connection with the market, and connection with funding opportunities.

One success story from these youth centres involves the integration of marginalised minority ethnic groups such as the Fulbe. As a historically highly marginalised group, the Fulbe have benefited from participating in these centres, which has helped reduce stigmatisation by majority ethnic groups. Youth from various backgrounds are sensitised to appreciate the cultural perspectives of minority groups. Over time, interactions between Fulbe and non-Fulbe youth regarding sensitive issues such as discrimination have positively influenced community attitudes, leading to greater satisfaction and social cohesion within the Fulbe community.

How can young people further contribute to building community resilience? Youth centres in the five northern regions of Ghana provide a foundation for peace initiatives. There are large proportions of youth in the country who use the internet and access social media platforms.⁵⁵ These young people can be trained to serve as role models to educate their peers about the risks of associating with violent extremist groups. In addition, youth can also be engaged in peace education and empowered to serve as peace ambassadors.

Furthermore, inter-youth dialogue committees—supervised by local chiefs—in several northern communities in the country play an essential role in early warning. Our findings from the field show that some committee members receive intelligence on the hideouts of youths involved in drug abuse and take action to disperse them. These efforts are vital given the impact of drug abuse on youth recruitment into violent extremism.⁵⁶ Youth groups can also collaborate with community leaders to establish watchdog structures that monitor and report on suspicious activities.

c. Regional and District Security Councils

The Security and Intelligence Agencies Act 1030 empowers subsidiary security councils —such as the Regional (REGSEC), Municipal (MUSEC), and District (DISEC) councils— to provide early warning signals to the Government on the existence or likelihood of a security threat. In consultation with the National Security Council (NSC), these councils take appropriate measures to ensure peace, stability, law and order, and to assist affected populations during emergencies or disasters at the local level. Their key roles include:

- i. **Pre-empting threats:** Employing appropriate mechanisms (via DISEC/REGSEC) to prevent the outbreak and escalation of violence.
- ii. **Deploying security personnel:** Sending national security officers into communities to monitor conflict situations, gather, and relay intelligence—supported by community informants.
- iii. **Joint/interagency operations:** conducting operations and interagency meetings to gather valuable information and discuss effective response strategies.
- iv. **Regional security coordination:** Coordinating with the five regional coordinating councils in the North to provide updates on the security situation.
- v. **Border monitoring:** Deploying joint monitoring teams in selected communities to devise measures for effective surveillance.

Furthermore, REGSECs and DISECs can also collaborate with community radio stations to provide public education on entry points for suspected criminals. For these initiatives to succeed, regional and district security councils must earn the confidence of the local population.

d. Regional and District Peace Councils

The principal functions of the regional and district peace councils include public education, sensitisation and raising awareness of conflict indicators and promoting peacebuilding at both regional and local levels. The National Peace Council (NPC) collaborates with REGSECs, METROSECs, MUSECs, DISECs and the respective Regional Houses of Chiefs to provide early warning and intelligence on impending security

⁵⁵2020 Household Survey on ICT in Ghana.

⁵⁶Interview with member of a civil society group in Tamale, 29 May 2024.

threats thereby harnessing collective efforts to reduce tensions. For example, the chiefs serve as primary points for consultation and decision-making. Owing to their influence, they delegate elders and other members of the community to monitor for early warning signals and report them to the chiefs, who then pass the information on to the regional and district security councils. Community members also identify suspected criminals and report their observations to local community leaders, ensuring that valuable intelligence is gathered by the regional and district security councils. Similarly, regional and district peace councils deploy monitors within the local communities to provide early warning signals. Moreover, these councils can leverage the existing interfaith and intrafaith harmony in the country to thwart the operations of violent extremist groups while religious authorities support community initiatives aimed at deradicalisation.

Conclusion

Though Ghana is being touted with robust security structures, a clear manifestation of vulnerabilities to the activities of violent extremist organisations exist in the country. This paper sought to explore the existing mechanisms for establishing and strengthening community resilience against the operations of violent extremist organisations. The first part explored national mechanisms and how they feed into community structures. What is evident is that though some of the national mechanisms make provision for community structures, they are overly state-centric. The Accra Initiative framework also lacks the focus on building and empowering communities to overcome the vulnerabilities that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. The last part of the paper highlights the role of the different groups and institutions at the local level and their potential contributions to building and maintaining community resilience.

Recommendations

a. The over State-centeredness of the Accra Initiative must be reviewed. Rigorous attempts should be made to involve local community actors and other stakeholders such as women, youth, religious and traditional leaders, as well as civil society organisations to enable them to make valuable contributions to preventing and countering violent extremist efforts in the country. Additionally, the Accra Initiative needs to adopt clearer and more transparent information-sharing strategies in order to build trust among member states.

b. There is an urgent need to respond to unresolved grievances and intercommunal conflicts. Rather than focusing on the ad hoc military operations, it is important that Ghana, as an Accra Initiative member state, focuses on responding to the basic needs and grievances that exist locally. These grievances such as high unemployment rates, corruption and the lack of basic social amenities in some communities, could serve as fertile grounds for violent extremism to prevail.

c. Women play instrumental roles at the grassroots as members of civil society groups as well as at the district and regional levels. In order to enhance their contributions to decision-making processes, they need to be empowered economically and through capacity building and skills training.

d. The State should invest in creating safe spaces for young people and opportunities for young people to find alternative sources of income, especially in areas that are affected by the adverse effects of climate change, in order to reduce their frustrations and possible exploitation by violent extremist groups. Added to this, the state should address the social, political and economic marginalisation of young people. In addressing the issues of young people, it is important to recognise that youth are not a homogeneous group; they are a diverse and heterogeneous group with varied interests and perspectives. Therefore, there is a need to design targeted interventions that address their diverse needs, views and responsibilities of youth in all spaces.

e. There has to be a deliberate attempt to empower and engage young people in finding creative solutions that will counter the threats from VEGs. For instance, reinforcing the National Youth Authority's youth parliament concept and extending it to other regions in order to enhance the public speaking and problem-solving skills of young people. Also, young people should be empowered to use technology to contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism rather than seeing themselves only as recipients of information.

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