

Targeting youth at risk for VSD:

A synthesis of experiences from the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends. It is a great pleasure to be here these two days to exchange ideas about this intriguing and highly relevant yet complex and challenging topic.

I am the Director of a small foundation based in Biel, Switzerland, called Swiss Academy for Development - SAD. We have been around since 1991, positioning ourselves at the interface between science and practise. We are a centre of excellence for sport and play that sustainably transforms the lives of disadvantaged and marginalised children and youth, enabling them to become engaged, healthy, educated and employed citizens.

We will delve into a number of topics today, and hopefully, arrive at some useful ideas from the field but in all likelihood also arrive at some more questions to be further explored.

Because, despite extensive research and experiences from operational projects, answers do not come easily when we are trying to pinpoint how a person is attracted to violent political activities, to violent extremism, or what interventions we can undertake to lessen the chance of that.

For the sake of context, I would like to suggest that our discussion here--and our mission beyond--has a broader resonance as well.

If the prevention of extremism is our immediate concern, I believe we will also do well not to lose sight of the idea that the underlying concern is how to remove the grounds on which terrorism flourishes and how to integrate youth into societies. Social factors that are likely key to preventing extremism are the same ones that make well-run societies possible.

I offer that thought as a reminder that our focus on the details should not be allowed to obscure the larger picture.

That said, at the heart of today's discussion is the assumption that VSD programmes are a part of the answer, although certainly not the entire answer.

But if VSD programmes are expected to help prevent the radicalization of young people, and violent extremism among them, we have to begin by asking a somewhat different question.

How do we identify and efficiently target those groups at risk of being drawn to extremism?

And how do we home in on the individuals within them who are already radicalized, or who are most susceptible to recruitment, in order to intervene effectively?

Those are questions of national and even global concern, certainly. But experience teaches us that those critical tasks are ones that can only be accomplished with any degree of effectiveness in the field, at the local level.

To a significant extent, that means working through people and organizations in the community, on the “grassroots” level. They are the ones who are likely to see behavioral and attitude changes in young persons or groups that might signal a move toward radical activity.

For SAD, working exclusively in a participatory way with, and through, local partners, particularly at the grassroots level, is a key principle for all of our projects, specifically those in Nepal, Myanmar, Egypt, Jordan and the South Sudan where we run VSD related programs; more specifically we design and implement short-term vocational training and youth entrepreneurship programmes; we develop curricula and teaching materials for technical and life skills; we provide start-up funding and improve access to funding opportunities; we build up the capacity of local partners. This approach enables us to benefit from our partners’ understanding of local circumstances, resources, and culture, and by extension provide access to those most in need.

Working through local partners, also has the long-range benefit of enabling us to develop programmes that are sustainable beyond the life of our development projects, as our partners remain active in their communities. This local ownership, drawing on local resources, allows our projects to have a lasting impact.

I would offer one caveat, however. In some locales, it can be a challenge to identify an appropriate local partner. In South Sudan, for example, we have found the need to devote considerable attention to developing the partner’s capacity before launching a project. This capacity-building phase is essential in order to develop a sustainable project.

Our local partners, too, are the ones most likely to be able to distinguish between those who have already crossed the line into violent extremism and those who may be moving in that direction. In terms of intervention, that distinction is an important one, because different responses are in order. At SAD, I would note, our experience is primarily in working with youth who are not in education, employment, or training, or perhaps former members of armed groups.

On the subject of community, there is another point to be made. In an age of social media, the concept of 'community' must be broadened as well. Just as potential or emerging terrorists or groups might reveal themselves in some way to those around them in a physical community, it is also important to remember that their online or SMS social circles can play a part.

What then are the risk indicators?

There is extensive research attempting to answer that question, and much of it is of great value to us.

We can say with some degree of confidence, for example, that a persistently high unemployment rate in a region or a nation creates an opportunity for extremism to flourish. We know, too, that a culture of shame can push some individuals toward violence.

In each regard, however, it is important to bear in mind that, while researchers and practitioners are working toward definitive answers, such answers remain elusive.

And, in one sense, that search for absolutes may never be complete.

For example, it is demonstrably true that poverty and unemployment often can provide fertile soil for the radicalization of young people, as we will discuss in a moment, and at length during our sessions. But it is equally true that significant examples come readily to mind of violent extremists raised in families blessed with wealth and privilege.

Similarly, we have learned that--perhaps paradoxically-- there is no single answer regarding the relationship between education and terrorism. We see that education reduces terrorism in countries with sound economies and institutions. But it has the opposite effect in countries marked by poor conditions--for those, more education seems to fuel terrorism, as noted in a recent study by Brockhoff, Krieger and Meierrieks.

That study, for one, and that very much reflects our own experience, suggests that country-specific strategies may be required to achieve country-specific differences in VSD programme designs. We have also found through applied studies in China, South-Pacific and Nigeria that it is crucial to look not only at macro-level indicators such as demography, crime rate, substance abuse but also at micro-level indicators. What is the perception of young people? How does their perception, values and norms shape their behaviour? We find that it often is their inner state of being, their frustration, hopelessness that have them engage in violent extremism.

All this is to emphasize that we do not have authoritative statistical data that can describe, or predict, a recipe for radicalization with any precision. After all, a large population may live in poverty, but only a small number of them might be drawn to extremism.

Nevertheless, in a few matters, at least, something close to a consensus has emerged, with researchers dividing generally accepted causes into the categories of "push factors" and "pull factors"

One of these is the role that a lack of socioeconomic opportunity might play in "pushing" individuals toward violent extremism.

It is a persuasive hypothesis that those who live in poverty can be susceptible to radicalization. It is not difficult to imagine a line from poverty to desperation to violence.

A closer look, however, reveals that other factors come into play as well. Current poverty can lead one to despair, certainly, but when a person sees little prospect of future improvements in his situation he may become far more willing to participate in political resistance.

Social or peer pressures are also identifiable factors and the subject of considerable research, much of it quantitative. In fact, these social influence factors are by far the most important predictors of both peaceful and violent political protest.

Members of marginalized groups, too, can more readily be radicalized--particularly in a locale in which scarce resources are effectively hoarded by a dominant group at the expense of the marginal where feelings of injustice are high.

It is important to note here that peer pressure can also have positive effects.

We have found it to be beneficial in both Middle-Eastern and Asian countries to implement programmes in which the participating youth work together in groups. That creates a setting in which such concepts as conflict-resolution, collaborative problem-solving, and social and civic engagement skills arise naturally in the course of instruction, creating a beneficial form of peer pressure and learning. Given that participants often think that they don't need such skills training, integrating these lessons into the normal course of the programme can have a great impact.

We also learned that targeting youth at risk only can be counterproductive. It can lead to stigmatisation of those targeted and hence, be a source for conflict. Therefore, we always include youth from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, different ethnic groups and religions regardless of whether we work in Nepal's Dang district that was used by the Maoists for recruitment purposes or in an urbane environment such as Cairo. In the end, we think that programs are most successful when they reflect the society on a very small scale, when programs simulate integrative processes allowing young people to actively participate in them and experience that peaceful co-existence is possible.

We further try to include as many women as possible. We find that women are often the backbone of societies, the change agents that have a positive influence on their male peers.

It is also interesting to mention that from our experience people joining our projects are not necessarily the poorest among the poor. However, those that indeed establish a business, for

example, after an entrepreneurship program then employ the most vulnerable, poor people from their often conflict-ridden areas of origin. There is an underestimated multiplier effect of such programs.

These examples only touch the surface, obviously, and we will look more deeply into the topic during the day's discussion.

For us today, of course, the immediate question becomes, after examining the causes and identifying the at-risk players, how can Vocational Skills Development programmes reach out to them and secure their participation?

Outreach efforts must recognize--and rectify-- the often significant barriers that undermine participation.

A potential participant's baseline level of education is frequently one of those barriers. For programme providers, there can be a tendency to work with those who already have a university degree.

The better and more effective solution, however, is to tailor training to varied educational backgrounds, and support students who need it with active and engaged mentoring.

In our experience, it takes a lot of time to select the "right" participants, to make sure that they are motivated and therefore, also to reduce drop-out rates.

We also find that the development of support structures regardless of the educational or socio-economic background of participants is a crucial success factor. It helps address technical but also questions of everyday life. Support networks can further provide information to youth where jobs are, where potential employees are and so forth.

Other barriers may include prohibitive tuition expenses or geographic distances that limit access. For impediments such as these, the solutions need to be found at the local or regional level, and reflect the specific conditions affecting each programme.

In Nepal, for example, the most successful model was to offer village-based trainings facilitated by mobile trainers to reduce geographic barriers; what we do in Myanmar is to provide scholarships for students from disadvantaged families.

We also should remain mindful that programme design itself can be a disincentive.

Skills training cannot be so long or so theoretical that it ends up defeating itself by discouraging participants from continuing, or from getting involved in the first place.

Also, in our experience, VSD programs work best, when they include an economic empowerment component. Students need to have access to capital. In most of our projects, we work with loan systems; we also made very good experiences with loan and saving groups enabling youth to save sufficient money to implement their own projects.

There are other significant barriers as well. Consider our findings in Egypt, for example.

There, high unemployment among youth is one important cause leading young people to join radical groups, but clearly not the only factor. There is also a strong culture of shame that prevents young people from joining VSD or similar programs.

The reality is, it is more prestigious to join ISIS than to become a hairdresser.

More research is needed to identify incentives that might counter this culture of shame. We find, for example in Egypt, embedding the project in local structures, fostering collaboration with universities, parents, elders can help address the culture of shame, although it is incredibly time consuming.

Eliminating such barriers is crucial, of course, but I also want to suggest that there is another, perhaps larger, question we need to address.

What is the role VSD programmes can realistically be expected to play in preventing young people from traveling violent paths?

In that regard, we can say that VSD has an important role, but in many ways a limited one.

Both research and practical field experience support the conclusion that it is most effective as one component of a broader, holistic approach that takes their personal and social development into consideration as well.

In fact, in instances in which more education fails to yield more opportunity, it can have the opposite effect. Those who pursue education or training in hopes of a better life can grow bitter and embrace violence if their hopes aren't realized.

Traditional education and skill development as a path to increased economic security, are significant, certainly. But they don't offer a promising approach to preventing violent extremism, in isolation from factors that foster successful integration into society, such as personal and social development and activities ranging from sport to art and even play.

Allow me to clarify that last. At SAD, sport and play is a broad category encompassing traditional local sports and games, dances and singing as well. These elements are integral to all of our programmes across cultures, because they have shown themselves to be among the best for engaging and motivating participants, building the bonds and trust that enable them to live and work together and to "teach" technical and soft skills.

In South Sudan, for example, we work with traumatized women. The project teaches VSD skills and helps them implement small-scale livelihood projects through loan and saving groups, along with matching funds. But we found something very interesting: the loan and saving groups only started working once women got to know each other-- and that bonding came about through mutual sport activities.

For a training to be motivating, it needs to address the local grievances. In Egypt, we found that the environmental degradation is one of the key contributing factors to the young people's dissatisfaction. Hence, our entrepreneurship program includes the teaching and application of

green skills which keeps the youth people motivated. In Nepal, including basic sexual and reproductive health issues was what corresponded to the youth' expectations.

Outreach mechanisms depend on the context. In Nepal, for example, the main channel to attract participants for the project were community leaders. Radio came in second. Nepal is also a good example to demonstrate that outreach activities need to be creative. We had teams of social mobilizers that travelled from village to village to disseminate information about the VT program. A key element was to organise events that included playing a piece of theatre that was meaningful in that context. In Myanmar and Egypt, we find that the two most effective outreach channels are friends and social media.

Before closing, I would just like to leave you with a few more lessons we have learned along the way.

First, while I recognize that it is more costly and time-consuming to do so, I strongly believe that VSD programmes must be customized, participatory, based on a close collaboration with local partners.

Further, such creative elements as sport and play are needed in designing programmes that are most effective at addressing psychological and social factors at the same time they enhance employability.

On a related note, I think there needs to be a better understanding of psychology incorporated into programme design. As a beginning, there is much to be learned from positive psychology

and cognitive behavioural therapy, from psychological interventions in the area of gang violence. Positive psychology, in particular, supports us in developing the positive assets of young people rather than focusing on their weaknesses and “deviant behaviours”.

I also would emphasize that VSD should not be considered in isolation from other education and development initiatives. Holistic approaches work best, and we not only should look at interventions for older youth, but at age-appropriate approaches for young children as well.

And one final but critical point--programmes must be rigorously monitored and evaluated, if we are to advance our knowledge and enhance our success. In our projects, this includes a baseline study, post-training assessment, and follow-up reporting a year or two after the programme ends. It is important in this regard, to strengthen the M&E capacity of local actors. In the end, research and possible solutions need to come from nations and regions most affected.

For now, I thank you for your time and attention and look forward to stimulating, engaging and productive conversation throughout the conference.

Thank you.