

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL



Side event - 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

Organised by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center), and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI)

In collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and the Permanent Mission of Senegal to the United Nations



On the sidelines of the 74th session of UNGA, on 24 September 2019, UNICRI, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) and the Global Center on Cooperative Security (the Global Centre) - in collaboration with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Permanent Mission of Senegal to the United Nations - organised a panel on the critical role that youth play across the Sahel in preventing and countering violent extremism.

The event was organised to provide a platform for young leaders and their advocates to directly address policy makers, implementing partners, and donors on how to better support them in their efforts and to address persistent challenges and promising interventions.

The panel - comprised of Rahama Nantoumé, a young Malian researcher and project manager at Think Peace Sahel; Yehiya Boré, a journalist and youth leader from Timbuktu, Mali; and Maji Peterx, a trauma counsellor who works with youth in Nigeria for the Alternatives to Violence Project - emphasised that youth are too often viewed as potential risks to national security rather than as vital partners in championing alternatives to violence, building community resilience, and

developing strategic communications to counter violent extremism.

The panelists called for youth to be recognised as key actors that should be involved from the outset in program design, implementation, and evaluation. Furthermore, they stressed that engagement should reach beyond urban youth to incorporate perspectives of young people in more remote areas.

Key Takeaways

In their opening remarks, Ambassador Julie Pruzan-Jørgensen (Special Envoy to the Sahel and Maghreb, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark) and Coumba Gaye (First Counselor, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Senegal to the United Nations), expressed their concern regarding the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the Sahel and the impact of the spill-over effects on the larger West African region. They advocated for strong partnerships and cooperation among international actors, including the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum's Capacity-Building in the West Africa Region Working Group, as well as the promotion of youth as actors of change to address the challenges faced by Sahelian countries.

Julie Pruzan-Jørgensen: "An effective approach requires even closer partnerships with the countries in the Sahel as well as regional organisations"

Coumba Gaye: "Young people should be at the forefront of this fight"

Youth as the drivers of change

The overwhelming majority of Sahelian youth have no interest in joining or engaging with terrorist or violent groups and do not view themselves as 'potential extremists.' Instead, they want to address the structural issues that often affect communities in the Sahel such as scarce educational and employment opportunities, the fragile security situation, and the lack of inclusivity at the governmental level. The international community should be careful with the words used to label their programs and put youth at the centre of their actions. Indeed, making youth resilient against terrorism and raising awareness on the narratives and recruitment techniques of terrorist groups should start from a positive focus on youth as drivers of change.

Rahama Nantoumé: "Youth are not the future; they are the present, the future needs to be prepared today"

The need to engage youth before, during and after program implementation

Youth should be involved in every stage of programming. They should not solely be beneficiaries of programs and projects, they should be engaged in the design, monitoring and evaluation process. This requires their involvement from the very beginning of each initiative in order to incorporate their views and perspectives to better prioritize issues and present tailor-made responses. The input from youth should not be limited to identification of areas to be addressed, but should also concern the approaches and manners to address those issues. Youth should be engaged and recognized as pivotal partners in building resilience and fostering more inclusive societies.

Maji Peterx: "Young people are (portrayed as) the face of violent extremism... they are also the solution"

The need to reach beyond urban youth

The international community tends to work with English and French-speaking, urban elite youth who already have resources and leadership capabilities. There is a distinct need to come up with strategies to reach beyond that group. Existing counterparts could represent a gateway to local communities and should be consulted on how to best engage hard-to-reach groups.

Yehiya Boré: "I hear everywhere that the Sahel is about terrorism, radicalisation, and extremism...that is not true. In the Sahel, you find culture everywhere. People sing together, people dance together, people laugh together"

Conclusions

The Sahel region is primarily home to thousands of youth who work every day to build a more peaceful society. The international community can facilitate this process by supporting them to unite against violent

extremism, to weaken the appeal of terrorism, and to be the drivers of change. Culture, education, employment and social networks should be at the forefront of the strategy to counter violent extremism. Cross-cultural youth dialogues and initiatives can enable young people to mobilize and effectively counter radicalization, recruitment, and thus violent extremism in the region.