

# COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: INSIGHTS FROM UNICRI EXPERIENCE IN THE SAHEL-MAGHREB TO ADAPT, BEND, AND CHANGE - BUT NOT TO BREAK



In physics, “resilience” is a measure of how well a material, such as rubber or metal, responds to pressure by bending, adapting, and changing, without breaking. However, this concept is more than a scientific term. Resiliency can also describe a community’s ability to bounce back from pressures, including natural disasters, economic downturns, and - in the case of UNICRI’s Pilot Project on Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Sahel-Maghreb - violence and terrorism. In the Sahel and Maghreb, the pressure on communities is certainly intense, and ever-growing. Conflicts in Libya and Mali threaten to spill over porous borders, while drought and desertification have increased food insecurity and heightened intercommunal tensions. Increasingly active extremist militant groups have brought violence and chased out tourists, which once had been an importance source of income. Now, more than ever, an approach aimed at building the resilience at a community level is needed - one that can empower communities to respond to these pressures by adapting and changing, without “breaking” and entering into conflict.



Often, when the government has been present, it has been weak, or viewed as biased and corrupt. Therefore, one might conclude, the focus should be put on improving the ability of the state to police the areas of insecurity, and relying on the army to impose security. Certainly, these are important elements of a counterterrorism strategy, and form a key part of the international efforts in the regions.

However, a community-resilience approach recognizes that the issues of violent extremism and radicalization have their roots in local conflicts - and likewise that the solutions lie in a dynamic and inclusive, community-wide approach. In the words of the Nigerien diplomat Abdallah Wafy, « la réponse au terrorisme n'est pas que 'le tout sécuritaire. » (The response to terrorism is not 'only security').<sup>[1]</sup>

UNICRI's pilot programme (envisaging many projects) seeks to implement and evaluate efforts to improve the capacity of the communities in the Maghreb and Sahel to cope with the pressure they face and resist to violent radicalization. Rather than confronting threats with a purely military response, it strives to identify ways for communities to harness their own assets to undermine and control violent radicalization. While the individual projects differ in their activities, focus, and geographic locations, they all demonstrate some key elements of resiliency - to begin with, they are community-driven.

The power to envision the future

As the name might suggest, efforts to build community resilience must be based precisely there - in the community itself. Resilience cannot be built on behalf of the communities, it cannot come from external actors imposing ideas and programs from afar. Rather, it requires critical reflection on and coming to terms with the issues, needs, and problems driving some members of the community to engage with violent extremism. This means that projects must be locally-defined and driven. That is, "the power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with the community members."<sup>[2]</sup>

UNICRI's pilot programme began with each community having the freedom - and responsibility - to define its own problems and propose appropriate solutions. Based on the belief that those most directly affected by violent extremism can design the most innovative and successful efforts to counter it, the project was, from its very inception, community-led. As a consequence, several and different grievances have been identified by local partners, encompassing political, social, educational, economic and security issues. Interestingly enough, even though all of them have been reported as critical for the local communities, not all of them have been addressed by the interventions. Main emphasis and attention have been devoted to inclusive governance and citizens' participations, equal access to services, accountability of security forces, social justice, access to education, (including religious education) and social inclusion.

Resilience for whom?

Who should be included in resiliency-building projects? Who should benefit from them? The answer to these questions is deceptively straightforward: everyone. Inclusivity goes to the very heart of resiliency. In order to truly be resilient - to be able to weather the pressures that these communities face - it is important to include those who often have been excluded in traditionally gerontocratic, male-dominated communities: women, youth, and ethnic minorities. The pilot project did just that. The reason for focusing on these groups is two-fold. First, exclusion can be a powerful driver of violence.

Yet, it is not simply a matter of effective programming: women, youth, and minorities cannot be shut out of the system. A system that works only for a select group or groups is brittle. In order to exhibit the dynamism inherent in resiliency, communities must embrace diverse perspectives and inputs, and strive to respond to the needs of all community members.

Try, and try again

Even

with an inclusive and community-driven approach, resiliency is not something that, once achieved, can remain static and in place. Nor can it be achieved through a one-size-fits-all initiative. Building resiliency requires being open to failure and learning what methods work well and what do not. It demands an iterative process of trial, error, and learning.

Indeed, a final ingredient in building community resilience

to violent extremism is a healthy dose of courage. Undoubtedly, it takes a great deal of courage to face up to violent actors in one's own community and country. It takes another, equally important, form of courage to be willing to accept failures, at least in the short-term, to battle the seemingly insurmountable one step at a time, and to commit time, energy, and resources to the long and ongoing process that is resilience-building.

This

has been the foundation of UNICRI's pilot programme, which, from the beginning, has sought to implement, test, and evaluate a diverse range of interventions, in different locations, and with varying organisations in order to identify the most successful projects, and determine why they were successful.

Though an admittedly difficult task in and of itself, identifying successes alone is not sufficient to build a robust and resilient base against violent extremism. Despite the human toll that violent extremism has taken in these regions and around the world, our understanding of what drives and prevents violence is still improving. Thus, sharing and disseminating the various projects' strategies, challenges, materials, and important findings is crucial.

UNICRI has published the [preliminary findings](#) of its evaluation of the pilot programme interventions in the nine countries of Sahel and Maghreb in September 2019.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Rolley, Sonia. «Invité Afrique - Abdallah Wafy: « En Réponse Au Terrorisme, Il N'y a Pas Que Le 'tout Sécuritaire'». RFI. June 08, 2019. Accessed July 09, 2019. <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20190608-reponse-terrorisme-il-y-pas-le-tout-securitaire-abdallah-wafy>.

<sup>[2]</sup> Lerch, Daniel. Six Foundations for Building Community Resilience. Post Carbon Institute. Edited by Asher Miller, Ken White, and Richard Heinberg. November 2015. Accessed July 9, 2019. <http://www.postcarbon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Six-Foundations-for-Building-Community-Resilience.pdf>.