

Youth Extremism Series, Paper I: Understanding Youth Extremism

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From Agriculture to Street Gangs and Youth Extremism

The InnovATE project came to the subject of youth violence while assessing the agricultural education and training systems in [Honduras](#) and [Nicaragua](#). Gang-related violence is having a dramatic impact on youth in those countries. Research has indicated that a poorly functioning education system is one underlying cause of youth violence. (OECD, 2011, p.18). [InnovATE is investigating gaps](#) in the understanding of how citizen security and food security are interrelated, particularly in regards to the youth bulge and the growing phenomenon of youth violence. While street gangs and violent extremist organizations are not the same thing, there are many similarities. USAID commissioned a publication, "Street Gangs and Violent Extremist Organizations: Learning across Fields," (Dininio, P. & Werbel J., 2016, August) to identify cross-disciplinary lessons for programming to address gang violence and violent extremism. As both kinds of violence affect agriculture, education and youth development, InnovATE believes a cross-sectoral approach is important. It is InnovATE's hope that this series on youth extremism will provide knowledge and ideas that can be used by agriculture educators and youth development specialists in countries affected by violence.

Introduction

Youth extremism is an important issue to understand in today's world. From media stories of young people engaging in violence, to programs trying to entice youth away from extremist behavior, youth extremism as a focus of study and practice seems here to stay. For those interested in this topic, it is important to understand how terms such as extremism, terrorism, and radicalization are used and what they mean in a cross-cultural context. It is also important to understand the factors which can shape and influence youth's involvement in extremist behaviors.

Key Terms Related to Extremism

The following definitions have been defined in the UNESCO policy guide entitled "Preventing violent extremism through education" (UNESCO, 2017).

Term	Definition
Extremism	The belief in and support for ideas that are very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable. Attitudes and behaviors outside the norm.
Violent extremism	There is no internationally agreed-upon definition. Most common understanding includes beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals.
Terrorism	A particular strategy adopted to achieve a political goal through the creation and exploitation of fear.
Radicalization	Wanting to cause political change. Commonly used to describe the process of adopting extreme views to the point of legitimizing the use of violence.
Resilience	An individual's capacity to overcome challenges. In relation to extremism, resilience refers to the ability to resist views and options that portray the world in ways that legitimize hatred and violence.

Table 1. Key Terms Related to Extremism (UNESCO, 2017)

Understanding the Facts Related to Extremism

Extremism and radicalization are more common when youth are exposed to extremist ideology that relates to their personal experiences. This includes radicalization of all varieties-religious extremism, political extremism, violent extremism, and also non-violent extremism. Often these ideologies use recent history to build a narrative of how youth are being wronged by the current state of affairs. These narratives incorporate and encourage both positive and negative reasons for youth to join the cause. Negative reasons can include a desire to control others, a desire to have personal fame, and wanting to enact revenge on others. However, there are some positive reasons, such as a realization that structures of power in society can unfairly disadvantage certain groups and cultures, of which youth vulnerable to extremism may represent. In these cases, resistance is an act of resilience and reflects an honest and critical understanding of situations that are unfavorable for youth.

Pathways toward radicalization occur when a young person encounters another person or group (either in real life or virtually) who can clearly communicate this new ideology and make it personal and important. The recruiter may relate the ideology to a youth's personal circumstances and context, challenge their national or cultural identity, and emphasize grievances a youth has experienced which have gone unaddressed. These factors, which interact with one another and are mutually reinforcing, help to explain why some individuals are more at risk from radicalization than others.

Risk Factors	Explanation
<i>Real and Perceived Grievances</i>	Real and perceived injustices can alienate and stigmatize vulnerable groups. Such grievances should be addressed specifically.
<i>Perceived Lack of Real Alternatives for the Future</i>	The lack of economic and social opportunities for youth can discourage their hope for the future, leaving them vulnerable to extremism.
<i>Cultural Isolation, Threats to Culture, and Despair</i>	Culture plays a crucial role in determining values and morals. In areas where culture has been disrupted, individuals are more vulnerable to extremism
<i>Crisis of Identity</i>	Emphasis on differences of other groups can lead to radicalization through feelings of competition and opposition.
<i>Absence of Realistic Effective and Affective Role Models</i>	Lack of positive role models with whom individuals can identify can lead to crisis of identity and radicalization.
<i>Extremist Ideologies</i>	Extremist ideologies can be perpetuated through a myriad of outlets and don't necessarily break any laws.
<i>Extremist Recruiters</i>	NGOs have been effective at countering the rhetoric and narrative of extremist recruiters, but careful attention to the strategies and roles extremist recruiters play is still needed.

Table 2: Summary of Risk Factors for Extremist Behavior (Brennan et al, 2015)

Challenging extremism is the duty of all responsible members of society. Not only do all members of society have a stake in preventing extremist behavior, but in most cases cultural insularity and extremism are products of wider society's failures to incorporate youth into a shared sense of belonging, attachment, and commitment to advance democratic values.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on knowledge from academic scholars, youth practitioners, and policy-makers interested in the issue of preventing violent extremism among youth.

- 1) **We must understand that youth radicalization and de-radicalization is a process.** As a process, it can be combatted and understood. Key to understanding this process is recognizing the importance of the narratives constructed by recruiters to entice youth to join a cause. Rather than demonizing these narratives or reasons, those interested in preventing extremism should consider the legitimacy of these grievances and seek ways to acknowledge these concerns in positive ways.
- 2) **Practitioners and others working directly with young people should consider ways to create new heroes and leaders for youth to follow which do not condone violence.** For instance, development of superheroes that reflect the cultural and gendered identities of youth can be a way for young people to “see themselves” portrayed in entertainment and media in positive ways.
- 3) **Incorporate youth in youth-led research.** Inviting youth to drive social research by selecting topics they find important can be a strategy to legitimize their grievances and demonstrate that there is a place for their concerns and issues. Displaying research findings can show the wider community that youth have capabilities and value within their local areas. Participating in research can also help youth see themselves as capable and worthy of having a voice towards researching their surroundings and creating change they would like to see happen in their local communities.
- 4) **Foster traditional community development through the encouragement of intercultural and intergenerational communication and social supports while paying special attention to inviting youth to these conversations.** Being connected to other youth and adults who care for them and listen to their concerns can be a powerful deterrent to youth extremism. These connections can help youth feel less isolated and more empathetic towards members of their communities.

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