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Un programme du Département fédéral des affaires étrangères (DFAE) suisse, depuis 2015.  
**Placer le dialogue au cœur de la prévention de la violence et de l'extrémisme violent.**

A program of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) since 2015.  
**Place dialogue at the heart of the prevention of violence and violent extremism.**

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# Preventing violence: the urgent need of alternative responses

*Seven years of commitment  
by Switzerland and its partners*



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## List of Acronyms

<b>ADF</b>	Allied Democratic Forces
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>ECCAS</b>	Economic Community of Central African States
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>DSF</b>	Defense and Security Forces
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>FDFA</b>	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
<b>IHL</b>	International Humanitarian Law
<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>MINUSMA</b>	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PVE</b>	Prevention of violent extremism
<b>SSR</b>	Security Sector Reform
<b>VE</b>	Violent Extremism



## Technical note from the editors

The material presented in this publication stems from various sources. The first source comes obviously from the exchanges that took place during the various meetings, which form the framework of the working dynamics facilitated by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program. The second is in the summary reports prepared at the end of each of these meetings, all of which are available online and now consolidated in a regularly updated Chronicle. The third consists of the various audiovisuals generated during this process. A significant source has been added to this material: the (anonymous) results of the online consultation conducted between March and May 2021 with the large community of over 2000 people who took part in this initiative. And finally, the "In-depth Interviews for the PVE" series, which were carried out in 2021 and 2022 (see below). All these sources have provided a very diverse perspective on this process and its future.

Various audio-visual products support this publication and contribute to disseminating this initiative's messages and results. On the one hand, there is the series of "In-depth Interviews for the PVE" conducted with seventeen personalities with very different profiles, all of whom are involved in PVE actions; and on the other hand, a documentary film tracing this journey through various illustrative testimonies and proposing an educational tool on the PVE, complements this material. The interviews and the documentary (videos) are available on the YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0s8N4Cx-9UnMPTYIZTWuZOGlIhp8gzaT>.

The editors are solely responsible for any errors made in the transcripts of the exchanges that abounded during these seven years of meetings. However, the variety of opinions reflected therein or in the above-mentioned sources are those of the various personalities who participated in the work and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss FDFA or the editors.'

The publication form has been kept as light as possible by editorial choice. Therefore, references to the various documents and quotations mentioned are all gathered at the end of the text. In addition, the numerous quotations taken from the anonymous results of the online consultation are followed by an asterisk (\*), without mentioning the source each time.

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This publication would not have been made possible without the invaluable assistance and precious contribution of Gwénola Possémé-Rageau, who has worked patiently on its preparation alongside the FDFA's PVE program managers. She contributed much more than her editorial skills: she also brought her experience in the field of peace in Africa. Heartfelt thanks are extended to her.

Finally, Jean-Daniel Biéler was a long-time companion on this journey. His profound humanity was an outstanding leaven to the community that emerged from this initiative and gave full meaning to the work of facilitating dialogue pursued by Switzerland. Thank you, Jean-Daniel.





## PREAMBLE

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Preface, Foreword and  
Key messages





# Preface

Seven years already! It was in 2015 that the UN Secretary-General asked Switzerland to help launch his campaign for a comprehensive approach to violence prevention. He was in the process of finalizing his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism<sup>1</sup>, which was launched at the end of that year. Driven by this same vision, his successor declared on the occasion of the Security Council Open Debate on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security on 10 January 2017<sup>2</sup>: “We must rebalance our approach to peace and security. For decades, this has been dominated by responding to conflict. For the future, we need to do far more to prevent war and sustain peace. [...] Prevention is not merely a priority, but the priority.”

Building on its close relationship with the United Nations, Switzerland was able to mobilize in 2015 on several fronts to respond to this call. It adopted a Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism (April 2016).<sup>3</sup> It co-chaired, with the United Nations, the Conference on the Prevention of Violent Extremism: *The Way Forward*, held in Geneva on 7 and 8 April 2016.<sup>4</sup> It also included the PVE in its Foreign Policy Strategy 2020-2023<sup>5</sup> and its strategies for both Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>6</sup> and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (2021-2024).<sup>7</sup>

But what exactly is this about? There is growing international recognition that counter-terrorism measures based on military and security means are not sufficient to stem the tide of violent extremism. Although Switzerland condemns armed violence, it values the prevention approach, which first addresses the causes of violence, be they political, social or economic. In fact, exclusion, injustice, lack of economic opportunities, poor governance and corruption, old unresolved conflicts, and even marked rearmament are found to push some toward violent extremism.



Solutions must therefore be found to eradicate the causes of this violence. For Switzerland, facilitating spaces for inclusive political dialogue is a central tool for the prevention of violence, along with tools to address the needs of populations in the areas of education or health, for example. And to this end, it is essential to work with all the actors: governments, the military, elected representatives, researchers, civil society, traditional power structures, the media, including considering, where possible, dialogue with violent extremist armed groups.

This policy has both a national and regional or international dimension because in our globalized world, no one is protected from such a threat anymore, and everyone shares the responsibility to prevent it.

For example, Switzerland, with its long experience working in conflict and transition contexts, launched a program to prevent violence in 2016.





This not only enables it to support the prevention efforts of its partners in various contexts (especially in West, Central, and North Africa as well as in the Middle East) but also to draw on these concrete experiences in its advocacy for prevention in multilateral fora.

This publication traces the many stages of this concrete commitment and is a tribute to the many governments, partners, and personalities this program has supported over the past seven years. It is thanks to them that the impetus needed to contain this extreme violence is gradually developing, and it is also thanks to them that Switzerland has been able to share so many common visions and maintain so many solid relations to consciously build peace together.

On behalf of Switzerland, I would like to warmly thank all of you for this work in solidarity, and I look forward to seeing you in its next stages.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Livia Leu". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Livia" and the last name "Leu" clearly distinguishable.

Livia Leu, State Secretary  
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA



# Foreword

## Crossed views

After developing over the past seven years, the dynamics of regional meetings for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) are starting to make an impression. Four personalities with very different lives and experiences, who took part in this journey, share some thoughts.

She is a civil society actor, working closely with women in the Far North of Cameroon (Madeleine Memb); he is a Chadian political actor and parliamentarian committed to the emergence of democracy (Gatta Gali N'Gothe); he is a former Tunisian international civil servant who held high positions in Africa as well as at the United Nations headquarters (Youssef Mahmoud) and finally, he is a Senegalese senior military officer currently serving as Deputy Force Commander of MINUSMA (General Paul Ndiaye). They all share a common hope of a world without violence but, above all, a commitment to making it happen.

## What is the core of the PVE?

**GNG** “ The PVE is a long journey of reflection on violence and peacebuilding. It is fundamentally based on dialogue. In any dialogue, respecting and listening to the partner is paramount, and then comes providing an approach that allows the parties to engage in a dialogue. Solidarity of action for dialogue must be built. ”

**PN** “ The responses to security challenges, particularly violent extremism, in Africa and elsewhere, continue to be mostly security-oriented. Unfortunately, the purely security-oriented approach has its limitations. We must think of other forms of response (good governance, development, and democracy), especially ones that rely on dialogue and consensus. These alternative responses require a shared vision and a synergy of efforts. ”

**MM** “ In the Far North of Cameroon, where we are working to rebuild the weakened or broken social bonds due to the action of Boko Haram, our approach is to articulate the PVE around the Communication/Dialogue tandem - communication between the various social bodies interacting within the territories that are in the grip of the security crisis, and use of dialogue to help rebuild these broken ties and regenerate the devastated regions. We strive to foster a rapprochement within communities as well as among women actors of peace, public services, and other local institutions in order to create synergy. ”

“ These pioneering meetings have, through their constancy and consistency, thanks to the PVE concept, built another solidarity of action against violence. They have shown that, against resistance and fear of all kinds, dialogue and peacebuilding are possible. ”

“ In regions that require little or no security presence, we must work on preventing and consolidating social peace through mediation, community dialogue, human rights. In Mali, for example, these dialogues are numerous and have led to the signing of peace agreements between communities, which enabled the return of displaced populations, improved peaceful coexistence, and facilitated the resumption of socio-economic activities. ”



Gatta Gali N'Gothe (GNG), Chad



Madeleine Memb (MM), Cameroon

## Did these meetings influence practices?

“ When in 2017, we launched an initiative inspired by these regional meetings and aimed at the moral and economic recovery of women affected by Boko Haram, we did not expect communication to act as a catalyst in this rural context. Our approach was simply to build the PVE around communication and dialogue, but very quickly, we discovered the strength of our feminine values and our capacities for dialogue. Little by little this yearning for peace was embraced by community leaders and the local authorities. ”



**GNG** “These meetings did not shy away from shaking things up. Many participants were surprised by the new courses of action proposed in these large rooms where people of all origins, geographical, professional, or political, came together. Coffee breaks and chance encounters were all opportunities to discuss the plenary debates. This is what these meetings are about: a kind of people’s university where everyone takes what is within their reach, and they fulfilled their role. Secondly, as the companions of a long journey usually do, the structures supporting the meetings take stock after each stage. This is how the content of the PVE has constantly matured. ”



Youssef Mahmoud (YM), Tunisia



General Paul Ndiaye (PN), Senegal

**YM** “The three major regional meetings (Dakar, NDjamena, and Algiers) amply demonstrated the limits and even the setbacks of the fundamentally security-oriented responses to violent extremism. These responses are based on the assumption that the only perpetrators of violent acts are outlaws spreading terror, who must be eradicated. This obscures the role of poor governance and exclusion policies, among other factors, in creating a breeding ground for the outbreak of this scourge. To address this situation, the participants in these conversations recommended additional multisectoral measures, whose main purpose is to invest in peace and justice as the starting point and ultimate goal of any preventive action. ”

“These meetings have strengthened my convictions, especially in my work as a parliamentarian. Currently, MPs of the majority consult me so that the Assembly can be a genuine space for dialogue. ” **GNG**

## Any thoughts on the next steps of this cycle of meetings?

“I am pleased to say personally that Switzerland’s peace policy, which combines human security and the prevention of violence, is a great source of inspiration for the task of rebuilding minds in which I have been involved. In my opinion, the place of communication and the media, introduced at the very first meetings for the PVE (Dakar and NDjamena), must necessarily be pursued. ” **MM**

“The natural disasters related to the acceleration of climate change and the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic are matters of concern. Preliminary studies suggest a correlation between these disasters and the rise of violent extremism. It would be interesting to study the extent to which these global phenomena and the responses to curb them exacerbate the conditions that lead to violence. The regional meetings for the PVE could thus examine whether their own recommendations can be useful in mitigating the impact of these two major phenomena. ” **YM**

“Ultimately, the security response can be complemented by other forms of response, including intra- and inter-community dialogue. We need to consolidate and replicate the achievements in this area. ” **PN**

“The upsurge in extremist acts of violence in rich countries shows that violent extremism is not limited to poor and fragile countries. It would therefore be useful to explore the extent to which these meetings’ recommendations could help rich countries. ” **YM**

“Peaceful coexistence is a fundamental element for the heterogeneity of the populations who inhabit the states bequeathed by colonization. This area is not sufficiently exploited. Peaceful coexistence is not only a global issue; it is also a question of the various components of society and each person’s culture. Can we, through regional meetings, open the door to address these issues? ” **GNG**



# Key Messages

## 1. Keys to KNOWLEDGE

**01** Violent extremism is **not a phenomenon arising out of nowhere** or resulting solely from personal or group excesses. It also stems from societal, governmental, and local policies decided by political leaders or others who no longer control the consequences of their choices.

**02 Exclusion** fuels violent extremism. It can be political, socioeconomic, health-related, educational, generational, or ideological. It is at the root of the deterioration and even the rupture in relations between citizens and the State, which is responsible for providing public service.

**03 Failure to reach out**, share, engage in dialogue and the lack of spaces for expressing citizens' needs and demands, especially the youth, pave the way for violent extremism.

**04** At the heart of the causes of violent extremism are issues of **governance**, the quest for identity, **political participation, justice, socioeconomic outlook, intergenerational relationships, environmental governance**, the need for **protection, weapons**, the behavior of the **Defense and Security Forces (DSF)**.

**05 Civilians are the main victims** of extreme violence. Populations are increasingly targeted by violence not only by extremist armed groups but also by regular armies and self-defense militias. They are the central issue in a logic of war, which only leads to more violence.

**06** The concepts of **"religious radicalization"** or "jihadist terrorism" do not often resonate with the populations affected by violent extremism; on the contrary, they are seen as offensive because religion is not regarded as a cause of violence.

## 3. Keys to ACT

**16** The role of the **State** is central in the prevention of armed violence. It is up to it to develop, with the participation of all, a strategy aimed at establishing a vision and an operational implementation framework for the PVE. The authorities must get involved in making it a truly national and **public policy**.

**17** Alongside political decision-makers and state officials, **parliamentarians** must also undertake to ensure that the political will and vision of prevention are taking shape and that the legislative frameworks and budgetary allocations are consistent with the latter.

**18** There is no prevention of violence or peace without a fully **functioning justice** system that serves the citizen. For lack of access to justice or in the absence of justice, populations are tempted to take the law into their own hands, which fuels violence.

**19** The **DSF** have a fundamental role to play in the PVE. They are the ones who, through their mandate, are in contact with violent extremists and the populations. Their behavior, in times of peace as in times of war, guarantees the credibility of a State where justice prevails and the population is protected.

**20** The whole of **civil society**, including women, youth, religious and traditional leaders, opinion leaders, teachers, the media, researchers, and representatives of the private sector, are key players in the PVE. They are not just beneficiaries of peace policies; they are their main **promoters**.

**21** The solutions proposed by **local communities** are seldom heard when they are the ones on the front line against the violence of armed groups and that of the DSF. They need to be more involved in formulating solutions to prevent violence and developing the PVE national strategies.

**22** The role of **women** is essential in prevention, as is the role they play in society. They are central to defending the family and heritage against the shortcomings of their society or the State; they can encourage their relatives to join or not join armed groups or militias. They should also be able to put forward their vision of security and peace, including at the decision-making level.

**23 Extensive dialogue** with and among **youth** on the rapid transformation of societies experiencing VE, is essential. Changes in ideas, references, and beliefs raise among young people questions that challenge their society and erode the traditional ramparts of violence.

**24** Viable **exit measures from violence** for all those seeking to leave armed groups, facilitate their return. It is about going beyond reconciliation or forgiveness and discussing, with them and those around them, the issues that led to their involvement in violence.

**25 "Returnees"** can become particularly experienced and convincing **champions of the PVE!**

**26** The **media** and **social media** can promote the prevention approach. They can disseminate and amplify positive messages around prevention initiatives, through community radio stations, for instance. They can also be used to respond to arguments advocating for violence, combat fake news and create spaces to discuss the culture of peace.

**27 Journalists** have an **educational role** when it comes to demystifying violence; they can foster dialogue around solutions and responsibilities that involve the research sector, public actors, DSF, private businesses, and civil society.



## 2. STRATEGIC KEYStones

**07** The **prevention** of violent extremism (PVE) is a societal reality already expressed in many forms. It is neither a choice nor an option but a **necessity** that responds to the urgent need to act on the causes of conflicts to prevent the occurrence and reoccurrence of violence.

**08** There is **no such thing as a time for prevention** and a time for reacting to violence. Understanding and acting on the causes of violence is an ongoing commitment that requires time, will, and patience. Especially when the violence is already out there. It is about building peace at all times, relentlessly, and with all the means available.

**09** Preventive responses based on **inclusion, dialogue, and respect for differences** are the only way of preventing or resolving antagonisms in the long run.

**10** **Human security** is at the center of the PVE. Engaging in the PVE means working to ensure that respect for human beings and their safety is considered a priority. Civilians are the main recipients of the PVE.

**11** The military response too often serves as a **“screen”** for the lack of political will on the part of leaders to anticipate and meet the needs of the populations and their demand for participation.

**12** The aim of the PVE is to **create multiple peace alliances** within society and to put an end to war coalitions.

**13** **Building peace** is the best way to prevent violence. Peace is neither the absence of war nor stability; it is acknowledging the humanity of others.

**14** **Eradicating the causes of violence**, rather than eradicating the actors of violence, is the only way to achieve a sustainable solution.

**15** Providing alternative responses to violence requires a **change of thinking patterns**: while military and security responses, as well as urgent humanitarian responses and short-term reconstruction responses, are necessary, they are not intended to address the causes of violence.

## 4. Keys of COMMITMENT

**28** **Inclusion** is the top priority. It is THE key.

**29** **Inclusive dialogue**, one that involves everyone, is the preferred mechanism for achieving peace and the prevention of violence, including violent extremism. It is the basis for social cohesion, political participation, sound governance, and a harmonious relationship between the State and its citizens.

**30** **Dialogue with violent extremist groups** is part of prevention initiatives, where possible. This is difficult and often seen as a daring and groundbreaking approach. It is, however, an example of inclusiveness that strengthens the future cohesion of society.

**31** Without the support of the population, extremist armed groups are nothing. Engaging in dialogue with populations also means creating opportunities to **build bridges** with violent extremists.

**32** The **return of violent extremists** can only succeed if, at the same time, full support is also provided for the **victims of VE**. Furthermore, reconciliation should not be confused with recognizing one another's responsibilities in the emergence of violence.

**33** **Improving the security** of society is a **common endeavor** that includes every citizen. It is constantly built through all the instruments the State and society possess to be reinforced in cohesion and peace. This governance must be shared at all decision-making levels so that every individual feels responsible for their own safety and that of others.

**34** Rather than investing in excessive militarization and security, the time has come to **invest in peace!**

**35** The protection of populations by **self-defense militias** raises more problems than it solves. The cycle of violence it sustains is too often beyond the control of the State. Maintaining a constant dialogue on this matter with all the relevant actors is part of active and responsible prevention.

**36** Government officials must be **trained in dialogue**, which is necessary to prevent violence; learning about a culture of peace and respect for differences must also be promoted socially in families, schools, universities, and socialization places.

**37** All these manifestations of the PVE must be **actively nurtured**. Meetings, exchanges, lessons learned, research, on the PVE are essential for implementing effective national strategies leading to a better balance within societies over time.





# INTRODUCTION

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Armed violence is not inevitable. It stems from political decisions and acts carried out by individuals who make choices, the consequences of which often get out of control and lead to spirals of violence involving and affecting thousands or even millions of people. Today, **such violence is becoming increasingly complex**, characterized by both transnational and global frames of reference and realities, as well as local motives and roots - terrorism and violent extremism being its latest forms.

## An approach to be reinvented

These global trends have prompted the United Nations to **put the prevention** of conflict and violent extremism back at the heart of the peace and security agenda. <sup>1</sup> This was notably through the adoption of a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (24 December 2015) <sup>2</sup>, which calls for stronger preventive measures to directly tackle the causes of violent extremism. Calling upon Member States to achieve this change of course, it recalls that the United Nations Charter has no other vision or purpose than the prevention and removal of threats to the peace.

The **concept of Prevention** of Violent Extremism (PVE) is one of the recent ways of viewing politics as a tool for peaceful social regulation. It remains **difficult to grasp** because we find it hard to shift violent extremism away from a perception that defines it, as with terrorism, as an **element external to the life of nations**, a "metastasis" from which the society as a whole must be rid. Violent extremism has mainly generated military and security responses around the world, fueling exclusion and violence. These thus express the difficulties governments have in recognizing that a society is globally changing and that the fate of its citizens must be considered equally, otherwise some of them will, sooner or later, in some way, remind them of the reasons why they were given power. This is how VE is responding today in its own way, in many parts of our globe and particularly in Africa, to the major excesses of both our global and local world.

## Switzerland, a country committed to prevention

Switzerland has long made **peace policy**, mediation, and political dialogue the founding elements of its foreign policy. In the face of armed violence, whatever one calls it (extreme, extremist), it considers that this policy line remains **a priority**. When violence erupts, the warring parties will sooner or later have to silence the guns and restore peace; isn't it therefore worth investing resolutely and from the outset in peace and the prevention of violence, rather than inflicting great suffering and mending a torn social fabric? Switzerland understood the need to **deal with extreme violence as a political approach**, a means to power and to bring about

social change. It shares this vision in high-level international discussions as well as on the ground with its state and non-state partners. As early as 2016, it adopted a Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism <sup>3</sup>, which provides a framework for the implementation of these commitments and has included this approach among the priorities of its Foreign Policy Strategy 2020-2023 <sup>4</sup>, as well as of its Strategies 2021-2024 for Sub-Saharan Africa <sup>5</sup> and for the Middle East and North Africa. <sup>6</sup>

Switzerland's PVE Action Plan is implemented by all the entities of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) concerned, in particular its Directorate of Public International Law, its Directorate for Development and Cooperation, and its State Secretariat. Each year, various activities are carried out or supported through various partnerships, both multilateral and operational, by the units at headquarters as well as by the Swiss representations and cooperation offices, in the various areas of commitment: political dialogue and prevention, conflict resolution and transformation, strengthening good governance and respect for human rights and the rule of law, involving of the population, mobilizing of young people and women, education, strengthening of skills and facilitating access to employment, and strategic communication.

It is within this framework and based on its experience in peace processes in conflict and transition contexts that the Peace and Human Rights Division of the FDFA has developed a new PVE program over the past seven years, which, as with other Swiss PVE activities, supports the implementation of the United Nations' PVE Action Plan <sup>7</sup> and the violence prevention efforts of its partners, particularly in North, West Africa and in the Sahel, in Central Africa and in the Middle East. This publication is based on the experience of this specific program, illustrating one of the practices carried out by Switzerland in this field of VE prevention.

This program is based on the premise that violence is not born of abstraction or an unknown origin but that it originates in social and political environments that are not well adapted to local, national, or global dynamics and to the aspirations of the peoples. Environments where inequality, injustice, political and military violence, poorly managed public governance, lack of economic opportunities, and many other obstacles, make violent extremism seem appealing. All these causes can be grouped together under the term **exclusion**; preventive work then consists of doing the exact opposite and promoting **inclusion**. The program thus makes dialogue its central tool.

It is a question of encouraging, through the activities carried out by this program, a common understanding of the realities, stimulating the exchange of experiences, fostering the emergence of innovative alternatives aimed at transforming the causes of violence, as well as building capacity for the prevention of violence.





## A path is being created

This prevention work relies in the first place on understanding the **root causes** of each situation of armed violence (which can vary from one country to another, from one region to another within the same country, and from one period to another). To do this, the program has, for instance, supported research to **better understand** the demands and/or challenges faced by those directly affected by these environments and violence, whether or not they are members of VE groups.

It is then about giving a **space for dialogue** and for the exchange of experiences to those confronted with this violence who seek or manage local, national or transnational solutions. While bringing together people with different views and from diverse backgrounds, it is also a question of facilitating this openness to the perspectives, needs, ideas, and experiences of others. To this end, governments, Defense and Security Forces (DSF), political circles, parliamentarians, judicial systems, regional and local elected representatives, CSOs, the economic and trade sector, journalists, women, youth, traditional and religious leaders, academics and researchers, are invited to express their vision of their own responsibilities, to reflect on what can be done or changed in the situations they are living in, and to consider what they can build together. As **dialogue at all levels of public life is part of the solution**, this learning could be the starting point for preventing violence.

It is first through what was called the **"Regional Conversations"** (there have been three so far held in Dakar <sup>8</sup> (2016), NDjamena <sup>9</sup> (2017), and Algiers <sup>10</sup> (2018)) and the public events sharing their findings, later, in various international forums in New York or Geneva, that Switzerland and its first partners (the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel - UNOWAS, and the International Peace Institute - IPI) inaugurated this space for dialogue. These major meetings offered participants from North, West, and Central Africa the opportunity to exchange views on their realities and their specific characteristics, but also on the common threads that connect these regions, for worse (the transnational nature of VE and that of serious crime, the shortcomings of the state apparatuses) or for better (the better-shared understanding of these realities, the common commitment in seeking alternative solutions, the relay of regional structures). These meetings stimulated the interest of many to take ownership and get involved in the process of preventing violence.

In the process, some **fourty meetings** were organized in a smaller format and sometimes refocused on certain sub-regional areas or certain subjects. In Dakar, Bangui, Algiers, Ouagadougou, Yaoundé, Abidjan, Tunis, and a dozen other cities, mostly African, and on topics as diverse as relations between the State and citizens, the role of the DSF in

the PVE, the role of the media, women and youth, issues relating to land, to the environment, to climate change and insecurity, the management of cross-border areas as a prevention tool, the connection between weapons and the prevention of violence, the role of dialogue, including with violent extremists, and many others.

It is also the launch in 2020 of a **training program** entirely dedicated to learning about violence prevention tools that the experts of Switzerland's PVE program have developed with the African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism of the African Union (ACSRT-AU).

In addition to the numerous bilateral visits, sessions to accompany the reflections on the PVE or addresses at international conferences, to which the **program experts** have regularly contributed, in this same effort of sharing the vision and tools for preventing violence.

## A way of doing things

The originality of this PVE program of the Swiss FDFA lies in the fact that it has opened up spaces where these issues can be dealt with freely, where dialogue serves as an instrument of awareness and projection into the future. The systematic use of dialogue is the primary instrument of the PVE work. **Multiplying PVE meetings is no coincidence**: it is what has enabled this topic to be discussed, understood, and integrated by some 2,000 people who have been involved in this process to date. The common thread running through this dynamic relies on establishing a network of persons and institutions that share Switzerland's approach and are willing to get involved in organizing and participating in such meetings. Switzerland now has around thirty competent and committed local partners with whom it works and shares reliable operational and institutional links. As a result, a **community of practice** has emerged, whose influence is gradually increasing among decision-makers. Even crossing paths with the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be an advantage: as it confirmed the unique value of these human encounters (see also box *A proven methodology*, p. 35).

## Major topics

The main themes that marked the work can be summarized as follows:

► **Armed violence** reflects a damaged socio-political relationship to the point where tensions and frustrations outweigh the possibility of peaceful coexistence. It is a social expression that requires a political response because it generates dynamics of co-production of violence, self-defense, cleavage (marginalization and stigmatization), or "departures" that are psychotropic (drugs), physical (migration), or violent (joining armed groups).



- ▶ **Joining violent extremist groups**, which must be thoroughly documented in each case, is motivated by multiple reasons: strong perception of the unfair behaviors of the State or the DSF, a sense of liberation from authority or from a marginalized social status, personal or group vendetta, the pursuit of quick and easy money, the prospect of taking part in a conquering international community, etc. Also, understanding disengagement is equally important.
- ▶ **Formal and family education and learning about social life** are considered the first pillar of the PVE. This is how the ground rules of peaceful coexistence and citizenship are acquired.
- ▶ The **presence or absence of the State** in areas of instability, its behavior, its governance, and the way it responds to VE are paramount in the evolution of the population's reactions.
- ▶ The responsibility of **elected representatives** in addressing violence and the marginalization of specific territories or communities and with respect to public governance, is crucial yet too often overlooked. They are the ones who define and approve the policy lines (including the PVE), and who pass laws and budgets, especially those allocated to violence prevention and peacebuilding policies and those allocated to defense.
- ▶ The development, adoption, and implementation of **national strategies and PVE action plans** designed according to nationally rooted policies and structures and inclusive processes, are widely called for.
- ▶ With regard to the **Defense and Security Forces**, their role in republican cohesion through the Army-Nation relationship, the compliance with legal frameworks including those of human rights and IHL, civil-military activities, and their adequate training, are considered to be key elements of the PVE.
- ▶ **Justice** is a determining factor of peace within a society – adversely, its absence, shortcomings, and misuse generate deep wounds and are among the main triggers of violence.
- ▶ **Traditional and religious authorities** have an important role to play in the local regulation of social behavior. They are at the forefront of establishing dialogue within the communities to prevent violence.
- ▶ **Youth** are vital to the PVE. They need to be fully involved, especially given that intergenerational tensions have often taken root in societies confronted with modernization and that they form the bulk of VE groups.
- ▶ The importance of **women** in societies, their relationship with men and social and power structures, is recognized everywhere. Victims or actors of violence, they are also on the front line of dialogue and peacebuilding possibilities. Their view of security cannot be disregarded. Integrating them into the PVE is essential.
- ▶ National, international, and community **media**, along with **social media**, depending on how they communicate, can both moderate and instigate violence. Awareness-raising campaigns on the PVE and the implementation of preventive communication are currently insufficient.
- ▶ Special attention should be given to the **victims of violence**, often abandoned by the State. They deserve both moral and financial recognition, especially since the former combatants are often assisted in their reintegration into economic and social life.
- ▶ **Former combatants of violent groups** (repentant fighters, converts, prisoners, disarmed fighters) can become true advocates of the PVE, provided that the legal frameworks for their reintegration are clear and that they are called on to share this experience.
- ▶ The existence of **self-defense groups** (vigilance committees, community armies, militias) is often tolerated or even legalized. Still, it is necessary to clearly establish their role, their legitimacy (can security be privatized?), the limits of their mandate, the sanctions in the event of abuses; the risks of instrumentalization are also highlighted.
- ▶ Governance deficits related to **land, environment, and climate** (land tenure, water) and **natural resources** (gold, diamonds, oil, national parks, wildlife) increasingly appear to be a breeding ground for extremist armed groups.
- ▶ The **economy of violence** is significant. The links between VE groups and national, cross-border and international banditry, traffickers, those who govern that could use them, and economic operators should also be taken into account.
- ▶ The need to integrate more actively the issue of **weapons** into violence prevention efforts through the prism of demand, is also emphasized: what are the social, financial, and security motivations for acquiring, trafficking, and using weapons?
- ▶ **Research**, while critically lacking in resources, is essential to improve knowledge about societal issues related to VE, particularly to describe local specificities and their connection with local conflicts, as well as the governance of VE groups and the rationale behind their political agenda.



► The **private sector** is often caught in the throes of violence. It is an employer and has the responsibility to protect its employees, but in order to survive, it must often maintain ambiguous relations with the actors of violence. It is, therefore, a matter of protecting traders and entrepreneurs so that they can be key actors of the PVE from which they will be the first to benefit.

► **International governance** in the face of VE is being challenged. Northern countries' special interests must conform to the priorities of the partner governments when, for example, the latter favor a policy of dialogue. Regional and international organizations are also called upon to play a more active role in the PVE.

## A wealth to share

This publication is designed as a pooling of the wealth of experience gathered by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program over the past seven years (experiences of dialogue, implementation of policies, documentation, reflections, analyses, open debates, unanswered questions, emotions). It is intended to share this survey and breathe new life into it, through its readers.

The following pages will reflect the different themes that were discussed, the solutions that were advocated, and the experiences that were shared in this regard. They will also look at the resources of know-how and interpersonal skills that can be drawn on to make this prevention a reality in both our personal and professional lives.

## A desire to continue

All these meetings have shown that the PVE is really a shared concern. It is based on the incredibly positive effects of free speech given the need, expressed everywhere, to preserve peace. Listening to and involving the affected populations ensures that the PVE is in good hands and gives it the chance to be effective. Dialogue, as a prime attitude, applies to governments that do not want peace as well as to armed groups. The PVE is also recognized as a factor in rebuilding social cohesion: and who better to be its driving force than the people, communities, and States directly concerned?

In proposing this publication we hope it will continue to inspire and stimulate, as the meetings did, the will to move forward, and we need it to guide further activities of the program. We also have to constantly reflect on the best way to strengthen this will among national and military leaders as well as civil society leaders, to address the risks or realities of VE in ways that are different than by flexing one's muscles.

Our **interdependent work dynamic** is a source of strength to continue building.

Nothing could have been accomplished without the commitment, intelligence, knowledge, and contacts of the partner institutions of this program and of all those who have actively contributed to the work carried out over the past seven years. Switzerland thanks them deeply and hopes that these special relations will develop further in the future so that the vision of the last two Secretaries-General of the United Nations can be achieved in order to quell the violence and strengthen peace where extremes still challenge each other.





## CHAPTER 1

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The need to approach  
violence differently





Throughout history, but especially since 2001, governments have struggled to resist the simplistic temptation of responding violently to violence, particularly against extremist armed groups. The past twenty years have clearly shown this: how many hotbeds of violence have grown due to the disproportionate reactions of security-related public policies, thus fueling the spiral of violence. To overcome this, many sectors of society have committed to alternative responses, taking into account local realities and the needs expressed by the populations. It is the search for peace that deeply guides them. This set of reflections and approaches make prevention, as in medicine, a societal priority. But to achieve prevention, it is necessary to know well the causes of evil and the ways it takes to spread. It is based on this reality that this work begins.

Extreme violence is now pervading the reality of our lives. In Syria, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Mozambique, Haiti, Myanmar, or the Sahel, as well as in certain European or American cities, to name but a few, hardly a day goes by without populations being subjected to it.

While the number of armed conflicts around the world tends to decrease, Africa is an exception, as pointed out by the NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) in its numerous publications, including its report "Ten conflicts to worry about in 2021" (February 2021) <sup>1</sup>. Indeed, in Africa, violence continues unabated, if not reinforced by the health and climate crises.

## 1.1 Trends and manifestations of violence

Extreme violence is protean. It is increasingly noticeable in all types of governance, from dictatorships to democracies. Such violence is commonly associated with the so-called "terrorist" or "violent extremist" armed groups in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. However, violence is not exclusive to these groups only: the shooting of young teenagers by a lone wolf in the United States, the elimination of drug addicts by police forces in the Philippines, the rape of women in Eastern DRC, the killing of civilians in villages in the Sahel or the scenes of violent repression of public demonstrations that are now regularly seen on all continents, are all expressions of extreme violence, even if their consequences for civilians may vary. According to the United Nations <sup>2</sup>, the number of attacks by militants of extremist parties, white nationalists, or islamophobes in Western Europe and North America has increased considerably over the past two decades.

### ***Violent extremism, what exactly are we talking about?***

The lexicon of extreme violence encompasses a variety of concepts whose definitions are not universally accepted. In fact, a "terrorist" can be considered, by the group that supports the same cause, a "resistant". Similarly, radicalization is not necessarily regarded as negative, much less linked to violence. In regions where the so-called "jihadist" groups (another contentious term) are established and where populations suffer the injustice of government Defense and Security Forces (DSF), these will not have the same perception of Violent Extremism (VE) as those living in a European country not experiencing armed conflict.

### ***Trivializing violence, abuse, and emergency regimes***

The feeling of living in a violent world is increasingly prevalent. This violence is even more worrying when caused by the holders of legitimate violence. In the name of the fight against terrorism and the defense of freedom, democratic states (or not) commit human rights violations, even crimes against humanity, with impunity. Very often, in the name of counter-terrorism, governments have passed laws or adopted exceptional measures allowing, for example, to detain for years individuals suspected of terrorist acts outside of any judicial system; or, paradoxically, to restrict the freedoms in the name of which these measures are taken; or even exempt the military operations engaged in the "neutralization" of individuals whom the states describe as terrorists, from the duty to comply with the international commitments which they themselves have drawn up. All this contributes to the perpetuation of violence.

### ***Radicalization versus a deviant democracy and failing governance***

Elections are usually periods of tension in many countries. They are too often accompanied by violence before, during, and after they take place. Authoritarian governments refusing political alternation of power lead the opposition to harden their position. This can result in violent clashes between those in power and the opposition. Moreover, the governance of these countries having not been able to meet the aspirations of the populations, the latter sometimes choose arms over ballot boxes to make their voices heard; the abandoned peripheries of the State are particularly illustrative of this phenomenon. And in countries where minorities have long been neglected by the successive central authorities, people tend to seek refuge in communitarianism to voice their demands more effectively. The resulting protest movements can be subject to violent repression leading, in turn, to a form of radicalization. This is the case, for example, in the Sahel, Mozambique, Cameroon but also in Ethiopia, the Tigray region, and on the border of Somalia with the Afar and Oromo territories.



### ***Violence against women as a weapon of war***

Extreme violence against women is expressed in particular through rape, which is used as a weapon of war. Women in Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sudan, or the DRC are systematically targeted in conflict zones. They are also often used by VE groups to carry out indiscriminate attacks (human bombs) or reduced to being sexual slaves. This violence exercised to humiliate and dehumanize women is without risk for the aggressors, who are very rarely convicted, whether by the opposing forces who use the same weapon against women of the other side or by both the national and international justice systems. Victims on both sides are usually left on their own to fend for themselves after the assault or even get rejected by their community.

### ***Injustice***

In the Sahel, the absence of justice, a history sometimes extending over several decades, has led many people to join VE groups. It is not only the dysfunctional justice system but also the impunity for actors of violence that lead populations to turn to armed groups. In the northern Nigerian State of Borno, DSF abuses are cited as the primary factor in the Boko Haram group's shift toward armed violence and many young recruits joining its ranks. Another phenomenon where violence and justice are linked is the absence of the State in certain remote areas, which facilitates the emergence of self-defense militias. These militias, often formed on a community basis, are now part of a societal cleavage that has brought further violence or are being recklessly manipulated by local or political leaders. In some countries, such as Burkina Faso, they are even regulated by law, and their growing numbers

may ultimately pose a danger to the authorities, as they will constitute a legitimate force of violence in the same way as the army or the internal security forces. In many cases, these militias are only remotely controlled by the authority, and they too violate human rights with impunity, potentially leading to a violent chain reaction within communities.

### ***The linkage between corruption and political violence***

Many studies show the connection between corruption and the escalation of violence. Large-scale cases of malfeasance and embezzlement, rocking societies in the grip of extreme violence, exacerbate feelings of anger and frustration. Through social media, which often relay these scandals, people are beginning to understand that corruption, beyond its morally and legally reprehensible nature, can have severe consequences for their own security. And all this adds to the torrent of frustrations and the crisis of confidence in the State, which for some, are determining factors in their path to armed violence.

## Increasingly targeted civilians

Civilian populations remain the vast majority of casualties in conflicts. According to ACLED<sup>3</sup>, between 2011 and 2020, 92% of those killed or injured by explosive devices (e.g., bombs, IEDs, etc.) in armed conflicts were civilians. A century ago, these represented 5% of losses compared to 15% during World War I and 65% at the end of World War II. While the number of armed violence involving civilian targets worldwide decreased in 2020, it has, according to ACLED, increased significantly in Africa, particularly in three countries (Cameroon, Nigeria, and DRC), with the attacks of Boko Haram and those of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), affiliated with the Islamic State in Eastern DRC.

In Mozambique, where Al-Shabab extremists affiliated with the Islamic State of the Somali coast are wreaking havoc, violence against civilians accounts for 70% of all acts of violence recorded in 2020 in Cabo Delgado province, according to ACLED.

With the Solhan attack in Burkina Faso on 5 June 2021, the death toll of civilians killed by VE groups in the Sahel since the beginning of 2021 has reached 500 victims. At the same time, since late 2019, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and other organizations have documented more than 600 extrajudicial executions carried out by defense and security forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger during counterterrorism operations<sup>4</sup>.

This **increase** in manifestations of violence against civilians thus leads to a worrying **trivialization of violence**.



## 1.2 Actors of extreme violence with their many faces

### **Actors of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” violence**

Extreme violence is not exclusive to the holders of illegitimate violence (so-called VE movements, such as the LRA in South Sudan, pro-independence armed groups, urban gangs, etc.). In many situations, the holders of legitimate violence (defense and security forces, official or private militias but backed *de facto* by the authorities or certain political elites) are guilty of the same violence they are supposed to be fighting. This is one of the scourges of our time.

According to ACLED, 52% of violence in 2020 is attributable to regular armed forces, while there is a 46% increase between 2019 and 2020 in the number of non-state violent groups worldwide, particularly in Africa.<sup>5</sup> In addition, violence by non-regular forces such as community-based militias, similar to the Dan Na Ambassagou in Mali, or militias set up by the government, such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland (VDP) in Burkina Faso, has increased dramatically recently. These militias are accused of numerous atrocities against civilians, but their hybrid status does not subject them to the same control rules as the regular DSF. The same is true of private security companies operating in countries such as the CAR, Libya, Syria, or Mozambique, in support of regular armed forces but without sufficient control.

### **Youth, as both an actor and a victim of violence**

What characterizes extreme violence is that it mainly concerns the youth who are actors of this violence but also victims at the same time.

Over the past twenty years, there has been abundant quantitative and qualitative literature on the reasons for the anger among African youth joining armed groups. This anger expresses a lack of recognition, a lack of prospects for the future, a need to earn a living to survive, or a difficulty in getting married and starting a family. It can also be about protecting one's family in areas where certain communities are stigmatized and suffer violence. The loss of trust in local or national authorities and in political systems which seem dysfunctional, where the weight of tradition can hinder or act as a brake on certain aspirations of youth, where citizens have the feeling of not being heard, where politics is perceived as a business that only benefits an elite; are other reasons for this anger. According to a UNDP study, 78% of the surveyed young people from VE groups say they no longer trust the police, the military, and politicians.

## 1.3 What responses to violence?

### **The military and security responses**

When confronted with violence erupting from within, states most often choose the option of military response, even though they know that this will be long-term, cost a lot of money to taxpayers, and lead to abuses in terms of human rights, protection of civilians, respect for minorities and justice. But it can offer immediate political benefits, particularly electoral ones. However, it is rarely effective in the long term, and above all, it reveals a lack of commitment on the part of political leaders in addressing the causes of the imbalances expressed through extreme violence. It is a way of seeking to contain violence by controlling and securing, without trying to permanently transform the causes that generate violence. It is seeking to stabilize, rather than building peace.

### **Prevention as a response to extreme violence**

What do we mean by prevention? The semantic field of prevention is vast. Prevention can be medical, social, economic, or political. Prevention is, in particular, at the basis of public health policies. It is intended to anticipate a hazardous event and prevent its incidence. Natural disasters, pandemics, asthma attacks, but also economic crises and conflicts can be prevented. Prevention means making strategic choices before a disaster strikes. However, history has taught us that human beings find it difficult to anticipate and tend to react rather than prevent. And, when it comes to primary prevention, it is not just a question of anticipating nor containing but acting on the very causes of the phenomena - soil erosion, virulence, political, economic, and social exclusions.

### **Investigating the root causes of violence**

Prevention requires understanding the root causes that lead some individuals to resort to violence. Inequalities, injustices, marginalization, or political deadlocks are often-observed factors in the presence of extreme armed groups. The improvement of public policies and the implementation of policies promoting good governance in countries facing VE are more effective sources of prevention than the security-based approach.





### ***Fostering dialogue***

Since the beginning of the crisis, initiatives promoting dialogue (dialogue between populations and DSF, intergenerational dialogue and intra- and inter-community dialogues, dialogue with VE) have been launched by CSOs or by the states themselves in several contexts, such as in Niger and Nigeria. They have reduced tensions at the local level in many places. The transnational dimension of this violence, however, makes it necessary to devise forms of dialogue that go beyond national borders.

Nevertheless, the possibility of such dialogues is not yet unanimous among the populations and even among some authorities of the countries concerned. The initiatives already taken in this respect by the army or the administration have led to positive results in terms of the release of hostages or the surrender of certain combatants. But the tendency to label VE often leads to stigmatization that reinforces stereotypes and often limits the possibilities for dialogue with these individuals.

### ***Investing in peace***

The many efforts to prevent VE have shown that while respecting the expressed needs of the populations, peace must be the starting point and ultimate goal of governance. It is also important to understand how societies spared from extreme violence have managed to avoid it. These societies, often multicultural and plural, are best able to reveal their resilience factors, despite the internal vulnerabilities and external pressures from which they, too, suffer. For them, peace is a public good. This is reflected in several countries through the creation of new institutions or the strengthening of existing mechanisms whose main purpose is to ensure that national policies, especially sectoral ones, promote peace rather than conflict and do not cause unintended harm.

## **1.4 The slow emergence of a policy to prevent violent extremism**

Although the prevention and peaceful settlement of disputes is the *raison d'être* of the United Nations (Art. 1, Chapter I of the Charter), it should be noted that this objective has been difficult to achieve over the past 75 years. Since the attacks in New York in 2001, and the emergence of counter-terrorism policies based on the security response and the emergency regime aimed at annihilating the enemy, referred to as such, for a large majority of its Member States, this has been the only response. The United Nations Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2015), urging States to further address the root causes of such violence and strengthen Pillar 1 (Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism) of the 2006 United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, has not yet had much impact. This PVE approach follows, however, the same line of thinking as that developed in the 1990s around the concept of human security. It was at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 that UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, emphasized a more people-centered approach to security. Because taking an interest in the PVE is to focus on taking greater account of the individual, their aspirations, their needs, and their ability to contribute to building this common peace.

But if we look at the course of the PVE program that Switzerland has embarked on with its various partners or at other work that contributes to this same effort, we can detect a slow progression and a recognition of prevention as an alternative approach, albeit sometimes hesitant, limited, isolated, but increasingly politically assertive and driven by the practice of a myriad of actors who, together, can begin to make a difference.





## CHAPTER 2

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The journey of a commitment  
by Switzerland and its  
partners





## 2.1 Why a new initiative?

The previous chapter emphasized the extent to which the prevention approach can meet a need to understand, consider and transform the causes of violence. It also showed how this approach stands out from that aimed at stopping the actors of violence by a response itself based on the use of violence and a logic of control that can even be repressive.

To support this alternative approach, the Swiss government has worked with its partners since 2016. It thus launched a **program for the prevention of violent extremism**, one of the main features of which is a cycle of regional meetings held in Africa. Seven years after this program of the Swiss FDFA was launched, it has already welcomed some 2,000 occasional or regular participants, active in North, West, and Central Africa, forming today a large community of thought and practice. This initiative allows the actors on the ground to voice their perceptions of the phenomenon; it supports actions that offer alternatives to violent extremism (VE) and shows that going down the road of prevention can be a valid option.

### *Each word counts*

**“Conversations”** conveys the idea of informality, the equality of all in participating and speaking, and is an open invitation to expressing oneself in confidence, away from the conventional discourse or language norms, which stimulates desires and ideas. **“Regional”** because it is at this scale that a significant part of this initiative takes place. This helps to take a step back and gain perspective to deal with harsh realities constructively; this enriches the exchange of experiences due to the wide variety of facts and regions considered; this also reflects the reality of transnational violence and the need for solutions that go beyond borders; this finally helps connecting actors who are sometimes in opposition in their immediate context, establishing a network of diverse competencies, creating this community of solidarity and dynamism. **“For”** because the aim is not to “fight against” nor look “at” things from afar, but commit instead to working together to build. **“Prevention”** corresponds to the direction of this effort, which is neither to repress nor to deal only with the consequences of violence but to get to the bottom of things by addressing the various causes of violence, political, social, economic, and cultural. **“Violent”** extremism, as a reminder that violence is the problem and not an ideology, however radical it might be. And this initiative has a subtitle: **“Investing in building peace”**; it is toward this ultimate paradigm shift that this program is also working: peace is not just the absence of war or violence. This “peace” is never a given in any society and must therefore be built daily through a conscious commitment of all. That is the primary purpose of this effort.

### *Switzerland, the driving force behind the initiative*

The Swiss government has drawn on its culture of dialogue and compromise to launch this initiative; in fact, the country has been living a linguistic, cultural, and even geographic diversity and remains convinced that this diversity of values and thoughts is a wealth that must be preserved. This is also what forms the basis of the priority given in Swiss foreign policy to its commitment to international peace, a priority enshrined in its Constitution and policies. For more than thirty years, the Peace and Human Rights Division of the FDFA has acted as a competence center for the implementation of this policy. Therefore, what could be more natural than choosing violence prevention rather than exaggerated security responses?

Switzerland's neutrality and absence of colonial history in Africa are also considered important assets by those involved on the ground, whether they are political players, weapon-bearers, or members of civil society. Its voice is credible and heard, and its expertise in peace policy is recognized. In addition, the government's involvement in such an initiative gets the messages emerging from the meetings across to a higher level of decision-making at the national, regional, or international level, thus giving it an additional dimension.

“Very few governments are committed to the dynamic that we chose and which goes as far as advocating, when necessary, dialogue with actors of violence who are banished from societies. To be able to discuss these issues is a huge relief for the officials and representatives of the states we work with but also for other people who are part of our work circles.”<sup>1</sup>

“I think that Switzerland brings to the table its governance model based on promoting dialogue, the ability to listen, the constant search for peace. I think that in the current situation, peace is also built with models. Much as we can have models that favor the inappropriate use of force, we also need models based on the lasting values of peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and listening to one another.”<sup>2</sup>



## What the participants themselves say

"The initiative allows a common reading and a harmonization of the response."

"It is an innovative approach as it allows moving from theory to practice. We translate concepts into effective action, and the sharing shows that prevention exists but was not labeled as such."

"The participatory approach taken by the initiative fosters a common understanding and sharing of experiences and responsibilities."

"Such a posture (bold dialogue) is groundbreaking."

"This initiative is highly innovative in that it helps acquire the right tools other than that of coercion to entrench a sustainable response to violence on the African continent."

"This initiative is an innovative approach in that it brings together actors who usually do not meet even though they operate in the same field."

"In an environment where violence is always a response to violence, in a social landscape where violence becomes systematically an outlet, this unprecedented and somewhat daring and risky initiative proved to be salutary. It has offered a different insight, a view of alternative methods of conflict resolution."

"The initiative is unique in that it has succeeded in creating spaces for dialogue between a variety of actors working on security issues: political and administrative authorities, parliamentarians, civil society actors concerned with security issues, the media, researchers, Defense and Security Forces (DSF) and representatives of regional and international organizations."

*Source: Online consultation conducted between March and May 2021 among participants in the cycle of meetings organized by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program and its partners (anonymous results).*

### **An initiative at the service of a community**

Ultimately, this initiative aims to bolster the ability of all participants working in constructive peace dynamics to feel less alone in this endeavor and benefit from mutual support in both reflection and action. Switzerland stands alongside these participants as it does with the various partners with whom it has patiently been building this course of action for more than seven years. It is a whole community that is thus mobilized.

## 2.2 With whom is this work undertaken? Different backgrounds come together

The keystone of this edifice rests on the recognition that no actor has the monopoly on bringing about peace; **the latter is fundamentally built on the notions of sharing, inclusion, and dialogue.** The effort must come as much from states as from other actors within society and partners, in a shared pursuit of the common good. This initiative, therefore, aims at encouraging dialogue and **building bridges between these actors.** This is done by creating spaces for inclusive dialogue and is extended to political leaders so that this prevention approach finds its rightful place.

What makes this approach unique and successful is the fact that it brings together actors from different professional backgrounds (political leaders, parliamentarians, security officials, representatives of the DSF, representatives of civil society, researchers, etc.), from different countries and



regions, who would otherwise not meet, due to institutional cultures, “reserved areas” of competence, lack of trust, geographic distance, language barriers, socio-professional clusters, generational gaps, gender inequalities, different schools of thought, etc.

### Facilitation and selection

Making “security everyone’s business” in these circumstances, as was often expressed during these meetings, requires genuine efforts of facilitation, networking, and good selection, on which the quality of the meetings also depends.

To identify participants, the Swiss FDFA’s PVE program, along with its various partners, adopted a format and established selection criteria replicated in all the meetings to ensure a good gender, generational, and geographic balance and diversity of the professionals gathered. This step is crucial since fruitful interactions between participants will emerge – or not, from this selection.

This modality in the choice of participants, which does not rely on any mechanical effect, is one of the recipes for the conduct of the initiative. This contributes fundamentally to the success of meetings, as it fosters informality, creates trust, and encourages the assembly to think outside the box and beyond pre-assigned roles.

### Partners

To carry out this initiative, the Swiss FDFA’s PVE program has also surrounded itself with partners with proven analytical and field practice skills, recognized for their commitment to peace and the prevention of violence (governmental and intergovernmental partners, think tanks or CSOs, active in the region or external) (see the list of partners in Appendix, p. 78).

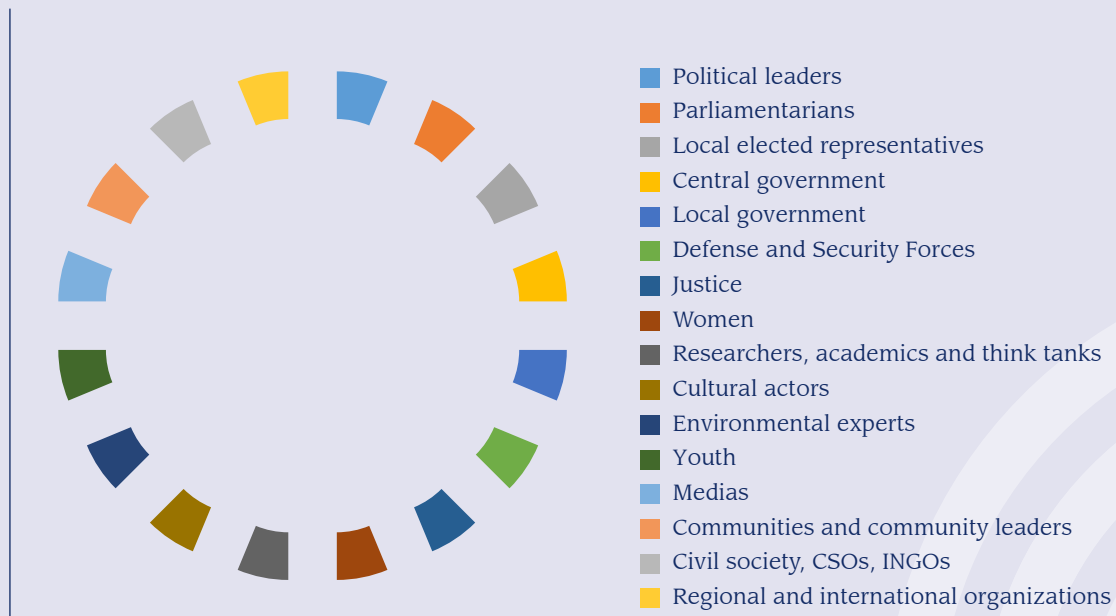
The idea of these partnerships is not only to work together toward peacebuilding by joining forces but also, for the Swiss FDFA’s PVE program, to enable these partners to eventually reproduce the approach on their own by both taking ownership of the process and expanding it.

### Multiplier effect

Beyond the dynamics specific to each meeting, the initiative also relies on the dual factor of strengthening the capacity of the individual and its sense of belonging to a community of thought and practice.

At the end of the meetings, each participant undertakes to reproduce what they learned within their institution to share gained knowledge and experiences.

## A multi-actor dialogue process





“ After taking part in the meeting, I became aware and took ownership of the PVE themes by integrating them into my daily activities. I prepared a presentation to raise awareness among the actors in the criminal justice chain on this subject.” \*

“ After the 2018 meetings in Maroua, I conducted a series of eleven inter-community dialogues. These various activities were made all the easier as my participation in the Regional Conversations has enabled me to understand the importance of dialogue and negotiation in restoring social cohesion.” \*

“ The Regional Conversations were an opportunity to bring together people who otherwise would not have met around issues they might not necessarily have been able to address in a national context. They also made it possible to convey field realities and messages to country leaders as well as to decision-makers in New York. It is up to each of us at our different levels and according to our different mandates to further this approach; the fruit of a collective effort.” \*

Other sources of enrichment: the threads that weave through the meetings allow the participants to sustain by themselves the exchanges that were born at a given moment and seek each other for advice and support. The Swiss FDFA's PVE program and its partners also stimulate the life of this community by making sure to draw on its diversity and richness and constantly interconnecting the human resources necessary to hold new meetings.

#### **Scaled-up work**

The final aspect of this dynamic generated by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program is that this commitment is characterized by **working at different scales**. From the regional dynamics, which meet specific needs as mentioned above, it is about ensuring that the messages arising from these meetings and the voices expressed therein reach the **spheres of decision-making and influence**. Conveying these messages occurs through various public events organized in New York, Geneva, or other diplomatic meeting venues. In addition, the program also seeks to support **local or national dialogues** and the development of public policies for the PVE.



Together !



SOLIDARITY  
JUSTICE  
EVERYBODY  
SHARING

FRIENDSHIP

DIFFERENCES  
PROTECTION

PEACE

BUILDING

DAILY

COMMITMENT  
RESPONSIBILITIES  
INCLUSION

HUMAN  
SECURITY

RESPECT  
SOFT  
SKILLS

UNDERSTANDING

PREVENTION  
PARTNERSHIP  
TRUST  
BRIDGES CHANGE





DIALOGUE  
TRANSPARENCY  
ATTENTIVENESS  
COMMUNITY  
HOPE  
FREEDOM  
SOLUTIONS  
ANTICIPATION  
ALTERNATIVES  
TOLERANCE  
GOVERNANCE





## 2.3 How does this initiative operate? A methodology based on dialogue

But what is the focus of all these different actors invited to the meetings? What are the seeds this initiative is sowing?

### ***New know-how and soft skills: fostering inclusive dialogue***

The originality and force of this initiative lie in its methodology approved and adopted by the participants throughout the meetings. **Inclusive dialogue** is at the heart of its approach and became its “hallmark” that can be described as follows: **to understand one another, one must listen; to listen, we must talk to each other; to talk to each other, we must meet.** Thus, these meetings are first and foremost a space for dialogue and building bridges between multiple actors, as dialogue is a way to understand the other better but is also **a behavior** that makes it possible to respond to one of the causes of violence, namely **exclusion** or the feeling of exclusion, as dialogue allows **inclusion**.

“ Our job is first and foremost organizing meeting spaces that are actually spaces for inclusive dialogue. This can only be achieved by bringing together participants from diverse geographic areas and very different professional profiles with sometimes opposed cultures, visions, mandates, and who precisely need to find spaces to first confront them, then gradually learn how to understand and speak to each other. **These meetings are nothing but a vast space for dialogue.**”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Stepping outside the comfort zone by finding a “confidence zone”***

Another challenge is to get participants to break out of their habits, the idea being to encourage changes in their practices. During the meetings, the participant is not asked to “be the expert” but to share their experience and spark discussion while sometimes accepting contradiction, and **to place themselves as a possible or effective actor of change.** This can only be done when one feels confident and is convinced that their words will not be distorted.

“ Part of our work is not to put words in people’s mouths but to offer them this meeting space and the opportunity to meet that they often do not have. There is a form of inhibition, withdrawal, fear or denial, which makes it difficult to reach out to others spontaneously.”<sup>4</sup>

“ To date, there is no similar mechanism and especially because dialogue between actors is the only way to have a common understanding of the threat and a co-definition of preventive policies. The participatory approach makes it possible not only to break out of the ready-made counterterrorism logic but also allows the acceptability of the measures taken by mutual agreement.”\*

Thanks to this mindset, constructive exchanges on the sometimes controversial role of the DSF for example, are made possible between the military and representatives of civil society, which otherwise would be difficult in another context.

These meetings are also an opportunity to make unexpected contacts. A female civil society actor will, for example, be able to meet, for the first time in her life, with a representative of her country’s intelligence services. While the initial exchanges may be distant at first, as informal discussions and exchanges progress, trust is established and dialogue can begin.

“ The Regional Conversations are useful, especially in allowing civil society actors and the government of the same country to meet in a secure setting.”\*

“ The Regional Conversations have led me to a less Manichean approach when it comes to VE and to understand that there are not the good guys on one side and the bad guys on the other, that the motivations are plural, and that the approach to preventing this violence must be holistic, inclusive and requires a great deal of patience.”\*

“ My participation in these meetings was a breakthrough that helped me understand the dangers our misconduct toward the population can cause.”\*



### ***Being attentive to the needs***

If dialogue is put forward as the primary prevention tool, since it serves as the essential vehicle for social life and its regulation, listening to the other is its corollary. The same goes for the conduct of this initiative: it is in a spirit of collegiality that the Swiss FDFA's PVE program works with its partners, and together they define the outlines of each of these meetings.

These also reflect the needs expressed by participants. It is indeed by listening to them that this initiative evolves. While there was initially a strong need to focus on diagnosing extreme violence, identifying the actors of violence, and understanding the different prevention approaches, other concerns have gradually become part of the agenda; such as issues related to dialogue with violent extremist groups or the close connection between land governance, insecurity and violence prevention.

## A proven methodology

- ▶ Systematically use dialogue as a core instrument for the PVE work.
- ▶ Create informal spaces for dialogue where bridges are consolidated and trust is gradually built.
- ▶ Ensure and benefit from the diversity of actors taking part in the meetings that come from different contexts, professions, institutions, and practices.
- ▶ Provide a space for expressing the multiple perceptions of violence situations by actors often confronted daily with the reality of VE and let their fears speak.
- ▶ Support the work carried out by various researchers on the realities of VE and their root causes, as well as on the provided responses, and involve them in dialogue.
- ▶ Foster sharing experiences on the PVE and analyze, in particular, the successful practices of alternatives to extreme violence.
- ▶ Analyze together the type of presence (or absence) of the State on the ground when it comes to the PVE.
- ▶ Make states aware of their leading, but not exclusive, role in the PVE and jointly examine the roles of the various actors of the PVE.
- ▶ Build the capacity of states and DSF in understanding and implementing the PVE and raise their awareness of the ripple effect of violence when abuses are committed in the context of the counterterrorism response.
- ▶ Build the media's capacity to process information relating, on the one hand, to violence by extremist groups and other actors and to the PVE, on the other hand.
- ▶ Encourage the participation of women and youth in defining and implementing the PVE policies and activities.
- ▶ Boost existing or desired synergies between the projects and actions of the various PVE actors.
- ▶ Support a regional PVE approach that can facilitate and foster transnational dialogue and unite the efforts.
- ▶ Draw up conclusions (and sometimes recommendations) to be presented to the different types of actors in charge of the PVE policies and programs.
- ▶ Propose inclusive methodologies for developing and implementing national strategies and action plans on the PVE.
- ▶ Provide expertise in terms of PVE to the processes initiated by states.
- ▶ Keep advocating the PVE approach within the UN or International Geneva but also within the AU, ECOWAS, and ECCAS, based on the experiences made and through the voice of those living them.



## 2.4 Choice of locations and formats favorable for the approach

While dialogue lies at the heart of violence prevention and at the heart of this initiative, other parameters are important because they are characteristic of the course described in this chapter and because they are working tools that can serve the effort of preventing violence.

### Meeting places to nurture diversity

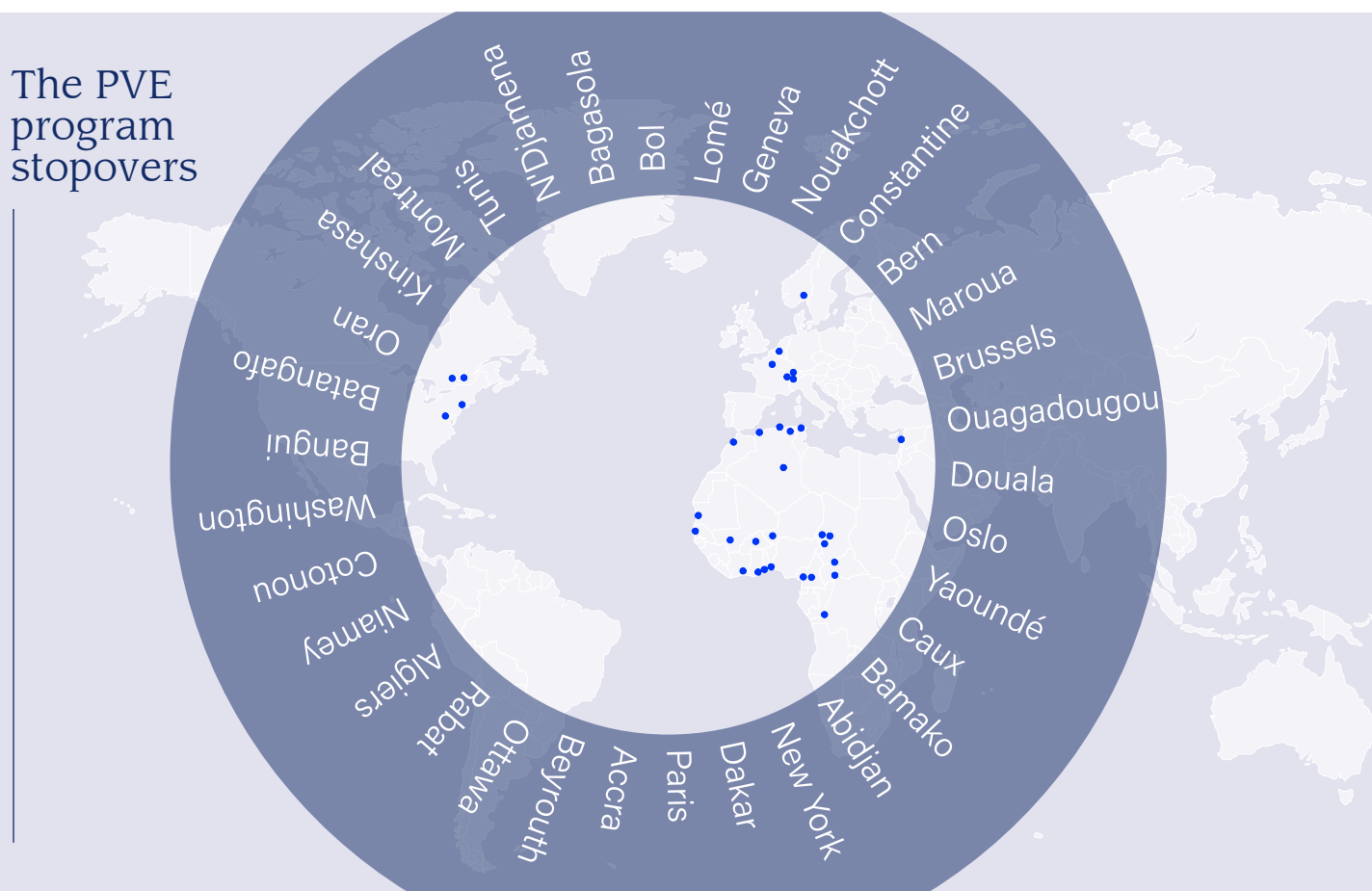
Given the vast geographic area covered by the initiative, it is important to vary the meetings' places and reach areas where VE is a reality and those where it may only be a threat, with the aim of spreading the message of prevention and peace. At the most local level, in Maroua in Cameroon or Hamile in Ghana, for instance, as within international fora, the initiative has taken root in some thirty cities, capitals, or secondary cities. Supported by three major conferences called the "Regional Conversations" (Dakar in 2016, N'Djamena in 2017, and Algiers in 2018), this journey includes many other stops, notably in Tunis, Ouagadougou, Accra, Abidjan, Cotonou,

Yaoundé, Bangui, Kinshasa, Niamey, Lomé, but also New York, Caux, and Geneva.

For the PVE Regional Conversations of Dakar, N'Djamena, and Algiers (2016-2018), the Swiss FDFA's PVE program was joined by the **United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)** and the **International Peace Institute (IPI)**. Since 2017, it has started working with partners such as the **Conseil de l'Entente** (Gulf of Guinea) and the **African Center for International, Diplomatic, Economic and Strategic Studies (CEIDES)** (Central Africa).

Covering many places allowed wider dissemination of the messages. The diversity of the realities and experiences on which this journey focused has enriched the understanding of the phenomenon and the diversity of the alternative responses that have emerged in various places. Last but not least, in the face of a phenomenon of violence that has both very local roots and transnational dynamics, this journey has connected oft-isolated geographic spaces and actors: between North Africa and the Sahel; between the Central Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea; between Central Africa and its neighbors to the West or in the Great Lakes, etc.

### The PVE program stopovers





“ Meetings are important. If they are seen in isolation, one can doubt the impact and value of the thing. But if you look at the whole journey and the whole increasing number of people and partners crossing paths, you can see indeed that **the cumulative effect is not linear; it is definitely exponential.**”<sup>5</sup>

“ Changing the meeting places was an important factor in allowing the participants to gain the necessary perspective.”\*

#### ***Work formats adapted to the needs***

The meetings and other activities of the Swiss FDFA's PVE program and its partners take various formats: conferences, workshops, public round tables, strategic retreats, bilateral meetings, focused briefings. Some activities specifically address capacity-building needs expressed by the participants or various partners.

**The African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT)** of the **African Union** is the partner of the Swiss FDFA's PVE program for the training course program offered, since 2019, to the African Union member states to strengthen their policies on the PVE as an alternative response to the security response.

These meetings may be attended by as few as ten people or as many as a hundred participants and be private (under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution), confidential or public.

Meetings are held in English and French as much as possible; this linguistic diversity is essential to ensure that all participants can participate fully in the discussions.

Lastly, in order to capitalize on and share the richness of this initiative, the publication of articles or summary reports, as well as the development of communication materials, complement and complete this range. The Swiss FDFA's PVE program also publishes and keeps up to date a Chronicle that traces this journey stage by stage.



## The range of activities



### DIALOGUE

**Favor the experience of listening, dialogue, and joint reflection on alternative responses to violence other than security-oriented responses and on the experiences made.**

In addition to the major events that were the Regional Conversations for the PVE in Dakar (2016), N'Djamena (2017), and Algiers (2018), other types of dialogue have marked the past seven years.

Some have taken **the conversation to a more targeted geographic region**, such as the seminars with the Conseil de l'Entente, which have initiated the dialogue with the Gulf of Guinea States (Abidjan 2018, Ouagadougou 2019, Lomé 2022), or brought it to Central Africa (Yaoundé 2017 and 2019, Maroua 2018, Bangui 2019), or the Great Lakes (Kinshasa 2021).

Other dialogues have addressed more directly **the role of certain actors in the PVE**, such as the **Defense and Security Forces** (the Dakar cycle, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022), the **media** (2017, 2022), or **youth** (2021,2022).

Finally, others focused on **specific challenges**, such as the link between **land governance**, insecurity, and the PVE (Caux webinar cycle, 2020 and 2021) or the issue of **weapons** in connection with the prevention of violence (2022).



### PUBLIC EVENT

**Reach the spheres of influence and decision-makers and share the experiences and the voices from the field.**

About fifteen **public roundtables** were organized on the margins of the United Nations Assembly and during major international forums (such as the Dakar Forum on Peace and Security) and at diplomatic hubs in New York, Geneva, and Addis Ababa.

Some of the work carried out in a restricted format or research was then followed by **public roundtables**, which made it possible to present the key findings to decision-makers, such as in Abidjan, Dakar, or Ouagadougou.



### CAPACITY BUILDING

**PVE training curriculum, workshops to acquire prevention tools, and support for the implementation of PVE public policies.**

A first Regional Senior Course on the PVE for Central Africa (2019) was followed by the development of a **comprehensive PVE training program intended for the member states of the African Union**, in partnership with the African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism - ACSRT of the African Union. A **Manual** was produced.

A new **program intended for media professionals** in West Africa, with the Fondation Hironnelle, was launched (2021).

A new **training program intended for women**, with the Peace Operations Network (ROP) of the Université de Montréal, has been developed (2022).



### EXPERTISE

**Provide technical support within the framework of public policies or projects for the PVE.**

Multiple partners called upon the Swiss FDFA's PVE program to provide **bilateral support for developing their PVE policies**, for example, in Tunisia, the DRC, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Lebanon.

Consultations are regularly held with various partners to support the development of the PVE projects.

The program also regularly participates in **the facilitation of courses or conferences** related to the PVE.



Dialogue



Public event

Capacity  
building

Expertise



Research

Documentary &  
Interview

Contributions



## RESEARCH

**Fund independent research, undertake studies and promote the sharing of results.**

The Swiss FDFA's PVE program has provided **financial support for independent research**, such as the work of the *Jihad in Modern Conflict* program of the International Crisis Group since 2016 or the multiannual research conducted by the Dakar Office of the Institute for Security Studies in the Liptako-Gourma region (2017-2019).

This work also involves **public presentations** or **results-sharing workshops**.

The Swiss FDFA's PVE program also conducted an extensive **comparative study on the DSF doctrine for the PVE** in West Africa with DCAF (2020-2022).

It also regularly conducts internal **strategic retreats** with its partners, intended to ensure that its main orientations are in line with the developments and needs.



## DOCUMENTARY &amp; INTERVIEW

**Gather illustrative testimonies, develop training and communication tools, and make audiovisual resources available.**

The Swiss FDFA's PVE program is committed to documenting the wealth of experience and work in audiovisual form as well. Some of the **work is available online in video format**, particularly those held in 2020-2021, such as the series of four webinars on land governance.

In 2021-2022, it produced a series of about twenty **"In-depth Interviews for the PVE"**<sup>6</sup>, in the form of filmed testimonies and stories, which give the floor to personalities from various geographic and professional backgrounds who took part in this initiative.

A **documentary film** produced in 2023 is a substantial resource for advocating and facilitating debates around the PVE. <https://www.youtube.com/@programmepreventionviolenc6915>



## CONTRIBUTIONS

**Make available in the form of publications the work results and publish articles or guidance notes.**

All the meetings organized by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program and its partners have been the subject of **reports** and **summaries**, substantially documenting the work carried out. These are published in French and English, or even in Arabic and German, and are accessible online.

The program also regularly publishes a **Chronicle** that summarizes all activities carried out since 2016, available publications and access links, interview videos, and documentary films, as well as the list of partners with whom these activities were undertaken.

It also sporadically publishes advocacy **articles** on the PVE or **guidance notes** on various topics relating to the PVE.







## CHAPTER 3

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Preventing violence in  
practice: what actors  
have to say





“It takes many hands to weave together the tapestry of peace.”<sup>1</sup>

Prevention of violent extremism (PVE) initiatives are numerous and diverse. During the various meetings organized by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program with its many partners, actors from very different backgrounds shared their successful and unsuccessful experiences in this area.

During the conferences and workshops, several important themes were discussed, including the relationship between the State, local officials, and citizens; the role of the Defense and Security Forces (DSF) in the PVE; that of the media; the unique role of women and youth; security and peace issues related to land, the environment, and climate change; the management of cross-border areas as a prevention tool; the role of dialogue, including with violent extremists, in the PVE; the part that can play in the PVE those who have left extremist groups; the importance of research in understanding the origins and development of violence, and in guiding the responses; the need for justice as a driving force for the PVE – to mention but a few.

This chapter focuses on **how the meetings' participants addressed these topics** and shared their **experiences and stories**.

From these experience-sharing sessions, an obvious fact emerges: **the centrality of the human being, of women and men in prevention**. They are the ones that make up the State, the ones that make up civil society, the ones that make up the academic, the civil servant or the baker, the police officer or the soldier, the peasant or the journalist! Hence the importance of the notion of human security, which places the human being at the heart of collective and individual efforts for peace and security, and not an abstract discourse on security. Therefore, the PVE is likely to succeed if concrete investments are made in peace and if peace is seen as the starting point and the ultimate goal of governance. **It is very long-term and arduous work**, and perhaps the most challenging part to get started.

“The PVE: I had some preconceptions. I did not see the reasons for the conflict as human rights demands. I saw them as if a group of people could attack the State to defend their own interests. But when I analyzed the conflict, I realized that these were indeed human rights demands.”<sup>2</sup>

“I have been involved in local peace agreements between armed groups. But when people are victims and have suffered, once we approach this question of peace differently, that is to say, through listening and dialogue, people are on the defensive and dig in their heels. They want repression right away.”<sup>3</sup>

“At first, we don't see how dialogue would solve a problem of this magnitude. We don't see how we are going to talk to the insurgents; we can't imagine putting those who attack and those defending themselves at the same table. We can't imagine anything other than repression.”<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1 Useful synergy between the various actors of prevention

Prevention is essentially based on **the commitment of actors**: the kind of commitment that leads them to adopt prevention in their duties or even try to convince their colleagues to adjust their practices and their understanding of the root causes and responses to violence. The richness of this initiative lies in the fact that actors working in a variety of fields get to meet each other: members of civil society, political leaders, elected officials, youth, women, DSF, researchers, the media, etc. This diversity also allows the prevention approach to be applied in very different fields. This can be achieved through dialogue between the representatives of the DSF and women's or youth organizations, through the fieldwork of researchers or journalists to understand better the causes of youth involvement in armed groups, or through the ability of local authorities to listen to their communities and work with them to find ways to deter youth from violence. This can be done by training the DSF and the media or sharing high-level experiences at regional or international meetings. **There are no areas to which the PVE does not bring its positive way of conceiving peaceful coexistence and being open to others.**

However, while all these actors and others have a decisive role in the PVE, **they often act in isolation, sometimes believing they are the only ones responsible for providing a response**. There is still too little synergy between them, even if initiatives in this direction appear here and there.

So many participants noted and agreed on the fact that these gatherings open the way for unusual encounters and exchange, and maybe even, for the contradiction that calls into question. New forms of collaboration emerge from these occasions, and a better understanding of what others can do in a complementary way is gained. Besides, through these new dynamics, all these actors weave the fabric of prevention. That is **the synergy created by this initiative**.

However, it was reiterated that this dynamic, the acceptance of such dialogue, requires **an appropriate framework**. There must be trust, and diversity must not be random as experience shows that participants are not indifferent to the careful choice of the invited persons and that the organizer is Swiss; quite the contrary. All these combined produce a particular outcome that never ceases to amaze the partners.



“By putting the main actors in charge of security in touch with other actors from their own society, it allowed them to realize that their society contains important resources to think about these issues in a more nuanced and sophisticated way.”<sup>5</sup>

“These meetings have always been based on candid and genuine exchanges with one another, all the other actors involved in the PVE, very heterogeneous actors. It is necessary to put actors in a framework for them to exchange on new developments in prevention and threat, to share experiences and failures, and it is important to do so on a regular basis.”<sup>6</sup>

“Switzerland understood before others that it takes time to change things. The FDFA was able to set up an important network of collaborators and friends across the African continent. There is a critical mass of people who can bring about change and on whom this initiative can rely today.”<sup>7</sup>

“When we are in the meetings, we really are a community. We are together, staying at the same place, and we keep in touch with the other participants. We can't spare or skip this time spent together. And the more time we spend, the more ideas we get that we then can take home.”<sup>8</sup>

“Also, the methodology used by Switzerland is a participatory approach, generating a great deal of respect for one another. It is a very valuable approach, especially given African traditions, for which, to get results, one must first start on the principle of respect, trust, and open-mindedness.”<sup>9</sup>

“Getting together is important because it facilitates dialogue. Dialogue brings understanding, the measurement of the risks we face, and it also allows for the education needed for the PVE. Bringing together different actors from different social strata leads us to open up to perspectives and even possible solutions that we do not necessarily consider when in our own environment or context.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 Three pillars of the work: the practice of dialogue, humanism, and understanding of violence

During the various meetings, participants were able to experience how difficult it can sometimes be to come face to face with actors who, on the ground, can be perceived as obstacles to finding solutions and with whom it may be hard to engage in dialogue. For example, it is not always easy for a woman or a young person to speak after a senior

military officer in an assembly. The meetings enabled various categories of actors to overcome their barriers to dialogue and encouraged them to reproduce this approach and put it into practice.

#### *The need for a culture of dialogue*

One of the pillars that run through the whole work dynamic undertaken by Switzerland and its various partners is understanding the importance of dialogue in prevention. Dialogue is an instrument for opening up to new ideas and searching for innovative solutions, such as the violence prevention approach. Its recurrent practice leads to inclusive dialogue, which becomes an essential and necessary step toward preserving peaceful coexistence. **It is from dialogue that acceptance of the other and dissemination of a culture of tolerance are born.**

“Dialogue is absolutely necessary. Even in managing violence, when dialogue is broken, that's when we see violence expressed in an unbridled and particularly harmful way.”<sup>11</sup>

“Back home, we have a saying: ‘the efforts of someone sweating in the rain cannot be seen’. We are having a dialogue, but the situation is not necessarily getting any better. But we could see things differently: thank goodness there is a dialogue! One could imagine the worst if there was no dialogue.”<sup>12</sup>

“Dialogue is more than essential; it is an obligation under any circumstances. First, there must be dialogue with oneself. Then you need a dialogue with another person; whether that person is your enemy or not, you still need dialogue.”<sup>13</sup>

“Dialogue is the most valuable tool in any kind of prevention of extremism. Engaging in dialogue is to reach out to the other. It means being willing to listen to be able to collect information and get to the root causes of conflicts and the stakes involved.”<sup>14</sup>

“This dialogue needs to happen with everyone. Everyone in a community has their share of responsibility. Whoever is excluded from the dialogue could later be the source of the problem.”<sup>15</sup>

“There is a need to talk, a need to engage in dialogue and find common ground. Because when that happens, social cohesion, tolerance, and respect can be built down to the local community levels. This is how we can prevent an explosion.”<sup>16</sup>

“It is always useful to come together to exchange and engage in dialogue. If we take an African context close to our culture, our natural approach would be the palaver tree to discuss issues.”<sup>17</sup>



“ Dialogue is a decisive tool: first, it pacifies the hearts. Because dialogue allows those who feel frustrated or do not understand to express themselves. It is a way of venting, being understood, and even explaining and justifying oneself. It is an invaluable platform that should be perpetuated and replicated at more levels and scales, especially the smaller ones.”<sup>18</sup>

“ Regarding the importance of dialogue, often when talking about certain topics that can be upsetting, we talk about our point of view and our own way of thinking. We don't necessarily include all the other points of view or perspectives. Dialogue must be cross-cutting. It must go in a number of different directions. There is listening and understanding. When engaging in dialogue, I get what you say to me rather than seeing it from my perspective.”<sup>19</sup>

**Many dialogue initiatives**, local or national, were shared by participants, demonstrating their commitment and certainty that prevention is not only possible but absolutely necessary.

“ In our work in Tunisia, community dialogue allowed us to bring together religious leaders, members of the police, neighborhood youth, and several other partners to discuss issues of common concern to them. Extreme violence was not seen as a priority issue but rather considered a mere symptom of other problems, such as governance.”<sup>20</sup>

“ In our region of Agadez in Niger, a regional peace committee was set up ten years ago to resolve problems early on. This committee brings together all community forces of the region: all the traditional chiefs, mayors, parliamentarians, and ministers from the region. We were fortunate to be supported by the State in this process. Dialogue is needed because there are young people in these armed networks who are there for economic reasons but are not terrorists.”<sup>21</sup>

“ Some of the women of the association working in the Far North of Cameroon have a brother, son, or husband who has joined the insurgents and they wanted to talk to them. They chose to write a song to address them as a way of reaching out. With words that come straight from their hearts, they were able to make a difference. The song reached the ears of the insurgents. It had a huge impact.”<sup>22</sup>

“ In my country, the Central African Republic, I have participated in several peace-seeking initiatives. In the 2015 Bangui Forum, which remains the reference in terms of dialogue in the Central African Republic, I chaired the Preparatory Committee and held the position of Vice-President of the said Forum. And every day, in my mandate

as a Member of Parliament, I listen to people and try to find with them consensus to build lasting peace.”<sup>23</sup>

“ Dialogue is the fundamental instrument of the PVE. We've come to realize that creating frameworks for dialogue helps greatly in liberating speech and thought and therefore liberating reflection. Here in Dori, Burkina Faso, at the level of the communal council, we have initiated this dialogue with councilors from different villages, with associative structures, women's associations, youth associations, and religious leaders. It is this kind of dialogue that must be introduced into the habits of the population.”<sup>24</sup>

Dialogue also enables the social partners, the State, and civil society to **build together dynamics of reflection and action in elaborating public policies**. It allows breaking down the walls of decision-making processes and providing data or strategies on which the government and the DSF could otherwise miss out on their own.

“ As a civil society structure in Ghana, we work on raising awareness of civil society and that of the authorities concerned with VE. We have greatly influenced the development of the Ghana Framework for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and its orientation. Our concern now is how to support its implementation at the local community level.”<sup>25</sup>

“ To define the actors with whom we need to discuss, there is important work that CSOs and academics can do. But the role of the State is central; it should be the fuel that mobilizes all other actors.”<sup>26</sup>

### ***The need for humanity and dignity***

What emerges from the stories shared by a large number of actors on the ground is the need for humanity and dignity that young people of all origins, as well as communities on the periphery far from the capitals, are asking for. They all have in common the feeling of being abandoned by the political elites, mistreated by the DSF, and for some minorities, being stigmatized and even abused. Only a few preventive measures are taken by the authorities to mitigate these feelings of abandonment or injustice, although some CSOs are working to restore pride to these populations.



“ I work in a neighborhood in Tunis that is considered a breeding ground for terrorists. In the center we created, children pursue and complete their integration cycle. This is where we discover their talents and direct them toward the arts. The festival ‘Our neighborhood is an artist’ takes place in the neighborhood square. Everyone participates. It’s continuous work, not a one-time thing. We’re seeing the results seven years later.”<sup>27</sup>

“ I’m from northern Nigeria. I come from a very poor, polygamous family of 25 children. The fact that I’m able to address you here today [at the United Nations in New York] is a miracle because such an opportunity doesn’t usually present itself for people who come from where I come from. There’s also this idea that only the children of the poor are extremists and join Boko Haram, which is not true. When the State burns your house and kills your loved ones, the only thing you want is justice. Does that make me an extremist or a very angry person seeking revenge?”<sup>28</sup>

“ We have to take an interest in this youth, talk to them to create the conditions so that they don’t swell the ranks of the jihadist groups. With the new laws aimed at curbing migration, which used to be one of the main economic activities of our region of Agadez in Niger, we are worried. We need to give this youth an alternative.”<sup>29</sup>

“ When land is governed by a population-targeted ban, as is the case with protected areas in my country Burkina Faso, these populations find themselves excluded from the resources on which they depend for their agriculture, for their livestock, but they are also excluded from their ancestral lands for their sacred rites and spirituality. For them, the land is there for social reproduction.”<sup>30</sup>

“ We are working to promote a society of equity where everyone has a place, a society where all voices can and should be heard. We try to involve people in their own future. The context in which we are, the Far North of Cameroon, lends itself to this because it is a landlocked area on many levels; in terms of communication, access roads, media, exploitable resources, administrative presence. All this paves the way for radicalization.”<sup>31</sup>

### ***The need to understand violence and its context***

**Research** is regularly sought to inform thinking and discussion. It is a valuable tool at the service of the initiative, and it should also find its rightful place in any prevention approach. Without field studies and reliable data, it is difficult for authorities and actors to act wisely. In this respect also, the initiative has helped underline the importance of funding independent studies and research to facilitate decision-making.

Many participants pointed out **the importance of understanding violence**, its origins, and its context. It is fundamental for them to exchange views in order to gradually reach a better-shared understanding of this phenomenon. They also recognize that this initiative, by systematically involving researchers in its work, has enabled them to broaden their knowledge and adapt their practices accordingly.

“ These meetings have allowed a better understanding of the phenomenon. If you don’t understand, you’re not providing the right solutions. It helped deconstruct a great deal of narratives and bring information from the field: ‘Here’s the reality’.”<sup>32</sup>

“ Many coastal states in West Africa are all about the frustrations, vulnerabilities, and radicalization leading to VE. But the causes and risks are prevalent and have names: feeling of neglect, absence or inadequacy of State presence in peripheral areas, lack of community-based social public services, youth unemployment, poverty, poor governance and impunity, injustice, and abuses by state officials (brutality, violation of rights, racketeering, etc.) against the population.”<sup>33</sup>

“ These regional meetings have allowed us, civil society actors, to have more arguments and examples to give to our states and other organizations. We meet researchers, academics; that’s very important documentation. On a personal level, it made me evolve. I have a much broader view of the issue, of the causes of violence.”<sup>34</sup>

“ It is important to take the time to listen to the people who have been engaged [in VE groups], their life stories, the individual and collective logic that push people into the ranks of these groups. This can help those who joined to leave. Paying close attention to these personal narratives can prevent these individuals from going back.”<sup>35</sup>

When we talked about terrorism before, we used to think about religion, but we’ve come to realize that there are political demands, as well as cultural and identity aspects involved in the phenomenon.”<sup>36</sup>

“ What I’m interested in is non-state armed groups, their relationship with the population, and how they are often treated in a one-dimensional way; which means that we are only interested in their actions, while there is very little interest in the processes that lead young people to take up arms.”<sup>37</sup>



This **link between researchers, public policymakers, and practitioners** is one of the recognized added values of the initiative. The intellectual interest decision-makers take in research is well known, and at the same time, it is not taken into account. There is some sort of institutional difficulty in translating widely accepted research findings into public measures. These meetings allow time and space for this difficult dialogue.

The Swiss FDFA's PVE program supports the two think tanks **International Crisis Group (ICG)** and **the Institute for Security Studies (ISS)**, in their research to better understand the complex realities of VE and its root causes; it also involves their experts in dialogue meetings to foster a better-shared understanding.

“It’s important for those who conduct field research to be able to have state actors, international actors, NGO actors in these meetings to share the results of this research and give them tools to help decision-making.”<sup>38</sup>

“These regional meetings were opportunities to realize that we were not alone advocating for a better understanding of the causes and formulating responses based on empirical data. Thanks to these meetings, we felt connected to a network of actors, researchers, decision-makers, ready to look beyond the manifestation of violence.” \*

### 3.3 Experiences in the field of violence prevention

#### *The State as a prevention actor*

In West and Central Africa and elsewhere, state initiatives for the PVE remain limited. It is true that, in recent years, a large number of countries have adopted strategies, action plans, or public policies that take account of the PVE. Many participants from official circles have mentioned this at the various meetings of the initiative.

However, it was noted that these policies often combine the prevention and fight against VE without clearly separating the messages. Is the public authorities’ will seeking to resolutely move away from the purely security-oriented approach, which has shown its limitations? Moreover, the processes of drafting these texts have often remained narrowly inclusive, and the proposed programs vastly exceed the available resources.

“In my opinion, the difficulties are essentially linked to the actors, the decision-makers, insofar as there is a certain conservatism in the approach, in the way of looking at things. This prevention approach came a bit late to decision-makers. They have long been convinced that the purely security-oriented response was the one needed.”<sup>39</sup>

“States must take ownership of the comprehensive and integrated approach of the PVE, bringing together all the actors that complement each other. But the different government departments and the DSF refuse to coordinate. Success depends on this coordination.”<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, some states have taken **the opportunity of drafting these texts to conduct inclusive consultation processes**, for instance, in the form of workshops or preliminary field studies. Others have integrated pre-existing consultation or peace mechanisms into implementation arrangements. Yet others have also provided for centralized implementation, which also gives significant responsibilities to decentralized structures.

**Such approaches are in line with the need to listen and be heard**, communicate and better understand decisions, the need for shared governance, rapprochement, and dialogue, all of which have been pointed out by all as expected responses from the State, which is often seen as too distant from its citizens, or even at odds with their legitimate expectations of public authorities.

“Generally, people think of public authorities’ support in terms of logistics and financial resources. For us, the most important part is for the authorities to know what you are doing, that you are out there, and for them to say: ‘Go ahead’. It’s immeasurable support; knowing that your efforts are appreciated is motivating.”<sup>41</sup>

“In Niger, we have conducted consultations in each region of the country and each time produced a report gathering the opinions and needs of the populations and local administrations. This was then reflected in the PVE National Strategy and its Action Plan, which emphasized the need for action at the grassroots community level.”<sup>42</sup>

“In Togo, the Government realized that a preventive approach taking into account the factors that could lead to terrorism was also needed, hence the creation in May 2019 of the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Prevention and Fight against Violent Extremism (CIPLEV). The composition of the Committee reflects a whole-of-government approach and allows the participation of civil society, women, and youth alongside state actors. After the national level, we are in the process of setting up CIPLEV branches at the cantonal and prefectural levels.”<sup>43</sup>



“Ghana’s National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NAFPCVET), formulated in 2019, outlines a four-pillar strategy: Prevent, Pre-empt, Protect, and Respond. The Prevention Pillar provides a place for CSOs. The best way to tackle VE is to prevent it, not by only empowering the security sector but, most importantly, improving human security by addressing the causes and drivers of VE. It is also important to nurture among the population patriotism, civil responsibility, and social cohesion, among others.”<sup>44</sup>

**Another major responsibility of states is deciding whether or not to engage in dialogue with VE groups or let the local authorities do so on their behalf.** Most West and Central African countries concerned have unofficially launched initiatives to promote dialogue with armed groups, directly or indirectly.

“Dialogue is the most important tool because the more time passes, the more the VE phenomenon persists, and the more tongues are loosened, the more people no longer see any problem in talking about dialogue with VE actors, with state actors, with non-state armed groups.”<sup>45</sup>

“A few years back, in the Sahel, we could not consider talking to armed groups, saying that we did not negotiate with terrorists, with these armed groups. But today, this debate is no longer taboo.”<sup>46</sup>

“Why not talk to these young people the terrorists have recruited? They are our kids. Why can’t we reach out to these kids and bring them back?”<sup>47</sup>

“This question of civilians’ own experiences in violent situations is important: understand how communities themselves engage in dialogue with the actors of violence, how they try to grow stronger to prevent violence from undermining them from within.”<sup>48</sup>

“Dialogue must be all-encompassing and all-inclusive. We even need to engage in dialogue with all the entities involved in the repression of violence and put these actors together, those who repress and those who are repressed, and try to see if there is room for compromise or common ground or even a possibility of understanding each other. For me, that is crucial.”<sup>49</sup>

In some cases, such as in Niger and Nigeria, states have openly implemented programs for the return and rehabilitation of young people recruited into VE groups. While these programs face challenges in meeting the expectations of voluntary young returnees, they can serve as an example for other youth and help prevent their recruitment into the ranks of armed groups.

“In 2009, in Algeria, we decided to gather some families of wanted terrorists and sensitize them to the issue of the surrender of their relatives involved in terrorism cases. These meetings were well received because most families realized they could benefit from the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation and joined the process.”<sup>50</sup>

“In Nigeria, starting in 2016, we launched the Operation Safe Corridor program, which aims at the return of Boko Haram insurgents. The Nigerian authorities managed to reach them through information campaigns via radio stations or by dropping leaflets from military aircraft.”<sup>51</sup>

The practice of **militias** (whatever one calls them) is also being called into question because it raises fears of containing the seeds of additional violence rather than appeasement.

“A practice should be addressed: the use of civilian populations to organize them into defense or self-defense groups, the substitutes. It has been noted that in some countries, the emergence of these surrogate groups was encouraged to involve them in the security fight. It’s a practice that must be questioned: is this not a form of instrumentalization of populations? Isn’t it a way to generate more violence?”<sup>52</sup>

“We need inclusive dialogue. But we need everyone to be there. We obviously can’t engage in dialogue with everyone, but there are also people on whom the focus is not placed because they’re not considered VEs when they absolutely are. I’m talking about armed militias.”<sup>53</sup>

The development of prevention policies also presents **an opportunity to stimulate reflection on the shortcomings of the State in meeting the needs of citizens.** In this regard, it has often been observed that armed groups have been able to establish themselves where the State is physically absent (no public administration, no representatives of the judicial system, no basic services) or poorly present. And that raises serious concerns.

“Before being a security problem, VE is a governance issue. In reality, the VE exposes a crisis between the State and society. This is the problem of governance, which puts the ball in the State’s court rather than the extremists’. There is an environment of democratic deficit, poor governance, and impunity that generates VE. In reality, VE is acquired, created, and maintained.”<sup>54</sup>



“ Territorial equity is the best response to the rise of VE. Extremism cannot be dismantled with guns but with a bowl of rice. Peace is built among and with the people. Socioeconomic development is the new name for peace in the Sahel.”<sup>55</sup>

“ After making an alarming finding on the abandoned border areas, which are completely isolated and fed by a feeling of abandonment and injustice, Benin made the development of these areas a priority, from 2007 onwards. A sort of ‘Marshall Plan’ was needed to restore their sense of belonging to a nation. This is how the Beninese Agency for the Integrated Management of Border Areas (ABeGIEF) was born.”<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the participants further recalled that **the State is also the legislative and judicial powers.**

The **parliaments** play a key role in establishing legislation that guides the work of state bodies, including the DSF, and monitoring their implementation, especially when it comes to protecting society and preventing violence. They pass the relevant laws and budgets and influence government action, primarily through the defense and security commissions. Moreover, their members are constantly at the center of public and media debate. Therefore, mobilizing local populations and institutions for community and participatory security also requires the commitment of national elected officials and political leaders that are recognized and listened to. Their voices carry weight and can be decisive in the understanding and commitment to prevention.

“ We need to involve many more elected officials, local and national, and shift the mentality from the purely security-oriented approach to a civil treatment of VE. Here, we have plans to train representatives in the PVE.”<sup>57</sup>

As for the **judiciary**, it plays an important role in the peaceful management of the aftermath of violence. It is there to remind people of the importance of the rule of law and the importance of upholding it by all. It acts as a regulator between the unbridled responses generated by emotions and the need to supervise the segments of society that use violence as an instrument of power. Its rigor is essential to slow down the spiral of violence whose first victims are the populations.

“ We know that justice is not always accessible to certain communities, and even when justice is accessible, it is often delivered in a language that communities do not understand. So there is a build-up of resentment, of frustration. Whereas we could have had simpler solutions, even if they do not follow the rules of Western law.”<sup>58</sup>

### *The role of women in the PVE*

Women are full-fledged actors of peace and prevention, but also of violence. They play a key role in terms of influence through the way they see and think about their family or community life. By preventing, for example, their husbands and children from joining armed groups or self-defense groups, or on the contrary, by encouraging them to do so, they actively contribute to reducing or spreading violence.

“ When you ask young Tunisians returning from Syria if they regret their actions, they say no. When you tell them they hurt their mother, they react. Prevention has to go through the mothers.”<sup>59</sup>

Faced with threats that could destabilize their environment, tear their families apart, or even in the face of armed violence, they are often the first to work for peace and inclusion actively.

“ The recovery process took very little time because women recover from their ordeal quickly. They were told: ‘What’s happening there can be prevented because you are at the center of life. Those in the bushes are your children, your husbands. What do you want?’ Answer: ‘We want dialogue.’ ‘How? Do you need protection?’ ‘No, we don’t need it. We know them; they’re our children. We must talk to them.’ It was a relief.”<sup>60</sup>

“ In our families, even though officially we are not given the place we need, we play a central role. When my country was faced with this crisis in 2012, we looked for solutions. And that’s when I discovered the Peace Circle tool, suited for the PVE. We decided to experiment with it in Mali. Today, more than five hundred women have adopted this tool. Women in the northern parts’ armed movements, who were once the most rebellious, are now true keepers of the Circles of Peace.”<sup>61</sup>

“ As part of my activities to support soil regeneration in Niger, I was on a piece of land where there were tensions, with one person saying, ‘the land belongs to my great-grandfather’, and the other answering back, ‘me, this is where I opened my eyes.’ This is why we have set up management committees for each plot of land. Women are normally part of these committees, but they often refuse to express themselves in front of the men of the village. So I used the method of asides with the women, and that’s how we could clarify the situation and get recognition for that piece of land.”<sup>62</sup>





But above all, **women** most often **have their own vision of security** within their close community or country, which is only too eager to be expressed. Although this vision rarely overlaps with the decisions taken mainly by men, it is increasingly finding its place, given the social transformations caused by extreme violence. However, the spaces where women can bring their specific vision are still too rare, both at the local level and, even more so, at the decision-making level.

“Recently, our meetings are shared by women and men in uniform, which I thought impossible before. Impossible from the point of view of the common belief that the place of women is at home. These intense moments of direct discussions with the men and women of the ‘Grande Muette’ (i.e. the Great Mute, the Army) have strongly and intensely changed my reading. I am convinced that another world is possible.” \*

“An important point to consider is the particular role of women and girls in a field that is often thought of as exclusively male. Because there is a barrier: resistance to the idea that women have something specific to contribute to the debate on the PVE.” <sup>63</sup>

“As far as women are concerned, there is this question of cultural constraints. Women in our societies are relegated to a place where they cannot say publicly what they think.” <sup>64</sup>

“Young people and women have not waited for anyone to work because they are not victims or perpetrators of violence but people who have become leaders through force of circumstance, bringing about positive change in their communities. We need to identify and choose the right people and networks that exist.” <sup>65</sup>

Placing women at the heart of violence prevention and human security is an objective that the Swiss FDFA's PVE program is pursuing with two partners: the **MediaWomen4Peace** association in Cameroon and the **Peace Operations Network (ROP)** of the Université de Montréal in Canada.

### ***Youth, the oft-forgotten actors of prevention***

During the many meetings organized within the framework of this regional initiative, a special alert was issued: tectonic shifts in youth are not yet properly perceived by their elders and public officials. However, the rapidity of youth awareness of the political, educational, economic, and cultural conditions that shape their present and future, and the immediacy of their responses, namely through the use of social media, are already shaking up habits.

Involving youth more actively in the PVE is a challenge that the Swiss FDFA's PVE program is taking up with its partner, the **Kofi Annan Foundation (KAF)**, based in Geneva.

The armed groups, meanwhile, have clearly understood the value of mobilizing the youth, who are only interested in leading a decent life, studying, starting a family, and making a decent living to support themselves. In many regions, they are the ones who provide the social and economic support that the population lacks through job opportunities and financial gain.

“All the issues concerning youth are at the heart of VE: how young people understand politics, the frustration, stigmatization, the fact of being ostracized from the nation.” <sup>66</sup>

**Therefore, it is imperative for states to play their full part and invest heavily in youth.** Otherwise, they will continue to turn to violence, the mirages of drugs, or migration. For these fragilities are also what makes **these young people essential actors and mobilizers in the efforts to prevent violence.**

“At the individual level, these young adults and teenagers have ambivalent feelings about themselves. They feel both shame and pride. Shame: because they belong to a neighborhood perceived as dangerous, radicalized, and considered full of thieves. Pride: that they belong to this neighborhood. If we want to think about concrete solutions that really meet the needs of these young people, it is to take over the real spaces of these neighborhoods and the community. Trying to work with that sense of pride because they can become leaders of peaceful and creative change in their neighborhood.” <sup>67</sup>



“As far as the PVE is concerned, the keywords for us young people are resilience and fulfillment. In Mauritania, we developed a project on social cohesion, personal development, and youth social and solidarity economy. We start from who they are. In our country, youth is not sufficiently valued nor trusted. This fragility makes them vulnerable to any form of recruitment by terrorist networks. When a young person doesn't believe in themselves and has not sufficiently explored the values within them and what they could produce for society, no matter how much money is put at their disposal, their empowerment will not work.”<sup>68</sup>

“In Niger, we launched the Citizen Control of Public Action (CCAP) project to enable youth to play a positive role in society through citizen-based monitoring. In the communes, young people are beginning to take an interest in local development plans and make proposals to elected representatives.”<sup>69</sup>

### ***The difficult intergenerational dialogue***

Young people find it difficult to make their voices heard in societies where age determines their place. And it is even more difficult when you are a young woman. While it is mainly a question of their role as actors of violence, since combatants are mostly young people, they are hardly represented in the local or national bodies that determine public policies and are not invited to become prevention actors. In the testimonies of young people who have joined armed groups, the issue of intergenerational relations is often mentioned as an important factor in their departure to achieve social status, family and community recognition, and to be heard. Intergenerational dialogue is, therefore, an important element of prevention.

“A certain segment of the population, especially the older one, is a little more reluctant to this discourse on VE because they do not perceive constructively to be told that ‘See, what you normally say or do is a threat to peaceful coexistence.’ So there is a need for re-educating people. This is much easier when talking to young people, such as students.”<sup>70</sup>

“It is also important to establish a dialogue between the young and the elderly so that the youth can find a space to express themselves.”<sup>71</sup>

“Intergenerational dialogue is now a fundamental problem in Africa in terms of cohesion. Young people no longer feel they have space. It is a source of fundamental tension and a motive for radicalization. Promoting dialogue should enable older generations to bequeath certain values to young people so they can accept elders as their parents did and pave the way for greater social cohesion.”<sup>72</sup>

“We launched the project ‘Young girls and peace in the Tahoua region (Niger)’. We are in a society where young women are relegated to the background. We are therefore trying to find ways for them to participate in intergenerational dialogues, particularly within the peace management committees, with traditional leaders, women, and young men. Since this project was launched, things have changed. Young women are more accepted by the elders, and even the authorities' attitude has changed.”<sup>73</sup>

### ***Education, culture, and citizenship as a means of preventing violence***

Many civil society actors recommend **the establishment of educational curricula that promote the values of tolerance and respect for diversity, inclusion, and equality from an early age**. It is also suggested to include local traditions and customs to preserve and transmit the history of the communities as well as upgrade these social balance practices as a bulwark against violence. It was also pointed out that promoting volunteering, such as scouting, a youth movement based on learning the values of solidarity, mutual aid, and respect for others, could also be helpful.

“In Burkina Faso, young people in some regions were too far from state institutions, which they did not know about or even rejected. In an attempt to forge this link, the association launched an initiative, the Peace School, where issues of security and social cohesion are discussed with young people who have never had the opportunity to debate such issues. Thanks to this project, they participate in a communal council and have conversations with civil servants.”<sup>74</sup>

States were also asked to **invest in youth policies** and support private initiatives, such as local youth centers, radio stations, or sports facilities. The participants indicated that associations had taken initiatives to open cultural centers in different countries that allow young people to practice activities such as music, sports, theater, and singing, sometimes diverting them from illicit or even violent activities.

“Back home in Morocco, when the center was created in this neighborhood, which was considered dangerous, there was just a deserted wasteland. I built the classrooms there, then the garden, and the sports field. From forty children gathered at the beginning, there are five hundred and fifty today. The kids come from the slums. At first, they didn't come regularly. We went to meet them at their homes and they told us: ‘It's too luxurious for us and we can't pay what you're asking’. They didn't even feel like citizens. They were used and despised children. Now they are respected and recognized. Come and see the children's twinkling eyes.”<sup>75</sup>



“ Our efforts to prevent violent extremism should identify clearly the avenues we can use to occupy the youth and address their potential, their interests, and their aspirations. In the past, in Ghana, we did something that worked. We bought brass band equipment and got some retired soldiers to teach the young men how to play the brass band. It took about six weeks for us to have a good village band. It brought much social cohesion.”<sup>76</sup>

“ In Niger, youth meeting places are few, even though initiatives were taken in 2012 to rehabilitate the youth centers built in the 1970s, resources are lacking. We have therefore launched an initiative in four regions of Niger that aims to enable young people to reclaim these cultural spaces through the launch of the “Consultation frameworks for youth associations and movements” (CCAJ).”<sup>77</sup>

### ***The contribution of the Defense and Security Forces to the PVE***

The weak involvement of the DSF in the PVE was highlighted. **For many, the DSF are oriented toward repression, as they lack the tools, training, and information needed to be PVE actors.** Some security authorities still believe that prevention is not consistent with their mission of maintaining order, fighting crime, defending the national territory, and guaranteeing security.

“ DSF are often resistant to change. When you know their psychology, they only work on the issues they have been commissioned to work on; they are only efficient on the issues on which they have been trained. For the DSF, training is their biggest shortcoming. The curricula of training schools do not yet include courses exclusively dedicated to prevention.”<sup>78</sup>

Therefore, a great deal of work is still required for these mandates and training courses to evolve. The cycle of dialogues launched in 2017, specifically involving the DSF representatives in a reflection on doctrines, mandates, rules of engagement, and training governing them, and the place given to the PVE, has made this clear. At the same time, however, these exchanges showed the relevance and even the appetite for rethinking security approaches (see Box on p. 54). Many participants thus pointed out the obsolescence of mandates inherited, on the one hand, from former colonial armies whose purpose was not to serve the nation but to repress the wishes of those who thwarted the interests of the colonists, and on the other hand, from the doctrine of the Treaties of Westphalia (1648) which conceptualized the sovereignty of the State and its defense against an external enemy (another State).

“ As you know, armies are organizations that sometimes resist change, and here we are facing a paradigm shift. We are moving from an approach strictly security-oriented to a more global approach that includes and challenges the actors’ ability to integrate on their own the implementation of non-violent solutions.”<sup>79</sup>

“ These difficulties are much more related to our paradigms, our ways of doing things, than to individual resistance. In a constitutional State where the rule of law prevails, our actions must be based on legislative and regulatory paradigms. For example, when you are a member of the military or a police officer, you are not qualified to resolve complex social conflicts or conflicts related to managing natural resources.”<sup>80</sup>

This also means that the wave of violent extremism is one of the **important indicators of the deep trust crisis** between the populations and the DSF. It is linked to these obsolete mandates but also, as many studies show, to the abusive behaviors of the DSF elements, which lead some young people to join VE groups.

“ Radicalization begins with frustrations. The DSF, by their attitude, can be one of the causes of radicalization. In the performance of their duties, they must reduce abuses, injustices, the unfortunate settlement of problems, racketeering, corruption, all of which contribute to the radicalization of the population. We work through awareness and corrective action.”<sup>81</sup>

“ There is jihadism, but little is said about State-sponsored violence. There too, we have just as many victims. When it comes to prevention, all forms of violence must be taken into account. If we don’t do so, we risk failing to notice all the grievances and the concerns of the communities, and so we can’t ensure to have their commitment.”<sup>82</sup>

The **need to rethink security and the DSF role**, from being State-centric to being geared toward the needs of the population, is expressed on many scales and stresses the importance for the state and its representatives, including the DSF, to be there to ensure the security and well-being of all. This is the very meaning of **human security**.



“ One of the challenges is political and related to initiating and leading change. In fact, recognizing a role for the DSF in the PVE implies significant changes for these forces in terms of doctrine, training, equipment, and deployment. Political will is thus needed to undertake the necessary reforms and carry them out successfully. Thus, assigning a clear PVE role to the DSF in public security policies is a prerequisite. The DSF's PVE contribution must also be organized to be effective and sustainable. Depending on the needs of each country, this contribution could be under the leadership and management of a PVE office within the general headquarters or the high command or under a central department in charge of the PVE. The provision of the PVE service could be carried out by mobile teams, and when resources are available, by teams at the regional level.”<sup>83</sup>

“ The DSF today are corporations completely isolated from the populations. And that is what makes it difficult not only to engage in dialogue but also to build trust. Police officers and gendarmes must be trained to co-produce security with the population. Security without the population is not effective. This work must be carried out by the DSF. It is difficult because these are very conservative bodies, and introducing new elements, innovations into their way of working can be hard sometimes, but it has to be done. This is what is going to save us.”<sup>84</sup>

“ In Niger, the national police rely on the concept of community policing. It is a tool for (re) establishing a dialogue between members of the police force and the populations, intended to respond effectively to the root causes of extremist violence.”<sup>85</sup>

“ The DSF, who are the ones who have to restore security, should not think that weapons are their only option, but should be accomplices, advocates, allies of their people.”<sup>86</sup>

Many experiences were shared during the meetings, showing that in many countries, the DSF already contribute to the PVE, but without labeling it as such and without saying so, through **civilian-military actions**.

“ In some cases, especially in areas far from decision-making centers, the DSF are the only public services available to the population. Even when the DSF are not the only public services accessible to the population, they often have more resources and are permanently available because of their status.”<sup>87</sup>

“ Throughout my time in Casamance, Senegal, in my area of deployment, which was a conflict zone, I have favored constant contact with the population in terms of school support or civic guidance. We have always provided health care and have emphasized the need to establish a relationship of trust with all opinion leaders, including the traditional authorities.”<sup>88</sup>

“ In Côte d'Ivoire, the Ministry of Defense places particular emphasis on building up civilian-military relations to establish and maintain a bond of trust and mutual understanding between the populations and the DSF. In this regard, the DSF are involved in many social activities, such as the army's participation in urban sanitation or donating equipment to hospitals or nurseries.”<sup>89</sup>

“ The integration of the DSF into the nation can be concrete. We have the necessary technical potential. Military engineering is involved in the process of opening up and improving access to land, and the actions of this unit allow the army to be accepted. The deployment of our units can help restore the land so that when our units leave, the land is made available to our populations. This is done with demining units.”<sup>90</sup>

There has also been a **lack of communication** on the part of the DSF due to negligence or confidentiality concerns, which can reinforce the feeling of mistrust toward them (especially when they are accused of abuse). With effective communication – as far as possible – the DSF could gain more effective support from the population and integrate it into the efforts of prevention and governance of the security sector.

“ Military actions are increasingly misunderstood by the population, which causes most populations to switch sides and side with terrorist armed groups. Military operations must be followed by operational communication adapted to the situation to help the population understand the military's action and not oppose them.”<sup>91</sup>

“ Within the DSF, recruiting young people from the region is important because they know the local culture. Under the supervision of the DSF, they can help ease tensions with the population.”<sup>92</sup>

**This openness to transparency, sharing, and dialogue on the part of the DSF was seen as essential and transformative by many participants.**



- “With these meetings over the years, we have targeted the DSF and the populations to build trust between them. These meetings have led us to create these frameworks for dialogue between the DSF, governments, and civilians.”<sup>93</sup>
- “These meetings are very important because they allow us to share our experiences in our countries but also be in contact with other actors. For example, in one of the meetings, there was a conversation about civil society and the DSF. In our countries, the army is ‘la Grande Muette’. But in these meetings, we are with DSF high-ranking officers. This helped break this mistrust and ensured that we could have frameworks for collaboration. Even after the meeting, the exchanges are ongoing.”<sup>94</sup>
- “As a military man, I was governor in a region that experienced this explosion of terrorism. The many pleas from the people, from the communities for which I was responsible, forced me to take an interest in this issue, to think about possible solutions. We identified the Regional Women’s Association because we felt that the role of women was important in detecting changes in their children’s behavior. When we launched the idea of carrying out preventive actions, many actors, including political actors, believed that the military solution was best to curb these behaviors.”<sup>95</sup>



# The role of Defense and Security Forces and political actors in the PVE in Africa

## 1. Understanding and taking ownership of the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) approach addressing the causes of violence

- ▶ Working toward the inclusion of the prevention approach in public policymaking.
- ▶ Basing the understanding of VE and its causes on applied research and boosting the latter as a policy guidance tool (benefit of using/creating strategic defense and security centers, think tanks, and independent research).
- ▶ Promoting better institutional communication on the PVE and judicious use of the media.
- ▶ Clarifying the specific roles of the various state bodies in charge of national security in the context of a PVE approach.
- ▶ Integrating reflection on the PVE into security sector governance, including in the democratic oversight bodies of the DSF.
- ▶ Examining the place the PVE holds in established doctrines and considering the necessary developments.

## 2. Capacity-building and strengthening

- ▶ Designing and implementing national, sub-regional, and regional PVE training, including on dialogue tools, and/or benefiting from existing training.
- ▶ Integrating the PVE approach into DSF training (adaptation of doctrines, curricula, continuing training).

## 3. Emerging avenues to get involved

### *At national level*

- ▶ Designing or strengthening multi-actor consultation frameworks that would ensure that the PVE approach is taken into account.
- ▶ Setting up or strengthening consultation forums promoting synergy and complementarity between the DSF and political actors while respecting the prerogatives and responsibilities of each.
- ▶ Working toward ensuring that more account is taken of the PVE by the defense and security committees of the national assemblies (or other relevant committees).
- ▶ Initiating inclusive processes for developing PVE strategies and action plans that take into account the role of the DSF.

- ▶ Initiating inclusive processes for formulating or revising defense and security policies that integrate the PVE dimension.
- ▶ Revisiting the DSF missions to incorporate PVE aspects, including through periodic Security Sector Reform (SSR) exercises.
- ▶ Adapting political, legislative, doctrinal, and operational frameworks to the PVE in order to provide the DSF with the frameworks and mandates guiding their action in this area.
- ▶ Creating or strengthening national, regional, communal, and even cross-border consultation forums promoting synergy between the DSF and the populations (including CSOs, women, youth, and the media), to restore/consolidate trust and promote mutual respect and tolerance for the participatory management of security.
- ▶ Strengthening the Army-Nation link to rebuild/consolidate trust between the DSF and the population, thereby contributing to the PVE.
- ▶ Developing strategies to showcase and enhance local cultures to prevent VE.

### *At regional level*

- ▶ Ratifying and implementing by states, the African Union instruments including the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralization, Local Governance, and Local Development.
- ▶ Integrating and harmonizing regional normative and operational approaches and frameworks for the PVE.
- ▶ Exploring opportunities for inter-sector (political, security, and social) networking at the sub-regional level to harmonize approaches relating to the PVE.

## 4. Recommendations to CHEDS and the Swiss FDFA (co-organizers)

- ▶ Continuing to run the platform for national and regional exchange and dialogue on the PVE for the DSF.
- ▶ Providing technical support (capacity-building, enhancing policy-making processes and action plans) to national and regional efforts of both DSF and political actors (parliamentarians, local elected representatives in particular) and other components of society.
- ▶ Contributing to the pooling of efforts.

Source: *Final Report of the Third Regional Seminar on Defense and Security Forces and Political Actors in the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa: For Operational Synergies (Dakar, Senegal, 2-4 October 2019) (CHEDS and Swiss FDFA, 2019).*<sup>96</sup>



### ***The need to work with communities at the local level***

The role of local communities has always been strongly emphasized in all meetings. Local communities are at the heart of peaceful coexistence issues and also at the heart of conflicts. However, their representatives are often absent from the elaboration and implementation of policies affecting them, including prevention strategies. It is generally at the local level that social and inter-community tensions can be tackled most successfully, that the issue of land, which is very often at the root of tensions, can be considered, that the participation of youth and women in the civic affairs can be best taken into account and that solutions that respond to the realities on the ground can be found.

“One important thing is decentralization. The people should be the ones making decisions on the things that affect them; there must be power at the community level. Trust must be restored between the governments and the governed. This is an important point of prevention.”<sup>97</sup>

“We note the almost non-existent involvement of local communities in the implementation of all prevention strategies. It is, therefore, necessary to consider a very micro level for their involvement as the main actors in the various land conflicts linked to transhumance or the exploitation of wealth.”<sup>98</sup>

“I think that we also need to give communities a greater voice since parts of the territory of our states have been deserted by the State, but communities live there.”<sup>99</sup>

Many participants stressed the importance of using **endogenous mechanisms** to effectively prevent and manage conflict and meet the expectations of the communities.

“In Burkina Faso, there are a variety of endogenous mechanisms such as the joking relationship or the palaver tree, and resolving conflicts before community or religious leaders. [...] In some communities, we tried to identify with them what these mechanisms were and what their contribution would be because the communities thought it was up to the State to provide security as a ‘Welfare State’. This has led to the communities taking responsibility for their own security.”<sup>100</sup>

“Local communities are the ones that know best their own challenges. They need to be empowered through decentralized, bottom-up structures, not top-down. We need to listen to the needs and interests of the different stakeholders and give space for mediation.”<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, **community and religious leaders**, who are moral authorities within communities, can play a significant role in preventing violence and, if necessary, bringing people to their senses. But they need to work alongside other actors, especially youth and women, to avoid creating or maintaining unequal social relationships that cause further frustration. The question of their legitimacy arises, however, when they distance themselves from their fellow citizens swayed by political games.

“At the level of each region, there are these spaces created where the DSF, the communities’ representatives, and the administration exchange through the peace committees. There needs to be a rebalancing of decision-making. At the local level, when the military man speaks, he is heard more than the woman or the young person. It is not the idea that is not taken into account; the person is. We must try to integrate the unrepresented parts of society and deconstruct the traditional hierarchical system to be able to consider the priorities of each.”<sup>102</sup>

“In Algeria and Morocco, ‘murchidates’ (Muslim women preachers and religious assistants) work alongside their male counterparts to convey Islam’s messages of tolerance, not only in mosques but also in families, youth centers, hospitals, or schools.”<sup>103</sup>



### *The role of civil society in the PVE*

Many experiences and initiatives already demonstrate a genuine willingness to involve civil society in the PVE, led by a very large number of CSOs that are multiplying the spaces for dialogue and integration projects: entrepreneurship training, alternative dynamics, awareness-raising actions on peaceful coexistence, and even seeking dialogue with the DSF, to reflect and act together in the face of violence. However, while on the one hand, the role of civil society in prevention is praised, and rightly so, many states, on the other hand, are criticized for taking advantage of the security (and even health) crisis to limit its powers and fields of action.

“When we realized that jihadist networks were infiltrating these communities in Mali, we asked ourselves how we could save them: sound the alarm bell, get across information about future dangers, and call on the authorities to strengthen their presence and take preventive action through actions promoting social peace.”<sup>104</sup>

“In Tunisia, the Tunisian National Counterterrorism Commission ensures that all segments of civil society are included in its activities. It is also a matter of public institutions and political leaders taking full account of the richness of interaction with civil society and emphasizing its value in the framework of public policies.”<sup>105</sup>

“We need an approach that brings together all citizens, all people who want to bring peace. We believe that every citizen has the potential to be creative, not only in the artistic, cultural, and/or technological fields but also when it comes to deciding what they want to do with their life, what they want to be as a citizen, as a peaceful actor of the changes we see in our society.”<sup>106</sup>

### *Media as a tool for the PVE*

During the various meetings, the media were not spared the criticism of participants, whether they were members of civil society, DSF, or representatives of the authorities. They were criticized for **focusing on sensationalism**, for dealing with current events from the perspective of violence without sufficiently seeking to decipher the causes of such violence and the situations in which it takes place, and for not being interested in the culture of peace or the promotion of human values.

At the same time, participants recognized the power of the media as a **catalyst for change**. Their role in raising awareness and promoting prevention (particularly in using appropriate vocabulary that can influence action in a positive direction) is welcomed. This is also the case in the face of

the development of social media, which can both positively influence the connected populations and at the same time spread propaganda messages or fake news.

“The media have a key role to play as intermediaries between decision-makers, other stakeholders, and the population to ensure that the dialogue we wish to have is also held in public. Some things can only be discussed behind closed doors, but to give credibility and legitimacy to a PVE process, it has to be done in front of the public.”<sup>107</sup>

The positive role of **community or local radio stations** was notably recognized because of their flexibility, which allows them to reach all populations, even the ones living in the most remote areas, and give everyone the opportunity to express themselves and exchange.

“In supporting women victims of armed violence in the Far North of Cameroon, we use culture extensively in communication and as a prevention tool. We record songs that are widely broadcasted on local radio stations and social media within the country and in the diaspora. Following the most recent one, the children who had left to join the extremists said: ‘Moms, know that when you record a radio show, we are the first to listen and react’. One of them called and said: ‘Mom, please, I want to go home, come and get me.’”<sup>108</sup>

Raising media awareness of their role in violence prevention and building their capacity are at the heart of the partnership between the Swiss FDFA's PVE program and the **Fondation Hirondelle (Lausanne)**.

But journalists also face **challenges that limit their effectiveness**: restrictions on freedom of information and lack of resources, training, and protection. Moreover, dialogue with the DSF, a critical journalistic necessity for understanding their interventions, is still tricky. Access to primary sources, including the various actors of violence, is often subject to emergency anti-terrorism legislation, depriving the public of access to objective information that helps understand the issues at stake. Yet the spaces for debate that the media offer are part of a healthy approach that makes dialogue, rather than fear, the keystone of the necessary social regulations to which they contribute.

“We are told: you shouldn't communicate about violent incidents because people get nervous. But for under-represented communities, the fact of talking and broadcasting has an inclusive and therapeutic function. It brings people who are suffering together. When there is recognition, there is a legitimization of their suffering.”<sup>109</sup>





“ Fact-checking is essential. For example, in central Mali, it was said that hunters were walking around with people’s severed heads stuck on spikes. There is one case we know for sure, but the rest is propaganda. So we have to train people through our rigor.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Land governance, as a key issue in the PVE**

In Africa, **the land is at the center of all community life.** Rainfed agriculture and pastoralism provide a living for a substantial proportion of the working population. Peace and peaceful coexistence in the countryside are therefore essential for the controlled exploitation of land and subsoil and for the marketing of goods.

However, several significant obstacles disturb the peaceful and rational use of these spaces. The climate crisis and the scarcity of usable land are, among other things, known and quantified data.

“ Conflicts are linked. They are rooted in long-standing rivalries between communities, which have been exacerbated in recent decades due to the pastoralist crisis, which became more acute following the drought of the 1980s. There has also been competition over access to natural resources, particularly land.”<sup>111</sup>

But strong voices were raised during regional meetings and webinars to highlight the **fundamental links between land and resource governance and insecurity.** When in the face of limited resources, governance is unjust and unbalanced; when it benefits only a few through inadequate land tenure systems; when it leaves out women and young people, while they are the ones rooted in the land and who will sustain it tomorrow; when it denies communities the access to their natural and ancestral lands; when the exploitation of resources or its benefits are beyond the reach of the people living on the land as well as the national economy, then the adverse effects are inescapable. It is precisely such deficiencies that have been seen in many places being exploited by VE groups.

“ It was in 2018 that we saw that terrorist groups had captured the hearts of the frustrated populations: restricted available land and protected areas often leased to foreigners. The State did not understand that the major stake was natural and mineral resources. But these groups have managed to gain the consent of the populations and became accepted by them, as they are much fairer in the distribution of natural resources and listen to the populations.”<sup>112</sup>

“ In Mali, youth and women are excluded from land governance. The customs are not favorable to them even though they are the ones who live off these lands, and women are not in management positions.”<sup>113</sup>

“ We have to think community before land. We set up a very decentralized political system, but it failed: local officials have very little impact on conflict management. People have lost their only means of survival, their land. Now there are two options left for the youth: leaving or turning to extremism.”<sup>114</sup>

“ We have artisanal miners, who come from the sub-region, digging and reselling gold to licensed or unlicensed buyers, and it is precisely all these ore and gold mining zones that go into VE and terrorism. Supporting the states in controlling the subsoil resources is of great importance.”<sup>115</sup>

“ It is around protected areas that terrorist groups have established themselves or are trying to establish themselves. These are forests, wildlife reserves, resources on which people depend. But these protected areas are governed by exclusionary regimes that deprive communities of resources and economic benefits. Moreover, for local communities, land has three dimensions that cannot be dissociated: economic, but also spiritual and political. So it is the political existence of society that is at stake, the exposure of their values.”<sup>116</sup>

“ Tensions over land and natural resources are escalating into conflict, mainly because conflict resolution mechanisms, both traditional and state-based, lack effectiveness and legitimacy. Customary mechanisms consist of unwritten rules, such as community ownership of land, whereas public law recognizes only those owners who hold land titles. This legal dualism creates multiple problems. It is therefore essential to adopt a new land code, starting from the bottom, from local political consensus on how to manage the land, and then bring it up.”<sup>117</sup>

It is, therefore, essential to consider how environmental peacebuilding and land governance responsive to people’s wishes can be two crucial tools for preventing violence.

Participants shared the positive results achieved when states introduced equitable legislation or simply applied existing legislation correctly (especially on matters of transhumance, subsoil use, and land tenure). Many soil restoration or gum arabic production practices, for example, have enabled communities to avoid dispersion or exile.



“ Transhumance and grazing can be, if well planned with communities, an asset rather than a source of conflict. They can become a way of bringing communities together so that grazing and land restoration can converge for the benefit of the communities.” <sup>118</sup>

“ Assisted natural land regeneration relies primarily on the commitment of local communities because they know what they want. It allows young people and women to find a profitable occupation without having to leave the village. Currently, when threats of violence drive people away, it is often the women who remain in the area and who ensure the continuation of production.” <sup>119</sup>

“ If we want peace, we must invest in natural resources and engage in dialogue with armed groups because they are important people in certain local situations. There are, in fact, many agreements with them. So we need a territorial approach, not a global one, by helping people to improve the land they use. Otherwise, they will leave.” <sup>120</sup>

The work carried out by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program on issues of land governance and violence prevention tied in with that of its partner **Initiatives of Change - Switzerland**. Together, they conducted a series of webinars on the issue in 2020 and 2021. A pilot program is currently under discussion with the **Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS)**, based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

## For a just, inclusive, and violence-free land governance

- ▶ Systematically include the environment in peace programming.
- ▶ Help communities step out of the subordinate role of “land management” and give them the full right to participate in its “shared governance”.
- ▶ Use dialogue and facilitation to break the deadlock and emerge from the violence that sometimes results from land governance mistakes.
- ▶ Set up participatory management committees for forests and protected areas and allow native populations to regain access to these areas so as not to fuel frustrations that can degenerate into outbreaks of violence.
- ▶ Encourage awareness of stakeholders' interests and needs through mediation (listening, hearing, and engaging in dialogue). It is not only a question of restoring land, but it is often about restoring human relations and public governance!
- ▶ Strengthen community dialogue as well as knowledge sharing on land tenure and pastoral systems, especially since most of this knowledge is oral.
- ▶ Promote the experiences of land restoration led by women, through which they promote at the same time community dialogue and dialogue with the youth lacking prospects, thereby effectively combining the challenges of land and peace.
- ▶ Strengthen exchange spaces such as this webinar, which brings together field actors, researchers, and political leaders, to regularly discuss results and challenges and better optimize governance, as well as the implementation of proposed actions.

Source: Geneva Peace Week 2021 Webinar “Building peace through improved land governance in West Africa”, Geneva, Switzerland, 4 November 2021. <sup>121</sup>



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### 3.4 Good practices to be consolidated at national and regional levels

The main thrust of the regional meetings to better operationalize prevention initiatives is to strengthen existing synergies or create new ones among all the public or private actors involved in the PVE. This is reflected at the national level in **institutional frameworks or public policies** that integrate this principle of synergies, such as national defense and security councils, national PVE strategies, security sector reform strategies, local peace and security committees, and defense and security commissions within the national assemblies.

This is also reflected, at the regional level, in local **cross-border initiatives**, which make it possible to provide responses to the causes of violence by overcoming the barrier of borders, through a **commitment by regional organizations** to the PVE, or through voluntary initiatives which stimulate the political will to integrate the prevention approach and contribute to its implementation, through the sharing of experiences, networking, capacity-building, and the practice of inclusive dialogue on a regional scale, as this initiative has sought to do since 2016.





## CHAPTER 4

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Impact: reorientation  
of public policies  
and practices





## 4.1 The dynamics of change

After more than seven years, it is time to consider what impact this regional initiative led by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program has had on public policies, institutions and the women and men working within, as well as on CSOs and the various other actors who took part in it. The impact is not always reflected by visible action; it can be felt in a shift in thinking, the introduction of new practices, training curricula, or taking a fresh look at these issues. Impact in all its forms has been, for the participants, a mark of change and stronger commitment to the prevention of violent extremism (PVE).

The results of the online consultation conducted between March and May 2021 among the participants who took part in these meetings, as well as the illustrative testimonies collected over time by the facilitators, attest to the following key impacts:

- ▶ **The concept of PVE, which is relatively new, is better understood:** over time, the meetings helped refine the PVE concept and provide a common understanding for all participants. This work aimed at furthering understanding has been essential in ensuring that the community speaks with one voice.
- ▶ **Participants in the initiative's various meetings are aware of their personal role in the PVE:** many participants thought that the PVE was beyond their competence and that they had neither the ability nor sufficient knowledge to participate in the PVE initiatives. Through the sharing of experiences, some realized that they were, in fact, practicing the PVE unknowingly or that everyone at their level could contribute to further the PVE.
- ▶ **The PVE is recognized as necessary and progressively integrated into national policies:** the initiative's participants, regardless of their position and title, work at their level to ensure that the PVE is included in national policies and strategies. They are aware that a paradigm shift is needed to curb extreme violence.
- ▶ **For many actors, a taboo has been lifted:** dialogue with those involved in violence is possible. In just a few years, attitudes have changed on this issue, which has long been taboo. It is now openly discussed by representatives of public institutions, Defense and Security Forces (DSF), and civil society.
- ▶ **States representatives in their many components and civil society representatives have become aware of the importance of dialogue** as a central tool of the PVE and of the need to conduct inclusive PVE processes.

▶ **States have become aware that the PVE applies to all levels of political and administrative structures (national, regional, and local):** the PVE is not a mere concept but primarily a tool at the service of grassroots communities and an opportunity for shared governance.

▶ **DSF are starting to integrate the PVE into their doctrines, rules of engagement, and behavior.** Some countries have even started integrating the PVE into their DSF training curricula.

▶ **Civil society, in particular women and youth,** has become aware of the importance of its mobilization for the implementation of the PVE at both local and national levels: this initiative has made it possible to get the PVE out of the inner circle of security experts and put the citizen at the heart of the mobilization for the PVE.

## 4.2 Illustrative testimonies on the impact of participating in these meetings

The examples below that illustrate the initiative's impact are mostly taken from the results of the online consultation conducted between March and May 2021.<sup>1</sup> These testimonies **thus allow us to directly link the participation in these meetings to an impact for the person expressing themselves.**

Listening to them helps understand that the impacts of the initiative operate at different levels:

- ▶ Impact on the changes in individual postures and practices
- ▶ Impact on the sharing of experiences, the acquisition of PVE tools, and synergies
- ▶ Impact on public policies
- ▶ Impact on the structural entrenchment of the PVE in institutions
- ▶ Impact on driving new initiatives



### ***Impact on the changes in individual postures and practices***

The online consultation helped measure the changes that have taken place among the initiative participants. For the vast majority, this mainly meant being aware of the need for the PVE. Some report changes in their behavior and way of understanding and dealing with extreme violence issues. This helped them develop a less Manichean approach to violence.



“ This activity has made me aware of the fact that public administration, particularly the justice we represent, can be the cause of VE, especially when it is operating very poorly or does not meet the expectations of citizens. I confirm that my participation in this activity was quite educational for me. Indeed, after taking part in this activity, I gained awareness and took ownership of the PVE themes by integrating them into my daily activities. I also prepared a presentation to raise awareness among the actors in the criminal justice chain on this subject.” \*

“ With my background as a military officer, I now look beyond the usual kinetic approaches to military operations. I consider the non-kinetic aspect of military operations as highly crucial to prevention. On occasions where I speak at meetings on VE and terrorism, I push for the agenda on PVE since it remains a major weakness in the region. We have so far had discussions on the need for a changing role of the military in operations at the community level.” \*

“ This initiative has led me to a less Manichean approach when it comes to VE and to understand that there are not the good guys on one side and the bad guys on the other, that the motivations are plural, and that the approach to preventing this violence must be holistic, inclusive and requires a great deal of patience.” \*

“ The fact that we meet regularly as part of these meetings organized by Switzerland with its partners did us a lot of good. When you are young, you are not being heard back home. By contrast, you suddenly get much more attention if you talk from elsewhere. These meetings allowed me to be heard almost everywhere, all the way to New York. We see the imprint of our suggestions in the programs deployed in our countries. It is reassuring and this is possible thanks to this initiative.” <sup>1</sup>

“ Even in my wildest dreams, I have never thought I would one day sit and engage in a straightforward dialogue with Boko Haram terrorists, given their countless atrocities and the killing of thousands of people. Thanks to the PVE meetings in Maroua, I was able to overcome my preconceptions, interact with and listen to our executioners of yesterday.” \*

“ Before, I believed that one should not engage in dialogue with the actors of violence, that we should only fight them. Now, I have come to realize that the causes of VE, although illegitimate and illegal, can be understood and therefore prevented or addressed.” \*

“ Thanks to these Conversations, I have a different take on extremism issues, which has changed my approach to addressing the issue. I have initiated with other organizations a dialogue among women in Côte d'Ivoire on radical hate speech and led a project that facilitates dialogue between female mediators and local authorities in order to involve them in formal conflict resolution and violence prevention mechanisms.” \*

“ Taking part in these meetings has radically changed me since they influence each of my actions. How to resolve disputes differently is a question I now ask myself constantly. I take much more time to understand how the protagonists got to this point. I, for instance, have organized several meetings between the criminal justice chain and the military forces in conflict zones. These exchanges have enabled us to achieve satisfactory results, notably by mitigating violence and narrowing down the number of arbitrary arrests and violations of individual rights and freedoms, which are factors that aggravate VE. These meetings also brought together sectors unfamiliar to each other and always looking at each other from afar, constantly blaming and accusing one another. The solutions that come after hearing each other out are usually lasting ones.” \*



#### ***Impact on the sharing of experiences, the acquisition of PVE tools, and synergies***

This initiative facilitated the sharing of experiences between institutional and non-institutional actors, between actors who rarely have the opportunity to meet. This allowed some public and private institutions to enhance their work and develop new programs or training curricula. The diversity of the actors was one of the key elements put forward by the participants allowing mutual enrichment; synergies that some then reproduced at a local or national level.

“ It was a new topic for many actors, but there was not really any big area of resistance at the institutional level. Our security experts had understood this quite early on and asked to go further in this direction. We even encouraged their participation in other workshops, including in Dakar. They found it very interesting to have access to these analyses as they did not have the ability nor the time to undertake them.” <sup>2</sup>



- “ Our participation has enabled us to better define our offer in the security field, focused in particular on building the capacity of experts in terms of security and border management of Member States. For us, these meetings are henceforth capacity-building actions for our experts through the exchange of experiences and the mix that arises from the dialogue that has been established between institutional actors (elected representatives, political-administrative authorities, DSF) and non-institutional actors (CSOs, researchers, media).” \*
- “ For me, the Regional Conversations have already helped put an end to some certainties. I think that when we are full of certainty, we very often stray from the right questions. We often look for angles in our research that interest us and toward which we are usually drawn, but we have blind spots. These Conversations enable us to identify these blind spots and fill them in as they often have already been addressed by others, and to discuss them, which is mutually enriching.”<sup>3</sup>
- “ This initiative has a proven track record in developing prevention strategies at the international level, particularly when it comes to capitalizing on the results or in the definition of indicators in the context of comparative studies.” \*
- “ Many officials in charge of developing their country’s public policies on security, counterterrorism, and PVE have been able to gain more knowledge and enhance their work through participation in a number of the initiative’s meetings. Some of them said that this has made them aware that this dimension was missing or needed to be reinforced in an update of these policies. A further level of impact is the fact that participants from local governments or local elected representatives became aware that the PVE would go through them and also that they would get more attention from the central state to do so; some have clearly taken this on board.” \*
- “ During these meetings, there are people from the field who I never meet. However, I know these people are experiencing the same things as we. So to meet them there allows us to say to ourselves that it is not exactly what we thought and that if we want to do prevention, we need to know beforehand what those people are going through.”<sup>4</sup>
- “ What I appreciated most in the meetings was the listening part, letting everyone speak. Besides, each one contributes in their own way, and it is taken into account. Also, putting people together from all sides to express themselves on the same subject, the PVE. These are also about sharing good practices.”<sup>5</sup>



### **Impact on public policies**

The UN Secretary-General Plan of Action had encouraged Member States to adopt a new approach to the fight against VE. The Regional Conversations were instrumental in making this action plan known and instilling into participants the need to challenge the “purely security-oriented” approach. Participants credited the involvement of senior state officials or regional institutions with helping them make this paradigm shift by further gearing policies toward the PVE.

- “ The UN Secretary-General recommended prevention as the first pillar in his Plan of Action. This, unfortunately, has not been followed up. It is only through the Regional Conversations initiative, among others, that the international prevention agenda has been popularized and attitudes changed.” \*
- “ There has been a significant change because the Regional Conversations, the workshops, the round tables we organized have completely changed how people view things. It can be said today that a certain political and security elite has adopted the PVE. We can even see it in the policies: most countries today are adopting national PVE policies. The Regional Conversations have influenced this because the people invited are often at important levels of responsibility.”<sup>6</sup>
- “ The Regional Conversations initiative has greatly influenced the AU and its Member States’ approaches to the PVE, especially in Africa.” \*





“When I was Deputy Executive Secretary of the Conseil de l'Entente, in 2016, the Heads of State had decided to organize a meeting on security in the region. In the meantime, there were N'Djamena's Regional Conversations for the PVE, during which I met the Swiss facilitators. I expressed my concerns about the meetings of our organization, which needed prevention content as the military response was not enough. This is how we approached the FDFA and how we worked together. This collaboration has enabled us to understand the VE problem better and take preventive action. The main recommendations of the two regional meetings we held in 2018 in Abidjan and 2019 in Ouagadougou were the subject of a Community Directive on the PVE, submitted for adoption to the Conference of Heads of State and Government.”<sup>7</sup>

“In Côte d'Ivoire, the meetings contributed to the ongoing work of preparing the drafting of the National Prevention Strategy and of its Action Plan.”<sup>\*</sup>

“In the DRC, since the initiative of these meetings was launched, there has been a gradual change in the concept of prevention with regard to public policies. With this initiative, decision-makers and actors are becoming aware of the absolute need to add to the existing arsenal softer measures likely to prevent violence.”<sup>\*</sup>

“Within the African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) of the African Union, the main orientation shifted from combatting terrorism to the PVE as a result of the Regional Conversations initiative, reinforced by the UN Secretary-General Plan of Action on the PVE.”<sup>\*</sup>

“Through the initiative, Switzerland's priority policy in terms of the PVE has become a concrete reality through the various partnerships established over time. This work has also made it possible to continuously contribute to the exchanges in which Switzerland participates both bilaterally and multilaterally. This fills two needs with one deed: by making the voices of those in the field heard, Switzerland also gains in the consolidation of this policy and credibility in this area. It's a win-win situation. That is the very essence of a community of practice and policy.”<sup>\*</sup>



#### **Impact on the structural entrenchment of the PVE in institutions**

Upon their return to their countries, some participants set up working groups or training sessions with their colleagues to perpetuate the spirit of the regional meetings and permanently embed the PVE in their institutions. Training courses on the PVE have also been developed for officials within the ministries and the DSF.

“In Cameroon, a working group on the PVE has been set up within the Ministry of External Relations. It thus undertakes a process of discussions and consultations with a view to adopting and implementing a National Strategy.”<sup>\*</sup>

“In Mali, the initiative of the Regional Conversations for the PVE has greatly influenced my institution (defense forces). In addition to including some training sessions on the PVE, it has helped strengthen aspects of the fight against terrorism other than repression.”<sup>\*</sup>

“In Ghana, my institution, the National Peace Council, is now offering capacity-building sessions on the PVE for its board and staff.”<sup>\*</sup>

“In Congo Brazzaville, after participating in the meetings, we introduced this theme in the judicial police curriculum.”<sup>\*</sup>

“Recently, institutions such as the High Council for Dialogue and Social Cohesion or the Ministry for National Reconciliation have been created. There is also the Ministry of Territorial Administration, which has a social cohesion section. These are new institutions. This means that the importance of prevention was grasped at the state level, which facilitates all the educational part which is necessary and needed to raise awareness.”<sup>8</sup>

“In Benin, there is a general revision of the training schools' curricula, especially as regards the police forces, since they are the ones in constant contact with the population, to introduce modules on how to prevent VE on the ground, also in collaboration with the elected representatives.”<sup>9</sup>

**Impact on driving new initiatives**

Following their participation in these meetings, some sought to perpetuate their spirit and develop new practices. Each at their own level –whether a civil society member, a civil servant, a DSF representative, or a journalist– has taken up PVE initiatives through facilitating debates within the university, organizing community radio broadcasts, or launching civil-military dialogues with youth, for instance.

- “ It changed my practice in a meaningful way because what I have seen in the Conversations convinced me of the need to prepare women to participate in such debates. The Conversations were the starting point for me to develop a program as part of the research network I lead, where we trained 25 female activists from different countries in West Africa and the Sahel, who to this day continue to support each other. This has deeply shaped my belief that we must take action and develop very concrete programs to help those whose voices are not always heard in the spheres of reflection on violence carve a place for themselves.”<sup>10</sup>
- “ In Togo, at the initiative of the President of Lomé University, we invited a group of Togo civil society organizations to a workshop of exchange and debate on the issue of VE and prevention.” \*
- “ In Côte d’Ivoire, participation in the meetings has helped gear projects toward greater involvement of local communities in conflict prevention Committees, as well as in schools where students have become extremely violent and attack each other based on ethnic and regional identity. We organize group discussions among students, as well as among women, community leaders, and administrative authorities. About 200 women have been trained and joined the network.” \*
- “ I was able to incorporate a number of elements of the Regional Conversations for the PVE when I helped develop the first SSR-P/CVE course (preventing and combating violent extremism) for ISSAT/DCAF, led in Mali for the G5 Sahel High-Level Group and donors in early 2019.” \*
- “ In Benin, I spoke about this situation of violence and the need to initiate actions aimed at preventing it, in our association, through awareness-raising bringing together the police and the population in symbiosis.” \*
- “ I attended the PVE Workshop in Central Africa in Bangui, CAR. This allowed me to test what I have learned at a local level to contain violence at the grassroots level. In villages, violations are frequent, but state responses are slow. In this case, meetings of the community elders and leaders are a cardinal way out.” \*
- “ In Senegal, during the International Day of Peace celebrated by the Platform of Women for Peace in Casamance, we discussed the challenges and stakes of VE. Since then, we have taken this subject into account in all our activities.” \*
- “ Another of the recommendations of the regional meetings was endorsed and echoed by the organization: the need to enhance borders by adopting an integrated border management approach, with the concept of human security being at the center of this approach.” \*
- “ IPI benefited from the Regional Conversations in formulating its own prevention approach and was able to be the voice for the experiences of local, national, and regional actors in the context of the public finding-sharing events in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.” \*
- “ In Cameroon, the Regional Conversations initiative has enriched the areas of intervention of our organization. The presentations at each meeting have inspired us to come up with many ideas for projects related to our fields of exploration, namely the media, women, and the drivers of lasting peace.” \*
- “ In Chad, the initiative has led, within our organization, to the involvement of youth from the border regions of Chad in the prevention of violence. Meetings with youth from the border regions of CAR, Lake Chad, and the North toward Libya were organized for this purpose.” \*
- “ In Togo, we organized dialogues between the security forces and youth on conflict prevention. Youth capacity-building sessions are planned on this issue.” \*



### 4.3 Advocacy and media outreach

The media have a crucial role to play in terms of prevention. This is why, throughout the meetings, the media were invited to inform about the initiative in order to better disseminate the messages on the PVE and spark discussion among the population. In all the countries where the meetings were held, the print media, radio, and television covered the initiative through press articles or interviews with personalities. The “Media Carousel” on the following double-page spread offers a glimpse into this valuable media outreach.

Moreover, while most of the initiative’s meetings were held behind closed doors, dialogue with the media was favored on all these occasions, with the participation of journalists or community radio hosts as experts, to encourage the integration of the PVE into their professional activities at that level as well.

“ In Cameroon, journalists have begun to raise the issue of PVE in public radio and television programs following their participation in one of the regional meetings in Maroua. These are productions on the equitable management and distribution of public resources and youth inclusion in local decision-making. Through these broadcasts, young people educate their peers and make suggestions to local authorities, including mayors, on mentoring and supervising youth by creating, for instance, income-generating activities for them.” \*



It was covered by the media



INTÉGRATION RÉGIONALE  
**Société civile, institutionnels, religieux... : Tous dans la construction des paravents contre l'extrémisme violent**  
02/04/2019 | Intégration | Aucun commentaire  
...pleur de la menace est importante. A l'heure actuelle...  
...devrait inciter chaque acteur social à s'int...  
...capacité à prévenir, à empêcher et à...









## CONCLUSION

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A dynamic is set in motion





At the very first PVE meeting Switzerland launched in 2016 in Dakar together with the United Nations, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Mr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, had these words that have guided us ever since:

“ This meeting bears witness to a shared belief that, given the complex challenges facing this important part of the African continent, a different approach is now needed to meet the -legitimate- security needs and -equally legitimate- requirements of economic and human development. In a world increasingly dominated by the purely security-oriented approach, Africa and, in particular, the West African subregion and the Sahel cannot underestimate the extent of the multifaceted threat that terrorism poses. They also cannot dampen or ignore the aspirations of the mostly young populations for more development and prosperity. For while security is an unquestionable imperative, investment in the various economic and human development sectors is just as necessary. Investing in the prevention of violence and peace in West Africa and the Sahel is no longer an option; **it is a strategic priority** that the governments of the subregion must take on with a clear and strong commitment.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, all these meetings, discussions, and exchanges within the community of participants in the initiative launched by Switzerland have demonstrated that the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) is no longer a choice nor an option but a necessity that highlights **the urgency** of acting in advance to prevent the occurrence and reoccurrence of violence.

This prevention approach requires **a profound change in how we view security**. It needs to be discussed and integrated on a broad scale, both by the relevant state structures and the actors affected by this violence. Developing national or regional strategies is, among other things, a valuable process for creating an environment conducive to this change, the latter being based above all on shared governance of public affairs, where security means human security, and where dialogue between citizens and governments makes it possible to **build peace each and every day**.

This multilayered peace is deeply rooted in the local and historical grounds as well as in the social, economic, and political landscape. Hence, it can only be built by drawing strength from these realities.

Prevention is, therefore, a political matter as much as a personal and interpersonal one since change and peace cannot be decreed; they are lived.

Moreover, in a world where violence is constantly promoted in the media, **peace should not be seen as an exception**. It is almost everywhere. It thus must be given recognition and placed at the center of **communication**.

## The future of the initiative

There is a consensus among participants in this initiative, which is now seven years old, that it should be pursued and strengthened. According to them, it is and remains even more relevant than it was at the beginning, **for it provides a recognized and necessary space for dialogue**.

“ This dialogue must continue as the PVE and VE often change shape, and people need to keep exchanging and sharing further strategies to cope with it.”<sup>2</sup>

“ It is beneficial to continue with this initiative. The more time we spend together, the more we get to know each other and the more we develop a discourse, the more ideas we can take home, and that’s a good direction to head to.”<sup>3</sup>

The **model** of this regional multi-partner and multi-actor initiative is **unique**, although other organizations and institutions are beginning to work along these lines.

“ The initiative served as a matrix for formulating the PVE approach. Should we stop building a house without covering the roof? The initiative was noted for its relevance and the potential it holds in terms of inventiveness and ability to interconnect areas of focus. It is an opportunity to work toward its consolidation as it is being copied here and there, mainly in form.”<sup>\*</sup>

“ There are no mechanisms similar to the Regional Conversations, and dialogue between the actors is the only way of achieving a common understanding of the threat and a co-definition of preventive policies. The participatory approach of this initiative allows not only to think outside the ready-made logic of counter-terrorism but also the acceptability of the mutually agreed measures.”<sup>\*</sup>

Having opened this **space for dialogue** in West, Central, and North Africa is seen as **unprecedented and indispensable** and must be sustained. Some even suggest opening it up to other geographic areas.

“ I would like to see the Regional Conversations replicated in other geographic areas than the ones in which they have been held so far. There are overwhelming needs in other parts of the world.”<sup>4</sup>





There is, moreover, a real awareness among political leaders and the **Defense and Security Forces (DSF)** of the limits of a mainly military response to VE. The DSF understood the importance of having the population's support and have even started integrating a PVE approach into their training and operations. This new approach is underway and is reflected in the cycle of meetings on the DSF's role in the PVE, conducted within the initiative's framework.

“ This initiative needs to be pursued because it is only now that countries and the DSF are beginning to realize the importance of the Regional Conversations and the PVE.” \*

“ We also need to involve the military troops on the ground, not just the high-ranking officers. Sometimes there is a perception gap between them.” <sup>5</sup>

“ We, at the DSF level, believe that the continuation of this dialogue will gradually make it possible to integrate into the DSF doctrinal corpus this very important dimension of prevention in carrying out our missions.” <sup>6</sup>

The role of all in the PVE, and in particular **women** and **youth**, is not only recognized but also sought after. Their contribution is considered essential for societies to return to a peaceful and balanced life. Many women and young people participated in the initiative and drew inspiration from it in their work.

“ The path of dialogue allows us to have some positive impacts on the ground. The credo of dialogue sung by women actors of peace in the Far North of Cameroon led to a series of surrenders among the combatants, most of whom are relatives and acquaintances.” <sup>7</sup>

“ I hope the initiative will continue to build momentum; that it remains inclusive, embracing the largest number of institutional actors, DSF, CSOs, youth, and women; all those who have something to say in peacebuilding.” <sup>8</sup>

**Switzerland** is valued and recognized as a **pioneer** in the field of **prevention**. Confidence in its role as a **facilitator** is well established. It is important that Switzerland provide the necessary means and resources for continuing and further expanding this initiative.

“ Switzerland has special expertise on dialogue and citizen participation in policy-making, which could be a very important starting point to reflect on what comes next.” <sup>9</sup>

“ Switzerland brings to the table its governance model based on promoting dialogue, the ability to listen, and the constant search for peace. I think that in the current situation, peace is also built with models. Much as we can have models that favor the inappropriate use of force or the use of other types of settlement, we also need models based on the lasting values of peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and listening to one another.” <sup>10</sup>

## New avenues for action

During the meetings, the online consultation, or filmed interviews, this community's members expressed their views on the future of this initiative. While calling for the continuation of what they consider “added value”, they also put forward various proposals for new avenues for action or avenues to be stepped up.

### ► *Facilitate contact and dialogue with the actors of violence*

“ The next steps can lead to facilitating contacts with the actors of violence, facilitating exchanges between states and groups of actors of violence but also making visible the affected communities through the participation of their representatives.” \*

### ► *Remain attentive to the new dynamics of violence and act as a laboratory for responses to be devised*

“ I see this initiative as a training space for PVE actors, allowing the exchange of experiences. We must not remain static by taking what has already been done for granted because these VE groups are developing new strategies. This is why a framework for training, exchange, and sharing is needed.” \*

“ The threat is dynamic. It is thus necessary to regularly put the actors together in a framework to exchange on the latest developments in prevention and threat, to share experiences and setbacks.” <sup>11</sup>

### ► *Extending regional action through national and local action*

“ This process must be pursued. People need to take ownership of the spirit of the PVE Regional Conversations. It must be broadened to go into the depths of the rural world.” <sup>12</sup>



“ I suggest that the Regional Conversations transform and translate into practical actions on the ground through pilot projects with and for the communities, and be very inclusive of youth and women.”<sup>13</sup>

“ The initiative must involve many more local and national elected representatives so that they gradually bring about change in philosophy, mentality, and approach, from the purely security-oriented approach toward the civilian treatment of VE. This can be achieved if elected representatives are committed.”<sup>14</sup>

“ I think it is very important to carry on with these Regional Conversations, but they need to be brought to a much lower level to allow some key actors who contribute daily to the PVE to have access to these consultation frameworks. They are the first actors and the first victims. In the future, I would be more in favor of developing this consultation framework at the commune or village level.”<sup>15</sup>

“ The format is quite interesting but could be improved with new actors, decentralized actors, local actors. A different format should be looked at to involve the affected local populations and to hear their voices and their stories. Sometimes we think for them while they have more interesting things to say because they are the ones living these realities.”<sup>16</sup>

#### ► *Investing in capacity-building*

Throughout the initiative, there were calls, especially to the attention of the FDFA's PVE program, for continued investment in building the capacity of the various actors involved in the PVE.

“ In order to monitor the impact of the Regional Conversations, outreach coaching aimed at the actors could be considered.” \*

The Guidelines emerging from the cycle of regional seminars for the DSF and the PVE (see Box p. 54) highlight, for example, the importance of capacity-building for the various DSF corps so that this new vision of their role gradually becomes a reality.

“ Designing and implementing PVE training at the national, subregional, and regional levels, including on dialogue tools and/or benefiting from existing training; integrating the PVE approach into the DSF training (adaptation of doctrines, curricula, continuous training).”<sup>17</sup>

#### ► *Introducing new themes to be addressed or strengthened*

Participants regularly identified a few themes on which the meetings should focus more actively. These prominently include ► dialogue with the actors of violence, ► greater involvement of women and youth, ► greater involvement of communities, ► the return or reinvention of the State, ► justice, ► the role of culture in the PVE, ► access to resources, land governance, and climate change ► and arms control.

### Last but not least...

The prevention of violence is a necessary step today. On all sides, voices are calling for a comprehensive and humane approach to extreme violence, far from the merely military response. Dialogues with extremists are on the increase. Politics is seizing on this new vision of future peaceful coexistence and the creation of pluriform and peaceful societies. Already in 2015, the UN Secretary-General defined, through his PVE Action Plan, the guidelines states should follow to pacify their societies, to respond to those who suffer political, social and economic inequalities, and express it through armed violence. Switzerland, like other states, is committed to this approach to violence prevention, notably through the program that is the subject of this publication. Through this program, as through the other activities Switzerland carries out with its various partners in the framework of its foreign policy, a fundamental common thread emerges: that of dialogue. There lies the strength of this collective work in favour of people's need for humanity and peace.







# ANNEX

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# List of partners



**APEV**  
Association pour la paix et la prévention de l'extrémisme violent dans les pays du Golfe de Guinée, Bénin



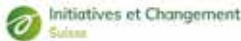
**CNC-SNPRVR**  
Comité national de Coordination de la Stratégie nationale de Prévention de la Radicalisation et de l'Extrémisme violent, RCA



**CAERT-UA**  
Centre africain d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Terrorisme, Union africaine



**CNCLT**  
Comité national de Coordination de la Lutte contre le Terrorisme international, RDC



**Caux - Initiative et Changement**  
Suisse



**CNLCT**  
Commission nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme, Tunisie



**CBLT**  
Commission du Bassin du Lac Tchad



**Conseil de l'Entente**



**CEIDES**  
Centre africain d'Etudes internationales, diplomatiques, économiques et stratégiques, Cameroun



**DCAF**  
Centre de Genève pour la Gouvernance du Secteur de Sécurité, Suisse



**Chaire UNESCO-PREV**  
Chaire UNESCO en Prévention de la Radicalisation et de l'Extrémisme violent



**Fondation Hironnelle**  
Suisse



**CHEDS**  
Centre des Hautes Etudes de Défense et de Sécurité, Sénégal



**Forum international de Dakar sur la Paix et la Sécurité en Afrique**  
Sénégal



**CILSS**  
Comité permanent inter-États de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel



**GCSP**  
Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Suisse



**CIPLEV**  
Comité Interministériel de Prévention et de Lutte contre l'Extrémisme violent, Togo



**GCTF**  
Global Counterterrorism Forum



**HSRCGh**  
Human Security Research Center Ghana



**ICAN**  
International Civil Society Action Network,  
USA



**NCU-PVE**  
National Coordination Unit for Preventing  
Violent Extremism, Lebanon



**ICG**  
International Crisis Group, Belgique



**OIF, FrancoPREV**  
Réseau francophone pour la Prévention  
de la Radicalisation et de l'Extrémisme  
violents



**International Alert**  
Tunisie



**Programme des Nations Unies pour le  
Développement - PNUD**



**Interpeace**  
Suisse



**ROP, Université de Montréal**  
Réseau francophone des Opérations  
de Paix, Canada



**IPI**  
International Peace Institute, USA



**UNESCO**  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



**ISS**  
Institute for Security Studies, Afrique  
du Sud



**UNIDIR**  
United Nations Institute for Disarmament  
Research



**KAF**  
Kofi Annan Foundation, Suisse



**UNOCA**  
United Nations Regional Office for Central  
Africa



**MediaWomen4Peace**  
Cameroun



**UNOWAS**  
United Nations Regional Office for West  
Africa and the Sahel



**MISAHEL**  
Mission de l'Union africaine  
pour le Mali et le Sahel



**UNREC**  
United Nations Regional Centre for Peace  
and Disarmament in Africa



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**Nota bene:** Throughout the publication, for illustrative testimonies extracted from the results of the online consultation conducted between March and May 2021 with participants in the cycle of meetings organized by the Swiss FDFA's PVE program and its partners, the source is not repeated each time it occurs. They are simply followed by an asterisk (\*). Only testimonies from other sources are individually referenced in the endnote of the document.

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7. This is also the reason why the Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism – The Way Forward, was organized by the United Nations in partnership with the Government of Switzerland, on 7 and 8 April 2016 – <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/geneva-conference>. Joint Co-Chairs Conclusions: <https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org/counterterrorism/files/gvapveconfjointcochairsconclusions.pdf>

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## B. Photo credits

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“Investing in the prevention of violence and violent extremism is no longer a choice; it is a matter of urgent necessity, a strategic priority.”

Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Second Regional Conversations for the PVE, N'Djamena, Chad, 31 May 2017.

“Prevention must consistently be seen as a value in itself. It is an essential means of reducing human suffering. Prevention is not merely a priority, but the priority.”

António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Address to the Security Council, 10 January 2017.

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