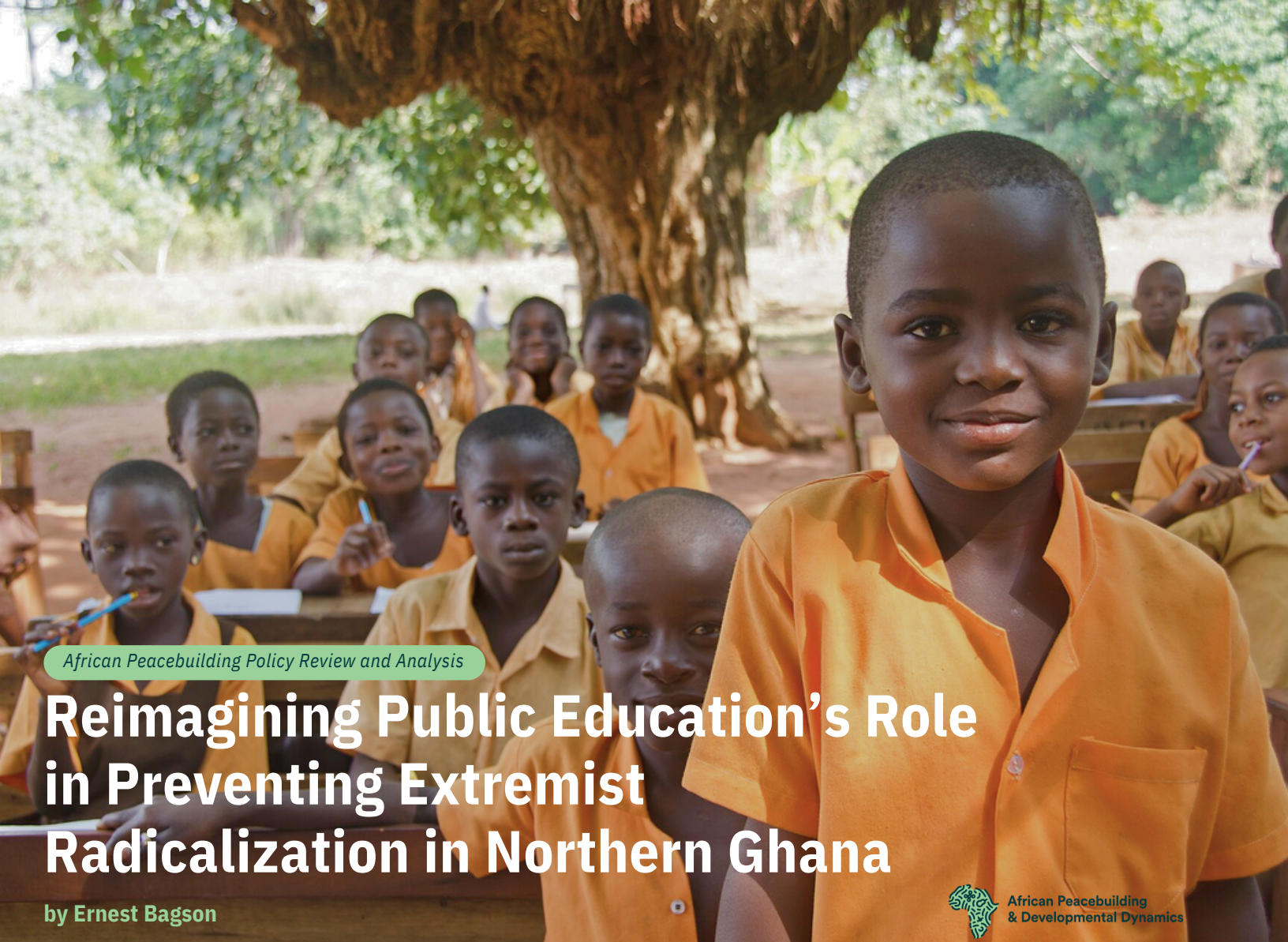




African Peacebuilding Policy Review and Analysis

Reimagining Public Education's Role in Preventing Extremist Radicalization in Northern Ghana

by Ernest Bagson



Abstract

Drawing on empirical studies, practitioner reports, policy documents, and case studies, the review highlights the role of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) education in promoting civic awareness, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing pathways to alternative livelihoods. It provides policy-relevant insights on how to use education as a tool for empowerment while minimising its potential for fostering alienation. The research finds that in accessing PCVE education, persistent systemic inequalities can generate a perception of exclusion, deepening grievances, and increasing susceptibility to extremist narratives. The review recommends adopting a holistic PCVE approach that simultaneously addresses cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic factors, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of efforts to reduce susceptibility to violent extremist ideologies.

Keywords: Education, radicalization, violent extremism, resilience, vulnerability, Ghana

Key Takeaways

Addressing systemic inequalities in access to PCVE education is critical to the success of prevention strategies.

Failure to ensure inclusive access may perpetuate perceptions of exclusion, exacerbate social grievances, and heighten susceptibility to extremist messaging and recruitment efforts.

It is important for (N)GOs and CSOs to draw on the relative peace in Northern Ghana to offer balance public education on PCVE.

(N)GOs and CSOs should make deliberate efforts promoting the protective factors of public education. At the same time, lowering the risk factors and reshaping aspects of the current public education strategies is also of paramount importance.

(N)GOs and CSOs need to reconceptualize public education on PCVE to include the mental and emotional wellbeing of the youth.

Ghana Education Service and partners require strengthening teacher capacity and inclusive curricula that promotes the mainstreaming of preventing violent extremism education at the secondary and tertiary education levels.

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Figure 1.0: Gulf of Guinea,
Maritime Security. Source: SAIIA,
2016.

Introduction

This policy analysis explores how public education mitigates and potentially magnifies vulnerability to the rippling effects of violent extremism. The Sahel region of Africa has been described as the epicenter of violent extremism and terrorist groups, attributable to poor governance, socio-economic marginalization, and localized conflicts.¹ Intersecting the West African and the Sahel regions, Burkina Faso has recorded the highest level of deaths through violent extremist and terrorist attacks in 2023 and 2024, respectively. These developments have put other West African countries, particularly along the Gulf of Guinea, in danger of violent extremist attacks.

Notably, Ghana remains the only country bordering Burkina Faso that has not experienced violent extremist attacks or related deaths.² But the increasing vulnerability of Northern Ghana to violent extremist events cannot be ignored.³ Northern Ghana seems more vulnerable to violent extremist events than the rest of Ghana because of its proximity to Burkina Faso and the Sahelian conflict zones and porous borders.⁴

Moreso, Northern Ghana appears vulnerable since it serves as a haven for violent extremist groups to replenish, strategize, and attack countries within the sub-region.⁵ Knowledge and experiences of these narratives, including the socio-economic and cultural relationships between border communities in Ghana and Burkina Faso,⁶ have increased the vulnerabilities of border communities to violent extremist ideologies, radicalization, and the consequences of violent extremists' attacks.

In response to Ghana's vulnerabilities to the activities of violent extremist groups, both hard and soft approaches to PCVE are employed by the state and non-state organizations.⁷ Whilst hard PCVE approaches are militarized and security-driven, soft approaches are preventive and non-coercive. In addition to the collaborative border patrols by the security services of Ghana and Burkina Faso, public education on PCVE has gained popularity,⁸ as well as extraordinary experiential learning within border communities via social, economic, and cultural interactions, which co-create awareness.⁹

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Public education, in this context, encompasses formal, informal, and non-formal educational strategies characterized by civic sensitization, advocacy, and community-based training initiatives. Such initiative are aimed at discouraging events of violent extremism. Using relevant case studies, empirical studies, policy documents, and other relevant literature in Northern Ghana, this policy analysis examines how public education is shaping pathways in both mitigating and magnifying violent extremists' radicalization processes.

Addressing this lacuna will provide policy direction on how to reconcile the duality of public education as a means of empowerment and a means of alienation. Immediately following the sections on methodology and risks associated with delivering public education on PCVE, the next section presents and evaluates case studies of some public education strategies deploy by (Non)Governmental Organizations (NGO) and Civil Society Organizations (CSO) in PCVE in Northern Ghana. This is followed by comparative analysis of the PCVE case studies in Northern Ghana. The review ends by exploring the implications for policy and practice, and drawing conclusions around actionable recommendations.

Methodology

Data search strategies and selection criteria

This policy analysis benefits from searches on electronic databases, including web of science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR, spanning from 2000 to 2026, to cover possible publications on recent violent extremist events. Also using web search engines, grey literature was retrieved from the websites of (N)GOs and CSO, who are providing public education on PCVE in Northern Ghana.

The review focuses on Northern Ghana, which consists of the Upper East, Upper West, Northeast, Savannah, and Northern Regions. The Northern Ghana has persistently faced socio-economic marginalization characterized by poverty, limited infrastructure, and weak access to services.¹⁰ The region is also characterized by multiethnic, religious and cultural diversity, and notable rivalries over limited resources and chieftaincy disputes.¹¹ It is, therefore, timely and relevant to explore the dynamics that foreground public education on PCVE within the context of Northern Ghana.

Risks associated with delivery public education on PCVE

Public education on PCVE can deepen alienation and grievances in some interrelated ways.

Firstly, perceived exclusion and inequality in access to quality public education and opportunities (associated with PCVE potentially reinforce public sense of marginalization among peripheral or border communities. This situation is aggravated when public education on PCVE does not translate into employment and general economic wellbeing, and also possibly worsening public trust in state and non-state agencies who forefront events or strategies of PCVE. The consequences are not without public interest in extremist narratives.

Moreover, when public education strategies and content on PCVE are not co-created among the relevant actors, they are likely to suffer rejection. This means that public education on PCVE that is characterized by externally driven messages are devoid of cultural sensitivity and relevant local orientations. In addition, when public education spaces become securitized, individuals' willingness to associate with or participate in related events is likely to decline due to fears of stigmatization.

Finally, if public education on PCVE provides limited attention to critical digital literacy - particularly in contexts where individuals are aware of the perceived benefits of affiliating with extremist groups - the public becomes increasingly vulnerable to online extremist propaganda, thereby heightening the risk of radicalization.

Public Education on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Northern Ghana

In Ghana, public education on the threats of violent extremists' radicalization is widespread, especially close to Burkina Faso. This study was designed to synthesize existing case studies with the aim of critically analyzing intervention effectiveness, identifying cross-contextual patterns, and deriving lessons to support evidence-based policy and practice recommendations. Using varied pedagogical approaches in public education, such as dialogue, drama, visual storytelling, the media among others, (N)GO and CSO, have been instrumental in creating public awareness, civic/peace education, livelihood empowerment, and building resilience against the complexities of violent extremism and terrorism as, established in the following case studies.

Case Study 1: Preventing Election Violence and Providing Security to the Northern Border Regions of Ghana (NORPREVSEC) Program

Funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the Ghana National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies (FIIAPP), and Cognition et Intelligence Appliquées (COGINTA), NORPREVSEC aims

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at “preventing pre- and post-electoral violence and at countering violent extremism, terrorism and organized crime in five northernmost regions in Ghana.” Specifically, the program strengthened CSOs in enacting peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism in Northern Ghana. In PCVE, the program has supported intelligence gathering, religious tolerance, conflict mediation, and prioritizes security in every endeavor.¹² However, the program’s overreliance on improving security capacity limits its contributions to PCVE, since addressing structural socio-economic drivers are equally important in preventing violent extremism,¹³ especially in a deprived northern Ghana.

Case Study 2: The “See something, Say something” campaign

The Ministry of National Security has noted that national security is a shared responsibility, and that the absence of reporting mechanism limits efforts in PCVE. It launched a national campaign to create awareness on PCVE among residents, encouraging them to report suspicious behavior to security agencies and local authorities. The campaign was widely promoted through the media, town hall meeting, and visits to schools, mosques, and churches. The campaign also encourages local level participation in security matters fostering citizen-security agency collaboration in PCVE.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the campaign may unintentionally promote reporting of behaviors that pose little or no security threat. Within the context of Northern Ghana’s complex multi-ethnic relations and underlying tensions, this could contribute to the spread of false alarms, potentially intensify social tensions among communities.

Case Study 3: Building Resilient Communities Against Violent Extremism

Funded under the Coastal State Stability Mechanism (CSSM) and implemented by the West Africa Center for Counter-Extremism (WACCE), in partnership with TeenTalk Ghana, the program set out to empower local actors against the threat of violent extremism in border communities in Northern Ghana. The program built the capacities of local actors to resist the recruitment narratives of violent extremist groups and to alter those narratives to be in favor of peacebuilding and social cohesion. The program prioritizes social cohesion and livelihood empowerment in PCVE. The use of radio, visual storytelling, and youth-led media content creations, were the dominant methods of educating the youth and the communities at large, which enables inclusivity (West Africa Center for Counter Extremism 2025). However, limited evaluation of the program makes it unclear how this bottom-up approach could ensure structural reforms and sustainability in PCVE.

Case Study 4: The Gulf of Guinea Northern Regions Social Cohesion (SOCO) Project

In this project, Northern Ghana benefits from community-driven development, including social cohesion, improved local governance, and inhabited intercommunal conflicts. The project uses a bottom-up approach to identify and study development initiatives, such as small dams, rural road construction, and markets to erase public feeling of exclusion and marginalization from national development, especially in regions of limited presence of government. The project also fosters youth economic empowerment through vocational skills training program to reduce grievances and vulnerabilities that extremists might exploit.¹⁵

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Case Study 5: Community Cohesion and Livelihood Enhancement Projects

Funded by International Organization for Migration (IOM) and implemented by Star-Ghana Foundation, the community cohesion aspect of the project improved communal and social cohesion through dialogue platforms purported at resolving security threats. The project uses public education and campaigns to strengthen human security and community participation in legitimate border security endeavors. Conversely, the community livelihoods enhancement aspect of the project aims at addressing emerging socio-economic factors, such as the provision of small-scale livelihood enhancement opportunities to minimize communities’ susceptibility to the recruitment narratives of violent extremist groups.¹⁷ The project makes social bonds and economic opportunities more affective buffers to the tendencies of violent extremist radicalization. But without longitudinal empirical studies, the successes of the project remain inferential.

Case Study 6: The Ghana Education Service (GES)

The Ghana Education Service, in partnership with CSOs, have successfully integrated peace and civic education into the curricula of basic schools,¹⁸ even though transiting from basic to secondary school has been bedeviled with issues of inequality, alienation and continuously emerging grievance.¹⁹ Evidence of correlation between education and the tendency to engage in violent extremism exist.²⁰ Consequently, the GES has indirectly imbedded PCVE into the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework, as in the study of peacebuilding, equity and inclusivity, professional values and ethics as well as critical thinking and media literacy which buffer violent extremists' incentives narratives.²¹ However, the capacity of teachers to localize the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework to enable it induce and change students minds and attitudes to violent extremist narratives remains evasive in a highly heterogeneous Northern Ghana.

Comparative Analysis of the Case Studies in PCVE in Northern Ghana

Security-led awareness and intelligence gathering are relevant strategies in reducing the spread of extremist-led narratives, improving early detection, reporting, and responding to violent extremist threats and events. (N)GOs and CSOs deployed both soft and hard hybrid approaches inducing people's interest in their immediate security situations. As a State-led project, the "see something, say something" campaign appears a proactive tool in creating public awareness and in intelligence gathering foregrounding collaboration between the security services and citizens. Even though continuous awareness creation builds a new mindset, induces critical thinking and responses,²² the potential of securitizing communities, over-surveillance, and recruitment of false alarmist in a geography of multi-ethnicity cannot be ignored. Also, limited funding from the Government of Ghana is worrying.

Furthermore, the EU funded NORPRESEC project implemented by the NCCE also contributes to public security mindfulness. Public education on election-related violence and violent extremism help reduce the vulnerability of communities to radicalization by limiting the ability of extremist groups to exploit ignorance for recruitment and network expansion. Such awareness initiatives empower citizens with the knowledge needed to recognize and resist extremist narratives and activities. However, dependence on fixed-term and fixed-budget funding from the EU raises concerns regarding local ownership, continuity, and the long-term sustainability of these interventions.

Socio-economic resilience and livelihood empowerment

In PCVE, the World Bank funded project – SOCO – deployed a decentralized approach to infrastructural development in Northern Ghana. The construction of market places, roads, water systems, and schools, among other development touchpoints, aims at disincentivizing residents' interest in possible livelihood opportunities offered from violent extremist groups.

The community cohesion and livelihood empowerment project implemented by STAR-Ghana and IOM in Northern Ghana used legitimate economic empowerment opportunities as alternatives to extremists' incentives. This approach gives the youth some sense of hope, identity, and purpose, which support efforts to counter extremist narratives.²³ Even though this approach is instrumental in PCVE, the tendency to securitize development appears more pronounced than promoting development as a basic human right, especially in a geographically deprived Northern Ghana.

Building emotional and ideological firewalls

Focusing on a long-term soft approach to PCVE, the GES indirectly inculcates peace education in teacher training to enable teachers identify and respond to signs of radicalization in schools and communities. Similarly, in building resilient communities against violent extremism, CSOs largely focus on improving capacities of local actors on conflict mediation—which if not managed well, could degenerate into pathway for extremist radicalization.

Policy and Practical Implications of (N)GOs- and CSOs-Led Public Education for PCVE in Northern Ghana

The duality of education as a protective and sometimes risk factor within the domain of PCVE requires critical attention in crafting relevant policy and practical interventions. The case studies suggest that (N)GOs and CSOs in Northern Ghana are predominantly focused on building emotional and ideological resilience, as well as co-creating security-centered awareness and intelligence-gathering mechanisms to counter violent extremism. However, their efforts to integrate socio-economic and livelihood empowerment into public education initiatives on PCVE appear relatively limited, potentially constraining the effectiveness and sustainability of their interventions.

Consequently, while the public may become more security conscious and exhibit higher levels of social cohesion, the persistence of declining socio-economic opportunities in an already deprived Northern Ghana creates conditions that can heighten vulnerability to violent extremist influences. In such circumstances, offers of socio-economic incentives from violent extremist groups may become increasingly attractive, thereby enhancing public willingness to engage with or support such groups.

Furthermore, there is a need to co-create security awareness among the public. Particularly, ensuring PCVE programs have funding and sustainability challenges. Limited collaboration among (N)GOs and CSOs implementing PCVE initiatives also weakens overall effectiveness. In addition, the near absence of digital literacy components in these programs further exposes communities to vulnerabilities and increases the risk of violent extremist radicalization in Northern Ghana.

The duality of education as a protective and sometimes risk factor within the domain of PCVE requires critical attention in crafting relevant policy and practical interventions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence indicates that addressing systemic inequalities in access to PCVE education is critical to the success of prevention strategies. Failure to ensure inclusive access may perpetuate perceptions of exclusion, exacerbate social grievances, and heighten susceptibility to extremist messaging and recruitment efforts. Also, review of the case studies indicates that (N)GOs and CSOs in Northern Ghana have prioritised initiatives aimed at strengthening emotional and ideological safeguards against violent extremism, while also supporting security-oriented awareness creation and intelligence gathering. Nevertheless, comparatively less attention has been devoted to promoting socio-economic and livelihood empowerment through PCVE education, highlighting a gap in the holistic implementation of prevention strategies.

It is therefore important for (N)GOs and CSOs to draw on the relative peace in Northern Ghana and the willingness of the people to participate in PCVE events to offer balance public education on PCVE.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. (N)GOs and CSOs should make deliberate efforts in promoting the protective factors of public education. At the same time, lowering the risk factors and reshaping aspects of the current public education strategies to reflect the interests of the youth, is also of paramount importance. This includes digitizing PCVE-related content in the form of competitive video games or animation, as well as context relevant digital comics. Youth increasing their interest in the virtual environment sustains their online activities could be leveraged on by posting strategies of PCVE than the current dominant presence of online content posted by violent extremist groups and their sympathizers.
2. In the delivery of public education on PCVE, (N)GOs and CSOs need to reconceptualize public education on PCVE to include the mental and emotional wellbeing of the youth which contributes to inducing and sustaining elements of the PCVE in the minds and hearts of the youth. This approach progressively shapes the skill sets of young people by fostering critical thinking, promoting tolerance, and encouraging the adoption of non-violent means to address the social and economic challenges facing the burgeoning youth population.
3. To stimulate and sustain effective delivery of critical pedagogy on PCVE, the Ghana Education Service and partners require strengthening teacher capacity and inclusive curricula that promotes the mainstreaming of preventing violent extremism education at the secondary and tertiary education levels. It is imperative to intentionally establish and sustain structured partnerships among relevant stakeholders, including both state and non-state actors — to foster coordinated, inclusive, and sustainable strategies for PCVE. This should be operationalized through clear institutional frameworks, defined roles, and continuous collaboration mechanisms to enhance policy coherence and implementation effectiveness.

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