

# JOURNEY TO EXTREMISM IN AFRICA EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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**JOURNEY TO EXTREMISM IN AFRICA:  
DRIVERS, INCENTIVES AND  
THE TIPPING POINT FOR RECRUITMENT**



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‘I am convinced that the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism.’

António Guterres  
*United Nations Secretary-General*

## FOREWORD

# Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa

The expanding reach and destructive consequences of violent extremism are among the major challenges to peace faced in today's world. In Africa, 33,300 fatalities are estimated to have been caused by extremism between 2011 and 2016, with related displacement and economic devastation contributing to among the worst humanitarian catastrophes ever seen on the continent. Violent extremism is also posing a direct and manifest challenge to the gains enjoyed by many countries over recent years, and threatens to stunt development outcomes for generations to come if left unchecked. The steep rise in violent extremist activity in Africa represents a significant threat to global security and development overall.

Development actors are uniquely placed within the overall response architecture for tackling violent extremism, and have an integral role to play in averting the threats posed by preventing and transforming it. Development expertise and resourcing can be leveraged to address structural drivers; to support communities in implementing deradicalization initiatives; and to help ensure that former members of violent extremist organizations are socio-economically reintegrated, among many other critical areas, many of which are explored in this report.

Many partners are already taking up the challenge with new programmes and initiatives, and wide-ranging Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) interventions. However, the question remains open as to how to most effectively respond. Collective reflection is needed on lessons that emerge from past and present interventions – not only on the development side, but also across the mainstream of counter-terrorism. To date, overall success is mixed at best, as insecurity continues to deepen. The challenges also demand a closer nexus between the security and development arms of government, and more integrated ways of working than has yet been achieved.

UNDP is leveraging its own long-established presence, partnerships and expertise to contribute to preventing the threat of violent extremist expansion across Africa. In 2015, we developed a bold Africa-wide initiative, Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa: A Development Approach, which works with national governments and stakeholders, regional institutions, faith-based institutions, civil society and many others to augment PVE interventions while also striving to contribute new understanding and knowledge. Through this programme, we are supporting national and regional partners to develop new strategic


responses that strike at the core of the conditions that are conducive to violent extremism. At the same time, we are working in other areas, such as in assisting religious leaders to develop curricula for the governance of religious institutions, and building bridges between security actors and communities to reduce distrust and mutual suspicion.

We know the drivers and enablers of violent extremism are multiple, complex and context-specific, while having religious, ideological, political, economic and historical dimensions. They defy easy analysis, and understanding of the phenomenon remains incomplete.

Undertaken as part of the UNDP Africa PVE programme, the *Journey to Extremism in Africa* study has been a complex two-year intervention explicitly designed to respond to knowledge and evidence gaps – building on our earlier work exploring perceptions on radicalization, violence and insecurity in the Sahel. Specifically, it aims to generate improved understanding about the incentives and drivers of violent extremism, as expressed by recruits to the continent’s deadliest groups themselves. Our team has travelled to remote areas of Africa to conduct the largest ever number of interviews with individuals who have been recruited by violent extremist groups.

Our intention has been to develop a picture of the typical ‘journey map’ to violent extremism: from childhood, through to the ‘tipping point’ for recruitment, and even on to demobilization. We have drawn on our expertise from across the organization to interpret the resulting dataset, and to identify where development actions can help build resilience.

We believe this study provides important findings about violent extremism in Africa with direct implications for policy and programming. The *Journey to Extremism* study assesses and suggests a reframing of some key aspects of existing responses, while confirming the relevance and need for deepening in other areas. I am delighted to invite you to read on, and to urge our collective focus and efforts to stem and transform violent extremism in Africa, towards sustainable development and peace.



Abdoulaye Mar Dieye  
Assistant Administrator and Director  
Regional Bureau for Africa, UNDP

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism in Africa is setting in motion a dramatic reversal of development gains and threatening to stunt prospects of development for decades to come. From 2011 to 2016, it caused 33,300 fatalities as well as widespread displacement, creating situations of pronounced and critical humanitarian need. The 2015 United Nations Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism urges the global community of states to pay closer attention to the root causes and drivers of violent extremism, after decades of overconcentration on militarized approaches.

The *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report represents a major output of UNDP Africa's Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa programme, which has set out since 2015 to provide leadership and support to national and regional partners in delivering development-focused and effective responses to the expanding crises associated with violent extremism across the continent.

Just as violent extremism profoundly impacts the attainment of development goals, so the search for solutions must also place development approaches at its centre. Still, the evidence base concerning the causes, consequences and trajectories informing violent extremism – and what works in preventing it – remains weak globally. This is particularly true in Africa when compared to other regions.

The UNDP Africa *Journey to Extremism* study represents a unique contribution towards creating precisely such an evidence base concerning the drivers and incentives

for recruitment in Africa. This study is drawn from an unprecedented number of interviews with former recruits from multiple violent extremist groups spanning the continent.<sup>1</sup> The research process was developed with the objective of understanding the dynamics of the recruitment process, from its initial conditions and factors, through to the 'tipping point' that triggered particular individuals to take the step of joining a violent extremist group where others did not. Analysis of these findings yields new insights into pathways for more effective policy and programming responses.

## ***Journey to Extremism in Africa: Key findings***

Starting with the 'accident of geography' that is place of childhood, experiences related to living in highly peripheral regions of Africa – often borderlands and traditionally marginalized regions – begin to shape individuals' worldview and vulnerability. Long-standing realities of 'centre/periphery' divides have, if anything, been exacerbated by the recent economic growth enjoyed overall in Africa. The vulnerabilities of communities living in such areas (macro- and meso-level factors) were, in the journeys to extremism of the individuals interviewed, refracted through micro-level experiences of early childhood. These included a relative lack of exposure to people of other religions and ethnicities. Perception of childhood happiness was lower among those who went on to join violent extremist groups within the sample. The critical factor in explaining childhood unhappiness that correlates with future extremism is perceived lack of parental involvement in the child's life. Further, in environments where overall levels of

literacy and education are low, individuals who later join violent extremist groups are found in this research to be particularly deprived in educational terms. Their experience of civic engagement in childhood was also low.

The findings also clearly differentiate between perceptions about religion and its significance as a reason for joining violent extremist groups, and actual religious literacy. Fifty-one percent of respondents selected religion as a reason for joining. However, as many as 57 percent of the respondents also admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts. Indeed, higher than average years of religious schooling appears to have been a source of resilience. These findings challenge rising Islamophobic rhetoric that has intensified in response to violent extremism globally, and demonstrate that fostering greater understanding of religion, through methods that enable students to question and engage critically with teachings, is a key resource for PVE. Further, feeling that 'religion is under threat' was found to be a common perspective among many respondents. This sounds a warning that recruitment by violent extremist groups in Africa, using religion as a touchstone for other context-based grievances, can readily expand.

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### Just as violent extremism profoundly impacts the attainment of development goals, so the search for solutions must also place development approaches at its centre

The *Journey to Extremism* research unequivocally underscores the relevance of economic factors as drivers of recruitment. The grievances associated with growing up in contexts where multidimensional poverty is high and far deeper than national averages, with the lived reality of unemployment and underemployment, render 'economic factors' a major source of frustration identified by those who joined violent extremist groups. This is a key dimension of individuals' vulnerability to narratives that invite them to channel such grievances and associated desperation into the cause of extremism. If an individual was studying or working, it emerged that that he or she would be less likely to become a member of an extremist organization. Employment is the single most frequently cited 'immediate need' faced at the time of joining. Individuals who joined but were studying or employed (not in vulnerable employment) at the time of joining the organization took longer to take the decision to join

than did counterparts either in vulnerable employment or unemployed. Respondents report uneven experiences in receiving salaries for being active members of violent extremist groups: some were paid above the local average, whereas at least 35 percent were not paid at all during their period of recruitment.

The research makes clear that a sense of grievance towards, and limited confidence in, government is widespread in the regions of Africa associated with the highest incidence of violent extremism. This may be an inevitable corollary of the life experience of growing up in the context of acute and relative multidimensional poverty, neglect and political marginalization affecting these areas. However, disaffection with government is highest by significant margins among the *Journey to Extremism* respondents who were recruited by violent extremist groups across several key indicators. These include: belief that government only looks after the interests of a few; low level of trust in government authorities; and experience, or willingness to report experience, of bribe-paying. Grievances against security actors, as well as politicians, are particularly marked, with an average of 78 percent rating low levels of trust in the police, politicians and military. Those most susceptible to recruitment express a significantly lower degree of confidence in the potential for democratic institutions to deliver progress or meaningful change. Meanwhile, positive experience of effective service provision is confirmed as a source of resilience: respondents who believed that governments' provision of education was either 'excellent' or 'improving' were less likely to be a member of a violent extremist group, within the sample.

The research specifically set out to discover what pushed a handful of individuals to join violent extremist groups, when many others facing similar sets of circumstances did not. This specific moment or factor is referred to as the 'tipping point'. The idea of a transformative trigger that pushes individuals decisively from the 'at-risk' category to actually taking the step of joining is substantiated by the *Journey to Extremism* data. A striking 71 percent pointed to 'government action', including 'killing of a family member or friend' or 'arrest of a family member or friend', as the incident that prompted them to join. These findings throw into stark relief the question of how counter-terrorism and wider security functions of governments in at-risk environments conduct themselves with regard to human rights and due process. State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse.



Forty-eight percent of respondents joined in less than a month from first contact with the organization in question, and 80 percent in less than a year. This speed of recruitment shows the depth of the vulnerability faced. Emotions of ‘hope/excitement’ and ‘being part of something bigger’ were high among those who joined, indicating the ‘pull’ of opportunity for radical change and rebellion against the *status quo* of circumstances that is presented by violent extremism. Despite the highly personal aspects of the journey to extremism, local community social networks were also influential. Indeed, the journey to extremism in Africa appears to rely significantly less heavily than in other regions on the Internet as a venue for recruitment.

The highly localized nature of recruitment that is suggested by the findings has important implications for response strategies and the search for solutions that are tailored to Africa’s circumstances. The research found that respondents who were aware of initiatives to prevent people from joining slowed down the pace of recruitment. Forty-eight percent of those who joined violent extremist groups were aware of PVE initiatives, however identified distrust of those delivering these programmes as one of the primary reasons for not taking part.

### **Responding to violent extremism in Africa: Policy and programming implications**

Africa faces a unique vulnerability to violent extremism that is shaped by persistent underdevelopment and incomplete peacebuilding and state-building in key regions. There are immense challenges faced by governments: in delivering peace and stability, and in ensuring that the pace and benefits of growth keep up with the expansion of the most youthful population in the world. Narratives of radical upheaval and change, which appeal to the multifaceted sense of grievance that may envelop an individual whose horizons promise no path for advancement, will continue to be attractive as long as underlying circumstances remain unaddressed. Where there is injustice, deprivation and desperation, violent extremist ideologies present themselves as a challenge to the *status quo* and a form of escape. The message is tailored by recruiters to suit different contexts as well as different types of individuals. Still, low levels of education and a reliance on intermediaries to interpret religion allows largely imported ideologies to serve as a lightning conductor for the frustration and anger that is the inevitable consequence of generations of socio-economic and political marginalization.

Grievances against government and state security actors are particularly pronounced among those most vulnerable to recruitment, who also express deep-seated scepticism about the possibility of positive change. The speed with which recruitment has to date been shown to take place by this research illustrates the ‘ripeness’ for recruitment of those who do make the journey, and hence the depth of Africa’s vulnerability. Although recruitment is largely highly localized, steadily increasing connectivity across Africa will enable recruitment to expand over time, perhaps leading to larger numbers of African foreign fighters joining theatres of conflict outside of their immediate environments. Indeed, there is a very real prospect of an even greater spread of violent extremism in Africa than has been witnessed in recent years, with further associated devastation and backsliding in development terms. This warrants concerted efforts both to guard against and transform it. The window for sustained action to prevent and respond to violent extremism is now.

#### ***I. Policy implications***

##### **Delivering on global human rights commitments and rights-based approaches to militarized and state-centric counter-terrorism responses**

The *Journey to Extremism* research provides startling new evidence of just how directly counter-productive security-driven responses can be when conducted insensitively. These findings suggest that a dramatic reappraisal of state security-focused interventions is urgently required, including more effective oversight of human rights compliance, rule of law and state accountability. Going forward, it is essential to long-term outcomes that international commitments – such as those shared across United Nations member states – to human rights and rule of law, citizens’ participation and protection, and accountability of state security forces be actively upheld by all. It is also critical to ensure that there are no counter-productive results from counter-terrorism, particularly in regard to civic participation. In the absence of ‘state legitimacy’, in the eyes of citizens living in high-risk areas, initiatives that focus exclusively on state capacity-building run the risk of perpetuating malign power structures, which are overt drivers of violent extremist recruitment in Africa.

### **Reinvigorating state legitimacy through improved governance performance and accountability**

The importance of state legitimacy to delivering peacebuilding and state-building objectives is well-established globally. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The research suggests that improved public policy and delivery of good governance by African governments confronted with violent extremism will ultimately represent a far more effective source of counter-terrorism and PVE than continued overconcentration on security-focused interventions. The *Journey to Extremism* findings call for a reinvigoration of commitment by states to upgrading the quality and accountability of institutions across service-delivery areas, at the national and sub-national levels, above all in at-risk areas. Deepening the democratic process and closely guarding its integrity, beyond the moment of elections, into a wider commitment to an inclusive social contract between government and citizens, as well as meaningful opportunities for civic engagement and participation in the national development agenda, are also highly relevant policy responses.

### **Connecting PVE with peacebuilding and sustainable development policy frameworks**

In addition to the critical importance of improved governance environments, the *Journey to Extremism* study underscores a spectrum of priorities and entry points along the journey of the individuals interviewed where different outcomes may have been achieved. These represent opportunities to directly influence and reduce further expansion of violent extremism in Africa. Indeed, accelerated implementation of the Transforming Our World: Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 that

includes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in at-risk areas would provide an important foundation for long-term resilience.

Following a wider convergence between security and development over the past decade, and as signalled by the 2015 United Nations Plan of Action and other related policy frameworks, there is now increasing high-level recognition of the importance of development approaches in tackling the root causes, drivers and consequences of violent extremism as they variously play out in different settings. Challenges persist in integrating institutional perspectives across security, peacebuilding and development arms of government. Streamlining responses and drawing on all relevant departments and capacities, ensuring responses to violent extremism are embedded and coordinated, must intensify to ensure comprehensive strategies and lasting results.

At the same time, even as the development dimensions of violent extremism are gaining higher recognition, key development partner governments have already reduced or are considering reductions in official development assistance (ODA) expenditure. This sets the scenario of the range of resources invested in building peace and amplifying development gains shrinking, even as military expenditure continues to grow. Pulling back international support for accelerating development progress in areas at-risk of violent extremism in Africa would be unconstructive in the extreme. African states must themselves leverage ODA as well as domestic resources more effectively for prevention and response efforts. Military solutions alone will not deliver. Development budgets must be protected and smart, targeted PVE programming expanded by national and international actors alike if lasting results are to be achieved.

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## Clarifying tiers of relevance between ODA and PVE

At present, the global context in which international development budgets are facing shrinkage has created a significant inducement for development programming in at-risk African contexts to be rebranded as PVE-related. This brings its own challenges. Observers have raised concerns about the ‘securitization of aid’. They have also flagged the potential pitfalls that may arise through framing development interventions as PVE in highly charged political contexts.

Further, as yet there is limited consensus on precisely how different types of development programmes actually deliver PVE results. Development interventions that have the building of more peaceful and inclusive societies as core objectives are important. While *conducive* in a generalized sense to reducing the scope for violent extremism, confusion between these and more immediate PVE goals should be avoided. There is a clear argument for protecting development interventions in at-risk environments while at the same time expanding PVE-specific programming. In order to inform and shape more targeted programmatic responses, greater understanding of what this means for policy and programming needs to be articulated and internalized across relevant government institutions. (The full *Journey to Extremism* report includes such a framework.)

## Coordinating national, regional and global policy responses to violent extremism

Finally, it is necessary that policy responses be coordinated more effectively across the expanding plethora of actors engaged. This means appropriate roles and responsibilities defined and distributed; common understanding of drivers and entry points for prevention and transformation debated and established; and a shared commitment to mutual peer review and constant improvement. At present, the PVE space is crowded with players often working with contrasting understanding of priorities.

The 2015 United Nations Plan of Action calls on each member state to ‘consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism which sets national priorities for addressing the local drivers of violent extremism and complements national counter-terrorism strategies where they already exist’. Such national planning processes should be inclusive, engaging a wide range of stakeholders. National plans provide a platform for convergence in understanding and prioritization, and efficient distribution of resources and capabilities across government agencies, international and civil society partners. Increasingly, there are also efforts to link national plans to the sub-regional level. This

responds to the invariably transboundary nature of violent extremist group activity, with some regional organizations beginning to develop their own strategies on PVE. In time, these can be linked again to the continent level and the African Union’s own related frameworks. International partners need to continue to work to find the most constructive mechanisms for supporting national and regional actors in this domain, taking care to coordinate among themselves.

## II. Programming implications

The *Journey to Extremism* research has shown that awareness of initiatives to prevent people from joining violent extremist groups does act as a factor influencing decision-making. However, a number of issues hampering the impact of some programmes can be observed and are hinted at in the research. These include issues of scale and resourcing, delivery modalities and the extent to which these prioritize implementers that are trusted locally, as well as responsiveness to actual incentives and drivers as experienced by affected individuals. Further, PVE programmes have tended to overlook gender dynamics and differences informing violent extremism at a number of levels.

Key programming entry points suggested by the research are as follows:

### Family circumstances, childhood happiness and education

- Supporting community-led outreach on good parenting, domestic violence and providing child-welfare services;
- Ensuring provision of education for all in at-risk areas (SDG 4), together with social protection interventions to ensure children’s sustained attendance at school;
- Upgrading school curricula and teaching quality, enabling the development of critical thinking, social cohesion, peace education and civic engagement values from childhood;
- Reducing the acute impoverishment, often relative in national terms, of areas such as those where the majority of the respondents grew up, with dedicated catch-up development programmes and commitments, and through accelerated and purposeful implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

## Religious ideologies

- Supporting and amplifying the voices of traditional religious leaders who challenge misinterpretations of Islam and preach religious tolerance and inter-faith cohesiveness;
- Providing opportunities for religious leaders to network and develop national and regional PVE strategies of their own;
- Investing in the development of community-led governance systems providing transparent and accountable leadership of religious affairs. Such systems should include mosque management, development and dissemination of curricula by religious preachers and *madrassas*, and engagement with parents on teaching content;
- Capitalizing on the important role that religious teaching can play as a source of resilience and supporting increased religious literacy among at-risk groups.

## Economic factors

- Investing in the economic regeneration of at-risk areas, upgrading infrastructure, access to markets and financial services, removing obstacles to entrepreneurship, and prioritizing job-creation opportunities;
- Providing immediate as well as long-term livelihood programmes and entrepreneurship training and schemes for at-risk youth, integrating citizenship values, life skills and social cohesion curricula into programme design;
- Working with demobilized former recruits to develop and communicate narratives designed to disincentivize at-risk groups regarding the economic opportunities of recruitment;
- Developing strategies that learn from the challenges of past disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes and successfully provide economic incentives and alternatives for violent extremist recruits – engaging wider communities so as to avoid being seen as ‘rewarding’ those recruited.

## State and citizenship

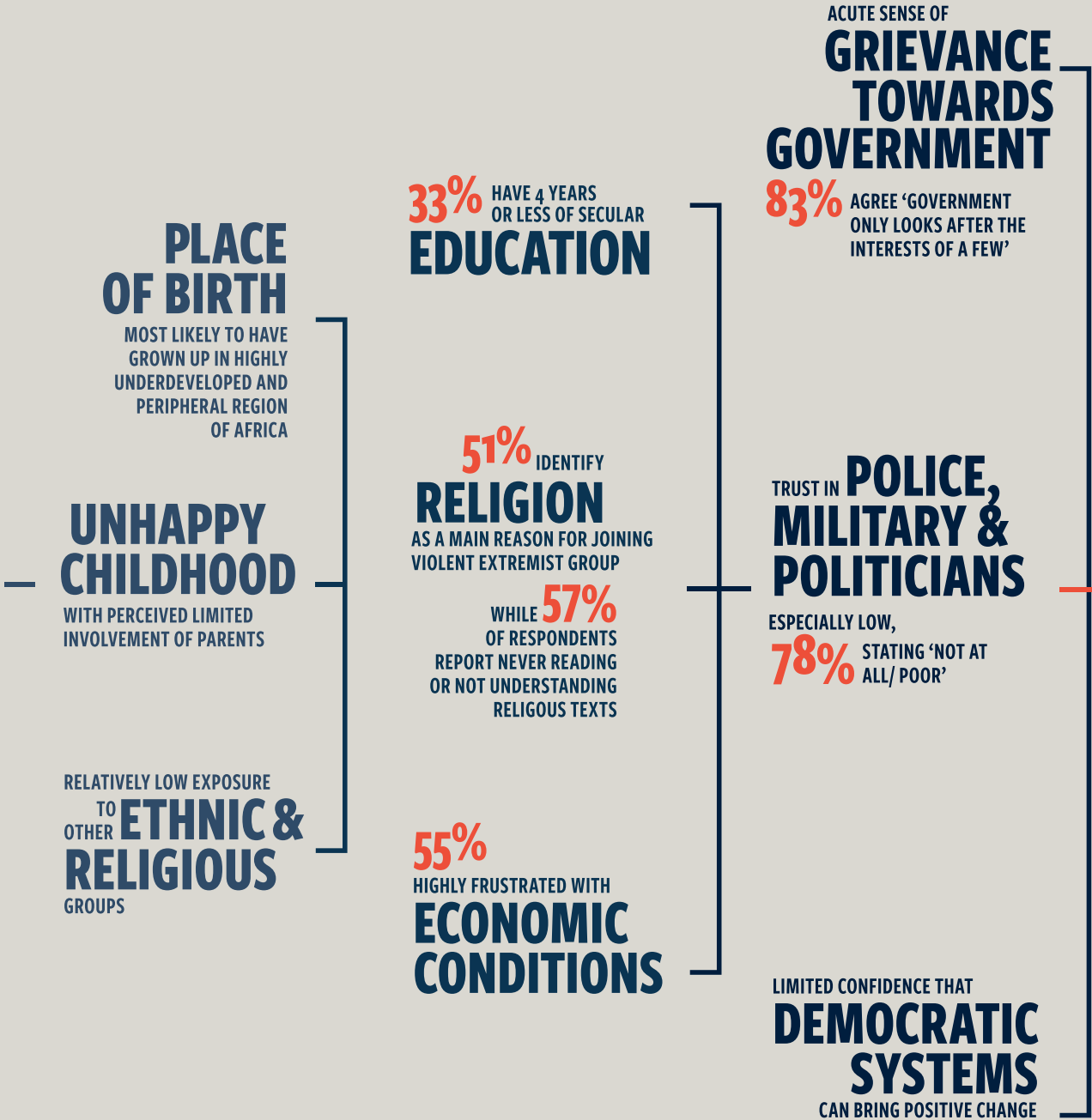
- Improving service delivery across the spectrum of security and other basic services provided by the state, integrating citizens’ oversight and engagement as part of delivery;
- Amplifying the effectiveness of anti-corruption campaigns with renewed emphasis on building state-citizen confidence and accountability, ending impunity for officials;
- Deepening democratic institutions and processes, and supporting related civic-education processes;
- Supporting initiatives to build national identities, social cohesion and citizenship.

## The ‘tipping point’

- Escalating the implementation of security-sector reform processes tailored to the specific challenges of violent extremism. These should be grounded in international humanitarian law, standards and rights-based approaches, integrating civic oversight and confidence-building mechanisms;
- Supporting community-led mentoring and trauma-counselling services;
- Implementing counter-messaging programmes that are highly contextualized in vernacular cultures, emphasizing peer-group factors and influences, and delivered through DVDs, SMS, radio and community centres, avoiding over-reliance on the Internet, and drawing on trusted local organizations as ‘messengers’;
- Scaling-up amnesty and other exit opportunities for disillusioned recruits, investing in comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration services;
- Leveraging the perspectives and voices of former recruits as conduits for counter-messaging.

# JOURNEY TO EXTREMISM IN AFRICA

As might be undertaken by an individual most at risk of recruitment by a violent extremist group in Africa, based on the key evidence produced by the *Journey to Extremism* project.





## EMPLOYMENT

SINGLE MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED IMMEDIATE NEED AT TIME OF JOINING

1 MONTH — 12 MONTHS

## TIPPING POINT

**71%** SAY GOVERNMENT ACTION TRIGGERED DECISION TO JOIN

6 MONTHS — 4 YEARS

## SPEED OF RECRUITMENT

FROM FIRST CONTACT WITH VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP IS EXTREMELY QUICK

**80%** WITHIN A YEAR     **48%** LESS THAN A MONTH

MOST LIKELY TO BE AGED BETWEEN

**17** AND **26**



## IF LEAVES

LIKELY DUE TO LOSING TRUST IN ORGANIZATION'S LEADERSHIP, OR NO LONGER AGREEING WITH THEIR ACTIONS OR IDEAS

REGRETS EVER HAVING JOINED





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