



### **POLICY BRIEF**

# Violent Extremism Definitions: From Official Ambiguity to Conceptual Clarity

Sameer Yadav Jigyasa Gulati Mridul Upadhyay



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## 0. About EU-funded Project ALLY and VE Redefine Initiative

The paper is a result of the exploration undertaken by Sameer Yadav and Jigyasa Gulati, two young peace researchers from the ALLY Project under the guidance of Mridul Upadhyay. This report was edited by Mridul Upadhyay.

ALLY Project was a 30-month program to amplify young people's constructive voices and agency in addressing diverse factors of violence and building peace in their communities in South Asia. Launched in March 2020, and implemented by UNOY Peacebuilders with a consortium of partners: Finn Church Aid/Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, Youth Development Foundation, Sri Lanka Unites, Youth for Peace International, Rural Development Society, and Centre for Communication and Development. ALLY Project aimed at supporting and amplifying the leadership of local youth in peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism by building their capacity and providing technical and financial assistance in their social action projects and advocacy endeavours.

As a part of this project, a group of Young Researchers also Fellow, conducted extensive research to understand the existing ambiguity around the definition of Violent Extremism to bring to light its implications for young peacebuilders and their work.

#### 1. Introduction

When the group of ALLY Researchers and Fellows were receiving their training on preventing violent extremism (PVE), the fundamental questions that would always arise during the discussions is; What is Violent Extremism (VE) exactly? What is the difference between countering and preventing violent extremism? How much PVE is part of the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda? Facilitators could only take support from some unofficial definitions, guidance from facilitators and their experiences as there exists no official definition, the ambiguity was evident from the facilitators' perspective as well. Furthermore, post the publication of ALLY Research Paper: Peace, My Heart, it was felt that several young peacebuilders who were interviewed faced challenges due

to the absence of a globally agreed definition, for instance, non-addressal of key root causes because of a multitude of overlapping efforts by different stakeholders. This led to further explorations and a few Fellows decided to understand and present this issue from young peacebuilders' lens. This paper mainly tries to address three questions:

- 1. How do policy-making institutions, i.e., UN bodies, Multilateral Donors, Governments of South Asian Countries, INGOs and Think Tanks define Violent Extremism (VE)? What do the variations among these definitions look like?
- **2.** What is young peacebuilding practitioners' perspective on definitions of VE?
- **3.** How can the ambiguity of these definitions be cleared from the perspective of young peace researchers?

### 2. Methodology

The paper is based on the Exploratory Research Design, a method developed for social science research by Robert A. Stebbins.¹ The chosen research design makes it appropriate to explore the **research questions** as well as to give enough room for new findings to emerge without any preconceived assumptions:

The paper is based on a two-fold approach to the qualitative research methods:

1. Desk Research: The research project began with desk research of existing definitions of Violent Extremism including both literature and an institutional review of 10 UN Agencies, 10 International Non-profit Organizations and Think Tanks, the European Union, the Commonwealth, and the USAID. This desk research is not exhaustive but extensive enough to map the nexus of various official and working definitions. To go a step deeper, the young researchers also attempted to conduct

**<sup>1</sup>** Stebbins, Robert A. Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences. Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage Publications, 2001.

similar desk research for four States of the South Asia Region (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) to build a contextual understanding of the region.

2. Interviews: Young Practitioners and Researchers are key stakeholders in any of the existing policies especially, on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. However, they are not considered partners but are only seen as either perpetrators or victims and are kept out of the decision-making processes. To fill this gap and bring voices of young people who are either working on the ground or researching violent extremism, the project researchers interviewed 70 young peacebuilders and five young peace researchers (the distinction between young peacebuilders and young peace researchers is made to highlight the diversity and the capacity in which they are engaging in the space, rather to create any hierarchy).

### **Positionality of Researchers**

For policy papers, the positionality of researchers is important since it not only directly influences how the research is carried out but also determines the prevailing results and outcomes.<sup>2</sup> This research is conducted by youth peace researchers who took a reflective approach to ensure a neutral position and present as much as possible an objective exploration free from biases and judgments. Their approach is also close to the objective because they hold no office of profit to suit any power stakeholder. Besides, they have conducted this research in a voluntary capacity and have even included the European Union (the funder of the project) in the scope of this research.

### 3. Summary of the Data Collected

#### 3.1 Demography of Interviewees (Youth Peacebuilders)

	Bangladesh	India	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Female	5	5	9	7
Male	12	4	10	13
Non-Binary	3	0	1	0
Total	20	9	20	20

#### 3.2 Stakeholders Reviewed and Status of Definition

- Total of 46 high-level stakeholders were reviewed inclusive of UN bodies, Multilateral Donors, Governments of South Asian Countries, INGOs and Think Tanks;
- Out of these only 7 organisations have officially defined Violent Extremism and these definitions also contradict with each other majorly;
- And six organisations have working definitions.
- For details, refer to Annexure-I.

## 3.3 Most Appropriate Definition Identified by the Young Researchers Based on Interviews

Search for Common Ground's Definition: Violent extremism relates to an individual or group's violent advancement of an exclusionary ideology, which seeks to eliminate the 'other' group, culture, or identity. The choices individuals make to use or support violence to advance a cause are based on exclusionary group identities. But the particular identity of the perpetrator of violence does not determine what constitutes violent extremism, nor does the nature of the ideology, even if that ideology may be considered radical by many.

The following points make the above-mentioned definitions favourable above all the other existing definitions reviewed for this paper:

The distinction between radicalization and VE - A distinction between radicalization and violent extremism provides more conceptual clarity. Accepting that not all exclusionary ideologies are violent even when they could be considered radical.

**<sup>2</sup>** The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research Researcher, Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide, Andrew Gary Darwin Holmes, School of Education, University of Hull, England, accessed at <a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5147-0761">https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5147-0761</a>



- Violent manifestation of extremism Recognizes VE as the violent manifestation of the act and thus, segregates it with all acts without the use of violence. However, it does not suggest what kind of violence is part of it. It could include terms from Galtung's work.
- Unbiased approach Unbiased in approach without favouring any one actor over the other and without emphasizing the interest or standpoint of the entity defining the term
- No prejudice for specific identity and belief the definition debunks inherited assumption based on any person's or group's identity that indulge in VE. Two key points to reflect on:
  - No specified criteria or nature (for instance, political, religious, etc.) of ideology and cause is stated except for being 'exclusionary' in nature. And thus, the onus lies on the individual or the group who chooses to use violence and not on the ideology and the identity of the perpetrator.
  - The same is represented in the objectives mentioned. It broadly refers to the elimination of the other groups including their culture and identity and not any specific political, or religious, among other criteria.
- **Applicability on the state** Use of neutral language that makes it applicable to all the actors including the state.
- Clear & specific terminology The meaning of all the words used in the definition is clearly stated without leaving scope for open interpretation. For instance, no use of words like 'extremist ideology' where the word extremist is open for interpretation.

#### 3.4 Analysis of Key Definitions Mapped

\*See page 6-8 for definitions chart

### 4. Key Insights from the Research

The key insights present the major themes that emerged from the desk research conducted about various institutional stakeholders (annexure for the mapping) and around 75 interviews conducted with peacebuilders (69) and peace researchers (six). The secondary research conducted over a span of a month helped in building a coherent understanding of the existing definitions of Violent Extremism along with how each institution sees the participation of young people. On the other hand, listening to young peacebuilders and researchers helped in understanding what they think and how they relate to these definitions. On the basis of these two sets of insights, the authors of the paper have tried to find the convergence (interlinks and gaps) in what definitions mean to young peacebuilders and researchers and how it shapes their work.

### **4.1** The Existing Complexity and Ambiguity of Violent Extremism Definition

There are multiple definitions of violent extremism as could be seen in the annexure however, in the opinion of young researchers, all exist with certain complex challenges that hamper the purpose for which they are made. Thus, being 'non-consensual and biased' is the first issue to highlight.

The United Nations leaves the definition of VE as the 'prerogative of states'. But none of the four South Asian states analyzed for this paper has defined VE. For instance, Pakistan interchangeably uses terrorism and counter-extremism, resulting in a great overlap in policies made to address two diverse phenomena. This leads to several issues as listed in point 4.3.

Most of the definitions covered for this paper include or emphasize one or the other factor based on the beliefs of the entity they come from that affects its effectiveness and applicability. For instance, as per Task Force of USIP definition, VE is a form of violent conflict in which people "espouse, encourage, and perpetrate violence as they seek to [replace]

existing political [or social] institutions with a new political [or social] order governed by [an absolutist and totalitarian] doctrine that denies individual liberty and equal rights to citizens who identify differently." The emphasis on 'individual liberty' and 'equal rights' are values honoured by certain states. This limits the applicability of the definition by limiting it to specific contexts. Further, without contextual understanding, it could delegitimise differentiated cultures and political processes such as Central Asia.

S.N.	Stakeholder	Type of Definition	Definition	Differenti- ating VE & Radicalism	Violent Man- ifestation of Extremism	Unbiased Approach	No Prejudice Based on Identity	Applicability on the State	Clear & Specific Ter- minology
1	UNGA & UNOCT	Working	"Definitions of "terrorism" and "violent extremism" are the prerogative of Member States and must be consistent with their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law. Just as the General Assembly has taken a practical approach to counter terrorism through the adoption by consensus of the United Nations Global Counter- Terrorism Strategy, this Plan of Action pursues a practical approach to preventing violent extremism, without venturing to address questions of definition." <sup>3</sup>	X	X	X	X	X	X
2	UNDP	Working	Violent extremism refers to beliefs and actions of people or groups who support or use violence to achieve idealogical, religious or political goals, including terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and sectarian violence.4	х	<b>√</b>	х	х	х	Х
3	European Union	Working (OSCE)	Generally refers to acts of violence that are justified by or associated with an extremist religious, social, or political ideology. The concept of violent extremism is broader and more expansive than terrorism, because it accommodates any kind of violence, as long as its motivation is deemed extremist. <sup>5</sup>	х	✓	✓	х	х	х
4	USAID	Official	Violent extremism refers to advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, political, or religious objectives.6	х	<b>√</b>	х	х	х	х

**<sup>3</sup>** UNGA. "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism Report of the Secretary-General." Documents-Dds-Ny.un.org, 24 Dec. 2015, <u>documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/456/22/PDF/N1545622.pdf?OpenElement.</u>

<sup>4</sup> UNDP. Frontlines Young People at the Forefront of Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism United Nations Development Programme. May 2019.

**<sup>5</sup>** OSCE. A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism a Guidebook for Central Asia. Mar. 2020.

**<sup>6</sup>** USAID. Policy for Coungtering Violent Extremism through Development Assistance. Apr. 2020.



S.N.	Stakeholder	Type of Definition	Definition	Differenti- ating VE & Radicalism	Violent Man- ifestation of Extremism	Unbiased Approach	No Prejudice Based on Identity	Applicability on the State	Clear & Specific Ter- minology
5	International Alert	Unofficial/ Working	Alert approaches violent extremism from a multidimensional, context-specific perspective. The organisation explores the different social, political and individual drivers of conflict at a local level, which create a vacuum to which extremist groups respond. We look at the vulnerability factors that are created by dynamics such as disruptive social contexts, deprivation of personal needs, poor economic opportunities, failures in governance, and breakdowns in community and citizen-state relationships. We explore the relationships within and between these different factors to build an understanding of why people choose to fight and, critically, what builds resilience among the majority. <sup>7</sup>	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
6	Counter Extremism Project	Official	Extremism is the holding of extreme political or religious views, often advocating illegal, violent, or other forms of extreme behaviour. Extremism is considered by many to be a necessary condition of terrorism. In many cases, terrorist groups require their adherents to adopt extremist and intolerant worldviews to dehumanize, persecute, kill, or oppress dissidents and opponents. Often, the victims of extremism are political, religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Extremism is often divided into two categories: violent extremism and non-violent extremism. Violent extremism is used to describe movements that endorse certain forms of violence (including terrorist violence) to pursue an extremist ideological agenda.8	X	✓	✓	x	x	X
7	Alliance for Peacebuild- ing	Official	Violent Extremism is the use of violence to shape society according to a particular set of political or religious beliefs. (previously available on the website).	х	<b>√</b>	х	х	х	х

<sup>7</sup> International Alert, and KMYA. WE DON'T TRUST ANYONE STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS as the KEY to REDUCING VIOLENT EXTREMISM in KENYA. Sept. 2016.

Counter Extremism Project. Glossary. www.counterextremism.com/glossary.

S.N.	Stakeholder	Type of Definition	Definition	Differenti- ating VE & Radicalism	Violent Man- ifestation of Extremism	Unbiased Approach	No Prejudice Based on Identity	Applicability on the State	Clear & Specific Ter- minology
8	USIP	Official	A form of violent conflict in which people "espouse, encourage, and perpetrate violence as they seek to [replace] existing political [or social] institutions with a new political [or social] order governed by [an absolutist and totalitarian] doctrine that denies individual liberty and equal rights to citizens who identify differently."	х	<b>✓</b>	х	х	х	✓
9	Hedayah	Official	The beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, religiously-based or political objectives. 10	х	<b>√</b>	х	х	х	х
10	Institute for Strategic Dialogue (under Youth- Can)	Official	Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based "in-group" over all "out-groups", and promotes a dehumanising "othering" mindset that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their world view. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike. <sup>11</sup>	х	х	✓	х	✓	<b>√</b>

**<sup>9</sup>** USIP. Final Report of the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States - Preventing Extremism in Fragile States - a New Approach. Feb. 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Hedayah, and Search for Common Ground. Countering Violent Extremism: An Introductory Guide to Concepts, Programming, and Best Practices Adapted for the Central Asian Region. 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Comerford, Milo, and Sasha Havlicek. Mainstreamed of Prevention Extremism and the Future. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021.



### **4.2 The Engagement of Young Peace Practitioners with Violent Extremism Definitions**

The young peace practitioners are either unaware of the complexity of definitions or are reluctant to engage since they don't feel these definitions represent their experience and are useful for their work on PVE.

- Non-inclusion of youth and their experiences Most young peace practitioners mentioned that they don't know about these definitions primarily because they have never been adequately included by the structures and institutions in the design of the definition or implementation of initiatives based on these definitions. It is primarily because young people are considered a part of the problem (perpetrators) or people who need assistance (victims). This also ignores the efforts of young people in prevention and countermeasures.
- Reluctance to engage Even when young peacebuilders know these definitions, they found many of these to be non-applicable to their context (for instance, definitions developed for fragile states that don't really apply to South Asian Context). Further, the inherited bias of definitions and the demands of major stakeholders to still abide by the same hinders the liberty and creativity that a young practitioner could imply in finding the relevant solution that ultimately makes them reluctant to engage.
- **Complexity of definitions** For young peace practitioners, it is also difficult to understand the bulk and the spread of various definitions since it's hard to find all conveniently and apply them in their work. There is also no comprehensive document that provides an overview of all definitions. Thereby, most of them go ahead with the first and usually one of the most commonly available definitions.

### **4.3 The Implications of the Chaos of Violent Extremism Definitions**

In the opinion of young researchers and practitioners, the ambiguity of definitions creates multiple implications at various levels from international and national to local. Major implications are:

Misuse by entities – With no clear understanding and definition of VE, states have been utilizing various laws and policies to silence dissent in the name of addressing VE. As the UN special rapporteur on counter terrorism has pointed out, some states have misused poorly defined concepts outlined in the plan of action "to suppress political opposition or ideological dissent from mainstream values". 12 An example cited by a young peacebuilder was of the Unlawful Activity and Protection Act (UAPA) in India which has led to the arrest of many journalists and social activists. According to the data the Union Home Ministry tabled in the Indian Parliament in February 2021, only 2.2 per cent of cases registered under the UAPA between the years 2016-2019 ended in convictions by the courts. 13

### Overlap in measures and non-addressal of root causes

- With the lack of conceptual clarity, a broad spectrum of initiatives falls under Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). For instance, confusing preventing violent extremism with general peacebuilding or prevention of violence. Further, it leads to overlap and repetition of efforts by different actors. It could be observed even at the top-level measures. "Even within the UN system there are significant discrepancies: for instance, the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate and the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism use the terms 'CVE' and 'PVE' respectively, despite sharing a relatively homogenous understanding of the steps necessary to diminish the threat of violent extremism(VE). Both

<sup>12</sup> Special Rapporteurs. "Do Not Criminalize Extreme Views – UN Special Rapporteur on Counterterrorism." OHCHR, 15 Mar. 2016, <a href="https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/03/do-not-criminalize-extreme-views-un-special-rapporteur-counterterrorism.">www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/03/do-not-criminalize-extreme-views-un-special-rapporteur-counterterrorism.</a> Accessed 27 May 2023.

**<sup>13</sup>** Alam, Mahtab. "Tripura Riots and the Misuse of UAPA." Deccan Herald, 9 Nov. 2021, <a href="https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/tripura-riots-and-the-misuse-of-uapa-1048718.html">www.deccanherald.com/opinion/tripura-riots-and-the-misuse-of-uapa-1048718.html</a>. Accessed 27 May 2023.

agencies also occasionally conflate these appellations as P/CVE, exemplifying the inconsistency in the application of terminology".<sup>14</sup>

Operational challenges – With a lack of clarity on what needs to be resolved and how, it becomes <u>difficult to identify the outcomes with concrete monitoring and evaluation frameworks</u>, further leading to long-term unindented consequences and ineffective projects. The point is relevant in both national and international contexts.

Dispersal and wastage of resources – With a broad spectrum of measures falling under PVE, the limited resources and funds get dispersed to multiple measures like education and employment that may not directly address VE. We know that the policy panic has driven policy and programmatic approaches that view education and employment as stand-alone solutions to the problem of youth participation in violence or recruitment into violent extremism, despite the lack of supporting evidence. The most visible wastage of resources is the amount of money spent on CVE measures. Even after decades of excessive spending on CVE, we have only witnessed a rise in VE.

#### 5. Recommendations

Based on interviews and the desk research conducted, Young researchers of this paper found the following to be essential to discuss Violent Extremism to make it inclusive and less complicated especially, for young peace practitioners who constantly engage with VE in their various capacities. These points are compiled below as a set of recommendations that could be adopted by stakeholders such as young peace practitioners, policymakers, states and CSOs, among others.

- 1. Assimilate youth peacebuilders' perspective to make PVE work more inclusive and effective. By viewing the problem of extremist violence using the broader and more neutral lens of conflict prevention, peacebuilders can help extract a deeper understanding of the drivers of violent extremism.<sup>16</sup>
- 2. VE needs to be defined clearly at the international level and then states should be given the flexibility to contextually define it at the national level but as per strict pre-determined parameters. International SDGs and their national target & indicators framework are exemplary examples to refer to. This will help surpass the deadlock due to international politics.
- **3.** Components of Potential Definition of VE: Firstly, the definition of Search for Common Ground should be referred to guide the drafting of proposed definitions. Furthermore, the essential components of the VE definition are as follows:
- Should be inclusive of the perspective of various marginalised groups.
- Should categorically exclude groups that have radical views but are non-violent. For example, the Gandhian Indian freedom movement was radical but not violent and was an important milestone for the positive development of the country and region.
- Should be neutral and not biased for or against any specific stakeholder. It should not withhold any inherited assumption based on any person's or group identity who indulges in VE.
- Should list a few key and specific drivers of Violent Extremism and restrict the scope of PVE programs limited to addressing those drivers only.
- Should use only those worlds in the definition that are clearly defined previously without leaving scope for open or misinterpretation.

**<sup>14</sup>** Wallner, Claudia. The Contested Relationship between Youth and Violent Extremism Assessing the Evidence Base in Relation to P/CVE Interventions. Feb. 2021 (page 51).

**<sup>15</sup>** Identical letters dated 2 March 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, accessed at <a href="https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1477559">https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1477559</a>

**<sup>16</sup>** Holmer, Georgia. "Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective." USIP, 2013.



- Should be binding/applicable to the states as well. If it binds all states and not just labels or focuses on individuals/groups or a few states like the present time, then all member states would agree to bring consensus as it will create a joint liability against the individual or small group liability.
- Keywords to be included othering, dehumanizing, non-physical violence, etc.

### 6. Annexure

S.N.	Stakeholder	Official Definition?	Working Definition?
1	UNGA & UNOCT	No	<u>Yes</u>
2	UNDP	No	<u>Yes</u>
3	UNESCO	No	<u>Yes</u>
4	UNFPA	No	No
5	UNHCR	No	No
6	UN-Peacebuilding Support Office	No	No
7	UN Women	No	No
8	UNICEF	No	No
9	UNODC	No	No
10	UNV	No	No
11	European Union	No	No
12	The Commonwealth	No	No
13	USAID	<u>Yes</u>	No
14	Kofi Annan Foundation	No	No
15	Search for Common Ground	<u>Yes</u>	No
16	The Asia Foundation	No	No
17	Peace Direct	No	No
18	International Alert	No	<u>Yes</u>
19	Promundo, US	No	No
20	Berghof Foundation	No	No
21	Mercy Corps	No	No
22	Counter Extremism Project	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
23	United Network of Young Peacebuilders	No	No
24	Alliance for Peacebuilding	No	N/A

S.N.	Stakeholder	Official Definition?	Working Definition?
25	Global Network of Women Peace- builders (GNWP)	No	No
25	FCA- Network of Religious and Tradi- tional Peacemakers	No	No
27	The Prevention Project	No	No
28	ICAN - International Civil Society Action Network	No	No
29	Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), UK	No	No
30	United States Institute of Peace (USIP)	No	<u>Yes</u>
31	Program on Extremism, George Wash- ington University	No	No
32	Hedayah	No	<u>Yes</u>
33	RAND Corporation	No	No
34	Resolve Network (project working under USIP)	No	No
35	Organization for Security and Co-op- eration in Europe (OECD)	No	<u>Yes</u>
36	Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security	No	No
37	International Peace Institute	No	No
38	Brookings Institute	No	No
39	Global Centre on Cooperative Security	No	No
40	Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Youth- Can)	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
41	Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)	No	No
42	Pak Institute for Peace Studies	No	No
43	State of Bangladesh	No	No
44	State of India	No	No
45	State of Pakistan	No	No
46	State of Sri Lanka	No	No
47	Australia	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
48	Canada	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
49	USA	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
50	Norway	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
51	Sweden	<u>Yes</u>	N/A
52	UK	<u>Yes</u>	N/A