



Effectiveness of Community-Led Approaches in Countering Terrorism in Northern Kenya

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Abstract: *Since the terrorist attacks in 1998, the government of Kenya has adopted law enforcement-led counterterrorism with human rights organizations questioning its validity. Scholars have consistently proposed different initiatives. This study explores the effectiveness of community-led approaches to counterterrorism with a special focus on North Eastern Kenya. A qualitative approach was used in this study with the target population being the residents of Garissa County because of previous terrorist attacks that targeted the area. The study found that family or community members can raise alarm at early stages since recruitment begins at the community. The relationship between police and community members is an important factor in the debate on the role of the community in countering terrorism. The implications of the study findings contribute to the growing debate on the role and effectiveness of community-led initiatives in counterterrorism.*

Keywords: *Counter Terrorism, Community, Initiatives, North Eastern, Effectiveness*

How to cite this work (APA):

Onyari, J. A. Effectiveness of Community-Led Approaches in Countering Terrorism in Northern Kenya. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 7(4), 58 – 64. <https://doi.org/10.59765/lvth3496>.

1. Introduction

On 2nd April 2015 four gunmen attacked Garissa University killing people mainly, innocent students. This terrorist incident provided more evidence that Kenyan authorities lack the capacity to control the country's 700-kilometer border with Somalia and guarantee the safety of its inhabitants and visitors (Bar, 2016). Such attacks contribute to Kenya being ranked at 48, though the impact of terrorism generally remains very low (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). Although it did not surprise many, the Somali-based terrorist group, Al-Shabaab, announced their motivation for carrying out the attacks attributing it to Kenya's decision to send troops to Somalia. Immediately, the government responded to the attacks using various ways including excessive force, arbitrarily arresting people from their homes and detaining many without trial within Garissa, Wajir and Mandera counties. Human Rights Watch in a study found that the military was actively involved in raiding homes and compounds to arrest people who were allegedly suspected of links with the armed Islamist group, Al-Shabab. However, months and in some cases over a year, later, suspects had not been charged with any crimes and

families would not locate them. This gave rise to debate on whether Kenya can try another approach to countering terrorism or improving its security.

This study is conducted at a time when global deaths from terrorism have reduced compared to ten years ago (IEC, 2023). The reports demonstrate that violent conflicts remain a key driver of terrorism and regions in conflicts are deadlier than attacks in peaceful regions (Oji, & Afolabi, 2022; IEC, 2023). This explains why there have been many terrorist cases in Northeastern or why the region has become synonymous with terrorism (Otiso, 2009). The interest in exploring further solutions to countering terrorism in the region has witnessed more and more research. For example, in his Doctoral dissertation, Laktabai (2020) investigated the use of a Geographic Information System (GIS), a computer system to assess the risk of terrorism in Garissa County. The first gap has to do with how security is still viewed as the province of the state. This reality is problematic because it fails to recognize how the state's monopoly on security is under attack.

The study recognizes efforts by the government of Kenya in countering extremism and terrorism mainly emanating from Somalia. Cannon (2016) explores the efficacy of border walls, particularly Kenya's wall with Somalia and notes that the walls rarely accomplish stated goals, and this may reignite border disputes and separate communities in Kenya. While it is evident Somalia-based terrorism is targeting Kenya, literature confirms that democratic countries like Kenya are always the target of transnational terrorism (Li, 2005; Avdan & Gelpi, 2012). Avdan and Gelpi (2017) in a study of border barriers and the transnational flow of terrorist violence note that border fencing doesn't prevent terrorism flow. However, the report that border fencing is effective at solving other policy problems, such as illegal migration or the flow of illicit drugs. This is supported by Garces (2005) who studied the link between drugs and terror in Colombia reporting that drugs are the main sources of income to terror groups. In fact, increasingly, studies are beginning to study drugs, organized crime, and terrorism as the new threats to global security, demonstrating the level of relatedness among these issues (De Andres, 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Counter-terrorism strategies adopted by the Government of Kenya

Anti-terrorism act defines measures meted to anyone engaging in terrorism activities, "A person who carries out a terrorist act commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding thirty years". Although Kenya established an institution that addressed terrorism issues, recent reports list several factors such as uneven coordination, resource constraints, insufficient training, corruption, and unclear command and control continue to hinder effectiveness of counterterrorism in the country. In fact, the Kenya National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) has been collaborating with private security companies to prevent soft target attacks, but the private security might not have adequate training to monitor suspected terrorist individuals (Mkutu & Sabala, 2007). Furthermore, private firm's officers lack weapons that match terrorism and hence have continued to be soft targets. For example, on several occasions, most private security firm guards had suffered bullet wounds (East African Standard, January 4, 2007).

To demonstrate its capability in addressing further terrorist attacks, the NCTC established county action plans for countering violent extremism (CVE) in all 47 counties to further implement its national strategy to counter violent extremism. While County Action Plans continued to be the primary framework for international CVE programming at the local level, implementation of action plans in many counties remained hampered by a lack of funding. Police in Nairobi, coastal, and north

eastern counties participated in community engagement training and early warning and response programs. According to Open Society Foundation (2013) in a report a successful counterterrorism strategy is one that requires regional security cooperation that combats terrorism, and it becomes important to recognize communities in Kenya and Somalia who often share similar demographic characteristics.

Furthermore, one of the areas that has been ignored by security agencies is not only incorporating communities in its counterterrorism activities; but allowing the communities to lead in the process. The prevention Project on Organizing Against Extremism recognizes the need to have a comprehensive and strategic approach that empowers local actors and focuses more attention on community-led interventions to address underlying drivers of the phenomenon is required in a study of community-based counterterrorism, Spalek, and Weeks (2017) note that "Constrained by legal frameworks, governments are increasingly looking to partner with communities in their counterterrorism efforts". Huq (2017) concurs with Spalek and Weeks that attention now should be on community-led counterterrorism which presents an untapped opportunity, even as it raises new and difficult ethical questions for both Muslim minority communities in the West, as well as liberal democracies. A notable case is presented by Briggs, (2010) in the study of community engagement for counterterrorism in the United Kingdom (UK). He pointed to an increasing focus in the UK who called for an overhaul in its working styles, and favoured people rather than projects, and the need to draw a much clearer line between downstream and targeted 'Prevent' work and the broader and longer-term community development work.

The debate on the role of community-led counterterrorism continues to receive global attention. For example, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), offers grants to community-led counterterrorism initiatives, According to Koser, and Cunningham (2016), such funding recognizes challenges that local communities have in accessing resources in three ways. Firstly, local actors lack the appropriate networks to tap into funds. They frequently lack the awareness or ability to reach funding, which is frequently disbursed through states, donor agencies or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Secondly, even when able to access funds, community initiatives often are not able or eligible to receive funds, due to varied restrictions and organizational requirements such as monitoring and evaluation programs. Thirdly, there exists a lack of trust between local communities and potential grantors, whether they be the state, NGOs, or foreign donors.

2.2 Theoretical Explanation

Why terrorists exist and their motivations have been studied by academics from several fields, including

Political Science (Hoffman, 1998), History (Lewis, 2003), and Psychology (Stout, 2002). Within the paradigm of rational choice, terrorist preference development requires more consideration. The evolutionary game model developed by Arce and Sandler in 2003 provides a great illustration of the circumstances in which moderate members of a community adopt extremist preferences to fit in with the extremist group. In this study, rational choice causes of terrorism view terrorism as a logical political choice among alternative actions (Crenshaw, 1990). Rational choice explanations help us to understand the circumstances surrounding terrorist decisions to choose violence. For example, community members aiding terrorism favours them to undertake their terrorist activities without notice.

Violent acts promise terrorists certain benefits as well, which are reflected graphically within the demand curves. Additional terrorist attacks are assumed to provide terrorists with relatively decreasing benefits, as societies learn to better react to terrorist acts and to decrease the impact of these attacks. According to Martha Crenshaw, people do, in fact, weigh costs and benefits rationally, and terrorism is purposefully chosen over other operational options because it is thought to be the best way to advance various interests and realize specific socio-political objectives (Crenshaw, 1981). The benefits outweigh the costs in this case. Considering that terrorist individuals operate in communities; these benefits are likely to be reduced if every member of the community activates their network. Carson, and Sabol, (2012) note that people involved in this terrorism consider the threat of sanctions when deciding on whether to engage in illegal behavior.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in the Lamu West sub-county, one of the two sub-counties in Lamu County. It is located Northern coast of Kenya. Lamu County borders Kilifi County in the Northeastern, Garissa County to the North, and the Northeastern part of Somalia. The Sub- County had been selected because of its unique topography which favors insurgency and terrorism as it borders Somalia, a region regarded as home to the terrorist group, Al Shabaab (Arslan, Mohamed, & Cetinkaya, 2022). The study area has also been selected because of Western tourists who had been targeted by the terrorist group and continue to face similar challenges. A descriptive research design was used to examine the effectiveness of community-led strategy to counter terrorism in Kenya, particularly in the Lamu West sub-county. The study adopted a census method where all members of a population are analyzed and for this study, all the 43 study participants were considered for the study.

This study used ethnographic methods including in-depth interviews with key informants. In-depth interviews conducted with the informant begin with a small number of introductory questions that proceeds in

whichever direction that allows the informant to speak most meaningfully to the research questions with concrete and personal details (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). Thus far, we have carried out more than 30 in-depth interviews in various areas of Garissa County with purely community leaders, /advocates, parents and youths (aged 18 years and above). Each interview was transcribed, coded and is being analyzed using fields notes to yield themes (Charmaz, 2006). The findings are presents narratives of the field notes in a qualitative approach.

The data collection selected by the study considered the sensitive nature of the topic which required research assistants to be recruited and trained on handling such research fields. In this case, the data collection was purely anonymous or confidential and researcher communicated this clearly to respondents. Anonymity means that no identifying information is collected, whereas confidentiality means that the respondent's identity is known but kept private.

Microsoft Word was used for thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the online survey. This software was selected for the qualitative analysis because it gave the researcher the ability to view all of the qualitative data at once, conduct a thematic analysis using color-coded themes and the highlight feature, and further use the control find feature to look for specific words or phrases (Lester, Cho, & Lochmiller, 2020). Prior to starting the coding and theme categorization stage, the researcher became familiar with the data and took brief notes on any viewpoints that became clear in order to make sure that crucial facts were not overlooked. To ensure that any final findings were reached after in-depth analysis and interpretation of the qualitative results.

4. Results and Discussion

The study findings presented are based on data collected from residents of Garissa County who are perceived to be the most targeted area by terrorism recruitment. Previous studies have identified various counterterrorism strategies adopted despite recurrent cases of terrorism in Kenya and East African countries. The present study explores the effectiveness of community-led approach in counter terrorism. In literature, the notion that communities are effective counterterrorism tool attracts controversy and intense debate (Spalek, 2012). Why attention is shifting to the community is the argument that terrorists are rational individuals who calculate cost and benefit of their actions before carrying out their terrorism activities (Anderton, & Carter, 2005; Perry & Hasisi, 2017; Carson, Dugan, & Yang, 2020). Whether this approach acts as deterrence to further terrorist attacks is something to be subjected to intense scholarly research. For now, the study attempts to shift Kenya's focus to the community considering their position in the counterterrorism debate. As argued by Jones (2019), the community-led approach is effective in tracking down

terrorist and any other anti-social behaviour in the community.

4.1 Prevention of Terrorism

The history of terrorism in Kenya has reshaped since major attacks in 1998 during the bombing of United States of America (USA) Embassy in Nairobi (Mogire, & Mkutu Agade, 2011; Kamau, 2006). To many, the government has tended to rely to much on security-led approach in countering violent extremist and other terrorism activities. This study presents findings showing why community-led could be effective mainly in a community whose shared interests revolves around religion, culturally connected and driven by ethnic leadership (Kirui, & Mwaruvie, 2012). In order to offer deeper understanding on effectiveness of community-led approach, the study asked study participants to share their experiences whether since the start of the fight against terrorism and extremism the community had been ignored by the government.

The results highlighted that the majority of participants were generally in agreement, with only a small number of participants expressing more opposing views. For example, one participant perceives counterterrorism is the role of the security officers but again the community can be effective because they can alert authorities:

KII2: Our community doesn't participate in any way because we believe it is the work of the police to protect us. But I believe if people in the community are asked to work together with police, it can help in reducing this problem of terrorism. Our people can help the government because the people who are always attacking people might be within us.

Some other participants had contrary opinion regarding their participation in counterterrorism activities:

KII4: No, the government has been coming here requesting that we assist them identify suspected individuals trying to join the terror groups. We have done that, but the challenge is when they turn against us as witnesses to something we are not comfortable with. But I cannot say we have worked together fully.

One of the themes emerging from qualitative analysis is the perceived fear of information handling by security officers. It seems this has been impediment in the fight against terrorism as community may withhold crucial information that could help security officers track down suspected terrorists. Participants shared the experiences that their interaction with police officers in the region is not well. Several participants indicated having strained relationship with law enforcement because police turn to the community members. The following descriptions depict how each participant dealt with the theme:

KII1: I don't think people here can offer to give information to the security officers because they are not sure about the security. Also, the way the police or military are treating people here, might shy away fearing being victimized.

Another added that their greatest fear is the time police take to respond to their messages or reports of individuals suspected of engaging in terrorist activities. Accordingly, there are notable cases of failure of prosecution, suggesting the return of the suspected terrorist to the community:

KII2: I have come across few cases of residents here helping police arrest terrorist suspects. One man here reported some youths to police, and were arrested by police but few days, the same youths were in the villages. If the police could trust us, I am sure cases of terrorism would be reduced but this thing of someone must produce evidence.

4.2 Early Warning Systems

Although it has widely been associated with the fight against conflicts, the concept of early warning systems is now finding its way in the counterterrorism debate. According to Nyheim, (2015) early warning system involves regular and organized collection and analysis of open-source information on violent conflict situations. Based on these descriptions, it would be right to say that with proper training and support community members can perfectly help detect incidences at early stages. However, the effectiveness of community-led strategies is either hindered by the inefficiency of individual security officers or how community members present evidence on the information about suspected terrorists. A participant shared his frustrating experience over the manner in which law enforcement responded in a case involving suspected individuals who were seen within the community:

KII3: I personally did that when I saw some 5 strange people in our area but due to too many questions by the police, their late action did not materialize as the people had moved. Yes, unless police take seriously what people like us tell them, the community will just remain bystanders in this war of terrorism. Terrorists are not animals who do not understand other people's behaviours. They are sharp people who monitor any visitors and also police presence within their surroundings and that is why police should take community members seriously and avoid too many questions.

Improving the government's effectiveness in the fight against terrorism depends on the relationship between law enforcement and community members. Most study participants strongly believe that a shift to approach that

places police and the community in a common effort to control terrorist and criminal violence in the region. This approach is consistent with the one taken by police forces in the United States and Western Europe that emphasizes basic law enforcement and community outreach (Perito & Parvez, 2014). Participants see law enforcement working alone as hindrance to counterterrorism because they have adequate knowledge about the local residents:

KII1: I believe in most cases; police keep distance from the community members and this is affecting how they operate in cases where there are terrorist attacks. It will limit the engagement between both of us. And that is why young people are recruited from this community. If police walk around with guns harassing people, the people will always run away from them or talk to them to allow us to attend to our daily businesses.

Furthermore, participants were asked to share their experiences on overall security agencies' approach to countering terrorism and whether it has yielded fruits. In fact, some noted that most residents feel as if the police target anyone who is from the community and that is why they are not willing to cooperate with law enforcement. To build a productive community engagement program, police departments need to work towards overcoming the mistrust of law enforcement agencies that community members might have:

KII1: Yes, it can make people shy away from even coming close to them. The way they communicate or talk to us scares us a lot. No one can dare go close to them and this is why I am saying their presence can be good or bad. Imagine the way some of them look at you as if you are one of the terrorists. This is not encouraging at all. I mean, how do you expect a youth to talk to police officers who don't talk to them politely.

KII2: It is true, the way they walk around here with guns and 'rungus' scares people. There were instances when they stormed into the pool table room where many people were playing and all of a sudden, started beating everyone over an incident which took place many kilometers away from where we were. I don't trust their activities as much as I support their presence in this area, they need to be trained on how to handle innocent community members.

It is possible for the community to identify and prevent radicalization of youths in the early years because of their family ties. Although, it might be the case, building close bonds amongst community members is likely to reduce instances where one community invades the other to undertake their recruitment process. What family links do is to prevent attitudes toward non-violence to

serve as a "front line" actor in identifying signs of possible radicalization to violence, preventing such radicalization's onset, and intervening in the radicalization process. Social networks and peer groups in general play a profound role in facilitating, or undermining, processes of radicalization to violence. Positive social networks are important in reinforcing non-violent norms and resilience to terrorism:

KII1: We share a lot as a family and We know each other at a family level. I believe if given the opportunity, every family can identify with peace-loving community members, and this means all can prevent their children from joining bad groups... even recently a family almost killed their son on suspicion of being a member of a gang... If you are talking about countering terrorism, the family is best placed to do that.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Although scholars find it controversial, community-led counterterrorism initiatives can be very effective if utilized well. The youths and anyone joining terrorist organizations are part of a family and largely communities which has the ability to raise alert at early stages of the individuals' subscriptions to the organizations. Most participants believe that law enforcement agents need to change how they perceive community members. In fact, it presents a challenge to police-community members' relations which is key in fighting terrorism. This means the government should work on guidelines and carry out sensitization to ensure the family or community understands their crucial role in the fight against terrorism. Therefore, creating a trusted relationship between the police and the community can serve as a platform to advance community goals, enhance public safety, and prevent acts of extremist violence.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that the government should complement community-led initiatives with a law enforcement-led approach for this may effectively deal with terrorism cases.

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