



*Young Men and Women Driving Change Through Advocacy;*

# **THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION BILL**

in Kogi State, Nigeria



## Young men and women driving change through advocacy:

the case of the Youth Development Commission Bill in Kogi State

“ Today, we made history when the Governor of Kogi State signed into law first ever private bill, ”

stated Hon. Ahmed Mohammed who sponsored the Kogi Youth Development Commission Bill after it was signed into law by the Governor of Kogi State on 24 April 2019.

The historic Bill establishes a multistakeholder Youth Development Commission, whose mandate is to increase social-economic opportunities for youth, reduce anti-social behavior, and empower young men and young women. It paves the way for policies that will contribute to youth development and to address some of the drivers of violent extremism.

The Bill would not be a reality today, however, without the ActionAid consortium and its Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programme funded by GCERF. This success reflects important lessons for PVE-programming.

# GCERF's work in Nigeria and ActionAid Consortium

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GCERF's work in Nigeria started in 2016 when it committed USD 4,2 million to build community resilience against violent extremism across four Nigerian North Central States (colloquially known as the Middle Belt). The region is an emerging hotspot for recruitment to violent extremism and terrorism.

GCERF supported five local consortia to design and implement PVE programmes, whose objectives were to address the drivers of violent extremism (VE) identified through local needs and baseline assessments.

ActionAid Nigeria was the lead organisation of one of the five consortia, implementing the “System and Structure Strengthening Approach against Radicalisation to Violent Extremism” (SARVE) Programme in Kogi State. SARVE took both a whole-of-community approach and focused especially on women and youth. SARVE's purpose was to address the drivers of VE, such as grievances and frustrations caused by conflict between farmers and herders, lack of social and economic opportunities for youth, and the fractural State-society relationship.

One of the key results of the SARVE programme was its positive impact on communities feeling involved in decisions that affect them. SARVE established Community Action Response Teams (CART) both as part of PVE efforts and to serve as a conflict resolution response mechanism. One example of the effects of the CART's initiatives was the signing of a peace pact between herders and farmers. The programme also contributed to the development and implementation of the Kogi State Plan on Peace and Security of Women and Children.

Another key result was the passage of the Youth Development Commission Bill into law. The Commission is responsible for establishing programmes to foster youth entrepreneurship and employment (e.g., a micro-credit and franchise scheme, a transition to work program, and skills training), and supporting awareness raising through media campaigns, sports, and recreational activities.

The Bill also asks the Commission to collaborate with other agencies to identify labor market needs and areas of skills shortage; and to create and manage a database on youth demographics, tracking all public investments in youth to facilitate planning, and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).

# The path towards the Bill

**T**he Bill is the result of a long advocacy process. As the first step, the SARVE programme provided youth with the tools and knowledge on advocacy, bringing youth organisations together into clusters. In these clusters, youth refined their skills and received support to identify key stakeholders, power holders, and gate-keepers with influence over youth-centered issues.

The youth organisations supporting the Youth Development Bill became known as “the Kogi Youth Advocacy Cluster”. With a strategic youth-led approach and with its leadership team, the Cluster established its values; recruited constituents and supporters; and identified its opposition. The Cluster developed monitoring mechanisms and evaluated efforts made at every step of the journey.

The Cluster decided to strategise and organise itself and engaged actors that were classified around two axes of power.

First, 'power with': groups whose public support was important for the passage of the Bill, such as the media, State Assembly members, elected officials, community leaders, and youth. To gather their support, the youth organised a series of road walks, town hall meetings, advocacy visits, roundtables, manifestations, and a social media campaign.

Second, 'power over' – who were actors directly linked with the law-making and policy processes, such as the Speaker of the Kogi State House, the Chairman of the House Committee on Youth, Kogi State Attorney General, Chief of Staff to the governor. On this axis, the advocacy visits and roundtables were crucial tools.

In all interactions, the Youth Cluster representatives applied their newly acquired skills to advocate for the establishment of the Commission as a crucial step to address youth needs and concerns in Kogi State. However, this did not come without opposition from specific stakeholders that were concerned about funding for the proposed Commission and the risk of the process being influenced by political forces.

Despite the challenges, the Youth Advocacy Cluster—buoyed also by the work of other youth advocacy groups—remained steadfast in its commitment which culminated in the successful passage of the Bill, ten months after its conception.



## Why is the Bill relevant to Prevention of Violent Extremism?

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According to GCERF's theory of change, resilience to VE is a product of the interaction of four factors. Two factors at the community level: social cohesion and community agency, and two factors at the individual level: equal access to opportunities and a sense of purpose.

The Youth Development Commission Bill addresses the drivers of VE by building the resilience of communities and individuals across these factors, especially equal access to opportunities, community agency, and a sense of purpose.

First, it does this by improving socioeconomic conditions. A recent survey of 3317 youth and adults across four Nigerian North Central States commissioned by GCERF and its partners, shows that 84.4% of the youth in Kogi State do not feel that their income is enough to sustain themselves and their dependents.

Although the relationship between poverty or unemployment with VE is mixed, the lack of access to socioeconomic opportunities – a driver identified through baseline assessments- puts youth at risk of recruitment to VE. For example, a survey of Boko Haram members, conducted by Mercy Corps in 2016, highlights that initial membership to the group was motivated by anticipated support from Boko Haram for their businesses. Many accepted a loan before joining the group while others joined hoping to receive some material support (loans or capital).

Therefore, the Commission and its programmes will address an important driver of violent extremism that has been exploited by violent extremist groups in the northern part of the country and is presented as a real challenge to youth in Kogi State.

Second, the Bill (and Commission) is a product of strengthened community agency brought about by a successful bottom-up advocacy campaign led by youth in Kogi State. It shows that community members can have their concerns heard by the government and influence law and policy-making through non-violent action. The multistakeholder nature of the Commission also ensures that this positive dynamic continues.

There is evidence that a problematic and tense relationship between State and society is a key driver of violent extremism. This is especially true when groups attempt to engage with the government but fail to have their concerns and needs heard. In Kogi State, in a recent survey, 37.6% of youth still feel that their voices are not heard when dealing with government and authorities. This is a relevant proportion – while seemingly lower than in the other three States included in the assessment (Benue, Nassawara and Plateau).

Therefore, the Bill directly addresses this by fostering a healthier and positive dynamic of participation and accountability between the State and youth. Moreover, in the minds of youth, the Bill reestablishes the State (and society) as a trusted actor.

Research shows that when the State is incapable of providing essential services, violent extremist groups often fill the void which increases the legitimacy and support towards the latter, and gravely undermines the State relationship with the community. For example, in the north-central region of Nigeria, Communities have often regarded the financial services provided by Boko Haram as sometimes more accessible than alternatives. Boko Haram used these services as a tool for recruitment and for gaining community support.

Third, youth involved in the campaign developed their sense of purpose. Not only did they acquired the skills to advocate, but they also applied them through an organised and strategic advocacy campaign. Research has shown that if youth at-risk of radicalisation to violent extremism feel empowered because they can contribute through non-violent means, their affinity with violent extremism might decrease. However, the research is clear that for this to happen the community/society needs to listen to the youth and they need to see the impact of their work - as in the case of the Bill.

Moreover, the programmes under the mandate of the Commission have a high potential to foster self-confidence and a sense purpose on a large scale across Kogi State. As the coordinator of the Kogi Youth Advocacy Cluster, Okwutepa Aminu Oseni, stated: "The bill will also create opportunities for youth in the state to discover their capabilities, build capacities to be self-sufficient and contribute positively to the revenue base of the state."

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Allan, H.; Glazzard, A.; Jespersen, S.; Reddy-Tumu, S.; Winterbotham, E. (2015) Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review. Royal United Services Institute.

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The proportion of youth who do not feel heard by the government in Kogi State is clearly lower than in Benue and Plateau States, however it is within the margin of error in comparison with youth in Nassawara State (43%).

# Conclusion, Learnings and Next Steps

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The successful passage of the Youth Development Commission Law hinged on the definition of a clear goal and well planned and inclusive activities. It was the product of a successful capacity-building approach for youth leadership and of a very strategic public campaign.

The Bill brings several valuable lessons for GCERF programming. Funding upstream work, such as advocacy, is an important element of a successful programme and when possible, should be an integral part of any whole-society PVE programming. It builds the resilience of communities by strengthening their agency – including a healthier relationship with the State.

It can also influence policy and trigger action on drivers of violent extremism on a scale that is beyond any community-level project by collaborating with local authorities. Thus, it has a multiplier effect on GCERF investments. It also strengthens the sustainability of projects by embedding practices and policies that address the drivers of violent extremism into the local governance system.

GCERF's assessments, including those directly involving affected youth, as well as research from other entities clearly show that socio-economic conditions influence vulnerability. They might not be sufficient for triggering radicalisation to violent extremism, but they are an integral part of the drivers.

This also illustrates that when the Cluster centered its efforts on advocating for a Commission to address poor socio-economic conditions, it chose an issue that truly resonates with youth in Kogi State. Coupled with an advocacy campaign ran and led by youth, the Cluster produced a message so relevant and significant to youth that they were easily mobilised and motivated to take action.

In addition, the Bill shows that a successful PVE programme that works on youth leadership, needs to go beyond transferring advocacy skills. It must include a feasible opportunity for trained youth to apply those skills, and continuous support throughout the process to ensure focus and offer guidance. Without such support, it is unlikely that the Cluster would have managed to engage and convince the various stakeholders of its mission.

In summary, the path towards the Bill was difficult but rewarding. It highlighted important lessons for the consortium, for GCERF and for the PVE-field. The passage of the Bill, however, is just the first step. The youth Cluster has now started building momentum to advocate for the implementation of the Bill.

GCERF will continue to support the work of the Cluster – and the ActionAid consortium. It recently committed over USD 5 million dollars for a second round of grants to three consortiums (including ActionAid's) to continue to deepen and expand their PVE programs in the Middle Belt Nigeria to build safe, empowered and resilient communities.

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Ibid

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