

Sustainable Development as a Path to Peacebuilding: Finding Common Ground to Counter the Extremist Narrative

by Austin Schiano, Juan E. Chebly, and Federico Ruiz

1. INTRODUCTION

Ideologically terrorist organizations have taken an increased prominence in the public consciousness. These organizations draw from a global support base, including young and increasingly educated populations. These organizations often take shape in the scope of a larger sentiment, and are able to rise to prominence through an ability to engage alienated individuals who are often on the margins of society. For many around the world, this issue has become an inescapable and harsh reality. It is time that we evaluate what is causing the growth of these networks, and consider sustainable development solutions to combat them.

It is this paper's attempt to highlight some examples of sustainable development solutions that successfully counter violent extremism, and to provide recommendations based on these successful examples. The answer to many of these problems can be having a bottom-up approach to building stronger communities. Inclusion and participation in public policy can empower citizens of all ages to become agents of human development and kick-start a virtuous cycle of peace that effectively eradicates extremism. It is the responsibility of public institutions to recognize best practices and support them to their best capacity with adequate policy and regulation. It is clear that we must first understand terrorism and its various foundations, before we can meaningfully fight against it.

2. STATE OF AFFAIRS

Terrorism and War in the Numbers

The U.S. Council on Foreign Relations 2016 Report Card on International Cooperation ranked combatting transnational terrorism as the top priority in the world that needs to be addressed. The organization's research asserts that "5 countries account for 57 percent of all terrorist attacks and 78 percent of all deaths caused by terrorism in 2014."¹ These 5 countries are: Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria. Within this specific context, the so called Islamic State (IS or ISIS) and Boko Haram were responsible for over half of all terrorist attacks

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worldwide. The global economic cost of terrorism was estimated at \$52.9 billion for 2015-2016 by the report.²

The Islamic State's propaganda and ability to keep up with global trends has helped it consolidate an international brand and accumulate wealth. According to Dr. Christina Schori Laing, the global reaction against this terrorist group has been determined by the aspiration for regional stability and the fear that conflict will spread out to other borders.³ So far as the cost of efforts by U.S. Central Command and partner nations to "conduct targeted airstrikes of Iraq and Syria as part of the comprehensive strategy to degrade and defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL" known as Operation Inherent Resolve, the estimated cost has been an average daily amount of \$12.5 million and a total cost of 10.9 billion. These most recent figures are for the period of August 8th 2014-December 31st 2016, a total of 877 days of operation.⁴

IS has found success in fundraising by moving away from the Al-Qaeda model of funding that relied on wealthy donors. In 2014, the Brookings Institute cited David Cohen, the undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, saying that:

ISIS's principal source of finance is still derived from its control and sale of oil, which he assessed was still bringing in \$1 million a day. Additional funds come from kidnap for ransom, extortion networks, criminal activities, and donations from external individuals, the latter being of least significance in terms of scale.⁵

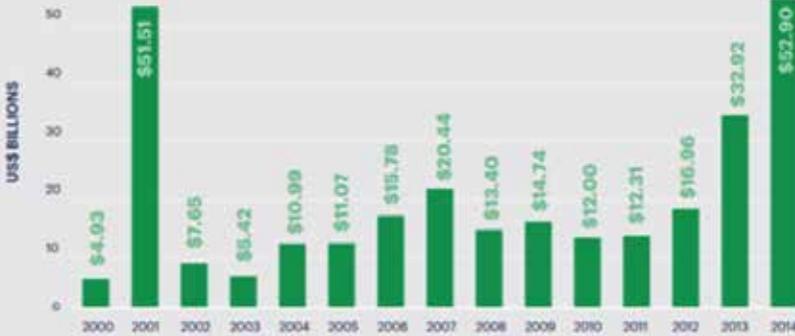
Analysis of ISIS's financing strategy in 2015, also attributed significant cash flow to the sale of stolen historical artifacts, and a careful attention for the organization never to move large sums of money at once to avoid financial tracking.⁶ ISIS also derives significant funds from taxing the individuals in their territory.

3. THE COST OF VIOLENCE AND WAR.

According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Report, the economic cost of terrorism was at its highest in 2014, going from 32.9 billion USD in 2013, to 52.9 billion USD with a total economic impact of 105.8 billion USD.⁷ It is important to point out that this number is very conservative, since the study for the most part involves counting the loss of income of the injured and dead victims and their direct consequences on relatives. This estimate does not take account of further cost such as the increased level of security or higher insurance payments, nor the aftermath of broader economic impacts like the effect of a city gridlock after a terrorist act.

FIGURE 34 THE COSTS OF TERRORISM, US\$ BILLIONS, 2000-2014

Based on IEP's methodology, the global economic costs of terrorism reached the highest ever level in 2015 at \$52.9 billion. Figures reported in constant 2014 US\$ billions.



Source: IEP Calculations

NOTE: Figures include property damage from the September 11 attacks.*

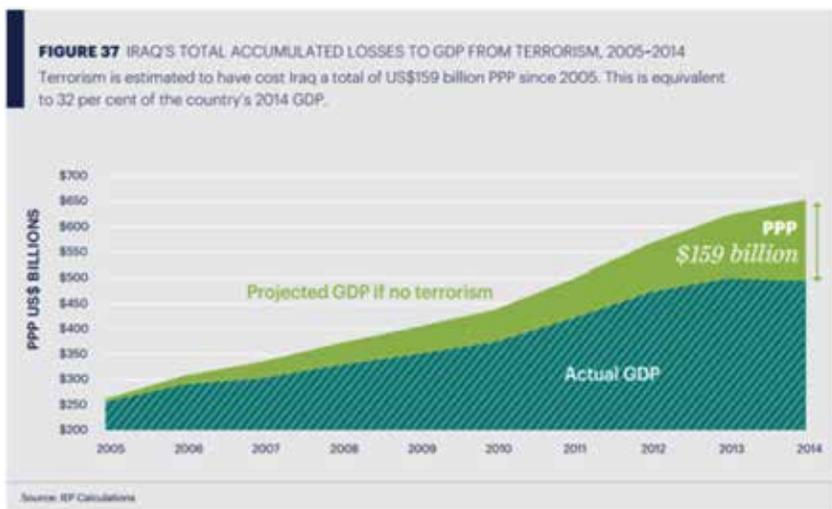
TOTAL COST OF TERRORISM BY TYPE IN 2014, US\$ Millions	
EVENT	TOTAL COSTS (US\$ MILLIONS)
Death	\$51,275.00
Injuries	\$918.00
Bombing/explosion	\$410.00
Facility/infrastructure attack	\$104.00
Armed assault	\$99.00
Hijacking	\$67.00
Hostage taking (barricade incident)	\$12.00
Hostage taking (kidnapping)	\$8.00
Unarmed assault	\$3.00
Assassination	\$2.00
Total	\$52,898.00

2015 Global Terrorism Index Report

The loss of human life to terrorism are not only flagrant violations of human rights, they are attacks to our own humanity. Therefore, when trying to assess an approximate global total cost of terrorism, one must not only focus on the monetary cost. There are always also direct and indirect costs. This is why having an exact

measure of the global economic impact of terrorism is a challenging endeavor. Measuring the direct costs like damaged property or the direct loss of life is quite feasible, but measuring the indirect costs involves intangibles such as psychological and social aspects like distrust, hate, stress, fear, just to mention a few that in any case are not easy to quantify. For example, according to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index Report, studies trying to evaluate the impact of the 9/11 attacks have an approximate range from 35 billion USD to 109 billion USD. Terrorism is certainly costlier than what numbers say, “Terrorism inflicts more than human casualties and material losses.”⁸

According to an IEP study which took account of aggregated national security expenditures, the world spends approximately \$117 billion USD on national security agencies assigned to prevent terrorist activities.⁹ With the U.S. approximately spending U.S. \$1.1 trillion from 2001 to 2014. Another important aspect of the report is that the countries most affected by terrorism have seen their economic growth and direct foreign investment diminished. For example, the increment of attacks in Nigeria saw its FDI decreased by thirty percent, while terrorist episodes in Israel in 2001 were said to have decreased GDP by one percent. Furthermore, the IEP study found that since 2005, terrorism has had a profound cost on Iraq’s economy since the purchasing power parity decreased by 159 billion USD, representing thirty-two percent of country’s GDP in 2014. If we estimate that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals amounts to an extra ninety billion USD per year globally in public expenditure,¹⁰ just looking at these figures shows how it is indeed possible to find the necessary public funds to achieve the SDGs. It is clear that the most significant resources will need to come from private sector investments, but again the case stands, where we must encourage sustainable long-term investments as opposed to mere security and defense spending from the private sector.



4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A TOOL FOR PEACE.

The United Nations 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) are the most recent long-term development framework by the UN system. These goals are revolutionary in a political and social scope. However, little has been done to rethink approaches to counterterrorism. Just like in the interdisciplinary collaboration that made the SDGs possible, sectors must work together to address complex issues like terrorism. Successful programs must not only be supported at the ministerial level, but also need to be fostered and supported in local communities. The shape this proposed action would take, is prescribed as follows:

- 1) Provide vulnerable populations innovative economic, social, and political participation opportunities to create meaningful alternatives to violence. Citizen engagement is central.
- 2) Encourage partnership across sectors to develop such programs sustainably. The inclusion of non- governmental organizations, corporations, and civil society networks will be critical.

The United Nations System and Steps to Counter Global Violence

International peacekeeping requires significant reform. The number and efficiency of forces is often seen as the most crucial peacekeeping augmentation. What may be more important however, are strategies to empower communities through human development.

The 2015 Report on the UN Special Committee of Peacekeeping Operation, stresses the need for “lasting progress on strengthening security, national reconciliation, the rule of law, human rights and sustainable development”; and the importance that these forces play “to occur in parallel, given the interconnected nature of those challenges in countries emerging from conflict.”¹¹ Additionally, the inclusion of civil society, the revitalization of local economies, and cross UN-agency coordination is highlighted as imperative to success. Of specific interest to the report is the importance of increased technological tools and electronic learning tools for peacekeepers. Among listed best practices is the inclusion of more civil officers in peacekeeping missions and the incorporation of culturally adept forces to support the strengthening of local communities being served.

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy report is designed to address how “terrorism affects every aspect of our society and how concerted and coordinated efforts can result in a more effective fight against terrorism.”¹² This report calls for the establishment of a United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center for sharing best practices across countries.

In the Secretary General's publication “The UN Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism,” which was presented to the General Assembly on January 15, 2016, Ban Ki Moon emphasizes the vital connection between effective

peacebuilding, terrorism, and violence. The report calls for “systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups.”¹³ The Secretary General’s recommendations include “the creation of open, equitable, inclusive, and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights and with economic opportunities for all.”¹⁴ The Secretary General is cognizant that “we will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised.”¹⁵ This feeling of disenfranchisement and exclusion is at the root of why young persons without opportunities are drawn to violence and violent networks. The Secretary General concludes “(young persons) must be viewed as an asset and must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations.”¹⁶

Goal 16 of the SDGs calls for the need to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”¹⁷ Of the ten additional targets that accompany Goal 16, target one and 16.a are most relevant to this paper’s focus. These targets are as follows: “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere” and “Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.”¹⁸

Examples of Cross Institutional Collaboration

1) The efforts of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in engaging youth of the Ayilo Refugee Settlement in northern Uganda toward sport and drama programs has led to positive results of community building.¹⁹ In sport and recreational activities, otherwise vulnerable youth who have experienced exploitation and violence have found purpose that has prevented them from being a target for extremist recruiters. The drama programs which address violence and other difficult health and social issues in Ayilo are conducted by the Peace Drama Group, and similar initiatives could be utilized in other refugee contexts. USAID has supported from 2010 to 2014, a program entitled “Youth Theater for Peace” in Kyrgyzstan, and participants in the program:

Reported higher levels of empathy for people of different ethnic, religious or national origins; greater confidence in their ability to positively affect conflict situations in their communities; and improved confidence when speaking with government officials or community leaders.²⁰

2) Global efforts in peace education and policy awareness such as the MY World 2015 survey, World We Want 2015 platform,²² and MY UNEA²³ site are powerful as they successfully showcase multi-stakeholder participation in global policy-making. The MY World survey was able to mobilize partners from corporations

such as Coca-Cola or GeoPoll to civil society organizations like MDG's Nigeria (which brought in almost 3 million MY World votes) or Pakistani Youth Revolution Clan (which brought in almost 700,000 MY World votes). These civil society organizations are critical as the MY World survey was conducted and distributed by youth volunteers in countries that are noted as having endemic concern with violence and terrorism. eighty percent of MY World votes, came from those under the age of thirty. Further success is highlighted in a report by Beyond 2015, UN Volunteers, and UN Bangladesh along with other local groups titled "The World We Want Bangladeshi Youth Voices on a Post-2015 World." The report speaks on the need to educate youth, and the power to understand the root causes of terrorism through these platforms.²⁴

3) UNICEF's U-Report is a tool which allows for individuals to engage in governmental decisions, and this information is then "instantly mapped and analyzed, yielding vital information and real-time insights about how young people see their world and what they think is most important." In turn, these aggregated views are used by development partners in their advocacy with governments – and even shared directly with elected leaders.²⁵ U-REPORT was in July of 2015, showcased as having over 1,000,000 users across 15 African countries. The tool has been used to disseminate information and coordinated action plans in combating epidemics (like Ebola), social policy, and health campaigns. This sort of engagement empowers local networks.

4) The United States State Department has directly highlighted the importance of microfinance and local economic development in countering terrorism. In a podcast, Cathy Novelli, the Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy and Environment at the U.S. Department of State, spoke at length on the need to incorporate "informal economies" in an effort to provide individuals with reliable financial security. USAID has made significant investment in microfinance within Iraq starting in 2012. USAID helped establish the country's first indigenous microfinance institutions and began to support the transition of private commercial banks towards modern standards. Since then, nearly 400,000 microloans—ranging from \$500 to \$5,000 USD—have been disbursed throughout Iraq with a combined value of more than \$1 billion and a 98-percent payback rate.²⁶ Through the success of such programs, US DOS and USAID have been able to showcase the importance of sustainable finance in communities vulnerable to terrorist recruiting.

5) In January of 2016, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published a report entitled "Preventing Violent Extremism in Schools" which highlights the fact that youth are targets of violent extremism. Among the FBI's recommendations, are: "Raising awareness on the catalysts driving violent extremism within our communities; establishing collaborative grassroots initiatives fostering community buy-in and, facilitating intervention activities within our schools."²⁷ The report recognizes that countering violent extremism is "a shared responsibility

between law enforcement, civic leaders, and their communities.”²⁸ A 2012 report for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) likewise emphasizes the importance of inter-agency cooperation, pluralist discussion, job opportunity, and youth communication tools in combating violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism amongst youth.²⁹

Corporate Efforts to Counter Violence and Terrorism

The rise of internet connectivity can enable violent groups. Global terror organizations have capitalized on their members’ use of these tools. There has been considerable resistance from social media corporations to respond to efforts of censorship, given a latitude of concerns surrounding freedom of speech. ISIS has taken such strength in the utilization of Twitter, that accounts associated with the organization have called themselves from within “the province of Twitter” and James B. Comey Jr., Director of the FBI, called Twitter “a way to crowdsource terrorism... to sell murder” in November of 2015.²⁹ In early February of 2016, Twitter has officially declared that they have taken definite steps against the Islamic State. The corporation, since the middle of 2015, “deleted 125,000 accounts associated with extremism.”³¹ Twitter has routinely disclosed statistical information about accounts removed online, but these reports have not provided any specific context on terrorism. The challenge that persists however, is how a platform dedicated to free speech can keep track of millions of users, specifically around such a complex term as terrorism.

Pakistan has made efforts to combat violent extremism in their country with online efforts. The country which has an estimated thirty million internet users has, under the authority of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), aimed to remove social media accounts and online videos posted by terrorist groups. However, scholars in the region, such as Ahmed Rashid, recognize that social media plays a smaller role in recruiting for countries with limited connectivity like Pakistan. The root of radicalization is more often from the local leaders who manipulate religion and preach an extremist narrative disguised in religious sermons, according to Rashid. It is worth noting that unlike other Muslim countries, Pakistan does not have state sponsored sermons. Farieha Aziz Director at Bolo Bhi, a Karachi based nonprofit geared towards digital security privacy, proposes the creation of an online “cogent counter narrative” websites that purport a less extreme view of religion.³²

Will McCants and Clint Watts wrote in the Brookings Institute of the power that ISIS holds in their online publication Dabiq. Dabiq provides stories of ISIS fighters, clearly states the organization’s goals, provides news on the growth of the organization, and highlights any major developments.³³ McCants and Watts argue that the most difficult bulwark the western world faces in their battle against extremism, is the ambiguity it has shown in this fight and perhaps the lack of a strategic and coherent plan. This returns to our idea of cross-institutional partnerships, as the potential for a broader counter-terror narrative could present a

more viable and culturally accepted alternative.

5. THE FINANCING GAP:

Humanitarian and Defense Budgets vs. Development Budgets.

When analyzing the UN Sustainable Development Goals in their entirety, as a holistic agenda to eradicate poverty and hunger, foster human development, human rights, and peace, and ensure environment and ecosystems' health, the financing aspect becomes very relevant. The setting of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is based on the premise of backcasting, or goal setting, for development on a global scale. If we as a global society have agreed on what kind of world we want to live in, then it is crucial that we also determine how to get there. This issue is ever more relevant when we see international multilateral processes, as the Financing for Development Process, siloed and stuck on the same outcomes and principles agreed 13 years ago in Monterrey, Mexico.³⁴ Very little has changed in this area of work over the last decade. Financing for Development resolutions have failed to incorporate and consider the rise in extremism and violence worldwide, not to mention climate and humanitarian crises.

Some might argue that the Financing for Development process is an independent mechanism from humanitarian and sustainable development agendas. Indeed, many of the pundits that make a living within this process argue that it ought to be siloed to protect and ensure the expertise of its contributing agents. In other words, the process according to these pundits needs to remain closed to those with the know-how, as opposed to becoming more open and transparent. This train of thought however is proving to deliver poor results.³⁵ The silo approach is far from ideal when it comes to solving systemic issues. Systems theories emphasize the centrality of a holistic approach. Sustainable Development is no different and is indeed one of the most complex systems we must contemplate upon in our time.

When we fail to consider public spending in comparison to other agendas like the humanitarian and the defense agendas, we miss the point of what sustainable development financing ought to be. In other words, we are segmenting funding streams and disregarding tangible opportunity costs which are undermining long-term peace, security, and environmental sustainability.³⁶ Clear evidence is the outcome document of the Addis Ababa Agenda, where there is no single mention to defense spending.³⁷ This seems a bit odd when we consider the centrality of peace for development. Another example is the lack of practical mechanisms to incentivize private spending as the main source of resources toward achieving the SDGs, and the over emphasizing of Official Development Assistance, an instrument that albeit important is quite insufficient in the quest from billions to trillions of USD for development.

Historically we can say that humanitarian agendas have had priority over development agendas when it comes to public finance and international cooperation. This comes as no surprise, as the value of human life is on the line in times of crisis. The main reasoning: poverty and environmental degradation,

can be addressed later. However, this type of thinking is no different from the silo approach described earlier. What we are finding in our present societies is a situation where we are not planning for the long-term and are caught in addressing ever-changing short-term calamities. This seems to be a vicious cycle, where the more we fail to invest in sustainable development, the more humanitarian aid will be needed and so on and so forth. This vicious cycle can become a virtuous cycle the moment we start to prioritize sustainable development investments over any other type of investments.³⁸ Let us look at the case of the United States, the biggest economy in the world, as an example:

Even though the public budget allocation of the United States of America says it all, some critical aspects can be applied to most of the world's resources. The United States spends an estimated 18 times more on military and defense than on diplomacy, development and war prevention.³⁹ Skeptics would argue that it seems as if the U.S. is practically aligning itself towards war, as opposed to peace, by just looking at public spending. On the other hand, skeptics could also argue deterrence as a means to peace. However, on sustainable development agendas, it is human development and human rights that drive the reasoning for financing not intimidation and submission.

	2012 (in billions of dollars)	2012 percent of federal funds budget
Current Military Spending	806	27%
Interest on Pentagon Debt	188	6%
Costs of past wars	129	4%
Total military percent	1,123	37%
Health care	558	19%
Responses to Poverty	452	15%
Interest on Public Debt	263	9%
Supporting the Economy	241	8%
Federal Government Operations	258	8%
Energy, Science, & Environment	81	3%
Diplomacy, Development and War Prevention	45	2%

Source: Where Do Our Income Tax Dollars Go? [44](#), *Friends Committee on National Legislation*, February 2013. Note, due to rounding, totals and percentages may not add up. Current military spending includes Pentagon budget, nuclear weapons and military-related programs throughout the budget.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

1. Consider the roots of extremism when addressing peacebuilding efforts. For example: address rising inequalities and a poor state of human development as opposed to merely focusing on the consequences of extremism.
2. Balance short-term, medium-term, and long-term objectives and investment to properly address extremism comprehensively.
3. Align humanitarian and long-term development budgets under one coordinated strategy to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
4. Consider the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for medium-term/ long-term peacebuilding.
5. Prioritize Public Spending to align with the Sustainable Development Goals.
6. Allow for inclusive, transparent, and accountable open budget and legislative mechanisms that ensure social participation and ownership at the local level.
7. Visualize social inclusion and participation as the main tool to combat the extremist narrative.

NOTES

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- ¹⁶ Ibid.
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