

Strengthening Community-Led Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism in Ghana: Lessons from the Upper East Region

Policy Brief | 8 |

August 2026



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Executive Summary

Whilst the Sahel remains the epicentre of violent extremism, Ghana, like other Coastal West African countries, faces significant threats from violent extremism, particularly in its Northern regions. These parts are highly vulnerable due to their proximity to the Sahel including factors such as porous borders and socioeconomic issues like youth unemployment, prolonged local conflicts and illegal mining activities. Grievances related to conflicts between farmers and herders, land disputes, and chieftaincy tensions further exacerbate this vulnerability. The 2026

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Multidimensional Poverty Index by the World Bank highlights the Upper East Region as among the poorest in the country, emphasizing the conditions that extremist groups could exploit. To counter these threats, Ghana must address the root causes of violent extremism through

a comprehensive, collaborative approach involving state actors including security agencies, civil society, and local communities to foster resilience and sustainable peace. Most importantly, community-led approaches constitute the best suited and potential game changer in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in Ghana. The use of Local Peace Committees and Early Warning Monitors in the Upper East region by the National Peace Council highlight the potential of local community-led efforts to PVE.

This policy brief examines the role of communities in preventing violent extremism in Ghana. It highlights the importance of leveraging local actors, traditional governance structures, and coordinated stakeholder efforts to strengthen prevention initiatives. The brief goes beyond identifying what actions are needed and who should be involved by exploring why communities are central to sustainable efforts to prevent violent extremism. Drawing on experiences and lessons from interventions implemented in the Upper East region, it demonstrates how community-led approaches can enhance resilience, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to long-term peace and security.

Introduction

The Government of Ghana has made significant strides in preventing and countering violent extremism through a range of policy, institutional, and operational interventions. Notable among these are the development of the National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism¹ (NAFPCVET) and the establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Fusion Centre (NCTFC) accompanied by a public awareness campaign tagline "*See Something, Say Something*". The NAFPCVET is underpinned by the development of a National Security Strategy document that contains a comprehensive assessment of Ghana's security threats and priorities. In addition, major security operations and exercises including *Operation Kundanlgou I, II, III and IV*, *Operation Home Shield*, *Exercise Eagle Claws* and *Operation Conquered Fist*, have been undertaken across the five regions of Northern Ghana: Upper West, Upper East, Savannah, North East, and Northern Regions. These have been largely state-led initiatives and programs.

While these efforts have strengthened Ghana's preparedness and response capacity, a more comprehensive and effective approach requires a leading role by local community actors. Experience in the field highlights the fact that local communities command higher goodwill, higher local knowledge and deeper appreciation of the context that allows them to not only design the appropriate interventions,

but also address the nuances of the threats in ways that maximizes outcomes. Their proximity to local realities, knowledge of community dynamics, and ability to identify emerging risks in time, position them as indispensable actors in early warning, early response, resilience-building, and the promotion of social cohesion. Strengthening community ownership and participation in prevention initiatives can therefore significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Ghana's efforts to prevent violent extremism.

Given their inherently critical role, communities should be recognized not merely as beneficiaries of interventions, but as key partners and the first line of defence against violent extremism. This allows them to serve as lead actors in the design and implementation of PVE interventions and provides an important opportunity to further institutionalize and deepen community participation in prevention efforts.

Local Peace Committees

Across Northern Ghana, several community-led initiatives are contributing to efforts to prevent violent extremism and strengthen local resilience. One notable example is the establishment of Local Peace Committees (LPCs) by the National Peace Council (NPC) in the Upper East Region with support from development partners. The LPCs comprise nine members drawn from diverse segments of the community, including assembly members, youth representatives, women, traditional authorities, and minority ethnic groups, particularly the Fulbe where applicable. Currently, forty (40) LPCs have been established across the region.

¹ Government of Ghana. (2019). *National framework for preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism in Ghana*. Ministry of National Security. <https://www.peacecouncil.gov.gh/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NAFPCVET-Documents-29-Jan-2020.pdf>

These community-level peace structures perform three key functions. Firstly, they identify and report early warning signs related to conflict and violent extremism. Secondly, they facilitate dialogue, mediation, and negotiation to resolve minor conflicts at the community level before they escalate. Thirdly, they monitor and analyse local conflict dynamics and report emerging issues to the Upper East Regional Peace Council for further action. Prior to their deployment, committee members receive training in conflict resolution, mediation, dialogue facilitation, early warning monitoring and reporting, and the prevention of violent extremism.²³

The LPCs have recorded a few notable successes. In Fumbisi, for example, committee members identified and reported an individual allegedly involved in the sale of weapons and ammunition within the community, leading to a timely response by the security services. The committees have also played an important role in resolving recurrent farmer-herder conflicts through dialogue and community engagement⁴. In Widnaba, for instance, an innovative local solution involving the dredging of a community water reservoir helped address tensions between farmers and herders by improving access to water during the dry season. This intervention reduced competition over water and contributed to peaceful coexistence between the two groups.⁵⁶

The experience of the LPCs demonstrates the important role local community actors can play in identifying risks, resolving disputes, and supporting broader efforts to prevent violent extremism. Similar community-based structures have been established across the five regions of Northern Ghana, further illustrating the value of local ownership and participation in building resilient and peaceful communities.

Early Warning Monitors

Complementing the work of the Local Peace Committees (LPCs) are community-based Early Warning Monitors who are carefully identified and trained to detect and report emerging threats. Unlike LPC members, Early Warning Monitors are not publicly known within their communities in order to preserve confidentiality and protect the integrity of the information they gather. Their primary role is to monitor and report early warning signs related to conflict, insecurity, and violent extremism. Reports are submitted either to the Local Peace Committees, the Upper East Regional Peace Council, or directly to the security services in situations that require an immediate response. Monitoring is guided by a set of established indicators that enable the timely identification of potential threats and vulnerabilities. Through this system, Early Warning Monitors serve as a critical link between communities, peacebuilding structures, and security agencies, enhancing early detection, information sharing, and preventive action. Their contributions demonstrate the value of community-based approaches in strengthening local resilience and preventing the escalation of threats that

² Upper East Regional Peace Council. *Standard Operating Procedures* (2025).

³ David Angaamba, Programme Manager, Upper East Regional Peace Council, interview by author, 2026.

⁴ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2024).

⁵ Angaamba interview, 2026.

⁶ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2023).

could create conditions conducive to violent extremism.⁷

The effectiveness of community-based early warning mechanisms is evident in several cases reported by Early Warning Monitors. In one instance in Paga, monitors identified an individual who allegedly posed as a mentally ill person during the day but exhibited suspicious behaviour at night. Their observations and subsequent reporting prompted further investigation, which reportedly led to the discovery of weapons, and other ammunition. The timely identification and reporting of the suspect enabled the security services to take appropriate action before any harm could occur.⁸⁹

In another case, Early Warning Monitors raised concerns about a group of fifteen individuals, comprising ten men and five women, who had arrived in the Doninga community in the Bulsa South District claiming to be preaching religious teachings. Through close observation and community engagement, the monitors detected inconsistencies in their activities and reported their suspicions to the relevant authorities. Subsequent investigations revealed that the group's activities were allegedly being used as a cover for the sale and distribution of narcotic substances¹⁰. Another example of the effectiveness of community-based early warning systems occurred in the Bisawo community in the Kassena-Nankana West District. Acting on information provided by an Early Warning Monitor, security authorities

intercepted a woman who was attempting to cross into Ghana from Burkina Faso while carrying weapons concealed in a basin on her head. The timely tip-off enabled the authorities to apprehend the suspect and prevent the illicit movement of weapons across the border.¹¹¹² These examples demonstrate the critical role that community-based early warning systems play in detecting suspicious activities, facilitating timely responses, and strengthening local resilience against threats that could undermine peace and security.

Women and Youth as Frontline Actors

Women, youth groups, and other marginalized groups have also been actively engaged in efforts to prevent violent extremism across the Upper East Region. Through PVE initiatives led by the Upper East Regional Peace Council, civil society organizations (CSOs), and security agencies, these groups have received training on conflict prevention, early warning and response, peacebuilding, social cohesion, and the prevention of violent extremism. For example, women in Doba and Kandiga have been instrumental in reporting emerging land issues between various individuals that would otherwise have escalated into violence between the two communities. Women in both Doba and Kandiga were also crucial in the establishment of the Traditional Mediation Team (TMT) of kinsmen of the two communities. The TMT, comprising chiefs and queen mothers from Ghana and Burkina Faso, is the main insider mediator in the Doba-Kandiga conflict¹³. These interventions, supported by development partners, have strengthened the capacity of community

⁷Angaamba interview, 2026.

⁸ Angaamba interview, 2026.

⁹ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2024).

¹⁰ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2025).

¹¹ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2024).

¹² Angaamba interview, 2026.

¹³ Anankpieng interview, 2026

members to identify and respond to emerging threats, while promoting a greater sense of ownership in local peace and security efforts.

Across the region, these initiatives have generated several positive outcomes. Notably, they have contributed to strengthening community resilience against extremist influences, enhancing trust and cooperation between communities and security agencies, and improving local participation in peace and security processes. The interventions have also provided platforms for women, youth, and minority groups to contribute meaningfully to decision-making, early warning mechanisms, and community dialogue, reinforcing their role as key actors in PVE. As a result, communities are better positioned to identify risks, address grievances, and work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders to sustain peace and security.

Other notable successes have emerged from the active involvement of women in community-based efforts to prevent violent extremism. In Zebilla, for example, two women engaged in cross-border trade who sell *waakye* and *kenkey* participated in a training programme organized by the Upper East Regional Peace Council. Following the training, they became more vigilant in observing and reporting suspicious activities within their community. The women noticed a man who appeared to be living in poverty but regularly purchased large quantities of food using high-denomination currency and frequently transported the food across the border. After observing this pattern over several days, they reported their concerns to the Upper East Regional Peace Council, which subsequently alerted the security services. Investigations revealed that the individual had been disguising himself as a poor person while allegedly concealing a cache of weapons in an

abandoned toilet facility.¹⁴¹⁵ This case demonstrates how empowering community members, particularly women, through training and awareness raising can strengthen early detection mechanisms and contribute significantly to preventing potential security attacks. It further highlights the critical role that local communities play as the first line of defence against violent extremism and related criminal activities.

Conclusion

The Upper East region's proximity to the Sahelian security crisis renders it more vulnerable to extremist exploitation than most regions of Ghana. Whilst the state has undertaken various security interventions, it is essential to understand that the fight against violent extremism cannot be won solely on the battlefield; a pivotal role must be played by local communities in addressing the root causes of extremism and conflict. Local actors possess a unique closeness to the issues at hand, enabling them to comprehend the nuances of their vulnerabilities in ways that equip them to identify and tackle these challenges more effectively. Community-driven initiatives foster greater goodwill and support from residents, as these efforts emerge from within the community and directly engage with individuals who share common values and needs.

Moreover, community-led approaches are not only vital; they are often more sustainable than those driven by outside forces or external organizations. Without the active participation of community members, many security threats may go undetected until it is too late,

¹⁴ Upper East Regional Peace Council, *Project Report* (unpublished report, 2024).

¹⁵ Angaamba interview, 2026.

potentially leading to catastrophic outcomes that jeopardize the peace and security of the affected areas. In a landscape characterized by limited resources, involving local community members presents a unique opportunity for learning and capacity-building, all at a reduced cost. This collaborative approach not only enhances effectiveness but also strengthens community resilience against the scourge of violent extremism.

Policy Recommendations

Government and Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs)

- 1. Strengthen community engagement in preventing violent extremism.** Government institutions including the National Peace Council, the National Commission for Civic Education and District Assemblies should not only prioritize but also institutionalize community-led approaches to interventions in addressing VE vulnerabilities in local communities. Regular community-level engagements that create safe spaces for citizens to share concerns, volunteer information, and contribute to local security efforts. Such engagements can strengthen trust between communities and state actors while complementing existing national initiatives such as the *"See Something, Say Something"* campaign.
- 2. Improve grievance response and feedback mechanisms.** Establish clear and accessible reporting channels, response protocols, and public feedback systems to ensure that community concerns are addressed promptly.

- 3. Invest in the capacity of women and youth.** Targeted training and awareness programmes should be expanded for women and youth, particularly those engaged in cross-border trade and other high-risk sectors. As key actors within communities, these groups are well positioned to identify and report suspicious activities and contribute to local resilience-building efforts.

Security Agencies

- 1. Strengthen community policing approaches.** Security agencies should receive regular training on community policing, community engagement, and trust-building to improve relations with local populations and encourage information sharing.
- 2. Promote regular community-security engagements.** Security agencies should organize joint dialogues, forums, town hall meetings, and community durbars to strengthen collaboration with community members and create platforms for discussing local security concerns.
- 3. Institutionalize sustained engagement.** Community engagement activities should not be treated as one-off interventions. Instead, they should be conducted regularly to build trust between communities and security agencies.

Other Actors

- 1. Develop context-specific messaging and awareness campaigns.** Preventing Violent Extremism requires locally relevant messaging that reflects the cultural, social, religious, and

linguistic realities of different communities. Tailored communication strategies are more likely to resonate with local populations and promote behavioural change.

2. **Promote evidence-based programming.** Peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism interventions should be informed by robust assessments, conflict analyses, and community consultations. This ensures that interventions address local needs, respond to context-specific risks, and promote community ownership throughout implementation.
3. **Recognize communities as partners in prevention.** Communities should not be viewed solely as beneficiaries of interventions but as active partners in preventing violent extremism. Their local knowledge, networks, and understanding of community dynamics make them indispensable actors in identifying risks and developing sustainable solutions.
4. **Leverage existing local and traditional mechanisms.** Stakeholders should build upon existing community structures, including traditional authorities, Local Peace Committees,

religious leaders, women's groups, youth associations, and community-based early warning systems.

5. **Leverage digital and online platforms to counter violent extremist narratives.** Stakeholders should use social media and other digital platforms to promote peace, social cohesion, and positive counter-narratives while challenging extremist propaganda, misinformation, and hate speech, particularly among young people who are more exposed to online content.
6. **Integrate peacebuilding education into school curricula.** Peacebuilding, conflict resolution, social cohesion, and civic responsibility should be incorporated into educational curricula from the junior high school level through to tertiary institutions to foster a culture of peace, tolerance, and non-violence among young people.

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How to Cite:

Yiriyelleh, A., & Muqthar, M. (2026). Strengthening community-led approaches to preventing violent extremism in Ghana: Lessons from the Upper East Region (Policy Brief No. 8). WACCE.