Preventing Violent Extremism in Mauritania - Thought Leadership and Jobs for the Youth

by

Jeremy Chevrier

 Henley-Putnam University

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Dr. Diane Maye, Committee Chair

Dr. Troy Mitchell, Subject Matter Expert

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Abstract

This project describes an innovative approach to preventing violent extremism design for a USAID project based in Mauritania. The project has a logical results framework developed based in a systems analysis of all the relevant and root drivers behind the increase in radicalization amongst the youth in Mauritania.

The NOUR (Nudging Opportunities Underlying Resistance) project described in this document is a youth employment and empowerment program. The program focuses on three main objectives: improving social justice, reinforcing pro-social decision making capacities, and reducing the attraction of violent extremist organizations (VEO). This project leverages an abundance of social science research to create a mentality shift amongst the youth to counter the growing appeal of extremist modes of thinking. The project centers around the creation of a regional network of youth thought leaders empowered with higher order thinking skills (HOTS) to allow them to solve their own countries complex challenges using their dynamic energy, creativity and concern for their future and that of their wider community.

Keywords: vocational training, preventing violent extremism, Mauritania, thought leadership, critical thinking
Dedication

This project is dedicated to my fourth and last son, Moses Thoth Chevrier. Today Moses is seven months old. May the great amount of work, deep thinking and reflection that has gone into this project serve as a foundation that may bring a peaceful future to you as you grow older.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all the people who care about me and have supported me throughout its long period of research and development. Firstly, I would like to thank my loving wife Caronline Tewah Simbo for having the patience to encourage me and stay positive when I was under a lot of pressure and time constraints. I would also like to thank the kind faculty of Henley-Putnam University for all of their responsiveness and timely support as I needed it to get through this project. In particular, I would like to thank the dean of the counter-terrorism department, Dr. Diane Maye for her ability to recognize and appreciate novel and exciting research that may be relevant to the future of counter-terrorism. I would also like to thank Dr. Troy Mitchell for his continuous encouragement and support of my work. I would like to thank my colleagues in USAID who have supported me, particularly Tyce Shideler and Scott Dobberstein. I would also thank my good friend Aaron David for engaging me in stimulating intellectual discussions that helped me develop my ideas. Finally, I would like to thank my loving and always supportive mother, Karen Lee Chevrier and my four handsome, intelligent and kind sons: Isaiah Suliman Chevrier, Abdoulaye John Chevrier, Alex Azeem Chevrier and Moses Thoth Chevrier.
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<td>Beneficiary Based Survey</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
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<td>CVE</td>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>GIRM</td>
<td>Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania</td>
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<td>IC</td>
<td>Integrative Complexity</td>
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<td>National Institute of Technical Vocational Training</td>
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<td>PBS</td>
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<td>PDEV</td>
<td>Peace though Development, USAID CVE project</td>
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<td>PVE</td>
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<td>RIVE</td>
<td>Radicalization and Involvement in Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>SDI</td>
<td>Sahel Development Initiative</td>
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<td>SRO</td>
<td>Sahel Regional Office</td>
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<td>TSCTP</td>
<td>Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership</td>
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<td>TVET</td>
<td>Technical Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>VEO</td>
<td>Violent Extremist Organization</td>
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Introduction

This applied capstone project (ACP) represents a project design for a USAID project to be implemented in Mauritania likely starting in the fall of 2016. A plethora of relevant social science research and lessons learned from previous USAID countering violent extremism (CVE) projects were leveraged in the design of this preventing violent extremism (PVE) project.

This project has a focus on the youth. Youth unemployment is a critical problem in Mauritania today and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (GIRM) is placing a special emphasis on addressing this issue. Generally, this project will focus on providing market driven vocational training along with a three month pre-requisite thought leadership training program. It is expected that by reducing a core grievance (push factor), youth unemployment, the youth will be less compelled to join extremist movements. The thought leadership training is primarily focused on increasing the pro-social decision making capacities of the youth so they are less susceptible to extremist rhetoric, propaganda and narratives. Thought leadership training will also enhance the likelihood that youth will make positive pro-social life decisions more generally.

The remaining sections of this ACP paper will go into more detail about the context, the problem statement, the detailed description of the project that will address the problem statement and also the analysis and research that supported the design of this project. This project adds a significant and new feature that doesn’t currently exist in the literature surrounding preventing or countering violent extremism, namely, thought leadership training.

Background and Project Description

Context and Background
Geographically, Mauritania covers an area of approximately one million square kilometers, larger than the land area of Egypt and yet has a population of approximately 3.5 million people (1/25 of the population of Egypt), one million of whom live in the capital Nouakchott (Miles, 2015). As a result, the vast uninhabited land with porous borders is a potential breeding ground for terrorist organizations to infiltrate and congregate virtually unnoticed.

Historically, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has taken advantage of these vast uninhabited geographies and porous borders to plan and stage attacks on military and civilian targets. Between the years 2005 and 2011, Mauritania experienced a series of 13 separate terrorism related attacks, including suicide bombings, killing and kidnaping of foreigners, and attacks on military installations and foreign embassies (Miles, 2015). Since that time, Mauritania has increased its security presence and has maintained peace and security throughout the country. The government has also had a moderately successful program of de-radicalization established in some prisons (Boukhars, 2016). As a result, the current administration under President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz views itself as a model of success for others to emulate. However, accounts from local sources suggest that extremist rhetoric has infiltrated local mosques and traditional schools.

Obtaining data demonstrating the trends in the growth of Salafist Islam and its potentially violent outcome in Salafi-jihadism is almost impossible, particularly since the Mauritanian government actively seeks to conceal the true nature of the challenge. Regardless, a plethora of locally sourced information, including information collected during field visits to Mauritania by the design team, make it abundantly clear that more intolerant conservative forms of Islam
(including more radicalized and violent ones) have been growing rapidly in the country and the majority of Mauritanians are very worried about the current situation.

According to a recent report (Boukhars, 2016, p. 1), “Relative to its population size, no other country in the Sahel and Sahara region produces as many jihadist ideologues and high-ranking terrorist operatives as Mauritania does.” The internal radicalization problem has led to the creation of a Salafist prison in Nouakchott where the government has had moderate successes in using Sufi imams to de-radicalize many individuals (Boukhars, 2016). In addition, the Department of State INR Survey (INR, 2014) indicates approximately 30% of all Mauritanians think the United States is at war with Islam and not terrorism; while 51% of Mauritanians have an unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of the United States. It is important to understand that both of these figures are the highest in the Sahel. The survey results suggest that the black and white extremist narrative that the West is at war with Islam has penetrated deeply into Mauritanian society, and remains a risk factor for the radicalization of Mauritanian youth compelling them to join extremist organizations.

Complicating the issue, Mauritania appears to be on the brink of social change as it continues to confront long standing social injustices and divisions existing between ethnic groups, most notably in the continued practice of slavery and the vestiges of slavery that perpetuate an antiquated caste system which consolidates power and resources into the hands of the elite Bidan or white Moor population. The lack of social, economic and political inclusion of the black Haratine population and other sub-Saharan Africans is a continual source of frustration for the country’s largest ethnic population, and a potential flashpoint for instability in the country. Although recent anti-slavery laws signed in 2007 and 2013 have given a legal basis for
the prosecution of slave owners, the implementation of the law is largely ineffective and only results in the conviction of two slave owners since its establishment.

Meanwhile, historical grievances stemming from the violent expulsion of sub-Saharan populations from the Senegal River Valley in the 1980’s and the subsequent unresolved land disputes have remained a source of tension between the sub-Saharan and Moor populations (Miles, 2015). These divisions have contributed to a lack of national identity and promoted a sense of allegiance to ethnic and sub-national political groups rather than country.

In addition to social and political grievances, Mauritania is confronted with high youth unemployment (48.9% for men and 40.7% for women), high poverty (42%) and a lack of formal education (Miles, 2015). While the exact statistics are not available, the vast majority of vulnerable youth attend traditional Qur’anic schools that lack a cursory introduction to the humanities, literature, science and the arts, further contributing to the narrow intellectual landscape and black and white thinking that is so prevalent among extremist organizations. Of those that are fortunate enough to attend a formal lycée only 10% of the students who take the final BAC exam pass and eventually attend university (Miles, 2015). The vast majority of students who are lucky enough to have a limited form of education in Mauritania find themselves lacking in relevant job skills that lead to employment. This can lead to frustrated youth populations with low critical thinking skills and an inability to assess potential life options fully, and who are more likely to adopt negative coping strategies (ie. crime, drugs, and extremism) to survive and meet their needs.

It is also critical to understand that Qur’anic schools and the formal lycée use an outdated and less effective teaching methodology that encourages shallow processing through rote repetition without deeper reflection about and engagement with the material being learned.
Educational research has shown (Lublin, 2003) that teaching approaches that encourage broader student engagement, questioning and critical thinking actually encourage *deep processing* of knowledge which leads to stronger long-term memory of material learned and a critical, open mind capable of making smart choices in a complex world of stress and pressures.

**Problem Statement**

Increasing levels of internal radicalization, particularly amongst disenfranchised youth, within Mauritania in combination with increasing threats to internal stability forming around fault lines of social inequality grievances put Mauritania in a high risk category for the growth and spread of violent extremism (Boukhars, 2016; Miles, 2016). Extremely high rates of youth unemployment (48.9% for men and 40.7% for women) along with an extremely large youth bulge (under 25 are more than 60 percent of population) are pushing the youth into negative coping strategies, including radicalization into violent extremism (RIVE) (Miles, 2016).

A clear lack of *social cohesion* is also evident in Mauritania today. According to a recent USAID CVE assessment in Mauritania (Miles, 2016):

In addressing the drivers that contribute to the current level of vulnerability to extremist violence, the team found that the most important factors are social and political, principally the fundamental lack of social cohesion across groups. Enduring slavery and its legacies, disempowerment of youth, discriminatory (if not degrading) treatment of women, and persistence of social denigration of castes (i.e., jewelers, iron smiths) are all factors which damage the social fiber and make Mauritanian society less resilient and more vulnerable to the appeals of violent extremism. National unity remains tenuous, as the four major ethnic components of society (Arab, Hapulaar, Wolof and Soninke) tend
to identify with their traditional units of social solidarity rather than the larger nation. (p. 2)

The assessment (Miles, 2016) identifies education (both vocational and other) as being critically important to bring hope and opportunity to the youth. The assessment further recognized that the often rudimentary or incomplete nature of religious education, civic education and public education do not provide a sufficient “firewall against an urbanizing, modernizing, and consumerist society that raises expectations without providing sufficient opportunity.” (Miles, 2016, p. 3)

In alignment with our Theory of Change (see next section), Mauritania has high “push” (social injustice grievances) and “pull” factors (VEO attraction – narrative appeal and psycho-emotional allure of VEOs) alongside weak “process” factors (pro-social decision making capacities – informed and empowered agency), particularly among the youth population who are the general target of VEO recruitment efforts. These three factors contribute to and enable the growth of radicalization amongst vulnerable populations in Mauritania. For many youths in Mauritania today these three enabling factors are overlapping thus driving internal radicalization of the youth in Mauritania.

**Push factors (social injustice).**

There are a wide variety of grievances around different social injustices in Mauritania. Of particular note are grievances around social tensions between the white Moors and the black Sub-Saharan Africans, poor educational outcomes and lack of quality education, a lack of job opportunities for the youth, along with high perceptions of government corruption and a system of elite rulership that is failing to meet the demands of its citizens for equity and justice, progress and development (Miles, 2015). Mauritania is also a highly stratified society divided by an
ancient case system placing the nobles (white moors and their marabouts) at the top of the hierarchy with all other castes (ie. warriors, iron workers, storytellers and slaves), who are generally those of Sub-Saharan African decent, at the bottom.

Tensions around the many perceived injustices in Mauritania are extremely high at the moment and Mauritania is clearly in a precarious position (Boukhars, 2016). Grassroots social protest movements and opposition to the ruling class are growing and becoming more active and assertive. According to reports from local Foreign Service Nationals working at the US Embassy in Nouakchott, Sub-Saharan Africans are forming bonds around racial lines with the Haratines and are becoming more aggressive in their approach to demanding their equal treatment and human rights.

The lack of quality education within the country and also the lack of employment opportunities for youth are leading to high levels of youth frustration. According to a recent USAID CVE assessment (Miles, 2016):

Unemployment among youth is very high. According to a report by the National Office of Statistics (ONS) in 2012, the overall rate of unemployment was about 10% although there were wide differences between urban and rural locales. The survey noted that one-third (33.3%) of the jobs in the country were “precarious” (part-time, temporary, casual) and that over half (53%) of current workers are “vulnerable” in that their employment is precarious. A large proportion of young people (15-35 years) are neither employed nor matriculated in the school system. The publication of the report with its figure of 10% proved to be very controversial given the figure of 30% in the Permanent Survey of Conditions of Life and Households (EPCV) study in 2008. (p. 8)
The President of Mauritania made it clear that youth employment is a top priority for Mauritania. Youth frustrations over unemployment and other social injustices are leading many to adopt negative coping strategies rooted in feelings of hopelessness and perceptions of intractable systemic injustice. The GIRM and the U.S. State Department have both tracked a strong rise in various forms of youth delinquency in recent years, including: crime, banditry, prostitution, drugs and RIVE (“Mauritania”, 2014).

All of these grievances around issues of social justice are exacerbated by high poverty rates (42%) and extremely poor access to social services (Miles, 2015). It is clear that Mauritanians, particularly the youth, are in a state of discontent and have generally lost faith in their system of governance. These grievances are being exploited by extremists to bolster their narrative that only God’s law can bring true justice. Many youths are beginning to feel that extremists may have a valid perspective since the current system within their country has continued to fail them in so many ways.

**Pull factors (VEO attraction factors).**

According to a recent report (Boukhars, 2016, p. 1), “Relative to its population size, no other country in the Sahel and Sahara region produces as many jihadist ideologues and high-ranking terrorist operatives as Mauritania does.” The internal radicalization problem has led to the creation of a Salafist prison in Nouakchott where the government has had some moderate successes in leveraging Sufi imams to de-radicalize many individuals (Boukhars, 2016). In addition, the Department of State INR Survey (“INR”, 2014) indicates that approximately 30% of all Mauritanians think that the United States is at war with Islam and not terrorism; while 51% of Mauritanians have an unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of the United States. It is important to understand that both of these figures are the highest in the Sahel. The survey results
suggest that the black and white extremist narrative that the West is at war with Islam has penetrated deeply into Mauritanian society, and remains a risk factor for the radicalization of Mauritanian youth compelling them to join extremist organizations.

On the positive side, Mauritania is historically renowned for its tolerant and deep knowledge and practice of Sufi forms of Islam. Its traditional mahadras educational system is famous throughout the region. If Mauritania’s moderate Islamic scholars are leveraged properly they can greatly reduce the appeal of the Salafi-jihadi narrative through moderate messaging of local, contextualized counter-narratives. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MIA) is taking the issue of internal radicalization amongst the youth very seriously. A source within the GIRM recently shared that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs is currently beginning the process of putting together a manual of “ideological weapons” or counter-arguments to challenge the extremist narratives that are being propagated by extremists in Mauritania today. The MIA noted many of the youths in Mauritania are not properly prepared with counter-arguments when they are approached by radicals. The ministry is hoping that if Mauritanian youth have access to this type of manual they will be better prepared with logical arguments supported by the Quran to defend themselves from jihadi propagandists.

In summary, Mauritania presents many of the factors that can be exploited in extremist narratives (as exemplified by the large amount of regional jihadi ideologues and AQIM leaders who are of Mauritanian origin) but at the same time Mauritania has the positive capacity to delegitimize that same narrative by leveraging the depth of Sufi religious knowledge amongst Mauritania’s religious scholars. The vulnerable and frustrated state of the youth demands the USG think deeply on how best to support a positive narrative developed by Mauritanians themselves to reduce the appeal of the salafi-jihadi master narrative that is so prevalent today.
Process factors (pro-social decision making capacities).

As discussed under push factors, Mauritanian youth have either had no formal or a poor quality/limited education (“Mauritania National”, 2014). Literacy rates in Mauritania rank in the 25th percentile compared to the Sub-Saharan African country average (“Mauritania National”, 2014). Youth who receive a public education rarely attend high school (~20%) and for those that do move on to high school only 10% pass the BAC (Miles, 2015). Many of the most vulnerable youth are only educated in traditional Quranic studies in mahadras that are extremely limited in humanities, science, math, literature and the arts. Also, because of the institutionalization of Islam in the constitution, there is a lack of religious freedom and very little freedom of speech which in turn can lead to limited freedom of thought. Behavioral norms reinforce cognitive norms which in turn reinforce behavioral norms, thus facilitating the status quo.

Poor quality education and weak critical thinking skills.

Research has shown that a lack of formal education or a poor quality rote learning (focusing on memorization and repetition), compliance based formal education does not create the proper stimulation and environment for critical thinking skills to be strengthened (de Bruin, 2015; Eisner, 1985; Franco, 2015; Ijaiya, 2010; Lublin, 2003; Taghva, 2014). Of course daily life and interactions with community members does naturally lead to basic critical thinking, problem solving skills and other important cognitive capacities but without reinforcement through a curriculum of some kind designed to engage students, critical thinking skills will remain relatively under developed (Taghva, 2014; Lublin, 2003). Since the Mauritanian educational system is based on a rote-learning model, compliance and unreflective memorization is the reinforced implicit curriculum (Eisner, 1985) and the cognitive deep-processing through
participatory student engagement that is required to foster reflection, open questioning and
critical thinking is quite absent (Lublin, 2003).

A lack of strong critical thinking skills often leads to poor life decisions. Research has
shown a significant positive correlation with strong critical thinking skills and positive life
decisions away from anti-social behaviors and decisions that can have negative consequences
upon an individual’s life and the life of others (de Bruin, 2015; Franco, 2015). Critical thinking
skills can help to prevent vulnerable youth in Mauritania from making bad choices (ie. drugs,
crime, and extremism) by understanding and thinking logically through the consequences of their
potential decisions, particularly over the longer term. Critical thinking can also reduce gullibility
and susceptibility to simplistic black and white thinking, conspiracy theories, hasty
generalizations and rhetoric with identifiable logical fallacies (Rose, 2015; Bonnell, 2011; "Abu
Dhabi", 2014).

**Limited perspectives – restrictive social norms, insular life experience, knowledge and
thought taboos.**

Societal social norms can play a restrictive role on ways of thinking, attitudes and
people in some group believe to be normal in the group, that is, believed to be a typical action, an
appropriate action, or both.” (p. 7). These norms are partially limited by the insular nature of
Mauritania’s sparsely populated geography. Mauritania is very large geographically (~1 million
square km) but with a relatively small overall population (~3.5 million people) (Miles, 2015).
Mauritania is a society set within the framework of institutionalized traditional Islam. Islam is
how Mauritanians define their worldview and religious ideas are at the heart of how
Mauritanian’s think or don’t think about the world.
The religious views of vulnerable youth often prevent them from considering other perspectives not explicitly sanctioned by their religion. Many ideas, thoughts or discussion topics may be considered sinful because they are viewed as potentially threatening to strongly held religious beliefs, regardless of whether they are correct or not within a studied context of Islam (Tetlock, 2003). Islam, in its less profound interpretation, often leads youth to avoid ideas, discussions or experiences that threaten their defined religious boundaries and values. They often echo the beliefs of one another which creates a strong sense of in-group with the disbelievers (kafir) representing a clear out-group. This leads to a limited ability to appreciate alternative perspectives, worldviews and concepts – a narrowing of the ability to understand in different ways and a closed mind. It is important to note here that most sufi scholars believe in questioning and deep thinking in order to strengthen faith and believe the Quran itself encourages this type of deep knowledge seeking. Since most vulnerable youth do not have this depth of religious understanding they tend, instead, to hold firmly to their prejudices and opinions and don’t make a common practice of trying to see from the vantage points of others outside of their localized context, their in-group – their reference group (Mackie, 2015).

This insularization of thought and behavior according to the societal social norms defined primarily by their religion and culture can lead to profound misunderstandings about perceived out-groups. In-group dynamics can lead to the dehumanization of out-groups (i.e. “the evil West”, “the evil zionist Jews”, etc.) and a closed mind that is unwilling to consider the potential validity of perspectives (even perspectives not related to religion) coming from perceived out-groups (Bandura, 2012). This insularization of thought and behavior can also reinforce an echo-chamber of ideas being shared within the in-group. This is particularly worrisome when the ideas being echoed are becoming more and more radical.
Research on integrative complexity (IC) is very relevant to a situational analysis of vulnerable youth in regards to their ability to make pro-social life decisions. Integrative complexity is a research psychometric that refers to the degree to which thinking and reasoning involve the recognition and integration of multiple perspectives, possibilities and their interrelated contingencies. High complexity of thought (high IC) has been shown to be highly correlated to the ability to resolve conflict peacefully and negotiate through one’s ability to see value in perspectives different from one’s own whereas extremely low complexity of thought (low IC) has been correlated in individuals just before acts of violence and terrorism (Suedfeld, 2010). Essentially research has shown that low IC (a more closed mind and simplistic polarized thinking) acts as an **amplifier for vulnerability to other factors that might radicalize an individual** (Savage, 2015). The weak educational situation in Mauritania today alongside the insular thought norms restricted by geography, religion and tradition leads to a lower level of critical thinking skills and a limited ability to see from other perspectives. This limited cognitive capacity is referred to as low integrative complexity (low IC) and makes one more susceptible to radicalization into extreme thinking and beliefs.

**Urbanization, globalization and the destabilization of identity, meaning and purpose.**

As youth from rural areas continue to rapidly migrate to urban centers, particularly Nouakchott, their sense of identity, meaning and purpose begins to unravel as family linkages become weaker (on account of distance) and tribal and cultural identities become challenged by the intermingling of diverse peoples and exposure to different ideas and experiences in the urban milieu. Confusion around identity is currently leading many youths in Mauritania to become interested in reform movements within their religion, particularly radical Islam, in an effort to redefine a new identity, meaning and purpose for themselves - a personal anchor in a rapidly
globalizing world (Boukhars, 2016; Miles, 2015). As Dr. Sara Savage (2013) from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge states:

A number of researchers suggest that the wider context for radicalization and involvement in violent extremism (RIVE) is the increased interpenetration of cultures arising from globalization. This increases the likelihood of conflict as groups with differing value hierarchies come into ever closer contact, leading to uncertainty about identity and behavioral norms, particularly amongst young people whose developmental task is to find answers to these questions. In a response to perceived threats to values, groups can retrench to polarized, value monist position…Self-definitional uncertainty is strongly associated with wanting to identify with groups that are highly orthodox, simple and consensual. This is what extremist groups offer. Groups with clear value hierarchies become attractive as they provide certainty and resolve the ambivalence of competing values in the globalized condition. They do this through eschewing value complexity and providing simple, black and white solutions to a complex world. (p. 45)

This new sense of anomie created by urbanization and its comingled cousin globalization places youth in a very vulnerable position where they can be swayed in new directions by external influences, both good and bad, as they search for a new anchor for a sense of meaning, purpose and identity. This is why at this critical juncture the USG needs to reach out to strengthen their capacities to make positive, pro-social life decisions, particularly since the extremists and criminal networks in Mauritania are reaching out currently and tempting the vulnerable youth to go down radical and dangerous paths. The youth are searching for a new platform and we also need to be there to help them in their search.

Theory of Change
The overarching theory of change for this PVE project states: if push (social injustice) factors and pull (VEO attraction) factors are reduced and process (pro-social decision making capacities) factors are strengthened within vulnerable youth populations then the risk of radicalization amongst vulnerable youth will be significantly reduced.

Push and pull factors have been previously discussed in CVE related literature (Bacon, 2011), however “process factors” is a new category created during the design of this project. Process factors represent all of the psychological and cognitive elements within an individual that might lead one person to join a VEO and yet another person under the same environmental and social conditions of push and pull factors to choose a more socially constructive path\(^1\). Process factors are intimately tied to the idea of human agency and strong process factors lead to informed and empowered agency.

The design team has identified process factors as a key gap in previous CVE programming in the region. These three “P’s” are what our design team considers to be the three enabling factors of radicalization. Listed here are brief definitions for these terms that have been adapted for this project\(^2\):

1. **Push Factors** – Grievances based on real or perceived social injustices. Social injustice can be within the economic, social or political realms. Examples include: unemployment, poverty, lack of access to basic services, marginalization, social inequalities, human rights abuses, government corruption, lack of inclusion, etc.

2. **Pull Factors** – These are all the various factors that might attract or draw an individual to a VEO. These include both the appeal of the extremist narratives and rhetoric and also

\(^{1}\) It should be noted that the concept and term “process factors” has been coined during this project design and is a new term for the countering violent extremism literature to consider.

\(^{2}\) Please note that “push” and “pull” are terms that are quite germane to countering violent extremism literature but “process” is newly defined by this project.
the allure of various psycho-emotional factors (i.e. the “jihadi cool” factor, need for meaning, purpose and identity, need for adventure, romanticization of war, glory, brotherhood, etc.). It is important to note here that the allure of monetary incentives (which are related to poverty, an identified push factor), may also be considered as a pull factor – particularly in the Sahel amongst poor vulnerable youth who often make up the rank-and-file of VEOs.

3. **Process Factors** – These constitute the third and perhaps most critical enabling factor for radicalization. They are called process factors because these are all the cognitive factors and mental capacities the human mind uses to process experiences in order to make decisions – both pro-social and anti-social. *Essentially, process factors are all of the individual’s decision making capacities used to PROCESS and make sense of environmental pressures from the PUSH and PULL factors in order to make a decision regarding a course of action going forward.* Pro-social process factors include: critical thinking skills needed to see through rhetoric, perspective taking and empathy (appreciation of alternative perspectives to avoid black and white thinking and approaches), value-focused decision making and the reinforcement of pro-social values incompatible with violence and intolerance, lateral thinking skills (“outside the box” - innovative thinking) and the facilitation of a *growth mindset* (particularly important for ensuring project sustainability).

On the next page is a simple Venn diagram (figure 1) visualizing the three enabling factors (three “P’s”) of radicalization:
Figure 1. Venn diagram depicting the three enabling factors of radicalization. When all three overlap the propensity for an individual to radicalize is higher.
Programming that can positively address all of these three enabling factors of radicalization (i.e. push, pull and process) can go a long way to reducing the risk of the growth of violent extremism in Mauritania. See figure 2 below - Theory of Change:

![Diagram of Theory of Change](image)

Figure 2. Theory of change for the NOUR project. Diagram shows the three enabling factors of radicalization and the interventions that should address them.

This project will not be able to address all of these factors with the current limited funding available (~$5.5 million dollars over 5 years) for PVE efforts in Mauritania. This is why
collaboration will be critical on many components of this strategic approach where there isn’t anticipated money for USAID funded activities currently. The more we address all the various factors in this strategic framework the more the expected reduction in the risk of growth of violent extremism.

**Analysis & Critical Application**

In the following section the two overarching purposes (objectives) of the project will be explained in detail and will serve as a detailed description of the project. After each purpose description illustrative examples of activities along with illustrative results will be detailed. It is important to note here that this project and its two overarching purposes came out of the creation of a PVE strategy (see causal results framework in Appendix A) for this project design. The strategy was useful in framing the overarching analysis of causal factors and root drivers of radicalization in Mauritania.

After going over the project details in the project purposes a description of the beneficiary targeting and geographic targeting for this project will be described. Risks, both threats and opportunities, for this project will be in the section following the targeting section. The final section will detail all of the research and analysis that was leveraged to inform the design this project.

**Project Purpose I: Improve Social Justice Among Targeted Communities by Addressing Core Grievances (Push Factors)**

Under Project Purpose 1 the NOUR project will focus on reducing identified top-line social justice grievances within Mauritania. Generally speaking, the three top-line issues identified are: high youth unemployment rates, inequalities and growing tensions between sub-
Saharan Africans (including the Haratines) and the white Moor ruling class, and high perceptions of government corruption.

These top-line social justice grievances will be addressed in the NOUR project primarily through market-demand driven vocational training and job placement support services, the creation of a youth think tank that will focus on proposing solutions to complex problems faced by Mauritanians, and the training of civil society organizations (CSO) and political party members on inclusive democratic approaches and engagement methodologies.

Available market information and a new market survey will be conducted to determine where there is real demand for particular technical skills and also which soft skills are particularly needed within Mauritanian society today. Soft skills are all the non-technical skills that help an individual succeed in the workforce. These soft skills might include: problem solving skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, pro-activeness, professionalism, leadership, work ethic, etc. The vocational training will be tailored to where the actual job needs exist within Mauritania currently. Many previous programs have failed to train in market relevant skills which may have led to enhanced feelings of relative deprivation from a build up and let down of aspirations and thus effectively increased the vulnerability of these youth to extremist messaging. The NOUR project plans to support market demand drive (based on a market assessment) vocational training for the most vulnerable (least educated and jobless) in manual labor type activities (i.e. carpenter, mechanic, electrician, tailor) and also professional vocational training (i.e. accounting, computer work, administration, etc.) that is appropriate for the literacy and educational levels of the slightly less vulnerable (secondary education or higher and jobless). It is important to note here that the NOUR project considers all unemployed youth as vulnerable.
Before beginning vocational training the youth will receive training on demand-driven soft skills to enable them to succeed in the workforce. Soft-skills include: pro-activeness, professionalism, self-control, appearance, detail orientation, work ethic, timeliness, communication skills, etc. Along with these soft-skills the youth will have job search and success mentoring and coaching to enable them to not only select the right vocational program but also to secure a job after graduation and succeed in the longer term in the workforce. The project will also provide to youth networks, relevant CSO’s and guild networks as needed to ensure that youth graduates can connect to employment opportunities and succeed in the longer term in the workforce.

The NOUR project will also support the creation of a youth think tank to leverage the youth of Mauritania as an asset to support the GIRM in resolving difficult social problems. The youth think tank will be composed of identified youth thought leaders already within Mauritanian society along with a few experienced adult facilitators. Thought leaders are defined here as individuals with highly developed innovative, creative and critical thinking skills that are respected within their society for their novel ideas and strong analytical skills. The think tank itself will be set up as a safe space for dialogue amongst youth thought leaders (and other youth, CSO representatives and international consultants as needed) so that they can analyze seemingly intractable problems within their society and provide guidance for a way forward. The many prominent social issues within society – like the growing tensions between the white Moors and the Sub-Saharan Africans and Haratines – can be addressed and discussed by the youth within the confines of the safe-space of the youth think tank. The government, the G5 and civil society can propose complex problems to the youth think tank and the think tank will propose creative solutions and road maps to move forward. The think tank will facilitate a “win-win” relationship
between the youth and the government in order to reduce the increasingly polarized feelings that currently exist of the “government against the people”. The think tank will enable the youth to be seen as a great asset for the country instead of a challenge.

The most ambitious, creative and resourceful amongst the youth in this program will be identified during a preparatory three-month thought leadership training program (see Purpose 2). This smaller subset of youth will be offered an opportunity to be part of a social entrepreneur incubator program. This incubator will train the youth on the skills needed to manage a small business, help the youth nurture a novel business idea and help them to obtain small start-up grant funding or micro-credit as needed.

The youth think tank will also be the entry point for youth seeking orientation and coaching on how to find a job and what might be the appropriate vocational training they should be embarking upon. From the guidance vulnerable youth receive upon orientation in the think tank they can make well informed decisions as to what type of training will best suite them. Soft skills training will be the last module at the end of the though leadership training program offered by the think tank as a perquisite to graduating through a vocational training program. Job search, placement and mentoring support will be facilitated by the youth think tank in conjunction with vocational training partners.

In order to reduce perceptions of government corruption, particularly perceptions of elite rulership by the white moors with little opportunity given to the Sub-Saharan Africans and Haratines, the NOUR project will focus on two key types activities: inclusive and democratic capacity building for government officials and CSOs representing marginalized peoples within Mauritanian society and relationship building and social networking support between GIRM representatives and representatives from CSOs representing marginalized groups. By training in
inclusive governance and providing social opportunities to improve relationships and enhance communications between GIRM representatives and CSOs representing marginalized peoples, the NOUR project hopes to open new opportunities for inclusive and democratic governance in Mauritania.

**Sub-purpse 1.1- incomes and investments for vulnerable communities improved.**

**Illustrative interventions (inputs).**

- Market demand surveys supported to assess current technical and workforce soft skills needs in Mauritania
- Provide TVET training to 1000 vulnerable youth
- Support INAP on TVET curriculum reform efforts (ie. integration of critical thinking, creative problem solving and enhanced student participation)
- Support INAP’s expansion into ICT training by installing solar panels to power ICT training facility
- Support ICT training equipment purchases for INAP
- Support INAP through thought leadership training for 20 TVET instructors
- Support the creation of a center of excellence for vocational training for mahadras graduates which integrates thought leadership and soft skill training into curriculum
- Social entrepreneurial training and micro-finance support for 100 exceptional vulnerable youth
- Youth think tank will provide orientation services to vulnerable youth seeking employment
- Job search, placement and mentoring support will be facilitated by the youth think tank in conjunction with vocational training partners
Create a structural vulnerability map of Mauritania to be used as a tool to influence new development investments from the GIRM and wider donor community into vulnerable communities

*Expected results.*

- 1000 new jobs for vulnerable youth created as a result of USG programming
- 1000 vulnerable youth complete TVET training
- 1000 vulnerable youth have made informed decisions about which vocational training is most appropriate for them based on orientation with youth think tank
- 1000 vulnerable youth have job search, placement and mentoring support facilitated by the youth think tank in conjunction with vocational training partners
- 100 new social enterprises started up by vulnerable youth as a result of USG programming
- 20 INAP instructors trained in thought leadership
- 2 INAP ICT training centers have solar panels installed and are self-powered through solar energy
- 2 INAP ICT training centers have state of the art ICT training equipment needs met
- 1 INAP *center of excellence* to act as a cutting edge vocational training model created for mahadras graduates integrating thought leadership and soft skills training into curriculum
- Donors and/or the GIRM have decided to invest in vulnerable geographies on account of the structural vulnerability map of Mauritania

*Sub-purpose 1.2- social inequalities reduced.*

*Illustrative interventions (inputs).*
• Youth think tank will facilitate inter-ethnic/ cross-cultural dialogue among youth groups on issues of community importance.

• Youth think tank will learn from and leverage knowledge from international experts by organizing workshops and panel discussions with them to exchange and dialogue on critical issues of community importance.

• Youth think tank will work with the GIRM to analyze and propose solutions or road maps to serve as guidance for addressing complex problems proposed by government.

• Youth think tank will exchange learning and ideas with CSOs representing marginalized groups in order to empower CSOs with innovative approaches to peaceful societal transformation.

Expected results.

• GIRM implements solutions or elements of solutions proposed by youth think tank.

• Positive perceptions of the youth as an opportunity rather than a challenge are increased within the GIRM as a result of the win-win relationship developed with GIRM and youth think tank.

• Perceptions of government political will to address social inequalities improved amongst youth leaders.

• New ideas and opportunities implemented as a result of exposure to workshops with international experts on critical issues of community importance.

• CSOs empowered with new ideas and approaches that had facilitated positive changes for marginalized communities.

Sub-purpose 1.3- perceptions of just and inclusive governance improved.
Illustrative interventions (inputs).

- Provide training to CSOs representing marginalized groups on participatory governance and parliamentary engagement
- Train political parties on political party platform development and inclusive stakeholder engagement
- Hold regular networking/social events where political representatives can meet informally with and exchange with representatives from CSOs representing marginalized groups
- Hold facilitated workshops in *World Café* format where CSO representatives can exchange and dialogue with high-level government decision makers

Expected results.

- 5 CSOs representing marginalized groups trained on participatory governance and parliamentary engagement
- Political party platforms inclusive of key citizen demands through CSO input
- Dialogue and relationships improved between CSOs representing marginalized groups and GIRM representatives
- Perceptions of just and inclusive governance improved

Key assumptions.

- GIRM buy-in to youth think tank on account of collaboration with GIRM
- Mauritania doesn’t destabilize during life of project
- Sufficient market demand for new jobs exists
- Youth unemployment is a key push factor contributing to youth radicalization
• Improved inclusive dialogue will contribute to a reduction in social inequalities and perceptions of government corruption over time

**Project Purpose II: Strengthen Pro-Social Decision Making Capacities of Targeted Youth Populations and Key Influencers (Process Factors)**

Under Project Purpose 2 the NOUR project will focus on strengthening prosocial decision making capacities of vulnerable youth and other key community influencers. This will be done through a non-formal three month thought leadership immersion program that will be a prerequisite for vocational training. The thought leadership curriculum will be an innovative and tailored curriculum reinforcing cognitive capacities and reflective skills that contribute to prosocial decision making thus increasing the likelihood of future pro-social life decisions vs. anti-social ones (ie. crime, drugs, violent extremism).

The NOUR project will establish a thought leadership training center within the youth think tank facility. A new and innovative non-formal experience based learning curriculum will be tailored to include all elements of thought leadership identified within this project. The training is designed to reinforce: critical thinking skills, the ability to appreciate and reflect upon alternative perspectives, prosocial values incompatible with violent extremism, lateral thinking skills (“outside the box”), and the *growth mindset* in order to orient the youth towards continuous learning and growth. All of these thought leadership skills are discussed in this PAD as “process factors”. These are the cognitive skills that will not only help prevent the youth from radicalizing into violent extremist ideologies but also, importantly, will help them succeed in their lives more generally and be positive and creative change agents within their society. The broad range of positive impacts coming from thought leadership training reflects the power of primary
interventions. Primary intervention will be discussed in more detail in the targeting section.

Figure 3 below illustrates the role of process factors in behavior change.

**Figure 3.** The importance and role of informed and empowered agency (process factors) in preventing violent extremism. New cognitive approach in Psychology takes into account the thought processes of an individual in decision making.

These thought leadership skills will explicitly enhance integrative complexity (IC) levels in trainees. As stated in the problem statement, integrative complexity is a research psychometric that refers to the degree to which thinking and reasoning involve the recognition and integration of multiple perspectives and possibilities along with their interrelated contingencies. Higher IC levels have been shown to lower an individual’s susceptibility to extremist thinking and violence by increasing the complexity of one’s value base (by reinforcing values incompatible with violent extremism), complex reasoning skills and appreciation of
alternative perspectives. For example, extremists generally focus on the magnetic pull of one value, such as “justice for the community”, to the exclusion of “individual liberty”. Increasing IC levels enables people to explore the importance of both ends of the various value spectrums. Dr. Sara Savage (2013), a leading researcher on IC and its relationship to radicalization, from the Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge explains:

A vast literature supports that complex information processing, undergirded by the attempt to maximize multiple competing values, is associated with non-violent strategies for conflict resolution. A large body of cross-cultural research by Peter Suedfeld and colleagues shows that conflict is predicted when integrative complexity (IC) drops from its recent baseline (measured in the communication of political decision makers); conversely when IC rises, peaceful solutions to conflict ensue. Because individuals are more receptive to messages with a complexity level similar to their own then thinking about conflicted social issues, increasing complexity builds resilience to the low complexity communications and recruitment efforts of extremists. (p. 47)

Dr. Sara Savage (2015) further states:

Increased value complexity leads to increased empathy (for one’s own and other groups), which leads to increases in IC and higher logical reasoning. This increase leads to an adaptive conflict style and pro-social behavior and well-being, including improved academic achievement…IC abilities, and their equivalents, empower people to engage more fully with wider society by increasing their ability to perceive some validity in opposing viewpoints, and providing methods to integrate those viewpoints with their own practical solutions without a loss of value integrity. These skills in “critical thinking plus”
are needed for resolving practical social, economic and political problems that give rise to extremism in the first place. (p. 45)

In addition, Jo Malone (2015) a senior project manager at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and Religious Education Advisor states:

To counter extreme and divisive narratives and ideology, education must open the mind of young people to be comfortable with diversity and difference, reducing misunderstanding, prejudice and stereotypes. It is important that young people can differentiate between different value positions, respecting and appreciating that each has its worth for the person or people holding it; what Savage terms “Developed Integrative Complexity” (IC). It is significant that research shows that lowered IC (a more closed minded and simplistic thinking process) “acts as an amplifier for vulnerability to extremism”. (p. 1)

Vulnerable youth being supported with vocational training will go through this prerequisite three month thought leadership training program. The thought leadership training will not only ensure pro-social life decisions into the future but will also enhance the students learning outcomes during their vocational training and stimulate innovation within whatever vocational job sector the youth become employed in. Key community influencers will also go through thought leadership training to better spread and catalyze a broader pro-social mentality shift in the region. Key community influencers will include: INAP trainers, GIRM representatives, influential imams, women leaders, village chiefs, etc. These key community influencers will act as catalytic change agents through the process of organized diffusion, spreading new pro-social ways of thinking about and analyzing the world and alternative perspectives with those they reach thus encouraging a broadening of this democratizing
mentality shift – a regional enlightenment. This democratization process is facilitated by enhancing the respectful and free exchange of knowledge, new ideas and ways of thinking, thus strengthening what the renowned German sociologist and philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, refers to as the public sphere (Habermas, 1962).

After finishing the thought leadership training program, the youth graduates will be given certificates and photo identity cards so that they can feel proud to be part of this new prestigious regional youth network of thought leaders. This will be a small incentive but likely one that graduates will appreciate and thus will have a motivating effect on them to continue to engage in the network. This card will likely be prestigious and will be an aid to securing employment.

Youth graduating from thought leadership training will also be entered into a talent database so that youth in the network can connect with each other based on relevant skills and talents that will be tracked in the system. The idea is this network is really a new alternative youth social movement that can bring about positive development and change through innovative thinking and the sharing of employment opportunities. This youth social movement of employed thought leaders can serve as a positive alternative to the violent extremist movement that compels too many young people today. The thought leadership will empower youth with the capacities and knowledge needed to solve their own life problems and the complex problems facing their country.

This activity expects to have broader positive catalytic effects beyond the direct youth beneficiaries within the program. The idea here is that youth graduating from this program will reintegrate into their lives and jobs with a new mindset, reinforced pro-social values and strengthened ability to see from other perspectives - essentially a new broader approach to reflection along with stronger critical thinking and reasoning capacities. These new ways of
thinking and open-mindedness are anticipated to influence other youth within their social networks and spread through social contagion on account of mirroring/modeling behavior. This will begin the catalytic process enabling a broader mindset change amongst the youth in Mauritania and even beyond into the region. By broadening the intellectual capacities and horizons of the youth they can truly be empowered to enlighten the region and overcome the complex problems they are facing today.

**Sub-purpose 2.1- role of pro-social values in decision making enhanced.**

**Illustrative interventions (inputs).**

- Non-formal participatory training will allow students to express the values that are important to them. Once values are identified by students themselves, a subset of *prosocial values incompatible with violent extremism* (ie. diversity, caring, equality, freedom, openness, etc.) will be identified for use in a variety of activities designed to activate and thereby implicitly reinforce these values. Activities include: explaining to members within small groups why these values are important to them, expressing these values through visual media and role-playing in a scenario where one must defend these pro-social values.

- Students will be taught how to reflect on decisions in light of the pro-social values they have self-identified with using locally relevant examples. Exercises will be designed with hypothetical scenarios where team members need to think through appropriate actions working through their values lens using experiential exercises that enhance learning through embodied cognition.
• Role-playing and miming will be used by students to express pro-social values in order to reinforce and strengthen them leveraging embodied cognition to strengthening neural connectivity surrounding these values.

*Expected results.*

• Enhanced value preference ranking for identified pro-social values based on the Schwartz Value Inventory (SVI) amongst beneficiaries trained
• Qualitative pro-social behavior changes identified by family members, friends or colleagues of beneficiaries trained
• Higher integrative complexity (IC) scores amongst program beneficiaries
• 1100 vulnerable youth trained in pro-social value-focused decision making
• 120 key community influencers trained in pro-social value-focused decision making

*Sub-purpose 2.2- critical and creative thinking skills enhanced.*

*Illustrative interventions (inputs).*

• Visual/picture based and oral based non-formal participatory training in skills relevant to critical thinking such as:
  
  o Students will create and identity basic logical fallacies in arguments
  
  o Strengthening categorization skills by creating pictorial Venn diagrams by identifying three pictures/images that when put together represent a particular concept best. After, student groups explain why they chose what they did to reflect the concept best.
  
  o Exercises in analogy creation based on local scenarios
  
  o Test students evaluation skills by presenting arguments and asking students to explain whether they are believable or not and why
• Learning to identify implicit claims in enthymemes (arguments with unstated/hidden implicit claims) and how to create them

• Teach students about the dangers of hasty generalizations and how to resist them.

• Basic media literacy training to enable students to see through rhetoric

• Continuous use of the Socratic questioning methodology during training sessions. Constantly asking students to explain why and bring reasoning to any claim they make.

• Use local proverbs and have students give examples of the proverb’s relevance to real world situations

• Visual/picture based and oral based non-formal participatory training in skills relevant to the ability to appreciate alternative perspectives (i.e perspective-taking) and empathize with others such as:

  • Expose students to many different viewpoints on a locally relevant issue thought video or other presentation format and have groups divide and discuss the different viewpoints that are possible on one particular issue

  • Have groups role-play and advocate for viewpoints that are more progressive and pro-social than perhaps their own in order to reinforce appreciation of those perspectives leveraging counter-attitudinal advocacy for attitudinal change from cognitive dissonance theory.

  • Have students explain the value of democracy and the importance of human rights and freedom from their own perspective using their own self-identified local values and terminology for these concepts
• Have students learn about and explain false dichotomies. Students will then work with examples to deconstruct false dichotomies such as shar’ia vs. democracy.

• Visual/picture based and oral based non-formal participatory training in skills relevant to lateral thinking (thinking “outside the box”, creative and innovative thinking) such as:
  o Students will engage in riddle solving. Riddles force students to engage to lateral thinking to solve them; direct analytical approaches fail with riddles.
  o Students will engage in problem solving scenarios where the solution is not obvious. This will force them to use ingenuity based on limited resources available to solve problems.
  o Students will be asked to provide creative and non-typical solutions to common challenges within their society.
  o Students will be encouraged to keep open minds and not to make fun of another student’s idea or thinking just because it is different or outside of the norm.
  o Students will learn how to brainstorm and leverage stream of consciousness to come up with new ideas

• Visual/picture based and oral based non-formal participatory training which will encourage the Growth Mindset and Need for Cognition (NC), such as:
  o Continuous use of the Socratic questioning methodology during training sessions. Constantly asking students to explain why and bring reasoning to any claim they make.
  o Using exercises to build the capacity to aspire such as having students share stories about their favorite role models and how they have affected their community or even the world
Present stories of impoverished or marginalized individuals who have gone on to have a significant impact on the world for the better.

Have students develop a roadmap for their lives showing how they can have a positive social impact on their community, country or even the world.

Give students opportunities to express and present on a topic that interests them the most in life.

Have students think through what their true passions and unique abilities are and how they can leverage those abilities and passions to earn a living or even change their community.

**Expected results.**

- Critical reasoning skills will show a significant increase as measured using Raven’s Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) as a result of thought leadership training
- Higher integrative complexity (IC) scores amongst program beneficiaries
- Qualitative critical and creative thinking related behavior changes identified by family members, friends or colleagues of beneficiaries trained
- 1100 vulnerable youth trained in critical and creative thinking skills
- 120 key community influencers trained in critical and creative thinking skills

**Sub-purpose 2.3- capacity for moral disengagement reduced.**

**Illustrative interventions (inputs).**

- Visual/picture based and oral based non-formal participatory training in skills relevant to reducing the student’s ability to morally disengage such as:
o Engage students in role-playing exercises where they explain a position from an out-group’s perspective. For example, act as a non-Muslim explaining why family is important and why freedom of religious belief is important to you.

o Have guest speakers from perceived out-groups (i.e. Americans, Jewish person, Christian) talk about what they love most about Mauritanian culture and the religion of Islam. This can help to build relational bridges between in-group and out-group and humanize out-group perceptions.

o Have students present what they like the most about perceived out-groups (i.e. atheists, Christians, Jews, Americans, etc.). This will implicitly reinforce a positive feeling towards those outgroups through the effect of counter-attitudinal advocacy for attitude change aligning with research from cognitive dissonance theory.

Expected results.

- Perceptions improved towards perceived out-groups. Note – When measuring perceptions the survey must include a wide variety of different countries and types of people so that beneficiaries cannot figure out what group perception we are most concerned about. Otherwise, there can be survey bias.

- Student’s level of confidence in conspiracy theories that assume an evil intention from an out-group lowered after training.

Key assumptions.

- Three months of full-time immersion training in thought leadership is long enough to make a substantive positive change in a youth’s capacity to make pro-social life decisions

- Mauritania doesn’t destabilize during life of project
• Local trainers can be trained adequately to truly provide a high quality transformative training in thought leadership.

**Targeting – Beneficiary and Geographic**

**Beneficiary targeting.**

The vocational training program support will target vulnerable youth. Vulnerable youth within the context of this project are defined as unemployed youth. Within this subset of unemployed youth there can be young people with various educational levels. Those with higher educational outcomes (i.e. high school graduates, university degrees) are considered only slightly less vulnerable than youth with little or no education. The thought leadership training will target both vulnerable youth and key community influencers (i.e. imams, village chiefs, government officials, vocational trainers, etc.). The governance portion of this project (out-year funding) will primarily target government officials and CSO representatives.

Youth unemployment has been identified as a key grievance within Mauritania today. The president himself has made youth employment a key priority of his government. Youth unemployment has often been cited as a key reason many youth become rank-and-file members of West African regional terrorist organizations (Onuoha, 2014). Low literacy rates (low educational levels) have also been identified as a key driver for youth susceptibility to extremist narratives (Onuoha, 2014). Youth unemployment rates in Mauritania are some of the highest in the region and educational outcomes some of the lowest. This is why the NOUR project has identified a broad targeting of unemployed youth (both more educated and less educated) for primary prevention programming.

Since vulnerability in this PVE project is defined quite broadly (i.e. unemployed youth) it is necessary to discuss the rationale behind this broader targeting approach. This project is a
primary prevention project. Primary prevention focuses on addressing root distal causes that are common in a society. Primary prevention focuses on the structure of thinking to prevent the possibility of extremist thinking in the first place. Below Dr. Sara Savage (Savage & Liht, 2013) from the Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge explains the difference between primary prevention approaches and secondary/tertiary preventions:

Primary prevention is a term borrowed from the field of medical, psychiatric prevention and is commonly extended to preventing social problems. Primary prevention of a social problem, such as Islamist extremism, is aimed at the broadest relevant population (not necessarily showing signs of the disorder) in order to cover the widest range of causal factors, including broad cultural and social psychological factors. Its research focus is to understand the deep level causes; its aim is to increase resilience and decrease vulnerability, increase social support and decrease stressors, in order to reduce the prevalence of the social problem.

Secondary prevention has a tighter focus. It focuses on early diagnosis, referral and treatment, for example when someone with a radical opinion transitions towards (terrorist) violence…Tertiary prevention applies to an even smaller subset where the disorder is in an advanced state. In this case, it concerns work in prisons with those detained on terrorism related charges. (p. 70-71)

Essentially, tertiary and secondary prevention focus on what promotes or inhibits a transition from radical opinion to violent actions. Primary prevention focuses on preventing an individual from having violent extremist opinions in the first place. Secondary interventions are extremely different particularly since research has shown that there are at least 250 possible
transition points towards or away from violence. Factors are multi-causal, nested and mutually influencing (Orlina & Desjardins, 2012).

Knowing the amount of and complexity of factors that might take an extremist person from extremist thinking to violence is daunting for anyone trying to either profile potential radicals for a program and to develop appropriate tailored interventions for the exponential number of possible permutations of drivers for each individual. Being able to program more distally through a primary prevention approach is more realistic and will have a broader positive impact on the beneficiaries, beyond just PVE but also having positive multiplier effects leading to pro-social life choices and success more generally.

Today extremism is a moving target; it changes its deep structure and methods of persuasion over time. Programming using secondary/tertiary interventions have to constantly dynamically adapt to an ever changing environment – a kind of soft “wack-a-mole” approach is required. Often even if the multitude of relevant causal factors could be identified within a beneficiary subset they may not be amenable to intervention. Common RIVE factors such as relative deprivation and perceived exclusion are widespread. They depend on perceptions of social reality – the core domain of primary prevention.

It should also be noted here that in the Mauritanian context there are many sensitivities around trying to target a particular group of youth (the haratines for example). This would likely have the appearance of an unfair or biased selection process for the project and could be a potential red flag that the project has PVE or other political objectives or that it is biased in the sense that only certain groups of youth from a particular identity group have been privileged to be in the program.
Figure 4 below summarizes the differences between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention programs:

![Diagram showing the differences between primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs]

**Figure 4.** The differences between primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention.

**Geographic targeting.**

According to USAID West Africa’s recent assessment of violent extremism risk in Mauritania - Nouakchott, the south east of the country near the Mali border and the north of the country have been identified as the most vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization (Miles, 2015). On account of this the NOUR project plans to startup its programming for the first year in Nouakchott. Having the location of the initial project easily accessible for continuous monitoring will be critical for such an innovative intervention, particularly in the beginning. Lessons learned
will be adapted and then be scaled to a more vulnerable city or town in the southeastern area of the country after year one.

**Risk (Threats and Opportunities)**

Mauritania is slowly emerging from the fetters of a servile caste system that has repressed the universal rights and freedoms of its largest ethnic population, while at the same time this isolated nation is coming to terms with modernity, which is slowly infiltrating and transforming the cultural norms and perceptions of its people. At the vanguard of this transformation is the youth who will ultimately shape Mauritania’s future. This natural and inevitable transition to a more inclusive and just society, where basic freedoms and privileges exist equally for all of its citizens must and will occur over time. However, the nature of this transition has yet to be determined. While there is still much work to be done, a number of civil society organizations have come into existence to promote basic freedoms and provide services to current and former slaves and victims of abuse. Although their modes of operation differ, their desire to address the ills that affect their society is universal.

The youth unemployment problem also presents a clear risk to the stability of Mauritania. The GIRM at all levels fully recognizes and has prioritized youth unemployment as a key driver of potential instability for their country. Many youths in Mauritania today are turning to drugs, illicit trafficking, banditry/crime and even joining terrorist organizations – many times in search of income to provide for the basic necessities of life. Major tensions around ethnic/racial divisions, human rights issues and youth unemployment are all coming to a head in Mauritania, creating a high risk situation currently that could lead to a violent transition for the country.

Continued social injustice can lead to frustration and anger, potentially leading to violent unrest as the victims of alienation and marginalization arise to demand their basic rights and
freedoms. Unrest in the capital and urban centers could be an open door for violent extremist
groups to enter the country, seeking to capitalize on the lack of order and push their own agenda,
as has been seen time and again in failed states throughout Africa and beyond.

The nature of this transition to a more just society is a real risk to the program but at the
same time it represents a real opportunity through a more creative approach in relation to the
issues. Evidence suggests that by inculcating positive higher-order mental processing factors
youth can be empowered to engage in deeper reflection and meaningful and constructive
dialogues that can help peacefully navigate the country’s transition to a more inclusive and just
society.

At its most fundamental level the NOUR project seeks to affect change by providing
market demand driven vocational training along with training in the soft/life skills needed for
thought leadership. This local capacity development centered approach will facilitate the creation
of a regional youth network of thought leaders committed to positive social change through deep
thinking approaches, constructive dialogue, promoting national unity, and intercultural exchange,
rather than through disruptive and potentially violent means (i.e. violent extremism, violent
protests). By promoting value-focused decision making, and equipping youth with analytical
skills, an openness to alternative perspectives, and a growth oriented mindset desirous of
continuous learning, they will be empowered with the thought leadership capacities essential to
act as catalytic change agents contributing peaceful and progressive solutions to their countries
complex problem set. Thought leadership skills will be scaled to the larger youth community
through social contagion from mirroring/modeling behaviors.

USAID is also conscious of the sensitivities of the GIRM around the issue of violent
extremism and the potential negative perceptions of the population associated with US
involvement in countering violent extremism. Therefore, rather than work at the level of formed ideas (narrative level) and potentially fruitless antagonistic debates (ie. counter-narratives of a religious nature) USAID seeks to influence change by leveraging thought leaders by equipping them with the tools (cognitive “process” factors) necessary to positively affect change through the application of critical thinking and value-focused decision making, designed to promote positive outcomes and assist participants in all aspects of their lives (workforce and beyond) through principles and values that are universally recognized and undisputed. By improving the pro-social decision making and reflective capacities of the youth, they will be better equipped to confront the difficulties that plague their nation and be empowered to make better life choices. By doing so we are increasing the probability of a peaceful transition and improving the lives of the participants, and enabling them to see through the negative propaganda and rhetoric of the extremists.

**Analytical Considerations**

**Youth stakeholder analysis.**

An informal youth stakeholder analysis was conducted for one week from February 22\textsuperscript{nd} through February 26, 2016 in Nouakchott, Mauritania. The youth appraisal was led by Jeremy Chevrier (USAID/Senegal SRO) and Lisa Washington-Sow (USAID - Mauritania Country Rep.)

**Purpose of rapid appraisal.**

The purpose of this stakeholder analysis of the youth context in Mauritania was to better tailor USAID’s activity design to the local youth context. Since the activity being designed is a youth employment and empowerment activity both the current US Ambassador to Mauritania, Larry Andre, and the USAID design team felt that it would be critical to meet with various youth from all classes of society to understand better their own perspectives and challenges.
Youth stakeholders interviewed.

Our team met with a wide variety of youth, from the extremely poor and jobless to the better-off youth thought leaders within Mauritanian society. We had many one-on-one discussions with youth and we also facilitated many larger group discussions with various youth associations and even youth oriented NGO’s. There was also a larger formal youth workshop help at the DCM’s house where about ten youth leaders were invited. Whenever our team met with the youth we spent most of our time listening to what the youth themselves had to say about their frustrations, challenges, opportunities and their visions. We made it clear to the youth that many projects for the youth are often designed without initial involvement with the youth in the design process. Our team was there to listen to the youth first to better inform and tailor our design.

After listening to the youth and their perspectives and ideas, our team would briefly present what USAID is thinking about in terms of an activity design relating to youth employment through market-demand driven vocational training and youth empowerment through thought leadership skills. The team would then ask the youth for comments and feedback on USAID’s design idea.

Overall findings.

Generally speaking, a vast majority of what the youth shared with our team was aligned and confirmed what the team already understood from a broad desk review process and previous visits to Mauritania about the local youth context. The youth were also extremely excited about USAID’s activity design idea and they felt that the USAID activity design was “exactly what is needed”. Many youths noted that the idea was very similar to what they were already thinking themselves but they hadn’t been able to articulate and formulate their idea as well as the design
team had presented. Many noted that without a change in “mentality” their country could never progress forward. They also emphasized the urgency of their situation and that if a project like this didn’t come soon their country would be in real danger of destabilizing in the very near future, particularly because of growing tensions around social issues (lack of social cohesion - racial and other class divisions), youth exclusion in government decision making, radicalization and unemployment.

The core messages that were received from the youth are listed in bulleted form below:

- *Youth unemployment* and the lack of quality education appear to be the primary issues of the youth in Mauritania today.
- Youth feel excluded and frustrated with the current government system, particularly regarding nepotism, and in some cases have lost total faith in the system.
- Many youths talked about the education-job alignment gap. What the youth learn in school doesn’t often align with the job market needs and the technical skills required to get a job. Many youths noted that it is fairly near impossible to get a job “unless you know someone”.
- It was noted repeatedly that in the public school systems most of the teachers are extremely unqualified to teach and many do not even show up to the schools on a daily basis.
- The public school system has polarized divisions within society due to the Arabization of curricula—which excludes many non-Arabic speakers (ie. sub-Saharan Africans) from education. Several youths lamented that their parents were educated under a more diverse and representative educational system where Mauritanians were socially integrated.
• It was noted by many that the youth have great potential; they are energetic, dynamic, naturally creative, willing and ready to learn, and desire to bring change to their society.

• The youth repeatedly pointed out that Mauritania is a “divided country” that is lacking social cohesion and many youths feel continually excluded on many levels. The youth lack a vision of unity and are unsure how to start to bring about positive change. Even some of the Mandela–Washington Fellows who have experienced life in the US are paralyzed about how to break down some of the racial/ethnic barriers in their own country.

• A mentality change is necessary in order for any real sustainable changes to take root within Mauritanian society. The youth emphasized that the old way of thinking needs to be replaced by more modern and open perspectives that could embrace the country’s vast diversity, creating a wider sense of community instead of the distinct and separated identity groups that exist in their divided country today.

• The youth, particularly the most vulnerable, feel that they need holistic guidance and support at virtually all levels. They don’t know what direction to focus their energies in order to have a positive effect on their future. They often feel helpless and even hopeless. The needs of the most vulnerable youth and the needs of the better off youth are not the same and thus any support program must be tailored to each type of youth and their unique life situation. The youth need coaching and guidance in order to navigate the process of bringing about positive change and becoming effective, productive citizens.

• Many youths noted that they have good business ideas but lack the financial support and means to get started. It was noted that microfinance is very limited and usually goes to the family members of those already in the “elite network” of Mauritanian society. Most
vulnerable youth didn’t even know of the existence of microfinance institutions in their country. Youth need positive life strategies which include microfinance and capacity building/coaching in business plans/management particularly because extremist groups are luring vulnerable and marginalized youth with cash, clothing and other attractive material goods.

- The need for a youth recreational center was noted, particularly a place where youth can participate in sports and other positive recreational activities. The youth noted that sports can offer a release from their tensions and also provide an opportunity for social cohesion within their community. There are many ideas around using sports to convene youth around positive life skills: bringing teams together that would not normally interact would break down barriers and allow a space for dialogue.

- The youth emphasized a need for a safe-space for dialogue on particularly sensitive issues around social cohesion, radicalization and government exclusion. It was noted that currently there is no safe-space to discuss these important issues and thus most youth will self-censor themselves in public spaces. Without having a safe-space for dialogue, frustration and tensions have grown which has led to the current polarizations within the country that are threatening the stability of the state.

- Most of the youths our appraisal team talked to note the rapid growth in youth radicalization into more extreme religious ideologies – particularly Salafism. Many are very concerned and frightened about the direction this is going within their country, particularly in light of their long history of a tolerant Sufi form of Islam.

- The youth noted that they are not working together amongst themselves effectively and that there are too many (almost eight hundred) small NGO’s trying to do practically the
same thing with very little funding and low capacity. The need to come together and collaborate with resources and skills in order to achieve any real impact was highlighted.

- English language training was in high demand amongst the youth. Many youths noted that if you spoke English your chances to get a better paying job were improved. English was largely seen as a *gateway language* that could only lead to better opportunities.

- There is a real absence of vocational training. Financing startups is a problem but another issue is the unavailability of equipment, products and services in the country which could help create jobs (diagnostic equipment for mechanics, mobile money/IT based transfer services).

- Many youths noted the large gap between the end of education and actually being able to get a job. The youth pointed out that if one has to wait five years after graduating from university in order to finally get a job most of what has been learned in university will be forgotten already – rendering one’s education useless.

**Conclusion.**

In conclusion, this appraisal team feels that the USAID activity design was already well tailored and aligned to the needs of the Mauritanian youth. Based on this appraisal some final tweaking has been done to the activity design to more precisely align it to the local context. The current activity design model will address the core concerns of the youth based on our rapid appraisal and other previous research.

The activity design is essentially a *youth employment and empowerment program* that will be the basis of the formation of a *regional youth network of employed thought leaders* that can act as change agents catalyzing a broader positive mindset change throughout the region and
perhaps beyond. The two overarching components of the activity design guided by this appraisal and previous research are:

1. Market demand driven vocational training – An assessment will be done first to understand what the technical and soft skills needs actually are within the current job market and then the youth will be trained in these demand driven skills which will improve their chances of finding and keeping a decent job. This vocational training will be the foundation of this activity design.

2. A youth *think tank* with a thought leadership training center – This think tank will provide a safe place for dialogue amongst youth thought leaders to address the complex issues their country is facing. The think tank will work on complex issues and problems facing Mauritanian society today. The think tank can also work on problems submitted by the government, civil society organizations and the G5. Think tank members will conduct a thorough problem analysis and then share guidance in the form of easy to understand visuals and written reports. There will also be a youth *thought leadership training center* within the think tank to train vulnerable youth to be part of a regional network of thought leaders with jobs. Youth given vocational training will also have prerequisite thought leadership training through this training center. Thought leadership training will ensure that youth provided with vocational training become leaders in their professions, make better strategic life decisions and catalyze a broader mindset change in the region.

Graduates of this prestigious program will be part of a new regional youth network of vocationally trained and employed thought leaders. Broader positive change is expected through this network of youth thought leaders through a catalytic mentality shift spread by social
contagion. For example, instead of just creating mechanics, this program will be creating innovative, critically thinking mechanics with game-changing cognitive skills and ideas to bring, not only to their trade, but to society more generally. Positive catalytic change within the larger youth community who are not able to be part of this program in a direct way will occur by natural social contagion through modelling/mirroring behavior as the graduates go on to interact with other youth in day to day life. Social norms will change gradually as more in the community change.

Clearly there are great needs within Mauritanian society that unfortunately our current limited funding levels cannot fully address. Our activity design reflects a short-term strategy to bring positive change rapidly, particularly relating to the dire youth situation within Mauritanian society currently. A critical longer-term backdrop of programming is desperately needed in high quality education (incorporating the reinforcement of positive social values and critical and creative thinking) that is representative of the language and cultural diversity in the country along with inclusive governance programming in Mauritania. Mauritania also needs programs to focus on social cohesion which convene groups across ethnic/socio-economic lines to find common ground. Such programming needs to intervene at high levels of government to demonstrate political will and to facilitate civil society and other actors to come together in a variety of ways.

It is also clear that Mauritania urgently needs more funding focusing on countering extremist narratives and ideologies. Increased funding is needed though the possible involvement of other regional programs such as PDEV in Mauritania or for support to national level think tanks in advocacy and peace messaging across mahadras and mosques. This positive work would
go a long way to bolster a positive foundation upon which Mauritanian’s can re-build their society in a more integrated manner.

**Additional Analyses**

This PAD design process leverages a broad range of research and evidence that informs the strategic outline, illustrative interventions, and expected results. The knowledge base the design team drew on ranges from USAID and USG CVE guidance and related assessments and evaluations, to new research from social psychology and cognitive science, including: integrative complexity thinking, persuasion theory (elaborative likelihood model), new learning approaches (levels-of-processing effect, growth mindset & need for cognition), critical thinking, decision theory (value-focused decision making), construal-level theory (value-based attitudinal change, theory of basic human values, communications theory (narrative paradigm), ideological research, the psychology of terrorism, moral disengagement theory and nudge theory. See section titled, “Additional analytical and best practices considerations” for details on all of the social science research leveraged by our design team utilized and some key lessons or insights derived therefrom for this PAD.

**USAID CVE lessons leveraged.**

**Assessment: Mauritania countering violent extremism resources and programming** *(USAID/West Africa, 2015) key takeaways.*

a. *Continued support for youth employment through vocational training is needed* - The PAD has an explicit focus on youth employment and vocational training as a core economic grievance in Mauritania today.

b. *Grievances around social injustices (social, economic and political) are creating tensions and fissures which can lead to internal radicalization* - Objective one of this PAD has the
explicit goal of addressing core social justice grievances – social, economic and political.
Topline social justice related grievances that have been identified within Mauritania by the
CVE assessment are exactly the core grievances being addressed by this PAD.
c. *Lack of social cohesion across identity groups* - Under obj. 1 (social justice) this PAD
explicitly addresses social injustices around basic human rights and the need for improved
and open dialogue about racial and ethnic inequalities in Mauritanian society today. The
process factor strengthening in Obj. 2 (pro-social decision making capacities strengthened)
will also strengthen social cohesion within the country by enhancing the ability of the youth
to appreciate different perspectives and strengthening empathy for out-groups.
d. *Corruption and unfair distribution of resources* - Obj. 1 (Social Justice) addresses these
issues under the political and economic IR’s.
e. *Post vocational training programs need better job placement support* - Job placement
support is a core focus under the economic IR of Obj. 1.
f. *Moderate Islamic messengers should be supported and counter-narratives reinforced* - This
is a core component of Obj. 3 (Attraction to VEO’s reduced) through supporting counter and
alternative narratives. It should be noted here that we do not have funding at this time for any
activities under Obj. 3.

**USG sponsored West Africa and the Sahel Regional CVE Conference (August, 2015 –
Nouakchott, Mauritania).**
g. *The importance of leveraging education and research to inoculate the youth against
extremist ideologies* - This is the core purpose of Obj. 2 (process factors – strengthened
decision making capacities) and Obj. 3 (pull factors – reducing the both the ideological
appeal and the psycho-emotional allure of extremist organizations)
h. **Leverage the moderate Islamic history and knowledge base that already exists in Mauritania to lead on regional counter-narrative development** - This is supported in our PAD under Obj. 3 – Counter-narratives supported IR. This is also why Mauritania has a comparative advantage regionally as a base for the propagation of powerful counter-narratives. It should be noted here that we do not have funding at this time for any activities under Obj. 3.

i. **The need for a regional youth CVE-related network was prioritized** - The whole point of the activity design under this PAD is to create a *regional youth network of thought leaders* to catalyze positive mentality and development shifts throughout the region.

j. **The importance of teaching critical thinking, moderation and tolerance to the youth to inoculate against extremist ideologies** - This is an explicit component of Obj. 2 (process factors – strengthened decision making). There will be focused critical thinking training and value-focused decision making training. Social values incompatible with extremism will be reinforced.

k. **Spread values of peace, social cohesion, and acceptance of others** - Obj. 2 of this PAD focuses on implicit reinforcement of positive values that are incompatible with violent extremist ideologies, attitudes and behaviors.

l. **Women need to be better integrated as peacemakers** - This PAD has an underlying assumption that women are critical thought leaders and change agents currently within Mauritanian society. The gender analysis section of this PAD explains further.

**Lessons shared from USAID/WA regarding five years of PDEV programming (2015) key takeaways.**

m. **There is a need for both geographic and programmatic flexibility in CVE programming as the nature of the threat is constantly changing** - This is why this PAD has CLA as a core
cross-cutting approach. We wish to have more periodic shorter, qualitative surveys (every ~6 months) to monitor perceptions and attitude changes more closely in order to adapt our programming in response. Geographic targeting will be set by the local context at the moment we make programmatic targeting decisions. The frequency of possible geographic changes will be limited by funding but we hope to catalyze broader geographic change through the effects of social contagion.

n. Building on country-specific resiliencies can result in more sustainable results - This project design team sees the youth as one of Mauritania’s greatest leverageable assets - particularly acting as positive change agents through thought leadership. The team also sees Mauritania’s long and respected history of mahadras education as well-positioning Mauritanians to create and expand both positive counter-narratives and alternative narratives against violent extremist ideologies.

o. Understanding the complexity of CVE issues requires local capacity to “think outside the box” and critically think. Having these capacities in local partners and communities can make a big difference in terms of programmatic impact - This is at the heart of the thought leadership, soft/life skills component of this PAD (obj. 2, Process factors - Strengthened Decision Making Capacities). The main activity design under this PAD will have a core focus on training youth trainers and vulnerable youth in both critical thinking skills and lateral thinking skills (“outside the box thinking”). The activity hopes to catalyze a broader mindset change amongst the youth through social contagion of these newly adopted cognitive skills.

p. Strengthening local and community level actors and organizations without strengthening national or regional level counterparts reduces programmatic impact potential - This PAD
has an operational approach based upon a collaborative model with local capacity building at its heart. There is currently not enough funding to do everything in the results framework of this PAD so USAID plans to leverage our convening authority to form positive relationships and synergies with other stakeholders - the national government (GIRM) through particular ministries, regional institutions (G5) and beyond (donors) in order to rally other actors in support of various components of this project’s approach.

q. Women need to be engaged more in CVE work but there is still more to be understood regarding their role in CVE - This PAD will have an explicit focus on women as potential key change agents for Mauritania. Many women headed CSOs and NGOs are doing some of the most progressive and effective human rights work in the Mauritania today. Women appear to have comparative advantage on this front and this PAD plans to leverage women overtly in the political and social justice IR’s under Obj. 1 (push factors - Social Justice Improved). Many of the identified YALI program leaders are young women and the new activity designed under this PAD is hoping to leverage YALI women as trainers of the thought leadership network.

r. A broad and deep grassroots network has proven to be the best resource for effectively adjusting and evolving to undermine VE efforts to recruit and operate - This is exactly why our activity design under this PAD will focus on supporting the creation of a regional youth thought leadership network. Our design team believes that if youth are empowered with thought leadership skills and employment opportunities they will be empowered to be positive change agents within their communities and beyond.

s. Implementing partners often are put in a position of danger because of their association with CVE programming - Fortunately, our current activity design under this PAD has no direct
links with CVE per se. This activity will be a youth employment and empowerment program. There will be no CVE framing of our activities.

**Additional analytical and best practices considerations.**

*Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) - Abu Dhabi Memorandum on Good Practices for Education and Countering Violent Extremism (in cooperation with Hedayah - 2014).*

a. *Consider semantics when labeling educational programs as “countering violent extremism” to avoid securitizing the education sector* - This project design team recognizes this issue and has framed the first activity design under this PAD as a “youth empowerment and employment program”. The program will provide youth with the vocational and life/soft skills that they will need to succeed as thought leaders in the workforce and in life more generally. We understand that the program has an internal goal of reducing the risk of growth of violent extremism in Mauritania but that is not how it will be publicly framed.

b. *Use existing empirical evidence to provide the basis for educational curricula development that addresses violent extremism and conduct further research to identify the gaps in knowledge on how education is relevant to studying conditions that lead to violent extremism* - This project design team has leveraged a wealth of new research from the social sciences that have provided the needed evidence base for the development of obj. 2 (process factors - strengthened decision making capacities). This design team feels this project is well positioned with an approach that is grounded in scientific research alongside a strong learning agenda.

c. *An educational training capacity building program should emphasize the concepts of problem-solving and the examination of issues through a “gray” lens as opposed to a black-
Critical thinking skills are useful for challenging violent extremist messages because they reveal the multiple ways of approaching an issue other than the use of violence.

- This is an explicit goal and a core focus of our programming within obj. 2 (process factors - strengthened decision making capacities) of this PAD design.

d. Increase and expand on a curriculum that emphasizes civic education, civic responsibility and human values. It is important to consider how best to highlight the value of civic education in light of a greater demand for math, science, engineering, and medicine rather than social sciences and humanities - This is also a core component of obj. 2 (process factors - strengthened decision making capacities) of this PAD design. IR1 under obj. 2 focuses on reinforcing human values that are incompatible with extremist beliefs, violence and intolerance. Empowering the youth with thought leadership skills is key to improved civic engagement and is a core concept within our first activity design.

e. Offer opportunities for vocational and technical training and emphasize the development of life skills - This essentially sums up exactly what our first activity design under this broader PAD will be - a youth vocational training program with an intensive life skills (thought leadership) component.

f. Relate CVE issues to existing social issues already included in educational curricula. In fact, the activity being designed under this PAD currently does exactly this - The CVE component is actually wrapped up in the thought leadership program which is really the package of decision making skills (“process” factors). These life skills are touted as being critical to making good life choices (ie. away from delinquency, drugs, banditry, extremism and other negative life decisions).
g. **Provide mechanisms for addressing grievances of students in an open and safe way.**

Understanding rhetorical techniques and the ability to appreciate counter-attitudinal perspectives can go a long way to reducing potential heated arguments to respectful and balanced discussions - Most of the process factors under Obj.2 focus on these abilities. Also, under Obj. 1, IR 1 – there is a focus on providing safe spaces for open dialogue on critical social issues.

h. **Engage the media to offer ways of advancing educational approaches to CVE in a formal and informal setting** - Obj. 3 which addresses the various pull factors could potentially leverage the media in its programming. Media platforms can be a highly effective way of promoting both counter and alternative narratives as well as a means to appreciate alternative perspectives and promote positive social values (Obj. 2).

i. **Involve the youth in the development of educational programming related to CVE.** Youth are often perceptive of the conditions that lead their peers to radicalization and recruitment, and can shape CVE programs creatively and in ways that are relevant to their cohort - This is the central reason our activity designed under this PAD is creating a regional youth network of thought leaders. Spreading thought leadership skills (obj. 2 - process factors) is really the key to empowering and enabling the youth to make their own creative agenda to counter violent extremism in a contextualized manner.

j. **Engage community leaders in education to raise awareness of violent extremism and effective techniques to counter it** - Obj. 3 (pull factors) has an explicit focus on counter narrative support primarily through local moderate religious leaders.

**Analysis of relevant social science research.**
a. **Integrative Complexity (Savage, 2013)**

Integrative complexity is a research psychometric that refers to the degree to which thinking and reasoning involve the recognition and integration of multiple perspectives and possibilities along with their interrelated contingencies. Higher IC levels have been shown to lower an individual’s susceptibility to extremist thinking and violence by increasing the complexity of one’s value base (by reinforcing values incompatible with violent extremism), complex reasoning skills and appreciation of alternative perspectives. The process factors (Obj. 2) will have an explicit focus on enhancing IC scores for youth and key community influencers as they go through thought leadership immersion training.

b. **Persuasion theory - Elaborative Likelihood Model (Petty, 1986)**

This dual-process theory of attitude change proposes two major routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. Individuals motivated by a high need for cognition (NC) and deeper thinking tend to focus on the central route (using reasoning and reflection) whereas those with a low-NC tend to be persuaded through the peripheral route (ie. personality of persuader, appearance, reputation, etc.). Understanding these two routes of persuasion our PAD addresses both routes of persuasion used by extremist groups in obj. 3 – the appeal of extremist narrative (central route) and the psycho-emotional allures (peripheral route).


New research has shown that enhancing student interaction and engagement with learning topics, including allowing students to question and critically think about materials presented, fosters a deep level of processing that leads to better long term memory gains and broader
applicability of insights gleaned. Getting students to believe they can learn and grow and that they are not determined (fixed) to be at a particular level of cognitive development garners what is called the growth mindset vs. the fixed mindset. A growth mindset is critical to establish in young learners in order for them to believe in the value of hard work and continuous learning rather than quitting early and giving up easily because they believe they aren’t smart enough or capable of learning. This knowledge of better modes of learning will be leveraged in all training and capacity building components of this PAD. Establishing the growth mindset in the youth thought leaders will be critical to the sustainability and growth of the learning dimensions of thought leadership after the life of the program.

d. Critical Thinking (Rose, 2015 & Bonnell, 2011)

The motivation to think along with the reasoning and logical skills needed embody what is termed critical thinking. Those who have strong critical thinking skills have been shown to be less susceptible to simplistic black and white thinking, hasty generalizations, rhetoric and conspiracy theories. Critical thinking skills help in identifying logical fallacies in claims and also hidden implicit assumptions. Critical thinking skills have also been shown to enhance good life decisions generally (Franco, 2015 & de Bruin, 2015). These skills are also in high demand in the workforce today. They are critical for youth to be able to see through extremist rhetoric and propaganda efforts. Critical thinking will also empower the youth with the skills needed to develop their own counter and alternative-narratives to the extremist narratives. A core component of this PAD is critical thinking training which is under Obj. 2 (process factors – strengthened decision making capacities).

e. Decision theory (value-focused decision making), construal-level theory (value-based attitudinal change), theory of basic human values (Blankenship, 2015 & Blankenship, 2012
Construal-level theory and value-based attitudinal change has shown that attitude and behaviors can be most effectively changed by affecting value preferences through value-priming and activation techniques. This is called the indirect approach to changing attitudes and beliefs vs. the less effective direct approach (ie. arguing with someone about their religious or political positions). Once positive values are reinforced an individual’s choices and life decisions will be “nudged” in a positive social direction. Promoting values that are incompatible with extremism and violence can prevent the decision to join a VEO or commit acts of cruelty and violence against others. Value-focused decision making and the priming of values incompatible with extremism are a core component of the thought leadership program under Obj. 2 (process factors – strengthened decision making capacities).


In 1984 Walter Fischer came up with the narrative paradigm that states that human beings generally understand the world more through stories and narratives rather than some pure form of reasoning or Aristotelian logic. Narratives essentially have to “ring true” and “hang together” well in order for people to believe in them. Compelling narratives leverage localized cultural values, beliefs and archetypes. The salafi-jihadi ideology of extremists today leverages the powerful master narrative that the “West is at war with Islam” in order to polarize a global and widespread jihadi movement. Understanding the powerful role narratives play in attracting individuals to an ideology simply highlights the importance of thoughtful counter-narrative and alternative narrative work that is explicit Obj. 3 (pull factors – narrative appeal and psycho-emotional allure of VEOs weakened) of the Mauritania PVE
results framework (Appendix A), which specifically focuses on supporting homegrown counter-narratives and alternative narratives. There currently isn’t funding for work within this objective under this PAD.

\[ g. \quad \textit{The psychology of terrorism (Brachman, 2008)} \]

There has been a lot written in terrorism literature about the various psycho-emotional factors that can draw an individual to terrorism. Some of the commonly identified psycho-emotional reasons a young person might be drawn to extremist groups are: a lack of meaning, purpose or identity in one’s life, the “jihadi cool” factor, an attraction to a romantic sense of glory, the need for a sense of brotherhood or camaraderie and the youthful need for a sense of adventure and excitement. All of these identified psycho-emotional allures are directly addressed in the PAD under Obj. 3 (pull factors – VEO attraction factors). Under Obj. 3 there is an IR that directly addresses each of these psycho-emotional allures. There currently isn’t funding for work within this objective under this PAD.

\[ h. \quad \textit{Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 2002)} \]

Albert Bandura, a Stanford University Psychologist, came up with the theory of \textit{moral disengagement} in 1986. The theory is that normally moral individuals utilize a particular identified set of psychological techniques to enable them to morally disengage in order to commit acts of cruelty and violence against others. Two of these techniques commonly used by terrorists to justify their acts of violence are: rationalization of the violence (ie. “It’s nothing compared to what the West is doing to Muslims!”) and de-humanization or demonization of an out-group (“other”). This PAD strategy understands the real danger that moral disengagement capacity represents and has explicitly designed an innovative IR under
Obj. 2 (process factors – decision making capacities strengthened) to reduce the youths’ ability to morally disengage.

i. Nudge theory (Thaler, 2009)

“Nudge theory (or Nudge) is a concept in behavioral science, political theory and economics which argues that positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions to try to achieve non-forced compliance can influence the motives, incentives and decision making of groups and individuals, at least as effectively – if not more effectively – than direct instruction, legislation, or enforcement.” (Wikipedia). This soft, more facilitative and subtle approach to attitudinal and behavioral change underlies core components of this PAD’s approach to preventing violent extremism – particularly through Obj. 2 (process factors – strengthened decision making capacities).

**Conclusion**

This ACP paper has attempted to detail a comprehensive and innovative USAID project for preventing violent extremism and radicalization of the youth in Mauritania. The project as explained in this paper has at its core vocational training combined with thought leadership training. This project’s theory of change hypothesizes that by reducing core top-line grievances in Mauritania alongside strengthening pro-social decision making capacities the youth will be less likely to radicalize. Since the project has yet to be implemented it is impossible to derive results and further conclusions until monitoring data is collected during project implementation.

It is critical that with any innovative project design there must be a serious approach to learning and adapting as the project implements. This project should be closely monitored through the collection of relevant indicators so as to learn more about what works, what doesn’t work and why during the implementation process. Based on this learning the project should be
programmatically adapted to be more effective and impactful overtime. Lessons learned from this project should also be shared widely within the USG and beyond in order to inform future PVE interventions.
Appendix A - PVE Results Framework for Mauritania (next pages)
Cross-cutting: Collaboration, Learning & Adapting
**This Objective has sub-sub IR’s.**
See full Objective components in Annex.

“Push”
Influencing the capacities that form ideas and make decisions in order to:

inhibit the ability to decide to join a VEO or commit acts of terrorism

= mutually reinforcing sub-IRs

Value-focused Decision Making
Enhanced role of prosocial values and beliefs in decision making

*(Keeney, 1992)
(Blankenship, 2012)
(Schwartz, 2010)

Cognitive Capacities
Enhanced critical thinking and creative thinking skills

*(Bonnell, 2011),
(Dweck, 2007),
(De Bono, 2015),
(Corman, 2008),
(Festinger, 1959),
(Franco, 2015)

Moral Agency
Reduced capacity for moral disengagement

*(Bandura, 2002)

“Process”

“What we need is a strategy to interrupt and disrupt the interpretive frameworks that exist for audiences around the globe, including, but not limited, to violent extremists. Rhetoric that does little more than say, ‘We’re right and you’re wrong’ does not provide any resources for audiences on either side to interpret meanings anew. Instead, propaganda works only to reinforce the ‘base’ of true believers.” (Corman, 2008)
Central Route (Petty, 1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Persuasion

Peripheral Route (Petty, 1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Persuasion

```
Ultimately, it is not going to be enough to defeat ISIS in the battlefield," Obama told representatives from more than 100 nations and civil society groups. "We have to prevent it from radicalizing, recruiting and inspiring others to violence in the first place. And this means defeating their ideology. —Barak Obama (Miller, 2016)
```

"The purpose of communication is to perturb the system and overcome its tendency to interpret and attribute in standard ways."—(Corman, 2008)
Appendix B - Other Helpful Conceptual Visualizations

Behavior change approaches to PVE and USG sensitivity

Metanarrative level
Ideological beliefs
(ie. debating religious beliefs about meaning of jihad)

Foundational level
evaluative and decision making factors
(ie. discussing our values and how they affect our decisions, reinforcing cognitive capacities)

*(Keeney, 1992)
(Blankenship, 2012)

Level of Formed ideas and Behaviors

Attitudes

Level of Idea formation and Values

Direct Method
(Less effective)
(attitude-based persuasion model),
Low-level (subordinate) construals
(Construal Level Theory)
Interventions here
most sensitive as USG
(separation thru 3rd party critical)
* (Blankenship, 2012)

By affecting here, we indirectly
affect “downstream” impact
(attitudes & behaviors) above

Indirect Method
(Most effective)
(value-based persuasion model),
High-level (superordinate) construals
(Construal Level Theory)
Interventions here
least sensitive as USG
(most subtle and non-obvious)
* (Blankenship, 2012)
What makes one individual under the influence of high PUSH and PULL factors radicalize while another under the same conditions does not?

Environmental Influences:

- **Social Injustice** (“Push” factors)
- **VEO Attraction Factors** (“Pull” factors)

Thought processes, analytical skills, cognitive capacities, ability to appreciate multiple perspectives, values, individual psychology, etc.:

Pro-social Decision Making capacities (“Process” factors)
“Process” Factors – Leveraging to prevent a decision to join a VEO

**Strong Process Factors**

- Cognitive Capacities
  - (Bonnell, 2011)
  - (Dweck, 2007)
  - (De Bono, 2015)
  - (Festinger, 1959)

- Reduced ability to morally disengage
  - (Bandura, 2002)

- Value-focused decision making - Reflection in relation to reinforced value preferences
  - (Keeney, 1992)
  - (Blankenship, 2012)

**Reason Decision blocked:**

- Logical fallacy detected
- Evidence of narrative not matching reality
- Claim overly simplistic, doesn't reflect complexity of reality or other points of view
- Can't kill the so-called “enemy”
- Can't kill for any reason
- Can't accept idea (contrary to my values)
- Claim isn't compelling, doesn't resonate

**Decides to join a VEO or commit an act of terrorism**

Decision is blocked by strengthened process factors
PUSH and PULL – two sides of the same coin

PUSH and PULL create a tug-of-war with the individual decider in the middle (PROCESS)

Ability to make a well analyzed, value based choice

Social Injustice (“Push” factors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs/wants not satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfaction Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government corruption</td>
<td>Justice only through pure God’s Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Monthly payments, safety nets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of services</td>
<td>Sharia system will offer services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of meaning, identity, purpose</td>
<td>Join Allah’s revolution, end times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization</td>
<td>Join a brotherhood of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral breakdown of society</td>
<td>Sharia will bring back morality and order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VEO Attraction Factors
(“Pull” factors)
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