



Empowering Yemeni Peacemakers: The Intersection of Conflict Resolution & CVE

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Executive Summary

The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) aims to empower Yemeni citizens to resolve local conflicts and address critical needs in their communities, providing an alternative to militant groups. These efforts focus on training religious and community leaders in conflict resolution (CR) and countering violent extremism (CVE), and facilitating trainee-led community projects. The program provides Yemeni civil society actors with the opportunity to build skills in internationally-practiced CR and CVE methods, which they can then adapt and integrate with local methods as appropriate and according to local contexts.

The impact of this work has been far-reaching. Project activities and follow-on initiatives have engaged over 1400 Yemeni participants to date, in nine governorates and the capital of Sana'a. Trainees have used the skills that they gained to resolve local conflicts, train others in their communities, and initiate sustainable projects. Yemeni civil society organizations have been strengthened and empowered to sustain these efforts. They have created new training resources based on what they have learned, raised their own funds to continue the work, and built new relationships and credibility within their communities.

While all the training topics have been well-received by trainees, three in particular—active listening, conflict analysis, and countering violent extremism—were especially embraced by participants and incorporated into subsequent activities. Participants have expressed that, as a result of the CVE training, they have felt motivated and empowered to work against violent extremism, conscious of their critical role as part of a broader community.

Trainees have initiated numerous follow-on projects to address critical issues. For instance, one group of trainees facilitated a community project to address a water conflict in the governorate of Abyan. In addition to providing resources and greater security for the area (e.g. eliminating the need for long and dangerous trips to gather water), the project empowered the community to work together in addressing local issues. This activity strengthened the community bonds and self-sufficiency, increasing its resilience to violent extremism and leading community members to agree not to join a militant group or to allow such a group to return to the village.

Based upon the lessons learned from this program, the following are recommendations for similar CR/CVE programs:

1. *Utilize the Training of Trainers model to bridge international and local practices.*
2. *Present concepts not as 'modern vs. traditional' or 'international vs. local', but as expanded options to enhance participants' existing toolkits.*
3. *Respect the role of religion and provide space for participant-led engagement with it.*
4. *Integrate learning, don't just replicate it.*
5. *Use a 'tiered' approach that combines training with action.*
6. *Be deliberate in the selection of training participants—choose trainees who can be 'bridges' or influencers, and be mindful of differences in education and experience level and power imbalances.*

Introduction

The war in Yemen has not only led to national political upheaval, but to an increase in local conflicts and a breakdown of services and the rule of law. In the absence of a functional government, militant groups like Al-Qaeda have been gaining popular support by filling the power vacuum and providing services not provided by the state.

The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) has been empowering Yemeni citizens to provide a credible alternative to these militant groups in resolving local conflicts and addressing community needs. To do this, ICRD has been empowering local religious and community leaders and civil society organizations (CSOs) with the skills to resolve conflict, promote tolerance and coexistence, counter violent extremism (CVE), and address community problems. The ICRD approach is based upon the belief that local communities must be able to resolve disputes peacefully and collaboratively regardless of whether a national political agreement has been reached.

These efforts have been multi-pronged and multi-stage, beginning with a Training of Trainers workshop conducted by ICRD for representatives of local Yemeni CSOs in conflict resolution (CR), CVE, and training skills. Subsequently the trainees themselves trained other religious, tribal, and community leaders in CR and CVE skills, conducted community dialogues on similar topics, and initiated local projects to address key issues of conflict or violent extremism in their communities.

Since 2016, these efforts and their follow-on initiatives—conducted in partnership with local organizations such as Partners Yemen¹ and the Dar Al-Salaam Organisation—have directly engaged over 1400 Yemeni participants from the governorates of Abyan, Aden, Taiz, Ibb, Lahj, Hajjah, Hodeida, Dhamar, and Shabwa, as well as the capital Sana'a. They have included members of often-marginalized groups such as women and youth, as well as members of different religious sects such as Salafis and Sufis.

The impact of this work has been far-reaching. Trainees have used specific knowledge and skills learned in the programs to resolve local conflicts in their communities and to train others to use these skills. They have launched new initiatives independently, such as a training program for imams on religious tolerance and CVE, and a Peacemakers' Council in Taiz.

The program has also empowered Yemeni CSOs. For example, participation in the program led one CSO that had suspended its activities due to threats during the war to resume its peacebuilding efforts. Another CSO revised its peace training manual to include new content learned in the ICRD training on topics such as CVE and the role of identity in driving conflict. The manual is now being used to train other CSOs and local leaders across the country.

However, perhaps more important than knowledge and skills has been the sense of empowerment and motivation acquired by the trainees of the ICRD program. In the governorate of Abyan, where Al-Qaeda had previously taken over and gained some support by providing basic services that the government was not providing, some trainees worked with local leaders to build a piping system to better distribute water and prevent the escalation of a water-related conflict. These leaders

¹ Partners Yemen is an affiliate of Partners Global.

engaged local youths vulnerable to extremist recruitment in installing the pipes—providing job skills and a sense of civic responsibility—and subsequently trained these same youths in peacebuilding/CVE skills. As a result, these youths are now taking the initiative to resolve local conflicts, and the community has realized that it has the power to address its own needs without having to rely on militant groups like Al-Qaeda. The same youths have also engaged youths in two neighboring villages in similar projects, where their collaboration with community leaders has resulted in water delivery to two more villages.

Through the approaches used by the ICRD program and the lessons learned, this paper will address such questions as: What role can CR/CVE training play in bringing about such outcomes? How can a Western organization like ICRD engage local Yemeni leaders in this process appropriately and effectively? Can and should international methods of CR and CVE be integrated with indigenous traditions and tribal methods, and if so, how?

Cross-Cultural Engagement

Any direct engagement of indigenous Middle Eastern actors by an American organization like ICRD must be done with great cultural and religious sensitivity. As a nonprofit, non-governmental organization committed to harnessing religion as a tool for peacebuilding, ICRD has successfully established partnerships with local religious actors in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen by (1) demonstrating its respect for religion and the role that religious values and actors can play in peacebuilding, (2) respecting local traditions and practices and building local ownership of the process, and (3) forming personal relationships with influential local actors who can bring others into the process.

The ICRD program in Yemen grew out of relationships formed by ICRD staff with local CSOs, and invitations by CSO leadership for ICRD to train their staff in ‘international’ approaches to CR as a complement to their indigenous practices. ICRD’s program was therefore designed not to replace indigenous methods with ‘international’ ones, but rather to provide Yemeni civil society with a wider array of skills to resolve conflict and counter violence. The program provided Yemeni actors with exposure to internationally-practiced CR and CVE methods that they could then integrate with their own local methods as appropriate.

The ICRD Training of Trainers (ToT) model directly engaged leading actors within various Yemeni CSOs who have sufficient local influence and relationships to subsequently engage other civil society actors in CR/CVE training and initiatives. ICRD trainees then shared what they had learned within their institutions and trained other community members themselves. The trainees created their own training manuals, combining content from the ICRD training with their own methods and tailoring their trainings to the specific needs of their communities. This allowed the program to reach other local actors who might not have been comfortable receiving training directly from a Western organization.

The ICRD training was conducted collaboratively by a cross-cultural team from the United States and the region. This allowed for flexibility in information delivery and interaction, as some sessions and examples were better received when presented by a fellow Arab than by an American, or vice versa. For example, the trainer from the region led discussions relating to religion and culture, while the American trainer shared observations on common challenges faced by both Yemenis and Americans (such as the impact of broken families on youth radicalization), and

common values (such as respect, trust, and justice) central to both Western and Middle Eastern CR approaches. The American trainer also highlighted that certain ‘newer’ concepts in the West have in fact been part of Yemeni tradition for centuries, such as restorative justice and offender restitution.

In this way, the cross-cultural training team embodied collaboration across identity divides and endeavored to build an environment in which concepts would not be seen as ‘old vs. new’, ‘traditional vs. modern’, or ‘indigenous vs. Western’, but as complementary to one another within a greater body of practice with the ultimate goal of peacebuilding. As such, the distinct approaches were not presented in the light of one being better than the other, but each cultural context was recognized for bringing knowledge and skills to share with the other.

Furthermore, attention was paid throughout the training to the respect of particular details, such as culturally-appropriate dress and demeanor. This helped establish trust between the trainers and trainees. That trust was deepened with the sharing of certain personal examples by the trainers, when it proved appropriate.

Training Topics

The training program encompassed the following topics: core principles of conflict resolution, methods of conflict analysis, problem-solving, mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, countering violent extremism, and training skills. The CVE portion of the training included modules on understanding drivers and warning signs of radicalization, context analysis, strategies and methods of addressing violent extremism, the role of identity and religion in addressing violent extremism, and critical thinking.

Training Methodology

The training methodology was built upon the following principles:

- *A variety of approaches (e.g. discussions, presentations, videos, role plays) were utilized, with a particular emphasis on interactive methods and eliciting participants’ experiences.*

There was initially some concern that the participants, coming from an environment where educational courses often emphasize lecture-style presentations and the instructor as the sole source of knowledge, might be uncomfortable with participating in more interactive activities or offering their own opinions. However, the interactive role-play sessions on topics like mediation and negotiation were among the most popular—stimulating enthusiastic participation and helping to create a more informal atmosphere. Interactive team-building activities in-between more formal sessions also helped stimulate creativity and bonding, and helped participants decompress after more intense discussions on sensitive topics.

- *Participants were invited to present their own methods before other methodologies were introduced.*

In sessions on topics such as conflict analysis, problem-solving, and mediation, participants were first asked to apply their own methodologies to a problem or case study. After they presented their methods and the results of their application, the trainers introduced additional methods, and participants applied them to the same situation. This approach was

designed to first honor the indigenous approaches and provide space for participants to share and learn from each other's methods, and then to provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the different methods, reflecting on the pros and cons of each and whether and how they might be integrated.

- *Logical frameworks were used to demonstrate how a variety of types of factors function and how they relate to each other.*

Frameworks on Drivers of Violent Extremism and Strategies for Addressing Violent Extremism, for example, were designed to stimulate systematic thinking. Participants found them helpful for analysis and for identifying correlations between different factors. As highlighted by one trainee: *"We had already been applying these concepts but hadn't had them presented to us in such a strategic way."*

- *Debriefing exercises at the end of each session formed part of both the training itself and the task of Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E).*

These exercises helped participants reflect on what they had learned in the sessions and how they could integrate these techniques with their own methods of addressing conflicts and of training others to do the same.

- *Training resources were made available to assist participants in conducting their own trainings.*

Electronic copies of all handouts, and copies of ICRD's CVE training film, *Back from the Brink*, were given to participants at the conclusion of the training. This made it easier for participants to incorporate what they had learned into their own materials and training.

Overall, the training methodologies were very well received by the participants. One trainee from Abyan stated: *"As a trainer ... I've learned a lot that will benefit my conflict resolution work and my training of others."*

Training Content Highlights

While all the topics were well-received, three in particular—active listening, conflict analysis, and countering violent extremism—were deemed especially useful by participants, who went on to incorporate them into their own trainings and initiatives. This section will explore these topics and ICRD's training approach, and highlight some other training topics of note.

Active Listening

One of the core principles of conflict resolution that was explored in the training was active listening—where the listener is an active participant in helping the speaker feel truly heard, understood, and cared about (rather than criticized or threatened), and supports him in deepening his reflections on a difficult theme. In situations of conflict or tension, active listening can play a powerful role in easing tensions, promoting healing, gathering and analyzing information, checking assumptions, helping parties be more open to listening to each other, and opening a space for deeper dialogue and potential reconciliation.

The ICRD trainers facilitated a specific session on active listening, which included interactive sessions in which each participant was alternately the listener and the speaker in a conversation. The trainers also incorporated and emphasized active listening throughout the training, by modeling it and encouraging participants to practice it during tense discussions.

Though active listening was a new concept for the participants, they embraced it with surprising enthusiasm, acknowledging that as a skill, it could play an important role in calming tensions and building trust in conflict situations. Participant feedback highlighted that, *“Yemenis like to tell stories and be listened to. When someone feels genuinely listened to, there will be stress relief, and they will be better able to communicate their feelings and to engage in conflict resolution and sustainable peace.”*

Active listening was repeatedly highlighted by participants as something they could incorporate into their work. While noting that it might be challenging to get some parties in Yemen to use active listening, participants felt that judges, sheikhs, tribal leaders, and civil society organizations—actors in mediation and arbitration roles—should be trained to use this skill.

Perhaps most notably, participants began practicing active listening on their own and encouraging each other to do so in subsequent sessions during the training. A year after the training, one trainee remarked that, *“Active listening added a skill I lacked and I now use daily.”*

Conflict Analysis and Problem-Solving

In this session, participants were divided into two groups and given conflict situations to which they were to apply their own, and then subsequently the ICRD-introduced, methods of conflict analysis. Initially, participants focused on analyzing the causes, results, and parties of the conflict. The ICRD model then introduced new elements such as distinguishing between root and triggering causes, analyzing what could be learned from previous conflict resolution attempts, and identifying both obstacles to and opportunities for resolution.

Participants were particularly responsive to this model of conflict analysis, finding the approach holistic and comprehensive. One participant stated, *“What I like about this (method) is that it saves a lot of time. Most previous methods give us parts of the conflict. But this approach goes deeper into causes, parties, factors, and helps us think more about values that might cause problems or help in reaching a solution. This will help a lot in the future.”* Other participants felt this conflict analysis process helped them realize that they had previously been focused on finding solutions to address parties’ positions (stated demands) but not necessarily their deeper interests and needs, and that they now wanted to start addressing the latter. The exercise also led to reflection on the importance of the *process* of conflict analysis, and of separating results from means of analysis. One participant said, *“This process of conflict analysis is useful—often we go right to the goal but forget about the process.”*

This session was followed by another on problem solving, in which participants applied old and new methods to address the same conflicts they had analyzed. Following both sessions, a discussion arose on the applicability of various methods to both interpersonal and tribal conflicts. Participants noted that people in tribal areas often prefer to use traditional tribal methods of conflict analysis and resolution, and that newer methods might be better suited for interpersonal conflicts and less tribal parts of Yemen. However, participants also noted that the methods introduced by

ICRD were not wholly different from existing tribal methods, and were in many ways in line with tribal approaches even if done in a more structural way. They emphasized that the ‘new’ methods helped them understand conflicts in a more holistic way and think creatively of solutions that respond to the needs of all parties.

Mediation

During the session on mediation, participants were also invited to apply traditional or tribal mediation methods to a conflict role-play scenario. They then applied mediation methods presented by ICRD to the same conflict.

The key distinction between the traditional approach to mediation in Yemen presented by the participants and the approach presented by ICRD relates to the role of the mediator and the parties’ ownership of the solution. In the ICRD approach, the primary role of the mediator is to help the conflict parties communicate and come up with their own solution to the problem that all of them can accept and sustain. The neutrality of the mediator is important for building the parties’ trust in the process and the outcome. In the tribal approach, the role of the mediator is first to stop or prevent physical violence, then to come up with a solution after listening to all parties, and finally, to try to persuade the parties to accept the solution. The goal of tribal mediation therefore becomes stopping current violence and preventing subsequent outbreaks of violence, rather than addressing deeper grievances and fostering reconciliation. The mediator typically earns the trust of the parties by promising to protect or serve their interests; thus parties are less likely to accept a ‘neutral’ mediator than one whom they feel will advocate for their needs. Sometimes the mediator can become an arbitrator, making and enforcing the final decision on behalf of the parties.

This exercise stimulated a lively discussion following trainees’ enthusiastic participation in the role-play. Discussing the merits and drawbacks of both approaches, participants stressed that Yemenis in tribal areas tend to prefer the traditional way of investing power in the mediator to come up with a solution and persuade parties to accept it. Though this approach runs the risk of generating a solution either unacceptable to the parties involved or unsustainable in the long-term, participants nonetheless felt that most tribal members did not want ownership in creating their own solution; they were more comfortable with entrusting decision-making power to the mediator or another arbitrator.

However, the participants also saw a value in the ICRD approach, as they felt that a neutral mediator who practiced active listening could help diffuse tensions and remove negative energy from the situation, guiding parties into a collaborative and constructive conversation that would lead to a solution serving everyone’s interests. This approach helped them better understand both how a mediator could help parties create their own solution, and how to maximize the benefit to the parties (e.g. through expanding rather than simply dividing the ‘pie’). Participants felt that this method could be applied to interpersonal conflicts, conflicts in non-tribal areas, and potentially even tribal conflicts themselves after tribal methods had been used to stop the initial violence. (A few of them had even been applying elements of this method already in certain cases.)

Reconciliation

As described above, traditional mediation efforts in Yemen (and elsewhere) do not always move from the level of stopping physical violence and creating temporary solutions to effecting deeper reconciliation and sustainable peace. Participants identified three key challenges to achieving such

reconciliation among conflicting parties in Yemen. First, the goal of tribal mediation is generally to stop bloodshed, not to reconcile relationships. Tribal mediation may create an environment that eventually allows reconciliation to occur, but does not itself aim to achieve reconciliation. Second, to achieve the kind of reconciliation desired by participants, victims should be empowered to accept apologies and forgive. However, this does not often happen because power imbalances between perpetrator and victim are not resolved through mediation. Victims are thus pressured to give up their rights and accept solutions without addressing their deeper grievances. Third, revenge and honor remain culturally linked, particularly in tribal areas.

The training session on reconciliation explored three elements of reconciliation: (1) truth-telling (communicating, understanding, and acknowledging one's own wounds and actions and those of the other); (2) relationship-building (assuming responsibility, trust-building, restitution, and sometimes forgiveness); and (3) healing (internal transformation). It also explored the role played by factors such as identity and structural conditions in reconciliation.

The participants felt there were a lot of similarities and complementarity in the way that the ICRD trainers approached reconciliation and the way Islam approaches reconciliation. They highlighted Islamic teachings on accepting apologies and forgiveness, mercy, helping others overcome their weaknesses, and the role of the community in reconciliation. They also stressed that Islam does not encourage one to take revenge on an innocent person simply because he or she belongs to the same tribe or group as the perpetrator—which often happens in tribal conflicts and leads to retaliatory cycles of violence that can last generations. The group discussed how misuse and misinterpretation of Islamic values by some religious leaders could promote a culture of revenge, and how, conversely, religious leaders could play a role in reducing the likelihood of revenge violence by promoting authentic Islamic values of tolerance and forgiveness.²

In small groups, participants then discussed how such values and principles of reconciliation could be applied to two common conflict scenarios. Both groups came up with proposed solutions that went beyond temporary or financially-based settlements to address the deeper needs of the parties and create sustainable solutions so that the problems would not recur.

Participants were particularly appreciative of the respect that the trainers showed for the role of religion and values in Yemeni culture and how they could be applied to conflict resolution. They felt that elements of the reconciliation models that were discussed could be applied in various contexts.

Countering Violent Extremism

The CVE portion of the training was designed to expose participants to core concepts of CVE, as well as address particularities of the situation in Yemen and the needs of the trainees themselves. The training focused on exploring frameworks facilitating the understanding of drivers of violent

² The challenge of how tribal or traditional values, which may even predate Islam, relate to religious values, is not an uncommon one. In ICRD's work with religious and tribal leaders in Pakistan, for example, it was observed that sometimes harsh collective punishments which were counter to Islamic values of justice were employed because they had long been part of tribal tradition, and the people of the tribe themselves assumed they were Islamically-sanctioned. One Pakistani religious leader who intervened to stop such a punishment appealed to the tribe's religious devotion and demonstrated to them that the tribal tradition being followed was, in this case, contrary to Islamic values.

extremism and strategies for addressing it, conducting context analysis of participants' communities, building skills in specific competencies related to CVE, and finally, designing local CVE initiatives. Furthermore, rather than focusing solely on Yemen-specific drivers of violent extremism, the training encouraged participants to explore factors of CVE that they may not previously have considered or may encounter in the future.

Terminology played a notable part in the training. The participants preferred the term “addressing violent extremism” (AVE) to “countering violent extremism”, because they associated the term “countering” with the use of force to oppose something. Yemenis made a similar distinction to that seen in the West with *counter-terrorism* (associated with more kinetic methods such as military action or law enforcement) as opposed to *countering violent extremism* (associated with more non-kinetic means such as counter-narratives or counseling vulnerable youth). Thus, although the more standard term CVE is used throughout this paper, the term AVE was used throughout the training.

The CVE training began with an exploration of the difference between violence and violent extremism. Subsequent topics included drivers of violent extremism, warning signs, context analysis, stages of intervention, strategies for addressing violent extremism, case studies and good practices, the role of identity in CVE, the role of religion in CVE, critical thinking, and CVE project design. Some of these components are explored in more detail below.

- *Drivers of Violent Extremism*

This session explored various drivers of violent extremism, including psychological factors, identity and ideological factors, influence of specific figures, and structural and environmental factors. Trainees felt that a lot of the drivers in the ICRD framework were present in their contexts. Among these, the concept of structural or environmental factors (such as lack of social services or unemployment) was newest to the participants. In discussion, they found educational, economic, and family problems to be particularly common drivers of extremism across their communities. The lack of a safe space for people to express themselves was also consistently highlighted, as violent extremist groups tend to attract people by providing an outlet for them to express their emotions and frustrations. The discussion also shed light on the interconnectedness of various drivers, such as how educational systems and families can affect psychological drivers.

- *Warning Signs*

The training explored potential warning signs of radicalization, including physical changes (such as dress), changes in relationships or interactions with others, and emotional and ideological changes. The training stressed that there is no single path to radicalization, and that as different people radicalize differently, the mere presence of a warning sign in an individual does not necessarily mean someone is radicalizing. *Sudden* changes in appearance or attitude may be more likely indicators of possible radicalization, though should not be automatically assumed to be problematic. This session challenged participants' preconceived notions regarding radicalization and its warning signs. Toward its end, they had gained a more nuanced understanding of the different ways in which radicalization manifests itself in different people, and were able to better distinguish between what were simply conservative attitudes and what were dramatic and troubling changes in attitudes.

- *Stages and Strategies of Interventions*

The training explored a ‘staircase’ model³ of how CVE intervention strategies might be applied to different ‘stages’ of radicalization, including: (1) preventing possible radicalization in the wider society, (2) intervening to dissuade supporters of violent extremism, (3) impeding or disengaging active participants in violent extremism, and (4) re-integrating former extremists. The participants found this model highly useful, and in using it to analyze their own work, most came to the conclusion that they were able to intervene most effectively at Stages 1 and 2. This model also demonstrated that CVE does not necessarily mean directly challenging active violent extremist combatants, and that intervening at early stages can be safer and more effective.

The training then explored specific strategies of CVE interventions, focusing on four main types: (1) psychology and counseling; (2) counter-narratives; (3) civic and social engagement; and (4) structural reform.

The training broadened participants’ perspectives on the variety of possible CVE approaches that they could personally apply in their communities. It also gave them a better understanding of specific strategies and what they entail. For instance, participants learned that psychological approaches could include providing emotional support, promoting positive social relationships and identity formation, and challenging black and white thinking and perceptions of threat to one’s identity. Civic and social engagement strategies could encompass community-building activities and helping vulnerable people build self-esteem and self-respect and achieve a sense of purpose. Structural reform approaches could include finding nonviolent alternatives to addressing community needs and developing an educational system that promotes respect for other people’s differences, critical thinking and problem solving skills, and civic responsibility.

- *Case Studies*

Using ICRD’s CVE film *Back from the Brink*, the training explored three case studies of violent extremism: LA street gangs in the United States, terrorism in Pakistan, and the Lebanese civil war. The film explored the way in which different individuals became violent extremists, how this affected their lives and those of their families and communities, why they decided to leave violent extremism, and how they and their communities are now engaging in positive alternatives.

The Lebanon chapter provided insight into the dynamics of identity conflict, profiling fighters of different national and religious backgrounds. Participants were struck by how it took so much violence and death in Lebanon for people to finally realize that war was not accomplishing their goals, and by how people subsequently accomplished more through peaceful means than they did through violence. One participant stated, “*Unfortunately, only after a lot of people died and they realized war was destroying everything, did they ‘wake up.’ In Yemen we’ve been fighting for over 150 years but we are still unable to ‘wake up’ from how much we’ve lost—in people, history, and resources.*”

The trainers at first hesitated to show the US chapter of the film (which profiles stories of former gang members and the Catholic priest who started an initiative to rehabilitate them), concerned that it might be too different from the Yemeni context to be useful to the participants. However, the participants were very interested to learn about examples of violent extremism in the United

³ This ICRD model was influenced, in part, by the work of the Muflehun organization.

States, and this chapter demonstrated that violent extremism is a global problem not confined to any one geographic area, culture, or religious background. It also helped participants realize that some of the challenges they face in their own society are shared by societies like the United States as well. Below are some examples of participant feedback:

“I was really inspired by what (the priest) said—that people full of hope don’t join gangs . . . It’s important to believe in oneself without resorting to violence to protect oneself—that is a significant responsibility of parents to raise kids this way.” (Trainee from Taiz)

“This film helped me learn a lot about the rehabilitation of gang members. This happens through employment and community service that sustains the rehabilitation. So the change is not linked [only] to a community leader but goes to the whole community—responsibility becomes collective. This is something we need to do in Yemen to provide venues for reintegration. Maybe [we] can use traditional customs in Yemen for this rehabilitation.” (Trainee from Aden)

“What is so interesting is that Homeboy Industries [the rehabilitation initiative] works with older people and most of our violent extremists are youth.” (Trainee from Sana’a)

“In the United States, there is a healthier environment, people can talk about things and analyze them without being shy. In our society we can’t talk about things like this; there’s a culture of shame. In America men and women can talk together about problems but in Yemen we are not used to this.” (Trainee from Sana’a)

The trainers initially expected the Lebanon chapter—which profiled another Arab country grappling with a civil war—to be most relevant to the participants. However, it was the Pakistan chapter—which explored Pakistani madrasas and the role of education in either driving or countering violent extremism—that resonated most with the participants, as they identified with many of the challenges faced by Pakistanis. They expressed concern that unregulated, privately-run religious centers in Yemen, as opposed to the mainstream religious schools overseen by the government, were often being used by extremists to inculcate impressionable young people with violent extremist ideology. Participants had been previously skeptical that religious leaders could talk explicitly about violent extremism. However, seeing Pakistani religious leaders do so in the film challenged that notion and instilled hope that such a thing could happen in Yemen too. One participant stated:

“In the Pakistan film, there was an initiative to bring teachers together. They had [made] judgments against each other, but once they met and started talking in a healthy way, borders dissolved and they found social values based on humanity. Sunnis protected Shias. We need in Yemen to engage religious leaders to listen to each other. We who are not religious leaders need to help or engage them to counter violent extremism. We need to create space for religious leaders to come together to make a counter-narrative [since we ourselves do not have the religious qualifications to do that].”

Participants felt the film was useful in teaching religious tolerance, and it prompted a long discussion on the role of religion in countering violent extremism. Despite the sensitivity of some

of the subject matter, participants were inspired to use the film, particularly the Pakistan chapter, in some of their own trainings.

- *Identity and Violent Extremism*

A portion of the training was specifically devoted to building participants' understanding of the relationship between conflict and identity, ways in which violent extremists manipulate identity to gain support, and the role of identity in countering violent extremism. Participants were asked to reflect on the most important components of their own identity—including not only group associations but personal characteristics—which led to an enthusiastic sharing of the way in which they perceived their own identities. Many participants found the concept of identity challenging, particularly the notion that parts of one's identity could be changeable (e.g. one's job or hobbies, as opposed to less-changeable identities like religion or nationality). However, they seemed to come away with a deeper understanding of the concept of identity threats, and the dangers posed by identity conflict. They also gained awareness of the challenge of disentangling identity from conflict. At least one participant mentioned that he would like to add concepts of identity to his organization's own training manual on peacebuilding.

- *Critical Thinking*

Critical thinking is an important skill for dealing with the narratives and emotional appeals of violent extremists. It can also interject nuance into black-and-white thinking and the tendency toward blind obedience to purported authorities, both of which can make one susceptible to radicalization. The concept of critical thinking as a means to assess whether something is true or credible and how it should influence one's decision-making was new to many of the participants, who had previously equated critical thinking with criticizing something. It was important to make this distinction in the training, explaining the term as a process of internal reflection and analysis of information and one's own assumptions.

The training explored a framework of key elements of critical thinking, including specific questions that could be used to analyze a statement or piece of information. Participants then took part in a role-play exercise, in which one person assumed the role of a violent extremist enjoining the public to follow his ideology, while the other participants practiced how they would respond to his narrative using critical thinking skills. This session was very positively received by participants, one of whom mentioned that he would like to incorporate critical thinking into trainings he conducts for lawyers. Another participant highlighted ways in which he felt Islam promotes critical thinking.

- *Designing CVE Projects*

Toward the end of the training, participants split into regional groups, and using a template of planning questions, designed CVE initiatives for their own communities. A number focused on engaging religious leaders to promote values of tolerance rather than divisive politics, and on bridging divides between conservatives and moderates and between more religious and more secular citizens. Engagement of tribal leaders, and the importance of listening and of creating safe spaces, were also highlighted. Skills and concepts from the training were incorporated in the project designs. As expressed by one participant:

“There is a problem that people don’t listen to each other, and I want to create a safe space for that. Conservatives think moderates are against them and if we create space for dialogue, they might see that they’re not against each other. Because we don’t listen to each other, a lot of groups feel their identity threatened by the other.”

A key outcome of the CVE training was a greater sense of responsibility, motivation, and empowerment among participants to work against violent extremism. While aware of the difficulty of countering violent extremism in Yemen without effective action at the government level, participants found that there was much that they could do at the community level to address violent extremism. Through the frameworks explored in the training, they came to realize that cooperation with other elements of society (e.g. religious leaders, tribal leaders, women, and schools) could have an even greater impact in addressing violent extremism since those actors and institutions were closer to those most vulnerable to becoming violent extremists. The following comment is indicative of this transformation:

“We have thought that the government should be responsible for addressing violent extremism, but now through this training we also see there is so much that we can do to address it through civil society.”

Integration of International and Indigenous Training

Graduates of the ICRD Training of Trainers program subsequently went on to train members of their own organizations and others in the community on CR and CVE. They created their own training manuals, integrating the curriculum created by ICRD with their own indigenous methods and incorporating additional principles of religious tolerance, respect for diversity, and religious freedom where appropriate. As described by one trainee: *“Thanks to the [ICRD] workshop, I communicated lots of information to my colleagues, and we applied the [ICRD conflict analysis] model among ourselves, and it worked great, and we agreed to encourage more counter-extremism projects and initiatives and make that a new direction for the organization.”*

ToT graduates trained religious, tribal, community, educational, and CSO leaders; members of political groups; educators; and others on these topics. This was done both through initial follow-up workshops supported by ICRD, and through subsequent workshops that trainees themselves organized and raised funds for after the ICRD grant program had ended. Some of the later workshops targeted specific populations. For example, graduates in Abyan and Taiz conducted special training for imams, while a graduate in Aden trained young adults who then conducted outreach programs reaching nearly 1000 students in various schools. Another effort used materials adapted from the ICRD training to train 25 other CSOs, who will in turn train youth councils and conduct community dialogues in nine governorates.

All in all, through incorporating the ICRD training into new and existing programs, trainees have impacted more than 1400 other Yemeni citizens to date.

Community members trained by these ToT graduates also responded positively to the programs. They reported being able to apply the knowledge and skills learned to local disputes and problems, and expressed a hunger to share what they had learned with others. Some trainees expressed an interest training others at their own institutes and in the community, training female teachers, holding community meetings, engaging fellow students and youth at schools and clubs, preaching

about the topics discussed at the mosque, and spreading awareness within the family and the community.

In their feedback, many participants asked for more training days and additional training programs in the future, especially for religious leaders, youth, and former extremists. Participants also called for networking among local and international CSOs to raise awareness of religious tolerance and violent extremism.

In designing their own subsequent training programs, ToT graduates drew on activities, content, and materials from the ICRD training. Particular topics incorporated from the ToT program included fundamental principles of conflict resolution; active listening and distinguishing interests from positions; conflict analysis tools and problem-solving methods; elements of mediation, negotiation, and reconciliation; and CVE. Topics of focus in the CVE portion included differentiating between violence and extremism, causes and drivers, warning signs, intervention strategies, critical thinking, the Pakistan chapter of *Back from the Brink*, and the role of identity in violent extremism, as well as coexistence, religious tolerance, and freedom of belief.

Individual trainers integrated their ToT learnings with their indigenous methods and adapted them to their specific contexts in different ways. For example, they provided greater background and expanded on certain concepts in some cases (e.g. principles of conflict resolution) and simplified or streamlined concepts in others (e.g. critical thinking), and chose particular locally-relevant CVE strategies to focus on. At times, trainers also adapted language to local sensitivities and security. For example, in places deemed too risky to conduct training on “addressing violent extremism”, trainings were framed as “peacebuilding”, “capacity-building,” or “protecting youth.”

Importantly, trainers also often framed concepts in religious terms and grounded them in Islamic principles. For example, they used Qur’anic quotes to explain concepts of religious tolerance and explored how Islamic values like mercy, forgiveness, coexistence, and social cohesion could be used to address conflict and violent extremism.

Trainers also used relevant examples from local contexts to explain concepts and models they learned from ICRD. In incorporating these into their own trainings, the trainers were able to present them alongside traditional methods as part of a range of options. In some cases, as in the ToT, trainers had trainees first apply traditional methods and then subsequently apply the new models to the same conflict.

In one training, religious leader trainees did not react positively at first to ‘modern training tools’, such as the models for conflict analysis and problem-solving, because these were new for them. However, when the trainers divided the participants into working groups and had them apply these models to a conflict situation, the participants’ reaction became positive and they saw the utility in such tools. As reported to ICRD:

“The religious leaders found the analysis tools . . . are interesting and go through the conflict thoroughly. This . . . happened after the trainer divide[d] them to working groups. The discussion among the group members play[ed] a major role in changing their thoughts. They enriched the session by their positive reaction through discussing all steps of the tools. This is very clear from the outcomes of the working group [in] which they discussed real conflicts within their communities.”

The trainers also added additional concepts and topics to the trainings they conducted. Some examples of these are stages and types of conflict, sources of conflict, how to distinguish between differences and disputes, dialogue, arbitration, examples of how traditional tribal methods have been used to resolve conflicts, cultural aspects influencing conflict in Yemen, relationship- and trust-building exercises, arts exercises (for youth trainees), and expanded concepts of religious tolerance and freedom (including historical examples of religious tolerance and pluralism in Yemen).

Participant feedback and program evaluation indicated that the ToT graduates' integration of traditional methods with new ones was successful and impactful. Where conducted, evaluation surveys frequently indicated an increase in the knowledge and skills of those trained by ToT graduates in most or all of the subject matter areas covered by the trainings. This is highlighted in the following comments from (ToT graduate) trainers and their trainees:

Trainer feedback:

"I can say that the training which was held in Sana'a has succeeded in integrating between the traditional system and the scientific modern approach, and for participants they have gain[ed] a lot of new skills especially in the essential principle of solving disputes and how they can differentiate between situation, interests, and needs . . . And also methods of analyzing problems and its [sic] solving. We have noticed reaction and acceptance, [and] understanding from participants, they also could apply it to the reality successfully."

"We have held dozens of training workshops, but this workshop honestly is the most professional workshop for the participation of those who already were trained [by] your Center [ICRD]."

"There have been participants in sessions that represent [our organization] and who can now operate with a high degree of professionalism and ability to give better activities in the future because of what they learned from this program . . . In my opinion, these . . . modern methods and approaches that we have learned . . . represent a quantum leap for the trainees, in helping them devise new and scientific methods to address problems."

"Trainees gained skills and scientific tools that added to their set of skills, and they tried to mix it with cultural and religious methodologies and it strengthened their abilities to resolve conflicts."

"What I have learned in [the ICRD training] was an excellent and effective information for me because it helped me to train others in some tribal gatherings and the feedback was great."

Trainee feedback:

“The knowledge and skills I got during the training workshop [are] really useful, such as conflict analysis and resolution; I can now distinguish between positions, interests and needs. The training train[ed] us how to be a successful mediator and how to resolve family and community disputes . . . The training changed my understanding [of] religious freedom and violent extremism.”

“I can say that I have absorbed great knowledge that I can use in my career as a teacher; I have learnt how to resolve conflicts. This skill gives me the power to resolve conflicts [that] happen, every day, with my students. I have to focus more about the students' positions, interests and needs while resolving their conflicts.”

“We, as community leaders, [are] always involved in resolving some conflicts. This workshop trained me how to analyze conflicts scientifically, the tools helped us in arranging information and think[ing] critically about the conflict.”

Youth trainee: *“Training topics touched our current condition and raised our knowledge on different topics. The most beautiful thing was to find solutions for particular conflicts, moreover, we participated in drawing the current condition of Yemen and another beautiful picture for the future of Yemen. Pictures and discussions raised our optimism, persistence and determination that the future of Yemen will be much better.”*

Most importantly, the trainees were able to apply the knowledge and skills that they had learned in the trainings to resolving concrete conflicts in their communities. As described by trainees:

“I resolved a conflict over a water sanitation in our neighborhood using the skills learnt, I used [ICRD conflict analysis and problem-solving models] for analyzing the conflict, it helped me a lot for arranging my thought and idea. The tools also helped me to work in a logical sequence which resulted in resolving the conflict.”

“I resolved an inheritance conflict between brothers and sisters. I used my judicial knowledge in addition to the modern tools and techniques in resolving a conflict.”

“After the training, we resolved a violent conflict between two groups of Abyan youth. The conflict reached [the point of] hand-fighting between the two groups, but, we worked hard to resolve the conflict in order to [prevent it from developing] to using weapons. We followed the policy of separating positions and focusing on interests and needs. Actually, we learnt the knowledge and skills of analyzing and resolving conflicts in the training . . .”

Community Project Implementation

The third stage of the program supported trainees' implementation of a community project to address a local issue of conflict or violent extremism. This project was implemented in Abyan by

one ToT graduate and several of the ToT graduates' trainees and colleagues, and provided an opportunity for them to put into practice what they had learned in the trainings related to conflict analysis, problem-solving, negotiation and mediation, CVE methodologies and project design, and training skills.

The trainee project team chose to apply the ICRD models of conflict analysis and problem-solving to the community in Abyan. They then proposed to facilitate the building of a piping system to provide water to a local village to prevent escalation of a water conflict. This village also faced the challenge of reintegrating youths who had formerly gone to fight with Al-Qaeda, subsequently left the group, and had now returned to the village. Lacking skills, job prospects, or other productive outlets for their time and energies, there were concerns that these youths and others in the village could be easy prey for extremist recruitment.

Given the dangers of Al-Qaeda in the area, the project team was afraid to conduct any project that would overtly address violent extremism and risk drawing the attention of militants. Through a process of brainstorming and mentorship with ICRD and its local partner, a project was designed that would engage these youths in building the water pipeline and subsequently train them in skills to resolve problems peacefully. The goals of the project were thus to:

- Facilitate a sustainable, win-win solution to the water conflict between the villages so that all parties could have access to the water they need and violent conflict would be prevented;
- Provide a needed service (water) to vulnerable communities, reducing the likelihood that they would turn to a militant group to provide this service; and
- Involve youth who may be vulnerable to violent extremism in the project so as to reduce the likelihood that they would join a violent extremist group in the future, by enabling them to: (1) gain job skills they may use in future employment; (2) gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in areas such as conflict resolution, tolerance, and addressing violent extremism; and (3) strengthen their engagement and bonds with their community and their sense of civic responsibility, thus increasing community resilience.

The project team engaged members of the community, including influential social figures and direct beneficiaries, to explain the project and its challenges and to secure buy-in and cooperation. Members of the team and community entered into negotiations with the local rural water institution to address several challenges to implementing the project (e.g. payment of fees, access, and use of equipment).

The ability to engage influential members of the community in the process, and to communicate the underlying issues and parameters of the project to stakeholders who might otherwise have derailed it, was a crucial factor in the project's success. Engagement with the larger community also led to the "stone soup" effect—where initial small steps of support led people to come forward to offer other resources and support that they previously may not have even realized they had.

Once the obstacles to initiating the pipeline were addressed, local youths deemed vulnerable to extremist recruitment were engaged to help install it, gaining skills that they could potentially use in future work. They then participated in the training program conducted by the previous training graduates. Fifteen youths were initially meant to attend the training, but due to the great need and

requests from the village, a total of 31 were trained, with the costs of the remaining 16 trainees covered by the community.

The training was the first of its kind conducted in this village. Given the sensitivities regarding violent extremism in this area, the trainers were careful to frame the language of the training predominantly in terms of peacebuilding and coexistence. The training addressed issues such as Islamic principles of tolerance and coexistence, and conflict resolution skills such as conflict analysis, mediation, negotiation, and dialogue.

The training was well received by the participants. All respondents to post-training surveys reported an increase in their knowledge and skills across the topics covered. They highlighted particular areas of learning such as conflict analysis and resolution, critical thinking, and coexistence. The following trainee comments are indicative:

“The training gave me knowledge and skills which I have not before. Now I know how to avoid militant groups and to build peace instead of creating violence.”

“Training taught us how to think critically while resolving conflict and to raise awareness on tolerance.”

“The training changed our thinking on how to deal with conflicts scientifically.”

Trainees also expressed a desire to implement what they had learned. In particular, they expressed eagerness to resolve conflicts in their community and to train other youth who had not attended the training on peacebuilding skills. One trainee stated, *“I am thinking how to be an important person in my community. Such as how to be a mediator in my community.”*

Following the training, trainees established a youth association to enhance youth participation in the community, which they are in the process of registering as a civil society organization. Additionally, they engaged youths in two neighboring villages—who had seen that the first village now had a water pipeline and wanted to know how this was achieved—to facilitate similar projects. Their collaboration with community leaders has resulted in water now being piped in to two more villages.

The impact of the project went far beyond providing a sustainable water source to the village and resolving tensions between those who had access to water and those who did not. For instance, children who previously could not attend school because they had to travel long distances on dangerous roads every day to fetch water could now resume their education. Furthermore, it is expected that some of the roughly 700 former residents who had left the village due to lack of water will now return.

Most significantly, the project empowered the community and increased its resilience against violent extremism. Findings from evaluations and community focus groups on the impact of the project are indicative:

“Most Abyan youth were thinking that the militant groups, including Al-Qaida, were better than the government, because they provide basic services for the people . . . However, when

the peace committee and project team resolved this conflict and provided the service of water to people, this proved that their thinking was wrong, and that the community participation, civil CSOs, and youth can achieve even what authorities did not achieve for a decade. . . .”

“Several conflicts were resolved as a result of the project. After the training course, youth promised that they will never ever join any militant group; however, they will help in disseminating the culture of peace in their community...[Now the village] youth are thinking to establish an association for developing community participation and enhancing the youths’ role in their community.”

“Training contributed hugely in reducing local reliance on armed actors to resolve conflicts, particularly after reaching the water project to the village. They found that violence and weapons do not resolve conflict but inflame it... The community will not permit for any militant groups from now on.”

The project also demonstrated that one does not need to directly challenge militant groups in order to counter violent extremism—engaging vulnerable young people in constructive activities and addressing local community needs are non-controversial initiatives that can have a large impact in reducing violent extremism. One participant said, *“We reached . . . a belief that even a small group or even individuals can make a change and a difference—through this small project and the cooperation of [trainees and other individuals] . . . the project is completed, the conflicts and violence disappeared, and most of all, the suffering of the people disappeared.”*

Overall Impact

Through the synthesis of international and local training and community project implementation, the program has positively impacted issues of conflict and violent extremism in Yemen and increased the capacity of Yemeni citizens to continue to address these issues. In particular:

- (1) Trainees have used the knowledge and skills they learned to resolve local conflicts, train others, and conduct their own community initiatives. The latter have included forming new local peace councils or CSOs, producing their own peacebuilding media, and sharing what they have learned within their various spheres of influence, such as mosques and classrooms. As related by one trainee:

“Because of this [training] workshop I was able to solve a lot of problems and I became more effective in dealing with others. Because of the workshop, we have been organizing several workshops for teachers and imams and we did also dialogues within the community . . . The results were very positive, and we even saw some participants donate money so they can start implementing the outputs of the courses and workshops.”

- (2) A replicable model has been created to empower Yemeni citizens to resolve conflicts, transfer skills, and provide a credible alternative to Al-Qaeda and other militants. This model includes locally-designed training manuals and other resources.

- (3) Local CSOs have been institutionally strengthened and empowered to sustain these efforts after the ICRD grant periods have ended. They have created new training resources based on what they have learned, raised their own funds to continue the work, and built new relationships and credibility within their communities.
- (4) Communities and local leaders have been empowered to implement their own initiatives to build peace and develop their communities, providing an alternative to militants in addressing local needs and building community resilience.

Recommendations

Mindful of the cultural and religious particularities that must be taken into account when implementing any training program in a new community, the following are general recommendations for implementing future CR/CVE training and community programs in Yemen.

1. *Utilize the Training of Trainers model to bridge international and local practices.*

Yemenis best suited to receive such training and integrate it in their communities are those who can combine an openness to international methodologies with an understanding of traditional practices and close personal relationships within their communities. In the ICRD program, these trainees were members of local CSOs, most of whom had previous experience as trainers, and all of whom had experience in peacebuilding but not necessarily CVE. Personal relationships of trust with local partner organizations facilitated access to the other CSOs in this first stage. If such factors are present, and if done with sensitivity and cultural appropriateness, training by a foreign organization can be collaborative and empowering.

2. *Present concepts not as ‘modern vs. traditional’ or ‘international vs. local’, but as expanded options to enhance participants’ existing toolkits.*

International practices for CR and CVE are bound to have both similarities and differences with traditional Yemeni practices. Providing an environment in which Yemeni trainees can compare the merits and applicability of both is likely to be more effective than presenting concepts as either wholly foreign or universally applicable.

3. *Respect the role of religion and provide space for participant-led engagement with it.*

Religion is an integral part of Yemeni society and culture and is likely to be an important part of trainees’ personal values and identity to varying degrees. Particularly with foreign or non-Muslim trainers, it is not advisable for the trainer to promote a particular interpretation of religion or to judge participants’ interpretations. However, acknowledging the importance and value of religion in building peace and addressing violence, and providing a safe space for participants to discuss how this could happen, can empower participants to think creatively and reflectively about their values and interpretations. It also demonstrates a respect for participants’ values and culture, creating an environment that can encourage reciprocal openness to new methods and the ability to connect them with existing culture and practices.

4. *Integrate, don't replicate.*

It is unrealistic and suboptimal to expect participants to directly replicate what they have learned. They should be encouraged to reflect on what aspects of new methods introduced would be useful in local contexts, what would be less useful, and how new methods could be adapted or integrated with local practices most effectively.

5. *Use a 'tiered' approach that combines training with action.*

Follow-up and sustainability are major challenges to many training programs. The ICRD program is built on the expectation that ToT graduates will conduct training programs for others, and accounts for the provision of modest resources to support a first round of such trainings (as well as one community project). Upon implementation, this was multiplied many times over as many participants subsequently took the initiative to conduct further training and community programs—working with communities to build support and gather needed resources. The initial support that enabled the first training programs helped participants to see what was possible, the benefits and effectiveness of such programs, and the enthusiastic response from their communities. This in turn inspired them to continue and sustain these efforts, after the ICRD-funded activities concluded. As advocated by one ToT graduate:

“To make an organization not [just] focused on collecting certificates, engage people to participate by other means. Focus on sustainability and knowledge. Like this ICRD project—we came not only to be trained but to train others. This encourages us and makes us think of sustainability and project contributions . . . I'm so glad that this training will not stop here, that we will continue by going back to train others and working in the community.”

6. *Be deliberate in selection of training participants.* In particular:

Choose trainees who can be influencers and 'bridges'—between international and local practice, between higher and lower education levels, and between CSOs and target constituencies or communities. For example, elder tribal or religious leaders may be in the best positions of respect to mediate tribal conflicts or influence violent extremism, but may also feel most threatened by 'new' methods. If it is impractical for international trainers to engage such leaders directly, they can train other community members who can then engage these leaders.

Be mindful of differences in education and experience level among trainees. Vast differences can create challenges to presenting and engaging with content. To ensure a common starting point, it may be necessary to begin with basic concepts that may already be familiar to some participants. Presenting such content as an initial 'refresher'—and inviting more experienced trainees to share their experiences in these areas—can help decrease potential boredom or alienation of more seasoned trainees, while ensuring that less experienced trainees are grounded in basic concepts and principles. Participants responded positively to this approach in the ICRD training, indicating that all topics were relevant, and that those with which they were already familiar were a good refresher for the experienced and useful for the less experienced.

Be mindful of potential power imbalances among trainees from the same group. If trainees with more experience or leadership roles are trained alongside less experienced trainees from the same organization or community, the junior trainees may be more hesitant to participate actively in front of their more senior colleagues, who may dominate discussions. At the same time, including multiple people from the same organization or group in a training can increase the likelihood of the knowledge and skills being smoothly transferred back to their organization or community. Trainers should simply be aware of the potential impact of power differentials, and adjust trainee selection and training methodology as appropriate to the goals of the program.