



## Understanding the multi-faceted drivers of radicalization to violent extremism in Northern Ghana

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### Summary

This brief summarizes findings from [UNDP study](#) that examines the drivers of radicalization to violent extremism in Northern Ghana. Among the findings, the study emphasizes that, there is a growing youth population that perceives both the modern state and traditional institutions and their leaders as insensitive to their needs. Recommendations to address the challenges include the need for educational and employment opportunities, community engagement, interventions for vulnerable youth, public awareness, a whole-of-society approach to address persistent socio-economic challenges and development gaps, as well as border security strengthening.

### Background/ Context

Ghana's vulnerability to the growing threat of terrorism and violent extremism from nearby West African states is driven by several factors. Terrorism and violent extremism continue to gain momentum in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. The severity and recurrence of extremist and militant attacks with indiscriminate targeting of civilian and military populations are particularly worrying. According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, the first quarter of 2022 recorded 379 terrorist attacks that resulted in over 2,824 deaths across Africa. The Sahel region

in West Africa recorded the highest casualty count, with 1641 deaths which was ranked the second most attacked area after East Africa. Other reports on the deteriorating security situation in the ECOWAS region indicate a staggering death toll of nearly 14,500 over a span of four and a half years while 5.5 million refugees are seeking humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup> The increased threat of violent extremism in the Sahel and its gradual descent towards coastal states is

<sup>1</sup> [ECOWAS: 14,500 Killed by Terrorists in Four and Half Years in West Africa.](#)

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/07/14/ecowas-14500-killed-by-terrorists-in-four-and-half-years-in-west-africa/>

alarming<sup>2</sup> with almost frequent attacks in the northern borders of [Togo](#)<sup>3</sup>, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire. Ghana's strong interaction with and proximity to the 'theatres of terrorist violence' in the Sahel and with these coastal states has significantly heightened its vulnerability to the interests of violent extremist groups.

Many conditions conducive to violent extremism impacts both on the potential violent radicalization of men and women. It is however critical to understand how these factors may be experienced differently along gender lines. Gender-based discrimination may indeed possibly overlap with and exacerbate discrimination and violations of rights on other grounds, such as race, ethnicity or belief. Moreover, specific conditions conducive to the extremist radicalization of women may include gender-based inequality and discrimination, violence against women, lack of educational and economic opportunities and lack of opportunities for women to exercise their civil and political rights and engage in the political process with lawful and non-violent means. When women and youth face marginalization and discrimination, they may be more prone to being recruited by violent extremist groups or seek out violent extremist groups as a pathway to pursue independence from the oppression in their lives. Women are targeted in some instances to serve as informants for extremists' groups.

Further exacerbating the situation is the porous nature of borders between Ghana and its neighbors'. It is estimated that there are over 80 unapproved borders and entry points around Ghana with routes along Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire borders, which leaves the country further vulnerable to infiltration of violent extremist groups. Following the July 10 attacks in Burkina Faso, there has been an influx of people from communities across Ghana borders for safety. As identified in UNDP's Journey to Extremism report, Ghana's West African neighbors such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Mali, and Niger have recorded cases of extremist violence emanating from the radicalization of vulnerable youth. These complex systemic emerging threats have the potential to disrupt and derail years of peace and stability in Ghana.

### Objectives, Scope, and Methods

The overall objective of the UNDP study on the drivers of radicalization to violent extremism in Northern Ghana was to undertake an assessment focused on identifying the underlying causes and drivers of vulnerabilities to radicalization towards violent extremism in the northern part of Ghana. The study employed a mixed method approach for data collection. After an extensive literature



<sup>2</sup> <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/05/togo-attack-a-sign-of-sahel-violence-spreading-south/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/how-ghana-is-dealing-with-terrorists-threat-after-10-soldiers-were-killed-in-togo.html>

review to identify the existing gaps, the study focused on primary data collection through a combination of a survey<sup>4</sup> as well as in-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews with key informants and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

In designing a common analytical framework for understanding the underlying *causes* and *consequences* of the journey from radicalization to violent extremism, the study applied two mutually reinforcing concepts, namely: *constructive* and *destructive* social incentives.

*Constructive social incentive* aims to place the agency of youth and communities within a framework that defines these incentives as: ‘those elements within a society that contribute to stability, and orderly, as opposed to violent, and social change’.

### Key findings

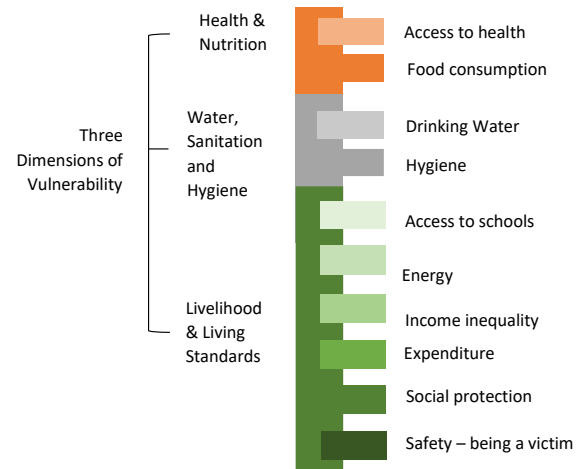
The overall level of economic and social *vulnerability experienced by households in northern Ghana is very high*. One-fourth of households are vulnerable to several deprivations grouped into three dimensions: **i) Health and Nutrition**, **ii) Water, Sanitation and Hygiene**, and **iii) Livelihood and Living standards**, as shown in Error! Reference source not found.: *Composition of the MVI – Dimensions and indicators*.<sup>5</sup> The most vulnerable region is the North East, followed by the Northern region. On the other hand, the region with lower vulnerable households is Savannah, followed by the Upper East region.

The overall **risk of violent extremism and radicalization in northern Ghana is moderate**. The Upper West and North East are falling under high risk of violent extremism and radicalization. Economic and social vulnerabilities play a significant role in explaining radicalization. More explicitly, **the higher the level of vulnerability, the more people are likely to fall into radicalization and violent extremism**. Education prevails over vulnerability in explaining the risk of violent extremism and

radicalization. ***Having no formal education increases the risk of radicalization and violent extremism.***

***Vulnerabilities to violent extremism and radicalization in northern Ghana***, should be understood within the wider socio-economic and governance processes, as well as security developments in West Africa and the Sahel. The stability of Ghana’s democratic practice has arguably not translated into addressing socio-economic and governance challenges, as challenges in the form of limited active citizenship, endemic corruption and clientelism, stalling local governance and weak macro-economic fundamentals continue to persist. In fact, the nexus between democracy and the distribution of its socio-economic dividends are at best tenuous in the Northern regions. Moreover, Ghana’s elections and post-electoral environment continue to be characterized by relatively high level of violence, which could contribute to undermining its democratic successes while increasing vulnerabilities to violent extremism.

Fig1:



There is ***an ambivalent relationship with local governance processes and issues and the state of Ghana*** as a whole, which has resulted from decades of sense of abandonment

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted utilizing a standardized and contextualized household questionnaire designed by the Surge Data Hub (SDH) at Crisis Bureau and the UNDP Country team in Ghana. Survey data was collected in December 2022 from willing participants of randomized households who are 15 years or older, employing a team of experienced enumerators fitted with the Kobo Collect application on android tablets. In all, 1394 questionnaires were administered by the

UNDP and Ghana Statistical Service (GSS). Of this number, 53 per cent constituted females whereas 47 per cent were males. The majority of respondents also fall into the critical youthful population, with 41 percent aged between 15 and 35.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Surge Data Hub, UNDP

and exclusion from the state. Thus, citizens' perceptions about the state and its capacities spanned from mistrust, dismissiveness, dissatisfaction of its incapacities of delivering protection (security, employment opportunities, and social protection) and public service goods such as access to water, hygiene services, schools etc. to limited engagement or withdrawal from national and community-based governance activities.

Similarly, *there is an increasing tension between the modern state and traditional institutions, a deepening tension and mistrust among different religious faiths.*<sup>6</sup> Religious tensions manifest in different forms from one region to the other, even if subtly. In the northern region, concerns have been raised about violent clashes between the Tijāniyyah and Ahlus-Sunnah, and the presence and activities of radical Muslim clerics in some communities, some of whom are said to be foreigners from neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup> In the Upper East region, intra-religious tensions between the Sunni, Shia, and Tijaniyyah remain a worrying trend. In the Upper West, intra-religious tensions often transmute into political tensions, pitching neighborhoods and local communities against one another.<sup>8</sup>

Again, there are ***clear and present differences in the construction of and perception of the sources, nature and direction of extremist threats at the national and local levels.***

While the state appears to perceive the threat of violent extremism as external, and thus focus more on preventing a spillover and infiltration of extremists from neighboring countries, locals in the northern part of the country appear to be more concerned about how internal socio-economic and political factors are driving survival strategies and subtle cross-border interactions that expose desperate populations, especially the youth, to radicalism. Consequently, there are perceptible differences in views on whether the emphasis on the fight against extremism should be placed on security measures along the borders, surveillance operations and policing of public places or on efforts at addressing structural inequalities and insulating the youth in northern

Ghana against recourse to extremism and radicalization. Care must be taken not to neglect internal vulnerabilities that expose populations to potential extremism in the five northern regions.

Significantly, there is a ***growing youth population that perceives both the modern state and traditional institutions and their leaders as insensitive to their needs.***<sup>9</sup> These youth are largely unemployed and unemployable, who are mostly male, who live by their wits or have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy. The internet and social media remain an important factor influencing religious radicalization of youth. The use of the internet as an information source for current events is high among people aged between 15-35 years, particularly in the Northern and Savannah regions. Notwithstanding, vast majority of youth rely on friends for information.<sup>10</sup> Combined with ill-formed political consciousness or limited political awareness, these youth have become willing and available cannon fodder 'used by politicians and political parties to distort political processes for small payments.'<sup>11</sup>



<sup>6</sup> FGD in Bolgatanga

<sup>7</sup> NR 12.12.22

<sup>8</sup> UW FGD 14.12.12

<sup>9</sup> Multiple interviews made such references.

<sup>10</sup> Cumulatively, 'friends' ranked the top source (30 percent) of information for current events, according to the survey results. It can be deduced that

majority of 'friends' use the second most cited source of information – internet (21 percent).

<sup>11</sup> MN 5, 11.12.22

## Conclusion and Recommendations



1. There is a need for a more granular appreciation of the local drivers of violent extremism, and a recognition that the risks of vulnerability differ around contextual issues. The issues that are prevalent in one region and the intervention measures that are applied to achieve results in one context cannot be simply imitated elsewhere.
2. There is need to expand state presence and capacity to provide both educational and employment opportunities.

3. A whole-of-society approach must be adopted in designing ways of preventing radicalization and violent extremism that addresses persistent socio-economic challenges and development gaps that have generated a sense of exclusion, marginalization and anger among the largely unemployed youth.
4. The catalysts for building resilience should necessarily include community engagement, interventions for vulnerable youth, efforts to counter online extremism, and attempts to deracialize through religious counselling.
5. Improve public awareness of information campaigns such as the "See something, say something" campaign using local languages and drawing on local realities.
6. Integrate Border Security Committees (BOSEC) into already existing national security institutions around borderlands to tackle smuggling, and criminal networks must have a better understanding of borderland political economies.

