



IGAD Centre of Excellence for
Preventing and Countering Violent
Extremism (ICEPCVE)



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A TRAINING WORKSHOP ON DEVELOPING COUNTER MESSAGES AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES ON P/CVE IN THE IGAD REGION

A Strategic Communication Manual Training Report



August 2020



TRAINING WORKSHOP ON DEVELOPING COUNTER MESSAGES AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES ON P/CVE IN THE IGAD REGION

Organized by:

IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE), HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies, and USAID.



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BACKGROUND

That terrorist activity is an important feature in the Horn of Africa region is well documented. The activity, motivated by political, ethnic, and/or religious ideologies, often manifests through acts of terrorism and radicalization into violent extremism. All IGAD member states + Tanzania have experienced one form of terrorist activity or another in recent times. Actors in the field of terrorism have suggested ways to prevent and/or counter violent extremism (P/CVE), including arresting extremists; eliminating leaders of extremist groups; shutting down or destroying physical and virtual spaces used by extremists; and instituting deradicalization programs. The results have been mixed. In some cases, such intervention has reduced the incidents and/or prevalence of violent extremism. In others, it has had no effect. In others still, violent extremism has increased.

The increase in violent extremism that the region has witnessed in recent times can be attributed, in part, to the sophistication with which al Shabab - the region's deadliest terrorist group - exploits prevailing circumstances, and existing technologies to recruit individuals and radicalize them into violent extremism. In the process, the need for increased understanding of the narratives that extremist groups such as al Shabab and others in the region use to recruit and radicalize 'at risk' individuals into violent extremism has become apparent. So has the need for knowledge on how to counter such narratives.

Cognizant of these realities, and of the absence a definitive resource on existing extremists' narratives in the region, and how to respond to these, IGAD Centre for Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE), with the support of USAID, commissioned a '*Training Manual for Developing and Disseminating Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives*,' in 2019. The Manual was developed by the HORN Institute. On August 20-21, 2020, the IGAD-HORN team conducted a Strategic Communication Training Workshop to pilot

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the Manual and validate its usefulness. The virtual Workshop was aimed at youth networks, civil society organizations, and government officials who are potential users of the Manual. Participation was invited from ICEPCVE's six focus countries (Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania). The Workshop's key outputs were six counter-messages and alternative narratives developed by the participants that would be disseminated according to a social media communication plan developed prior to the Training.

30 individuals representing five IGAD countries (Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Ethiopia) participated in the Workshop on August 20, 2020, and 28 on August 21, 2020. ICEPCVE was represented by the Centre's Director, Simon Nyambura, Ph.D., and Head of Strategic Communication, Grace Omondi; supported by Mohamed Ibrahim (Deputy Director), Racheal Mpiirirwe (Head of Civil Society and Community Outreach), and Farah Mohamud (Project Assistant, Communications). The HORN Institute was represented by its Chairman, Mustafa Y. Ali, Ph.D., Director, Hassan Khannenje, Ph.D., and Director, Centre for Sustainable Conflict Resolution, Ramadhan Aula; supported by Roselyne Omondi (Associate Director, Research), Daniel Iberi (Strategic Communications Manager), Fauzia Hussein (Assistant Strategic Communications Manager), Evans Ombisa (Designer), and Elvis Salano (Research Assistant). Razia Kimani, Acting Deputy Director, Office of Democracy, Governance and Conflict, represented USAID. This is a report of the Training.

Opening Remarks

ICEPCVE Head of Strategic Communication, Grace Omondi, thanked the participants for honoring the invitation to participate in the Workshop, and welcomed them. She also thanked the HORN Institute team for their support in realizing the Training, and gave an overview of the day's program, and the aim of the Training, before handing over the session to ICEPCVE Director, Dr. Simon Nyambura.



Dr. Simon Nyambura

Dr. Simon Nyambura welcomed participants to the Training. He appreciated the partnership between ICEPCVE and the HORN Institute and the role that the Institute has played in creating the Manual. He thanked ICEPCVE Head of Strategic Communication, Grace Omondi, for her leadership in organizing the training in collaboration with the HORN Institute team. He observed that “these are challenging times, courtesy of COVID-19.” He invited participants to reflect on increasing terrorist activity in Somalia. He also reminded them that “extremists are busy planning,” saying that “we should anticipate challenging times post-COVID-19.” He underscored the need to “continue reminding ourselves [of these realities], and sharpening skills to undermine extremists’ narratives.” Dr. Nyambura reiterated the objectives of the Workshop, to: test the Manual, and critique it. He concluded his remarks by thanking the HORN Institute Chairman, Dr. Mustafa Ali, the HORN Institute team, and USAID for making the Workshop possible, and then invited Dr. Mustafa to make some remarks.



Dr. Mustafa Yusuf Ali

Dr. Mustafa acknowledged the presence of the participants. He thanked ICEPCVE for its valued partnership, and for entrusting him and the HORN Institute team with the task of developing the Manual. The Manual has six stand-alone Modules. He also said that Manual, which provides knowledge on narratives of extremists, was one of the solutions available in the prevention and countering of violent extremism. In this regard, he added, “the work of creating and improving the Manual was useful for future generations too.” Dr. Mustafa also observed that measures by the regions’ government to minimize the spread of COVID-19 such as ‘Stay Home’ have seen many turn to online platforms to study, work remotely, and maintain social and professional relationships have inadvertently provided a “good opportunity for extremists.”



Dr. Hassan Khannenje

The HORN Institute Director, Dr. Hassan Khannenje, thanked participants for their attendance, and ICEPCVE for partnering with the Institute in creating the Manual and conducting the Training, in other matters relating to preventing and countering terrorism in the Horn of Africa region. He cautioned that the decrease in the number of al Shabab attacks in the region should not be taken to signal a decline in terrorism; “these are dangerous times.” He concluded by saying he was looking forward to a robust engagement, and the success of the Training.

THE TRAINING

This was undertaken in two phases: provision of background information on violent extremism, and development of counter-messages and alternative narratives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Participants were given an overview of violent extremism in the region, and of the Manual and Training. They were also taught what to consider when creating messages, about extremists' narratives, and how to create and disseminate counter-messages and alternative narratives. Three trainers were involved in this process: Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali , Grace Omondi, and Sh. Ramadhan Aula.

A. Overview of Violent Extremism in the Horn of Africa

Speaking about terrorist activity on the region, Dr. Mustafa highlighted three main trends.

First, he noted that the problem of radicalization into violent extremism in the region is growing; all countries in the region, represented by participants of IGAD's six focus countries, are grappling with some form of violent extremism. This trend is evidenced by the increase in the number of people targeted, the frequency of targeting, and the kind (variety) of people being targeted; women, children, youth remain the most targeted groups. Secondly, he highlighted the increasing number of attacks in specific localities, particularly in Somalia and north eastern Kenya, since the emergence of COVID-19 in the region. Thirdly, he talked about COVID-19 and violent extremism. He said the combination of regional governments' 'Stay Home' directives to help contain COVID-19 and citizens' increased reliance on online platforms to work, learn, and maintain social and familial bonds has presented extremists more opportunities to radicalize 'at risk' individuals.

Making reference to Module One of *'Training Manual for Developing and Disseminating Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives,'* the material on which the Workshop

... the combination of regional governments' 'Stay Home' directives to help contain COVID-19 and citizens' increased reliance on online platforms to work, learn, and maintain social and familial bonds has presented extremists more opportunities to radicalize 'at risk' individuals

was based, Dr. Mustafa also told participants that most of the extremists’ violence in the region is motivated by political, economic, historical, ethnic, socio-psychological, instrumental (military), and religious-based (theological) ideologies, or a combination of two or more ideologies. However, religious ones in general, and narratives of al Shabab in particular, are the most prevalent. He provided examples of violent extremist groups active in the region.

Table 1: Examples of Violent Extremist Groups in the Horn of Africa

Violent Extremist Group	Country Presence
Al Shabab	Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique
IS in Somalia	Somaliland
Al Muhajirun	Kenya (Majengo)
Allied Democratic Forces	Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo
Lord’s Resistance Army	Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic

Dr. Mustafa also apprised participants of radicalization into violent extremism. In addition to taking advantage of significant events such as the emergence of COVID-19, violent extremists’ and recruiters also radicalize ‘at risk’ individuals offline and online, in public (schools, places of worship, marketplaces, homesteads, workplaces, public transport) and virtual spaces. Online radicalization is accomplished using different media – including mainstream media and social media, he said, referring to Module Two of the Manual that discusses the use of media by violent extremists.

Dr. Mustafa reiterated that knowledge gained through the use of this Manual will increase understanding of extremists’ narratives and how to undermine the same, enhancing P/CVE initiatives in the region. He ended his presentation by encouraging participants to focus their attention during the Training on Modules Four (*Audience Selection: Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives*) and Six (*Step-by-Step Guide for Developing and Disseminating Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives*), as doing so would allow them to learn:

- What extremists’ narratives (political, religious, ethnic, and so forth) are
- How to identify such narratives
- What alternative narratives and counter-messages are
- How to create and use alternative narratives and counter-messages to counter extremists’ narratives.

B. Audience Setting

To create and use alternative narratives and counter-messages, Grace urged participants - in her presentation on *Audience Setting* - to think about two main aspects of effective messaging: the objective of the message, and the target audience.

- *The Objective of the Message*

Using private sector advertisements and COVID-19 messages as examples, she singled out memorability as an expression of an effective objective-target audience match. We all remember COVID-19 messages that urge us to 'Stay Home, Social Distance, Sanitize Frequently' she said. In other words, the rallying call of COVID-19 messages is memorable and actionable.

Messages, Grace said, are actionable when the individual crafting the message has clarity about what he or she wants the recipient to remember and/or do. For instance, she posed, *Do you want to transform perceptions on violent extremism in your country? Which perceptions on violent extremism do you want to change? What emotions do you want to transform? What action do you want the recipient of the message to take?*

- *Target Audience*

In targeting the message, Grace apprised participants to gear their messages to specific audiences rather than the whole population in their countries. The target audience, she said, can be distinguished using parameters such as: gender, age, literacy levels, faith (religion), and geographic location. This will determine the message, how it will be disseminated, and the extent to which the disseminated message will resonate with its intended recipients.

C. Developing Counter-Messages And Alternative Narratives

Sh. Ramadhan begun his presentation by offering definitions of 'narrative,' 'counter-message,' and alternative narrative. He likened a narrative to an advertisement that is presented as a statement, has catchy phrase, is well packaged to rationalize a certain action, and is used for branding. He said that although narratives can be positive or negative, those of violent extremists are always negative. He also distinguished a counter-message from an alternative narrative and

... although narratives can be positive or negative, those of violent extremists are always negative

used two narratives propagated by extremists in the context of COVID-19 to illustrate the difference(s).

Table 2: Difference between Counter-Message and Alternative Narrative (Essence of the Two)

	Counter-Message	Alternative Narrative
Tackling	'Pull' factors	'Push' factors
Definition	Directly deconstruct, discredit, and demystify VE messaging <i>What are we against?</i>	Undercut VE narratives <i>What are we for?</i>
How?	Challenge ideologies through emotion, theology, exposure of hypocrisy, lies, and half truths	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom, and democracy
Nature	Reactive, negative	Proactive, positive
Who Does It?	Government, civil society organizations, religious leaders	Civil society organizations, government, religious leaders
	Upstream	Downstream

Table 3: Illustration: Using Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives to Address Extremist COVID-19 Narratives

Covid-19 Narratives	Counter Covid-19 Messages	Alternative Covid-19 Narratives
The virus' transmission caused by the presence of forces from Christian-majority nations	Muslim and Muslim countries are affected, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, UAE to but name a few	Muslim physicians and other scientists join hands with others to find a cure for COVID-19
COVID-19 affected only enemies of Islam, specially China, which is being punished for its persecution of Uighur Muslims	Muslim countries are also affected including the holiest cities of Makkah and Madina	Cleanliness is highly encouraged in Islam (which is not different from what WHO is asking the masses to observe)

Additionally, he demonstrated the difference between the three using the analogy of a disease. If a violent extremist's narrative was a virus, Sh. Ramadhan said, then, a counter-message would be a treatment, and the alternative narrative would be a vaccine.

In keeping with the reality of the prevalence of al Shabab narratives in the region that Dr. Mustafa spoke about, Sh. Ramadhan also highlighted the seven themes on which al Shabab base their narratives: *Takfir, Dar al Kufir, Al Walaa wal Baraa, Al jihiliyya, Al hakimiya, Jihad, Tamkin, and Khalifah*. He encouraged participants to refer to Module Four of the Manual for additional information on these themes. He then listed the five steps involved in developing a counter-message and/or alternative narrative:

- i. Read the extremists' message
- ii. Internalize and contextualize the message
- iii. Define the topic being discussed
- iv. Develop counter-message
- v. Validate the counter message and/or alternative narrative

Sh. Ramadhan also highlighted factors to consider to disseminate a counter-message and/or alternative narrative effectively. These are:

- a) Identify your audience
- b) Adjust message to suit target audience
- c) Identify the messenger
- d) Identify channel through which the message will be disseminated
- e) Create messages to suit your chosen platform or channel
- f) Disseminate message through the right channel
- g) Review the effect of the message on your target audience

These reinforced Grace's talk on audience setting, and the need to think about the context of violent extremism in the region that Dr. Mustafa spoke about.

Participants were then divided into five groups (because there was no show from Tanzania) and given the opportunity to create alternative narratives and counter-messages.

... the seven themes on which al Shabab base their narratives include *Takfir, Dar al Kufir, Al Walaa wal Baraa, Al jihiliyya, Al hakimiya, Jihad, Tamkin, and Khalifah*

Development of Counter-Messages and Alternative Narratives

Led by moderators, members of each of the five groups discussed some of the prevailing extremist narratives (EN) in their countries. They then created a counter-messages (CM) and an alternative narrative (AM) to address the EN. They also indicated their message objective and target.

Here is an example of **UGANDA's** first submission:

Basis of Extremist Narrative: Use of tribal sentiments to undermine national unity

Objective: To neutralize tribal sentiments to attain national unity

Target: Youth in urban centers

Counter-Message: - "Uganda is for everyone" this is because we have had leaders from different regions. Uganda is our country and we own it.

Alternative Narrative: It is every one's responsibility to ensure national unity through inclusion for all tribes.

The groups' submissions were then presented to Dr. Mustafa and Sh. Ramadhan, who reviewed the same. The groups used Dr. Mustafa and Sh. Ramadhan's critiques, with some input from Grace, to improve their work. Dr. Mustafa and Sh. Ramadhan, for instance, asked the Uganda group to improve their objective, CM, and AM. Specifically, the reviewers asked the group to:

- Use 'reduce' instead of 'neutralize' (in their objective).
- Add 'enough' to the CM so that it reads 'Uganda is enough for everyone' (in their CM).
- Replace 'If you want to walk far, walk together, if you want to walk fast walk alone' with an African proverb (in their AM).

Cleanliness is highly encouraged in Islam which is not different from what WHO is asking the masses to observe

Here is an example of **UGANDA's** revised submission:

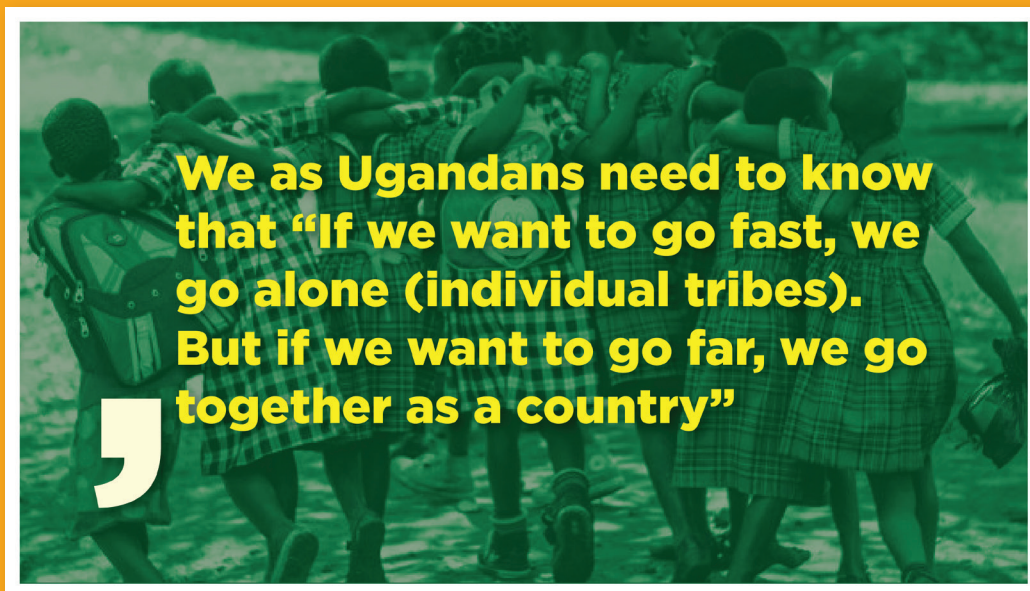
Revised Objective: To reduce tribal sentiments to attain national unity

Revised Counter-Message: "Uganda is enough for everyone" this is because we have had leaders from different regions. Uganda is our country and we own it.

Revised Alternative Narrative: "We as Ugandans need to know that 'If we want to go fast, we go alone (individual tribes). But if we want to go far, we go together as a country.'"

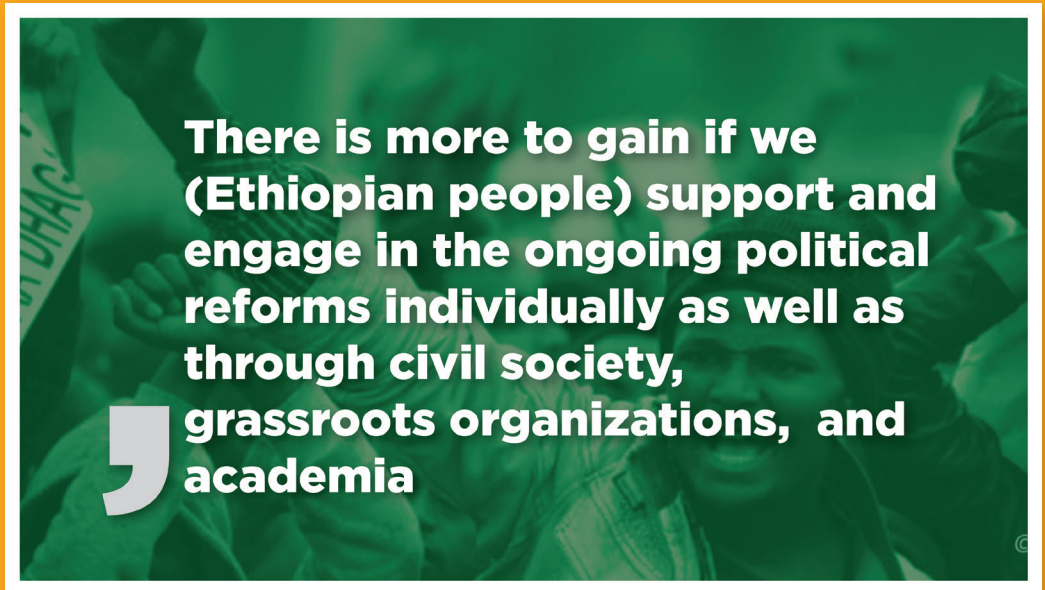
The groups then presented their revised messages to Dr. Mustafa and Sh. Ramadhan a second time for accountability (to ensure the feedback was taken) and to ensure that the improved messages are available for the planned launch of a social media campaign on August 21, 2020. The campaign, to be implemented on Twitter, would be spearheaded by ICEPCVE and the HORN Institute, and supported by Workshop participants.

The Strategic Communications teams representing IGAD and the HORN Institute: Grace (IGAD), Daniel Iberi, Fauzia Hussein, and Evans Ombisa (the HORN institute) then prepared the messages for a Twitter campaign. Here is an example of Uganda's packaged counter-message:



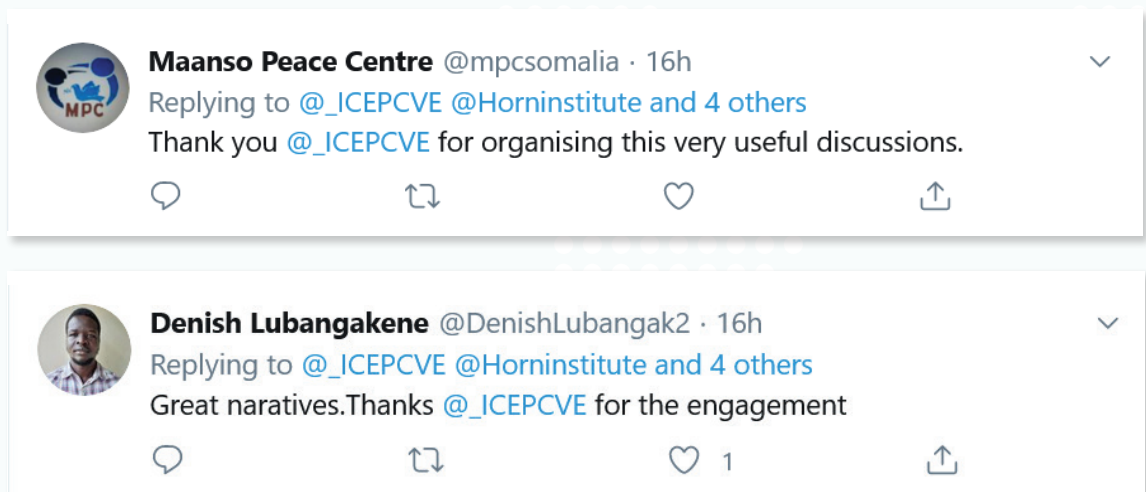
Uganda's packaged Counter-Message

Another example of a revised and package alternative narrative is Ethiopia's:



Ethiopia's Packaged Alternative Narrative

Based on the counter-messages and alternative narratives developed by the participants, and their feedback – verbalized or sent through the Chat function, and social media (Twitter), the participants understood the information shared by the three trainers. ICEPCVE and the HORN Institute are therefore confident that: individuals from IGAD's five focus countries can read the Manual easily, and the information on how to develop and disseminate messages to counter extremists' narratives is 'fit for purpose.' In short, the Manual is usable.



Having demonstrated their knowledge of extremists' narratives, message objective, target audience, counter-messages, and alternative narrative by creating country-specific counter-messages and alternative narratives, the participants were awarded Certificates of Participation. This was done by USAID's Acting Deputy Director, Office of Democracy, Governance, and Conflict, Razia Kimani. Before awarding the certificates, Razia appreciated efforts by IGAD and the HORN Institute teams that led to the successful delivery of the virtual Training in what she said were "abnormal times that required adaptation," and congratulated them for the same. She confirmed the importance of strategic communication to USAID, particularly now (the COVID-19 era) when "online extremism is increasing." She cited the "100 per cent traffic from more than 2,000 individuals with [internet] protocols addresses in Kenya, between March and May 2020, to al Shabab's magazine, *Al Khataib*," which she termed as "disturbing." Additionally, some of the messaging are in Kiswahili. Razia **recommended** that:

- 1) Kenya group consider translating some of their anti-violent extremists' messages to Kiswahili.
- 2) More attention be paid to the creation of alternative messages as these would be more effective in drowning out the messages that extremists are propagating in the region.
- 3) The participants, in addition to sharing the knowledge and skills acquired during the Workshop, use the same to create more counter-messages and alternative narratives.

She ended by saying that she believed in the work of ICEPCVE and the HORN Institute.

More attention be paid to the creation of alternative messages as these would be more effective in drowning out the messages that extremists are propagating in the region

CLOSING REMARKS

These were made by: Dr. Mustafa, Dr. Hassan Khannenje, Dr. Nyambura, and Razia.

Considering the absence of Tanzania in the Workshop, the limited number of participants, and the nuances relating to violent extremisms specific to each of the six countries, **Dr. Mustafa recommended:**

- 1) Follow up trainings for each of the IGAD member states +Tanzania for more specificity
- 2) Diversification of participants in the country-specific trainings

Dr. Khannenje appreciated the participants' patience and sacrifice. He said the participants have become "soldiers against violent extremism in their countries." He encouraged them to get involved in other events organized by IGAD and the HORN Institute, and to continue their engagement with the two organizations.

Dr. Nyambura said the commitment of the participants (as demonstrated by their messages) and the representatives of the two organizations over the last two days "excites and encourages me." He projected that "there will be a lot to analyze post-COVID-19" because "there is still a lot we do not know," and **recommended** engagement in research on the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism in the Horn of Africa region. He thanked the HORN Institute team, the IGAD family, the trainers, for developing the Manual and organizing and offering the Training, and Razia for continued support. **Razia** encouraged everyone to "be safe and well."

Grace then ended the Workshop by thanking participants, before holding a short organizers' debriefing session to share feedback on the Training, and ensure IGAD and the HORN Institute teams are on the same page ahead of the Twitter campaign. The campaign was launched on August 21, 2020. By 5:00pm (EAT), the first post had been retweeted 9 times, and received 22 likes. Other posts will be made in due course.

HORN International Institut...
4,598 Tweets

Tweets Tweets & replies Media Likes

HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies Retweeted



ICEPCVE @_ICEPCVE · 3d

Just concluding two days of cross-country learning & exchange of ideas on how to develop counter messages and alternative narratives. Thank you to teams from 🇨🇩, 🇪🇪, 🇳🇮, 🇸🇩 & 🇪🇸 and to @Horninstitute for the valuable partnership.



You and 4 others



A screenshot of a Twitter campaign post by ICEPCVE after the training on Day Two

