

If you really want to fight terrorism, start by fighting child poverty

Poor people have no stake in nations and economies that ignore them – governments must recognise residents of slums as full citizens, not squatters

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Poverty feeds terrorism by eroding a basic human need: the need to belong. This may seem like an unlikely place to begin a conversation on terrorism, but after growing up in one of Africa's largest urban slums for most of my life, I am certain that nurturing a sense of belonging in young people through economic opportunity and the cultivation of community is essential for curbing the spread of terrorism.

My home of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, is one of the largest urban slums in Africa. Growing up there and starting the grassroots movement Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) age 16, I saw in the young people around me an intense desire to belong to society and to be seen as valuable contributors.

Instead, lack of opportunity drove many promising youths I knew into gangs and terrorist groups. And as the 10-to-24 age group is expected to almost double to 605 million by 2050, the numbers of disaffected young people and threats to regional and world peace will grow with it.

Belonging to a society means participating and contributing to its growth and improvement. People without economic opportunity cannot belong to their communities – they can only exist in them. In Kibera, people live in homes with dirt floors and no front doors, walls are built from scrap materials, and there are open sewers and dirty drinking water. They live on less than \$1 (64p) per day.

Simply surviving is not enough for people with intelligence and energy though. I grew up with men and women in Kibera with enough energy, intelligence and entrepreneurial zeal to be a Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. Many of them were overwhelmed by the constant struggle for basic opportunity, like my dear friend Calvin who couldn't see any way out and I found hanging one day in his small 3m x 3m (10ft x 10ft) room. His dreams never had a chance to become reality. There are millions like him.

Many residents of Kibera are not even recognised by their government, so lack proper

legal identity, which limits their ability to find decent jobs, much less become entrepreneurs.

With no opportunities to use their energy and abilities productively, many of the men I knew joined gangs. The gangs offered them what their communities could not: a sense of belonging and a way to feed their families. It did not matter to the men that the gangs were criminal and violent as they grew up in an environment surrounded by crime and violence. The gangs were no more criminal than the paramilitary police who came through Kibera looting shops, spraying homes with bullets and killing at random.

So when middle- and upper-class people ask why someone with no natural inclination toward violence becomes a terrorist, the answer is usually “because they have nothing to lose”. But what terrorism is to people of the upper and middle classes is what happens every day in poor communities: random, senseless violence with no regard for the value of life and little, if any, chance of justice. With the upper and middle classes, however, this violence only becomes terrorism when it ventures outside the poor community into their own, as it did in Nairobi in 2013 when al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate shopping mall at a cost of 67 lives.

Until poverty and alienation are acknowledged as the major catalysts for terrorism, the world’s slums will continue providing a steady supply of young people willing to kill at the cost of their own lives.

From growing up in a poor community, I believe that grassroots community development is the best way to involve young people in transforming their own lives and community, and I have witnessed the power of grassroots leadership first hand.

SHOFCO has focused on building communities in Kibera and Mathare of which people feel a valued part. Our girls’ schools provides free education, nutrition and health services to students and their families. We use microloans to help launch small businesses - such as barber shops and vegetable stands - to help build a local economy. Theatre, clean water, employment counselling and football programmes give members of the community reasons to come together.

The SHOFCO movement had very simple beginnings though. It started when I saved up 20 cents to buy a football and gathered the kids in Kibera to play football together - it gave them something to look forward to and be a part of.

However, the burden of helping the poor cannot lie with community development organisations such as SHOFCO alone.

Upper- and middle-class citizens must pay fair wages and support humane working conditions to help people climb out of poverty. The hope of advancement stabilises societies and makes terrorist groups less appealing.

residents of slums as full citizens, not squatters, and extend services such as clean water and transportation into these communities. With recognition comes access to basic tools of self-improvement: legal identities, addresses and the ability to open a bank account.

Belonging is fundamental to the stability of our communities and nations. Poor people have no stake in nations and economies that ignore them. We cannot fight their alienation with the police and the military. If you really want to fight terrorism, start by fighting poverty and ensure that each person, no matter what their income, has a voice and an opportunity to contribute.

Kennedy Odede is the co-founder of Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), an organisation that delivers urban promise to Africa's largest slums. He is also the co-author of the upcoming book Find Me Unafraid: Love, Loss & Hope in an African Slum

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