The Exploitation of Climate Chaos, Confusion and Change

A New Frontier for P/CVE Strategic Communication

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Abstract

While scholarly debate continues about possible causal links between climate events and violent extremism, the evidence suggests that these events make communities more vulnerable to recruitment, provide fertile ground for anti-democracy sentiment, and erode trust in institutions and governments.

It is recognised that many of these challenges play out in and leverage the on- and offline public sphere. Strategic communication, therefore, is an essential tool to utilise in this space to help prevent and counter violent extremism.

This Policy Brief provides a starting point to explore further the potential nexus between climate events, violent extremism, and strategic communication. It explores a whole-of-society view of the potential strategic communication challenge and what actions practitioners could implement now to help address or minimise this existing or potential emerging threat.

Keywords: strategic communication, violent extremism, climate change, climate events

Introduction

Climate-related disasters and extreme events impact lives and livelihoods.[1] The rise in global temperatures is causing more frequent and intense sudden and longer-term climate events.[2] Current predictions estimate an additional surge of 4.4 degress Celsius by the end of the century, so the increase in extreme climate events is set to continue.[3] These events, including floods, heatwaves, droughts, severe storms, and wildfires, can impact people's health, access to water and food, and ability to generate income.[4] They can affect mental health and well-being, lead to individual and collective trauma, as well as erode a community's resilience and social cohesion.[5] These physical and mental impacts make response and recovery more challenging, increase vulnerabilities, and, over time, may require broader adaptation policies to ensure communities can survive and prosper.[6]

The complex economic, political, and social challenges extreme climate events bring are not limited to developing or conflict-prone region; high gross domestic product (GDP) economies and established democracies are not immune.[7]

Like COVID-19, increasing extreme climate events will likely have worldwide implications with specific local vulnerabilities. The pandemic demonstrated the potential for mis- and disinformation to drive division and increase the risk of violence.[8] The proliferation of misleading content reduced the community's ability to cope and maintain social cohesion and ultimately put more lives at risk.[9] Similarly, the spread of mis- and disinformation and resulting contestation about the causes of, and responses to, extreme climate events is of growing concern. It is becoming more challenging for governments and authorities to provide trusted information that cuts through at times when communities need it most.[10]

A study of 167 countries from 1970 to 2007 found that "on average, an increase in deaths from natural disasters of 25,000 leads to an increase in the following year of approximately 33 percent in the number of deaths from terrorism, an increase of approximately 22 percent in the number of terrorist attacks, and an increase of approximately 16 percent in the number wounded in terrorist attacks, holding all other factors constant."[11]

While the possible causal relationship between sudden and longer-term extreme climate events and violent extremism is still being explored, they are thought to exacerbate existing conflicts,

1 United Nations. "Climate Action Fast Facts", https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/key-findings

2 European Environment Agency. "Extreme weather: floods, droughts and heatwaves", 26 October, 2023, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/extreme-weather-floods-droughts-and-heatwaves?activeTab=fa515f0c-9ab0-493c-b4cd-58a32dfaae0a&activeAccordion=dd2e16ef-4d34-48ae-bd38-31258544004d

3 Copernicus Climate Change Service. "August Climate Bulletin. Summer 2023: the hottest on record", 5 September,2023, https://climate.copernicus.eu/summer-2023-hottest-record; World Economic Forum. "Climate Change: Is 2023 going to be the hottest year on record?", 14 November, 2023, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/11/climate-2023-hottest-year-on-record/; United Nations. "Climate Action Fast Facts. What is Climate Change?", https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/fastfacts-what-is-climate-change.pdf

4 Nina Nadine Ridder, et al. Increased occurrence of high impact compound events under climate change. npj Clim Atmos Sci 5, no. 3 (2022).

5 Lloyd's Register Foundation. "World Risk Poll 2021: A Resilient World? Understanding vulnerability in a changing climate", 2022, https://wrp.lrfoundation.org.uk/2021-report-a-resilient-world-understanding-vulnerability-in-a-changing-climate/; IPCC, Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 1-34, 2023; Jura L. Augustinavicius, et al. "Global climate change and trauma", International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Briefing Paper, 2021.

6 World Health Organization, "Climate crisis: extreme weather", https://www.who.int/europe/emergencies/situations/climate-crisis-extreme-weather; Lloyd's Register Foundation. "World Risk Poll 2021: A Resilient World? Understanding vulnerability in a changing climate", 2022, https://wrp.lrfoundation.org.uk/2021-report-a-resilient-world-understanding-vulnerability-in-a-changing-climate/

7 Lydia Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on violent extremism", *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf

8 Sana Ali, "Combatting Against Covid-19 & Misinformation: A Systematic Review", *National Library of Medicine* 5, no. 2 (2022): 337-352.

9 Ibid.

10 Lydia, Khalil. "The impact of natural disasters on violent extremism", *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf

11 Claude Berrebi, Jordan Ostwald, "Earthquakes, hurricanes and terrorism—do natural disasters incite terror?", RAND Corporation, September 2011, Earthquakes, Hurricanes, and Terrorism: Do Natural Disasters Incite Terror? (rand.org)

grievances, and marginalisation and can increase social, political and economic pressure. This can, in turn, increase the conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism.[12] These events can make communities more vulnerable to recruitment, provide fertile ground for anti-democracy sentiment and erode trust in institutions and governments.[13]

Image 1 shows the impact of a disaster on a community's cohesion and collective mental and emotional well-being.[14] While disasters often spark a momentary peak in togetherness, the 'Disillusionment' cliff demonstrates the time when communities become more vulnerable. Multiple or subsequent events that impede the Reconstruction trajectory, risk compounding this community impact.[15]

Image 1: SAMHSA Centre for Mental Health Services - community reactions to a disaster.[16]

During extreme climate events, issues or grievances tend to start or 'play out' in the traditional and online public sphere, meaning both offline face-to-face engagement and through traditional,

12 Lukas Ruttinger, et al. "A new climate for peace - Taking action on climate and fragility risks." *adelphi, International Alert, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, European Union Institute for Security Studies,* 2015, newclimateforpeace_fullreport_web.pdf (wilsoncenter.org); Tim Sweijs, et al. "Unpacking the Climate Security Nexus Seven Pathologies Linking Climate Change to Violent Conflict", *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, March, 2022, https://hcss.nl/report/unpacking-the-climate-security-nexus/

13 United Nation Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute. "Perceptions of climate change and violent Extremism Listening To Local Communities In Chad", October 2022, https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2022-10/Perceptions%20of%20climate%20change%20and%20violent%20extremism_0.pdf; Imen M., Teng J., "Could climate change mean more violent extremism?" United Nations Development Program, July 23, 2023, https://www.undp.org/blog/could-climate-change-mean-more-violent-extremism; Wong C., Saeedi N., Rizk S., "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism: Working at the intersection of major development challenges", United Nations Development Program, October 12, 2020, https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-climate-security-nexus-and-prevention-violent-extremism

14 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). "Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program Guidance. CCP Application Toolkit", *FEMA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,* Version 5.0, July 2016, Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program Guidance (samhsa.gov)

15 Jakob Zscheischler, et al. "Future climate risk from compound events", *Nature Climate Change* (2018), 8, 469–477 https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0156-3.

16 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). "Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program Guidance. CCP Application Toolkit", *FEMA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,* Version 5.0, July 2016, Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program Guidance (samhsa.gov)

digital, and social media.[17] Trust is often gained or lost by the way governments and institutions contribute, or not, to this engagement and discourse.[18]

While a government's response, or lack of it, can determine the level of anti-government sentiment, actors not only leverage this sentiment at the time of an emergency or disaster but can pre-emptively undermine future responses by sowing distrust and polarisation at a time when social cohesion and trust is vital.[19]

With extreme climate events an increasing phenomenon, there is an opportunity to understand these challenges further. Specifically, how violent extremists leverage the public sphere to exploit these events and narratives, and what can be learned from existing human rights-centred, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) communication approaches to help better understand and address the current risk and prevent potential future threats. This brief brings together findings from existing literature, as well as primary data collected from traditional and social media analysis and P/CVE and climate expert interviews. For this brief, the analysis explores climate themes in isolation with the understanding that these fit within a broader range of narratives and tactics used by violent extremist actors. It aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with an overview of the nexus between extreme climate events, violent extremism and terrorism, and the public sphere, as well as resulting strategic communication considerations.

Findings

While extreme climate events may not be seen as the primary driver of violent extremism, they are often viewed as a risk or threat multiplier. [20] It is the impacts of these events, such as local resource competition, livelihood insecurity, and displacement, which can be seen to increase the underlying vulnerability to violent extremism, contribute to the recruitment push and pulls factors, erodes trust in government, and strengthen the efforts of violent extremist groups and actors.[21]

The literature review identified three thematic areas as climate event risk multipliers and public sphere leverage points, noting that they are not always discrete. It found that violent extremists and actors using narratives which present potential violent extremism risks are exploiting climate events by:

17 Richard Butsch, "Media and public spheres", *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2007; Craig Calhoun, "*Habermas and the public sphere*", The *MIT Press, 1992.*

18 Selen A. Ercan, et al, "Building Democratic Resilience: Public Sphere Responses to Violent Extremism.", *NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet*, 2022, https://2965ca35-2b64-4394-960f-c11bebeac378.usrfiles.com/ugd/2965ca_35476e91fd0144e6abfc1ce502e6b27b.pdf
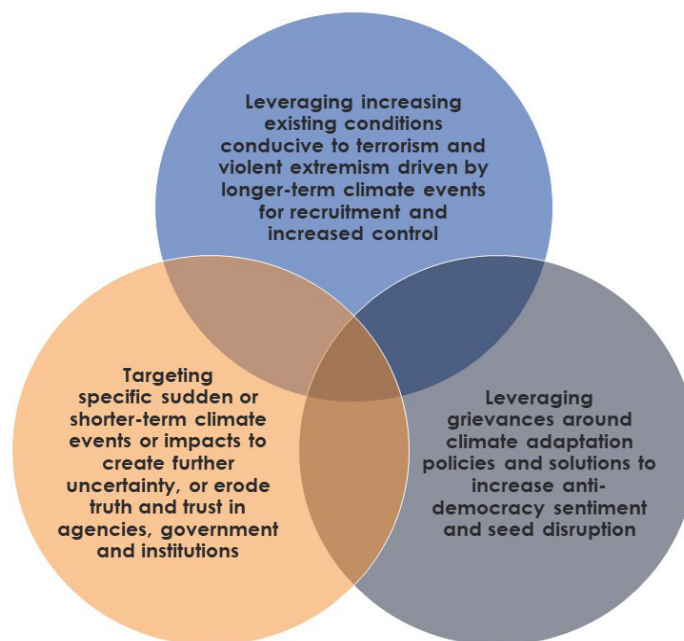
19 Lydia Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on violent extremism", *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf; Chao Fan, et al. "Emergent social cohesion for coping with community disruptions in disasters", *Journal of the Royal Society* 17, No. 164 (March 2020).

20 Lukas Ruttinger, et al. "A new climate for peace - Taking action on climate and fragility risks." *adelphi, International Alert, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, European Union Institute for Security Studies,* 2015, newclimateforpeace_fullreport_web.pdf (wilsoncenter.org); Tim Sweijs, et al. "Unpacking the Climate Security Nexus Seven Pathologies Linking Climate Change to Violent Conflict", *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, March, 2022, https://hcss.nl/report/unpacking-the-climate-security-nexus/

21 Catherine Wong, et al. "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism: Working at the intersection of major development challenges", *United Nations Development Program*, 12 October 2020, https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-climate-security-nexus-and-prevention-violent-extremism Lukas Ruttinger, et al. "A new climate for peace - Taking action on climate and fragility risks." *adelphi, International Alert, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, European Union Institute for Security Studies,* 2015, newclimateforpeace_fullreport_web.pdf (wilsoncenter.org); Tim Sweijs, et al. "Unpacking the Climate Security Nexus Seven Pathologies Linking Climate Change to Violent Conflict", *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, March, 2022, https://hcss.nl/report/unpacking-the-climate-security-nexus/

Image 2: How climate events and narratives are being exploited in the public sphere – key themes.

Eco and environmental terrorism was referenced in several papers. However, the overall scholarly opinion argues there is no substantial evidence that climate events or narratives have translated into a rise in eco-terrorism risk or violence and attacks.[22] Therefore, this theme has not been included in the analysis.

Analysis across Three Thematic Areas

Leveraging increasing existing conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism driven by longer-term climate events for recruitment, legitimacy and control

It is recognised that the countries where climate events have the most significant impact are often the same countries with the greatest risk of violent extremism. Analyses of climate change and violent extremism have mainly focused on regions in Africa and the Middle East because of their high degree of both climate and conflict vulnerability.[23]

Extreme climate events impact the resource quality, quantity and distribution required to survive.[24] In the Lake Chad region, severe drought has meant crop yields and fish are smaller, and there is little land for cattle to graze. This impacts people's ability to provide enough food for their

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22 Paola Andrea Spadaro, "Climate Change, Environmental Terrorism, Eco-Terrorism and Emerging Threats." Journal of Strategic Security 13, No. 4 (2020): 58–80. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26965518; Pool Resolution, "Monthly Threat Update July 2022", July, 2022, https://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1826/18425/Eco-Terrorism-assessing_current_threats_and_trends-2022.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Steve Vanderheiden, "Eco-terrorism or Justified Resistance? Radical Environmentalism and the "War on Terror,"" Politics & Society 33, no. 3 (2005): 425-447, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329205278462. 10 Michael Loadenthal, "Deconstructing "Eco-Terrorism": Rhetoric, Framing and Statecraft as Seen Through the Insight Approach," Critical Studies on Terrorism 6, no. 1 (2013): 92-117, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2013.765702

23 W. Maconga Carson, "Arid fields where conflict grows: How drought drives extremist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa", World Development Perspectives 29, (March 2023). https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2452292922000807; Ashley Moran, et al. "The Intersection of Global Fragility and Climate Risks." USAID, September 2018, https://www.strausscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Intersection-of-Global-Fragility-and-Climate-Risks-2018.pdf

24 Alec Crawford, "Climate change and state fragility in the Sahel", FRIDE Policy Brief No. 205. June 2015, https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/climate-change-and-state-fragility-in-the-Sahel-fride.pdf; International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq. Integrated Location Assessment VII. Factsheet: The impact of climate change on the environment in IDP and returnee locations, August 2022, https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/20221023456153_iom_DTM_The_Impact_of_Climate_Change_on_environment_Aug_2022.pdf

families or generate an income.[25] Boko Haram has capitalised on these impacts to successfully recruit young men.[26] These men, with limited resources and few prospects, have little choice but to consider joining terrorist groups that 'sell' a better future. It was reported a young man told of Boko Haram soldiers promising:

"We will give you good lives [...] You will have everything"[27]

A survey published in 2021 reported that "41 percent of respondents acknowledging climate-related difficulties farming, fishing, or herding knew people who joined Boko Haram as a result of these challenges."[28]

In Somalia, the increase in climate events has been an ongoing challenge. Catastrophic, compounding multi-year droughts and floods, as well as a predicted unprecedented sixth below-normal rainfall season in 2023, present an increasing risk.[29]

As of May 2023, 3.8 million people were displaced, and 6.7 million were struggling to have enough food to survive.[30] From January to May 2023 alone, the compounding conflict, drought and flood conditions resulted in more than one million people displaced in just 130 days.[31]

Many are forced to live in displacement camps and without access to social services, livelihood security, or support. This significantly increases conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism for both those who are displaced and the communities they are seeking refuge.[32] If they seek refuge internationally, for example, in Europe, it is often exploited to fuel anti-migrant sentiment and racism.[33]

For those within Somalia, the vulnerability and uncertainty are enabling violent groups, particularly al-Shabaab, to exploit impacted communities, building legitimacy and trust that enhances recruitment and control efforts.[34]

From 2014 to 2022, there were numerous reports of al-Shabaab running food aid campaigns in severe drought-affected communities. Promoting these well-staged events to the media appears to be designed not just to win favour with impacted communities but to build trust and legitimacy more broadly.[35] The photos mimicked the aid distribution undertaken by government or humanitarian agencies and, by default, highlighted a gap in response efforts.[36]

25 Wong C., Saeedi N., Rizk S., "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism: Working at the intersection of major development challenges", *United Nations Development Program*, 12 October 2020, https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-climate-security-nexus-and-prevention-violent-extremism

26 Gen(ret.) Tom Middlendorp, Reiner Bergema. "The warning signs are flashing red", ICCT Planetary Security Initiative Policy Brief, September 2019. https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/PB-The-Warning-Signs-are-flashing-red_2e-proef.pdf

27 Rachel Chason, "How climate change inflames extremist insurgency in Africa", *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/climate-change-extremism-boko-haram/

28 Jessica Caus, "Climate-driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria". United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. MEACFindings1.pdf (unu.edu); World Meteorological Organization. "Another poor rainy season forecast for drought hit Horn of Africa", 22 February 2023, https://public-old.wmo.int/en/media/news/another-poor-rainy-season-forecast-drought-hit-horn-of-africa

29 World Meteorological Organization. "Another poor rainy season forecast for drought hit Horn of Africa", 22 February 2023, https://public-old.wmo.int/en/media/news/another-poor-rainy-season-forecast-drought-hit-horn-of-africa

30 Norwegian Refugee Council, "Somalia: Over 1 million people internally displaced in Somalia in record time", 24 May 2023. https://www.nrc.no/news/2023/may/somalia-1-million-displaced/

31 Ibid

32 Desmidt, Sophie. "Climate change and security in North Africa Focus on Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia", ECDPM, February 2021, CASCADES-Research-paper-Climate-change-and-security-in-North-Africa-1.pdf

33 Institute of Strategic Dialogue, "The networks and narratives of anti-refugee disinformation in Europe", 2021. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-networks-and-narratives-of-anti-migrant-discourse-in-Europe.pdf

34 Kate Cox, et al. "Social media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development", United Nations Development Programme, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/africa/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Executive-Summary_final_3-Oct.pdf

35 Mercy -USA, "Food and meat distribution: Mercy-USA for Aid and Development Somalia". https://mercyusa.org/report/dignissim-vut-tortor-3/

36 Sunguta West, "Al-Shabaab Plays on Aid Distribution Role to Win over Desperate Somalis", *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor,* Volume: 15 Issue: 7, 7 April 2017; Al-Shabaab announcement, Somali online news outlet, April 2021. ICCT data on file. https://somalimemo24.net/articles/6886/Sawirro-Al-Shabaab-oo-Gargaar-Uqeybisay-Boqolaal-Qoys-oo-Dib-Ugu-Laabtay-Magaalada-Ceelbuur; Sebastiao Vieria de

Image 4: Example of promotion of aid relief by humanitarian organisation Mercy-USA.[37]

Image 5: Example of promotion of aid relief provided by al-Shabaab via online media.[38]

In 2018, the terrorist group broadened its reputation-building agenda by aligning with the global movement to ban single-use plastic bags, claiming plastic bags were a "serious threat to the wellbeing of humans and animals alike".[39] This could be viewed as an attempt to capitalise on environmental impacts and greenwash its actions to build trust and further support.

Freitas Netto, et al. "Concepts and forms of greenwashing: a systematic review" *Environ Sci Eur* 32, 19 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-0300-3; Al-Shabaab announcement, Somali online news outlet, October 2022. ICCT data on file.

37 Mercy -USA, "Food and meat distribution: Mercy-USA for Aid and Development Somalia". https://mercyusa.org/report/dignissim-vut-tortor-3/

38 Al-Shabaab announcement, Somali online news outlet, October 2022. ICCT data on file.

39 Rukmini Callimachi, "Al Qaeda-Backed Terrorist Group Has a New Target: Plastic Bags", 4 July 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/africa/somalia-shabab-plastic-bags.html

Image 6: Example of Facebook post reporting on al-Shabaab plastic bag ban via NY Times.[40]

Al-Shabab bans single-use plastic bags in the areas it controls in #Somalia, According to #RadioAndalus interview with #AlShabaab governor for Jubba regions In which Mohammed Abu Abdullah said that plastic bags "pose a serious threat to the well-being of humans and animals alike"

10:03 PM · Jun 30, 2018

♥ 68   💬 Reply   ↑ Share

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In November 2023, al-Shabaab issued alerts across radio and online platforms in response to extreme flooding. Appearing again to step into an institutional role, the media release uses government-style public safety information and social cohesion messaging.

> *"Al-Shabaab has urged people living along riverbanks in Somalia to move to higher grounds as the country experiences heavy rains linked to the El Nino weather phenomenon. Muslims living in the Islamic regions are advised to take precautionary measures, especially those living along rivers. Those living far away from rivers and water bodies are advised to welcome their Muslim brothers and give them shelter and supplies. Al-Shabab urged Somalis to practice caution, including keeping children away from dams and similar places, avoiding contact with electric wires and not during borehole water in flooded areas."* [41]

In the days following, the group announced via Facebook and media the formation of a more formal flood management committee to coordinate the emergency response.[42] This was followed by another announcement and images showcasing rescue efforts by the new committee.[43]

These examples again resemble attempts to further legitimise al-Shabaab's role as a trusted source of information and governance in emergency response. This type of approach is characteristic of the group's broader communication strategy. According to a recent analysis of al-Shabaab's communication infrastructure and ongoing communication campaigns that states, "[the approach] allows the group to maintain a level of influence through its established brand. It plays into a narrative that al-Shabaab offers a credible alternative to the current government—providing 'legitimate,' timely news to Somalis at home and abroad."[44]

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40 Rukmini Callimachi, "Al Qaeda-Backed Terrorist Group Has a New Target: Plastic Bags", 4 July 2018.   https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/africa/somalia-shabab-plastic-bags.html
41 Al-Shabaab announcement, Local radio news, November 2023, ICCT data on file.
42 Al-Shabaab announcement, Somali online news outlet, November 2023, ICCT data on file.
43 Ibid
44 Georgia Gilroy, "The Online Frontline: Decoding al-Shabaab's Social Media Strategy", January 2024, Volume 17, Issue 1. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-online-frontline-decoding-al-shabaabs-social-media-strategy/

Violent extremist groups have also targeted communities with specific resource shortages. In Iraq, the exploitation, or weaponising, of water is not a new phenomenon.[45] The decreasing rainfall, continued upstream damming, together with historical conflicts over land and inadequate irrigation systems have provided new opportunities for violent extremists to exploit.[46] Increasing temperatures mean each year an estimated eight to twelve billion cubic metres of surface water is lost due to evaporation.[47] By 2030, there is a predicted annual shortfall of 10 – 20 billion cubic metres, approximately a third of the country's total water demand.[48]

Historically, when controlling dams and water systems, violent extremist groups have used both the threat of scarcity, flooding and poisoning of the water supply to coerce community support.[49] Water rationing programs and those not adhering to allocations were exacerbating tribal and community grievances.

Like the tactics utilised in Somalia, Daesh offered aid to communities by supplying food, water, cash payments or fertiliser in return for support.[50] In addition to tangible support, multiple climate-related narratives are used by the group to persuade, recruit, and build legitimacy. Narratives are tailored to the specific grievances of individuals or villages, such as farmers struggling to survive or community leaders seeking to regain land and water rights.

They do this by eroding trust in government and government responses and providing a viable pathway:

> "*They will visit farmers in marketplaces and say climate change is happening and you are suffering because the government is choosing not to invest or choosing not to provide this for you. They want to disempower you, but we want to help you.*"[51]

Where inter-tribal or inter-village grievances are heightened, violent extremists use water scarcity to inflame division and incite violence:

> "*They will spread hate speech and calls to violence by saying that their village [or tribe] is being targeted by those who they are already distrust, or in conflict with, saying your water supplies are being taken from you. But we can help you get it back or seek revenge.*"[52]

To drive fear and disempower efforts to resolve water scarcity, communities are told that climate change is a curse inflicted because of the fall of the "caliphate":

> "*You destroyed the caliphate, and this drought is God's wrath. But it's not too late. God is the most forgiving and merciful if you repent.*" [53]

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45 Schwartzstein, Peter. "Climate Change and Water Woes Drove ISIS Recruiting in Iraq," *National Geographic*, November 14, 2017, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/climate-change-drought-drove-isis-terrorist-recruiting-iraq
46 Husam Sobhi, "Satellite Monitoring Reveals the Startline Extent of Iraq's Water Crisis", *the Century Foundation,* 1 September 2023, https://tcf.org/content/commentary/satellite-monitoring-reveals-the-startling-extent-of-iraqs-water-crisis/; Iraq P/CVE and climate experts, (names withheld by request), virtual and email interviews November 2023
47 Husam Sobhi, "Satellite Monitoring Reveals the Startline Extent of Iraq's Water Crisis", *the Century Foundation,* 1 September 2023, https://tcf.org/content/commentary/satellite-monitoring-reveals-the-startling-extent-of-iraqs-water-crisis/
48 Yedur Mihir, et al, "The Weaponisation of Water: Water Politics in the Middle East", *Oxford Political Review,* 24 June 2023, https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2023/06/24/the-weaponization-of-water-water-politics-in-the-middle-east/
49 Marcus D King, "Weaponizing Water: Water Stress and Islamic Extremist Violence in Africa and the Middle East", *Lynne Rienner Publishers*, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781955055949
50 Marcus D King, "Weaponizing Water: Water Stress and Islamic Extremist Violence in Africa and the Middle East", *Lynne Rienner Publishers*, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781955055949
51 Iraq P/CVE and climate experts, (names withheld by request), virtual and email interviews November 2023.
52 Iraq P/CVE and climate experts, (names withheld by request), virtual and email interviews November 2023.
53 Ibid

While traditionally, these narratives are part of face-to-face engagement, these grievances and narratives are also being exploited via Facebook and, increasingly, TikTok. The mainstream media tends to play a more moderating role around these grievances. [54]

As water is very powerful motivator for communities to act, the opportunity for violent extremists is significant. This highly tailored audience approach is proving a successful tool to persuade and divide, recruit and incite- and the event-driven approach is proving to be a successful tool for persuading, advising, recruiting, and inciting violence.

Targeting specific sudden or shorter-term climate events or impacts to create further uncertainty, and erode truth and trust in agencies, government and institutions

The second theme included the targeting of sudden or shorter-term climate events by violent extremist groups and actors using narratives which have been shown to increase violent extremism risk. This included exploiting the trauma, chaos or grievances after emergencies and disasters, mainly where functions such as disaster response are, or are perceived to be, inadequate.[55] While there is a wide variety of narrative themes that can occur during these events, for the purposes of this policy brief, only prevalent narratives that have been linked to violent extremism in the past were analysed. This includes The Great Replacement theory, which was claimed to have in part inspired violent extremist attacks in Christchurch, El Paso, Halle, Buffalo, Pittsburgh and Poway, The Great Reset theory, which during COVID-19 fuelled violent anti-vaccination protests and the QAnon conspiratorial movement, which the FBI has now deemed a terrorist threat. [56]

The 2023 summer heatwaves and power outages across Europe and the United States, as well as the Maui wildfires, were two events that drew considerable focus from those peddling misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Image 9: A meme posted on X in response to power outages resulting from heatwaves. The outages were framed as a mechanism to control populations, referencing the Great Reset theory.[57]

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54 Ibid

55 Lydia Khalil. "The Impact of Natural Disasters on Violent Extremism." Edited by Leanne Close and Daria Impiombato. *Counter Terrorism Yearbook 2021*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31258.24.

56 Gallagher, A., Davey, J., Hart, M. "Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017", Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Genesis-of-a-Conspiracy-Theory.pdf; Bettina Rottweiler, "Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality, Terrorism and Political Violence", (2022) 34:7, 1485 1504, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288; Stephanie Carvin, "Online Conspiracies, Extremism and Rage Fuel Threats to Democracy", *Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI)*, 8 October 2022, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/all-the-rage-online-conspiracies-extremism-and-anger-fuel-threats-to-democracy/; Aoife Gallagher, et.al "The 'Great Reset'", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue: ISD Explainers.* https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-great-reset/; Daniel Jolley, et al. "Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories" Current Opinion in Psychology 47, (2022): 1-5.

57 Aoife Gallagher, et.al "The 'Great Reset'", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue: ISD Explainers.* https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-great-reset/

The Maui wildfires provided a prolific example of this. The fires were the deadliest in the United States in over a century. They claimed the lives of more than 100 people and burned more than 2,500 acres, destroying homes and businesses.[58] While historically, the area is not known for wildfires of this scale, climate change contributes to more intense events.

An assessment of social media comments related specifically to the Maui wildfires showed a community trying to come to terms with the scope of the loss with questions and anger around cause and responsibility, as well as the adequacy of preparedness, response, and recovery. However, it was the subsequent inundation of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories which heightened concern. So much so, government and news outlets, including Reuters and CNN, published stories to debunk these conspiracies, mis- and disinformation.[59]

There were four main conspiracy themes that gained traction during and following the crisis. These themes drew from existing conspiracy theories, including QAnon, the New World Order, the Great Reset and the Great Replacement.[60] They were used as standalone conspiracies but were often combined. Many comments contained links to more extreme content on alternative platforms or were amplified by bots, which further perpetuated the theories and inundated conversations.

Social media commentary revealed a consistent pattern. A fact from the news story was used as an evidence point to seed a piece of mis- or disinformation, or logical fallacy, that then provided legitimacy for a conspiracy theory.

As an example, one mainstream news reporting theme was that people, including children, were being evacuated. This led to Facebook and X posts discussing that the children had not been seen again and police were impeding the search:

> *"There is a report out of Maui that children were sent home from school due to high wind advisories. According to a couple...an entire neighbourhood of children in Lahainaluna is now dead"*

> *"Over 1000 children were missing in Maui, and the cops didn't let the parents go in to look for them. This is all planned from the fire to the child trafficking #Dew #HumanTrafficking"*

> *"Do you think this was all planned, from the fire to getting the children? Where did they go?"*

This commentary quickly shifted to more direct conspiracy theories that the wildfires were a cover-up for the elite to steal children for a human trafficking ring.

> *"International Child Sex Trafficking, Organ and Adrenochrome Harvesting Ring #RunOutoftheVatican and Housed in China's Three Gorges Dam: Maui Hawaii: Over 2,000 children remain unaccounted for since the Maui fires started on Aug.8. Not even their bodies have been found, shocking truth about children..."*

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58 Ashley R. Williams, et al. "'Everything was on fire.' The hours that brought Lahaina to ruins", *CNN*, 8 August 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2023/08/hawaii-wildfires-timeline-maui-lahaina-dg/index.html; Claire Wolters, "Wildfires can move shockingly fast. Here's how they start – and how to stop them.", *National Geographic*, 11 August 2023, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/wildfires; Solcyre Burga, "Why the Maui Wildfires were so deadly", *Time*, 15 August 2023. https://time.com/6305113/maui-wildfire-cause-hawaii/

59 Ben Gutierrez, "Rumors and conspiracy theories: Authorities try to stamp out Maui wildfire disinformation", *Hawaii News Now,* 17 August 2023, https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2023/08/17/emergency-agencies-try-quell-lahaina-fire-misinformation-social-media/; Reuters Fact Check, "Fact Check: No minors are now missing from Maui wildfires", *Reuters,* 5 October 2023, https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/no-minors-are-now-missing-maui-wildfires-2023-10-04/; Samantha Murphy Kelly, "Maui conspiracy theories are spreading on social media, Why this always happens after a disaster", *CNN Business,* 26 August 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/26/tech/maui-wildfire-cause-conspiracy-theory/index.html

60 Brian F. Schaffner, "QAnon and Conspiracy Beliefs", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 5 October 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/qanon-and-conspiracy-beliefs/

Image 10: Example of an image used on Facebook to support a commentator's conspiracy theory.

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A second theme was the amazement of the community at one house that was left standing in a street decimated by the fire. Similar to the previous example the suspicion and misinformation sparked quickly in the Facebook and X commentary:

> *"Not so sure of this miracle, skeptical [sic]…"*

> *"How where [sic] the plant protected? And the grass…….. Most suspicious"*

> *"What do you think saved it?…there's so much we don't understand"*

> *"Something or someone was watching this house"*

These narratives quickly led to conspiracy theories aligned particularly with the Great Reset:
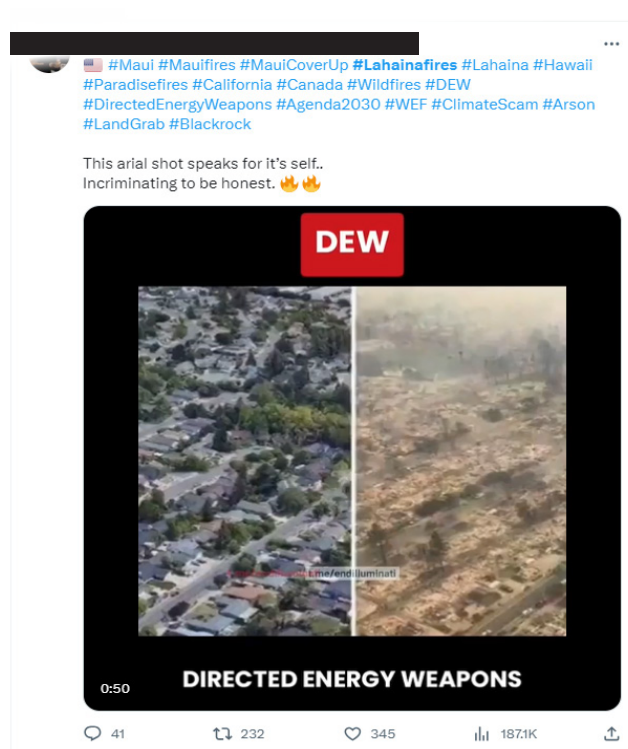
> *"This was a direct energy weapon attack, why didn't all the blue things burn??? Cars umbrellas mail box's, anything blue, because it was a laser attack by the government"*
> *"Paradise 2.0. Maybe you're next?"*

> *"The government's zapped the land with a laser from space to start the fire so they can obtain the land. Just like they zapped up the fires in Canada from space with a laser."*

Image 11: Example of image used on Facebook to support a commentator's conspiracy theory.

A third theme from the media was that climate change was a contributing factor to the fire. The following commentary included:

> "There is no climate crisis, it's a fabricated scam that lines the pockets of politicians and their business partners with the zero carbon hoax and carbon credit scams"

This was followed by:

> "Unm [sic] it was a terror attack. Just like all of the wealthy elite homes were spared...but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming."

> "This was an act of war. On the people of that town. By their own government and their own officials, anyone who thinks that as [sic] a natural fire needs to have their heads examined."

> "The climate crisis was Invented [sic] in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio. With it came Agenda 21 which morphed into Agenda 2030 and the Great Reset."

The conspiracy theories, mis and disinformation spread fear, confusion and division at the community's most vulnerable time and cast suspicion on emergency response efforts. As a result, some residents disregarded the authority's instructions, and children were afraid of a rumoured military takeover.[61] This is not an exception; similar cases have proven challenging for government disaster response and recovery efforts. An analysis of bushfires in Australia (2019-2020) and wildfires on the US West Coast (2020) and Canada (2023) also found the increasing emergence of conspiracy theories across social media hampered response efforts.[62]

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61 Pien Huang, "How rumors and conspiracy theories got in the way of Maui's fire recovery", NPR News, 28 September 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/09/28/1202110410/how-rumors-and-conspiracy-theories-got-in-the-way-of-mauis-fire-recovery

62 CAAD Data Monitor, "Wildfire Misinformation: Arson Claims Set the Climate Debate Ablaze", *Climate Action Against Disinformation,* Issue 2, July 2023, https://caad.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/caad-data-monitor-vol.2.pdf

Leveraging grievances around climate adaptation policies and solutions to increase anti-democracy sentiment and seed disruption

The third theme included the leveraging of grievances and narratives around climate policies and solutions.

There is concern in North Africa that potential incoherences and contradictions in renewable energy policies, harsh social corrective measures or agricultural policies could put pressure on already scarce resources and viable employment and increase the climate-related security risk.[63] Conversely, renewable energy is also being recognised as an opportunity to reverse the increased vulnerabilities to violent extremism brought about by extreme climate events in this region.[64]

In other parts of the world, similar to the Maui wildfire, conspiracies, mis- and disinformation are also being targeted at climate adaptation policies and interventions. The 15-minute city urban design concept is an example of this.[65]

The concept was developed in France by Professor Carlos Moreno in 2010 with the idea that everything a person needs, such as schools, stores and offices should only be within 15-minutes from a person's home.[66] While relatively uncontroversial at the time, during COVID-19 lockdowns, this concept was leveraged to prove that a more expansive plot of government control started before the pandemic. By 2021, the conspiracy had compounded to be a creation of the World Economic Forum as a form of control of populations in line with The Great Reset theory.[67] Conspiracy theories, rumours and truth distortions led to death threats against the creator and protests in the UK, where similar plans were proposed.

Renewable energy infrastructure such as solar geoengineering and wind farms are increasingly targets for these conspiracy theories.[68] A 13-year study of social media found that "conspiracy theories influence public reactions to geoengineering…conspiracies tend to spillover, shaping regional debates in the UK, USA, India, and Sweden and connecting with broader political considerations".[69]

Wind turbines have long been the focus of community contention and misinformation, and the technology uptake in many countries has not met expectations.[70] Increasingly, windfarms have been the target of a new range of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and like the Maui wildfires, theories have been linked to increased violent extremism risk.

While public opinion is generally supportive of wind power as a renewable energy form, they are often met with local opposition. Original grievances around visual and land impacts, not

63 Sophie Desmidt, "Climate change and security in North Africa", *Cascades*, February 2021, CASCADES-Research-paper-Climate-change-and-security-in-North-Africa-1.pdf

64 Megan Rowling, "In the Sahel, solar power can help ward off extremism: official", *Reuters,* July 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-westafrica-extremists-energy-aid-idUSKBN1K802F

65 Julia Simon, "It's a global climate solution, if it can get past conspiracy theories and NIMBYs", *NPR News,* 8 October 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/10/08/1203950823/15-minute-cities-climate-solution

66 Julia Simon, "It's a global climate solution, if it can get past conspiracy theories and NIMBYs", *NPR News,* 8 October 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/10/08/1203950823/15-minute-cities-climate-solution

67 Tiffany Hsu, "He Wanted to Unclog Cities. Now He's 'Public Enemy No. 1.'", *The New York Times,* 29 March 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/28/technology/carlos-moreno-15-minute-cities-conspiracy-theories.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare

68 Ramit Debnath, et al., "Conspiracy Spillovers and geoengineering", *iScience,* Volume 26, Issue 3, 106166, (17 March 2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.106166

69 Kevin Winter, et al. "Anticipating and defusing the role of conspiracy beliefs in shaping opposition to wind farms" *Nat Energy* **7**, 1200–1207 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-022-01164-w

70 Kevin Winter, et al. "Anticipating and defusing the role of conspiracy beliefs in shaping opposition to wind farms" *Nat Energy* **7**, 1200–1207 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-022-01164-w; Julia Simon, "Misinformation is derailing renewable energy projects across the United States", *NPR News,* 28 March 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1086790531/renewable-energy-projects-wind-energy-solar-energy-climate-change-misinformation

in my backyard (NIMBY) sentiment and wildlife concerns have been a target to further dis and misinformation and conspiracies. Online discourse has become a fertile ground to divide, disrupt projects and further erode truth and trust. [71]

Social media conversations followed a similar flow to those identified in the Maui wildfires. These conversations were predominately in response to media coverage in Germany and the US.

A mainstream news reporting theme centred around the fact that there were plans for wind turbines to be installed or there had been a malfunction with an existing turbine. The misinformation or logical fallacy commentary that followed in Facebook and X included:

> *"Lies, upon lies. Someone is getting rich with these fake windmills. They don't deliver anything!"*

> *"I read those turbines take more energy to make that they'll produce in their lifetime."*

> *"Maybe they've realised [sic] building, maintaining and disposing of these windmills is more harmful to the environment than directly using fossil fuels."*

With the conversation then turned to conspiracy theories for the 'answer':

> *"Climate change is just another way for Federal government to force. Us [sic] into submission"*

> *"The new green deal has never been about climate change. It's always been about the 2030 agenda. (The great reset) The build back better"*

> *"Today they tell you it's to save the planet, tomorrow they'll have you taking a shower once a month to save the planet's water supply. It's about control, period."*

A second media theme centred around the beaching of whales near a new offshore wind farm. Facebook commentary included:

> *"As we are allowing whales, birds and other wild life to die in the name of saving the planet"*

> *"If it wasn't happening before the wind farms went in, but now it is. Doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out"*

> *"The green ignorant deal is exploring the area with sonar sound for planting windmills and this sonar is destroying the whales and dolphins' hearing. They cannot navigate and or migrate."*

> *"The whale on the left appears to have a slash type injury that looks consistent with a a [sic] blade from a windmill device"*

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71 Maarten Wolsink, "Wind power and the NIMBY-myth: institutional capacity and the limited significance of public support", *Renewable Energy 21,* 46-49, (2000), https://courses.washington.edu/efuture/Wolsink2000.pdf; Jennie King, "Climate misinformation and disinformation" presentation delivered at the Wind Energy Hamburg 2022 Conference on 30 September 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYouzoYsZRw

Again, the commentary quickly then shifted to conspiracies linking windfarms to scams or hoaxes by government or international organisations to take control or force submission:

> "This is definitely government weaponry. It's all about their radar system. They're weaponising it in the oceans now and will kill countless marine life."

> "the New World Order is using "Climate Change", in order to bring about the Great Reset, to control the population... I've seen predictions of environmental disasters awaiting us,... All these predictions have this in common; they never happen."

> "big government and the globalist want complete control over everyone of us. Their goal is to complete control over every aspect of our lives, and to de-populate the earth, so there us [sic] more money available for the elite."

Beyond the above examples of fuelling anti-government and anti-democracy sentiment online, in a similar way to COVID-19, there are examples in the United States and Australia where disinformation and 'at risk' conspiracy theories have also been shown to spill over to action and fuel offline protests and derail projects before they begin.[72]

It is worth noting that while this brief only analysed conspiracy theories with existing links to violent extremist risk, scholars argue the need to consider the complexities and sensitivities of securitisation relating to climate change and events.[73] However, from a preventing violent extremism perspective, it could be viewed as the right time to better understand what opportunities there may be to avoid the potential escalation pathways seen previously with these narratives and conspiracies.

The Collective Communication Challenge

While these themes and examples above differ, there are common challenges they present for the public sphere and, therefore, strategic communication approaches.

1. **Unpredictability.** Risk can arise or flare up rapidly and unpredictably. Longer-term issues can flare without notice, and sudden events can happen anytime. Gaps in government and agency response or communication (perceived or real) are quickly filled. These events are exploited with changing narratives via different channels, and violent extremists and actors are adapting rapidly to the opportunity and the audience. Debates and challenges are borderless.
2. **Difficult to quickly identify and respond.** Narrative springboards such as face-to-face engagement and mainstream media provide hard-to-reach and hard-to-contain challenges. This makes it more difficult to lead the conversation, deliver important information and build trust. Related media coverage or conversations are exploited with strategies to build legitimacy and erode trust in government, institutions and democracies.
3. **Compounding impact of disinformation and conspiracy theories**. A mix of mis and disinformation and conspiracy theories with existing 'legitimacy' cross-pollinate between issues rapidly eroding truth and trust. These conversations gain momentum and amplify quickly, which is particularly challenging to mitigate during emergencies and crises.

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72 Josh Christenson, "Fishermen, activists protest offshore windfarms near Montauk, cite recent whale deaths", New York Post, 24 July 2023. https://nypost.com/2023/07/24/fishermen-activists-protest-offshore-wind-farms-near-montauk/; Adam Morton, et al., "How a false claim about wind turbines killing whales is spinning out of control in coastal Australia", *The Guardian,* 11 November 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/12/how-a-false-claim-about-wind-turbines-killing-whales-is-spinning-out-of-control-in-coastal-australia
73 Jeroan Warner, et al. "Securitisation of Climate Change: The Risk of Exaggeration", *Ambiente & Sociedade 20, no.3,* 2017: 203-24. https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-4422asocex0003v2022017

The ineffectiveness of informational interventions once conspiracy theories take hold demonstrates a need to look at more preventative measures. This includes how governments and organisations approach building the engagement, agency and social license needed to implement adaptation solutions successfully.[74]

4. **Target deep-seated grievances at a time when communities are most vulnerable.** Existing grievances, religious or cultural-based misleading narratives, NIMBY sentiment, and declining distrust, are deep-seated and challenging to address or counter. These emotive narratives are already embedded and can quickly inflame. Grievances may be real or perceived and not easily or quickly remedied or addressed. This is amplified as trust in government and institutions declines.

Considerations for Climate-Focused P/CVE Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is recognised as an important component of all aspects of counter-terrorism policies. From prevention to reducing the appeal of violent extremist and terrorist recruitment and fostering social cohesion through supporting government and agencies to effectively communicate the threat and their policies and responding to an attack in a way that diffuses violent extremists' objectives of chaos and division.[75]

Similarly, strategic communication is a critical tool for building trust, getting people to safety, and recovering during and after disasters and crises, as well as building the confidence, capability, and capacity to address and adapt to future climate policies, events, and changes.
This analysis showcases the complex, broad and opportunistic nature of this new and emerging, and potential threat, and that it is unlikely to be addressed by a single communication approach. Like COVID-19, extreme climate events, to varying degrees and intensities, are likely to impact many facets within all communities.
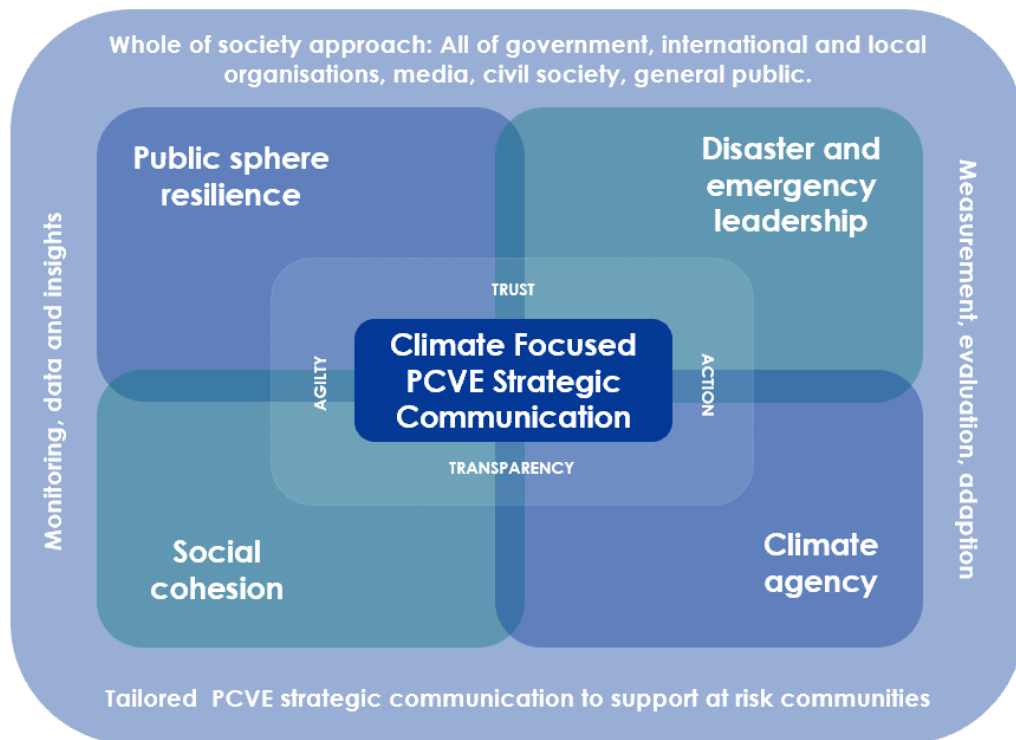
Because of this cross-cutting nature, it cannot be left in the realms of P/CVE specific interventions alone. It is likely to require an all-of-government and whole-of-society approach to strategic communication.

Therefore, in response to these challenges some learnings can be considered from existing P/CVE, crisis and climate strategic communication approaches to apply in this space.

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74 Siân Stephens, et.al. "The social license to operate in the onshore wind energy industry: A comparative case study of Scotland and South Africa", *Energy Policy*, Volume 148, Part B, (2021), 111981, ISSN 0301-4215, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2020.111981.
75 Andrew Glazzard, et al. "Beyond Prevention: The Role of Strategic Communications Across the Four Pillars of Counterterrorism Strategy", *The RUSI Journal*, (2020), 165:1, 74-88, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2020.1727165; United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, "Strategic Communication", https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/strategic-communication; Damien D. Cheong, "Strategic Communication and Violent Extremism: The Importance of State Action", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs,*(2018), 5(2), 129-148. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797018783115

Image 13: Framework for climate-focused P/CVE communication considerations.

While all strategic communication approaches should be human rights-centred and underpinned by local context data and insights, together with monitoring, measurement and evaluation, key considerations for climate-focused P/CVE strategic communication include:

1. **Whole-of-society approach:** What lessons can be learned from COVID-19 to create a whole-of-society approach to the challenge? What relevant stakeholders (e.g. Aid organisations, first responders or community groups) should be informed and empowered to help communication efforts? What needs to change to incorporate evidence and insight-based P/CVE lens to inform climate-related communication? How can consistent messaging and transparency be maintained across the approaches to build and maintain trust?
2. **Social cohesion:** What learnings can be taken from P/CVE strategic communication to help build social cohesion (social capital, social inclusion, and social mobility) to protect against potential violent extremism risks associated with climate events and solutions? What does the added complexity of increasing forced migration or displacement mean for now and the future? What preparation can be done to make communities more robust for the possible scenarios ahead?
3. **Disaster and emergency leadership:** How can current crisis and emergency management plans build in relevant P/CVE strategic communication considerations across preparedness, response and recovery? How can governments ensure they have the agility to respond quickly during uncertainty and remain trusted sources of information? How can they avoid information vacuums and reduce the opportunity for violent extremist organisations to claim legitimacy in the space? After the safety threat has passed, who are the leading voices that can continue to support communities and lead the conversation?
4. **Public sphere resilience:** How can public sphere resilience against conspiracies, mis and disinformation in the climate context be protected and strengthened? What opportunities are there to build the capacity of the community? If there is little evidence to suggest conspiracy theories can be directly addressed, is the misinformation or logical fallacy a weaker link in the

conversation chain?[76] How can truth erosion be curtailed?

5. **Climate agency:** How can strategic communication help foster a stronger sense of individual and community agency in the preparation, response and recovery to climate events, as well as the solutions that address the impact? How can people feel informed, involved, and empowered in a way that creates a more participatory social license or social contract that can help prevent potential risks from arising?[77]

Conclusion

It is clear that the direct causal relationship between sudden and longer-term extreme climate events and violent extremism is still being explored, and debates around sensitivities, such as the risk of securitisation, need to continue.

However, there is evidence to show the impact of these climate events, surrounding narratives, and adaptation policies are providing new and significant opportunities for violent extremists and actors to leverage. Whether the narratives are being tailored and targeted directly for recruitment and control or are eroding truth and trust through conspiracy theories and disinformation, the public sphere plays a critical role in these efforts,

The considerations outlined and the emerging nature of the threat clearly demonstrate the need for further research and analysis into the varied challenges and potential strategic communication responses. However, the findings also present an immediate and transparent opportunity to help address current challenges and potentially help prevent or mitigate future violent extremism risks through a more strategic and holistic approach to communication.

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76 Michael Le Page, "We don't have any viable way of countering conspiracy theories", *New Scientist,* 5 April 2023, https://www.newscientist. com/article/2367358-we-dont-have-any-viable-way-of-countering-conspiracy-theories/
77 Peter L. Kelly, "How to turn 'not in my backyard' wind opponents into 'please -in-my-backyard' supporters", *Recharge,* 17 August 2020, https://www.rechargenews.com/wind/how-to-turn-not-in-my-backyard-wind-opponents-into-please-in-my-backyard-supporters/2-1-858818

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For the past eight years she has worked with governments and civil society organisations across the world focusing on the role that strategic communication can play in preventing and countering violent extremism, reintegration, social cohesion and community resilience as well as crisis and emergency response.