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THE ROLES OF WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMME IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, violent extremism has been in the increase. This manifested in the activities of Boko Haram, bandit groups, unknown gunmen and radical militant groups, among others. These extremist groups have been operating for years with impunity. Their criminal activities ranging from bombing public arenas, kidnapping and cruel killings of innocent citizens have been affecting socio-economic and political sectors of the country. Their criminal activities and the role of government to control them have extensively been investigated in different academic disciplines, which produced a huge body of literature. The roles of non-governmental organisation in de-radicalisation of violent extremism has not been given adequate attention. Hence, this paper sets to examine the role of Women Environmental Programme as NGO in prevention of violent extremism in Benue State. In doing this, data was collected using mixed method approach, which enabled collecting both quantitative and qualitative information from the sampled respondents. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the quantitative data and Chi-Square was used to test the results. However, the paper argues that the programme in Benue State yielded positive results, in spite of the challenges encountered by WEP. Based on these results, it is therefore recommended that collaborations with the central government agencies will be intensified in order to extend this preventive effort to other states that prone to violent extremism.

Keywords: *Violent Extremism, Insurgency, NGO and Benue State*

Introduction

Preventing individuals from being radicalized is a topical issue that is seen as an effective strategy against terrorism and other violent extremism. Nigeria is currently being faced with serious threats from radicalization and violent extremism targeted against individuals, organizations, and the states. The most serious threat of violent extremism that is deadlier in nature has come from the insurgency of the Boko Haram terrorists, which has ravaged many communities in the North-eastern part of Nigeria (Policy Framework and National Action Plan 2017; Raji 2019).

Violent extremism is a serious global problem with an effect on socioeconomic aspects. There is an alarming rate of youths being recruited by violent extremist groups around the world. Largely, it has affected the socio-economic activities of the various African nations. According to UNDP (2017) report, youths (18-35 years) account for more than 30% of the African population. Consequently, most of these youths are unemployed. Statistics show that 40% of youths are jobless thus making them prey for recruitment into violent extremist groups and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs).

The conflict pose by violent extremist groups has become an integral part of existence in Benue State and has affected lives and livelihoods in communities. Women, Children, and youth are the most affected and for most of the groups, trauma plays an integral role in behavioural influencing. Violence arises from various factors including farmers/herders, boundary conflicts, political and electoral violence. By and large, the increasing poverty and agitations threaten to worsen the fragile security lot in the state with Agatu, Ado, Buruku, Guma, Logo and Kwande local government areas most affected.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (2017), violent extremism is seen as a sophisticated and multiphase global threat that is not confined to one territory. Prevention of Violent Extremism requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach, this means PVE is not limited to only Government and Security Agencies alone, Non-Governmental Organizations also have a role to play in PVE. The inclusion of civil society (NGOs) in international and local counter-terrorism efforts has proven to be a successful strategy for preventing violent extremism. At the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy's biennial review, member states must quickly resolve debates about the role and relevance of civil society in local and international efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism. NGOs have the insight to identify individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization, and the legitimacy to engage without stigmatizing them. Violent extremists often recruit the marginalized.

The war on violent extremism has remained a pivotal topic for the past years; with Nigeria being at the forefront in coming up with strategies that can be applied to the prevention of violent extremism. However, till date, there are still several violent extremisms that are felt. Several debates and reviews have been made over the years on how this violent extremism can be countered. These were in different contextual frameworks and not the role of Non-governmental Organizations. There exist little documentation and literature about the role of NGOs in Preventing Violent Extremism, and approaches used by NGOs to Prevent Violent Extremism in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central region where so much has been done on PVE. In spite of the little done in the role of NGOs in the prevention of violent extremism, Therefore, this research will document the role of NGOs in PVE and approaches used by NGOs to Prevent Violent Extremism using WEP as a case study.

Conceptualising Violent Extremism and the Prevention

Violent extremism and the prevention of violent extremism are concepts that are rarely discussed in the literature of international relations. In spite of their scarce attention, some scholars have attempted to conceptually clarify them. One of such scholars is Leuven (2019, p. 1), who posits that violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of people who supports or use ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, religiously based or politically motivated destruction of life and properties. In other words, violent extremism refers to advocating, engaging in, and supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence, to further social, economic, religious, and political objectives.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) refers to an approach that aims to address the root causes of violent extremism through non-coercive approaches. It also entails the actions taken

by individuals, groups, organizations, governments, and communities to help develop resilience to violent extremism and radicalization. These include providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that foster tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and global citizenship, and the ability to take appropriate action against violent extremism.

Historical Background of the Women Environmental Programme (WEP)

Women Environmental Programme (WEP) is a Non-Governmental Organization formed in April 1997 by a group of Women in Kaduna State, Nigeria. WEP was registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) 22nd October 2003. Although WEP emerged to respond to Environmental pollution by industries in Kaduna State, over the years, the Organization has Expanded its interventions to Conflict Transformation, Climate Change, and Governance Issues. WEP envisions a world where the lives of women and youth are positively transformed and a mission of ensuring the rights of women and youth through sustainable environmental, socio-political, and economic development.

WEP's work hinged on four pillars: Climate Change, Environment, Governance, Peace, and Security. To curtail the above, WEP in 2016 designed a project titled "Connecting with Women and Youth in Violent Extremist Prone Areas through Empowerment and Skills Acquisition in Benue State." The project received funding support from the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF); a Geneva-based donor (source).

WEP adopted the consortium approach working with credible and experienced organizations with presence and record of accomplishment of PVE related work in Benue State. The intervention also built a high sense of purpose amongst vulnerable youth in communities of intervention. mentation under a consortium arrangement with WEP serving as the Principal Recipient commenced in August 2016 with The Angel Support Foundation (ASF), Centre for Development and Social Justice (CEDASJ), Gender and Environmental Risk Reduction Initiative (GERRI) and the Foundation for Justice Development and Peace (FJDP), serving as Sub-Recipients on Phase I of the project which lasted from 2016 to 2018.

In 2019, the idea of Connecting with Women and Youth in Violent Extremist Prone Areas through Empowerment and Skills Acquisition in Benue State Phase II was approved by GCERF. This was because of the many successes recorded in Phase I of the project. WEP continued implementation from 2019 – 2021 using the same consortium approach but this time with two organizations. The Angel Support Foundation (ASF), and the Foundation for Justice Development and Peace (FJDP) serving as Sub-Recipients.

In 2022, WEP got funding from GCERF again to continue PVE intervention in Katsina State Northwest Nigeria. The project which is being implemented under a consortium approach in partnership with Murna Foundation seeks to strengthen the existing structures of the communities, facilitate the resolution of disputes within and between communities, raise awareness against violent extremism, and enhance the skills of women and youth for improved livelihoods to prevent recruitment and radicalization of young men and young women as well as reduce food insecurity among target community members through Climate Smart Agriculture Practices. The consortium seeks to achieve this through collaborations with relevant organizations and institutions such as security agencies, civil society organizations, communities, the private sector, and government agencies.

WEP got special status of the United Nations Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (UN) (ECOSOC). It also got an Observer's Status from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum, and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). With all these Statuses, WEP participates as a major group organization in contributing to the intergovernmental decision-making process in the UN-System. WEP is one of the Organizing

Partners (OPs) of Women's Major Groups WEP also served as the National Coordinator for Water Supply and Sanitation.

Methodology: Study Design

The study employed a mixed methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contribution of the Women Environmental Programme (WEP) to preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Benue state. Qualitative methods include key in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This method was employed to explore the approaches used by WEP in PVE and to assess the roles of WEP in PVE, using primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources included oral interviews, while secondary data sources were obtained from books, articles, journals, newsletters, and publications related to PVE. The quantitative method involved constructing a questionnaire to elicit responses from respondents.

Study Population and Sampling

The population under study comprised beneficiaries of the WEP project activities, including women, youth groups, teachers, security agencies, civil society organizations, government agencies, and religious and traditional leaders, who participated in the project sites across Benue State. The multi-stage sampling method was utilized to determine the target LGAs by dividing the state into three existing senatorial zones, namely Zones A, B, and C. The selection of Kwande LGA from Zone A, Guma from Zone B, and Ado from Zone C was carried out through simple random sampling.

The sampling size of 370 was randomly selected from each stratum using Taro Yamane's formula as follows:

n= N/ (1+N (e) 2)

Where: n=sample size

N = population of the study

e = the margin error which in this study is 0.05

Table 1.1: Sample size Selected.

Target groups	Total	Stratum allocation	Sample size	KII	FGD
Youths	1500	$\frac{370 \times 1500}{4920}$	113		**8**
Security agencies	480	$\frac{370 \times 480}{4920}$	36	6	
Farmers/herders	1500	$\frac{370 \times 1500}{4920}$	113	6	**8**
Traditional leaders	480	$\frac{370 \times 480}{4920}$	36	6	
CSOs	240	$\frac{370 \times 240}{4920}$	18	6	

Religious leaders	480	$\frac{370 \times 480}{4920}$	36	6	
Government agencies	240	$\frac{370 \times 240}{4920}$	18	6	
TOTAL	**4920**		**370**	**36**	**16**

Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

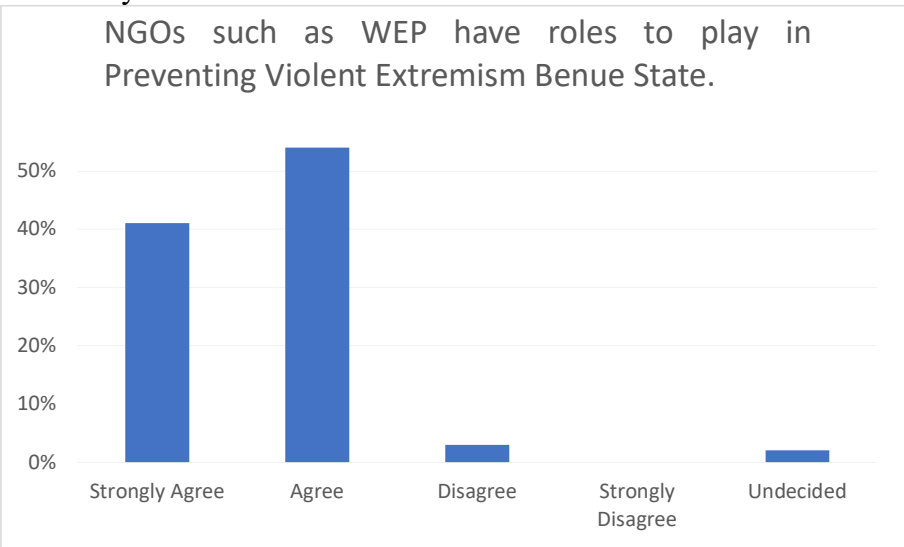
Table 1.1 depicts the approach utilized to determine the sample size, which was accomplished utilizing the Taro Yamane formulas as outlined in section 3.4. According to this technique, the sample sizes for each population group were determined as follows: Youths (113), Security Agencies (36), Farmers/Herders (113), Traditional (36), CSOs (18), Religious (36), and Government (18), resulting in a total sample size of 370. To attain the objectives of the study, 36 Key Informant Interviews (KII) and 16 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) involving eight participants each (128 total) were conducted, thereby reaching a total of 164 individuals.

Method of Data Analysis

This study employed both descriptive and inferential statistical tools of analysis. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using both Excel and SPSS. In addition, simple analysis techniques such as percentages, tables, matrices, and charts, along with a mix of testing tools, were employed to validate the inferences and results obtained from the data collected. The statistical significance of the role of WEP in preventing violent extremism was analyzed using Univariate Analysis of Covariance (UANCOVA).

The study analyzed the dependence of reduced violent extremism (ReVE) on a few factors including alternative dispute resolution training (ADRT), conflict prevention methods (CPM), mentorship programme (MP), skill acquisition training (SAT), interfaith dialogue (IFD), community policing training (CPT), and mini ranching (MRCH).

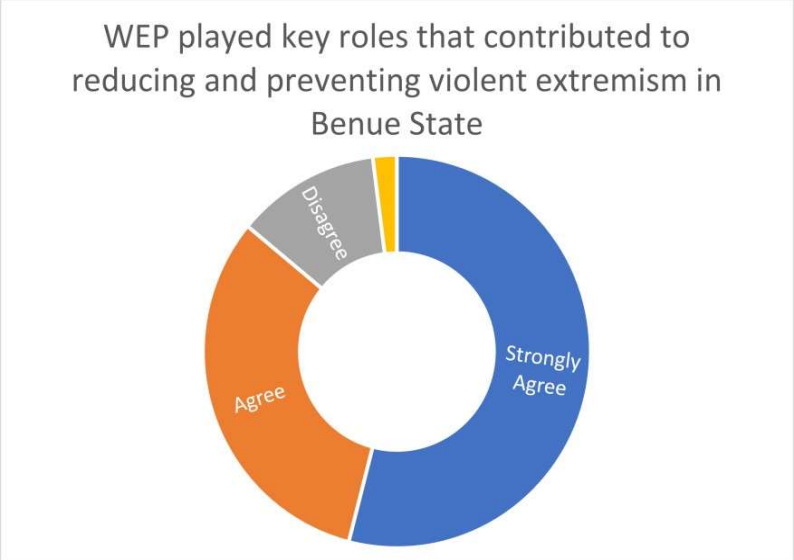
Roles of WEP in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in Benue State: Empirical Analysis



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.1: ***Responses on WEP's Role in Preventing Violent Extremism Benue State***

Responses, as summarized in Figure 1, showed that 41% of the respondents strongly agreed and 54% agreed that NGOs such as WEP have roles to play in Preventing Violent Extremism in Benue State while 3% disagreed with the statement, 2% were undecided. This implies that a greater percentage of respondents were in affirmation that the WEP played a significant role in preventing violent extremism in Benue State. This suggests that the various approaches used by the Women Environmental Programme in preventing violent extremism in Benue State could be effective.

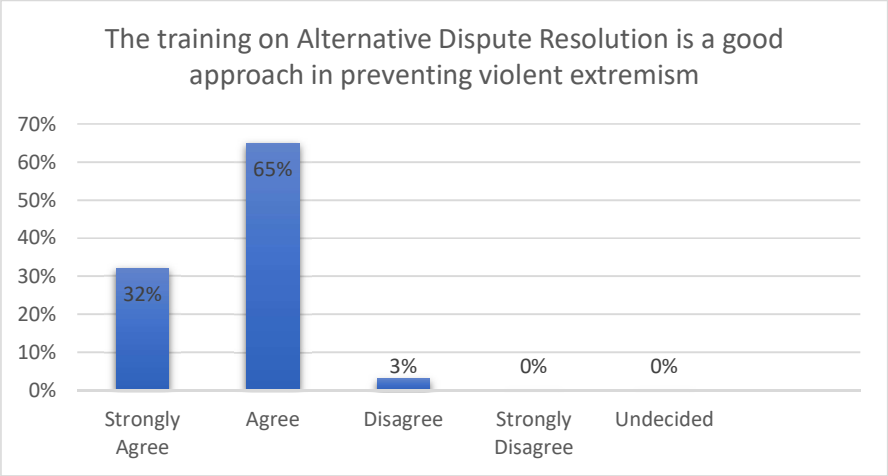


Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.2: ***Responses on WEP's contribution to reducing and preventing violent extremism in Benue State***

Responses as summarized in Figure 4.2, showed that 54% of the respondents strongly agreed and 32% agreed that WEP played key roles that contributed to reducing and preventing violent extremism in Benue State, while 12% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement. This means that WEP played key roles that contributed to reducing and preventing violent extremism is Benue State.

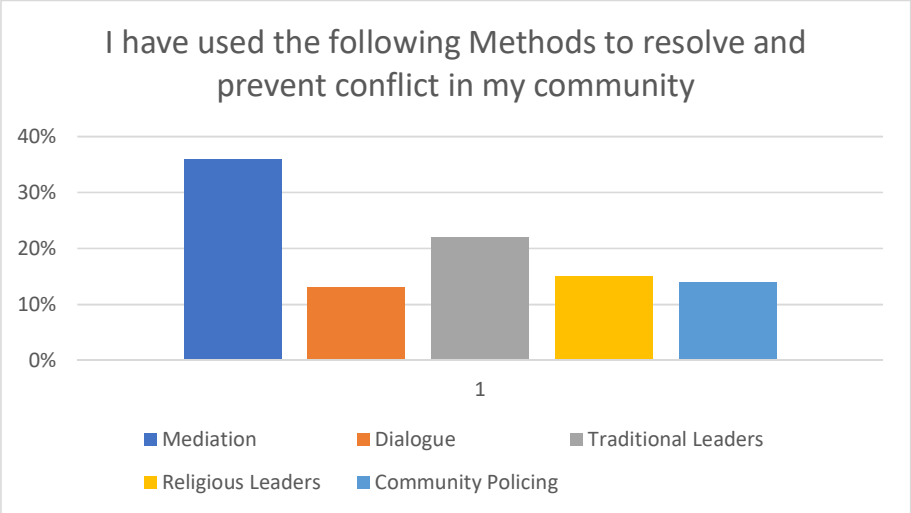
Approaches used by WEP to Prevent Violent Extremism in Benue State.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.3: ***Responses on Alternative Dispute Resolution as a good approach to preventingviolent extremism.***

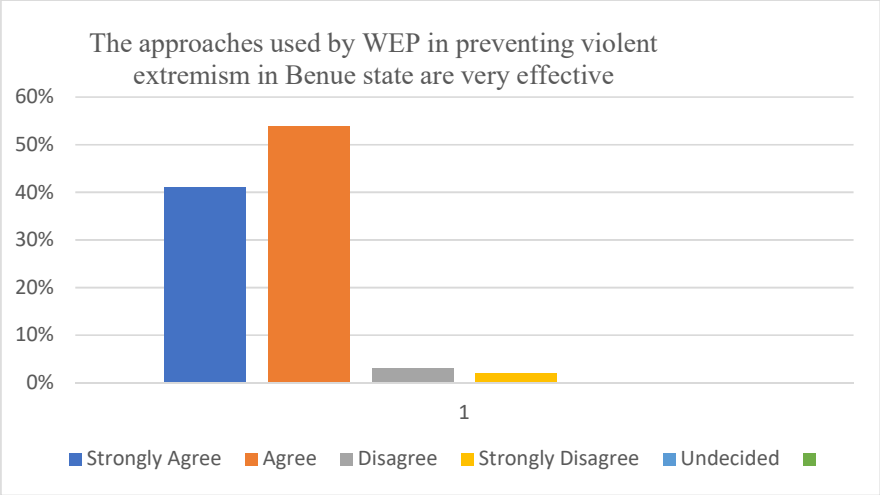
Responses as summarized in Figure 4.3 showed that 32% of the respondents strongly agreed and 65% agreed that the training on Alternative Dispute Resolution is a good approach to preventing violent extremism while 3% disagreed with the statement.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.4: *Responses from methods used to resolve and prevent conflict in communities.*

The above responses show that 36% of the respondents used mediation, 13% used dialogue, 22% traditional leaders, 15% used religious leaders, and 14% used communitypolicing to resolve and prevent conflict in communities. This implies that mediation was the most popular method used in preventing conflict in communities.

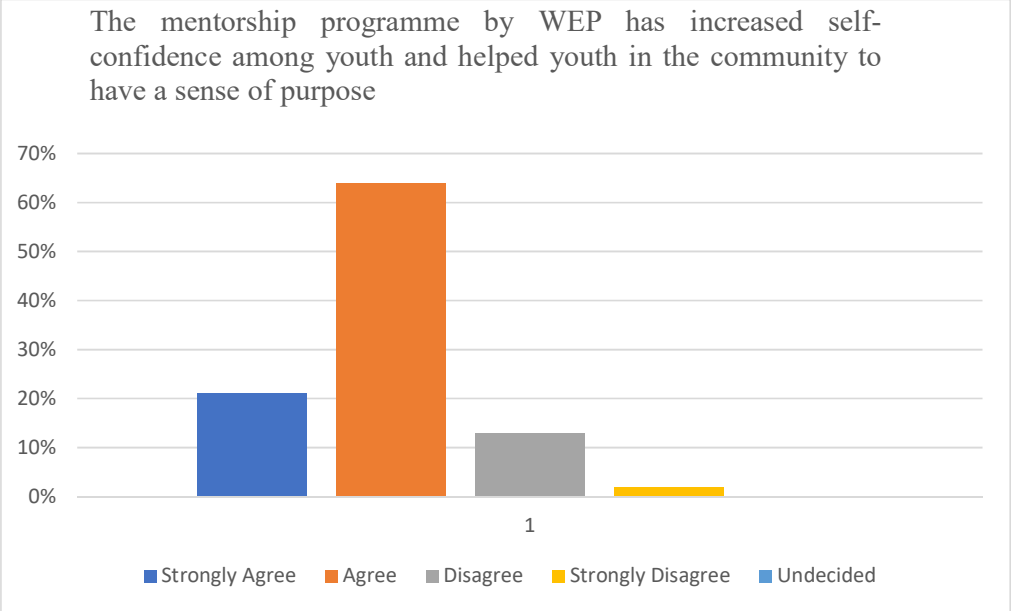


Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.5: ***Responses on the effectiveness of the approaches used by WEP in preventing violent extremism in Benue State.***

Responses in the above figure show that 95% of the respondents agreed that the approaches used by WEP in preventing violent extremism in Benue state are very effective, while the remaining 5% disagreed with the statement.

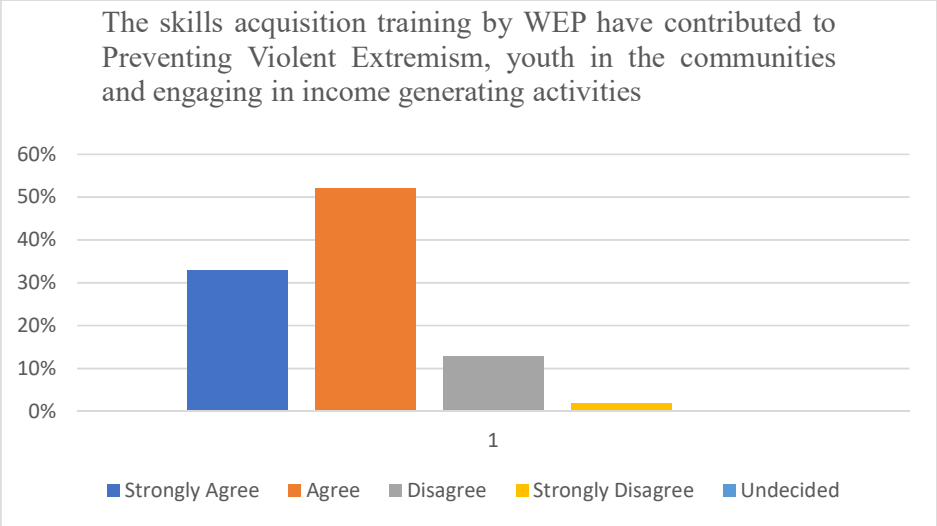
The impact of WEP's intervention on PVE in Benue State



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.6: ***Responses on the mentorship program by WEP***

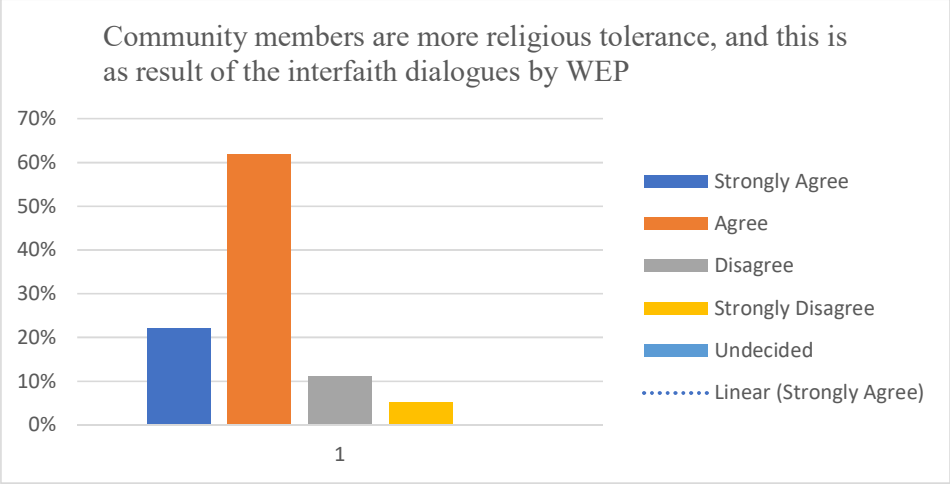
Responses, as summarized in Figure 4.6, showed that 21% of the respondents strongly agreed and 64% agreed that the mentorship program by WEP has increased self-confidence among youth and helped youth in the community to have a sense of purpose while 13% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.7: ***Responses on skills acquisition training by WEP***

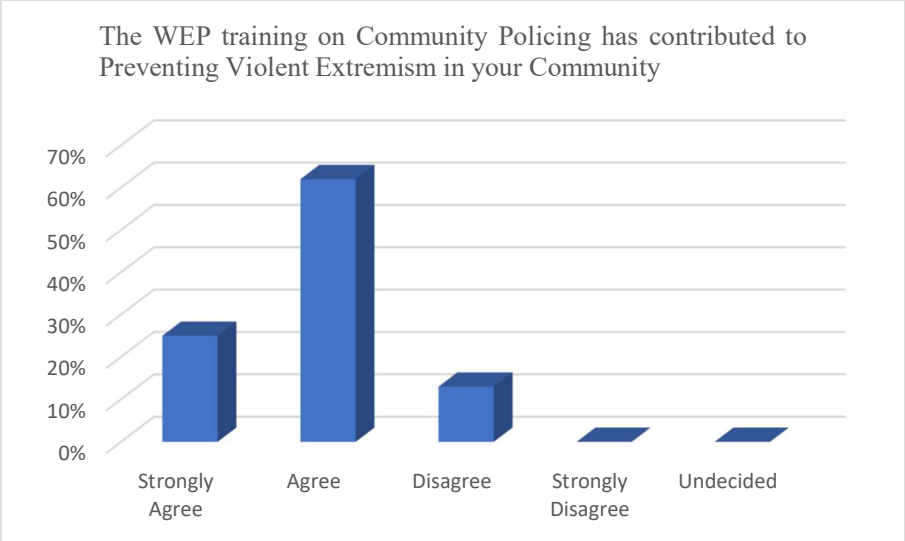
Responses as summarized in Figure 4.7 showed that 33% of the respondents strongly agreed and 52% agreed that the skills acquisition training by WEP has contributed to Preventing Violent Extremism, youth in the communities, and engaging in income-generating activities while 13% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.8: ***Responses on Interfaith Dialogue***

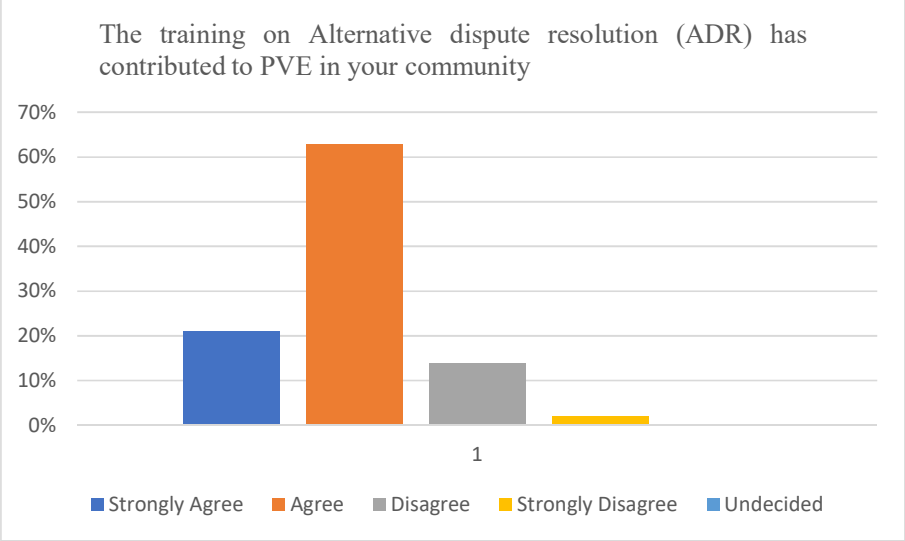
Responses as summarized in Figure 4.8 showed that the majority of the respondents agreed that Community members are more religious tolerance, and this is a result of the interfaith dialogues by WEP.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.9: ***Responses on WEP Training on Community Policing***

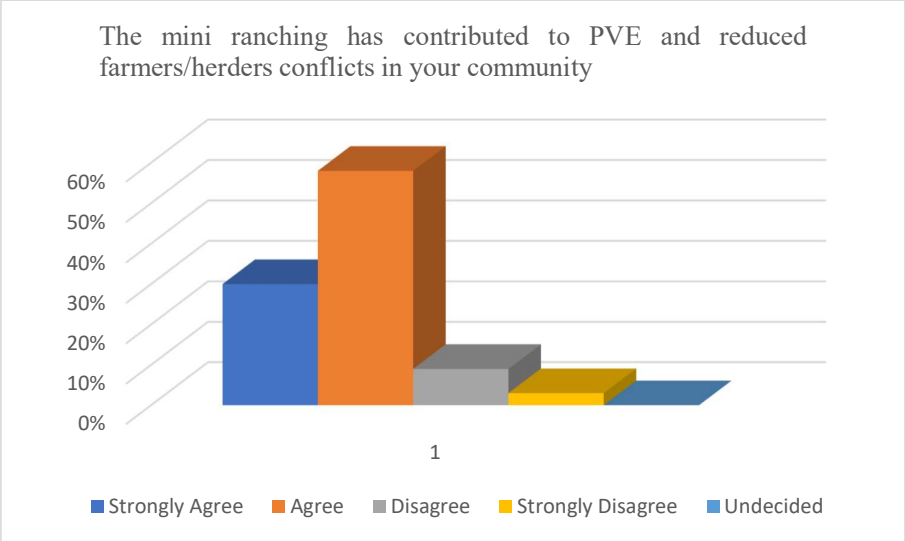
Responses as summarized in Figure 4.9 showed that 25% of the respondents strongly agreed and 62% agreed that WEP training on Community Policing has contributed to Preventing Violent Extremism in your Community while 13% disagreed with the statement.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.10: ***Responses on the Impact of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Training onPVE***

Responses, as summarized in Figure 4.10, showed that 21% of the respondents strongly agreed and 63% agreed that WEP training on Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) has contributed to PVE in your community while 14% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement. This shows the effectiveness of this approach in PVE in the study environment.



Source: ***Authours' Computations, 2023***

Figure 1.11: ***Responses on the impact of mini ranching on PVE***

Responses, as summarized in Figure 4.11, showed that 88% of the respondents agreed that the mini ranching has contributed to PVE and reduced farmers/herders' conflicts in communities, while 12% disagreed with the statement. This implies that farmers/herders conflicts have been reduced in the community through mini ranching, contributing to PVE.

Evaluating the Statistical Significance of the Role of Women Environmental

Programme on Preventing Violent Extremism in Benue State

The univariate analysis of covariance (UANCOVA) was used to evaluate the significance of the role of WEP in preventing violent extremism in Benue State.

Table 1.2: Test of Between-Subject Effects

Source	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	530.554	.000	.911
Intercept	145.234	.000	.286
ADRT	68.349	.000	.159
CPM	121.254	.000	.251
MP	14.751	.000	.039
SAT	21.487	.000	.056
IFD	11.041	.001	.030
CPT	48.322	.000	.118
MRCH	3.365	.067	.009

Source: *Researcher's Computations*.

The parameters above were used to measure the role of the Women Environmental Programme in preventing violent extremism. These parameters were used as factors of the between-subject effects model. The probability values of the F-statistic for all the factors except MRCH are less than 0.05. This means that the F statistics are statistically significant.

The statistical significance of the F statistics of the variables indicates that the Women Environmental Programme (WEP) has had a significant influence in reducing violent extremism in Benue state, through alternative dispute resolution (ADRT), conflict preventive methods (CPM), mentorship programmes (MP), skills acquisition training (SAT), interfaith dialogue (IFD) and community policing training (CPT). The F statistic of the corrected model

is statistically significant. This implies that the between-subjects model performed well. The value of the coefficient of determination (R-squared) is 0. 911. This means that WEP accounts for about 91.1% of the variations in changes in the trend of violent extremism in Benue State. This is a further confirmation of the influential role of actors such as the Women Environmental Programme (WEP) in reducing violent extremism in Benue State.

Table 1.3: ***Parameter Estimates (Dependent Variable: ReVE)***

		Std.			95% Confidence Interval	
Parameter	B	Error	T	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Intercept	3.308	.274	12.051	.000	2.768	3.847
ADRT	-.339	.041	-8.267	.000	-.420	-.259
CPM	-.326	.030	-11.012	.000	-.384	-.268
MP	.308	.080	3.841	.000	.150	.465
SAT	.325	.070	4.635	.000	.187	.463
IFD	-.181	.055	-3.323	.001	-.288	-.074
CPT	.464	.067	6.951	.000	.333	.595
MRCH	-.108	.059	-1.834	.067	-.223	.008

Source: *Researcher's Computation.*

Table 1.3 presents the directional effects of the approaches used by the Women Environmental Programme on preventing violent extremism in Benue State. The results show the effects of each value or level of the predictors. The intercept (or constant parameter) is 3.308. This suggests that without any intervention, violent extremism in Benue State will likely increase. With WPE's intervention, four of its approaches reduced the possibility of violent extremism escalating in the state. Specifically, alternative dispute resolution training (ADRT), conflict prevention methods (CPM), interfaith dialogue (IFD), and mini ranching (MRCH) returned negative effects on reduced violent extremism in Benue State. The alternative dispute resolution training equipped community members with the requisite knowledge and skills for resolving cases of violent extremism. The conflict prevention methods used by WEP also served as a direct approach to preventing violent extremism in Benue State. Interfaith dialogue creates a better harmony and understanding among people of different faiths. This leads to a more peaceful coexistence and consequently reduced violent extremism. Mini ranching prevents the unguarded movement of herds. This reduces the possibility of crop destruction by cattle and, as a result, reduces the tendency for farmer-herder clashes. It therefore implies that mini ranching is a favourable factor for preventing violent extremism in Benue State.

On the other hand, the mentorship programme (MP), skill acquisition training (SAT), and community policing training (CPT) appeared to be favourable to violent extremism in Benue State. Mentorship does not necessarily build the skills of community members to resolve violent extremism. This approach builds the vocational and technical skills of the participants to improve their livelihoods. There is, therefore, no guarantee that building the skills of community members translates into reduced violent extremism. This belief is the same for skill acquisition training. Though community policing is believed to be an important approach towards preventing violent extremism, the same approach is likely to increase interfaith and inter-ethnic tension. As a result, the approach may end up fuelling violent extremism instead of preventing it.

Table 1.4: ***Lack of Fit Test (Dependent Variable: ReVE1)***

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Lack of Fit	41.052	12	3.421	82.331	.000	.738
Pure Error	14.543	350	.042			

Source: *Researchers Computation*.

Based on the value of the F statistic and its probability value (which is less than 0.05), the null hypothesis that the model lacks fitness cannot be accepted. This means that the estimated model is a good fit and reliable for making predictions about the role of WPE in preventing violent extremism in Benue State.

Discussion of major finding

Having identified "Resilience" building as an impactful method of preventing Violent Extremism among communities, Women Environmental Programme (WEP) implemented a project titled "Connecting Women and Youth in Violent Extremist Prone Areas through Empowerment and Skills Acquisition in Benue State'. The project sought to Strengthen Resilience against Violent Extremism as its overall outcome with activities bordering around Advocacy, Training Workshops, Dialogue sessions, training on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), and skills acquisition among others.

Also, the establishment of peace clubs in secondary schools, formation of mentorship groups for youths in the community, training of local government administrators on Peace and PVE, training of traditional and community leaders on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods, the establishment of solar-powered digital computer laboratories in schools, training of youths in skills acquisition and livelihood support, sensitization rallies in high institutions, the establishment of mini ranches, advocacy visits of community stakeholders, economic empowerment and vocational skills training of out of school youth, ICT training for in-school youth, the proposition of policy changes, media engagements, community level peace rallies using Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials on which key messages targeted at reducing violent extremism were measures taken by WEP to prevent violent extremism.

These approaches have effectively built the capacity of individuals and communities to reduce violence and prevent conflict in their communities, this confirms the result of the quantitative survey where 41% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 54% agreed that the approaches used by WEP in preventing violent extremism in Benue state are very effective

Conclusion and recommendations

The WEP PVE intervention, implemented in Benue State, yielded positive outcomes as evidenced by the findings. Despite facing a few obstacles, community members as impactful acknowledged the project, and awareness of its goals was widespread. Based on the results, it was concluded that WEP played a significant role in mitigating the spread of violent extremism in Benue State. Furthermore, the study identified young people as critical stakeholders in preventing and addressing violent extremism.

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher makes the following recommendations. First, continuation and scale-up of the project; the project should be replicated in all communities across the state and extended to other states or regions that have tendencies of violence.

Secondly, the approaches used by WEP appear to gain community support and buy-in. Therefore, there should be continuous use of these approaches.

Finally, there is a need to expand the existing collaborations between the state and non-state actors to ensure inclusive formulation and implementation of strategies to deal with violent extremism in Benue State.

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