To Fund or Not to Fund:
Considerations Around Making Grants to Counter Violent Extremism*
March 2016

OVERVIEW
In February 2015, the White House held a Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), bringing the topic to the forefront for the peace and security community. CVE, a term coined by the United States Government (USG), is the framing given to a range of activities intended to prevent people from joining violent movements and engaging in violent activities, especially when motivated by ideology (religious or political).† Preceding – and increasingly since – the Summit, the Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG) has been approached by a number of members of the USG (the White House, State Department, and Department of Homeland Security) to discuss the opportunities for foundations and philanthropists to engage in the CVE space. Funders, many of who have been approached by their grantees regarding CVE, have been engaging in the conversation about whether to contribute funds, thought leadership or in some other way support these activities. PSFG’s Program Director, Meredith Stricker, has spent 15 months exploring this issue by attending meetings, organizing and speaking at conferences, and conversing with funders, both within and outside of PSFG.

This white paper looks at key takeaways from the last 15 months and recommends some options for advancing the conversation about whether and how funders should engage in CVE. Next steps include holding a number of off-the-record conversations with key players in the CVE community, hosting salon-style meetings to discuss the importance of the linguistic framing of this issue, and possibly, if there is sufficient interest, forming a PSFG Working Group on the topic.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: SHOULD FUNDERS ENGAGE IN CVE EFFORTS?

Arguments in favor
There is no clear and easy answer to this question, but there are some legitimate reasons why private funders and philanthropists are ideally suited to fund CVE efforts. The activities connected to deterring and preventing people from engaging in violent movements – be they motivated by religion, politics, economic need, or other grievances, most especially alienation and marginalization – draw on a lot of the expertise of peace and security (and other) funders. That includes peacebuilding, community

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* This paper uses the term countering violent extremism, as it is the most widely accepted framing of the activities described herein. Its use by PSFG is neither an affirmation of the term, nor is any further discussion of changing the framing a repudiation of it. It should be noted that many within the USG do not approve of framing this issue within the context of the term CVE. However, for the sake of expediency, the term is used widely among USG, other governments, and many funders, NGOs and others. The United Nations (UN) has adopted the term Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) instead.
† This paper presupposes a familiarity with the range of activities generally called CVE.
resilience, human rights, providing opportunities to alienated/marginalized populations, and specific population foci, like women and youth.

Additionally, funders do not usually operate with foreign policy or national security objectives in mind (though of course some of their grantmaking aligns with governments’ foreign policy and national security objectives), whereas government-funded initiatives, even when well intentioned, can endanger or delegitimize actors working against violent movements. Thus, there is the not insubstantial consideration that CVE is an area where governments do not only a poor job, but arguably, shouldn’t be doing a job at all. The issues that CVE tries to address – the very real concerns of political, social and economic inclusion, negotiating pluralism, advancing human rights – are in many cases not the appropriate purview of governments. Civil society organizations are much better suited to support local actors in these efforts (be they based in the U.S., Europe, or in the communities in which terrorist organizations have political and military power).

It seems likely that violent movements by non-state actors, including ISIL, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab, will continue to affect communities around the globe in 2016 and beyond. Funders will be called upon by their grantees and other NGOs to assist them in keeping communities safe, providing alternative opportunities to youth and the disenfranchised, helping them to strengthen women’s and minorities’ rights, and supporting civil society efforts to encourage and enforce good governance. It is likely that, faced with those requests, funders will begin to fund and/or ramp up CVE activities.

**Arguments against**

There are legitimate reasons why funders might not want to fund anything with the branding “CVE.” First, and perhaps most importantly, there is no way to deny that foreign policy considerations - specifically around national security concerns - overlap with the government’s desire to see CVE efforts taken up by private funders. This is not a new dilemma; debates about the politicization of aid, beginning during the Cold War, are well known to many. The important question funders need to ask themselves is whether or not it matters that CVE efforts might align loosely or tightly with the national security objectives of the USG or other governments. If the design and intention of the grant isn’t for that purpose, does it matter?

Second, the efforts that funders, NGOs and local actors might make in this area will perhaps have a limited impact on the overall objectives of CVE. That is because foreign policy and domestic national security considerations, which include counter-terrorism strategies, may frustrate and even retard valiant CVE efforts. In other words, counter-terrorism and CVE efforts may be in direct conflict with each other (e.g., U.S.-led drone strikes in Yemen have reportedly led to an increase in individuals becoming more radicalized), putting funders in difficult and potentially ineffective positions.

Finally, the landscape in which CVE efforts are necessary often shifts due to geopolitical realities, government military objectives, and individual actions (e.g., San Bernadino shootings). Funders engaged in this space may be in constantly shifting terrain, making strategic decisions (on who, what, where and how to fund) increasingly complicated.

**The Question of Language**

The term “CVE” is considered by some to be a misleading and offensive term that, in practice, is discriminatory toward Muslims. While much discussion has centered on replacing the term, it is difficult to do so for a few reasons:
• The USG and other governments have adopted the term CVE, and many around the globe use it, which makes having conversations using other terminology inefficient and potentially confusing.

• Those who reject this framing cannot agree on an alternative framing that suits all of their considerations or grantmaking in this space.

• It might be time consuming and inefficient to ask grantees to call their work different things to different funders.

However, if the top peace and security funders (most of whom are part of PSFG) were able to utilize a common term among them, it would be helpful for the civil society community more broadly and could possibly influence the USG to change its framing. One suggestion is “countering violent movements” - clearly broader than “extremism,” but maintaining the words “countering” and “violent” to make clear we are all engaging in the same conversation.

NEXT STEPS
It is clear that funders need to have more dialogue about this issue. Trust and open communication are essential in this space, which makes PSFG an ideal body to convene members who already know each other. Small-group conversations could yield consensus that can be shared with an ever-wider group of funders.

Workshops, both at the PSFG annual meeting and at other venues, can add to funders’ understanding of the specific opportunities and challenges of funding in the CVE space – regardless of what it is called by their organizations. Off-the-record conversations with key USG, other government, and UN officials can be extremely useful in helping funders understand where they fit in this space, both as grantmakers and as thought leaders.

CONCLUSION
It is hard to point to actual lessons learned in this space, since for most funders, CVE efforts are new endeavors that have not yet been rigorously monitored or evaluated. Even if they are older programs now called CVE, the perennial problem of proving a negative still exists: can any funder be sure their efforts led people to not engage in violent activities, outside of direct confirmation that such persons were intending on committing those acts and chose not to post-intervention? However, it is likely that in the coming year or two, funders will be able to draw upon best practices from real case studies, both in the U.S. and in Europe.

The CVE space is fraught, to say the least, but that doesn’t change the reality that there are violent movements threatening the safety and security of civilians around the globe. Peace and security funders at the vanguard of risk-taking philanthropy who agree to take chances and are more comfortable than other funders with complex situations must not disengage in this space, either because of linguistic/framing concerns, or because of CVE’s alignment with the USG’s counter-terrorism, foreign policy and national security concerns. The stakes are just too high.