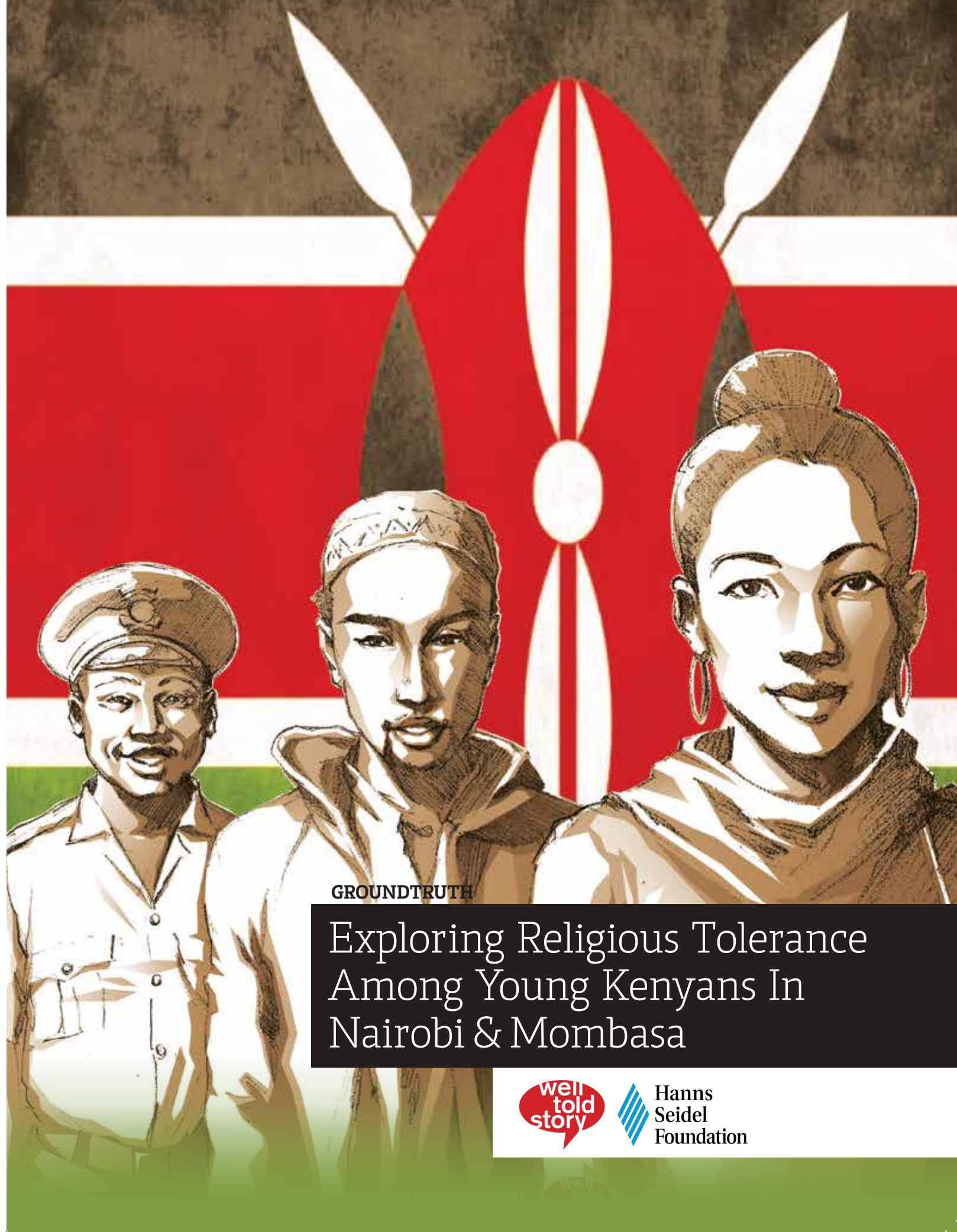


"....IT IS NOT ABOUT ISLAM" - YOUNG KENYANS SPEAK ON RADICALISATION....



GROUNDTRUTH

## Exploring Religious Tolerance Among Young Kenyans In Nairobi & Mombasa



Hanns  
Seidel  
Foundation



GROUNDTRUTH

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# Introduction, methodology and access

This report outlines the findings from Well Told Story's GroundTruth project conducted for The Hanns Seidel Foundation. GroundTruth is a research process unique to Well Told Story; the process engages with young people on an issue and triangulates their experiences with those who shape their context and environment. As most of the topics we seek to engage young people upon are highly sensitive, we use a variety of qualitative and ethnographic techniques with the goal always of meeting those we talk to on their own terms. We also examined data from our SMS database to identify trends, ideas and beliefs related to extremism, radicalisation, religious intolerance and existential crisis with the help of the Africa's Voices Foundation. To achieve this, we created a topical lexicon list from SMS and social media feedback around the dates of the Westgate and Garissa attacks to retrieve relevant words used by audiences.

The aim of this research was to increase understanding of the experience of young people living in the poorer and more challenged communities of Nairobi and Mombasa, who are under particular pressure from the escalating tensions around perceived or real discrimination and the activities of extreme political or terrorist organisations such as the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC)\* and al-Shabaab\*\*. We were particularly tasked to investigate religious intolerance and make recommendations based on our learning. We discovered that the perception of religious intolerance is strong and influential but the reality is different: almost everyone in the communities we studied is highly tolerant of other faiths.

Well Told Story conducted the research in September 2015. We spoke to young small-businesspeople about the escalating tensions and to others who had direct experience



\* MRC – Mombasa Republican Council: a Mombasa-based organization that fights for the autonomy of Mombasa from the rest of Kenya.

\*\*Al-Shabaab – an extremist organization that commits acts of terror using the name of Islam.



of petty crime, gangs, the MRC, prison and al-Shabaab. In total we talked to 47 young people, triangulated with adults and influential others in their circles. We strategically designed the approach of layered 'entry' into our target respondents' world as well as the subject of study. After a targeted literature review, we sought to understand how young people get to and out of crossroads or turning point moments; hence we deliberately started by speaking to young people who had attempted suicide. To understand life at the crossroads, we sought and met with petty criminals, seasoned gangsters, hit men and their handlers, the police, intelligence service and religious teachers. Reaching them was meticulously planned. We researched gangs: how they start, are organised, recruit membership and leadership, and relate to one another. We deliberately sought and identified respondents within or with links to gang leadership, MRC and al Shabaab. The snowball approach to respondent identification worked successfully as trust was central to researcher and researched confidentiality and by extension, security.

Well Told Story's youth media platform Shujaaz reaches the majority of Kenya's 15-24 year olds and recent research from the World Bank, Africa's Voices and the University of North Carolina shows that Shujaaz successfully creates positive influence both their discourse and behaviour. Because of the credibility of Shujaaz and the endorsement of those who set up the interviews for us we were doubly privileged. First we had access to individuals who would not normally be prepared to talk to outsiders and secondly, those we spoke to were remarkably candid and open.

This was a difficult and challenging piece of work. The team found itself in high-risk situations where members were totally dependent on the credibility and social capital of those who introduced them to respondents. In addition, considerable cultural and personal sensitivity was needed to gain trust and piece together deliberately obscured stories - told by respondents placing themselves at great personal risk by participating. Those that set up the interviews for us said that, if arranged with less care, we would undoubtedly have put their lives and livelihoods in peril.

It is for these reasons that we have been careful to frame quotations and stories in a way that will not lead to the identification of particular respondents. We sought to hear individuals' personal experiences or the experiences of those around them in relation to radicalisation, living and growing up in polarised society, facing huge social, economic and sometimes political pressure and thriving on loose social or religious values. Most of the interviews were one-on-one while a few were conducted in pairs – often connected to one another by social or occupation connections and bound by trust. We conducted two group conversations, mainly employed to identify individual respondents for interview and leads for further investigations. The group that was moderated by group members generated more insights, free conversations and leads compared to the one we moderated whose young members were openly suspicious and asked if we were the secret intelligence acting under cover.

Well Told Story found that lack of trust and confidence in social encounters is endemic: all social interactions are suspect. There is high suspicion of outsiders and a constant search for a hidden agenda in all meetings. Individuals trust each other only if they are known and have lived together for long periods; they do not extend this trust to those they do not know or recognise. Convened gatherings are viewed with suspicion as they could always be potential 'set-ups' by the administration or recruitment initiatives for any of the dominant competing groups.

Respondents said that they were living in a binary world, imposed upon them by others, where they were constantly being judged as for or against either the government or

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We spoke to young small-businesspeople about the escalating tensions and to others who had direct experience of petty crime, gangs, the MRC, prison and al-Shabaab.

one of the many different antisocial groups. The consequences of their opinions being known and judged in this manner are extreme – death not being unusual. This made respondents - although candid - extremely nervous. The constant threat and feeling that any small slip or use of a word or phrase indicating an allegiance meant that all accounts were disguised and displaced.

Information was shared on the understanding that not only was it not to be attributable but that it could not be traced to the source. In practice this meant that respondents refused to sign anything that indicated we could use their comments directly and some respondents asked that there be no records of the encounter or use of information that might lead to their identification as this might compromise them and/or the intermediaries.

# Key Findings

Well Told Story's findings agreed with and built upon earlier research and the findings of others in the field. Respondents were clear and knowledgeable.

**a)** The first finding is that there is a remarkable level of consistency across all those we spoke to as to the nature of the problem and the ways in which it could be tackled. This is unusual; when we triangulate other issues we have studied such as reproductive health there is no agreement between young people and those around them as to what the problems are and as a result little agreement on what actions could be taken to address the issues. There is a remarkably low level of religious intolerance but this is being severely tested in a population that is scared to speak out. Everyone we spoke to was in some degree terrified. Fear and lack of trust is all pervasive and all consuming. Those we spoke to - from a multi-religious group of hand-cart operators to current and past intelligence operatives - were all caught in a binary world where any indication, however mild, that they were interested in one or other of the competing political groups could result in their being identified with one cause at the expense of another. The consequences of being identified as aligned to any one group are extreme: being arrested, taken off the streets, beaten up or even killed.

**b)** Those we spoke to all agreed that there is a fundamental distinction between gangs, illegal sects, Mungiki or outlawed political parties such as the MRC, and al-Shabaab. Gangs have a recognised legitimacy and are understood to need and utilise a social structure in the place of a government that is perceived to have failed its citizens and as a result lost its license to operate. Belonging to an outlawed party has a logic that, while not always agreed with by others, is at least recognised as having an underlying integrity. It is understood that those who join gangs are fighting for their rights.

**c)** Al-Shabaab is perceived as a group that hides behind Islam. They have no immediate or local social legitimacy and are not a grass roots movement. Their two central strategies are the targeting for recruitment of vulnerable and typically invisible individuals at moments of weakness or crisis - and the deliberate manufacturing of division and conflict between two religions that is not felt at an individual level. For outsiders and the authorities, the picture - and the distinction - is blurred because al-Shabaab is using the same recruitment strategies and employing the same narratives as the illegal sects and gangs; they all exploit the same sense of abandonment and injustice.

**d)** The tactics employed by the state - which are accompanied by what is felt to be disproportionate and indiscriminate violence - only serve to reinforce the objectives of al-Shabaab. All those we spoke to (except of course those close to or recruited by al-Shabaab) recognise that al-Shabaab is fighting an ideological not a religious war and they feel that their leaders do not

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All citizens suffer from the effects of the manufactured binary conflict between Muslim and Christian that constantly plays out in the media and in public discourse and in the actions of state authorities and terrorists.



understand this. Our respondents believed that the authorities, the media and their leaders utterly fail to understand the real strategies of al-Shabaab. And in the time being, most agree that al-Shabaab are winning.

**e)** There is an imposed conflict between Muslim and Christian that is not felt on the ground. Millions of Kenyans of different faiths are successfully living in harmony. All citizens however, suffer from the effects of the manufactured binary conflict between Muslim and Christian that constantly plays out in the media and in public discourse and in the actions of state authorities and terrorists. It is accompanied by an ever-present threat of violence from both the authorities (who use extraordinary violence to penalise both innocent and guilty) and the extremists (who are capable of highly personalised attacks as well as large-scale terrorism). Local leaders are too intimidated to speak out.

**f)** Opportunity: there is a remarkable consensus among those we spoke to as to the nature of the problem - lack of hope and belonging among young people, feelings of inequity, injustice and severance across the whole of society, and the powerful attraction of the al-Shabaab narrative in this context. Be they police officers or gangsters, young people or clerics, all agree on what the problems are. There is also agreement on how this could be addressed.

**g)** Opportunity: most significantly, the level of resilience in the two regions we visited is extraordinarily high. All are aware that there is scope for artificially creating tensions – particularly at times of high stress (like during the Garissa, Westgate or now Paris attacks). Given the problems acknowledged by all, it is remarkable how little tension exists in these regions. Social connections are strong but could be stronger - state connections are weak and should be strengthened. Strengthening the web of connections that bind society will reinforce and build resilience.

# Findings

## Context of fear and attack

Everyone agrees on the problems and their solutions – a situation we have never before encountered. Such uniformity is very rare – young people seldom agree with their elders or businesspeople with government officials. Extreme poverty characterises the environments and people we accessed. Crisis and the need to survive (as opposed to getting by or thriving) is a constant. There is an overwhelming sense that there is no hope of significant improvement: education is poor, there is no investment in the inadequate infrastructure and there is no prospect of enough formal jobs being made available. And overlying all there is a pervasive sense of terror. Everyone is scared.

This poverty and lack of opportunity is a great leveller. There is a remarkable understanding and clarity of articulation around the global and local social, economic and political forces that contribute to their situation. In practice this means that citizens attribute blame for their situation to others outside their immediate environment and do not turn upon members of their own community. It is a tiny but disruptive minority that terrifies the government and international community. The vast majority of people lead un-radicalised lives and there is an impressive and inspiring degree of social resilience. This resilience however, is under constant attack. And importantly, everyone is terrified; terrified of being attacked by the state or an antisocial group and frightened of being identified as siding with either.

Any group wishing to further its agenda – whether it is a political party, an individual wanting to access resources such as land, or a terrorist group – can and does exploit the fear and desperation of young people. Young people are aware that their needs for money and opportunities makes them susceptible to exploitation but the intensity and immediacy of their needs often drives them to accept offers they know to be destructive and wrong. This is what fuels political disruption and violence: young people can be, and all too often have been, paid to cause disruption.

One group we spoke to had resisted temptation.

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We were offered 500 shillings [by a well known local politician] to attend a local meeting and heckle a speaker – just to shout ‘no, no, stop it’.

***“We were offered 500 shillings [by a well known local politician] to attend a local meeting and heckle a speaker – just to shout ‘no, no, stop it’. But when we got to the meeting we saw that it was a debate amongst two parties. We listened to the argument and realised that the person we were being paid to shout down was trying to protect our rights, so we decided not to shout. When we went to collect our money he refused to pay us as he said we hadn’t done what he asked. In the end he paid us 100 shillings (otherwise we would have beaten him)”.***

Gangs operate within this context and although they are in many respects disruptive they need, use and reinforce a social code and system. It is not in their interests to create total social disruption.

One gang leader told us:

***“We don’t want anarchy, we don’t like operating where there are no rules and no society, in fact we can’t operate where there is nothing.”***  
***“I was offered 100,000 bob to kill a fish seller by her competitor - but why should I kill a shopkeeper? There is no need for that. She is a working woman.”***

While there are many universal truths, there are also many differences between Nairobi and Mombasa. In Mombasa there is a real grass roots issue around separatism – embodied in the MRC. There is a widespread and strong sense that Coastarians have been exploited and discriminated against. They feel that they have been denied their basic rights – to land, to education and representation, to state resources and validation such as ID cards. This provides the MRC with a powerful narrative that taps into genuine grievances and means that their promises (representation, land rights, better education and more opportunities and jobs) have real appeal.

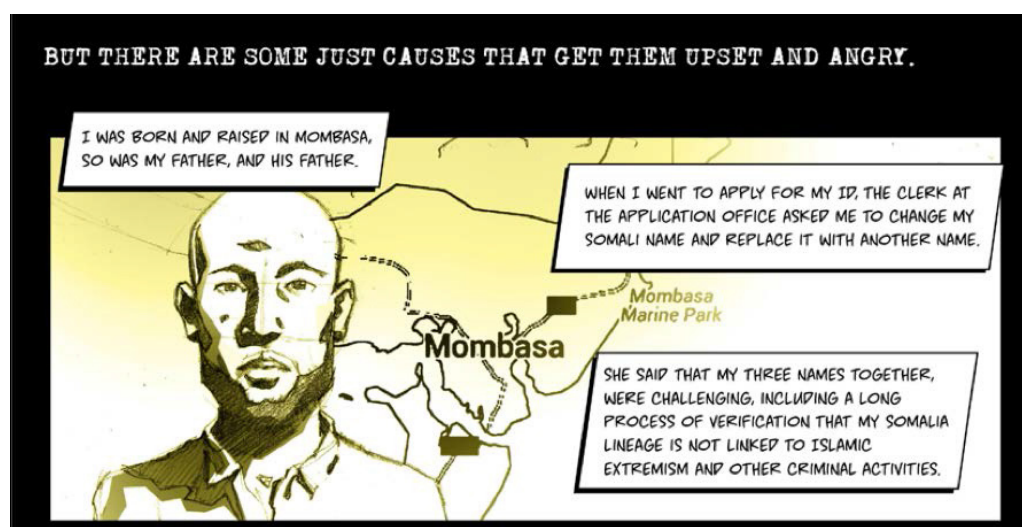
Because of Nairobi's cosmopolitan nature, its residents do not have such a sense of being directly discriminated against – although there is a feeling (or even acceptance) by many that they have been abandoned by the state. This allows parallel organisations to emerge - whether in the form of gangs or what are perceived and talked about as small governments, such as Mungiki. These organisations operate a parallel system - gathering taxes in return for security; they even offer a form of accountability. One respondent called it a "mini-government":

**"With the Mungiki you can go to see them. If one of them steals from you then you can go and see the head and say 'he has stolen from me' and that person will be caught and then you can get it all back from him, and maybe even take more."**

Two key factors are constant. Firstly, the state does not have the monopoly on legitimacy or governing in either city. Pronouncing groups such as MRC 'illegal' does not change the daily reality of city dwellers. Secondly, both state and illegitimate groups use violence as a means of control. All players compete for control of the community by employing intimidation, beatings, disappearances and even killings to further their aims.

**"You can't speak ill of the government because they will think you are in one of these outlawed groups and you may get arrested or killed. You speak ill of al-Shabaab and the next thing people hear is that you were knifed or gunned down. So there is always that fear you have as a young person living in Mombasa, even if it is at the back of your mind."**

The corrosive truth is that citizens caught in this crossfire feel they are constantly guilty and that this guilt is capable of being seen in their statements, actions and associations:



**"Even if we inform the government on someone we think is bad we will also be arrested and perhaps killed. They will say 'If you know them you must be with them'"**

## The difference between terrorist and other antisocial groups

The authorities bracket terrorist groups with illegal groups such as the MRC but this is not how the inhabitants of the two cities see it. For them there is a fundamental difference between the groups: one set wants to govern, the other wants to leverage tensions to disrupt society and recruit human bullets for a war being fought elsewhere. For those we spoke to there is no link between illegal groups and terrorists.

**"Even if I don't belong to the MRC myself I can agree with what they are doing, we on the coast are not being heard by those in Nairobi and we need people to speak up for us".**

**"The MRC do not mind what religion you are"**

This does not prevent both sets using the prevalent dynamics of tension and abandonment to add to the confusion and fear. Both sets attribute actions to the other side and so the population is constantly running two narratives:

**"With the bombs in Eastleigh we cannot be sure whether this is the government doing it to blame al-Shabaab, to make us hate them or if it is al-Shabaab trying to get our sympathy and make it easier to recruit"**

## Al-Shabaab – Abuse of religion, drivers, recruitment, the exploitation of connections and use of media

There is general agreement that al-Shabaab is not offering anything that has widespread individual or social appeal: it is not a grassroots movement. They are seen to be adept at exploiting the difficulties and easily inflammable social and cultural dynamics in poor communities. It is widely agreed that their aims are socially disruptive – that they want to recruit cannon fodder from Kenya, and that causing social damage and panic increases their ability to do so.

Al-Shabaab's strategy and tactics are well documented, nonetheless we believe our research gives fresh and local insight to existing material. The fact that our - extremely privileged - research found no anomalies is an interesting finding of itself.

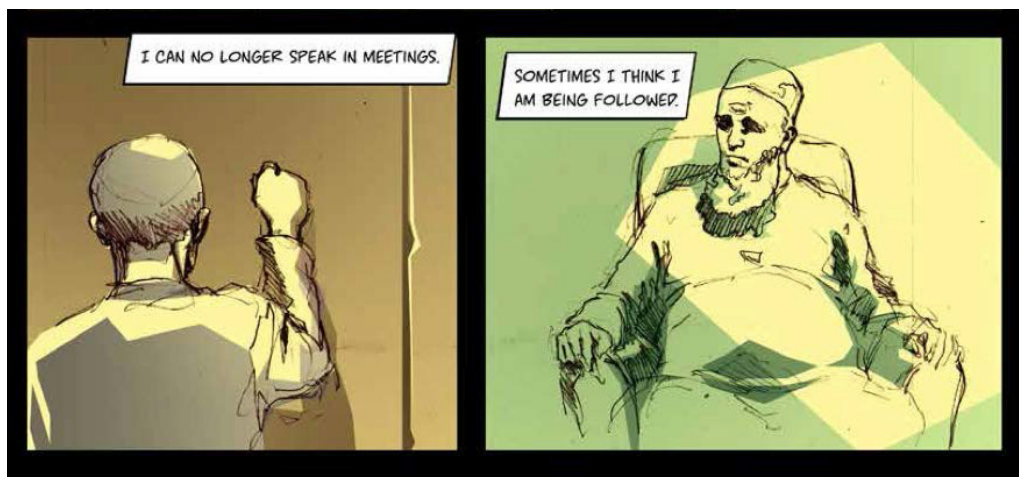
### Abuse of religion

We found that al-Shabaab are deliberately exploiting the social and cultural tensions in a multi-religious and politically and economically challenged community, using religion as an identifier and driver in order to divide society and achieve ideological ends. All agree and can see that there is a distinction between religion and ideology and that al-Shabaab is using religion as a front for an ideological struggle. A notorious gangster said:

**"It is clear they are hiding behind Islam."**

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*Even if I don't belong to the MRC myself I can agree with what they are doing, we on the coast are not being heard by those in Nairobi and we need people to speak up for us"*



There is an accompanying recognition however, that at times of crisis or disaster (such as the 2015 Garissa University shootings) it is easy for a crowd panic to take over and that individual experience gets pushed to one side. This artificially created binary distinction between Muslims and the rest becomes a reality when fuelled by panic and knee-jerk reaction. A highly educated mainstream Muslim community leader was pained by the Garissa attack but also with the reaction to it.

"What can I do when educated friends of mine call me on the phone after Garissa and ask me: 'What are you Muslims going to do about this?' These are people I thought knew better than that, that I am not one of them. With the first call I try to reason with them - after the sixth call I become angry."

Terrorist activities foment terror by definition. By linking the attacks to one religious group and dressing the logic up in religious language, al-Shabaab creates a division in societies along religious lines and focuses this fear on one section. The fact that one group can be easily identified through dress and some behaviours works to al-Shabaab's advantage.

What really increases the potency of this strategy and helps al-Shabaab is that the manufactured association between Islam and terror is confirmed and reinforced by the authorities in their response. The authorities behave and talk as though Muslims are all potential terrorists. It is hard for individuals to maintain a sense of perspective when the media, leaders and the authorities all behave as though those of a particular religious persuasion are to blame.

## Drivers

Al-Shabaab is targeting for recruitment different people who are hard to identify, those suffering from 'existential crises' over and above the 'everyday crisis' of life in the city. Here again our findings are consistent with published data. There is broad agreement that those most susceptible to recruitment are those that display:

- High level of current distress or dissatisfaction and feelings of powerlessness/ desperation- emotional, physical, or both
- Cultural disillusionment in a frustrated seeker, for example unfulfilled idealism
- Lack of an intrinsic religious belief system or value system
- Some dysfunction in the family system
- Some dependent personality tendencies like suggestibility or a low tolerance for ambiguity

- A combination of the above points in combination with a trigger event such as losing a relative or source of income.

While some of these characteristics are true of almost anyone living in constant and extreme poverty with no established paths to improvement, the psychographic profile is very different to that of career criminals or gang members. We found that there is a kind of existential crisis that overrides daily strains and can make many young people lose all perspective:

***"At this time I felt worthless and life had no meaning at all. I felt completely alone. It seemed that nobody cared about me or my situation. I considered suicide."***

Many survivors of such moments attributed their survival to the intervention of another who was there for them - even if practical help was not provided. The turning point was that someone cared and reconnected them as human beings. The act of being listened to and accepted is sometimes enough. The identification and exploitation of these turning points is an opportunity that can be exploited for good or harm. Currently extremist groups are using them effectively and the authorities are providing draconian rule when love may be the better answer.

### **Recruitment - exploiting broken connections**

Those targeted are often loners, outsiders, under extreme duress such as being thrown into prison or those in moments of transition, such as recent religious converts. Their situation and profile means that they are more likely to be at a point where all five preconditions above come together and they will experience an existential crisis as opposed to the more pervasive everyday crisis. These same people are not easily visible in society and can disappear without trace for long periods at a time before anyone notices. Often if they do 'reach out' it is missed by their peers.

***"We know one who was quiet, he stopped sharing stories and went more into himself. Little by little we saw and heard less of him. Suddenly he was gone for a while and when he came back he was even quieter."***

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*'By linking the attacks to one religious group and dressing the logic up in religious language, a I - S habaab creates a division in societies along religious lines and focuses this fear on one section..'*

"This person was recruiting new converts, not those who know much about religion. When people are new you can tell them anything, you can change things, you can say things that are not true."

The potential recruits display distinguishing - but often well hidden - characteristics and are most vulnerable at moments of existential crisis or transition. People spoke of the infection of the spirit that occurs to those that are seduced - not something that is externally identifiable. There is widespread recognition that al-Shabaab know what they are doing when they exploit weaknesses such as these:

***"Al-Shabaab know the price of everyone. Young or old, educated or not. "Wanajua jinsi ya kumshawishi mtu" ( They know how/ what to use or do to convince recruits)."***

A common thread among those who reported having gone through these moments of existential crisis, or who had observed others experiencing them, was a feeling of loneliness and isolation, of being cut off or estranged from society. Many talked of how small moments of connection - usually being listened to in a non-judgemental way by some one they knew and respected - proved to be turning points on the way back. These small interventions did not have to be (and indeed usually weren't) discussions or conversations about religion or extremism but were more general in nature and served



to re-establish a sense of connection between the individual and those around them. Many commented that they hadn't realised until too late that the individual – now lost or disappeared – had sent out small signals asking for help. Young people are notoriously moody and difficult so it is hard even for friends to separate out a real moment of crisis and withdrawal from a normal anti-social phase.

Al-Shabaab employ similar recruitment tactics to gangs and other political movements and include the same narratives if they feel it appropriate. The principles of grooming are powerful and proven and the addition of stories and accounts to add to the sense of injustice and alienation further increases the pull factor. The additional level of out-of-country training is where the al-Shabaab approach takes on a new intensity. This can be used to confuse and distract recruits from the real purpose of their recruitment:

***"They go abroad and when they come back they are still alive, their family has money, they have money, they forget about the killing and the danger, then they go to another camp and come back – still alive, still rich – but the next time they don't come back."***

Inline with other findings, the intelligence services are clear that al-Shabaab use Kenyans as bullets or cannon fodder; and its leaders do not come from Kenya.

Al-Shabaab has a powerful offer to vulnerable and frustrated individuals – acceptance, connection, community, validation, certainty (resolution of internal conflict) direction and hope. This forms a compelling and joined up narrative. The 'Golden Chance' is well known and dismissed by those outside the target group as a manufactured pipe dream but it is easy to see how it can exert a powerful appeal to those with a fragile sense of self and self worth in the absence of a convincing counter offer from society at large. Society seems to offer no hope at all. One angry and frustrated young man in the recruitment phase explained the logic as he saw it:

***"There is a group called Chafu, which is mainly made up of idlers, Wakali Kwanza, who kills outsiders coming in to Mombasa and there is Radical Muslims, situated in Majengo, they are not part of al-Shabaab but they also attack Christians. [Pause]... You see, Islam has been here for ages unlike Christianity, which was made by man – the Popes. Even when you look at the principles in the Bible. The Old Testament and the New Testament contradict each other. And there are some things Christianity condones, which are unacceptable in Islam. For example the way you are dressed [addressing a female member of our team]. It is not acceptable. It is a form of temptation to men. I will look at you, your hair, your legs and I will get tempted. In Islam, a woman is supposed to be fully covered to avoid tempting others. A lot of things signify the end of times as was prophesied: women wearing trousers, homosexuality, and tsunamis.... And this means it is time for war. Even the war we are fighting right now is one which we started ourselves. And you must have faith that that you are going to die one day even when blood is shed. You must have faith in Islam. You will go straight to paradise; virgins are waiting for you. And even now, if I was to talk to you about Islam, you will leave Christianity. You will see the sense in what I am saying and you will change your ways. Even your dressing will change."***

All respondents acknowledged the presence of rogue mosques or – more specifically – rogue leaders who seemed to be stoking tensions for local gain and who are key agents in identifying potential recruits. Importantly these rogue mosques were not seen to be mainstream but were nonetheless sufficiently powerful to be able to operate outside or around a religious education system that – like its Christian counterpart – is not standardised or transparent.

Al-Shabaab also exploits Kenya's notoriously ill-run prisons. A respondent who had been jailed for a petty theft was approached there:

**"They tried to convert me when I was in prison. I was just a small criminal but I was in with all degrees of criminals and the time was a bad one for me. I felt very scared and angry. I could see what they were doing to me and to others but in the end I didn't go that way – for me I had my music and my friends outside that I knew were waiting for me."**

His keenly felt sense of personal purpose and connection with a social group meant that he did not meet the right profile conditions, although he recognised the appeal at a key moment of vulnerability. Some respondents spoke of the powerful appeal of al-Shabaab to those in prison as they offer forgiveness and the opportunity to be cleansed as opposed to the stigma offered by the current system.

## Media

There is widespread acknowledgement that al-Shabaab are masters of social media – in understanding and using material on YouTube and elsewhere and in manipulating and encouraging the ways in which material can be created and distributed by others. Al-Shabaab uses material from elsewhere that can be easily re-edited and distributed through social media and other channels.

**"When network TV did a programme on extreme Christian evangelists it was taken, adapted and put on DVD and then shown in mosques who claimed that this was what the West was approving of."**

There is a profound and widespread belief that all media is mediated - be it the BBC, al-Jazeera or CNN - and therefore is to be interpreted rather than trusted. Young and old are aware that we live in the age where the media consumer is no longer a passive recipient but is also the media producer, user and distributor with an agenda of his or her own. There is no belief in the honesty of media or the integrity of those who run and produce it. This has a corrosive effect on those that wish to use it for positive ends as these can be quickly subverted, while the 'negative' and inflammatory use of media still has the power to shock and provoke.

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Al-Shabaab has a powerful offer to vulnerable and frustrated individuals – acceptance, connection, community, validation, certainty direction and hope.

The staging of spectacles with carnage and highly profiled targeting - sparing those who can recite the Qur'an and shooting the rest - grabs media attention and creates short term hysteria. This exploits the media's tendency to heighten, personalise and vivify stories – turning them into a form of melodrama with simple, binary explanations and attributions of cause and effect. Al-Shabaab uses this trait to its advantage.

Overall although the self-awareness of the incendiary power of media has some dampening effect on its impact, it is not enough to counter the divisive and destructive dynamics that are unleashed by the combination of shocking material and skilful deployment of social media. 'Conventional media still operate on the 'broadcast model' – one story presented for universal consumption. Standard editing strategies and codes of conduct (decency) are honoured. Shared media' is different. It is media that is constructed to be consumed quickly and passed on and it has a real resonance for young people. It is deliberately provocative and occasionally shocking. It is not trying to be 'truthful' but to provoke reaction and a response which might merely be 'have you seen this?'. This way al-Shabaab succeed in setting the terms of the debate. The forms and norms of media interaction require change to be an effective counterweight.

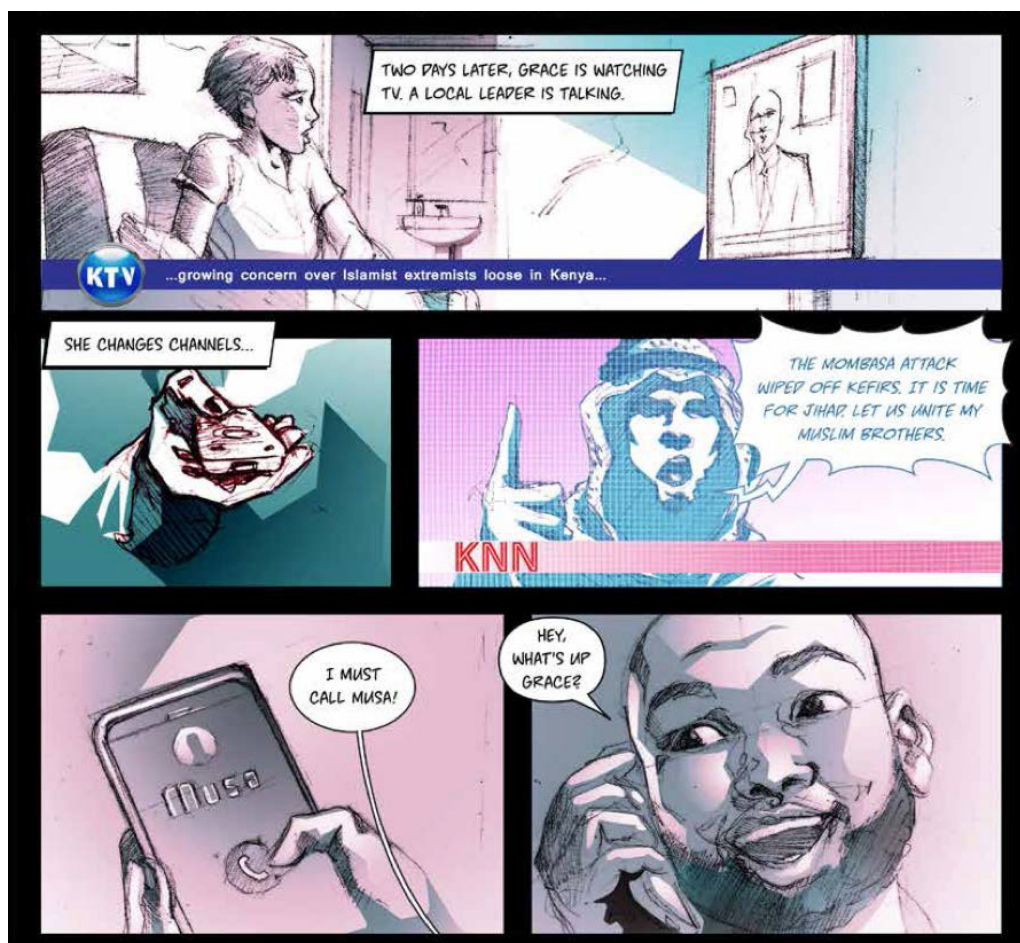
## The State Response

Those we spoke to felt strongly that the authorities misinterpret events and situations and respond badly to provocation. They believe that these responses are adding to and reinforcing tensions and fears.

As we have seen, al-Shabaab use many of the same recruitment strategies and techniques as other antisocial groups – in particular the gradual sensitisation and creation of new self-enclosed groupings that validate and reward their members, and the use of narratives of injustice and unfairness. This though is where the similarities stop. For the populations we spoke to, it is seen as a fundamental mistake to assume that al-Shabaab is like other antisocial groups and that it has a religious agenda.

The authorities are wrong-footed by their opponents. Firstly, they accept al-Shabaab's definition of the struggle as Muslims vs Christians and secondly, they respond inappropriately on the ground. In an attempt to reach the invisible few they target the visible majority. They use indiscriminate and excessive force which often targets the wrong people thereby reinforcing division. This creates and fuels feelings of fear, anger, unpredictability and injustice and increases tensions between different religious groups in society – the very thing al-Shabaab wants to achieve.

Globally such reactions are a well documented and common response from heavy handed authorities. When seeking to attack the invisible they target and punish the collective creating and reinforcing destructive dynamics within communities. In Kenya,



the authorities consistently reinforce the work of the terrorists, fuelling anger and resentment and thereby making the situation even worse. Wrongly identifying suspects is a key source of resentment: all kinds of young people have been rounded up and interrogated as the security forces seek to catch those at risk or who have engaged in potentially disruptive behaviour. They chase the visible when those they seek are invisible.

***“You may not be part of MRC or al-Shabaab and you may not be engaged with these groups. But once the police look at your face and hair, you will get shot. And if this happens to me, I will want to react. So if I get the chance, I will revenge to get justice, whether it is on the police or people from the mainland.”***

The authorities employ the binary language of division – Christians vs Muslims – of race and ethnicity, and fail to distinguish between acts based on religion and those driven by ideology. A conflict is created between the daily experience of co-existence and the claims of the authorities that ‘Muslims are at fault’ – so that even the law-abiding majority begins to doubt its own truth and become angry. To be suspicious of anyone ‘who looks like a Muslim’ when there are so many law-abiding Muslims connecting society is destructive and self-defeating.

This polarisation also has the effect of making it impossible to speak out on the issue – those taken to be in favour of either side may be killed or beaten up by the police or antisocial groups.

Indiscriminate and what is felt to be disproportionate force is used in a highly unpredictable and inconsistent manner. This takes the form of the apparently random and undoubtedly widespread rounding up and incarcerating of suspects, the use of torture and even killings. This adds to the widespread climate of distrust, resentment and fear.

There is a lingering group memory of how the US has responded to bombings in the past. This fear and resentment of the “FBI” and perceived American arrogance and indifference to local situations needs only minimal fuelling.

***“The Kenyan government is in the hands of the US government.”***

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*‘The different arms of the state do not work in a joined up manner – the police and army respond differently to situations. There is no clarity as to who is in charge...’*

The different arms of the state do not work in a joined up manner – the police and army respond differently to situations. There is no clarity as to who is in charge – or who to go to – central government, armed forces, the police, the security intelligence services or the county government? And there is a growing suspicion that the security forces are using the crisis to further their own agenda – artificially creating tension and difficulties so that they can profit. This is underpinned by widespread experience of corruption.

The authorities limit access to the ways in which society identifies and validates its citizens. Muslims find it increasingly hard to become corporate citizens – their applications for identity cards and passports are held up or ignored:

***“Without IDs, you can’t access loans, you can’t possess a title deed, basically, you are not Kenyan.”***

***“I was told that there is no point me applying for a passport with my name - that I should choose another name that does not look like a Muslim name. I did so and have a passport but this means that my children cannot have my true name.”***

***"I had gone to pick up my ID. I saw that one of my neighbours was on the vetting board and I relaxed a bit, assured that he will be able to help me since he knows me. When I presented my papers he exclaimed, 'aren't you so and so's son? Doesn't your family come from Zanzibar? You pick your papers and go apply for your ID in Zanzibar.'"***

Stories like these verify the claims of al-Shabaab that Muslims are targeted and subject to unfair treatment - prejudice and injustice become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The government's introduction of E-government will further marginalise many. The issue of title deeds is another high point of tension. For many at the Coast, title deeds embody a connection with a culture and community and if they are expropriated by outsiders this is experienced as injustice but also as destroying local communities at the behest of these outsiders. Anger is stoked on both sides.

Taken together these behaviours begin to erode the government's licence to operate. It is not providing security, consistency, accountability, validation or transparency and those we spoke to believe it is pouring petrol on the fire.

## The imposed conflict between Muslim and Christian

Notwithstanding all the challenges facing areas such as Nairobi's Mathare and many parts of Mombasa what is truly remarkable is that society still functions at all. Behaviour is still rule-bound even if the rules are strange to outsiders: gang activity for example often includes a strange symbiosis with the authorities:

"The police know who the gangsters are so when someone reports a stolen phone for example they know who did it. What they do is work out what that phone is worth and then they find the gangster and tell him - you give us 10 per cent of what it is worth and we will leave you alone."

In this way parallel social structures emerge. As with the mafia elsewhere, there are systems of taxation, protection and the provision of social benefits; there is even accountability.

In this context the MRC is a social movement that taps into the local sense and experience of restricted access to opportunity and resources, and offers hope to its supporters. There is a directly perceived logic and benefit and therefore widespread sympathy with the movement, even if its methods are socially challenging. They use similar recruitment strategies to al-Shabaab but also leverage real and perceived injustices such as land rights, misallocation of resources and restricted opportunities. Unlike al-Shabaab however, MRC is inclusive in recruitment as it thrives on mass membership. Al-Shabaab, as we learnt, is extremely deliberate and purposeful in its recruitment.

There is a social system that works and those groups operating in the environment have strong social codes. They both exploit and contribute to a broader functioning social context even if it is not one that a liberal conscience would consider attractive or laudable. There is no revolution.

This does not mean that there is harmony or stability. Many factors stretch this tolerance, such as the large and sudden arrival of migrants, corruption and political instability. If the ethnic mix in particular areas hits tipping points that are well documented elsewhere then there can be sudden extreme tension. Where for example there is a significant proportion or majority of recent Somali immigrants buying up land there is



considerable tension, resentment and disquiet. This is a result of population imbalance, scarcity of economic resource and time - and is recognised as such by all parties even as they are reacting to it.

Despite all this tension and potential for social disruption our research team was struck by the absence of religious intolerance. We encountered groups of young people where there was a high degree of collaboration and cooperation between Christian and Muslim, upcountry and coastal, Kenyan and Somali. We were told that many gangs included members from both religious groups and even where this was not the case both Christian and Muslim gangs would hide and protect each other's members from the police.

According to an Africa's Voices Foundation report commissioned by Well Told Story, examining over 400,000 SMS messages received in the Shujaaz database, those talking about violence, extremism and suicide are uncommon (trimmed average 5 SMS/month). They are mainly sent by males. Messages of intolerance about other religions and tribes are very rare and usually are jokes

The report showed a peak in the number of topical SMS sent during the Westgate and Garissa University attacks. The majority were against violence and there was no sign of religious intolerance.

***"It is easy to generalize that all Muslims (or Somalis) are terrorists. By doing so, we risk sending away the angel that was sent to save us. I have made this short film with my pals...watch, share and review #SayNoToPrejudice***

***"This is from God's haters, who want to get Christians and Muslims to crash. Young people let us beware not to fight one another because of these satanic people but we should have faith in God, He will deal with them."***

All those we spoke to are united in believing that al-Shabaab and other terrorist organisations operate outside the current social context and that their aim is to destroy society not work within it. They are united too in the view that there is a meaningful distinction between 'radicalisation' and 'extremism'. This is not immediately apparent as both can involve fighting and even killing:

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No-one sees al-Shabaab as the next step up from gangs or the MRC. While al-Shabaab's reach and effects are profound and widespread it is seen as wholly different to other antisocial groups..'

***"It is part of fighting for freedom and in these fights, blood must be shed. To give an example, when we wanted independence from the British government, blood was shed. "Afadhali nife ndio nipate haki yangu".***

But there is a vital difference:

***"Radicalisation is "Itikadi kali" – standing up for your rights. Extremism is Msimamo mkali – a blind passion."***

To our respondents, there is a definite and meaningful distinction between 'radicalisation' and 'extremism'. It is the difference between fighting injustice by enlisting individuals in a rightful struggle and employing violence to disrupt and terrorise.

No-one sees al-Shabaab as the next step up from gangs or the MRC. While al-Shabaab's reach and effects are profound and widespread it is seen as wholly different to other antisocial groups - in kind rather than degree.



## Strengthening connections with love and inclusion

When faced with desperate poverty, dysfunctional family circumstances and a lack of opportunity a young person faces a number of life choices that are in varying degrees antisocial. These choices encompass individual behaviours – theft, petty crime, drug selling and consumption, pimping and prostitution, and group activities like gangs and social movements.

**"When you are desperate and there are no jobs then stealing is a job."**

The recruitment and retention strategies of gangs and illegal groups are classic grooming – based on incremental levels of involvement together with the creation of the notion of a new family where individuals are validated and rewarded and where love and inclusion exist.

Awareness of the approach is as high in the Nairobi slums as it is in the academic literature.

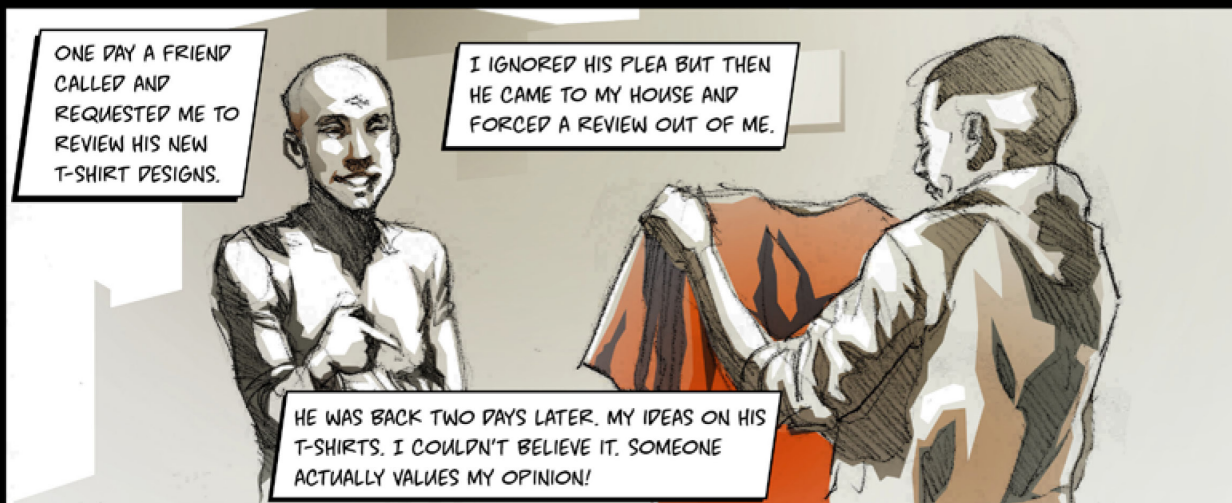
**"You are given a small, small task at first. 'Take this money to this person'. Then you are asked to do more and more. Each time you are given little money. Then you are told that you are one of us and will be looked after. Your family will be looked after, maybe your mother will be given money. You feel good. Then you are taken to a funeral of a gangster, there is a big party and celebration of his life. This can last a week. You feel that this is exciting. You feel that you belong, that you are respected, that you can do things."**



**"Why did you stay with your pimp even when you were being sold?"  
"Because he looked after me [Pause]. It's all about love."**

The grooming process is well established and understood but despite this it continues to be an effective strategy for a significant minority who find themselves without the social capital or personal conditions that enables them to resist the siren call of recruitment when it comes. Having a small business hustle or a supportive family around at the right time may be all the counterweight needed.

IN THE END WE ARE ALL THE SAME WE JUST WANT RESPECT AND TO FEEL THAT WE ARE WANTED.



FOR THE FULL NARRATIVE REPORT OF OUR GROUNDTRUTH STUDY PLEASE GO TO [WWW.WELLTOLDSTORY.COM](http://WWW.WELLTOLDSTORY.COM)  
WE ARE GRATEFUL TO THE [HANNS SEIPEL FOUNDATION](#) FOR THEIR SUPPORT.

# Conclusions and recommendations

Any summary of such an extraordinarily complex situation where global and local, historical, geographical, social, economic, cultural, political and religious forces are all in constant interplay and flux, risks oversimplification. This research threw up issues worthy of complete studies in themselves. In this context our report should be read more as an outline of the issues identified than as a compressed analysis. That said, the central conclusion of our team was that given the level of disruption, communities are remarkably resilient. Communities and individuals within them feel disenfranchised, angry, victimised and hopeless yet even then only a tiny proportion rebel or turn against each other. Most are resilient; they make do and hustle to solve the 'everyday crisis' that is their daily lives.

Young and old have a common understanding of what makes up a good community; they can see the fault lines and the solutions and they are still determined to maintain harmony. The yellow outer ring of Slide 1 below shows how young people would like their world to be at personal, local, national and global levels; they seek love and belonging. The blue inner ring shows their actual experience of life in the studied areas of Mombasa and Nairobi; in place of the love and belonging for which they yearn, they experience rejection and conflict at all levels.

Connections are what maintain their resilience; connections between families and businesses, religious groups and leaders, antisocial groups and communities, the state and its citizens. Some of these connections are stronger than others and their evident success and influence is what encourages us to make recommendations to strengthen or build them. The genius of al-Shabaab is that they too understand these factors and exploit them for maximum impact. To counter al-Shabaab's malign influence the different sectors shown by the inner circle of Slides 1 and 2 should focus on changing the narrative: from aggression to inclusion, crisis to calm.

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*Extremism is also a global issue. What is happening in Nairobi and Mombasa is part of a global social, cultural, religious, economic and political struggle.'*

Our respondents recognise that in the current environment there are enormous challenges to implementing any of the commonly agreed recommendations or solutions to extremism. Of course the government of Kenya will not be able to create full employment or reform its prisons overnight but addressing the issue of ID cards for all its citizens may be an easier task. The private sector is crying out for ways to support the communities on which it relies for markets.

Extremism is a complex problem and all complex problems are distributed problems with no linear solutions. This problem is distributed across many parties with differing and competing agendas; there is no direct correlation between input and output and agents' actions often cause unanticipated and counterintuitive effects. It is a context where every problem is a symptom of another and the dynamics of change are almost impossible to determine in advance. Thus any solution must be multidimensional as just changing any one variable cannot produce the desired outcome alone.

Extremism is also a global issue. What is happening in Nairobi and Mombasa is part of a global social, cultural, religious, economic and political struggle. In this context it would be presumptive to suggest solutions in a simplistic manner. What we can do however, is to analyse and report back what those on the ground feel should be done. We believe the best way to approach the issue is to build integration and strengthen connections. We found that most of the current or preferred approaches are at best confirming existing divisions and dynamics or at worst reinforcing and accelerating them. Our suggested approach is unashamedly multi-dimensional and structural. As a result our recommendations should be undertaken with a long-term perspective.

As shown in figure1, young people in the two areas of Mombasa and Nairobi that we studied are assailed by aggression on all sides. They are crying out to belong more, to have more hope and to be less scared. In short, they seek love. We – and they - recommend that the fight and the rage be taken out of the response to radicalisation – verbally, politically and physically. Thus the recommendations made on figure2 are all supportive of the remarkable resilience we discovered, designed as a counterweight to extremism – not as an aggressor. Aggression is part of the problem and has the opposite effect when used in response.

All of these initiatives will help strengthen the resilience and harmony between religious groups that we found; but they will not work alone. In order for change to be sustainable and society to increase its resilience all of the initiatives should be employed. Merely doing one or two will have little effect. It is the range of interventions and the way that they support each other that is the critical element. Other initiatives we have not mentioned will also help build the web of connections needed to sustain the resilience but these are the ones that came out of our short study. They will help strengthen the threads that – against all odds - still unite the populations of Kenya's two largest cities. Those seeking to counter extremism should reinforce and protect that unity with a broad web of initiatives that support the majority rather than attack the minority – a policy that demonstrably fails not only in Nairobi and Mombasa but from Paris to Madaguri, Kabul to San Bernadino.



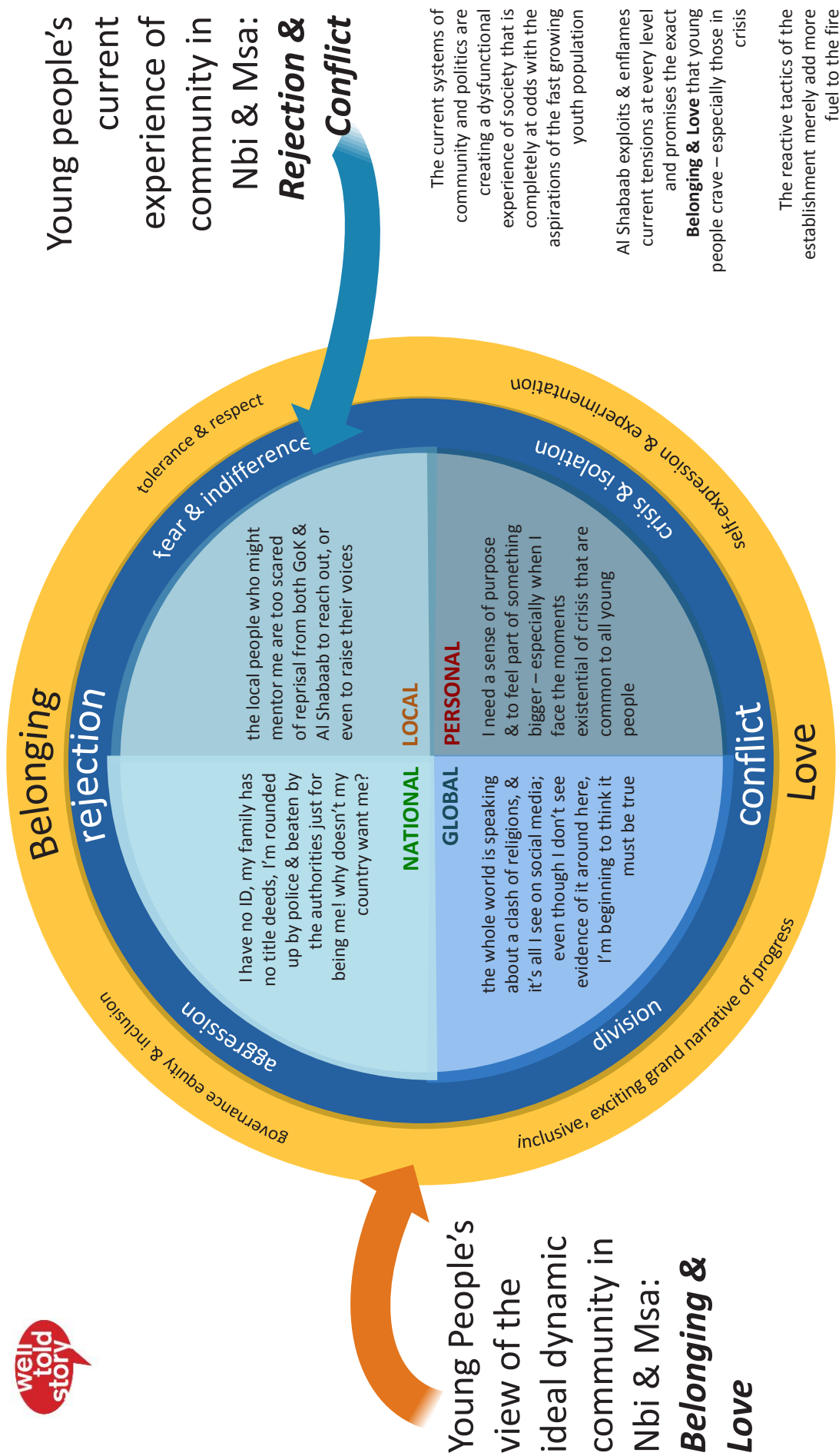


figure1



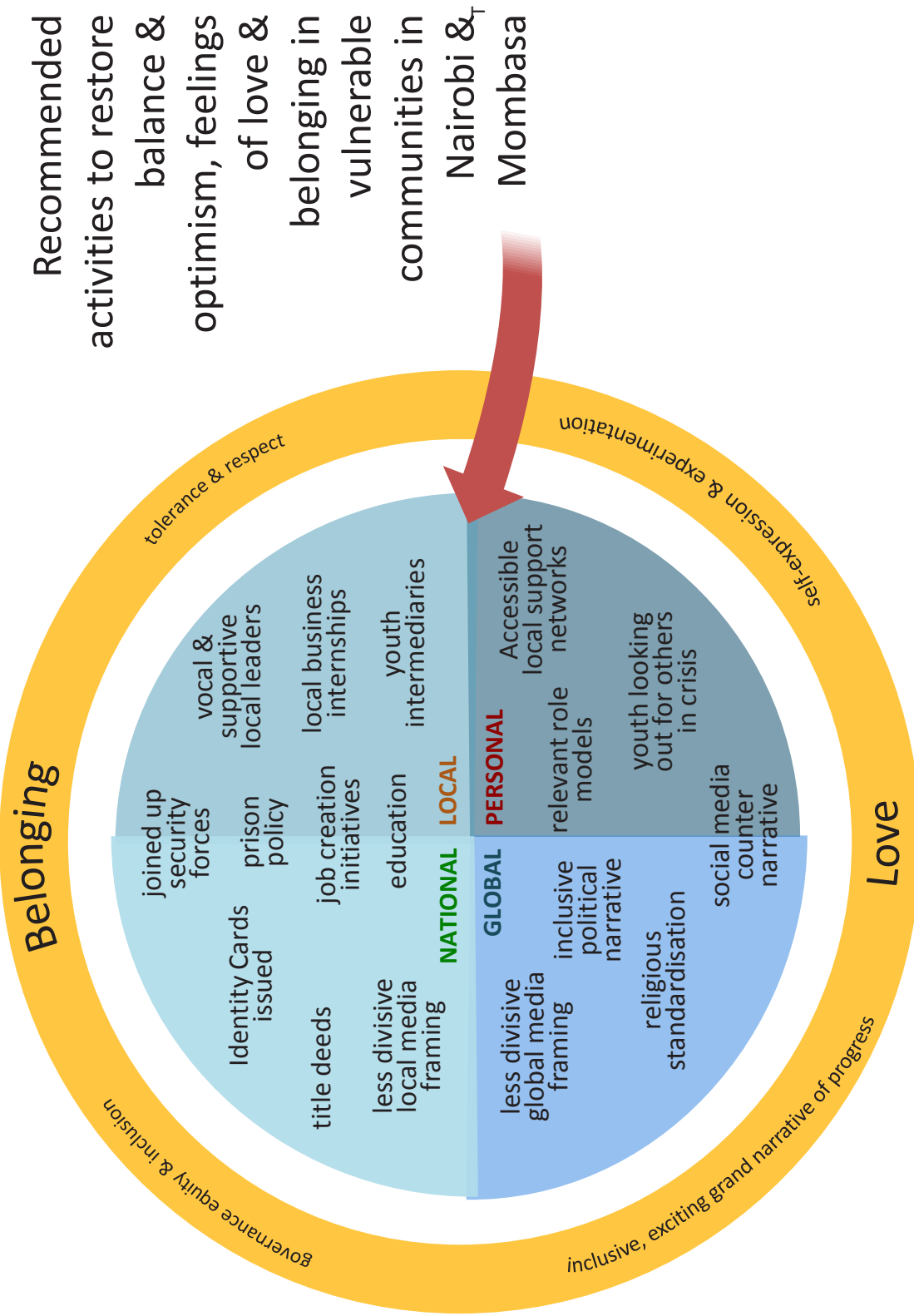


figure2





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This report was made possible by support from the Hanns Seidel Foundation.  
A comic book that captures the findings of this research is available at [www.welltoldstory.com](http://www.welltoldstory.com)