

Assessing the Ecumenical Contribution to Countering Youth Radicalisation and Religious Extremism in Mombasa, Kenya: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Youth radicalisation and religious extremism present significant threats to social stability, peace, and intergenerational cohesion in Kenya's coastal region, especially in Mombasa County. Although the causes of radicalisation have been widely studied, the specific contribution of ecumenical leadership as a faith-based response remains underexplored. This conceptual article analyses the drivers of youth radicalisation in Mombasa, focusing on political marginalization, socio-economic exclusion, identity challenges, and the manipulation of faith-based discourses, situating these within broader African and global contexts. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources in theology, sociology, peace studies, and social identity theory, the article argues that ecumenical leadership provides distinctive moral, pastoral, and community-based interventions that can enhance youth resilience. The analysis demonstrates that ecumenical actors facilitate theological reorientation, spiritual formation, social belonging, and positive identity reconstruction, all of which are critical for reducing vulnerability to extremist recruitment. The article further identifies opportunities to strengthen prevention through interdenominational collaboration, contextual theology, and youth mentorship. Despite challenges such as limited resources, weak coordination, and strained relations with state security agencies, ecumenical leadership remains an underutilized yet essential partner in addressing youth radicalisation in Mombasa. By integrating theoretical perspectives with contextual realities, this article advances discourse on faith-based peacebuilding and establishes a conceptual foundation for understanding how ecumenical engagement can support holistic, community-centred approaches to countering violent extremism. The analysis underscores the need for enhanced theological literacy, stronger ecumenical partnerships, and sustained engagement with youth in marginalized coastal communities. This conceptual assessment provides a basis for future empirical research and offers practical insights for church leaders, policymakers, and practitioners involved in counter-radicalisation efforts in Kenya.

Keywords: *Ecumenical Leadership, Youth Radicalisation, Religious Extremism, Mombasa County, Resilience*

1.0 Introduction

Youth radicalisation and religious extremism have become increasingly pressing concerns throughout Africa, posing complex threats to social stability, national security, and intergenerational cohesion. In East Africa, Kenya has been particularly affected, with Mombasa County emerging as a critical hotspot due to its long history of political marginalization, economic and social disparities, and religious contestations. Scholars widely acknowledge that contemporary

radicalisation processes are formed through a mix of ideological, socio-political, and economic factors that converge in specific local contexts (Neumann, 2013:7–10; Botha, 2014:21; Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3). In coastal Kenya, these dynamics are intensified by historical grievances, identity struggles, and the perception of cultural and religious alienation among youth communities (Mazrui, 1994:17; Odhiambo, 2019:41). As a result, extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab have exploited these contextual vulnerabilities by promoting discourses that appeal to marginalised young people seeking belonging, justice, or empowerment (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21).

While the Kenyan state has adopted a combination of security-based and policy-driven interventions, such as the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE) and multiagency operations, scholars assert that these tactics regularly fail to address deeper structural and psychosocial dimensions of radicalisation (Mkutu & Opondo, 2019:112; Kilonzo, 2017:45). Heavy-handed policing, profiling, and indiscriminate arrests have, in some cases, reinforced perceptions of exclusion and contributed to further radicalisation among susceptible youth (Ekici et al., 2016:11). This has led scholars and practitioners to call for more holistic, community-rooted, and faith-informed responses that can complement state efforts by addressing the relational, spiritual, and inner needs of young people (Abu-Nimer, 2018:54; Patel, 2012:66).

Within this wider context, ecumenical leadership represents a critical, still insufficiently examined resource for countering youth radicalisation in Kenya. Ecumenical leadership refers to collaborative Christian engagement across denominational lines, grounded in shared theological commitments to peace, justice, and human dignity. Ecumenical actors, including councils of churches, interdenominational clergy networks, and faith-based organisations, exert meaningful moral authority, deep community ties, and spiritual influence, enabling them to respond to violent extremism in ways that are relational, transformative, and contextually grounded (Katongole, 2011:49; Bwire, 2024:25–44). Despite this potential, scholarship on violent extremism in Kenya has tended to privilege security-led and policy-oriented analyses, leaving the distinctive contribution of ecumenical leadership largely underexamined (Silke, 2008:106; Lynch & VonDoepp, 2019:102).

This conceptual article addresses this gap by analysing the drivers of youth radicalisation in Mombasa County and assessing how ecumenical leadership can contribute to counter-radicalisation and youth resilience. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature in theology, sociology, political science, peace studies, and psychology, the article argues that ecumenical engagement,

when grounded in contextual theology and supported by transformative pastoral practices, offers a holistic framework for preventing radicalisation. Ecumenical leaders can challenge extremist ideologies through theological counter-narratives, provide youth with meaningful spaces for identity reconstruction, and promote socio-economic empowerment initiatives that reduce vulnerability to recruitment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979:34; Silva & Deflem, 2020:103; UNESCO, 2017:38).

The significance of this study lies in its ability to bring theological reflection into conversation with empirical and theoretical debates on radicalisation. Contextual theology, for example, emphasises interpreting Christian doctrines within the daily lives of a community, making it a powerful tool for tackling grievances and ideological manipulation in the coastal region (Mawerenga, 2024:19; Ndereba & Mugambi, 2024:3–7). Similarly, Social Identity Theory provides insight into why young people seeking belonging may be drawn toward extremist groups, while Transformational Leadership Theory points out the capacity of faith leaders to inspire ethical and behavioural change (Charmaz, 2006:187; Patton, 2002:39). By integrating these frameworks, the article develops a comprehensive conceptual lens for understanding how ecumenical leadership can influence youth attitudes, reshape identity constructs, and contribute to sustained community resilience.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, the article offers an important contextual analysis of Mombasa County. The region's socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, drug abuse, inequality, and weakened family systems, intersect with historical grievances and ideological contestations to create a complex environment in which radicalisation can flourish (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3; Botha, 2013:8). Understanding these intersecting drivers is necessary for constructing faith-based interventions which are not merely theologically grounded but also responsive to lived experiences. By focusing specifically on Mombasa, the article adds to a fuller localised understanding of violent extremism, which complements larger regional analyses from the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa (Onuoha, 2014:12; Botha & Abdile, 2014:21). The article is organised into several main sections. It begins with a contextual overview of youth radicalisation in Mombasa County, followed by a thematic literature review of the political, social, economic, and religious drivers of radicalisation. The article then presents a theoretical and conceptual framework combining Social Identity Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Contextual Theology. A core section offers a conceptual assessment of ecumenical leadership

as a multidimensional response to youth radicalisation. This is followed by a discussion that synthesises understandings and highlights implications for faith leaders, policymakers, and community practitioners. The article concludes by outlining key conceptual contributions, practical recommendations, and directions for future empirical research.

This conceptual assessment contends that ecumenical leadership, grounded in moral authority, theological literacy, and community engagement, can function as a transformative agent in countering youth radicalisation in Mombasa. For the purposes of this article, ecumenical leadership refers specifically to collaborative engagement among Christian denominations, grounded in shared theological commitments and institutional cooperation. This is distinct from interfaith leadership, which involves collaboration across different religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and other faith communities. While the present study focuses on ecumenical “intra-Christian” engagement, it recognises that interfaith approaches are equally important in pluralistic contexts such as Mombasa, where Muslim-Christian relations play a significant role in shaping community dynamics.

Accordingly, the article advocates for the deliberate integration of faith-based actors into Kenya’s counter-extremism strategies, acknowledging their significant role in advancing peace, justice, and youth resilience. In this regard, ecumenical initiatives may be most effective when complemented by broader interfaith collaborations that include diverse religious communities, thereby fostering inclusive and contextually relevant responses to radicalisation.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Contextual Overview of Youth Radicalisation in Mombasa County

Youth radicalisation in Mombasa County must be understood within the broader historical, socio-economic, political, and religious context of Kenya’s coastal region. Mombasa’s long-standing experience of marginalisation, cultural hybridity, and complex identity dynamics has created fertile conditions for the emergence and spread of extremist ideologies (Mazrui, 1994:17; Odhiambo, 2019:41). While radicalisation is a global phenomenon shaped by diverse local realities, the coastal region’s distinct historical grievances and socio-political configurations make its youth particularly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab and local criminal gangs aligned with religious and ideological narratives (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21; Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3).

2.2 Historical and Political Marginalization

Mombasa's history is deeply intertwined with centuries of trade, colonisation, Islamic scholarship, and cultural exchange. However, scholars argue that the region's incorporation into the Kenyan state after independence resulted in persistent political and economic marginalisation, especially for coastal Muslim communities (Mazrui, 1994:17; Willis & Gona, 2013:26).

While this marginalisation has particularly affected Muslim communities, it is important to note that ecumenical initiatives, being primarily intra-Christian in nature, do not inherently include Muslim participation. However, in practice, ecumenical actors may engage with Muslim communities through complementary interfaith platforms, especially in contexts such as Mombasa, where religious coexistence is central to community life. This suggests that while ecumenical leadership operates within Christian collaboration, its effectiveness in addressing radicalisation may be enhanced when linked to broader interfaith engagement.

These historical injustices include land dispossession, unequal development, limited political representation, and perceptions of cultural erasure. According to Odhiambo (2019:41), this structural marginalisation has created deep-seated grievances that extremist groups exploit by framing radicalisation narratives around resistance, identity restoration, and justice.

While such dynamics are particularly evident within historically marginalised coastal communities, vulnerability to radicalisation is not limited to local populations alone. Broader socio-economic pressures, identity-related challenges, and exposure to transnational ideological networks may also render youth from diverse backgrounds susceptible to radical influences. This suggests that radicalisation should be understood as a wider societal phenomenon that extends beyond specific geographic or community boundaries.

Government responses to insecurity in the coastal region have sometimes exacerbated these grievances. Heavy-handed policing, indiscriminate arrests, and profiling of young Muslim men have contributed to feelings of alienation and mistrust toward state institutions (Mkutu & Opondo, 2019:112; Ekici et al., 2016:11). Extremist recruiters frequently use these experiences to validate claims of state oppression and encourage youth to join violent movements presented as defenders

of their community (Botha, 2013:8). Thus, political marginalisation and state–citizen tensions form a critical backdrop for understanding radicalisation in Mombasa.

2.3 Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

Economic deprivation is another major driver of youth radicalisation in Mombasa. High levels of unemployment, income inequality, informal labour markets, and the rising cost of living disproportionately affect young people in urban and peri-urban areas such as Kisauni, Likoni, Kongowea, and Majengo (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21; Onuoha, 2014:12). Many youths experience chronic joblessness despite educational qualifications, leading to frustration, idleness, and vulnerability to 'criminal and extremist recruitment networks' (Silva & Deflem, 2020:120–121). Extremist groups often provide financial incentives, stipends, or promises of economic security to lure young people into joining their ranks (Ekici et al., 2016:49). These material inducements, combined with the emotional appeal of belonging to a structured movement, make radicalisation appear both financially and psychologically rewarding for marginalised youth.

The coastal region also faces challenges related to drug abuse, especially heroin and cannabis consumption, which further heighten youth vulnerability (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:6). Substance dependence and involvement in local gangs, such as *Wakali Kwanza* and *Wakali Wao*, create pathways into networks where extremist ideas can circulate (Botha, 2014:22). As a result, socio-economic vulnerabilities intertwine with psychological and relational factors, reinforcing susceptibility to radicalisation.

2.4 Identity Crises, Social Fragmentation, and Youth Exclusion

Identity-related grievances play a central role in youth radicalisation in Mombasa.

Social Identity Theory suggests that young people experiencing identity confusion or rejection are more likely to gravitate toward groups offering meaning, belonging, and recognition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979:34). This is particularly relevant in Mombasa, where competing religious, ethnic, cultural, and national identities intersect within a complex socio-historical landscape shaped by colonial legacies, marginalization, and coastal trade networks (Willis & Gona, 2013: 22–24). While these dynamics are often pronounced among historically marginalised coastal communities, they are not limited to them. Youth from diverse backgrounds residing in Mombasa, including migrants, urban youth from non-coastal ethnic groups, and those integrated into the coastal

economy, may also experience forms of identity tension, exclusion, or social dislocation. Therefore, many coastal youths feel disconnected from both local traditional structures and national institutions, creating a vacuum in which alternative identities gain appeal (Patel, 2012:66). This suggests that identity-related vulnerabilities should be understood as affecting a broader spectrum of youth populations within the coastal region, rather than being confined to a single community.

Anderson and McKnight (2015:3) observe that extremist groups skillfully manipulate this sense of identity crisis by presenting themselves as guardians of faith, justice, and cultural authenticity. In the context of Kenya's coastal region, such dynamics have predominantly been associated with jihadist-oriented groups such as Al-Shabaab, which draw on particular interpretations of Islam to justify violence. While forms of religious extremism can theoretically emerge within different religious traditions, including Christianity, the literature on radicalisation in Mombasa has largely focused on Islamist extremist networks rather than organised Christian extremist movements in this specific context.

These narratives are especially powerful when accompanied by ideological arguments claiming that violence is a justified response to oppression.

Digital technologies amplify identity-based radicalisation processes. UNESCO (2017:38) reports that extremist groups use social media platforms to spread propaganda, build peer networks, and recruit youths through personalized digital interactions.

Online spaces offer anonymity, constant access, and emotionally charged content, creating environments in which extremist narratives reinforce in-group identity formation while bypassing family, religious, and community oversight structures (Conway, 2017: 81–83; Aly et al., 2017: 6–8). This clarification helps situate the discussion within the specific empirical realities of the Kenyan coastal region, while avoiding the implication that all religious traditions are equally represented in extremist mobilization in this context.

2.5 Religious Manipulation and Ideological Contestation

Despite Mombasa's rich religious heritage, extremist actors have exploited theological gaps, limited religious literacy, and interreligious tensions to propagate distorted interpretations of Islam and Christianity (Neumann, 2013:8; Abu-Nimer, 2018:54). Recruitment efforts often take place in informal religious settings, unregulated madrasa networks, private homes, or through charismatic

preachers who present radical ideologies as authentic faith commitments (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21).

The absence of strong theological counter-narratives makes youth susceptible to ideological manipulation. As Mawerenga (2024:19) argues, religious identity becomes particularly potent when intertwined with political grievances, providing moral justification for violence. In this context, it is important to distinguish between ecumenical and interfaith engagement. While interfaith initiatives involve collaboration across different religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, ecumenical leadership, as the primary focus of this article, refers specifically to cooperation among Christian denominations. Accordingly, this study emphasises the role of ecumenical actors in developing theologically grounded counter-narratives within Christian communities.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that interfaith collaboration remains important in pluralistic contexts such as Mombasa, particularly in addressing tensions between religious communities. However, the conceptual gap identified in this article concerns the underexplored role of ecumenical (intra-Christian) leadership in countering radicalisation.

Ecumenical leaders may therefore contribute by offering contextually grounded theological interpretations that challenge extremist misuse of Christian teachings and promote peace, justice, and coexistence. However, studies note that these efforts are frequently constrained by limited resources, denominational fragmentation, and inadequate training in counter-extremism theology (Katongole, 2011:49; Bwire, 2024:25–44).

2.5 Localized Radicalisation Patterns in High-Risk Areas

Research shows that radicalisation patterns in Mombasa are not evenly distributed but concentrated in particular neighbourhoods, commonly referred to as hotspots—such as Kisauni, Mvita/Majengo, Likoni, and Old Town (Botha, 2014:22; Kaya, 2019:57). These areas are characterised by dense informal settlements, weak social services, and limited economic opportunities. They also contain tightly knit social networks, making them ideal for covert mobilisation and peer-driven recruitment.

Local gangs often serve as intermediaries between youth and extremist actors. While these groups may initially focus on petty crime or territorial control, some have gradually aligned with larger ideological movements to access weapons, funding, and protection (Anderson & McKnight,

2015:3–6). This blending of criminality and ideology creates a fluid radicalisation environment in which motivations for joining extremist groups are diverse and often overlapping.

2.5 Drivers of Youth Radicalisation

Radicalisation emerges from the interplay of political, socio-economic, religious, and psychosocial factors. Identifying these drivers is essential for situating ecumenical leadership within youth resilience frameworks. This review synthesizes key literature and highlights gaps addressed by this article.

Political Drivers of Youth Radicalisation

Political marginalisation and weak governance are widely recognised as catalysts for radicalisation (Lynch & VonDoepp, 2019:102). In Kenya's coastal region, these longstanding grievances, previously outlined in the contextual discussion, continue to shape youths' perceptions of exclusion and injustices (Mazrui, 1994:17; Odhiambo, 2019:41). Rather than repeating these historical dynamics, the literature emphasises how such grievances are mobilized within radicalization processes with extremist actors framing recruitment as resistance to perceived injustice (Silva & Deflem, 2020:45–46).

State responses can exacerbate tensions. Research indicates that heavy-handed policing, profiling, and arbitrary arrests deepen mistrust and inadvertently reinforce extremist narratives (Ekici et al., 2016:11; Mkutu & Opondo, 2019:112). Theological analyses demonstrate that political grievances may become intertwined with religious narratives, which can legitimize radical action (Bwire, 2024:25–44; Mawerenga, 2024:19).

While the literature recognizes political exclusion, limited research examines how *ecumenical collaboration* mediates state–community tensions or fosters civic agency among youth.

2.6 Socio-Economic Drivers of Youth Radicalisation

Economic inequalities, unemployment, and limited upward mobility feature prominently in radicalisation pathways (Silva & Deflem, 2020:120–121). In Mombasa, poverty and informal labour dependence contribute to youth vulnerability, while extremist groups exploit economic desperation through financial incentives (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21; Ekici et al., 2016:49).

Drug abuse and gang networks further embed youth in environments conducive to extremist messaging (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:6).

Faith-based socio-economic initiatives, including church-run vocational programmes and microfinance schemes, are generally designed to improve livelihoods, enhance skills development, and reduce youth exposure to crime and exploitation. Such programmes may strengthen resilience by providing alternative pathways for economic participation and social inclusion.

However, while existing studies acknowledge the role of faith-based organisations in community development and poverty alleviation, there remains limited literature explicitly examining how these initiatives function within counter-radicalisation frameworks. This suggests a gap in understanding the extent to which such programmes may influence youth vulnerability to extremist recruitment.

2.7 Religious and Ideological Drivers of Youth Radicalisation

Extremist movements frequently employ distorted religious narratives to legitimize violence (Neumann, 2013:8). Limited theological literacy in some contexts allows such narratives to flourish (Abu-Nimer, 2018:54). In coastal Kenya, informal religious networks and charismatic preachers have contributed to the spread of radical interpretations (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21).

Such interpretations may include selective readings of religious texts that frame violence as a justified response to perceived injustice, the construction of rigid in-group versus out-group identities, and the portrayal of participation in extremist causes as a form of religious obligation or moral duty. In the Kenyan coastal context, these narratives have been associated primarily with jihadist-oriented networks, often disseminated through informal religious gatherings, unregulated study circles, and digital platforms rather than established mainstream institutions.

Contextual theological responses, such as those advocated by Mawerenga (2024) and Ndereba & Mugambi (2024), offer alternative interpretations that emphasize peace, justice, and civic responsibility.

In response, both Muslim and Christian scholars and religious leaders have sought to counter such distortions through orthodox and contextually grounded teachings that emphasize the sanctity of life, social harmony, and responsible citizenship. These responses are often articulated through sermons, theological education, interfaith dialogue, and community outreach initiatives that promote critical religious literacy and prevent ideological manipulation. Nevertheless, few studies analyse how these counter-narratives can be strengthened *through ecumenical partnership*.

2.8 Social and Psychological Drivers of Youth Radicalisation

Identity crises, peer influence, and social isolation significantly contribute to youth radicalisation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979:34; Silva & Deflem, 2020:103). Extremist groups effectively exploit these vulnerabilities by creating emotionally compelling communities. Digital platforms further amplify recruitment through targeted messaging and online peer networks (UNESCO, 2017:38).

Existing scholarship increasingly acknowledges the role of psychosocial factors in radicalisation processes. For instance, Silva and Deflem (2020:103) highlight how emotional vulnerability, identity struggles, and social disconnection can shape pathways into extremism, while UNESCO (2017:38) emphasises the influence of online peer networks and psychological engagement strategies in recruitment. Similarly, Anderson and McKnight (2015:6) note the role of social environments, including peer influence and marginalisation, in reinforcing susceptibility to extremist messaging. Although the literature acknowledges psychosocial risks, it pays little attention to ecumenical contributions, such as pastoral counselling, youth fellowships, and safe community spaces, which are critical for restoring psychological stability.

This suggests a gap in the literature regarding how faith-based psychosocial interventions, particularly those grounded in ecumenical collaboration, may contribute to addressing emotional vulnerability, social isolation, and identity reconstruction among at-risk youth.

2.9 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive understanding of youth radicalisation and the potential role of ecumenical leadership necessitates an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. This section utilizes three complementary theoretical strands: Social Identity Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Contextual Theology. Together, these frameworks offer a conceptual lens for analyzing how ecumenical actors may address the political, socio-economic, ideological, and psychological drivers of radicalisation in Mombasa County.

2.10 Social Identity Theory: Understanding Vulnerability to Radicalisation

Social Identity Theory, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979:34), posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-worth from their social group affiliations. Youths experiencing exclusion, marginalisation, or lack of recognition may seek out groups that provide belonging, affirmation, and meaning. This dynamic is particularly significant in Mombasa, where young people often navigate multiple, and sometimes competing, identities such as religious, cultural,

ethnic, and national (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3). Radicalisation literature shows that extremist groups often exploit identity crises by providing clear in-group/out-group distinctions, emotional cohesion, and narratives of empowerment (Silva & Deflem, 2020:103; UNESCO, 2017:38). Such narratives are often communicated through sermons, online content, pamphlets, and informal study materials that selectively interpret religious texts to emphasise themes of injustice, moral struggle, and collective identity. These forms of radical literature may frame participation in extremist causes as a duty tied to defending faith, restoring dignity, or resisting perceived oppression. In doing so, they simplify complex socio-political realities into emotionally compelling narratives that resonate with youths experiencing marginalisation or identity confusion. Botha and Abdile (2014:21) found that Al-Shabaab recruits commonly frame their movement as a community of brotherhood and divine purpose, appealing to youths struggling with a sense of belonging.

The appeal of such narratives lies in their ability to provide clear identity markers, a sense of purpose, and perceived moral legitimacy, particularly for individuals who feel excluded from mainstream social, economic, or political structures. By offering a sense of belonging, recognition, and meaning, these narratives may become especially attractive to youth navigating fragmented identities.

In contrast, faith-based and ecumenical groups may seek to counter these influences by promoting alternative narratives grounded in peace, justice, and inclusive community belonging. These counter-narratives are often conveyed through preaching, theological education, youth engagement programmes, and community dialogue, aiming to reframe identity in ways that resist exclusionary and violent interpretations.

Conceptual Implication

Ecumenical leadership can be conceptualized as intervening by reshaping social identities through pastoral care, mentorship, inclusive youth fellowships, and theological narratives that affirm the worth and belonging of youth.

4.2 Transformational Leadership Theory: Inspiring Moral and Behavioural Change

Transformational Leadership Theory posits that effective leaders inspire followers by articulating a compelling vision, modelling integrity, challenging prevailing assumptions, and fostering personal growth (Bass & Riggio, 2006:15). Transformational leaders, particularly within religious

and community contexts such as Mombasa, may motivate behavioral change by engaging followers' values, beliefs, and aspirations rather than through coercion.

In the context of Mombasa County, leadership within religious and community settings may take diverse forms, including traditional clerical authority, community-based leadership, and, in some cases, informal or charismatic influences that operate outside established institutional frameworks. While many religious leaders play constructive roles in promoting peace and social cohesion, gaps may exist when leadership is fragmented, insufficiently equipped to address contemporary challenges, or unable to effectively engage youth facing socio-economic and identity-related pressures. These conditions may create space for alternative influences, including those associated with radical narratives, thereby highlighting the urgency for leadership approaches that are not only authoritative but also transformative, contextually responsive, and youth-engaged.

This framework is particularly relevant for ecumenical leadership, as Christian leaders frequently possess moral authority and community trust that secular institutions may lack (Katongole, 2011:49). Transformational leadership comprises four core components:

1. **Idealized influence** – leaders' model ethical behaviour and moral courage.
2. **Inspirational motivation** – leaders articulate hopeful, purpose-driven visions.
3. **Intellectual stimulation** – leaders encourage critical thinking and theological reflection.
4. **Individualized consideration** – leaders' mentor and support individuals personally.

These components correspond with pastoral and theological practices established within ecclesial settings. When applied to counter-radicalisation, transformational leadership enables ecumenical actors to:

- Provide ethical guidance that challenges extremist ideologies.
- Inspire youth to engage peacefully and take on social responsibility.
- Encourage theological literacy that counters manipulative rhetoric.
- Offer personalized mentorship, helping youths navigate identity crises.

Research demonstrates that faith leaders who embody these qualities can significantly influence youth attitudes, especially in communities where religious authority remains strong (Patel, 2012:66; Abu-Nimer, 2018:54).

Conceptual implication:

Ecumenical leadership informed by transformational principles should be strengthened and strategically applied to reshape youth worldviews and enhance resilience to violent ideologies.

4.3 Contextual Theology: A Framework for Faith-Based Responses

Contextual Theology asserts that theological understanding must emerge from and respond to the lived experiences of a particular community (Bevans, 2013:12). It recognizes that theology is not abstract but is embedded within culture, history, and socio-political realities. This renders contextual theology particularly relevant for Mombasa, where religious identity is closely linked to historical grievances, economic exclusion, and social tensions (Mazrui, 1994:17; Mawerenga, 2024:19). Therefore, contextual theology should be intentionally strengthened and strategically applied as a framework for faith-based responses to youth radicalisation and extremism. Contextual Theology operates through several key principles:

- Experience as a source of theology
- Dialogue between scripture and context
- Liberation from injustice and oppression
- Community participation in theological reflection

When applied to radicalisation, contextual theology is essential in guiding ecumenical leaders to reinterpret scripture in ways that challenge extremist misuse, address community grievances, and promote peace and justice (Ndereba & Mugambi, 2024:3–7). It constitutes a critical framework for integrating spiritual, psychological, and socio-economic dimensions of youth vulnerability.

Abu-Nimer (2018:54) emphasises that religious counter-narratives are most effective when grounded in the lived realities of those targeted by extremists. Similarly, Katongole (2011:49) argues that faith-based peacebuilding must speak to the deep wounds and hopes of African communities.

Conceptual implication:

Contextual theology equips ecumenical leaders to develop theologically grounded counter-narratives that directly address the specific conditions influencing youth radicalisation in coastal Kenya.

4.4 Integrating the Three Theories: A Conceptual Model of Ecumenical Engagement

The three theoretical frameworks, Social Identity Theory, Transformational Leadership, and Contextual Theology, are inherently complementary and collectively constitute a robust and integrated conceptual model for explaining how ecumenical leadership can effectively counter youth radicalisation.

1. Identity (Social Identity Theory)

Youth radicalisation is fundamentally tied to identity formation. Extremist groups offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and recognition.

Ecumenical leadership addresses this by providing inclusive spiritual communities, mentorship, and positive identity narratives.

2. Leadership Influence (Transformational Leadership)

Radicalisation involves ideological influence and charismatic leadership.

Ecumenical leaders can exercise moral authority, articulate hopeful visions, and inspire behavioural change.

3. Meaning and Theology (Contextual Theology)

Radicalisation exploits distorted religious meanings, including selective use of scripture and narratives that legitimise violence and promise spiritual reward. These interpretations gain influence by resonating with youth experiences of marginalisation and identity crisis. Ecumenical leadership should counter this by promoting contextual and life-affirming theological interpretations that dismantle extremist rhetoric. and foster critical theological awareness.

Combined conceptual effect:

Ecumenical leadership fosters cooperation through dialogue, joint initiatives, and shared theological engagement among diverse faith communities. Ecumenical leadership provides youth with:

- identity (belonging) through inclusive and affirming faith communities
- meaning (theology) through contextual and life-giving interpretations of scripture
- direction (leadership) through mentorship, moral guidance, and transformative vision

In contrast, extremist groups exploit identity crises, theological confusion, and emotional vulnerabilities.

4.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed for this article connects:

1. Drivers of radicalisation

- Political marginalisation
- Socio-economic deprivation
- Religious manipulation
- Identity crises
- Social fragmentation
- Digital influence

2. Mechanisms of ecumenical intervention

- Theological counter-narratives
- Pastoral care and mentorship
- Youth engagement programs
- Socio-economic empowerment
- Interdenominational collaboration
- Peace education and civic formation

3. Outcomes

- Strengthened youth resilience
- Reduced vulnerability to extremist recruitment
- Enhanced community cohesion
- Improved theological literacy
- Alternative identity constructions

This conceptual model demonstrates that ecumenical leadership, when guided by the three theoretical frameworks, constitutes a multidimensional intervention that directly addresses both the structural and symbolic dimensions of youth radicalisation.

Summary

This theoretical and conceptual framework establishes a robust foundation for analyzing the potential of ecumenical leadership as a transformative response to youth radicalisation in Mombasa County. By integrating social identity, leadership dynamics, and contextual theology, the model reflects the complexity of radicalisation and highlights the multifaceted role that faith leaders can play in fostering resilience.

4. Findings

Ecumenical Leadership as a Response to Youth Radicalisation: A Conceptual Analysis

Ecumenical leadership, defined as collaborative Christian engagement across denominational boundaries, constitutes a holistic and multidimensional response to the complex drivers of youth radicalisation in Mombasa County. This section applies Social Identity Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Contextual Theology to analyse how ecumenical actors strategically implement theological, social, psychological, and economic interventions that counter extremist narratives and strengthen youth resilience. While security-based approaches remain predominant in Kenya's counter-extremism efforts, ecumenical leadership advances contextually grounded strategies rooted in moral authority, community trust, and spiritual formation.

5.1 Reshaping Youth Identity and Belonging

Youth radicalisation in Mombasa is closely linked to identity crises, social exclusion, and the fundamental need for belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979:34; Silva & Deflem, 2020:103). Extremist groups exploit these vulnerabilities by constructing compelling in-group identities that promise purpose, recognition, and emotional security (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21). Ecumenical leadership addresses these dynamics by cultivating inclusive spiritual communities where young people experience acceptance, recognition, and dignity.

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Pastoral presence and mentorship

Ecumenical leaders, through their moral authority, provide relational support that addresses youth isolation and alienation. Pastoral counselling, youth fellowships, and structured mentorship programmes foster a sense of belonging and reduce the appeal of extremist networks.

2. Community-based identity reconstruction

Ecumenical youth movements, joint faith-based initiatives, and structured interdenominational engagements play a critical role in reconstructing youth identities by exposing young people to alternative narratives grounded in dignity, forgiveness, and peace (Katongole, 2011:49).

3. Countering in-group/out-group radicalisation logic

Ecumenical leaders foster unity within diversity and actively challenge the rigid identity boundaries promoted by extremist ideologies, including narratives associated with groups such as Al-Shabaab that frame society in binary “us versus them” terms. These narratives, often spread through informal teachings, online platforms, and peer networks, gain traction by exploiting youth marginalisation and social exclusion. Ecumenical leadership disrupts this logic by promoting inclusive theological interpretations, interfaith engagement, and shared community belonging.

Conceptual Insight:

Ecumenical leadership constitutes a transformative force in identity reconstruction, providing youth with stable, inclusive, and theologically grounded alternatives to extremist identity frameworks.

5.2 Providing Theologically Grounded Counter-Narratives

Extremist groups often manipulate religious teachings to legitimize violence and frame radicalisation as a sacred duty (Neumann, 2013:8). In Mombasa, distorted interpretations include the selective use of sacred texts to legitimize violence, the misrepresentation of concepts such as jihad and martyrdom, and the framing of conflict as a divine mandate. Ecumenical leadership responds by promoting contextually grounded hermeneutics, interfaith dialogue, and theological education that emphasises peace, justice, and the sanctity of life (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3). Ecumenical leadership is positioned to challenge such misinterpretations by offering contextual theological reflections grounded in principles of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Contextual re-reading of scripture

By applying Contextual Theology, ecumenical leaders reinterpret biblical and theological teachings to address local grievances and counter extremist misuse. (Mawerenga, 2024:19; Ndereba & Mugambi, 2024:3–7).

2. Interdenominational theological dialogues

Ecumenical forums function through structured interdenominational dialogues, joint theological reflections, and collaborative training of clergy, enabling the development of unified counter-narratives that challenge doctrinal manipulation and reduce youth susceptibility to radicalisation.

3. Faith-based civic education

Instruction on civic duty, justice, human dignity, and peace equips youth with theological foundations that make violent extremism morally and spiritually unacceptable.

Conceptual insight:

Through theological literacy and contextual interpretation, ecumenical leadership challenges the ideological foundations of violent extremism and advances alternative spiritual visions rooted in justice and peace.

5.3 Social and Pastoral Support Systems for At-Risk Youth

Youth in Mombasa frequently encounter structural vulnerabilities, including unemployment, substance abuse, family breakdown, and negative peer influence (Botha, 2014:22; Anderson & McKnight, 2015:6). Ecumenical leadership addresses these social drivers through pastoral care and structured community support systems.

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Ecumenical youth groups and safe spaces

These initiatives establish emotionally safe environments that enable young people to express themselves, build relationships, and access supportive adult mentorship.

2. Trauma-informed pastoral care

Many at-risk youth experience trauma, violence, or loss. Clergy trained in trauma-informed approaches support emotional healing, a critical factor in fostering resilience.

3. Family strengthening programs

Ecumenical initiatives provide marriage counselling, parenting workshops, and family mediation services to stabilize youth environments.

Conceptual insight:

Social support grounded in pastoral care reduces psychosocial vulnerabilities that extremist groups frequently exploit.

5.4 Socio-Economic Empowerment as a Counter-Radicalisation Strategy

Economic deprivation and unemployment are persistent drivers of youth radicalisation in Mombasa (Silva & Deflem, 2020:120–121; Ekici et al., 2016:49). Extremist groups exploit these conditions by offering financial incentives or economic opportunities. Ecumenical leadership counters these influences by providing alternative livelihood pathways.

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Vocational training and skills programs

Radicalisation in Mombasa affects a diverse range of youth, including unemployed individuals, students, and even economically stable young people, indicating that vulnerability extends beyond economic deprivation alone. Churches operate training centres in carpentry, tailoring, information and communication technology, and business skills. These programs enhance youth employability and mitigate economic desperation.

2. Microfinance initiatives and savings groups

Faith-based organisations promote youth entrepreneurship by providing microloans, facilitating savings circles, and offering business mentoring.

3. Linkages to job networks and apprenticeships

Ecumenical collaborations link youth to job markets and local business owners across denominations.

Conceptual insight:

The integration of socio-economic empowerment with spiritual mentorship, guided by ecumenical leadership, significantly enhances youth resilience.

5.5 Interdenominational Collaboration and Community Cohesion

Ecumenical leadership fosters unity within Christian communities, thereby enhancing social cohesion and collective action. In contexts of radicalisation, this unity serves as a powerful counterforce to fragmentation and extremist mobilization (Silke, 2008:106).

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Joint peacebuilding initiatives

Churches collaborating across denominations amplify their influence within communities.

2. Shared youth programs

These initiatives strengthen cross-community relationships and disrupt the isolation that enables extremist recruitment.

3. Collaborative advocacy

Unified ecumenical advocacy possesses greater legitimacy in promoting just policies, community safety, and equitable resource allocation.

Conceptual insight:

This study contends that collective ecumenical action strengthens community resilience by addressing social fragmentation, a condition closely linked to radicalisation processes.

5.6 Strengthening State–Community Relations

Persistent mistrust between coastal communities and the Kenyan state has contributed to radicalisation (Mkutu & Opondo, 2019:112). Ecumenical leaders serve as mediators in this context.

Key conceptual mechanisms

1. Dialogue facilitation

Ecumenical actors facilitate dialogue among youth, security agencies, and community elders to foster trust and address grievances.

2. Policy engagement

Churches support youth civic education, promote social accountability, and encourage local participation in security forums.

3. Advocacy for human rights-based responses

Faith leaders challenge excessive security operations and support legitimate efforts to prevent violence.

Conceptual insight:

Mediation by ecumenical leadership between the state and communities reduces grievances that fuel extremist narratives.

5.7 Integrated Conceptual Understanding

When analysed through the combined perspectives of identity formation, leadership influence, and contextual theology, ecumenical leadership emerges as a holistic and multidimensional response to youth radicalisation. It addresses:

- the identity needs of youth,
- the theological distortion exploited by extremists,
- the social and psychological vulnerabilities, and
- the economic desperation,
- As well as community fragmentation.

In conceptual terms:

Ecumenical leadership provides youth with a sense of belonging, meaning, direction, and opportunity, elements that extremist groups frequently co-opt.

6.0 Discussion

This article has examined the potential of ecumenical leadership as a multidimensional response to youth radicalisation in Mombasa County. Drawing from the contextual realities, literature review, and the integrated theoretical framework, this discussion synthesises how ecumenical engagement intersects with the political, socio-economic, religious, and psychosocial drivers of radicalisation identified earlier. While Kenya's counter-radicalisation strategy remains largely

security-driven, studies show that such approaches are insufficiently addressing community-level drivers of radicalisation, pointing to the need for complementary faith-based and ecumenical leadership interventions (Botha, 2014: 33; Mkutu & Opondo, 2019: 110; Katongole, 2011: 46).

6.1 Addressing Identity Crises Through Belonging and Community

Identity-related vulnerabilities remain central to youth radicalisation, particularly in environments marked by exclusion and social fragmentation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979:34; Silva & Deflem, 2020:103). In Mombasa, young people frequently face limited opportunities for belonging and recognition, which extremist groups exploit through narratives of empowerment and community (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21). In response to such identity deficits, ecumenical leadership offers an alternative identity framework grounded in spiritual belonging, pastoral care, and communal support, emphasizing inclusion and shared moral purpose (Appleby, 2000: 211–214; Katongole, 2011: 44–49). Youth fellowships, ecumenical worship spaces, and mentorship programs help young people form stable identities and relational networks that counteract extremist appeals. This aligns with research showing that inclusionary communities reduce susceptibility to radicalisation (UNESCO, 2017:38).

Synthesis: Ecumenical leadership strengthens youth identity by providing recognition, a sense of belonging, and positive group membership.

6.2 Countering Ideological Manipulation Through Contextual Theology

Extremist actors manipulate religious teachings to legitimise violence (Neumann, 2013:8). In coastal Kenya, theological distortions flourish where religious literacy is limited or politicised (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21; Abu-Nimer, 2018:54). Contextual Theology enables ecumenical leaders to reinterpret scripture in ways that address local grievances and dismantle extremist narratives (Mawerenga, 2024:19).

Through unified teaching, dialogues, and peace-focused preaching, ecumenical leaders can articulate credible counter-narratives that resonate with youth experiences. The ecumenical nature of such responses enhances legitimacy and reduces confusion across denominational lines (Katongole, 2011:49).

Synthesis: Ecumenical leadership provides theologically grounded counter-narratives that respond to both ideological manipulation and contextual grievances.

6.3 Strengthening Psychosocial Resilience Through Pastoral Care

Psychosocial factors such as trauma, social isolation, loss, and peer pressure greatly affect youth radicalisation pathways (Anderson & McKnight, 2015:3). Ecumenical leadership plays a vital role in addressing these vulnerabilities through pastoral counselling, mentorship, and trauma-sensitive spiritual care.

Ecumenical youth groups also function as safe social spaces, helping reduce loneliness and rebuild trust in community relationships. These forms of emotional and spiritual support limit the psychological openings exploited by extremist networks (Ekici et al., 2016:41).

Synthesis: Pastoral and psychosocial interventions strengthen emotional resilience, reducing the appeal of extremist narratives framed around revenge, justice, or purpose.

6.4 Enhancing Economic Stability and Hope Through Faith-Based Empowerment

Unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunity heavily influence youth radicalisation (Silva & Deflem, 2020:120–121). Ecumenical organisations often implement vocational training, microfinance programs, and youth income-generating initiatives that reduce economic vulnerability (Botha & Abdile, 2014:21).

By integrating spiritual formation with economic empowerment, ecumenical actors offer alternatives to the financial incentives used by extremist recruiters (Ekici et al., 2016:49). Their initiatives benefit from community trust and a non-political mandate, making them particularly effective in contexts of state mistrust.

Synthesis: Faith-based empowerment disrupts economic drivers of radicalisation by restoring hope and opportunity.

6.5 Building Social Cohesion Through Interdenominational Collaboration

Social fragmentation is a key contributor to radicalisation (Silke, 2008:106). In Mombasa, tensions between communities and the state create openings for extremist influence (Mkutu & Opondo, 2019:112). Ecumenical collaboration strengthens social cohesion by modelling unity within diversity, coordinating joint programs, and advocating for justice.

Ecumenical leaders can mediate between communities and security agencies, helping to rebuild trust and reduce grievances that extremists exploit.

Synthesis: Interdenominational collaboration improves community cohesion and reduces the structural fragmentation exploited by extremist networks.

6.6 Offering Moral and Civic Alternatives to Extremist Narratives

Many youths are drawn to extremism, seeking purpose, justice, or agency (Patel, 2012:66). Ecumenical leadership provides moral teachings grounded in peace, dignity, and civic responsibility. Transformational leadership enables ecumenical actors to inspire ethical imagination and guide youth toward nonviolent engagement.

Ecumenical groups also promote civic awareness by helping youth understand peaceful advocacy, governance, and rights, thereby countering extremist claims that violence is the only pathway to change.

Synthesis: Ecumenical leadership offers moral and civic frameworks that redirect youth energy toward constructive social engagement.

6.7 Integrated Discussion: The Transformative Potential of Ecumenical Leadership

Viewed holistically, ecumenical leadership emerges as a comprehensive and contextually grounded response to youth radicalisation. It addresses:

- identity reconstruction
- ideological deconstruction
- psychosocial support
- economic empowerment
- community cohesion
- civic and moral formation

These interventions collectively strengthen youth resilience and reduce susceptibility to extremist recruitment.

Final synthesis: Ecumenical leadership provides youth with belonging, meaning, direction, and opportunity, the very elements extremist groups attempt to counterfeit.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This article presents a conceptual analysis of the role of ecumenical leadership in countering youth radicalisation and religious extremism in Mombasa County, Kenya. Drawing on the contextual realities of the coastal region, a comprehensive literature review, and an integrated theoretical framework that combines Social Identity Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Contextual Theology, the analysis demonstrates that ecumenical leadership is well positioned to address the multidimensional drivers of radicalisation in the region. Although security-based approaches have received considerable attention in Kenyan policy and academic discourse, ecumenical leadership represents an essential yet underexplored avenue for promoting youth resilience and offering sustainable alternatives to extremist pathways.

Mombasa County constitutes a complex environment where historical marginalisation, socio-economic deprivation, religious manipulation, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and localised recruitment networks converge to increase youth susceptibility to radicalisation. The literature indicates that these drivers are mutually reinforcing rather than isolated. Political exclusion generates grievances, economic hardship exacerbates frustration, identity fragmentation undermines social cohesion, and theological distortions exploit these vulnerabilities to justify violence. Within this context, ecumenical leadership emerges as a multidimensional force capable of intervening across multiple aspects of youth experience, rather than solely as a religious actor. The conceptual analysis underscores the capacity of ecumenical leadership to reshape youth identity by fostering a sense of belonging, recognition, and positive community engagement. Social Identity Theory illustrates how ecumenical communities offer alternative identity structures that counter the emotional and symbolic appeal of extremist groups. Transformational Leadership Theory demonstrates that ecumenical leaders can inspire ethical imagination, model nonviolent responses, and guide youth toward purposeful civic participation. Contextual Theology further reveals that faith leaders can counter ideological distortions by grounding theological responses in the lived realities, grievances, and aspirations of Mombasa's youth.

In addition to identity and theology, ecumenical leadership plays a vital role in delivering psychosocial and socio-economic support. Pastoral care, mentorship, trauma-sensitive interventions, and safe youth fellowships address emotional wounds and relational deficits that recruiters exploit. Socio-economic initiatives such as vocational training, microfinance programs, and youth entrepreneurship provide practical alternatives to the financial incentives offered by

extremist groups. Interdenominational collaboration strengthens social cohesion, enhances collective influence, and builds trust between communities and state institutions, thereby reducing the fragmentation that facilitates extremist mobilisation.

Collectively, these contributions indicate that ecumenical leadership, when contextualised within the dynamics of coastal Kenya, provides a comprehensive model for addressing radicalisation. This approach integrates spiritual formation, social empowerment, moral guidance, community cohesion, and economic opportunity, dimensions frequently overlooked in securitized counter-extremism frameworks. The multidimensional nature of ecumenical engagement supports the argument that counter-radicalisation efforts should extend beyond policing and surveillance to include relational, theological, and community-centred strategies.

This article also identifies several gaps in the existing literature. Research on violent extremism in Kenya has often understated the role of ecumenical actors, focusing primarily on Muslim institutions, individual Christian denominations, or interfaith initiatives. can generate unified responses, shape identity formation, provide pastoral support, or offer contextual theological counter-narratives. Limited attention has been paid to how ecumenical collaborations, primarily among Christian denominations but often engaging Muslim leaders within broader interfaith frameworks, generate unified responses, shape identity formation, provide pastoral support, and offer contextual theological counter-narratives. While various youth programmes exist within denominational and interfaith settings, there remains a limited integrated analysis of how faith-based socio-economic interventions contribute to youth resilience against radicalisation. By addressing these gaps, this article establishes a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies that assess the lived impact of ecumenical interventions in coastal Kenya and similar contexts.

In summary, ecumenical leadership has significant potential to be a transformative force in preventing youth radicalisation and promoting community resilience in Mombasa County. Situated at the intersection of theology, social engagement, and community leadership, ecumenical actors are positioned to address both structural injustices and the symbolic narratives that sustain extremist movements. For policymakers, religious leaders, and peace practitioners, these findings highlight the importance of integrating ecumenical perspectives into national and county-level counter-extremism strategies. Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness, challenges, and scalability of ecumenical interventions, particularly in contexts characterized by historical grievances, socio-economic inequalities, and religious pluralism. Strengthening

ecumenical leadership is therefore not only a theological or pastoral imperative but also a critical sociopolitical strategy for fostering peace, justice, and hope among the youth of Kenya's coastal region.

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