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# Preventing Violent Extremism Through Media and Communications

Matt Freear and Andrew Glazzard



Royal United Services Institute  
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RUSI Whitehall Report, December 2021



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# Executive Summary

**C**OMMUNICATIONS AND THE tools of the media age have been at the centre of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) for many years. Often emerging in reaction to terrorist narratives, the emphasis has been on how to most impactfully distribute narratives that counter or present an alternative vision. The debate amongst practitioners has often treated young people as ‘target audiences’, identifying and using ‘credible messengers’, and designing creative digital communication tools to engage them most effectively. Despite the emergence of numerous ‘how-to’ guides and policy briefs, substantial criticisms around the theory, impact and ethics of such approaches remain largely unaddressed.

This Whitehall Report compares two P/CVE programmes in Kenya and Lebanon that independently came to the same conclusion: to counter the multiplicity of factors drawing young people into violent extremism, communications and media tools should be recast to serve the needs of young people, rather than treat them as an audience. This means understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of those young people involved in the programmes. The report describes the programmes’ communications outputs: digital media platforms, news reporting and campaigns led by young people and journalists in areas of Kenya and Lebanon particularly affected by violent extremism.

To provide practicable insights to those designing and implementing P/CVE programmes, the report uses a realist methodology that pays attention to the particulars of what works, for whom and where, by studying the context, mechanisms of change and outcomes of the two programmes.

The report finds that mapping the media ecology of the two target locations informed programme activities: examining how young people are represented and the dominant narratives in the media helped to shape, target and prioritise participation. It also finds that media content was secondary to the process which led to the active, voluntary participation of young people.

The report notes the application of hitherto under-used aspects of communication theory and practice to P/CVE, describing innovative communication interventions drawn from the fields of psychosocial therapy, media literacy and conflict studies that recognise the prominence of social relations, alongside message delivery, in creating meaning as an alternative to ‘strategic’ communications interventions that seek to persuade. Critically, these interventions enabled young people to explore their own meaning and purpose, and to communicate actively and authentically, so as to build capacity and potentially community and individual resilience. In both cases, activities integrated online and in-person communication activities.



# Introduction

**P**REVENTING AND COUNTERING violent extremism (P/CVE) is a field of practice at the intersection of security and development. Its aims – to reduce recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremist or terrorist groups – are primarily about security, consistent with those of the complementary field of counterterrorism (CT). However, P/CVE methods are often more consistent with those of development assistance. P/CVE programmes depend on non-kinetic and non-coercive measures, and often seek to prevent recruitment and radicalisation by building the capacity of individuals and communities to resist violent extremist influences. P/CVE is therefore often portrayed as ‘soft’ (in the sense of ‘soft power’), while CT is ‘hard’ in the sense that it uses the instruments of hard power (military force, the law, the criminal justice system and intelligence capabilities).

Although communications can and do support CT operations, they have also been a favoured tool in P/CVE since the field’s emergence in the years after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>1</sup> P/CVE communications interventions usually attempt to confront or to persuade, to delegitimise the content and appeal of violent extremist propaganda (when it is often called ‘counternarrative’ or ‘counter-speech’). Or they may present an alternative more in keeping with the priorities and values of the communicator (‘alternative narrative’ or ‘alternative speech’), even when they are intended to provide or promote meaningful alternatives to violent change.<sup>2</sup> These communications campaigns are usually developed by communication professionals working for and implementing the agenda of local, national or multilateral authorities. Sometimes the campaigns form part of a broader effort to counter terrorist or violent extremist threats, in which case they may be labelled as ‘P/CVE strategic communications’ (‘stratcomms’). As this report looks at the application of practices from different fields, it is worth noting that the term has particular military associations,<sup>3</sup> and a history of being used in reaction to military crises.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while definitions vary, ‘in many situations the only definitional difference is going to be

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1. Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, ‘Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 39, No. 5, 2016), pp. 381–404.
  2. Alejandro Beutel et al., ‘Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives’, *Journal of Terrorism Research* (Vol. 7, No. 3, 2016), pp. 35–49.
  3. Andrew Glazzard and Alastair Reed, ‘Beyond Prevention: The Role of Strategic Communications Across the Four Pillars of Counterterrorism Strategy’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 1, 2020), pp. 74–88.
  4. Philip Seib, *Toward a New Public Diplomacy: Redirecting U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 23.

the negative connotation associated with propaganda',<sup>5</sup> which has led some from the field of media development, for example, to look at P/CVE with scepticism.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, strategic communications- and narrative-based approaches continue to enjoy general support within the field of P/CVE, with 'how-to' and 'best-practice' guides emerging from governments, research programmes, NGOs, UN agencies and bodies such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF, a multilateral forum created to supplement the efforts of the UN) and Hedayah, the international centre of excellence for P/CVE.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, their utility and effectiveness have also been called into question. Criticisms include the theoretical and empirical.<sup>8</sup> The use of counternarrative interventions, for instance, has been shown to be based on simplistic and outdated models of human communication, notably the 'magic bullet' (also known as 'transmission belt' or 'hypodermic needle') theory of persuasion.<sup>9</sup> Empirically, there is little evidence of such interventions succeeding in preventing radicalisation to violent extremist groups and causes, and there are some concerns that poorly planned or implemented actions can actually make things worse.<sup>10</sup> However, as with other aspects of P/CVE, the evidence is currently too limited to enable firm conclusions to be drawn. There is an additional ethical or political criticism of P/CVE in general, which potentially applies to communication interventions. It suggests that how the problem of violent extremism is framed and by whom, which in turn dictates the response, reproduces and reinforces existing power hierarchies and securitises certain communities.<sup>11</sup>

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5. Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2011).
  6. Courtney C Radsch, 'Media Development and Countering Violent Extremism: An Uneasy Relationship, a Need for Dialogue', Center for International Media Assistance, October 2016.
  7. See, for example, Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), 'Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group Strategic Communications Initiative: Zurich-London Recommendations on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online', 2017, <<https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2017/GCTF%20-%20Zurich-London%20Recommendations%20ENG.pdf?ver=2017-09-15-210859-467>>, accessed 22 November 2021.
  8. See, for example, Kate Ferguson, 'Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies', Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, March 2016.
  9. 'Magic bullet theory', 'hypodermic needle theory' and 'transmission belt theory' are pejorative labels applied to a communication model that assumes the mass media has a uniform, immediate, direct, deliberate and powerful effect on populations. For a summary of the model and its limitations, see, for example, Frank Esser, 'Stimulus-Response Model', in Wolfgang Donsbach (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication* (London: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 4836–40.
  10. See, for example, Josephine B Schmitt et al., 'Counter-Messages as Prevention or Promotion of Extremism?! The Potential Role of YouTube: Recommendation Algorithms', *Journal of Communication* (Vol. 68, No. 4, 2018), pp. 780–808.
  11. Anne Aly, Anne-Marie Balbi and Carmen Jacques, 'Rethinking Countering Violent Extremism: Implementing the Role of Civil Society', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (Vol. 10, No. 1, 2015), pp. 3–13.

This report examines the emerging lessons from two iterations of an alternative approach to P/CVE communications – one that aims at participation, not persuasion. Counter/alternative narrative and strategic communications methods aim, in effect, to counter or out-persuade the extremists, whereas participative approaches seek to develop the systems and resources of the communities exposed to violent extremist influences to build their resilience.

Strengthening resilience, as an objective of P/CVE, has been criticised in the context of PVE programming in Europe for laying the burden of problem-solving on local communities in the name of ‘self-government’ and by attempting to de-politicise social grievances and political ideology with positive thinking.<sup>12</sup> While this debate about the authenticity and effectiveness of ‘active citizenship’ has taken place in P/CVE programming, it has rarely extended into the realm of media and communications. So, while strategic communications and counter/alternative narrative place values on how individuals respond to and engage with communications initiated by others, the notion of participative communication considers the results of processes of self-directed expression and bottom-up representation. Such an approach draws on communication theories that challenged and arguably superseded mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century models that conceived communication as a linear transmission from a sender to a receiver. Later theorists emphasised instead the social, expressive and performative aspects of communication, which not only impart information but also build and maintain social relationships and employ participation as a means to problem solving in communities.<sup>13</sup> Significantly for P/CVE, the evolution in theory reflects how communication technology has developed from systems of mass broadcast media to individualised, networked communications and the attendant political and social change.

This report asks whether participative communication methods can be employed as an alternative to strategic persuasion to increase resilience to violent extremism. It uses a comparative analysis of two interventions which had similar theories of change but were implemented in contrasting political and social contexts (Kenya and Lebanon). The report aims to help programme designers and policymakers consider options and methods for media and communications components of P/CVE interventions. In the debate about how development assistance can and should engage with security objectives, it draws on several bodies of practice, including development

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12. Niklas Altermark and Hampus Nilsson, ‘Crafting the “Well-Rounded Citizen”: Empowerment and the Government of Counterradicalization’, *International Political Sociology* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2018), pp. 53–69. It is used here to mean the capacity of individuals or communities to resist violent extremist influences, be that in terms of radicalisation, recruitment or mobilisation of support. It includes the ability to access and adapt the resources that enable communities to survive and thrive in circumstances where multiple pressures create an elevated risk of engaging in illegal or harmful activity, including violent extremism. Resilience in this sense is linked to the concept of social capital, which is briefly discussed below. For further explanation of this concept of resilience, see Sheelagh Stewart, ‘Building Resistance to Violent Extremism: A Cultural Relations Approach’, British Council, 2018.

13. For a fuller discussion of communication theories in relation to P/CVE, see Matthew Freear and Andrew Glazzard, ‘Preventive Communication: Emerging Lessons from Participative Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 1, 2020), pp. 90–106.

communication, media literacy and journalism, to demonstrate their applicability and effect. It builds on an earlier paper by the authors which sets out both the theory supporting participative communication interventions in P/CVE and describes the design of the intervention in Kenya.<sup>14</sup>

The Lebanon intervention was part of Strengthening Resilience II (SRII), the second phase of a multi-country, EU-funded programme that was implemented between January 2018 and May 2021 and which grew out of a pilot that started in 2015. It was implemented by the British Council with local partners in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. Its communications component comprised two connected sets of activity and coordinated the production of media (both content and platforms) in support of project objectives.<sup>15</sup> The first element to be established was TripoLives in 2019, an online platform for mobilising community action and sharing stories by and about citizens of Tripoli. This was followed by Shabibik, an initiative that carried out communication capacity-building activities in the first half of 2021 and was designed to use communication to strengthen participation throughout the programme. The Kenya intervention was part of STRIVE (Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism) II which ran from October 2016 to December 2020 and was a successor programme to the EU's first external P/CVE action, STRIVE Horn of Africa.<sup>16</sup>

## Methodology

The report uses a qualitative case study method, selecting two P/CVE programmes on the basis that both developed, after a process of trial and error, a similar theory in their communications components that was founded on participation as a means to build resilience, but were implemented in different settings by different organisations. The report's analytical method derives from realist evaluation, a theory used for studying programmatic interventions in the public, social sphere to determine 'what works for whom, where, and under what conditions'.<sup>17</sup> Realist evaluation is particularly suited for analysing social interventions in complex contexts as it requires attention to contexts as well as mechanisms and outcomes. For greater clarity, this framework was refined for this report to include categories of population (usually brigaded under 'context' in realist evaluation) and to divide intended outcome from observed effects.

The report follows these analytical categories in its structure. Chapter I examines the political, social and economic contexts, with particular emphasis on the media ecology, and discusses the populations targeted by the two interventions. Chapter II discusses the intended outcomes, setting out what the communications elements of the two programmes aimed to achieve, and

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14. Freear and Glazzard, 'Preventive Communication'.

15. See Tripoli Lives, <[www.tripolives.com/english/home](http://www.tripolives.com/english/home)>, accessed 22 November 2021.

16. For further information on the EU's STRIVE programmes, see RUSI, 'Strengthening Resilience Against Violent Extremism', <<https://rusi.org/projects/strengthening-resilience-against-violent-extremism>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

17. Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley, 'An Introduction to Scientific Realist Evaluation', in Eleanor Chelimsky and William R Shadish (eds), *Evaluation for the 21st Century: A Handbook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), pp. 405–18.

how they were intended to work, along with the observed effects of each programme. Chapter III highlights points of comparison and contrast, leading to findings and implications for future programming of P/CVE media and communications.



# I. The Contexts: Lebanon and Kenya

**C**HAPTER I INTERROGATES the contexts of Lebanon and Kenya to understand how a complex web of factors that feed violent extremism are reflected in the media environment. They draw on research both programmes used to understand the lives and viewpoints of the young people who participated in activities.

## Lebanon

Lebanon, and the city of Tripoli in particular, faces multiple social pressures, only one of which is violent extremism. However, the country's multiple and reinforcing structural problems potentially contribute to radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist groups. These include economic factors (an economy in freefall with obvious and grave consequences for employment and livelihoods), social factors (sectarianism, the spillover effects from the Syrian civil war, including millions of refugees) and political factors (the legacy of the Syrian occupation which ended in 2005, and a polity dominated by self-enriching, highly factionalised, patrimonial elites that are mired in corruption and paramilitarism).<sup>18</sup> The legacy of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) and certain phases of the Israel–Palestine conflict led to the establishment of numerous refugee camps, currently hosting around 200,000 Palestinians, and to the presence of deeply embedded paramilitary and violent extremist groups, from the Iranian-supported Shia movement Hezbollah (a member of the coalition currently in power in Lebanon and represented in government by two ministers) to a range of Palestinian militant factions, both secular and Sunni Islamist.<sup>19</sup> Lebanon adopted its National Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2018, aiming to regain 'social trust', promote citizenship, achieve 'social justice' and monitor 'social transformations'.<sup>20</sup>

Tripoli (comprising the three municipalities of Tripoli, Mina and Baddawi) is a Sunni-majority city with a population of approximately 500,000, including a Palestinian population of around 30,000 (many of whom live in the Baddawi refugee camp), and around 50,000 Syrian refugees

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18. Sebastian Ille and Dina Mansour-Ille, 'Warlord Politics and Economic Clientelism in Lebanon', *Economics of Peace and Security Journal* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2021), pp. 28–40.

19. Iliana Slavova and Muzna Al Masri, 'More Resilient, Still Vulnerable: Taking Stock of Prevention of Violent Extremism Programming with Youth in Tripoli, Lebanon', *International Alert*, October 2018, <<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/prevention-of-violent-extremism-programming-youth-tripoli-lebanon/>>, accessed 15 November 2021.

20. Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Lebanon, 'National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism', 2018, pp. 16–17; Ille and Mansour-Ille, 'Warlord Politics and Economic Clientelism in Lebanon'.

(as of 2018), as well as substantial Alawite and Christian minorities.<sup>21</sup> The city witnessed sporadic violence between Sunni Muslims and Alawites following the outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Syria, especially between 2011 and 2014, with two of Tripoli's mosques being targeted in car bomb attacks in 2013. The deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces to the city in 2014 substantially reduced levels of inter-community conflict, but the city continues to endure lower levels of street violence.<sup>22</sup> Tripoli has been a particular focus of P/CVE interventions in Lebanon, a phenomenon which has been attributed to a 'donor understanding of violent extremism as related to militant Sunni groups', including groups aligned to Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State which have operated in the city.<sup>23</sup> These and other violent Islamist groups have attempted to recruit from the city's youth, including by offering salaries in a city afflicted by high levels of youth unemployment and where over half the population earn less than \$4 per day, although studies emphasise that recruitment and radicalisation in Tripoli, as elsewhere, are multi-factorial and not explained by a single cause. Other factors identified as contributing to recruitment and radicalisation in the city include appeals to identity, pressures to defend specific communities against perceived enemies and grievances generated by security force harassment.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these manifold issues, most Tripolitans reject the image of violent sectarianism that is sometimes attached to the city.<sup>25</sup> The media environment contributes to Tripoli's politics of identity, as was recognised in ethnographic research undertaken by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London to support SRII.<sup>26</sup> This also found that mainstream Lebanese media (print, television and radio) largely failed to cater to the needs and interests of young people, and were seen by Tripoli's youth as contributing to stereotyping of marginalised communities and reducing levels of trust. It found a media ecosystem historically divided along political and sectarian lines such that national content was characterised as 'either politicised or irrelevant'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, political parties, sectarian power-brokers and militias control or influence newspapers, radio stations and television channels.<sup>28</sup> Mainstream national media outlets in Lebanon were perceived by the communities engaged by the programme as outdated in their journalistic style, lacking in investigative rigour, and closely aligned with elite interests, resulting in misrepresentation, under-representation and stereotyping of young people. By contrast, digital media platforms featured a diverse array of voices advocating for political change, and

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21. Dallin Van Leuven et al., 'Youth and Contentious Politics in Lebanon: Drivers of Marginalization and Radicalization in Tripoli', Search for Common Ground, June 2019, p. 18; Slavova and Al Masri, 'More Resilient, Still Vulnerable', p. 14.

22. Van Leuven et al., 'Youth and Contentious Politics', p. 24; Slavova and Al Masri, 'More Resilient, Still Vulnerable', p. 14.

23. Slavova and Al Masri, 'More Resilient, Still Vulnerable', p. 9.

24. Van Leuven et al., 'Youth and Contentious Politics', pp. 29–40; Slavova and Al Masri, 'More Resilient, Still Vulnerable', p. 33.

25. Van Leuven et al., 'Youth and Contentious Politics', p. 58.

26. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Centre for Global Media and Communication, 'Consolidated Deliverables: SOAS Review of SR Communication Activities', unpublished papers, January 2020.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

28. Paul Cochrane, 'Lebanon's Media Sectarianism', *Arab Media & Society* (May 2007).

the SOAS research found that young people were more attracted to ‘on demand’ media content delivered to mobile handsets. Online platforms were not merely a more attractive alternative to mainstream channels but permitted a fundamentally different kind of engagement that encouraged participation and facilitated new social connections.<sup>29</sup>

Other research has found relatively high levels of resilience in terms of ‘social capital’ and coping skills among Tripoli’s youth.<sup>30</sup> ‘Social capital’ is a term developed by 20<sup>th</sup>-century sociologists to mean the social resources available to individuals and communities, and for the purposes of the programme was considered under three headings: social bonding between individuals that share similar social identities; social bridging between groups with diverse social identities; and social linking between communities and institutions or governing bodies.<sup>31</sup> Social linking is viewed as being in particularly short supply in Lebanon, where state authorities and public institutions are widely viewed as corrupt, politically influenced and incompetent (which has only become worse with the country’s economic collapse and the state’s failure to respond adequately to the 2020 Port of Beirut explosion).<sup>32</sup>

## Kenya

Kenya is a middle-income and rapidly developing democracy which introduced a new political constitution in 2010 in the wake of serious violence around the general election of December 2007. But it is violence linked to Kenya’s northern neighbour, Somalia, that is the focus of the substantial level of P/CVE activity in the country. Somalia’s principal terrorist group, known as Al-Shabaab (‘the youth’ in Arabic) has been active in Kenya since its emergence in 2006 and was responsible for three of the country’s worst terrorist attacks (at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013, Garissa University in April 2015 and DUSIT-D2 in Nairobi in January 2019). Al-Shabaab has directed a large proportion of its considerable propaganda activity at Kenyan audiences, and has recruited members and supporters, especially (but not exclusively) from informal settlements within the two major cities of Nairobi and Mombasa, as well as Kenya’s northeastern and coastal counties. Al-Shabaab has been particularly innovative in its use of social media (such as ‘live-tweeting’ the Westgate Mall attack with taunts targeting the hapless response of the Kenyan authorities, which led to the closure of its Twitter accounts).<sup>33</sup> In its video and audio releases, as well as social media output, Al-Shabaab has leaned heavily on the perceived structural injustices (discrimination, marginalisation and economic inequality) suffered by the country’s Muslim population, as well as security force brutality which Al-

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29. SOAS Centre for Global Media and Communication, ‘Consolidated Deliverables’, p. 32.

30. Slavova and Al Masri, ‘More Resilient, Still Vulnerable’, pp. 16–22.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

32. See, for example, Mona Yacoubian, ‘As Lebanon Melts Down, Can it Avert Total Collapse?’, United States Institute of Peace, 5 March 2021, <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/lebanon-melts-down-can-it-avert-total-collapse>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

33. Mathias Muindi, ‘Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism Case Study of Government Communication During Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks’, International Centre for Countering Terrorism – The Hague, December 2020.

Shabaab presents as being targeted against Muslim youths. Media organisations are among the institutions which reproduce and reinforce structural grievances exploited by Al-Shabaab:

Collectively, these agencies have a substantial role in influencing, shaping and setting, the social, cultural and political milieu of Kenyan society and, thus, in their mediation of relations and portrayal of issues and events, have the ability to further exclude young people and marginalised groups and, conversely, provide voice, inclusion and representation to those who feel or are marginalised. Moreover, particularly in their coverage of terrorism, crime and violent extremism, media agencies in Kenya have the potential to affect, cement and transform relations between Kenyan state institutions and ‘at risk’ youth (and in wider conflict dynamics which affect all elements of society).<sup>34</sup>

The media ecology of the areas of Kenya targeted by STRIVE II is, like that of Tripoli, characterised by misrepresentation, under-representation and exclusion, with young people in informal settlements (‘slums’) being frequently stigmatised as criminals and extremists, while reporting of terrorism was often sensationalised and inaccurate. STRIVE II’s research confirmed that young people in the programme’s target locations saw media representation as contributing to their sense of marginalisation and alienation from mainstream society, while a discourse analysis of media outputs showed persistent stereotyping and objectification. One major finding was that Kenyan media reporting tends to ‘co-opt international frameworks, describing “terrorism” as a Muslim-driven thing, to try and cover up what are really local problems’.<sup>35</sup> Media participants acknowledged the presence of conflict and the need for the media to be impartial, amidst many competing grievances, and that moderate voices do not deal with what one participant called ‘bigger structural issues’.<sup>36</sup> Further to this point, another participant said: ‘It is not helpful to tell people just to be hopeful, use nice words in the Quran when people are being killed by the government’.<sup>37</sup> The programme’s research with Kenyan media professionals about the representation of youth in the media found that they lacked fair representation and voice because, as one focus group participant said, ‘they don’t get a chance to speak. People speak for them’.<sup>38</sup>

The two interventions conceptualised violent extremism in slightly different ways. SRII drew on thinking that sees violent radicalisation as a process of ‘de-pluralisation’.<sup>39</sup> Applying this model, the programme recast push and pull factors as a process of ‘funnelling’ which narrows

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34. Tom Fisher, Dan Range and John Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II) in Kenya”: Final Report’, European Commission, September 2020, p. 65.

35. Focus group carried out in Nairobi in 2016 under the STRIVE Horn of Africa programme, the predecessor to STRIVE II. The discussion gathered a dozen Kenyan journalists, editors and a government spokesperson to understand how participants saw the communications and journalistic dimensions of violent extremism.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. STRIVE II focus group, Nairobi, 2019.

39. Daniel Koehler, ‘Violent Radicalization Revisited: A Practice-Oriented Model’, ISN ETH Zurich, June 2015.

options and perspectives available to individuals.<sup>40</sup> This process is often reinforced, though not determined by, the violent extremists' narrative. STRIVE II employed a refinement of the 'push-pull' model, reframing push factors as 'structural factors' and pull factors as 'individual incentives', and adding two additional categories, 'enabling factors' and 'group-based dynamics'.<sup>41</sup> Both programmes, however, recognised that violent extremism is the product of a complex interplay of factors that vary between individuals and locations. This underlined the intervention logic in both cases that sought to empower their target populations to deal with a range of factors and circumstances, rather than to use communication techniques to counter specific influences or ideologies.

## Participating Populations

Both interventions examined in this report have young people as their main beneficiaries, as is common in P/CVE interventions. 'Youth' is a notoriously broad demographic category (defined by the UN as being the cohort aged between 15 and 24).<sup>42</sup> Clearly, in societies with relatively youthful populations – Lebanon's median age is just below 30 and Kenya's is just above 20<sup>43</sup> – an intervention has to be targeted at a sub-set of youth. In Lebanon, the communications workstream started in the city of Tripoli, and expanded to cover all eight governorates in the country. It developed to complement youth development activities which brought together groups of individuals broadly representative of the youth population in neighbourhoods where violent extremist recruitment was prevalent and where a combination of social and economic pressures was understood to elevate levels of risk.<sup>44</sup> In response to an understanding of the specific nature of mobilisation and recruitment strategies, the programme mobilised diverse

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40. Sheelagh Stewart, 'Building Pathways: What Works on Developing Young People's Resilience to Violent Extremism', Community of Practice on Preventing Violent Extremism, 2020, p. 17.

41. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, 'Evaluation of "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)"', p. 5.

42. United Nations Youth, 'Definition of Youth', A/36/215, 1981.

43. See Statista, 'Lebanon: Average Age of the Population from 1950 to 2050', <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/455265/average-age-of-the-population-in-lebanon/>>, accessed 22 November 2021; Statista, 'Median Age of the Population in Kenya from 1950 to 2050', <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1221871/median-age-of-the-population-in-kenya/>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

44. This approach was based on primary research conducted by the Strengthening Resilience II (SRII) programme which concluded that it was not possible to create valid 'predictive profiles', and that even if this were possible, it risked stigmatisation and sowing further distrust between the individuals being profiled and the authorities. For a discussion of the limitations of profiling in this context, see Walter Reich, 'Understanding Terrorist Behavior: The Limits of Psychological Inquiry', in Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 1990), pp. 261–80; John Horgan, 'From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 618, No. 1, 2008), pp. 80–94.

groups of young people to develop collective capabilities and deliver actions online and offline as part of a ‘whole-of-society approach to preventing or countermanding violent extremism’.<sup>45</sup>

STRIVE II took a narrowly targeted approach, following the programme’s overall intervention logic of focusing on youths assessed to be vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by Al-Shabaab. The communications component worked with the same cohort that was subject to the programme’s primary component – a mentorship programme for supporting individual young people in selected areas of Nairobi, Mombasa and Kwale counties assessed as being potentially vulnerable to violent extremist influences. Mentees were identified by a probabilistic method, which began by identifying a larger population within areas which have witnessed Al-Shabaab recruitment, such as Kisauni in Mombasa, and whose members displayed some of the leading demographic characteristics shared by Al-Shabaab recruits.<sup>46</sup> This pool of potential subjects was then narrowed down through surveys and interviews to identify those showing specific attitudinal and behavioural risk factors, and assigned to a mentor in small groups. Some mentees knew each other before joining the programme, some did not.

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45. Michele Grossman, ‘Resilience to Violent Extremism and Terrorism: A Multisystemic Analysis’, in Michael Ungar (ed.), *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 293–317.

46. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)”’, pp. 23–24.

## II. Intended Outcomes and Mechanisms

**T**HIS CHAPTER EXAMINES what the programmes construed as the media and communications outcomes, in light of the preceding research. It explains how the programmes sought to achieve those outcomes, in particular the process of designing the mechanisms of change and how they were implemented. It concludes with an analysis of some of the effects that were observed by the programmes and external evaluators.

### Intended Outcomes

The SRII programme aims overall ‘to strengthen the resilience of young people and communities against violent extremist narratives’.<sup>47</sup> Its communications component in Tripoli combined collective and media action to build trust and understanding across community and institutional boundaries. Responding to the assumption that recruiters to violent groups in the city were seeking to exploit the narrowing of options for young people, the programme sought to support young people to identify, articulate and take action on issues that matter most to them. It drew on Paul Mihailidis’s theory of civic media literacy, which fosters a caring ethic that values citizenship and working with others across divides to ‘bring people together in support of solving social problems, reinventing spaces for meaningful engagement, [and] creating positive dialogue in communities’.<sup>48</sup> This reframing of the concept of media literacy responds to the specific problems of digital media and information abundance. It seeks to go beyond tactically addressing the harmful effects of digital communication to overcome them by encouraging people to engage with media for a civic purpose. Acknowledging the complexities and risks of identity politics in Tripoli and in Lebanon generally, SRII’s communications activities thus focused on civic purpose rather than out-competing the extremists in identity appeals, as was articulated by one of the programme’s campaign managers:

In the case of Tripoli we discovered that, because Tripoli has different audiences, each target audience has its own idea of identity. Some people would not identify as Tripolitans first, some of them would identify as Sunni first, some of them would identify as the tribe. Most of the people in Tripoli are actually from outside of Tripoli. So, in our own programme we say that we work with people ‘who live in Tripoli’. Any attempt at defining a unifying identity might not work. So we are saying that we will have

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47. British Council, ‘Strengthening Resilience in MENA’, <<https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/international-development/news-and-events/march-2018/Strengthening-Resilience-in-MENA>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

48. Paul Mihailidis, ‘Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Engagement for Civic Intentionality’, *Learning, Media and Technology* (Vol. 43, No. 2, 2018), pp. 152–64.

a unifying idea about how Tripoli could be better for all of its citizens, rather than saying ‘this is our identity and this is our heritage’.<sup>49</sup>

While it presents externally as a digital platform, TripoLives emerged from group-based offline collaboration and capacity building which started under the previous British Council P/CVE programme in Lebanon.<sup>50</sup> Thus, TripoLives sought to develop individual agency and influence, and increase resilience to a range of threats and pressures (including but not limited to violent extremism), and in the process develop individual and community resistance to violent extremist influences in Lebanon. TripoLives was one element of a larger set of communication activities which included fostering communication skills among existing Lebanese civil society organisations (Shabibik) and integrating and supporting the existing collective action and youth development strands of the programme (called Shabab Act). As activities evolved, the collective action and communication elements became more closely aligned. The creative team responsible for TripoLives became more diverse and supported some of the collective action projects in communicating their messages and achievements. TripoLives created and promoted content that highlighted local community initiatives and positive paths taken by young people, with the aim of influencing other young people to make positive choices while also addressing anti-social attitudes. This was supported by training to strengthen the capacity of civil society members and participants in storytelling techniques, insight analysis and marketing strategies, and technical training in photography and postproduction, for example.

SRII’s communications component and its integration with offline action was therefore aimed at creating a broad outcome of increasing community resilience to a wide range of harmful influences and behaviours. Although violent extremism is the primary threat to the state, and the programme focused on specific areas with a high incidence of violent extremist recruitment, the programme team drew on evidence which indicates that the resources and capacities which provide protection against violent extremist narratives are, by their very nature, protective against a broader spectrum of risks.<sup>51</sup> They also recognise the need for collective strengthening reflecting the notion that the individual finds identity, ongoing mutual support and purpose as part of a peer group and needs to be able to navigate and access resources at the community level. This theory of change was articulated by the British Council as follows:

The programme has a mandate to reduce the appeal of violent extremist narratives. In MENA young people are experiencing a range of significant hazards including poor education, increasing joblessness and related marginalisation, conflict, instability, violence and violent extremism. These hazards tend to exist alongside, and compound, each other. Programme activities build the resilience of individuals and groups, equipping them to survive and thrive *no matter what hazards they face*.<sup>52</sup>

49. SOAS Centre for Global Media and Communication, ‘Consolidated Deliverables’, p. 11.

50. Facebook, ‘TripoLives’, <<https://www.facebook.com/TripoLives/>>, accessed 3 December 2021.

51. Michael Ungar, ‘Building Social Inclusion and Community Engagement of Youth: Pathways to Resilience as Alternatives to Violence’, in Travis Morris and Metodi Hadji-Janev (eds), *Countering Terrorism in South Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2017), pp. 103–09.

52. British Council, internal programme brochure, 2019.

By contrast, the STRIVE II programme is more narrowly targeted on reducing radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist groups (specifically Al-Shabaab). The aim of both the mentorship and communications components of the programme was reducing the appeal of violent extremist groups to the target cohort, measured in terms of individual attitudinal change, and hence reducing extremist recruitment and radicalisation. The programme's communication component was aimed at 'strengthening the voice of marginalised youth by improving their self-expression, sense of participation and representation in key media spaces'.<sup>53</sup> In parallel, it sought to improve the representation of marginalised youth by journalists in local media and to improve standards in reporting on violent extremism to mitigate the harmful effects of sensationalised or stereotyping journalism.

## Mechanisms

To achieve its intended outcomes, SRII used the TripoLives platform to showcase examples of initiatives for personal and community development, and provided new ways to engage. But the design of its mechanisms appears to have been experimental and iterative. TripoLives originated in physical meetings between community stakeholders designed to challenge negative perceptions within the city; with the support of the SR and SRII programmes it then developed an online presence and brand. This development of TripoLives into a platform and resource for developing social capital (both bonding and bridging) through showcasing inspiring stories from and about a specific location was also informed by J Brian Houston and colleagues' community resilience theory of communication, which includes four components ('communication systems and resources, community relationships, strategic communication processes, and community attributes'), and conceptualises community resilience as a process rather than an outcome.<sup>54</sup>

SRII thus provided new channels of communications, interactions and dialogue among youth, citizens and stakeholders including local government, and a medium for self-expression, empowerment and alternative, positive journalism. By building on existing community actions on the part of street artists, cafés providing soup kitchens and projects supporting refugees, for example, the stories developed by participants for the platform were shown to represent the ethos of the city and its youth, rather than the stereotyping and exclusionary messages from mainstream media. The platform's content promoted to the thousands of people living in the city the positive paths taken by community members with a story to tell; in doing so, it not only reported on but stimulated civic action on the part of community members. TripoLives was also distinguished from other nascent alternative media platforms by its link with Tripoli's local government, and an innovative hybrid approach between communication and development. A range of partners worked together to develop and sustain the platform towards the goal of improving the city's image. Stakeholders in TripoLives include the Tripoli Municipality representing the local authorities, the Chamber of Commerce representing the

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53. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, 'Evaluation of "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)"', p. 5.

54. J Brian Houston et al., 'The Centrality of Communication and Media in Fostering Community Resilience: A Framework for Assessment and Intervention', *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 59, No. 2, 2015), pp. 270–83.

private sector, a network representing 12 civil society organisations in the city called Increased Resilience in Tripoli (IRT), and a representative of the educational sector. The SOAS research commissioned by the programme found an appreciation on the part of local authority and civil society stakeholders that the programme's activities could have social benefits beyond those limited to preventing violent extremism (such as greater opportunity for youth entrepreneurs).<sup>55</sup>

Through the Shabab Act network, young people gathered in collective action groups, co-creating and implementing projects to address pressing social issues. Part of a wider programme that was run across eight governorates, this activity developed the young people's communication capacity and strengthened social connections – an outcome believed to protect against the risks of violent extremism.<sup>56</sup> Capacity-building included developing communications skills and material support, but more importantly it aimed to increase motivation through opportunities to develop a sense of individual agency and collective efficacy on issues important to them, recognising that what Mihailidis calls the 'civic agency gap' (the sense that participation in social media in particular is futile or risky) needs to be overcome through well-designed, well-supported and well-managed activities.<sup>57</sup> Programme documents reviewed for this report, drawing on Houston and colleagues' resilience model of communication, argued that the programme's communication activities would generate new social interactions, while communicating to create public goods would also develop a sense of agency and civic engagement.<sup>58</sup> Greater interactivity and a sense of purpose would combine to strengthen resilience; as Houston and colleagues argue, the 'interdependency of the community resilience components also illustrates that no single community resilience component is sufficient for a community to be resilient'.<sup>59</sup> The programme's media component, then, rested on an intervention logic that media activity with a civic purpose would develop the bonding and bridging capital associated with resilience.

STRIVE II sought to exploit the empowering possibilities of communication activities, but with a greater focus on individual behaviour change and interpersonal communication as opposed to the community orientation and civic activism of the programme in Tripoli. The preceding STRIVE Horn of Africa programme had implemented a counternarrative radio programme judged to have been relatively ineffectual. This led to a recommendation that future programmes should include a 'drastic increase in both the platforms available for young Kenyan voices and the output specifically addressing youth-relevant issues'.<sup>60</sup> STRIVE II's 'preventive communication' component was therefore designed to demonstrate the 'potential agency' of young people in effecting change:

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55. SOAS Centre for Global Media and Communication, 'Consolidated Deliverables', p. 50.

56. B Heidi Ellis and Saida Abdi, 'Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism Through Genuine Partnerships', *American Psychologist* (Vol. 72, No. 3, 2017), pp. 289–300.

57. Mihailidis, 'Civic Media Literacies'.

58. SOAS Centre for Global Media and Communication, 'Consolidated Deliverables', p. 49.

59. Houston et al., 'The Centrality of Communication and Media in Fostering Community Resilience', pp. 277–78.

60. RUSI and European Commission, 'STRIVE Horn of Africa: Lessons Learned', April 2017, p. 24, <<http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Strive-Lessons-Learned-Report-Final-Version.pdf>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

A key assumption behind this result area is that at-risk and marginalised youth, if given the right tools, confidence and opportunities, have both the power and will to contribute to countering violent extremism, tackling marginalisation and enhancing their own self-perception, representation and inclusion in society. In general, this result area seeks to connect young people and media institutions in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways, aiming to create a shift in the relationship between the institutions, at-risk youth and their respective cultural contexts.<sup>61</sup>

The communications interventions were integrated into the other mentorship activities which sought to create ‘positive social identity as a bulwark against violence, extremism and negative life choices’.<sup>62</sup> A critical thinking component was designed to help mentors and mentees to resist recruitment by understanding how violent extremists influence and persuade potential recruits, including through propaganda, and mentees were offered training about how propaganda is used to justify and incite violence.<sup>63</sup> Most activities, however, were designed to develop skills in communicating and participating in media activities, which included working with professional, independent media organisations for some mentees. Recognising that self-expression can create pathways to explore purpose, belonging and personal values, the component sought to build the mentees’ capacity in purpose-driven storytelling, intended to create ‘opportunities for participants to connect emotionally with themes in their lives, and to each other, in order to create stories that represent their experiences’.<sup>64</sup> The ethos of the communications component was drawn from the established practice of ‘narrative therapy’.<sup>65</sup>

By developing the skills to consciously communicate in narrative form, particularly in autobiographical stories, mentees were able to process their life experiences into self-expression, in a form that enabled them to engage in a process of constructive self-reflection leading to greater self-awareness, confidence and improved abilities to communicate and relate to others.<sup>66</sup> Their audiences ranged from peer groups to other programme participants to a wider audience for those whose outputs were circulated via social media, and shown at a small film festival in Mombasa.<sup>67</sup> As an interpersonal communication intervention, this also sought to strengthen relationships between and within the small peer group of mentors, based around the cathartic and bonding process of sharing personal histories: ‘the creation of stronger networks

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61. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)”’, p. 66.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

63. Tina Wilchen Christensen, Matt Freear and Hadija Suleiman, ‘A Mentorship Manual for Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya’, RUSI, 2020, <<https://rusi.org/publication/other-publications/mentorship-manual-countering-violent-extremism-kenya>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

64. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)”’, p. 78.

65. Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York, NY and London: W W Norton and Company, 1990).

66. David Denborough, *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience* (New York, NY and London: W W Norton and Company, 2014); Freear and Glazzard, ‘Preventive Communication’.

67. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)”’, p. 78.

for at risk youth will act as a deterrent to the attractiveness of the group dynamics of violent extremist organisations'.<sup>68</sup>

These interpersonal activities provided a foundation for media activities in which mentors and mentees created social media content and sought to influence dominant narratives about Kenyan youths in national newspapers. Voluntariness was an important component of effective and authentic participation. Incentive structures were created, such as a film competition, opportunities to have films professionally made and articles published. But, at the same time, young people were enabled to participate and engage in opportunities largely on their own terms and set the pace and objective of communications.

The mechanisms employed by STRIVE II to mitigate the harmful effects of mainstream media representations of violent extremism and of Kenya's youth included training in conflict-sensitive journalism and detecting propaganda techniques and influences. In two rounds, the four-day training was delivered to 42 journalists and editors from nine stations in Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa counties. It covered 'the principles of conflict-sensitive journalism and content on the causes of terrorism and violent extremism' followed by 'the process of developing a longer-form, feature story for air (with a focus on having space to probe issues and to deliberately plan a piece rather than work to immediate deadlines) but with key issues and messages related to terrorism, violent extremism and conflict-sensitive reporting highlighted throughout'. Skills topics included: 'how to research conflict, terrorism and violent extremism ahead of developing a story, beyond desk-based research and with curiosity for discovering the real story within communities'; 'which voices are usually included ... and which should be to make the product more conflict-sensitive'; 'appropriate language and terminology ... which aligns with conflict-sensitivity'; and 'skills and techniques for interviewing people from groups not usually included in media content'.<sup>69</sup>

In building the capacity of selected Kenyan media houses, the purpose was for journalists to change from security and violence-oriented journalism to conflict-sensitive journalism because 'media representation of terrorist threats and counterterrorist responses shapes perceptions of the legitimacy of counterterrorist policies, historical grievances (such as political marginalisation of some communities) and, crucially, of the position of those communities in the national discourse'.<sup>70</sup> Journalistic skills to enable the stories of under-represented communities to be told and knowledge about conflict and violent extremism were strengthened.<sup>71</sup> These enabled reporters to actively address dominant narratives that escalate conflict, more accurately report on the sources and nature of local violence and conflict, and amplify voices from marginalised communities. Historical conflict is often identified in research as a factor in violent extremism which can be particularly challenging for journalists to address, especially in an environment where government communications is focused on condemning the terrorist threat.

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68. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

70. Freear and Glazzard, 'Preventive Communication', p. 11.

71. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, 'Evaluation of "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)"'.

Despite these differences in emphasis, both interventions were founded on a rejection of the top-down logic of strategic communications and counter/alternative narratives as currently practised in most communications-based P/CVE programmes. The mechanisms involved in both programmes are diametrically opposed to the strategic use of communicative power to achieve a pre-determined, persuasive objective. Instead, they seek to ‘heal’ drivers of conflict, strengthen social relations, empower young people to develop agency and influence through their own stories and communicative practices, and produce outputs that are unpredictable, locally rooted and often highly personal. The logic behind this ‘relational’ approach and its contrast with more traditional ‘strategic’ approaches is set out in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Designing Relational Media and Communication Versus Strategic Communication Programmes

	<b>Strategic Communications</b>	<b>Relational Media and Communications</b>
<b>CVE problem analysis</b>	Prevalence and influence of terrorist messaging and narrative.	Structural pressures (in traditional media, journalism and online media use) and individual push factors (opportunities to explore meaning, purpose and create belonging).
Programme activities	Research into the nature and influence of violent extremist narratives.	Research into media ecology to identify dominant narratives, excluded voices and ideas, partisan media, and violence-oriented journalism.
<b>Outcome</b>	Attitude and behaviour change of at-risk individuals.	Capacity (skills, opportunities, confidence), resilience -building and systems change.
Programme activities	Creating engagement with and positive attitudinal response to counter narrative content .	Enabling plurality and diversity of narratives, strengthened agency, inclusion and participation, and conflict-sensitive media.
<b>Object of interventions</b>	‘Target audiences’.	Under-capacity and vulnerabilities in the media ecosystem – organisations or individuals.
Programme activities	Identifying at-risk audience and influential channels, messengers and messages.	Strengthening communication capacity, participation and representation of marginalised population; building capacity of ‘shared media’ to alleviate conflict.

	<b>Strategic Communications</b>	<b>Relational Media and Communications</b>
<p><b>Applicable communication practices</b></p> <p>Programme activities</p>	<p>Strategic communication.</p> <p>Enabling counternarrative campaigns and delivery mechanisms; building of strategic communication capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and credible messengers.</p>	<p>Range of media and communication practices depending on the context and implementer.</p> <p>Civic media literacies, communications for social change, narrative therapy, collective action, conflict-sensitive journalism.</p>
<p><b>Mechanism of change</b></p> <p>Programme activities</p>	<p>Persuasion resulting from engagement with media content.</p> <p>Creating counternarrative content, delivered through credible messengers and influential channels to at-risk audiences.</p>	<p>Building communication and media capacity. Individual and collective creative and participative processes.</p> <p>Strengthening youth-led platforms to create diverse and inclusive narratives that increase belonging and agency, opportunities to explore identity, meaning and purpose.</p>

Source: Author generated.

## Observed Effects

A realist evaluation study was carried out by the British Council's Lebanon SRII team to identify contextual factors, programme mechanisms and programme outcomes.<sup>72</sup> These were then configured into hypotheses of what had been achieved to address violent extremist factors, and how. Communications outcomes hypothesised in this way included:

- Communications committee members demonstrated increased collective resilience and knowledge of content creation techniques.
- Young people were able to positively influence their peers and wider communities by sharing their positive stories or initiatives and applying their communications training to this task.

72. This study was carried out by the SRII team, led by its resilience specialist. It included an outcome harvesting workshop with the project manager and field coordinators, context monitoring reports and bi-annual reports, as well as key informant interviews with each of the local CSOs involved in the programme.

- Young people used the communications platforms to spread awareness at the community level and share success stories, with the potential to mitigate risks associated with violent extremist recruitment activity.

An independent evaluation study of the SRII programme was ongoing at the time of writing, so full empirical evidence of SRII's effects is not yet available. However, insights can be developed from the internal realist study, a focus group discussion with participants, an internal SRII study based on workshops, and key informant interviews, along with other documentary sources.

The focus group discussion comprised six participants in Shabibik aged 17–25 from across Lebanon. It generated three broad findings: creating stories gave participants a sense of purpose and achievement; participation led to greater confidence; and, perhaps most importantly, the programme has the potential to break down barriers between communities (in other words, develop bridging capital):

This platform helps to integrate between the various groups, sects, and affiliations of society, forms a strong relationship, and contributes greatly to breaking down barriers and getting to know our society closely, thus discovering and demonstrating its talents through our spread into the neighborhoods and regions to find initiatives.<sup>73</sup>

SRII's internal programme documents and the testimony of stakeholders from TripoLives provide some limited evidence of the effect of that project. At its outset, trust between stakeholders (in CSOs, the Tripoli Municipality and the Chamber of Commerce) was low, their capacity to produce content was limited, and young people had few opportunities to engage in communications activities. Following training, the creation of the stakeholder committee, and the development and implementation of campaign plans, stakeholders reported an increased trust, shared purpose and a common understanding of factors contributing to violent extremism.<sup>74</sup> CSOs and youths engaged by the programme reported increased knowledge of and confidence in using content-generation techniques, but more importantly an increased sense of confidence in their ability to 'actively seek to influence the context and environment outside the programme'.<sup>75</sup>

Other evidence shows stakeholders have embraced the platform's aim of collective youth empowerment, including the local government.<sup>76</sup> In the context of evolving threats and disinformation campaigns stoking sectarian divides, the TripoLives committee monitored social and mainstream media to develop responsive content that could positively change conflict dynamics. During the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, Tripoli Municipality engaged TripoLives to connect to communities in the city with which it was having difficulties communicating. Throughout

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73. Focus group discussant, Lebanon, 13 April 2021.

74. SRII internal documentation, June 2021.

75. SRII internal documentation, June 2021. The quote is a response to a questionnaire completed by participants of a programme which showed particularly positive responses.

76. See, for instance, TripoLives, <<http://www.tripoli.gov.lb/index.php/ar/node/502>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

the process, the TripoLives partners reported that they learned how to plan positive campaigns, bridging groups and individuals and linking them to a wider audience. Through its Facebook page, TripoLives has attracted a following of 15,000 since it launched in March 2019. They have also recognised a need for greater focus on face-to-face communication, and for more detailed and specific audience research to improve the targeting of content. Although this component is yet to be independently evaluated, stakeholders report that TripoLives has succeeded in bringing positive community action to the fore and empowering the young men and women who have been involved in producing the platform's content.

STRIVE II has been subject to an independent evaluation which sets out the observed achievements of the 'preventive communications' component. The first of two rounds of training led to the creation of 12 radio items, most of which were judged by the implementation team to be high quality and reflective of the issues highlighted in the training. Topics included the role of women in violent extremism, the impact of recruitment on the families of recruits, youth marginalisation, and criminality and its links to violent extremism. Drawing on the programme's monitoring data, the evaluation found that participants developed greater conflict sensitivity in their reporting, including a recognition of impartiality and of multiple perspectives. The evaluation also found a greater awareness of the complexity of factors contributing to violent extremism, and in particular the role of law enforcement in creating and amplifying grievances – which had the potential to prompt a more critical approach to reporting the role of security actors in news reports.<sup>77</sup> This included government-owned media stations, where one participant commented that the station's 'reporting has definitely changed on violent extremism and crime generally' as a result of the training: 'More voices represented from the community. We spend more time in the slums now. Our relationship with the police has definitely opened up too – we speak to them more'.<sup>78</sup>

The outputs from the programme's mentees comprised one full-length documentary, intended for national television (but which television stations declined to air on commercial grounds), over 30 short films circulated on Facebook, and newspaper articles were produced with mentors and mentees for two of Kenya's highest-circulation newspapers. However, the 'entire ethos of the approach is to ultimately prioritise self-expression over efficiency and output', so the intervention needs to be judged on the effects of the process rather than the films and articles themselves.<sup>79</sup> Albeit with limited data, the evaluation found that the 'sharing of traumatic and emotional experiences and the building of common values and narratives can lead – and appears here to have led – to the recognition of both issues and opportunities for change'.<sup>80</sup>

In addition, internal programme documents provide some insights into the immediate effects of the communication activities on participants. For example, an activity labelled 'the storytelling project' involved 12 mentees from Kisauni, Majengo and Likoni (all in Mombasa County on Kenya's

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77. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, 'Evaluation of "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)"', pp. 69–70, 73.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

coast) in narrative therapy and film-making sessions, all of whom were subsequently interviewed to elicit how they benefited from the sessions.<sup>81</sup> One noted that with strengthened self-confidence they were able to affect their peers in a positive manner:

I have more confidence in myself now and I can express myself better. I can sit with two or three of my friends and give them good advice and ideas to support them emotionally. Because of the encouragement I have received through the program, I have the courage and confidence to offer the same to my friends.<sup>82</sup>

Others noted how the experience of catharsis enabled them to think positively about the future:

To tell one's story to a crowd is difficult, my close friend did not know much about me because I was not comfortable discussing my issues. I was afraid of being judged and seen in a different light. I felt I needed to release what was hurting me by telling the story of my life. I feel much better now because I have had some relief from letting go of my past and focusing on my future.<sup>83</sup>

And another experienced a 'reminder' of who they are and who is important to them:

It was a reminder of where most of my social support comes from – my mother and my sister. ... I can connect my past, current situation and my future.<sup>84</sup>

As these reports attest, the storytelling sessions appear to have succeeded as narrative therapy, as every participant reported a significant increase in optimism, self-confidence and determination. The very act of sharing experiences of conflict and trauma in a safe space had considerable significance itself and also created opportunities to recast their own stories and strengthen their self-esteem.<sup>85</sup> However, the link between these positive individual outcomes and the component's overall intended outcome – reducing radicalisation and recruitment – is impossible to demonstrate without a much larger sample and longitudinal data. This is acknowledged in the programme's evaluation, which found that while the component demonstrated 'significant promise to effect change if the appropriate scale and distribution was achieved in future iterations', the connection between activity and impact remained speculative.<sup>86</sup>

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81. All quotes are drawn from interview transcripts.

82. Male interviewee, Kisauni, June 2020.

83. Male interviewee, Kisauni, June 2020.

84. Female interviewee, Kisauni, June 2020.

85. Fisher, Range and Cuddihy, 'Evaluation of "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II)"', p. 79.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 84.



# III. Findings and Implications

**C**OMPARING THE CONTEXTS, target populations, intended outcomes, mechanisms and observed effects of these two programmes reveals commonalities of approach despite the marked contextual difference between Lebanon and Kenya and the fact that the two programmes were designed and implemented separately (despite both being funded by EU sources). This chapter presents some of the most significant commonalities, which may represent useful guides for donors, designers and implementers considering communications programming for P/CVE purposes. It also draws out implications relevant to those implementing P/CVE programmes.

**During the implementation of the first SR and STRIVE programmes, implementers increasingly judged that strategic communication and counternarrative activities were ineffectual.**

Through listening to the language and concerns of local partners and young people in Kenya and Lebanon, it became clear that communities exposed to radicalisation and recruitment were being antagonised rather than supported by traditional media channels, which stereotypes and stigmatises young people from marginalised backgrounds especially. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities and capacity to participate in media and communication systems diminished individuals' sense of agency. Rather than seeking to react to the narrative propagated by terrorists and perpetuating a 'war of words', interventions became about creating pathways for civic engagement and relationship building.

This finding suggests that P/CVE practitioners should be wary of seeking to change behaviour through persuasion and should consider developing more participative approaches. In both Kenya and Lebanon, participative approaches were developed through piloting and a degree of experimentation, suggesting that small-scale iterative interventions (as opposed to large-scale programmes built on pre-determined theories of change) can benefit from tighter feedback loops, while generating valuable evidence that can support future programming (whether scaled-up follow-on interventions or entirely new programmes).<sup>87</sup> Participation implies that beneficiaries should be engaged throughout the programme's life-cycle, and that activities and outcomes should be selected that reflect their skills, motivations, concerns and practical realities from early on in programme design.

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87. For a discussion of one method of iterative programming in an international development context, see Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock, 'Escaping Capability Traps Through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)', *World Development* (Vol. 51, 2013), pp. 234–44.

**Mapping the media ecology to understand processes of youth exclusion and stereotyping and how dominant narratives perpetuate was critical to programme design.**

A media ecology analysis examines social and political relationships and discourse, and how they interact. The choice of mechanisms for both programmes was determined by analysis that showed how news reporting and other media content about young people and conflict-affected communities in mainstream media contributed to under-representation in society, and that young people and communities had few opportunities and limited capacity to create and use media. The analysis extended to understanding how far the nature of local journalism reflected precepts of ‘war journalism’ in the representation of conflict.<sup>88</sup> This analysis convinced programme implementers that ‘top-down’ methods of communication that tended to reinforce polarisation, obscure the conflict underpinning violent extremism and limit creativity were part of the problem more than the solution, and that participative methods were therefore required.

This finding suggests that research for communications-based P/CVE interventions needs to go beyond the orthodox activities focusing on drivers of violent extremism to include the role and impact of journalism and traditional media channels as well as social media platforms, and to examine the process through which media is created, consumed and circulated. Crucially, practitioners need to understand the media ecology from the perspective of beneficiary communities. For example, issues of bias, discrimination and stereotyping have the potential to contribute to individual and community alienation, but these issues also present opportunities for interventions to develop participative responses that empower individuals and communities, challenge preconceptions and alter dominant narratives.

**Strengthening the communication processes and capacities of marginalised young people has the potential to provide opportunities for sustainable and systemic change.**

Although empirical evidence remains limited, programme implementers judged that enabling young people to be the communicators, to set the agenda and foster their collective identity has the potential to initiate bottom-up change which is most comprehensive and relevant to addressing factors of violent extremism. A voluntaristic mindset to designing and running activities with the young people was essential to effective participation.

Capacity-building in P/CVE often focuses on institutions (especially but not exclusively government and law enforcement) and assumes that sustainable change requires investment in skills and knowledge.<sup>89</sup> This finding suggests that capacity-building approaches should not be limited to institutions and can promote sustainable change in individuals and communities. In addition, personal development and community-level capacity-building can contribute to an

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88. See Johan Galtung’s table of distinctions between war/violence and peace/conflict journalism in Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, *Peace Journalism* (Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 2005), p. 6.

89. Andrew Glazzard, ‘National Government and Law Enforcement Capacity Building: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2021.

enhanced sense of individual and small-group agency – another possible mechanism linking participative activities to P/CVE objectives. Participation implies identifying capacity-building objectives that are meaningful to beneficiaries (rather than implementers or donors).

**A range of mechanisms drawn from development communications, journalism and psychology proved relevant and applicable to the contexts.**

These mechanisms included: developing civic media literacy – training individuals in communities to communicate for a common good; communications for social change, which enables people to set the agenda and activate peaceful social change in their community; conflict-sensitive journalism, which seeks to de-escalate the conflict that underpins terrorism and enables journalists to strengthen participation and governance for marginalised communities; communications for resilience, which enables communities and individuals to survive and thrive amidst upheaval; and narrative therapy, which enables young people to redefine problems in their lives through a process of storytelling. These mechanisms were used to bring young people together to imagine and pursue individual change and a collective civic purpose.

This finding shows the potential relevance of a range of fields to P/CVE communications interventions beyond those, like strategic communication, that are rooted in organisational theory and propaganda studies.<sup>90</sup> The fields that proved most useful to the interventions under discussion here have the potential to inform other P/CVE interventions, but this list is not exhaustive, so practitioners should remain open to learning from any communication field that seeks to promote positive social or individual change.

**Early signs are that these interventions were most effective when the target populations were allowed to create their own content and stories free of external agendas and in pursuit of a purpose they defined.**

Promoting agency meant focusing attention on the process of how young people could create meaning that was important to them. Success would, therefore, need to be judged in terms of self-efficacy, personal development and motivation for personal change, rather than quantitative measures of audience reach or engagement rates.

This finding again attests to the value of participative over prescriptive approaches to P/CVE communications interventions. It also suggests that P/CVE practitioners should be more focused on small-group audiences, at least when developing new interventions, rather than the broadcast approach which is often preferred by donors and implementers. There is also an important implication for monitoring and evaluation: P/CVE communications interventions often rely on quantitative measures of ‘reach’ and ‘engagement’, especially on social media platforms – sometimes labelled ‘vanity metrics’ because they are more impressive than meaningful<sup>91</sup> –

90. Glazzard and Reed, ‘Beyond Prevention’.

91. James Lewis and Sarah Marsden, ‘Countering Violent Extremism Interventions: Contemporary Research’, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2021, p. 34.

rather than actual experiences of communication activities and subsequent behaviour. In other words, practitioners should develop measures of actual attitudinal and behaviour change rather than superficial actions such as clicking a 'like' button.

### **Online engagement and social media content have limited impact in P/CVE.**

In many cases, individual or small-group offline activities generated the relationships and trust which could then be taken online: social media engagement and web content often played a role in reinforcing and developing existing offline dialogue. Such dialogue emerged out of other activities (mentorship in the case of STRIVE, collective action groups and skills training in the case of SR) which responded to the needs of communities and young people. Communication that arose from these real-life activities was the best opportunity for impactful relationship-building. Moreover, implementers found that social media is not necessarily an ideal environment for trust-building in contexts where young people are concerned about hostile social media feedback, surveillance or data costs.

This finding supports an emerging consensus that the impact of social media in both radicalisation/recruitment and P/CVE is often exaggerated<sup>92</sup> – in P/CVE, interpersonal communication is often more powerful than online campaigns, although, as SR in particular shows, the two may productively work in tandem. It also suggests that interpersonal communication can be designed to develop out of and support meaningful opportunities for individual and social change, as opposed to thinking of communications as a 'bolt on' or discrete strand of P/CVE. Practitioners should therefore be wary of approaches that rely predominantly on or prematurely engage in online communications, prioritising instead depth over breadth of impact, while harnessing social media in support of substantial offline activities.

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92. Paul Gill et al., *What Are the Roles of the Internet in Terrorism? Measuring Online Behaviours of Convicted UK Terrorists* (Dublin: VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2015).

# Conclusion

**G**IVEN THE SCEPTICISM surrounding conventional P/CVE communications approaches that are typically top-down, 'strategic' and based on a model of audience persuasion, it is important to explore alternative methods for using communication tools (including learning from narrative therapy, for instance) and rethinking the role of journalism in reducing the conflict that fuels recruitment and radicalisation into violent extremism.

The interventions discussed in this report were conceived and developed separately and show many points of difference, but both broadly take a participative rather than persuasive approach. Seeing communication activities as the means to increase resistance collectively rather than change attitudes individually is arguably more in keeping with the ethos of P/CVE than strategic communications and counternarratives. Furthermore, there is a clear logic in the design of these participatory interventions: engaging individuals and communities that are potentially exposed to violent extremist influences to develop skills, knowledge and values through communication activities is more likely to sustainably strengthen what these interventions call 'resilience' than treating those individuals and communities merely as audiences of what are often transient campaigns. By implementing a safe and managed place for the participation of young people at risk of radicalisation and recruitment, a process emerges in which youth can both direct and be responsible for managed, constructive social change.<sup>93</sup> In so doing, collective and creative responses can develop organically and, at times, unexpectedly. Including communication as part of a resilience-building process enables excluded individuals and communities to define which outcomes matter and avoids applying the overly simplistic and linear logic of strategic communications, or the narrow assumptions implicit in predetermined indicators of attitudinal and behavioural change. In enabling the agency and responsibility of individuals and communities, it also opens up new opportunities for peaceful social and political change, the antithesis of violent extremism.

However, it is also clear that evidence of impact remains scant. Although both programmes show positive outcomes at an individual level, neither has yet generated proof that increased confidence on the part of participants or newly generated social capital in and between communities have altered the dynamics of violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation. Judgements about impact even within the specific contexts of Kenya and Lebanon, let alone other environments, remain speculative.

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93. Thomas Tufte, *Communication and Social Change: A Citizen Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 13.

Nevertheless, P/CVE is a relatively young field and opportunities to learn and experiment should, in the authors' view, be embraced. These interventions have generated valuable knowledge about contexts (the extent of marginalisation of young people from traditional media in two otherwise contrasting locations), selection of populations (for example, between individual targeting as in STRIVE II or SRII's community-based approach), choice of outcomes (improving individual life chances, strengthening journalism and the media environment, or facilitating civic activism to generate social capital), and assumptions of what causes change and how (for example, the logic of participation in socially useful activity that is shared by both programmes). These programmes have reasserted the practicability, relevance and utility of the development of systems of purposefully civic-minded media and communications to address underlying causes of violent extremism, that go beyond the tactical response to violent extremist propaganda. They have indicated that media development and development communications can play a stronger role in P/CVE communications, without compromising core principles. These programmes suggest resilience can be built in the media and communication environment to address a broad range of communication challenges and information threats. They also point to the value of building resources, agency and capacity of the individual as part of a group. For communications interventions in P/CVE, the approaches to resilience described here put excluded youths in the position of problem solvers, not problem makers, and avoids the distrust that can result when they become the object of campaigns of persuasion.

Programmes that follow SRII and STRIVE II should, in the authors' view, aim to develop stronger evidence of how media and communications interventions work in different contexts and for different populations, with a particular focus on testing the link between positive individual or community outcomes and the level of radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist groups.

# About the Authors

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He is interested in researching and implementing innovative and alternative approaches to media and communications in the prevention of violence. His publications include 'Preventive Communication: Emerging Lessons from Participative Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya' (with Andrew Glazzard, 2020), 'Lessons from the African Union Mission for Somalia (AMISOM) for Peace Operations in Mali' (with Cedric de Coning, 2013) and 'Syrian Stabilization and Reconstruction: Lessons Learned for a Post-Conflict Syria' (2016).

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Prior to joining RUSI, he worked on a range of defence and security issues in the UK government for over 20 years. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2007. He received his PhD in English Literature in 2013 from Royal Holloway, University of London. He is particularly interested in the relationship between security and culture, including the role of narrative and communications in terrorism and counterterrorism, and increasing the contribution of arts and humanities disciplines in security studies.

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