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Lessons for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

An Evidence-Based Approach

Michael Jones, Claudia Wallner and Emily Winterbotham



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Executive Summary

THIS OCCASIONAL PAPER is part of RUSI's Prevention Project, a multi-year effort to collate, assess and strengthen the existing knowledge base for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions across different thematic and geographic areas. The research for this project found that the evidence base for programme efficacy remains limited, with little information sharing, weak monitoring and evaluation regimes, a reliance on the same relatively small cluster of case studies, and a general lack of longitudinal analysis hampering collective understandings of P/CVE outcomes.

As the conclusion to the Prevention Project series, the paper identifies cross-cutting findings and recommendations, highlighting key lessons and themes reflected in both the available literature and data collected from the research team's fieldwork in Kenya and Lebanon. Key findings include:

1. Securitising other types of intervention, such as development programming, by conflating them with P/CVE could undermine their purpose while failing to achieve P/CVE objectives.
2. Integrated interventions can help mitigate harmful outcomes and increase the efficacy of P/CVE programmes.
3. Identifying intervention target groups should be guided by evidence-based risk and protective factors rather than assumptions when designing programmes.
4. Those in the wider social environments of 'at-risk' individuals are often well placed to identify signs of radicalisation and warning behaviours, but it should not be assumed that they are always able to spot or will report such concerns.
5. Relatability and access to target populations should guide decisions on who to involve and support in P/CVE programme implementation.
6. The process of engaging in P/CVE interventions and the trust built between intervention providers and participants play an important role in the impact an intervention can have on participants.

Introduction

DEVELOPED IN THE context of the War on Terror, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has become a widespread supplement (and in some cases replacement) to harder security and military measures designed to tackle the threat of terrorism. Yet, regardless of its prevalence at a global, regional, national and local level, the evidence corroborating the efficacy of P/CVE remains problematic in both quantity and quality. The impact of interventions is often untested or poorly assessed,¹ with limited information sharing, weak monitoring and evaluation regimes, and a general lack of longitudinal analysis hampering collective understandings of P/CVE outcomes. This has raised significant practical, conceptual and ethical problems for the field, forcing practitioners to sometimes rely on little more than ‘gut instinct’,² ‘shaky theoretical and empirical foundations’,³ and a slate of unproven, weak or deleterious assumptions that can constrain project design and delivery.

Against this backdrop, the Prevention Project⁴ – a multi-year research initiative (January 2018 to December 2020) funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – sought to interrogate and strengthen the existing knowledge base for P/CVE programmes. In trying to assess ‘what can work’ and ‘what has not worked’ across different categories of intervention, the project identified gaps and lessons to help improve future policy and practice.

Methodology

This paper is informed by the authors’ review of the P/CVE literature as part of the wider Prevention Project, which featured a total of 546 English-language publications focused on

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1. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, ‘Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and Deradicalization Programs: Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security’, March 2016; Lasse Lindekilde, ‘Value for Money? Problems of Impact Assessment of Counter-Radicalization Policies on End Target Groups: The Case of Denmark’, *European Journal of Criminal Policy and Research* (Vol. 18, No. 4, 2012), pp. 385–402.
 2. Jacob Davey, Henry Tuck and Amarnath Amarasingam, ‘An Imprecise Science: Assessing Interventions for the Prevention, Disengagement and De-Radicalisation of Left and Right-Wing Extremists’, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019.
 3. Andrew Glazzard uses this description for counter-narratives specifically, but on the basis of the Prevention Project, the same could be applied for many other forms of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) intervention. See Andrew Glazzard, ‘Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, May 2017.
 4. See Eric Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress: The State of the Global P/CVE Agenda’, Prevention Project and RUSI, September 2018.

different thematic intervention areas (such as women-centric programming, education efforts, P/CVE communications, P/CVE mentorship and youth empowerment interventions). The material included peer-reviewed publications, independent programme evaluations, other programme documentation and an assortment of grey literature (Table 1). While the material sought to capture P/CVE programming worldwide, it was confined to English-language studies due to methodological constraints, meaning not all countries and regions were necessarily represented in full (Table 2).⁵

Table 1: Publication Types Reviewed as Part of the Prevention Project

Type of Publication	Number of Studies	Percentage of Total
Academic publication	176	32%
Research report	122	22%
Programme evaluation	106	19%
Policy report	87	16%
Conference report	20	4%
Other	35	7%

Source: *Prevention Project*.

Table 2: Regions Covered in the Literature

Region	Number of Studies	Percentage of Total
Global	183	34%
Europe	170	31%
Sub-Saharan Africa	54	10%
North America	44	8%
South Asia	22	4%
Middle East	22	4%
Oceania	19	3%
North Africa	14	3%
Southeast Asia	11	2%
Central Asia	7	1%

Source: *Prevention Project*.

5. For a full breakdown of the methodology's design, strengths and limitations, see Michael Jones and Emily Winterbotham, 'Research Methodology: The Prevention Project', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (May 2020).

In addition to the literature review, the paper draws on 50 key informant interviews (KIIs) and three focus group discussions conducted by the authors in Kenya between January and May 2019.⁶ Interview subjects were selected based on their experience in P/CVE policy or programming, and included government officials, representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), international NGOs and faith-based groups, and representatives of foreign embassies.

The findings of the Prevention Project were nevertheless limited by the availability of data, which can be attributed to several overlapping issues:

- P/CVE literature tends to re-examine the same relatively small set of case studies. Perhaps deriving from the narrow selection of organisations with the capacity and/or inclination to publish programme evaluations, the reliance on recycled analysis and examples heavily restricts learning.
- Similarly, there appears to be a propensity to repeatedly identify the same lessons rather than apply this learning in practice. Many of the contested assumptions and flawed theoretical models referenced in the Prevention Project have already been flagged in other studies, but they continue to routinely influence the design and delivery of interventions. This reflects a possible disjuncture between research and programming that could have a detrimental impact on innovation and, in the longer term, stall new insights and analysis.
- The depth of literature was also questionable: 20% of the reviewed studies were programme evaluations, but many displayed methodological shortcomings or leaned on output-level metrics, making it difficult to clearly establish effectiveness and impact. This included a lack of sex-disaggregated data on intervention participants and evaluation results.
- The Western-centric slant characterising a large proportion of P/CVE content reduced the generalisability of conclusions regarding efficacy. For instance, it was difficult to assess how transferrable specific lessons were to non-Western contexts as theories of change showing promise in one environment may not necessarily translate elsewhere. This is partially a consequence of the Prevention Project's methodology,⁷ but ultimately a clearer understanding of the relationship between context, intervention and outcome is needed to both gauge project impact and applicability across different spaces.⁸

6. For further details of the fieldwork in Kenya, see Michael Jones, 'A Template for the Global South? Understanding the Promises and Pitfalls of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya', RUSI Emerging Insights, December 2020.

7. See Jones and Winterbotham, 'Research Methodology'.

8. Todd C Helmus and Kurt Klein, 'Assessing Outcomes of Online Campaigns Countering Violent Extremism: A Case Study of the Redirect Method', Research Report, RAND Corporation, 2018; Karen J Greenberg, 'Counter-Radicalization via the Internet', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 668, No. 1, November 2016), pp. 165–79; Louis Reynolds and Henry Tuck, 'The Counter-Narrative Monitoring & Evaluation Handbook', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016.

Given these challenges, it is tough to draw categorical and empirically consistent conclusions and recommendations that span the breadth of the P/CVE field. The lessons outlined in this paper are primarily based on the findings of the Prevention Project, and are therefore subject to the quality, caveats and weaknesses of the literature review and fieldwork.⁹

9. For more details, see Jones and Winterbotham, 'Research Methodology'.

I. Cross-Cutting Lessons

COVERING VARIOUS THEMATIC areas such as women-centric programming, education interventions, P/CVE communications, mentorship and youth empowerment, the Prevention Project explored contested and promising approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism. This chapter draws on the analysis and fieldwork from the project as a whole to identify overarching findings and offer recommendations for how to improve P/CVE interventions.

Finding 1: Securitising other types of intervention, such as development programming, by conflating them with P/CVE could undermine their purpose while failing to achieve P/CVE objectives.

Given the blurred conceptual boundaries characterising P/CVE, it can often seem to overlap with a wide range of qualitatively distinct programmes, from peacebuilding and development to youth empowerment, social cohesion and gender equality.¹⁰ Linkages between these intervention categories may be beneficial, possibly even essential, but there is the risk that a highly politicised P/CVE agenda may co-opt such activities in dangerous ways.¹¹

Fieldwork in Lebanon, for instance, noted a tendency of some CSOs and local peacebuilding groups to rebrand and market their existing work as P/CVE to access new funding streams and better align with donor interests. In Kenya, several early drafts of County Action Plans similarly sought to inflate P/CVE coverage by absorbing local development initiatives,¹² and analogous patterns were evident across the thematic focus areas of the Prevention Project.¹³ This is problematic as, on a basic level, P/CVE involves skill sets that are not always synonymous with those of other interventions,

10. Steven Heydemann, 'Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice', US Institute of Peace, *Insights* (No. 1, Spring 2014); Jones and Winterbotham, 'Research Methodology'.

11. See Emily Winterbotham, 'What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (May 2020); Claudia Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism: Assessing the Evidence Base in Relation to P/CVE Interventions', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2021). Other examples include RUSI, 'STRIVE Horn of Africa: Lessons Learned', April 2017; Lynn Davies, 'Security, Extremism and Education: Safeguarding or Surveillance?', *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Vol. 64, No. 1, 2016), pp. 1–19; Lasse Lindekilde, 'Neo-Liberal Governing of "Radicals": Danish Radicalization Prevention Policies and Potential Iatrogenic Effects', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012), pp. 109–25.

12. Jones, 'A Template for the Global South?'; Ben Crisman et al., 'Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons from Kenya', Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, January 2020.

13. *Ibid.*

meaning a development, human rights or education-based CSO could be ‘ill-equipped to analyse and mitigate the risks associated with P/CVE’.¹⁴ Importantly, conflating these activities with P/CVE can also impose a securitised logic on their scope and delivery, leading to counterproductive results such as the stigmatisation, discrimination and alienation of target groups or individuals, particularly those already facing persecution or social marginalisation. Clear examples emerged in Claudia Wallner’s assessment of education-based initiatives.¹⁵

P/CVE can also end up instrumentalising and undermining other forms of intervention. Its merger with women’s rights and empowerment was a prominent case study in this respect as several reports expressed fears around: ‘bartering’ women’s rights away or conditioning them on a narrow set of P/CVE criteria; subordinating wider efforts to improve gender equality; and precipitating a backlash against women where they were perceived to be intelligence gatherers.¹⁶ In extreme circumstances, such projects can even contribute to radicalisation processes, with activities designed to prevent and counter violent extremism inadvertently creating an ‘aura of radicalness’, facilitating contacts between radicalised individuals, and enhancing distrust of the state.¹⁷ Additionally, potential participants may be reluctant to engage in processes tied to P/CVE for fear of undue scrutiny by security agencies, sapping the credibility and trust cultivated by practitioners¹⁸ and leaving targeted populations more suspicious, divided and vulnerable.

This is not to say that different intervention types cannot coexist. They can, and should, but simply re-hatting existing gender equality or development schemes to serve P/CVE goals, rather than introducing new purpose-built P/CVE projects or components, may weaken efforts to resolve broader systems of conflict and violence. Where appropriate, P/CVE initiatives could emulate or integrate activities that focus on, for instance, women’s empowerment, good governance or peacebuilding work if they are necessary to tackle the structural motivators, individual incentives and/or enabling factors that contribute to violent extremism in a particular context.¹⁹ However,

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14. See, for example, Kloé Tricot O’Farrell and Jordan Street, ‘A Threat Inflated? The Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism Agenda in Kyrgyzstan’, Saferworld, March 2019, <www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/a-threat-inflated-the-countering-and-preventing-violent-extremism-agenda-in-kyrgyzstan>, accessed 8 July 2021.
 15. Claudia Wallner, ‘Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Through Education Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2020).
 16. Winterbotham, ‘What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives’; Emily Winterbotham, ‘Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 2018; Jayne Huckerby, ‘The Complexities of Women, Peace, Security and Countering Violent Extremism’, *Just Security*, 24 September 2015.
 17. Jan Jämte and Rune Ellefsen, ‘The Consequences of Soft Repression’, *Mobilization* (Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020), pp. 383–404.
 18. Mario Novelli, ‘Education and Countering Violent Extremism: Western Logics from South to North?’, *Compare* (Vol. 47, No. 6, 2017), pp. 835–51.
 19. For a full typology of violent extremism drivers, see James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, ‘Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation’, *Whitehall Report*, 2-16 (June 2016).

they must subscribe to a theory of change that reflects the distinct sensitivities, purpose and constituencies of P/CVE programming, and avoid detracting from any independent efforts to achieve wider, entirely laudable non-P/CVE goals.

To summarise, adverse outcomes and externalities are possible if different projects, replete with their own objectives and mechanics, are automatically assimilated under the P/CVE umbrella. While synergy and coordination between interventions are critical for providing comprehensive, mutually reinforcing approaches (discussed in Finding 2), these linkages must be carefully developed and monitored to ensure they enable complementarity rather than appropriation.

Recommendations

- **A needs assessment should be conducted to determine the suitability and value-add of P/CVE in a particular environment.** Interventions focused on development, gender equality, peacebuilding, youth empowerment and education can overlap with and complement P/CVE approaches, and P/CVE projects may integrate these components in certain contexts, but they should not be automatically conflated with or subsumed under the P/CVE brand. They are qualitatively discrete forms of programming with different purposes, audiences, methods and priorities. A clear needs assessment should therefore be conducted to determine the suitability and value-add of P/CVE in a particular environment. If appropriate, a specific theory of change must be designed that not only speaks to P/CVE objectives and sensitivities but also acknowledges and manages the impact of P/CVE on other programmes operating in the same space.
- **Donors need to be more discerning and rigorous in their due diligence to verify that prospective projects are not simply a rehash or reframe of other interventions.** They may feature many of the same elements but must display a clear P/CVE-based theory of change. Crucially, donors should also ensure investments in P/CVE are not a zero-sum game that end up compromising development, peacebuilding or education commitments (to name a few examples) by reallocating funding or drawing away stakeholders. Violent extremism often exists within a wider ecosystem of insecurity and conflict that P/CVE cannot resolve in isolation. In shifting attention and resources to (comparatively) ‘new’ agendas like P/CVE, donors must not become tunnel-visioned – they should focus on complementarity and comparative advantage, preserving the effective work they are already doing while identifying and plugging gaps in coverage (such as the specific need to tackle violent extremism in certain contexts).

Finding 2: Integrated interventions can help mitigate harmful outcomes and increase the efficacy of P/CVE programmes.

Due to capacity and budgetary constraints, P/CVE interventions often rely on a limited set of activities and objectives that are not always commensurate with the complexity and scale of the threat they are trying to address. While this is not unique to P/CVE, the Prevention Project found numerous initiatives that struggled to satisfactorily tackle the issues they were prioritising, in part because these problems were intricately connected to wider dynamics beyond the scope of

their operations. This can often lead to ‘say–do’ gaps – an incongruency between practitioners’ rhetoric and actions that may frustrate the expectations of would-be beneficiaries.²⁰ If promised opportunities remain unfulfilled after the end of a programme, or if implementers fail to follow through after raising the hopes and aspirations of participants, projects risk producing sub-optimal or even negative outcomes.²¹

Communication-based activities provide a basic example: a counter-narrative condemning the use of violence but offering no practical alternatives to raise and ameliorate the grievances held by its audience may be quickly dismissed or face resistance.²² Even comparatively effective messaging efforts are susceptible to these shortcomings, with Casey Johnson arguing that ‘alternative narrative campaigns, no matter how locally tailored and creatively disseminated, will likely have a strictly limited impact if conducted in isolation’.²³ Nor are these problems restricted to discursive interventions. In Kenya, otherwise promising mentorship schemes that helped strengthen the skills and support networks of ‘at-risk’ youths found it difficult to maintain long-term impact, in part because project graduates still faced the same deeply engrained structural challenges such as unemployment, deprivation and social discrimination that contributed to their vulnerability in the first place.²⁴ They were now better placed to navigate these challenges but the programming did not address participants’ underlying problems (given most were outside its remit) nor offer a clear pathway to continue their development. As Michael Jones summarises, ‘despite the importance of follow-on resources like business start-up kits, micro-financing and vocational training to help sustain progress, demand is rarely satisfied’.²⁵

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20. Nafees Hamid, ‘Don’t Just Counter-Message; Counter-Engage’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 28 November 2018; Alex P Schmid, ‘Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, January 2014.
 21. For further discussion, see Michael Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (July 2020); Wallner, ‘The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism’; Beza Tesfaye et al., ‘“If Youth Are Given the Chance”: Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youth Support of Political Violence’, Mercy Corps, 2018; Mercy Corps, ‘Critical Choices Assessing the Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youths’ Propensity Towards Violence’, 2016; International Business and Technical Consultants Inc.
 22. Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’.
 23. Casey Johnson, ‘Alternative Methods of Alternative Messaging: Using Cell Phone Kiosks and Lo-Fi Production to Counter-Message in the Taliban’s Backyard’, 2016, cited in *ibid*.
 24. Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South?’. Similarly, an independent evaluation of STRIVE II’s mentorship scheme recommended ‘providing more formalised linking of mentees to employment or training opportunities, either through consortium partners or other means (for example, partnerships with other civil society organisations). In future iterations of the programme, this could be an expected or likely outcome at the end of the mentorship process rather than a possible outcome’. See Tom Fisher, Dan Range and John Cuddihy, ‘Evaluation of “Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE II) in Kenya”: Final Report’, September 2020, p. 10.
 25. Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South?’, p. 12.

In this context, integrated interventions – multi-dimensional programmes that incorporate concurrent and/or sequential strands of activity in mutually reinforcing ways – were found to be crucial. For a start, they help bridge the words and promises of practitioners with tangible impact on the ground. For instance, in his analysis of USAID’s radio-based ‘peace messaging’ in the Sahel, Daniel P Aldrich found local communities listened more regularly to the broadcasts if they also benefited from educational, development and capacity-building projects, resulting in ‘measurably different behaviours and norms than their less tuned in counter-parts’.²⁶ Similar findings were documented by Kate Ferguson, who drew analogies with the effective communications campaign for HIV/AIDS, which paired messaging with ‘medical provisions, practical strategies [and] community engagement’.²⁷ Engaging violent extremism across multiple vectors also allows P/CVE responses to become more holistic, strategic and, on the basis of the evidence, effective. Aligning with the conclusions drawn in Jones’s assessment of P/CVE communications, and Wallner’s reviews of youth empowerment and education initiatives, Emily Winterbotham’s appraisal of women-centric interventions shows that ‘a combined range of approaches – such as economic empowerment efforts, training women in P/CVE skills, increasing their interaction with the public sphere, and tackling gendered narratives – have a higher chance of success’.²⁸

Recommendations

- **Strategic frameworks including national (and subnational) action plans may offer an opportunity to facilitate collaboration and coordination between P/CVE interventions as well as various forms of horizontal integration.** Local-level interventions are unlikely to have the capacity or resources needed to run multiple activities on their own without compromising their standards or coverage.²⁹ Collaboration and coordination between different P/CVE projects can help offset (or at least mitigate) these constraints. However, this inevitably raises logistical and administrative barriers, not least because efforts to map other initiatives and stakeholders are often weak or incomplete. Strategic frameworks including national (and subnational) action plans may offer an opportunity to expedite this networking and facilitate consortiums and/or various forms of horizontal integration.³⁰ While it would require constant monitoring, communication and political buy-in, these processes could improve a currently fragmented P/CVE landscape, knitting

26. Daniel P Aldrich, ‘Radio as the Voice of God: Peace and Tolerance Radio Programming’s Impact on Norms’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 6, No. 6, 2012); Daniel P Aldrich, ‘First Steps Towards Hearts and Minds? USAID’s Countering Violent Extremism Policies in Africa’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 26, No. 3, 2014), pp. 523–46.

27. Kate Ferguson, ‘Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies’, Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research, 1 March 2016.

28. Winterbotham, ‘What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives’, p. 38.

29. Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South?’.

30. *Ibid.*

together various projects while allowing them to maintain their depth, granularity and specialisation.

- **Interdisciplinary linkages between P/CVE projects and wider (non-P/CVE) interventions should be facilitated (where appropriate) by donors to enable sustainable impact.** Violent extremism is intimately tied to, and incubated by, broader structural conditions that may be better addressed by development, peacebuilding or other modes of programming. Without ‘connective tissue’ between P/CVE projects and wider interventions, the former will likely struggle to create and sustain positive impact.³¹ Of course, nurturing and maintaining these links is easier said than done given the risk of securitisation and discrepancies in the mechanics, metrics, priorities and objectives that characterise different programme types. However, donors can play a key role as they set the goals, timetables and funding cycles of projects, and can consequently encourage and facilitate synchronicity between interventions where appropriate.
- **To understand the feasibility and suitability of these multifaceted approaches, donors will need to conduct regular needs assessments and context analyses, and encourage practitioner buy-in and input to ensure this is participatory and sensitive to local conditions.** Imposing a top-down, overly prescriptive or generic template for cooperation would be disastrous, reproducing many of the problems described in Finding 1.

Finding 3: Identifying intervention target groups should be guided by evidence-based risk and protective factors rather than assumptions when designing programmes.

This review found a tendency for some programmes to rely on assumptions of vulnerability without investigating whether the individuals or groups targeted are in fact those ‘at risk’ of radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism. As discussed in more detail in the Prevention Project papers on women-centric and youth-focused interventions,³² this includes the characterisation of young people, especially males,³³ as an inherent security threat,³⁴ and women’s allegedly ‘peaceful, moderate and maternal’ natures.³⁵ The dependency on stereotype and supposition is a failure in both practical and ethical terms. It securitises and ‘others’ individuals, groups and communities on the basis of often unsubstantiated and empirically flawed parameters that may misdirect interventions and waste resources on those who are at no discernible risk of engaging in terrorist activities.

Instead of relying on terrorist profiles based on monocausal explanations, the identification of ‘at-risk’ individuals would benefit from following more recent developments in P/CVE

31. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

32. Wallner, ‘The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism’; Winterbotham, ‘What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives’.

33. Marc Sommers, ‘Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism’, Promundo, 2019.

34. Wallner, ‘The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism’; Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’.

35. For a detailed discussion of this argument, see Winterbotham, ‘What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives’.

research. This includes the acknowledgement that a combination of factors across different risk domains, rather than a single cause, shapes individual trajectories into violent extremism, and that individual risk and protective factors interact with one another and affect each person differently.³⁶ While certain limitations persist in the research on risk and protective factors – for example, with regard to the generalisability of factors to different age groups and genders – the field has come a long way in recent years.³⁷

The application of existing research on risk and protective factors to analyse an individual's likelihood to engage in extremist violence can take the form of a threat assessment, which aims to detect violent intent prospectively, or a risk assessment, which takes place post-crime in correctional settings to gauge the risk of reoffending.³⁸ Assessment tools – such as the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA 2), the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+) or the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) – can help professionals who have received the necessary training in making judgements on the violent extremism risk an individual may pose. They combine more distal risk and protective factors, relating to an individual's family and social circle, mental health, exposure to extremist propaganda, and so forth, with proximal warning behaviours for violent extremist action, such as leakage of an individual's intent to commit an attack.³⁹ By focusing on specific warning behaviours that could give some indication of imminent risk, in addition to dynamic risk factors that might change over time (thus increasing or reducing the likelihood of an individual committing a violent act), these tools allow for more reliable assessments than approaches that only take into account static risk factors such as gender, socioeconomic status or previous criminal offences. While the accuracy of risk and threat assessments depends to a large extent on the knowledge, experience and expertise of the assessors, and the quality and availability of information about the individual in question, studies applying assessment tools, particularly the TRAP-18, to datasets of known terrorists found they were overall quite successful in 'post-dicting' ideologically motivated violent behaviour in the samples they studied.⁴⁰

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36. Paul Gill, 'Lone Actor Terrorism', in J Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann (eds), *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 257–67; Susan Fahey and Pete Simi, 'Pathways to Violent Extremism: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of the US Far-Right', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2019), pp. 42–66.
 37. Sarah L Desmarais et al., 'The State of Scientific Knowledge Regarding Factors Associated with Terrorism', *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (Vol. 4, No. 4, 2017), pp. 180–209.
 38. Monica Lloyd, 'Making Sense of Terrorist Violence and Building Psychological Expertise', in Meloy and Hoffmann (eds), *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, pp. 624–38.
 39. Menna Rose and John Morrison, 'An Exploratory Analysis of Leakage Warning Behavior in Lone-Actor Terrorists', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (March 2021), pp. 1–36.
 40. Darin J Challacombe and Paul A Lucas, 'Postdicting Violence with Sovereign Citizen Actors: An Exploratory Test of the TRAP-18', *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 2019), pp. 51–59; J Reid Meloy et al., 'Some TRAP-18 Indicators Discriminate Between Terrorist Attackers and Other Subjects of National Security Concern', *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (Vol. 6, No. 2, 2019),

While the research on risk and protective factors, as well as the tools designed for the assessment of risk, are inevitably limited and offer an imperfect approximation of potential candidates for P/CVE interventions, they can provide a better basis for judgements on inclusion or exclusion compared with generic assumptions about risk and vulnerability. Assessments should integrate multidisciplinary perspectives and contextual analysis based on local input, gender sensitivities and conflict scanning to strengthen their design where possible. They must also be carefully managed to mitigate the alienation of vulnerable individuals and ensure informed consent is received from participants. A comprehensive risk assessment framework can also be a useful monitoring tool to evaluate a programme participant's personal development.⁴¹

Recommendations

- **To better allocate limited programme resources, implementers should use multidisciplinary risk and threat assessment frameworks that leverage evidence-based catalogues of risk and protective factors**, many of which are already available but require adaptation to reflect contextual specificities and the perspectives of local stakeholders.⁴² The focus of such frameworks on identifying potential warning behaviours, rather than 'problematic' ideas, thoughts or beliefs, can help to avoid stigmatising certain groups while shifting the focus towards intentions to *act* violently. Given that the successful application of these tools requires extensive professional expertise, the selection and training of those tasked with identifying potential intervention recipients should be a priority in programme design and implementation.
- **Governments and donors need to redress the gender stereotyping of 'men as militants' and 'women and girls as non-violent victims'**. This dynamic entrenches a disproportionate P/CVE preoccupation with men and boys⁴³ and fails to tackle women's

pp. 93–110; J Reid Meloy and Paul Gill, 'The Lone-Actor Terrorist and the TRAP-18', *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016), pp. 37–52.

41. Jack Barclay, 'Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers (STREET): A Case Study in Government-Community Partnership and Direct Intervention to Counter Violent Extremism', Policy Brief, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, December 2011.
42. Gayatri Sahgal and Timothy Kimaiyo, 'Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: An Evaluation of a Mentorship Intervention in Kenya', *Journal for Deradicalization* (No. 24, 2020), pp. 113–60.
43. Sarah Ladbury, 'Women and Extremism: The Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming', Department for International Development, January 2015; Jayne Huckerby, 'Women, Gender, and the UK Government's CVE Efforts: Looking Back and Forward', in Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai (eds), 'A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism', Hedayah and the Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016, p. 89; Sofia Patel, 'The Sultanate of Women: Exploring Female Roles in Perpetrating and Preventing Violent Extremism', Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017, cited in Winterbotham, 'What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Interventions'.

radicalisation.⁴⁴ To remedy this, the infrastructure for women-specific prevention and deradicalisation programmes must be supported in line with existing UN resolutions.⁴⁵ More broadly, there is also a need for greater context-specific research on how gender norms contribute towards violent extremism on a structural and individual level.

Finding 4: Those in the wider social environments of ‘at-risk’ individuals are often well placed to identify signs of radicalisation and warning behaviours, but it should not be assumed that they are always able to spot or will report such concerns.

Individuals who are in regular contact with the prospective target groups of P/CVE interventions, including family members, peers, community members and frontline practitioners, can be well placed to identify and reach those ‘at risk’ of engaging in violent extremism.⁴⁶ For example, would-be terrorists sometimes display certain warning behaviours before engaging in extremist violence, giving individuals in their social environments the opportunity to intervene or report their concerns. Research on lone-actor terrorism has revealed that leakage behaviours, which play an important role in the risk and threat assessment frameworks discussed earlier, are particularly prevalent.⁴⁷ In a 2014 study analysing a sample of 119 people who planned or engaged in acts of lone-actor terrorism, Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert found that others were aware of these individuals’ extremist commitment in 79% of cases, while friends and family were aware of a specific intent to engage in extremist violence in 64% of cases, and details of the attack planning leaked to others in 58% of cases.⁴⁸

However, many of the interventions reviewed as part of the Prevention Project failed to consider that parents, colleagues, friends or frontline practitioners may not always understand the warning signs and could either overreact or not know what to do in response, leading to inappropriate referrals.⁴⁹ Even if signs of radicalisation to violent extremism are accurately detected, parents, peers and CSOs may be hesitant to report concerns due to fears of unknown consequences or the desire to avoid ‘spying’ on their own communities and households. As discussed in Wallner’s

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- 44. Katherine E Brown, ‘Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures’, in Margaret L Satterthwaite and Jayne C Huckerby (eds), *Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism: Human Rights Perspectives* (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), cited in Winterbotham, ‘What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Interventions’.
 - 45. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, S/RES/1325, 31 October 2000; UNSCR 2242, S/RES/2242, 13 October 2015; UNSCR 2396, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017.
 - 46. Tina Wilchen Christensen, ‘Lessons Learned from P/CVE Youth Mentorship’, RUSI Conference Report, October 2019; Davey, Tuck and Amarasingam, ‘An Imprecise Science’.
 - 47. Rose and Morrison, ‘An Exploratory Analysis of Leakage Warning Behavior in Lone-Actor Terrorists’.
 - 48. Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert, ‘Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists’, *Journal of Forensic Sciences* (Vol. 59, No. 2, 2014), pp. 425–35.
 - 49. For a more detailed discussion, see Wallner, ‘Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Through Education Initiatives’ and Wallner, ‘The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism’.

review of youth-focused interventions, expecting community members to flag suspicions to P/CVE service providers or law enforcement agencies can add to the securitisation of communities. It may also be perceived as trying to shift the burden of prevention, and the blame for any failure to detect and report radicalisation and recruitment, on to civilians, peers and family members.⁵⁰

Moreover, some of the reviewed P/CVE programmes lean on unproven assumptions about who is in the best position to notice and deter or disrupt radicalisation/recruitment processes. This includes the presumption, discussed in Winterbotham's assessment of women-centric interventions, that women/mothers are uniquely placed to address violent extremism in their families due to their inherent maternal abilities to spot and respond to radicalisation. It also includes a failure, covered in Wallner's review of youth-focused interventions, to account for people's membership of 'virtual communities' (often supplementing physical networks). In this context, 'proximate' members of the local community might not always be the best point of contact for reaching and engaging with 'at-risk' individuals because they do not necessarily occupy or access the same social geography.⁵¹ Consequently, the definition and delineation of what constitutes a 'community' needs to be carefully defined in each specific case, as well as identifying the most appropriate actors to engage with.⁵²

Recommendations

- **In order to overcome reluctance in reporting suspicions about the radicalisation/recruitment of individuals within communities, local authorities and police forces should invest in establishing rapport and trust with community members.** This can be done through outreach work with relevant communities to build closer links and trust-based relationships between parents, young people and other community members and local authorities, including the police.⁵³
- **Voluntary referral mechanisms should be implemented to give friends, family and other members of the community the opportunity to report their concerns about an individual without escalating the concern directly to law enforcement.**⁵⁴ Such a mechanism should be combined with trust-building measures to overcome concerns related to reporting individuals, as flagged in several Prevention Project papers. Referrals should be followed up with professional assessments to analyse the actual risk

50. Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism'.

51. Sommers, 'Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism'; *ibid.*

52. Winterbotham, 'What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives'; Wallner, 'Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Through Education Initiatives'; Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism'.

53. Winterbotham, 'What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives'; Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism'.

54. OSCE, *Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Navigating Challenges and Protecting Human Rights: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2019).

an individual poses as well as their specific intervention needs, thus providing the basis for bespoke interventions.⁵⁵

- **Decisions that prospective partners make to help identify and reach target groups should be based on careful assessments of the social context of potential recipients.** This includes an assessment of the physical and online communities with which ‘at-risk’ individuals most identify.

Finding 5: Relatability and access to target populations should guide decisions on who to involve and support in P/CVE programme implementation.

Having the ‘right’ messenger/interlocutor is key. What this means in practice is contingent on contextual particularities, cultural currents and social norms, audience composition, subject matter and, at a basic level, personal preference. For example, credible messengers engaging mainstream society will be different from those influencing ‘the most radicalised individuals away from violent extremism’.⁵⁶

However, there do appear to be some discernible trends. While government institutions can marshal significant resources and expertise to support P/CVE activities such as capacity-building and broad-based public awareness raising, they are rarely suitable candidates to front programmes that engage vulnerable populations. Taking counter-messaging as an example, state officials are often viewed as compromised or antagonistic by target audiences.⁵⁷

Additionally, interventions cannot just rely on the ‘usual suspects’ as they may not have the necessary reach or legitimacy to resonate with ‘at-risk’ groups. For instance, CSOs are regularly considered the preferred vehicle for delivering P/CVE programming given their perceived ‘trust, credibility and access within communities susceptible to violent extremism’,⁵⁸ and in many cases they are important agents of influence. However, they are not universally authoritative, and can sometimes be fairly peripheral to the social circuitries of target individuals, function as ‘gatekeepers’ in name only, or be dismissed as government proxies if they are considered too closely affiliated – financially, politically or discursively – with the state.⁵⁹ It is therefore important to map out the networks and brokers that actually define the social ecology of project recipients, which may include peers, ‘informal’ leaders and role models that are often overlooked in more conventional stakeholder mappings.⁶⁰

55. *Ibid.*

56. Talene Bilazarian, ‘Countering Violent Extremist Narratives Online: Lessons from Offline Countering Violent Extremism’, *Policy & Internet* (Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2020), pp. 46–65.

57. Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’.

58. Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress’, p. 12.

59. See Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’; Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South?’.

60. Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South?’. For other examples of empowering ‘alternative voices’, see European Commission, ‘Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Stories from Around the Globe’, Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, March 2021.

The P/CVE communications literature also emphasises the value of messengers who have the necessary ‘lived experience’ to converse using the same cultural, social and dialectical nuances as local VE recruiters.⁶¹ Analogous claims were flagged by Wallner, who argues those with similar ethnic, socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds to participants can make youth-focused interventions more authentic and relatable.⁶² Likewise, Winterbotham’s analysis of mentorship programmes notes the strength of ‘matching’ mentees to mentors from a comparable age group, who ‘have a more favourable effect on changing their behaviour than ... teachers or adults’.⁶³ While wider research stresses that ‘elements of similarity and dissimilarity’ can actually help clients explore their own ‘multiple identities’,⁶⁴ and does not necessarily find clear differential benefits between ‘same-race/ethnicity’ and ‘cross-race/ethnicity’ mentorship approaches,⁶⁵ the affinity ‘at-risk’ individuals are likely to share with those from familiar circumstances and backgrounds can help strengthen trust and relationship building.

Importantly, the role of ‘formers’ in this context remains contested.⁶⁶ They are often referenced as effective messengers in P/CVE campaigns:⁶⁷ relaying their own experience of identity formation and transformation; ‘deglamourising’ violent groups; offering a more engaging set of emotive stories; and providing a granular understanding of the discourse, ideologies and networks that comprise extremist milieus.⁶⁸ However, the empirical evidence substantiating

61. Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’; Michael Pizzuto, ‘Alter-Messaging: The Credible, Sustainable Counterterrorism Strategy’, Policy Brief, Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, May 2013.

62. Wallner, ‘The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism’.

63. Emily Winterbotham, ‘How Effective Are Mentorship Interventions? Assessing the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (September 2020).

64. For example, see Basia Spalek and Lynn Davies with Laura Zahra McDonald, ‘Key Evaluation Findings of the West Midlands (WM) 1-2-1 Mentoring Scheme’, University of Birmingham, August 2010, cited in Winterbotham, ‘How Effective are Mentorship Interventions?’.

65. David L DuBois and Fasika Alem, ‘Mentoring and Domestic Radicalization: National Mentoring Resource Center Research Review’, National Mentoring Resource Center, May 2017, cited in Winterbotham, ‘How Effective are Mentorship Interventions?’.

66. Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’, p. 33; Marina Tapley and Gordon Clubb, ‘The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism’, Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019. In contrast, there is a significant tranche of work examining the role of former combatants in conflict studies and disengagement/deradicalisation.

67. Pizzuto, ‘Alter-Messaging’; Riazat Butt and Henry Tuck, ‘European Counter-Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation: A Comparative Evaluation of Approaches in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Germany’, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014.

68. For examples, see Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, ‘Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What Are the Implications for Government?’, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013; Alejandro Beutel et al., ‘Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives’, *Journal of Terrorism Research* (Vol. 7, No. 3, 2016), pp. 35–49; Pizzuto, ‘Alter-Messaging’; Kurt Braddock and John F Morrison, ‘Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 43, No. 6, 2020), pp. 468–92.

these propositions remains limited, with the Prevention Project uncovering surprisingly little research specifically assessing their agency in and impact on P/CVE.⁶⁹

Recommendations

- **Assumptions about who is best placed to reach ‘at-risk’ individuals must be continuously interrogated and tested.** The input of CSOs, various types of mentors, peers and other stakeholders may be beneficial in certain contexts, but this is highly dependent on circumstance. In other cases, they could be ineffective or even detrimental to project goals. A comprehensive stakeholder mapping (including informal authority structures) and analysis, where possible, of relevant social networks should condition which partnerships and interlocutors are deemed appropriate.
- **Although they may (intuitively) appear relatable and therefore effective partners and messengers for P/CVE, the role of ‘formers’ needs further research to understand the scope, suitability, sensitivity and practicalities of their contributions.** Lessons from other disciplines, such as conflict studies, can offer useful insights, but this must be supplemented by empirical data from different forms of P/CVE intervention.
- **All partners involved in P/CVE programming should receive the necessary level of pastoral care, capacity-building and support to mitigate harm and ensure they are safe and effective in their activities.** Just because actors are relatable, influential and/or trusted by ‘at-risk’ populations does not mean they are sufficiently equipped to operate within a P/CVE project. Even frontline practitioners such as teachers and social workers would benefit from training in how to engage in the specific context of violent extremism, including a better understanding of its causes and manifestations, and suitable prevention methods. As mentioned in Finding 1, there is also a risk of backlash if these stakeholders are seen to be intelligence gatherers, so any engagement in P/CVE must be carefully assessed against the risk of harm.
- **Partnerships and collaboration cannot be used as an excuse to outsource responsibility for P/CVE programmes to local stakeholders.** Any engagement must be cooperative, ethical and carefully managed, with ultimate accountability resting with the lead organisation(s) and donor(s).

Finding 6: The process of engaging in P/CVE interventions and the trust built between intervention providers and participants play an important role in the impact an intervention can have on participants.

The appeal and persuasiveness of violent extremist recruiters usually consists of more than ideology alone, and can include (among many other factors) a sense of belonging, significance and meaning.⁷⁰ As Wallner discusses in her review of youth-focused interventions, P/CVE

69. Jones, ‘Through the Looking Glass’, p. 33; Tapley and Clubb, ‘The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism’.

70. Shandon Harris-Hogan and Kate Barrelle, ‘Young Blood: Understanding the Emergence of a New Cohort of Australian Jihadists’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 32, No. 7, 2020), pp. 1391–412;

activities that provide similar (or greater) benefits and socialisation processes can be valuable in reducing the leverage and attraction of violent extremist groups.⁷¹ However, these dynamics are often time intensive and require skilful project delivery and the input of effective interlocutors to help practitioners build the necessary relationships with 'at-risk' individuals.

Similar findings were evident in relation to P/CVE communications, with research suggesting that interpersonal bonds can help make a messenger convincing, a message resonate and P/CVE engagement more effective.⁷² Such connections are difficult to artificially replicate, so stakeholders that can already enjoy organic linkages to, and trust with, vulnerable individuals are generally well placed to support programming.⁷³ It is also important to note these relationships and social networks are not static and must be continuously monitored to identify (and track): entry points and prospective partnerships; actors able to leverage the necessary social capital; the risks involved; and any change in such dynamics over time as an intervention is conducted. If pre-existing partnerships or appropriate mediators are not available, there are no quick fixes, meaning successful interventions require a long process of building trust.⁷⁴

As the thematic content of P/CVE projects obviously remains important, trust and personalised engagement can be critical ingredients dictating an intervention's success as they often underpin identity formation, meaning seeking and social solidarities.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the Prevention Project found these elements were often overlooked in programme funding, design, delivery, and monitoring and evaluation. This likely has to do with the fact that they do not always provide clearly measurable outputs and tend to require extensive engagement in one location – conditions that are sometimes unavailable or only possible with longer-term commitments from donors.⁷⁶

Rudie J M Neve et al., 'Radicalisation and Travelling to Syria Among Delinquent Youths: A Case Study from the Netherlands', *Journal for Deradicalization* (No. 22, Spring 2020); Yvon Dandurand, 'Social Inclusion Programmes for Youth and the Prevention of Violent Extremism', in Marco Lombardi et al. (eds), *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2015); Arie W Kruglanski and Preben Bertelsen, 'Life Psychology and Significance Quest: A Complementary Approach to Violent Extremism and Counter-Radicalisation', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (Vol. 15, No. 1, 2020), pp. 1–22; Arie Kruglanski et al., 'The Making of Violent Extremists', *Review of General Psychology* (Vol. 22, No. 1, 2018), pp. 107–20.

71. Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism'.

72. See Jones, 'Through the Looking Glass'.

73. Bilazarian, 'Countering Violent Extremist Narratives Online'.

74. *Ibid.*

75. John Morrison et al., 'The Role of (Dis)Trust in Disengagement and Deradicalisation', Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, July 2021.

76. Jones, 'Through the Looking Glass'; Wallner, 'The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism'.

Recommendations

- **Donors' funding cycles and scope for project designs should better accommodate the 'hidden elements' of interventions that contribute substantially to their success**, such as the inclusion of trusted interlocutors and investment in relationship building. Any decision on who to involve in the implementation of interventions should be locally informed and take into account the level of trust that already exists between the communities receiving the interventions and the potential interlocutors.
- **To allow for the development of trust between programme implementers and beneficiaries, CSOs and other organisations involved in implementation should ensure consistency in staffing and delivery.** Where projects are limited by short timeframes or budgetary shortages, provisions should be made to help connect those recipients who still require support to other (ongoing) programmes to ensure this is not abruptly cut off.

Conclusion

THIS PAPER SYNTHESISES analysis and fieldwork conducted under the Prevention Project as a whole, drawing on P/CVE interventions from different thematic and geographic contexts to identify common findings and overarching lessons.

Perhaps the most immediate takeaway is the problem of the evidence base itself. Almost all the documents reviewed as part of this project identified a lack of empirically grounded data in the studies they were reviewing. While there were exceptions, a large proportion tended to re-examine the same well-known P/CVE programmes, rely heavily on description or focus almost exclusively on output-level metrics. These issues could be ascribed, at least in part, to the inherent challenges besetting evaluation work⁷⁷ – difficulties shared with analogous fields such as peacebuilding and development – and the fact that programme evaluations only amounted to 20% of collected material. Nevertheless, this makes it tough to draw clear conclusions about efficacy and impact.

This ambiguity has bled into the suppositions and logics framing P/CVE practice, with unproven or specious claims repeatedly infiltrating the design and delivery of interventions. Many have been questioned or debunked in the literature and yet continually re-emerge in various guises. Perhaps testament to the limited reach of research, or an inevitable lag between programmatic innovation and its inclusion in publicly accessible studies, the resilience of these assumptions seems to reflect an ongoing disjuncture between the identification and application of learning.

Yet, there are also positive trends and lessons coming out of the analysis that could offer a pathway forward for P/CVE. Based on the studies reviewed by the Prevention Project, it seems P/CVE is more likely to be effective when interventions are highly localised, contextualised and benefit from stronger coordination with (and referral to) wider development and peacebuilding initiatives, among others, to help increase sustainability and impact – as long as these programmes are not co-opted by the P/CVE agenda. This balance will often remain ad hoc, as it depends on fluctuating needs and dynamics across time and space, and therefore requires constant monitoring. However, in certain cases the relationship can be complementary, mutually reinforcing and necessary to address insecurity and violence at a systemic level.

Additionally, different ways of understanding what constitutes a community and who should be engaged in delivering P/CVE interventions, based on factors such as relatability and trust, can help reach vulnerable individuals more effectively. However, this should not only accommodate

77. For a more detailed analysis of the challenges and advances characterising evaluation in P/CVE, see Andrew Glazzard and Michael Jones, 'Improving the Evaluation of Interventions to Counter and Prevent Terrorism and Violent Extremism', Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism (CT-MORSE), 26 October 2020.

the fluidity of social networks, personal relationships, and any change in contextual variables or modes of social interaction (such as those produced by the coronavirus pandemic), but the need for training and safeguarding – even for those that already have experience in pastoral care. These partnerships are not an excuse to outsource responsibility for P/CVE, and it is important to avoid any blanket assumptions regarding influence, especially in relation to the (contested) role of ‘formers’ where the data remains surprisingly sparse.

New or updated tools can also address, or at least mitigate, the fundamental problem of targeting in P/CVE. Evidence-based approaches for identifying who is ‘at risk’ of engaging in violent extremism, drawing on recent research into risk and protective factors as well as warning behaviours that may indicate a ramp up towards violent activity, offer a more erudite approximation of groups and individuals to prioritise. Of course, such models are never perfect and should be supplemented as necessary to reflect contextual specificities and local input (where appropriate). Likewise, they should be embedded within robust monitoring and evaluation systems that are active across the project’s lifespan to track and facilitate mid-course adjustments, plug information gaps and ensure they are not doing any harm.

Ultimately, there is plenty of ongoing work aimed at improving P/CVE interventions, with methodological, programmatic and analytical experimentation offering new insights and opportunities to strengthen its theoretical and empirical foundations. In this respect, the Prevention Project was designed to be a tentative step in trying to collate and unpack these developments and wider lessons. By doing so, the process has also exposed significant constraints, ambiguities and problems that continue to pervade the field. If P/CVE is to remain a relevant resource for global policymaking, and a valuable addition to practitioners’ repertoires, these issues must be confronted and resolved.

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