

Executive Summary and Recommendations

A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities

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Systematic Review Summary

Donors supporting overseas counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate positive outcomes, value for money, and accountability to taxpayers. In April 2020, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) commissioned the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) to conduct a systematic review of literature on CT and P/CVE interventions to assist policy and programming decisions of the Government of the Netherlands. The review addressed the effectiveness of CT and P/CVE interventions in the three strands of greatest interest for the MFA: 1. youth engagement, 2. reintegration, and 3. capacity building of national government and law enforcement. The review collected and synthesised evidence on effectiveness (i.e., what works and what does not), conditions for effectiveness, underlying assumptions, and evidence gaps for each of the three strands. The research strands were complemented by a selective assessment of existing literature/systematic reviews in two pre-identified RELATED areas - work with gangs and delinquents/criminals for strands 1 and 2, and security sector reform (SSR) for strand 3. RELATED areas were identified as similar types of interventions with different populations, which could potentially help fill gaps through sharing of lessons learned.

Cross-Strand Findings & Recommendations

Findings:

- The evidence base on effectiveness is very limited. It is clear there has not been enough investment in researching, monitoring and evaluating programmes and types of intervention, including these interventions' wider effects. As a result, evidence of effectiveness of CT and P/CVE programming is largely limited to whether specific projects succeeded in delivering their activities. Evidence of impact (i.e., the extent to which interventions have reduced terrorist threats or the incidence of radicalisation) is very scarce.
- Even where programmes appear to have had beneficial effects, due to the way in which many programmes are designed with multiple components and types of intervention, it is difficult to say which "ingredient" is really working.
- The contexts within which CT and P/CVE programming takes place matters, both at effectiveness and impact levels. Programming must recognise and integrate into designs the importance of interplay between individual grievances, structural drivers (e.g., repression, poverty, human rights abuses, etc.) as well as enabling environments (e.g., presence of radicalising mentors/narratives, social networks with VE connections, etc.) in relation to the wider context when designing P/CVE programmes.
- Most interventions include training workshops as part of capacity-building components. However, research suggests that these types of programmes are unlikely to achieve significant and sustainable impacts unless they are part of long-term interventions that address institutional capacity gaps (e.g., security forces' abuse of human rights, structural inequal representation of the population, etc.) systematically and strategically.
- Programmes need to be specific about which populations they are targeting (e.g., age, gender, location, etc.) and include a gender lens. For example, lack of attention to which geographical areas have populations at risk of radicalisation and recruitment to VE groups, lack of definition of age categories of youth, and lack of usage of a gender lens have often led to lost opportunities for effective programming and learning from evaluation.

Recommendations:

- **Establish clarity from the outset of what the intervention is trying to achieve.** Donors and implementers need to ensure that programme designs explicitly articulate their intervention logic or theories of change. These should be realistic (given limited resources and the complex environments in which interventions take place) and consider the potential positive impact of a collective effort/multi-level stakeholder approach. Clear

definitions of key goals and intended results are essential to being able to effectively monitor and evaluate programmes, as well as monitoring these throughout the duration of the programme. Time and budget investments are needed to research contextually specific indicators which can be tested throughout the cycle of the programming.

- **VE is political and contextual, the response must take this into account.** In the design phase a careful assessment of the environment (e.g., political, social, religious, and economic factors, etc.) must be included and regularly revisited in the programming cycle (e.g., annually, to confirm priorities and indicators). Programmes must be adaptable to changes which might occur during implementation, through continuous monitoring and evaluation (e.g., if a government provides amnesty in the middle of a rehabilitation programme, this will have a significant impact on programming and must be accounted for).
- **Understand your target group.** Programming should be designed to account for demographics (e.g., geographical location, age, gender, etc.) and address the needs of target populations. This analysis is necessary for evaluation of intervention impact. Also, greater attention to target population will support confidence building in ensuring programmes are reaching the intended population.
- **Use of a gender lens is essential to effectiveness.** A gender lens should be used on all types of programming to gather gender disaggregated data and develop a deeper understanding of the implications of gender – including impact of socially engrained gender roles on drivers of violence, participation in terrorism and effective security solutions.
- **Invest in competency-based programming and research.** Donors, implementers and researchers should develop more multi-disciplinary approaches, considering the larger bodies of evidence available in more mature fields. This could include taking lessons from closely related fields such as criminology, but also, for example, the wider fields of education and businesses management, where training methods have been developed and tested over a longer period. Studies have suggested that theories of change and evaluation techniques can be taken from the included RELATED fields of gang/criminal intervention and SSR. Therefore, these should be considered during CT and P/CVE programming design, implementation and evaluation (each of the strand specific sections below offer more detail).
- **Enable assessment of both the sum and the parts.** Composite programmes need to be designed so that interventions can be evaluated individually.
- **Donors should invest in research-oriented** interventions, to move CT and P/CVE evaluations to the theory testing stage. This should include, but not be limited to, utilising experimental and quasi-experimental designs where possible and ethical, and testing control groups against populations receiving interventions. Also, programmes should seek multiple perspectives, including from social scientists and practitioners. Every effort should be made to have independent evaluators.
- **Capacity gaps are a structural problem.** Ensure that capacity building programmes do not rely on ephemeral training workshops alone, but address capacity gaps more sustainably and strategically as part of a larger programming base.
- **Invest in the knowledge base.** Donors and implementers should allow the publication of evaluations wherever possible, regardless of the outcome (evaluations showing ineffectiveness are as valuable as ones showing effectiveness). However, while limitations and weaknesses provide valuable learning opportunities when identified, it is also imperative to ensure that interventions do not cause harm. Therefore, risk management strategies need to be in place to offset potential for doing harm and counter-productive outcomes.

Strand Summaries, Findings & Recommendations

Interventions Targeting Youth Engagement

The youth engagement strand included programmes with “at-risk” youth focused on encouraging them to reconsider their path towards radicalisation and/or helping them to resist recruitment. The types of programming it intended to address were setting up youth groups; youth mentorship programmes; youth sport programmes; training youth and youth leaders on critical thinking, empowerment, and de-radicalisation; youth vocational training and income generation programmes; and developing online/media counter-narratives in cooperation with youth. The 33 FOCUS studies included independent and internal programme evaluations, as well as theoretical evaluations of programmes. It is worth noting that almost all the studies represent some kind of educational intervention. However, these varied on types of skill being taught and informal versus formal education environments for the interventions. This strand also included analysis of RELATED literature reviews, examining programming aimed at preventing gang and criminal/delinquent activity in youth.

Findings:

- Multiple types of interventions that were expected to be found, in fact, did not have enough evidence to feature in this review. There are several types of youth engagement interventions commonly used as P/CVE tools which are based on little to no evidence and are commonly carried out without sufficient measurement and evaluation.
- There is some evidence that many youth engagement P/CVE approaches are simply borrowed from programmes aiming to keep youth from committing crimes. When local community and non-governmental organisations are engaged to implement short-term, low-budget programmes, they are often just converting programmes which they are already running (potentially for other purposes) and adding in the required context to gain access to CT or P/CVE funding. This encourages inconsistency in focus and design across programming, as they may be converted from programmes focussing on criminal behaviour or ideology or community engagement, etc. It also adds an extra layer of difficulty to monitoring and evaluation, as the start and end dates of these types of programmes are so indistinct. Many practitioners in these types of environments lack confidence they are actually engaging the most "at risk" youth.
- Overall, many of the evaluations of various types of educational interventions indicate that awareness and attitudes of project beneficiaries towards extremism can be improved, but there is a lack of measurement and evidence linking this to behavioural changes or reduced willingness to participate in violence.

From the RELATED study, the following additional conclusions are potentially relevant:

- Many of the same strategies and types of intervention as in the P/CVE space were examined in relation to gang involvement (e.g., providing interventions on the assumption that lack of economic opportunity drives youths into gangs). However, these were not found to be backed by any more significant an experimental or quasi-experimental evidence base than exists in P/CVE.
- There are significant conceptual and logistical challenges to measuring effectiveness and impact for preventive programming. However, evaluation strategies can be improved by commitment to independent evaluation, triangulation of data, and use of experimental, quasi-experimental or other control group-based designs where possible and ethical.
- Mentorship programmes are an intervention type based on the development of an interpersonal relationship between mentor and mentee, with a variety of activities (e.g., educational or vocational training, interaction with alternative peer groups, etc.) chosen based on the needs of the mentee. The aim is to support the mentee to reduce their risk of radicalisation or recruitment to VE. This approach is identified as having an overall positive and statistically significant level of effectiveness. Mentorships can be used to engage youth at the

preventative and disengagement stages and include a wide variety of individually tailored activities. This intervention type should be tested further and expanded where possible.

Recommendations:

- **Donors need to commit time and resources to allow proper design, implementation and evaluation of programming.** Often programmes targeting youth (e.g., sport programmes, community outreach, criminal/gang deterrence, etc.) are being recycled to fit P/CVE goals without evidence of whether they are achieving the desired impact. More evidence is needed to better determine effectiveness and impact, and for multi-component programmes evaluation needs to be disaggregated.
- **Development of an effective selection process** is necessary to ensuring that programming is reaching the youth at risk of VE. Often youth engagement programmes, especially those implemented through the educational system, target a wide audience; therefore, they perhaps miss focusing on those most “at risk”.
- **Mentorship programmes should be tested further and scaled up** where possible in the preventative space, as evidence shows a consistent positive effect from this type of intervention. This requires a highly tailored approach, the resources to include multiple activities, and effective matching of mentors to mentees.

Reintegration: Disengaging Violent Extremists

The reintegration strand assessed effectiveness of CT and P/CVE interventions targeting reintegration of participants in VE, which included programmes aimed at disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration as part of the same process. The type of activities mentioned include support for the reintegration of (former) detainees, members of terrorist groups and ex-combatants. Rehabilitation and reintegration can involve vocational training, coaching and psychosocial support, and in-kind or cash support. The 15 FOCUS studies covered nine interventions in the Global South and six in the Global North. Seven studies were evaluations, including one mid-term self-evaluation. The remaining eight studies were academic reviews, with evaluative perspectives that provide evidence against the research questions informing this review. All the interventions were implemented by governments or implementing partners, providing support to a government led process. As such, it is evident that rehabilitation and reintegration programmes reviewed in this study are predominantly led by governments and placed within a broader national strategy to counter and prevent terrorism.

Findings:

- There is a lack of clarity around what programmes are seeking to achieve, particularly with the role of ideology. For example, ideologically focused programming (i.e., programming based on changing an individual’s beliefs) might require different types of interventions (e.g., value-based education or religious teaching, etc.) than social or economic reintegration (e.g., vocational training, job placement, or support to entrepreneurship, etc.). The design of a programme must be clear about what it addresses (i.e., disengagement versus de-radicalisation) and provide measures of success.
- The review clearly suggests a need to measure impact in more diverse ways than purely recidivism, including the collection of post-exit data on other factors (e.g., economic opportunity, social and political engagement, and attitudinal change, etc.).
- Work in prisons dominates the literature, but this can only be transferred to centre or community contexts to a limited degree. Programmes need to be more explicit about the incentives or disincentives associated with rehabilitation efforts, in order for evaluations to establish effectiveness and impact more comprehensively.
- In areas where VE groups hold territory or active conflict is ongoing between state and non-state actors, there is a particular need to identify the national position on amnesty of defectors and to discuss what type of defector is eligible for rehabilitation versus prosecution, so that justice and human rights are upheld.

From the RELATED study, the following additional conclusions are potentially relevant:

- The state of evaluation appears to be better in relation to disengagement programmes focussing on gangs. Lessons can be learned on transferrable evaluation strategies, which might benefit the P/CVE field. For example, the importance of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation designs, as well as having independent evaluations. Also, the triangulation of data – noting, however, that data might be more difficult to come by in the VE space, due to lack of indicators (e.g., police statistics on criminal activity levels) and the relatively less common nature of radicalisation.
- Supervision (e.g., incarceration, probation, etc.) and sanctions do not show significant impact in reducing recidivism and can even have the opposite effect of increasing reoffence rates. Rehabilitation (i.e., support provided with the aim for individuals who have been involved in VE to change, thus enabling reintegration into mainstream society), on the other hand, shows consistent positive results. However, there is often less political focus on and commitment to rehabilitation in correctional strategies. Therefore, this could be emphasised further for policy makers and practitioners.

Recommendations:

- **Design multidimensional programmes.** The most effective programmes identified in the review included multiple components such as needs assessment, rehabilitation initiatives, and after-care or post-exit support. These, however, are resource intensive. Better results were also evident in societies (such as the Scandinavian, Dutch and Australian) where the state plays a strong role across sectors (e.g., security, social, education, etc.).
- **Measure steps towards social, economic and political integration** over recidivism.
- **Consult with related literature** for intervention design, such as studies of disengagement from gangs. Lessons on ways of measuring effectiveness can be beneficial to consult. However, given the sensitivity of the programming, the approach must be conflict sensitive. In designing approaches to triangulation and experimental and quasi-experimental designs, risks must be assessed carefully.
- **Test further and expand mentorship focussed programming.** This has been identified as a reliably effective type of intervention in the gang disengagement space. The design of the mentorship should be highly tailored to the specific context and individual. This approach is also resource intensive.

National Government and Law Enforcement Capacity Building

This strand covers interventions to build CT and P/CVE capacity in national government and law enforcement agencies. In the studies included in the review, capacity building usually meant the delivery of training workshops, supported in some cases by technical assistance – the supply of equipment or expertise – or, in one case, the development of an institution that took on some responsibility for training. Only eight papers covering seven interventions (one project featured in two papers) met the criteria for inclusion in the FOCUS study, and three of these were either low-quality studies or at risk of bias. The FOCUS studies presented limited evidence of effectiveness and impact of capacity building interventions, with the result that no generalised findings could be made. The assumptions behind these interventions were rarely discussed, and the lack of an explicit theory of change approach across all interventions suggests that assumptions were not fully articulated in the interventions themselves. However, it is possible to infer two general assumptions underpinning capacity building of governments and law enforcement in this area. The first assumption is that it is possible to transfer capacity from high- to low-capacity states, i.e., that VE in developing countries can be countered by importing knowledge, skills and techniques from (or with the assistance of) donor countries. The second is that training and technical assistance are effective methods of transferring capacity. To supplement the limited evidence base, the RELATED study included a review of selected papers on community policing for CT and P/CVE purposes (identified during the literature search), alongside the pre-defined theme of SSR.

Findings:

- If evaluations are in any way representative of capacity building programmes, there appears to be an over-reliance on training workshops as the principal method of capacity building. Other methods of building capacity (which might include mentoring, South-South cooperation, secondments, institutional reform, etc.) do not appear to have been assessed in the publicly available CT and P/CVE literature.
- Any intervention that seeks to build the capacity of law enforcement agencies in CT has human rights implications and risks doing harm, as improved capabilities may be sought or used for purposes other than CT (e.g., to suppress political opposition groups). In most of the cases examined here, those risks are “priced in” by the fact that the intervention is, explicitly or implicitly, supporting human rights norms. Where that is not the case, implementers (and donors) need to actively manage the risks.

From the RELATED study, the following additional conclusions are potentially relevant:

- Building the capacity of security sector organisations brings risks and potential disbenefits: it is not a given that greater capacity leads automatically to better security. Capacity building may involve a donor-led imposition of an unrealistic, Western-oriented security model. Moreover, by potentially changing the balance of power in fragile contexts, SSR brings a significant risk of inadvertently doing harm. Providing security organisations with capabilities they would not otherwise have means that donors and implementers need to be especially alert to the human rights implications of their interventions.
- The SSR literature shows that capacity building as a mechanism is under-explored and subject to a range of implicit assumptions. In its reliance on ephemeral methods such as training workshops and its lack of attention to political factors and incentives, SSR has often been criticised for lacking sustainability. CT and P/CVE capacity building interventions may demonstrate similar weaknesses. Training, in general, has received a lot of attention from researchers in a variety of disciplines (e.g., pedagogy, occupational psychology, management studies, etc.), and yet knowledge of what is effective in individual and institutional learning, including in contexts where levels of literacy and numeracy may be low, has not been applied to SSR. It appears from the FOCUS studies that it has not been applied to CT and P/CVE either.
- The literature on community policing shows that such approaches tend to command greater support from citizens than, for example, paramilitary approaches, even if they have not been proven to be more successful at preventing and detecting crime. This suggests that community policing initiatives may be valuable outputs and outcomes of P/CVE interventions, where distrust of security forces has been shown to be a factor in radicalisation and recruitment.

Recommendations:

- **To build capacity, donors should consider a broader range of mechanisms than training workshops;** and, where workshops are proposed, donors should ensure that programmes are designed to achieve sustainable outcomes – e.g., through longer-term, rolling programmes of training and mentorship, or as part of a more strategic approach to capacity development, addressing institutional issues as well as knowledge and skills gaps.
- **Research on the effectiveness of training workshops to achieve security-related objectives should be commissioned,** drawing on existing work in education, management and organisational studies, etc.
- **Donors and implementers should have the “do no harm” principle and the rights-based approach at the heart of all security sector CT capacity building.** Human rights support should either be an overt objective of security sector capacity building, or programme design and activities should be audited and monitored to ensure they are consistent with a rights-based approach.
- **In high-threat locations, donors should coordinate police reform and CT and P/CVE programmes,** so as to create synergies through mutually supportive programming which realises the CT and P/CVE benefits of police reform, and the community benefits of improved CT and P/CVE capacity.