



Addressing the Drivers of Violent Extremism across Contexts: Lessons for CVE Programs

Summary of Small Group Discussion Outputs

OVERVIEW

On Wednesday, January 13, 2016, FHI 360 convened a half-day workshop for countering violent extremism (CVE) implementers, researchers, and donors to address how violent extremism (VE) assessments can inform CVE programs. Four research and development experts first briefly presented findings on the assessment of VE in different contexts, touching on the tools, approaches, and lessons learned in VE assessment and CVE programming. The contexts discussed included Kosovo, Jordan, Kenya, and Afghanistan. Afterwards, event participants engaged in a moderated Q&A session with the panelists and then participated in small group discussions on effective VE assessment research questions, research methods & methodological challenges for VE assessments, and what CVE implementers need from such assessments to inform programming practice.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Below we collated the key takeaways from each type of working group. There were six groups total, with two addressing each subject area – questions, methods, and practice.

QUESTIONS: *What are the key assessment questions for CVE programming? What frameworks should we use or develop for VE assessments?*

METHODS: *What methodologies have been tested, and which are best suited for VE assessments? What methodological challenges face VE researchers?*

PRACTICE: *What do CVE implementers need from assessments?*

“Questions” Group Outputs

What are the key assessment questions and frameworks for CVE programming?

- There is no one question or framework that works and can be applied across the globe and localities, since everything is contextual. There is a tendency to want one but we should embrace the fact that there will have to be variation.
- The type of questions practitioners and researchers have been asking has evolved over time, and continues to do so as people learn more about VE.
 - Initially there was a focus, particularly from the law enforcement and intelligence communities, on understanding: Who is recruited/engaged in VE? How do people stay engaged and why? Why do some people disengage? How can they be reintegrated into society?
 - This set of questions, particularly those pertaining to “who is recruited?”, has ignited a lot of debates, as there was an underlying assumption that there is a defined

profile for people who are more likely to engage in VE. This assumption runs the risk of leading to the stigmatization of particular segments of the population.

- With more and more evidence showing that violent extremists and those carrying out terrorist attacks come from different walks of life and have different socio-demographic profiles, there has been a noticeable shift by CVE practitioners and law enforcement towards understanding how and why people become engaged in VE. This set of questions, without completely mitigating adverse effects of profiling, puts emphasis on understanding the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization.
- There is also a second set of questions that focuses on contextual factors and institutions/structures and actions of violent extremist organizations (VEOs). The USAID analytical framework in the Guide to Drivers of Violent Extremism (hereinafter, USAID Drivers Guide) captures most of the questions surrounding the “push” (structural and institutional factors) and “pull” (incentives) factors that drive VE. In addition, the role of social media and the Internet, and to some extent physical places like prisons, are considered “vulnerable places” for recruitment, and are becoming a central focus for VE assessments.
- Practitioners and implementers of CVE programs are also starting to look at the notion of community resilience. Why and how do some communities in the same country resist or mitigate VE better than others? Are there cultural, institutional arrangements, and/or practices that immunize communities against VE?

What existing VE assessment frameworks have been used by donors and practitioners to inform policies and programs?

- There is a dearth of VE assessment frameworks that can inform development interventions. Security, intelligence and law enforcement actors have developed several assessments focusing on individuals.
- There seem to be conflicting priorities, in terms of focus on the context, structures and communities versus focus on individuals.
 - Most of these security-driven assessments try to answer the questions: (1) Who engages with VE?; and (2) How do they remain engaged in some instances while disengaging in others?
 - In the development sectors and in the emerging practice of soft CVE, most research and interventions apply the USAID Drivers Guide or variants of the framework, looking at the push and pull factors.
 - VE assessments that look at push and pull factors generally do not look at the radicalization process.
- There is equally a lack of focus on what works in a community to enable its resistance to and mitigation of VE.

What else influences question framing? What other observations have we made about question design?

- The framing of questions defines/changes what the findings are; therefore, language and question framing need to be intentional. We need to be clear about the definitions we are using for all terms.
- Gender and social norms feed into framing.
- The relationship of development CVE to counter terrorism and security efforts remains unclear and to some degree uncoordinated; therefore, we recognize that the framing of questions is also specific to the industry conducting the assessment.
- The government agency or office funding the research influences the nature of research conducted and findings from it. The audience for whom the assessment is being written, whether the same donor or a different group of individuals, also affects the tone of the work sought.

How do we frame questions that are not biased?

- A lot of times, we overlook behaviors, words, or actions that might indicate a tendency to VE because in our cultural context, they wouldn't indicate a tendency to VE. Therefore we could try to lean away from pre-defining responses and instead take a holistic, participatory observation approach to questioning and research collection.
- Corruption at all levels, not just in foreign governments, affects questioning. You can guard against bias with list and experimental design surveys
- A multidisciplinary approach to research may be most effective: anthropology, sociology, and psychology.
- Research question framing & programming should go hand in hand.
 - We should engage in participatory research: embed the expert/researcher in a program from the beginning of design. A third party can evaluate the program.
 - We want to do exploratory desk research before conducting our own assessments or doing programming, but a lot of government assessments conducted are not public; at least, the key takeaways need to be made available to the CVE community.
 - A challenge is that often the implementers - even technical experts - do not have the technical expertise to conduct anthropological or other types of research studies. There needs to be a concerted effort to collaborate between implementers and academics.

What do we need to explore further and learn in order to optimize VE assessment frameworks?

- Assessing resilience and what works in the community – common VE assessments are built on the assumption that VE thrives on fragile and disrupted communities and societies. This assumption overlooks community assets and strengths, in other words, things that work in the community. Therefore, these assessments and the framework they are based upon do not facilitate the assessment of resilience and community assets. Context does not only matter in understanding the roots of VE, but it also matters in looking at responses to VE and CVE programming.

- Transparency and accountability - The militarization and securitization of VE has created a cloud of suspicion and insecurity over VE assessments conducted for the purpose of CVE. Therefore, there is a need for transparency regarding intentions, goals and processes of the VE assessment within local communities. There is also a need for local participation and ownership of this process. Although there is no unique way to implement this, it is central to VE assessment.
- VE assessment as an intervention – The VE assessment is within itself an intervention into a community. Through the assessment, expectations may be raised and some awareness and learning are created. Ensuring the VE assessment integrates “do no harm” is integral to its success.

What are gaps in knowledge that we need to address for effective question framing?

- Lack of understanding of State/National Government practice around CVE – There is a gap of knowledge regarding actions (policies and initiatives) carried out by states to mitigate VE. This lack of understanding and knowledge of states’ actions and policies may reinforce the gaps between CVE responses by non-state actors (INGOs, CSO, etc.) and those by the state.
- Lack of data regarding the number of those at risk of recruitment – This makes the design, implementation and assessment of CVE programs difficult.
- Open-ended and flexible frameworks – In order to adapt and capture the dynamic nature of VE and also the changing coping mechanisms used by communities and countries, flexible frameworks are needed.
- Follow up on assessments – VE assessments raise expectations for CVE programs in communities; unfortunately, when assessments are not followed by concrete interventions, this may create frustration and suspicion at the community level.
- Local ownership of VE assessments – How can the VE assessment be locally owned? How to build local legitimacy and engagement without exposing local respondents?
- Universal terminology – There is still a lack of agreement on key terms commonly used within the field of CVE.

“Methods” Group Outputs

What methodological challenges face VE researchers?

- Assessments tend to look at snapshots while the environment is ever-changing.
 - We are continually playing catch-up in understanding the problem.
 - There is a constant stream of information, and it’s very hard to stay on the forefront of current reports, and to build meaningfully off others’ work. Information also proliferates in different, stove-piped fields and different conversations.
- Bias in questions is difficult to eliminate unless testing is done repeatedly with people from the specific village/geographic area where the survey will occur. Some inherent selection bias is unavoidable. We will never be able to reach the most extreme, because they are often in conflict zones or have been killed, or if we do reach them they are very unlikely to give answers.
- Accurate translation of survey instruments into local dialects is a challenge.

- Finding people for in-depth interviews. Related to selection bias above. Are there any approaches other than snowball sampling that may work?
- How to keep up with social media and big data, considering that most specialists in CVE and M&E are not also specialists in big data and social media. The tools in the peacebuilding toolkit are not millennial. To help, we could analyze social media with tools like Crimson Hexagon. We cannot get around selection bias for interviewees, but in online forums we may see what extremists are saying.
- Contrary to what many believe, we actually have a lot of information, and what is needed is curation of that information. Initiatives such as RESOLVE (USIP) and other government initiatives (including Australia) were held up as examples of potential curation.

What are major lessons learned on assessments?

- We should think carefully about the ***makeup of a VE assessment team***. The team can include established, possibly international, researchers but also local researchers.
 - There should be a clear distinction between specialized, academic researchers from a major city or capital city, and local researchers who know local dialects and local dynamics. It is useful to include people from both categories and not to conflate them into one group.
 - Bringing in university researchers from a national capital can lend credibility to the study at a local level, but then local researchers are a critical element to make that credibility accessible and translated into local dynamics and dialects. Invest heavily in local enumerator training, including in terms that may not easily translate, and in piloting the instruments. Triple-check translations.
- We should think about ***the goals of VE assessment***. There was minor disagreement over the need for VE assessments to be relevant to programming goals. Some said that this was necessary, while others argued that this puts too much of the onus on VE assessments, and the work should be done to translate those assessments into program and policy recommendations by other actors.

What VE assessment frameworks have event participants used?

- It was posited that the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), the USG, and other institutions do have frameworks, but that methods will vary widely depending on the problem set, and that there is a need to be contextually appropriate.
- There did not seem to be a large appetite for an overarching framework (similar to the USAID Conflict Assessment Framework 2.0) among some participants. However, one participant argued that we are overdue for a set of minimum standards in VE assessment, to include:
 - Inclusion of local research and knowledge
 - Asking “how” questions” (rather than “why” questions)
 - Building off knowledge that already exists

What is the line between research and intelligence gathering when conducting an assessment? How is this related to participant safety and data security?

- “Do No Harm” should be central to research and assessment, and continually addressed and reassessed (not just at the outset of a research project):
 - Protect anonymity of sources;
 - Consider conducting focus groups/interviews in locations far from subjects’ homes;
 - Avoid using terms like “extremism” if this will raise suspicion of subjects;
 - Use online surveys to let people participate without having to show up at a location that may be watched;
 - Random sampling lets respondents tell those who ask that they were not selected, it was random;
 - Outsiders can monitor focus groups via telephone to avoid attracting attention by showing up physically; and
 - Trust enumerators when they warn of risk.
- We as a research community need to get better at mainstreaming conflict sensitivity.
- Use an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to make sure human subjects will not be harmed as a result of participating.
- There should be an assumption that any data collected could eventually become public. At least, the data will end up in the hands of governments contracting the work. Our community could think through ways to keep survey responses anonymous from the start, to be sure that no individuals can be named or tracked.
- Participants also reiterated one panelist’s warning that participants may feel obliged to answer questions because of power relations of which the assessment team may not be aware; this is again a further call for constant reassessment of “Do No Harm” and for keeping all data anonymous as a safeguard.
- It is important to be clear about the work, and to keep researchers and participants safe while also not creating expectations that participation will yield concrete benefits.

What are past successes for VE assessment methods?

- In depth interviews. Mercy Corps conducted them successfully with internally displaced persons.
- Participant observation, along the lines of what the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) did in Kosovo.
- Surveys – they can be used effectively, but there are limitations.
 - Evaluations of programs
 - Quasi-experimental design
 - Perception surveys can be nationwide and insert limited questions on support for armed groups (was done in Iraq & Afghanistan by Mercy Corps)
 - Phone surveys can be used in high-conflict areas where door-to-door surveys are unsafe.
- Light Western footprint—local data collectors, but budget for sufficient training.
- Analysis of social media with tools like Crimson Hexagon.
- Archival research—legal documentation, death records, etc.

“Practice” Group Outputs

What do CVE implementers need from assessments?

- Information to help with targeting/reaching those most at risk:
 - What geographic areas have the populations at greatest risk of VE/recruitment?
 - Which communities, or sub-groups, within those geographic areas are most vulnerable?
 - How are VE recruiters using social media, and which online mechanisms/sites are they using?
 - Which institutions need to be engaged in CVE efforts?
 - Which individuals are most at risk, and which individuals have the most credibility to engage them (to serve, in Cure Violence’s terms, as “credible interrupters”)?
 - One participant noted the risk involved in engaging those individuals who are most at risk. There is both a greater likelihood of unintentionally doing harm, and there is the danger of stepping into police/security territory, the closer you get to the “tip of the spear.”
- Analytic frameworks for informing assessments, especially at the community level.
- Ongoing assessment and monitoring is needed throughout implementation. There needs to be an ongoing feedback loop so that activities can be adjusted as needed. Situational analyses needs to be conducted regularly as well.
- Holistic assessments that look at all factors. This includes looking at those psychological factors/issues that may be impacting individual level attraction to VE.
- Understanding of what the tipping points and triggers could be in the local context.

What do CVE implementers need to be able to do assessment, and project implementation, effectively?

- An expanded toolkit, and more sophisticated modalities.
- A multi-disciplinary Community of Practice to exchange what we learn, as we go.
- Methodologies for evaluation.
- Tested theories of change.
- More sharing of information. One issue is that most VE assessments to date are considered classified or “sensitive but unclassified” so implementers do not have access to them.
- Better understanding of how to integrate CVE into other sectors/disciplines.
- Better understanding of what level of resources/interventions are needed to have an impact.

What insights, questions, or experiences do you have to share that could help inform our discussion of the question: What do CVE implementers need from assessments?

- Assessment recommendations are often cross-sectoral. Trouble is many donors are not oriented to work in this way. One way practitioners can get around this is by organizing staffing patterns around more integrated solutions. Assessments can target which sectoral experiences/expertise is needed in an intervention.
- Assessments are a great way to generate interest, buy-in and ownership. Assessments should therefore strive to be more participatory to generate these goals and aspects.

- Simply because some stakeholders engage in the assessment does not mean that they are the only credible local partners. Assessments must show evidence that they are constantly questioning themselves and their definitions of credible local partners. Why are they credible? Because they can manage donor funds? Because they speak English?

From an implementation perspective, what are some key principles, and considerations, in terms of how to conduct assessments to most effectively inform our programming?

- Humility is the most important quality. Assessors are there to listen and not disrupt.
- Always remember that an assessment is a snapshot in time. The situation is dynamic and assessments must therefore be continuous. But they should project the trend lines (which direction are sentiments/dynamics headed?) and the rate of change.
- Continually reflect upon, and challenge, assumptions.

What are some sensitivities to consider in conducting assessments that could impact program delivery?

- Recognize what you can(not) address through interventions. You will not be able to change everything.
- Try to leverage existing literature/research as many communities have been over-researched.
- Ask yourself:
 - Does strengthening one community draw unwanted attention?
 - Who is credible/legitimate? Why?
 - How can you get a grip on the dynamics of a particular community? What methods must you employ?
- Work to build a shared understanding of resilience.
- At all times, try to be objective.

To help inform CVE programming (design and implementation) what are the key questions we need assessments to answer?

	Individual	Community	National/Regional
Enabling Environment	What are the attitudes/behaviors of at risk groups?		What are the cross-border dynamics and what is the nature of conflict (ethnic, sectarian, political)?
Push		Who are the local cooperative actors that can work with individuals?	
Pull	What are communication channels?	What is the nature of trust/distrust?	
Resilience	What momentum currently exists to promote resilience? What are the trends for resiliency? Increasing/Decreasing?		