SECTION I

Participatory evaluation of CVE

We define participatory evaluation of CVE as a process by which an implementer or researcher[1] engages various stakeholders to design some of the indicators that they will use as proxy indicators to measure violent extremism. This concept paper outlines emerging findings on the potential of participatory, community-based approaches to the research, analysis, monitoring and evaluation of countering violent extremism (CVE).

Given cross-contextual variation of violent extremism (VE) dynamics, a participatory approach could clear practical value. How local people experience extremist violence, and how they respond to changing conditions (good or bad), should inform how CVE projects are designed and assessed. This paper discusses a grassroots approach not as a replacement for methodologies currently in use, but as a valuable corollary to CVE research and learning.

Identifying useful examples from analogous fields, illuminating good practices, and better understanding the challenges of a bottom-up research approach reflect a gap in practice that this paper, and the discussion it hopes to catalyze, can help to fill. This paper concludes by outlining a model for a participatory research approach, and includes a list of examples of indicators developed through a participatory process.

A. What is participatory evaluation for CVE?

Contextual variation of risks, drivers, and the manifestations of violent extremism (VE) have led national and multilateral donors to call for grassroots responses, community partnerships, and tailored interventions. This has fed a range of initiatives promoting locally-led CVE initiatives, from community-based education to counter-narrative campaigns.

Yet, in spite of this programmatic emphasis on the local, there has been relatively less attention to incorporating grassroots voices in the research, analysis, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of CVE efforts. While analysis efforts typically survey locals, the questions and research priorities tend not to reflect grassroots attitudes, but instead the biases and assumptions of external actors: namely, thematic experts, implementers, and donors in distant capitals.[2] This narrow, top-down focus has epistemological implications — and in turn practical ones. The danger is not simply ineffective policy, but development efforts that fail the "do no harm"

[1] This approach can be used by researchers and by project Monitoring and Evaluation teams. Throughout this paper, we interchange the term "researcher" and "data collector" given that this approach can be used by teams conducting experimental or quasi-experimental design research, or by teams designing indicators to measure project impact.

[2] Roger Mac Ginty, "Indicators +: A proposal for everyday peace indicators," Evaluation and Program Planning 36, 2013: 56-63; Patrick Barron, Claire Q. Smith, Michael Woolcock, "Understanding local level conflict in developing countries: theory, evidence and implications from Indonesia," Social Development Papers, Paper No. 19, World Bank, December 2004.

standard, exacerbating risks, undermining local partners, and eroding the credibility of CVE efforts.

In theory, a participatory community-based approach could help mitigate these risks and improve programming outcomes.[3] Participatory research demands more than simply including local partners as adjuncts to an ongoing research or evaluation process. Instead, it would base analysis, design, and measurement on factors defined at the grassroots level. Ideally, a bottom-up CVE approach would push international actors to be more inclusive of local partners at the front-end of programming efforts, improving both process and outcomes.

Origins of Participatory Models for CVE Research

While the idea of participatory indicator design applied to CVE has conceptual appeal, as an approach there is still much to be fleshed out. Luckily, there is no need to start from scratch. Analogous bottom-up approaches to research and design are apparent in a number of fields, from conflict studies to public health.[4]

Increasingly, good practices from other fields are being tailored to CVE interventions. For example, RAND modified its suicide-prevention "Getting to Outcomes" (GTO) approach to assessing the dangers of violent radicalization.[5] As RAND researchers have argued, the parallels between suicide prevention and VE — including the rarity of the event, the need for multi-layered responses, and complications around measuring impact — can inform future measurement and analysis efforts. To address analysis gaps, which has vital implications for programs, RAND has proposed the use of proximal, locally-defined outcomes and interventions as part of a community-based CVE program.[6]

Similarly, an evaluation of the "Building Resistance Against Violent Extremism" (BRAVE) model advocated for an approach to CVE in light of grassroots risk assessments.[7] The lack of a top-down predictive risk profile at the level of the individual has undermined the developing of generalizable warning signs or "telltale" risk factors. Deferring to grassroots actors in defining

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[3] There are ongoing attempts to address this gap. For example, the Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism (RESOLVE) Network aims to cultivate a global consortium of local and regional researchers to feed into international CVE research agendas.

[4] For example, community-based participatory research approaches have long attempted to integrate the perspectives of community members and organizations into the research process. See Barbara A. Israel, Amy J. Schulz, Edith A. Parker, and Adam B. Becker, "Review of Community-Based Research: Assessing Partnership Approaches to Improve Public Health," Annual Review of Public Health, 1998, 19:173–202. See also World Health Organization (WHO), *Preventing suicide: a community engagement toolkit*. Pilot version 1.0 (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016).

[5] RAND, *Program Evaluation Toolkit for Countering Violent Extremism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan, William P. Evans, "Evaluation of a Multi-Faceted, U.S. Community-Based, Muslim-Led CVE Program," U.S. Department of Justice, June 2016.

locally-relevant warning signs may be a more fruitful approach to identifying and preventing early manifestations of VE.[8]

Arguably, CVE analysis is hampered by an over reliance on generic indicators, such as expressions of sectarian antipathy, or sympathy for religiously-motivated militants. Models that define indicators that are specific to conflict eco-systems add much-needed texture. For example, the "Everyday Peace Indicators" (EPI) project has developed a bottom-up approach to the development of conflict indicators, which may be relevant to CVE.[9] The EPI project has been piloted in South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Working primarily through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), targeted focus group discussions in key communities illuminated a series of communal conflict indicators. These included: declines in sectarian graffiti, storeowners painting their storefronts, access to medical care, youth being included in community meetings, children attending school, people being able to move freely about the community (particularly at night).[10] The assumption informing the EPI project is that localized perceptions of peace and conflict are articulated in different ways, and raise different issues, than top-down narratives. Participatory indicators are more true to local experience, and may allow for the improved targeting of development assistance.11

The USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives' model of participatory activity development and activity-based monitoring and evaluation conducted in partnership with community stakeholders, can serve as a model of foregoing traditional top-down approaches in favor of bottom-up activity design. The USAID/OTI/Libya I project implemented by Chemonics International worked in the town of Sabratah in Libya, which had been recently liberated from the Islamic state. Project staff brought assumptions about CVE drivers that included economic stress and citizen disenfranchisement. A participatory assessment revealed that pivotal drivers were more clearly rooted in family and social ties. Families often saw participation in combat as a "family trade". The project worked with the community to identify the community's three major needs around this, which drove design of a small, pilot CVE component. Actual monitoring and evaluation for LTI, like all OTI programs, was activity and output-based, but used community-identified needs as a framework for the "success" of CVE interventions.

At first glance, bottom-up indicators may appear to reflect the existing literature and reports of donors, implementers, and external researchers. For instance, marginalization or human rights abuses, which are commonly cited as drivers of extremist violence within the CVE literature, may be broadly apparent in community discussions about VE. Yet, the specifics are important, and the value of bottom-up indicators is that they tend to be strikingly intimate. They also may capture factors under-emphasized in top-down analyses. Gender is a striking example. Domestic violence, patriarchy, the inability to marry, the militarization of masculinity: these are prevalent motifs in ethnographic studies of conflict — including, increasingly, studies of VE — but are often ignored or rendered overly simplistic in external analyses.

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[8] Williams et al., "Evaluation," 2016.

[9] For an example of how this has been done in Afghanistan, see USIP, "Measuring Peace and Violent Extremism: Voices from the Afghan Village," by Eliza Urwin and Belquist Ahmadi, Peace Brief 244, March 2018.

[10] Roger Mac Ginty and Pamina Firchow, "Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict," *Politics*, Vol. 36(3), 2016: 308–323.

[11] Ibid.

If these assumptions neatly summarize the value of participatory research, the approach is not without challenges. From the outset, one should not over promise what a grassroots research initiative, preformed for the purposes of informing a program, can achieve in relatively short period of time. Most efforts will not enjoy the duration or depth of ethnographic study; consequently, the results will need to be viewed with some modesty. Furthermore, a participatory approach, while an important asset in assessing local drivers, cannot completely ameliorate the problem of elite bias or positioning. After all, the process would still be externally-driven and -led. Moreover, local narratives are not themselves immune to the discursive influence of elites and international actors. Particularly in areas of intense international engagements, locals may be savvy to elite assumptions and agendas, and may echo them (for various reasons). Finally, a grassroots approach, with its intense focus on local experience, may not easily translate to CVE policymaking articulated at national or regional levels. Findings may not be generalizable. While there is an understandable impulse on the parts of donors and policymakers to identify cross-cutting drivers and risk factors, this must be tempered by a recognition that the experience of individuals of a particular community may not translate elsewhere and that VE dynamics are highly context-specific.[12] This may temper donor appetites for funding participatory approaches, in spite of rhetorical commitments to community-based approaches.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that a grassroots approach to analysis would be an important addition to CVE efforts, and could help address significant design and evaluation shortcomings. As a starting point for further discussion, this paper will conclude with an outline for how to develop and implement a bottom-up approach to CVE research.

B. How does it work? A Model for Implementation

This section outlines a community-based research model, and touches on design considerations and identified good practices. While the material is organized sequentially, a key feature of grassroots research is flexibility and iteration. Ideally, any participatory approach is refined continuously in collaboration with local partners. Critically, the model offered here is not intended to be overly prescriptive, but to outline a potential approach. Any approach should be tailored to the needs of the research and the character of the operating environment.

Where does this approach come from? Origins of Participatory Models for CVE M&E

➔ **Step one: Enlist partners, conduct mapping exercises, devise M&E approach**

- *Enlist local partners as a "steering committee."* Identifying and engaging key actors and local partners, who will be critical to build trust among participants and co-lead on M&E plan development. Exemplary partners include respected community members (preferably spanning demographic profiles) and respected NGOs.

[12] Caitlin Mastroe and Susan Szmania, *Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and De-Radicalization Programs*, Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, Department of Homeland Security, START, 2016.

- *Conduct a community mapping exercise.* As a key component of early-stage planning, researchers and local partners should map stakeholders, interest groups, as well as marginalized groups within the community. A key part of the mapping exercise is to ensure that the project does not reproduce preexisting dynamics of exclusion. Additionally, engagement should be informed by a sensitivity to "research fatigue" among those communities saturated by other investigators.

- *Develop a "do no harm" strategy*. Given the potentially controversial topics addressed, the project must safeguard the safety, integrity, and (where appropriate) anonymity of participants and partners. The do-no-harm strategy should explicitly addresses the needs of vulnerable community members (including youth, women, and ethnic and religious minorities).

- *Develop a tailored and intentional M&E/research strategy.* The specific data collection methods should be tailored to the environment and research goals, and may include a range of qualitative approaches, including interviews, observations, and focus groups. Where appropriate, researchers may employ methods to limit social desirability bias — i.e., the impulse on the part of participants to be viewed favorably by enumerators. Indirect questions, list experiments,[13] and randomizing devices, such as spinners,[14] may promote confidentiality and accuracy.

- *Implement a pilot exercise, if at all possible.* Where resources, funding, and time allow, pilot the research in a test community to identify shortcomings in methodology and/or style of engagement.

➔ **Step Two: Socialize the M&E approach, commit to open dialogue, and create safe spaces for marginalized voices**

- *Socialize the M&E approach.* Initial community meetings should focus on communicating the goals of M&E, building buy-in, and soliciting feedback. Researchers should ask for permission to conduct the work, describe anticipated outputs, and commit to delivering a summary of findings at the conclusion.
- *Commit to an ongoing, iterative, and collaborative process.* Grassroots M&E demands patient, two-way engagement and a commitment on the part of researchers not to view dialogues superficially, or as simply a step to "getting the community to come around" to the researchers' point of view.
- *Avoid imposing external definitions of "VE."* This is a significant stumbling block for a bottom-up approach to CVE M&E and research. Locals may not agree with outsiders about

[13] For example, see Jon Kurtz, *Does Youth Employment Build Stability?: Evidence from an Impact Evaluation of Vocational Training in Afghanistan*, Mercy Corps, 2015.
[14] For example, see Beza Tesfaye, *Critical Choices: Assessing the Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youths' Propensity Towards Violence*, Mercy Corps, 2016.

what constitutes and drives VE. Moreover, given the political context, the language of CVE may be perceived as discriminatory — or, in the worst instances, a tool of oppression.[15]

- *Research and data collection methods should open up safe spaces for marginalized voices.* Narratives about VE are rarely monolithic, and opinions may diverge based on ascriptive characteristics. This should inform data gathering. For instance, focus groups may be divided by age, gender, religion, and/or ethnicity to avoid the silencing of junior or marginalized voices. Research should tease out differences in perspective across groups. If the research plan is able to devise a sound, safe, and culturally acceptable way to interview minors, then focus groups might focus, at minimum, on age/gender breakdowns (girls, boys, men, women).

➔ Step Three: Commence data gathering and document initial indicators

- *Consultations should pose open-ended questions.* Consultations should create the space for participants to discuss VE-relevant issues in a manner that is not overly programmed by enumerators. Participatory data gathering should be conversational. Rather than target particular issues of religious radicalization or recruitment, general questions about what "peace" or "insecurity" look like in the local context may open up unexpected conversations.

What does peace look like?

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- *Document initial indicators.* The grassroots process should encourage participants to offer spontaneous and idiomatic examples related to risks and drivers, insecurity, conflict, and/or sympathies for radical groups. These should be collected by enumerators into an initial list of relevant indicators. Initial findings will appear unwieldy, repetitive, and anecdotal; however, in a subsequent stage they will be categorized and verified (see below).
- *There is no online shortcut to participatory research.* In spite of a Western fascination with social media, in most cases meaningful consultations will only happen face-to-face. While social media provides seemingly robust opportunities for outreach, it is no substitute. Trust-building and proactive consultation will, in most cases, be more effective through traditional channels.[16]

➔ Step Four: Refine and verify the data, conduct follow-up consultations, and finalize indicators

- *Refining and categorizing initial indicators.* The initial indicator lists developing in the previous phase should now be categorized in a more discrete (and manageable) set of indicators. Overlapping observations may be combined into a single set of observations.

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[15] START, "Understanding Communities' Attitudes towards CVE," Research Brief, National Consortium for the Study and Responses to Terrorism, February 2015.

[16] Olivia Russell, "Meet Me at the Maskani: A Mapping of Influencers, Networks, and Communication Channels in Kenya and Tanzania," Search for Common Ground, June 2017; Scott Atran, "Pathways to and From Violent Extremism: The Case for Science-Based Field Research," Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats & Capabilities, March 10, 2010.

Researchers will begin to document locally-specific indicators relevant to CVE, how many times they are raised, and by whom. A spreadsheet of indicators from initial conversations will be lengthy and intimately drawn. Researchers may then categorize indicators. Relevant categories might include the ability to move safely through the community, or girls' access to education.

- *Conduct (multiple) follow-up consultations to verify indicator categories*. Data consolidation and categorization is a necessary compromise. Boiling diverse, anecdotal examples of insecurity or radicalization into a more discrete set of indicators risks "flattening out" relevant local experiences. Consequently, efforts to refine indicators should be continuous and iterative. Multiple verification rounds may be necessary.
- *Solicit community feedback on the relative importance of the finalized set of indicators.* The relevance of the finalized indicators will vary across demographic groups. This should be captured. For example, researchers may provide individual focus groups an opportunity to vote on relevant indicators, creating weighted values by demographic group. At this stage, it may be sensible to include an anonymous voting tool.

➔ Step Five: Integrate findings into other research efforts, and into program design and M&E

- *Participatory approaches can be a valuable addendum to other research methodologies.* A plural and civic epistemology, as briefly outlined here, is not intended to replace other approaches, but to complement more orthodox top-down approaches. Ideally, a participatory model should be an addendum to other methodologies.
- *Community-level findings may be integrated at an inter-communal level.* While a participatory process is best for illuminating local experiences, it may also contribute to a broader comparative study. The development of local indicators, and the resulting the categorization process outlined above, may inform inter-communal, regional, and national surveys. Tailoring instruments to capture cross-contextual — but still bottom-up — experiences relevant to VE can add nuance and depth to larger-scale studies.
- *A participatory process may also furnish much-needed detail for CVE programmatic theories of change and M&E.* A participatory approach may be invaluable to informing theories of change, designing program activities, assessing effectiveness, and safeguarding against unintended consequences. Locally specific indicators may be employed to create more resonant and specific monitoring instruments, and could inform longitudinal evaluations, pre-, mid-, and post-intervention.[17]

C. Illustrative indicators developed in participatory process

[17] For more on CVE design and evaluation practice, see Laura Dawson, Charlie Edwards, and Calum Jeffray, *Learning and Adapting: The Use of Monitoring and Evaluation in Countering Violent Extremism, A Handbook for Practitioners*, RUSI, 2014.

Below are a list of illustrative indicators that either have been used or might be developed through a participatory process.

- Public funerals for local VE "martyrs." These may be used to celebrate locals who died in service to a VE organization, and, by way of their example, encourage other at-risk individuals.
- Immobility due to insecurity. This can limit access to public services, including medical care or justice provisions, or to public transportation. Is freedom of movement constrained, or becoming riskier? For whom?
- Women and girls frequenting public spaces. Are they routinely seen conducting business at the market, getting medical care, attending public meetings, and/or going to school unmolested (by either teachers or peers)?
- The presence of NGO and government officials. Are senior government officials and/or aid workers visibly working in the community? Locals may perceive their absence as a sign of insecurity.
- Individuals carrying weapons in public.
- Young people wearing VE uniforms or logos. Do students or young people adopt or wear the symbols of VE groups (often as a means of protesting or acting out)?
- Security at home. Do people feel safe sleeping in their houses? In communities where the toilet is separate from the house, do they feel they can safely relieve themselves at night? The constant sound of dogs barking at night may be interpreted as an indication of insecurity: of strangers or thieves moving under the cover of darkness.[18]
- VE-specific symbols in public spaces. These might include graffiti on stores or schools, or individuals flying the flag of a local extremist group. Are such displays increasing in frequency? How are they tolerated?
- Minority religious groups are able to live and worship unmolested. Public displays of religious faith — praying, dress, etc. — may be particularly telling.
- Perceptions of insecurity when traveling. Locals may plan their routes to avoid roadblocks or tolls imposed by non-state actors.
- Television antennae on houses and on building rooftops. (In some places, VE organizations ban TV and public entertainment.[19])
- Acceptance of discriminatory language in the public square. Extreme examples include political or religious elites attacking minority groups, and working to polarize the community.
- Well-maintained businesses and shops. Are local owners investing in their businesses? Are shops painted? Well-stocked? Are goods from neighboring communities available?
- Public displays (such as billboards or posters) that celebrate non-state violent actors, such as militia groups.
- Young people marrying and starting families — or failing to do so. If youth are unable to "cross into" adulthood, what are the barriers (economic, social, etc.)? For disenfranchised youth, are VE organizations offering alternative means to gain social status?

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[18] Mac Ginty and Firchow, p. 320.
[19] See USIP, 2018.

- Gender shaming. Instances may include discussions of VE fighters and martyrs as the "real men" of the community. Women and girls may participate by emasculating, in public or private, those who refuse to join.
- Community members attending events hosted by/for the formal government. This might include public events, festivals, or funerals for police.
- Vaccinators freely working in the community.
- Polarizing changes to educational curricula. This might include curricular revisions — in formal or religious schools — that emphasize sectarian or ethnic differences within the community.