

# Debunking Prevailing Assumptions About Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies

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Counter-Terrorism



M&E  
Centre of Excellence

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ICCT Policy Brief

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## Abstract

This policy brief aims to dismantle four pervasive assumptions hindering effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the field of preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Drawing from the Dutch experience and international experience, the brief illuminates how these assumptions can be addressed to improve policy outcomes. It delves into challenges surrounding the measurability of prevention and non-events, the abstraction of key concepts, political sensitivities, and perceived time constraints. Offering pragmatic solutions, the Dutch Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation is presented as a case study, demonstrating how structured formats and evidence-based methodologies can enhance the efficiency and credibility of M&E practices. The brief concludes with five actionable recommendations aimed at policymakers, urging the adoption of nuanced M&E approaches, transparency, SMART indicators, optimised resource allocation, and evidence-based decision-making.

**Keywords:** monitoring and evaluation (M&E), preventing/countering, violent extremism (P/CVE), evidence-based policy, and toolkit

## Introduction

In the complex arena of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) emerges as a linchpin for success. While its role in determining impact, steering evidence-informed policy decisions, and guiding efficient resource distribution is undeniable, a web of assumptions often obstructs its full integration and utilisation. Drawing from the Dutch paradigm, particularly the innovative “Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation”, this policy brief unravels and addresses these assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

The policy brief delves deep into four prevailing assumptions surrounding M&E: that prevention and non-events cannot be measured and evaluated; that the concepts are too abstract to make it measurable; that M&E of P/CVE interventions is too politically sensitive; and finally, that there is not often sufficient time for M&E. Each assumption is anchored by its own set of challenges and juxtaposed against the international and Dutch experience. By spotlighting a specific Dutch case study, the “Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation”, we not only shed light on how these assumptions can be tackled, but also the wider implications for effective P/CVE endeavours. Through this assessment, we aim to advocate for a culture where evidence-driven decision-making takes precedence, international collaboration thrives, and P/CVE programmes and policies resonate with efficacy in an ever-shifting threat landscape.

## Methodology

This policy brief is based on insights from two distinct research and advisory efforts Gielen directly contributed to. The resulting reports provided insights into the prevailing assumptions, good practices, and case study presented in this policy brief. The first source is a report by Peeters and Gielen on implementing evidence-based work within the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs.<sup>2</sup> The research began with an exploratory phase that assessed the needs and current states of evidence-based policymaking by interviewing policymakers and managers within the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs (n=28) of whom many were responsible for P/CVE from March until May in 2020. This formed the basis for a set of interventions including training, supervision, and personalised advice on evidence-based policymaking in relation to P/CVE. Subsequent phases, from June 2020 until December 2021, involved knowledge transfer through training sessions for 31 (P/CVE) policymakers, assisting policymakers with 12 small-scale process and plan evaluations, and the implementation and consolidation of evidence-based policymaking. The second source, stems from a report from an advisory consortium that offered tailored advice to municipalities over the span of 1.5 years to stimulate evidence-based P/CVE policymaking and interventions in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Activities ranged from custom advice to municipalities, the organisation of online sessions on evidence-based P/CVE policy, the coordination of an advisory board with eight municipalities, and offering tailor-made P/CVE evidence-based policymaking support to municipalities on issues such as drafting a comprehensive P/CVE programme, civic education, and community resilience, among others.

<sup>1</sup> “Toolkit evidence-based werken bij de preventie van radicalisering” [“Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation], Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit,” [Expertise Unit Social Stability], accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.socialestabiliteit.nl/si-toolkit>.

<sup>2</sup> Malon Peeters, and Amy-Jane Gielen, Implementatie en borging Evidence Based Werken. Rapportage Fase 1 [Implementing and securing Evidence Based Work. Report phase 1]. (Amsterdam: RadarAdvies en A.G. Advies, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jane Gielen, Malon Peeters, and Jurriaan Omlo, Eindrapportage EBW Advies op Maat. Ondersteuningsaanbod gemeenten 2021-2023 [Final report EBW Tailormade Advice. Support offer municipalities 2021-2023]. (Amsterdam: A.G. Advies, RadarAdvies & Bureau Omlo, 2023).

To complement these sources, the policy brief also draws from a previous overview of the existing literature on this topic by Van Leeuwen.<sup>4</sup> The literature provided insights into the challenges underlying the prevailing assumptions and good practices that can be leveraged to overcome these challenges. Together, these sources offer invaluable insights not only into the assumptions surrounding M&E, but also how M&E can be effectively designed and implemented in complex, evolving fields like P/CVE, thus contributing significantly to the formulation of this policy brief.

## Prevailing Assumption 1: Prevention and Non-Events Cannot be Measured and Evaluated

### Assumption

One of the most prevalent assumptions surrounding M&E in the context of P/CVE programmes and policies is the belief that it is impossible to measure and evaluate preventive actions and non-events. Evaluations are understood to prove that violent activity or radicalisation would have happened if there had not been an intervention. This is understandable given that the nature of preventive actions, which often means that positive outcomes are defined by the absence of a harmful event or the non-occurrence of a violent act. As a result, some stakeholders might argue that it is impossible to measure the effectiveness of actions aimed at preventing something from happening.<sup>5</sup>

### Underlying challenge

This assumption is derived from the challenge to establish causality and attribute specific outcomes solely to the preventive measures undertaken.<sup>6</sup> Terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalisation are complex phenomena that manifest in complex environments. This results in the fact that many interrelated factors beyond a programme or policy's scope can influence the outcomes or impact. As such, it is a persistent challenge to attribute changes specifically to particular interventions or isolate certain contributions from the broader context.<sup>7</sup> Madriaza and

4 Aileen van Leeuwen, Introduction to Monitoring and Evaluation in the CT and P/CVE field: what it is, why it matters and how to start (The Hague: ICCT, 2023).

5 Randy Borum, "Assessing risk for terrorism involvement," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, no. 2 (2015): 63-87; Liesbeth van der Heide, and Bart Schuurman, "Reintegrating terrorists in the Netherlands: Evaluating the Dutch approach," *Journal for Deradicalization* 17 (2018): 196-239.

6 Andrew Glazzard, and Michael Jones, *Improving the Evaluation of Interventions to Counter and Prevent Terrorism and Violent Extremism* (London: RUSI, 2020); Lillie Ris, and Anita Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a Wheel: Applying Existing Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Strategies to Emerging Programming Approaches to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism* (Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium, 2017); Georgia Holmer, Peter Bauman, and Kateira Aryaeinejad, *Measuring up: Evaluating the impact of P/CVE programs* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018); Peter Romaniuk, *Does CVE work? Lessons learned from the global effort to counter violent extremism* (Goshen, IN: Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2015); Pablo Madriaza, and Anne-Sophie Ponsot, *Preventing Radicalization: A Systematic Review* (Montreal: International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, 2015); Caitlin Mastroe, and Susan Szmania, *Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and De-Radicalization Programs* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2016); Amy-Jane Gielen, "Evaluating Countering Violent Extremism," in 'De-radicalisation': Scientific insights for policy, ed. Lore Colaert (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2017), 101-118.

7 Gielen, "Evaluating Countering Violent Extremism"; Georgia Holmer, Ann Sutherland, and Claudia Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices: Measuring Results in Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism* (EU and UN, 2023); Holmer, Bauman, and Aryaeinejad, *Measuring up*; Ris, and Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a wheel*; Glazzard, and Jones, *Improving the Evaluation*; Laura Dawson, Charlie Edwards, and Calum Jeffray, *Learning and Adapting: The Use of Monitoring and Evaluation in Countering Violent Extremism: a Handbook for Practitioners*

Ponsot compellingly describe the two prevention paradoxes related to this challenge:

*“First, since prevention addresses factors underpinning a phenomenon, its tie to the phenomenon is always indirect. In other words, although the ultimate outcome is to prevent terrorist attacks, prevention, particularly social prevention, works only through measures that are themselves far removed from violence, such as social integration. Furthermore, if the prevention is successful, its tie to the absence of a phenomenon will be difficult to establish. This observation is at the core of the evaluation problems targeting this type of programme. Therefore, social prevention wrestles two shadows: the shadow seen, but distant from the measures implemented, and the shadow never seen as long as the response is effective.”<sup>8</sup>*

To further complicate the latter paradox, when preventive measures are effective, the absence of negative outcomes may lead some to question the necessity and impact of the interventions. This paradox can create scepticism among policymakers and the public, undermining support for ongoing prevention efforts.

## Good practices to address the challenge

To address the challenge posed by the prevention paradoxes and to effectively measure the impact of prevention programmes and policies, it is crucial to adopt an M&E approach that aims to create a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the problem and that can effectively measure possible pathways of change. The following approaches can be considered.

### Work with a Theory of Change (ToC)

Creating a ToC as a basis for the M&E approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how preventive actions contribute to desired outcomes. A ToC is a tool to map out the logical pathways through which interventions are expected to lead to positive results. ToCs facilitate the identification of specific factors and inputs that contribute to programme or policy effectiveness. Through M&E, changes related to these factors can be measured to indicate progress.<sup>9</sup> Examples of ToC statements can be found in the evaluation of the Dutch Deradicalisation and Disengagement centre Forsa<sup>10</sup> and the Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism – STRIVE

(London: RUSI, 2014); Cristina Mattei, and Sara Zeiger, Evaluate your CVE results: Projecting your impact (Abu Dhabi: Hedayah Center, 2018); Jacopo Bellasio, Joanna Hofman, Antonia Ward, Fook Nederveen, Anna Knack, Arya S. Meranto, and Stijn Hoorens, Counterterrorism evaluation: Taking stock and looking ahead (Cambridge: RAND Corporation, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Madriaza, and Ponsot, Preventing Radicalization, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Allard R. Feddes, and Marcello Gallucci, “A literature review on methodology used in evaluating effects of preventive and de-radicalisation interventions,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 5 (2015): 1-27; Ris, and Ernstorfer, Borrowing a wheel; Tiina Pasanen, and Louise Shaxson, How to design a monitoring and evaluation framework for a policy research project (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016); Amy-Jane Gielen, “Cutting through complexity: Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2020); Sarah Marsden, James Lewis, and Kim Knott, *Countering Violent Extremism: A Guide To Good Practice* (Lancaster: Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2019); Ruth Simpson, Briefing paper: Monitoring National Action Plans on Preventing Violent Extremism (UNDP and International Alert, 2020); Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*; Auke Dennis Wiersma, *Beleid Preventie Radicalisering, Kamerbrief aan de Voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal [Radicalisation Prevention Policy, Parliamentary letter to the President of the House of Representatives of the State’s General]* (The Hague: Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2021), accessed August 2, 2023, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-e493b31d-42c6-4413-8a20-ec70a735c6d9/pdf>; Fook Nederveen, Emma Zürcher, Lana Eekelschot, Emma Leenders, Iris Leussink, and Stijn Hoorens, *Naar een evidence-based aanpak van radicalisering en extremisme: Een eerste evaluatie van de gemeentelijke Versterkingsgelden 2020-2021 [Towards an evidence-based approach for radicalisation and extremism: a first evaluation of the municipal Reinforcement funds 2020-2021]* (Cambridge, UK: RAND Europe, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> M. Van de Donk, M. Peeters, F. Keijzer, M. van Kessel, E. Zuiderveld, M. Shahhoud, and T. Faber, *Onderzoek Effectiviteit Familieondersteuning en Forsa van het Landelijk Steunpunt Extremisme [Study on Effectiveness of Family Support and Individual Support from the National Support Center for Extremism in the Netherlands]* (Amsterdam: RadarAdvies, 2021).



(Horn of Africa) evaluation report.<sup>11</sup>

### Attribution vs. contribution

The complexity of the phenomenon and ToCs still severely challenge the process of attributing changes to certain interventions and establishing causal mechanisms. The latter is only possible with experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation methods, which use comparison groups to establish the effect of an intervention, but these methods are not always feasible and suitable.<sup>12</sup> To solve this, many M&E approaches rely on a contributory understanding for assessing an intervention's impact. This means that the M&E effort seeks to make clear to what extent and in what way the project activities have contributed to intended outcomes rather than attributing the outcomes directly to the activities. This approach is advised when evaluating highly complex environments.<sup>13</sup> Evaluators can measure contributions through contribution analysis, outcome harvesting, Most Significant Change analysis, process tracing, or feminist evaluation lenses.<sup>14</sup>

## Prevailing Assumption 2: The Concepts are too Abstract to make it Measurable

### Assumption

The second prevailing assumption is that due to a lack of universally-agreed definitions and the abstraction of the concepts, it is too difficult to operationalise and measure programmes and policies focused on P/CVE. This perception stems from the absence of universally agreed-upon definitions for key terms and the inherent vagueness of the concepts they represent.

### Underlying challenge

Many authors have pointed out that there is a lack of definitional consensus of key terms like (counter-)terrorism, (preventing/countering) violent extremism, radicalisation, resilience, and vulnerability.<sup>15</sup> This affects programming as discussions on, for example, the distinction between PVE and CVE or disengagement and deradicalization remain unresolved.<sup>16</sup> Terms are politicised, unclear or used interchangeably, which leads to the same concepts being used for different

11 Julian Brett, and André Kahlmeyer, Evaluation report: Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism – STRIVE (Horn of Africa) (RUSI/European Commission, 2017).

12 Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, Compendium of Good Practices; Glazzard, and Jones, Improving the Evaluation.

13 Holmer, Bauman, and Aryaeinejad, Measuring up; Ris, and Ernstorfer, Borrowing a wheel.

14 Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, Compendium of Good Practices.

15 Glazzard, and Jones, Improving the Evaluation; Isabella Pistone, Erik Eriksson, Ulrika Beckman, Christer Mattson, and Morten Sager, "A scoping review of interventions for preventing and countering violent extremism: Current status and implications for future research," *Journal for deradicalization* 19 (2019): 1-84; Joshua Sinai, Jeffrey Fuller, and Tiffany Seal, "Effectiveness in Counter-Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (2019); Lucy Holdaway, and Ruth Simpson, *Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism programming: A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation* (Oslo: UNDP and International Alert, 2018); Romaniuk, Does CVE work?; Gielen, "Cutting through complexity"; Ben Baruch, Tom Ling, Rich Warnes, and Joanna Hofman, "Evaluation in an emerging field: Developing a measurement framework for the field of counter-violent-extremism," *Evaluation* 24, no. 4 (2018): 475-495; Matthew Davies, Richard Warnes, and Joanna Hofman, *Exploring the transferability and applicability of gang evaluation methodologies to counter violent radicalisation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017); Bellasio, Hofman, Ward, Nederveen, Knack, Meranto, and Hoorens, *Counterterrorism evaluation*.

16 Glazzard, and Jones, Improving the Evaluation.

approaches. Additionally, the field of P/CVE is very much in flux,<sup>17</sup> leaving policymakers with a “fuzzy or moving target.”<sup>18</sup> This lack of shared understanding on what measures aim to achieve, and unclear boundaries between P/CVE and efforts in more established, adjacent fields (such as development, peacebuilding, and crime prevention), make it difficult to formulate outcomes and assess results.<sup>19</sup>

Another hurdle in M&E for the P/CVE field is the difficulty of translating abstract terms and concepts into measurable behavioural attributes.<sup>20</sup> There is no clear set of practices, methods or standards to evaluate the impact of P/CVE measures or guide M&E design.<sup>21</sup>

Nor is there agreement about whether formal standards are needed and how effectively they can be adapted from other fields. <sup>22</sup> According to Romaniuk, there is little coherence in P/CVE metrics to identify results and P/CVE evaluations rather lead to a series of insights than an accumulation of knowledge. Therefore, he argues for a “unified set of metrics”<sup>23</sup> that could be used across programmes.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, even if a unified set of metrics could be achieved, the data still needs to be interpreted, which is a subjective and challenging exercise that does not always lead to the same conclusion.<sup>25</sup> As Baruch and colleagues rightfully highlighted, “Evaluation in the field of CVE is fundamentally political and ambiguous, and developing an agreed approach to measurement would not of itself remove these ambiguities and ethical debates.”<sup>26</sup>

As there is no unified approach to measurement, combined with ambiguous terminology that can be difficult to operationalise, this makes it challenging to formulate appropriate indicators and accompanying data collection methods. The absence of clearly defined and measurable indicators can impede the evaluation process. A lack of concrete indicators makes it difficult for evaluators to determine if programme or policy objectives have been achieved, hindering the ability to assess effectiveness accurately.<sup>27</sup>

## Good practices to address the challenge

By employing good practices on getting to a shared definition, formulating SMART indicators, and utilising existing measurement tools, stakeholders can overcome the challenge of translating abstract terms into measurable behavioural attributes. The practices below will improve the precision of M&E efforts and contribute to evidence-based decision-making for more effective P/CVE programmes and policies.

### Work towards a shared definition

Given the challenge related to a lack of shared terminology, it is helpful to work towards clear and agreed-upon definitions – at least within teams or at the institutional level.<sup>28</sup> As there are many definitions of key terms, this ideally facilitates a reflection process on which definitions best fit the local context and understanding of the problem at hand. This should be done at the

17 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity.”

18 Glazzard, and Jones, *Improving the Evaluation*, 4.

19 Holdaway, and Simpson, *Improving the impact*; Ris, and Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a wheel*.

20 Glazzard, and Jones, *Improving the Evaluation*; Baruch, Ling, Warnes, and Hofman, “Evaluation in an emerging field.”

21 Holmer, Bauman, and Aryaeinejad, *Measuring up*; Ris, and Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a wheel*.

22 Ris, and Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a wheel*.

23 Romaniuk, *Does CVE work?* 35.

24 Romaniuk, *Does CVE work?*

25 Dawson, Edwards, and Jeffray, *Learning and Adapting*.

26 Baruch, Ling, Warnes, and Hofman, “Evaluation in an emerging field,” 479.

27 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity.”

28 Holdaway, and Simpson, *Improving the impact*.

start of a programme or policy to create a conceptual framework that delineates the objectives and boundaries of, for example, what constitutes violent extremism and whom it involves.<sup>29</sup> According to Holdaway and Simpson, “This will help to develop a shared platform for action, to raise challenges around potential politicising and stigmatisation and to set clear objectives that a programme can then be measured against.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Develop SMART indicators in the design phase of the programme or policy**

It is good practice to define specific results (on impact, outcome, and output level) and formulate indicators from the outset for effective evaluation of P/CVE programmes and policies.<sup>31</sup> As part of the M&E process, the previously mentioned ToCs need to be tested and revisited on a regular basis.<sup>32</sup> Hence, it is important that ToCs and the formulated project results are complemented with appropriate indicators and methods. These indicators need to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART).<sup>33</sup> There are public indicator banks that can be helpful when designing an M&E framework.<sup>34</sup> Generally, selecting and using indicators is a dynamic process that takes emerging evaluation evidence and learnings into account. This way, M&E frameworks stay responsive to the continuously changing nature of terrorism and violent extremism, and the needs of P/CVE policymakers.<sup>35</sup>

### **Utilise existing measurement tools**

It is recommended to use existing questionnaires and measurement tools to assess specific aspects of P/CVE interventions.<sup>36</sup> There are some P/CVE tested tools that provide standardised measurement approaches, capturing changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. For example, Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE-14) is a validated and standardised questionnaire tool that enables the assessment of risks and protective factors related to individuals’ resilience to violent extremism.<sup>37</sup> There are also other validated tools like Mann and colleagues’ questionnaire to measure resilience against violent extremism,<sup>38</sup> Barrelle’s Pro-Integration Model to assess disengagement levels,<sup>39</sup> and the ‘radical belief system’ questionnaire by Doosje and colleagues.<sup>40</sup> Holmer and colleagues recommend connecting academics working on new

29 Inga Nehlsen, Janusz Biene, Marc Coester, Frank Greuel, Björn Milbradt, and Andreas Armbrorst, “Evident and effective? The challenges, potentials, and limitations of evaluation research on preventing violent extremism,” *International Journal of Conflict Violence* 14 (2020): 1-20; Holdaway, and Simpson, *Improving the impact*.

30 Holdaway, and Simpson, *Improving the impact*, 16.

31 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity”; Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*.

32 Ris, and Ernstorfer, *Borrowing a wheel*.

33 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity”; Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*.

34 “PVE Indicator Bank,” UNDP, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/policy-centre/oslo/publications/pve-indicator-bank>; Adrian Cherney, Jennifer Bell, Ellen Leslie, Lorraine Cherney, and Lorraine Mazerolle, *Countering Violent Extremism Indicator Document* (Brisbane: Australian and New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2018); Sector Indicator Guidance: *Countering Violent Extremism* (Brussels: European Commission, n.d.); Pauline Massart, and Florence Ferrando, *Promoting the Role of Women in Security and Counterterrorism: Guidelines for the Criminal Justice Response to Terrorism* (Brussels: WIS Brussels, 2023).

35 Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*.

36 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity”; Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*.

37 Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*; Michele Grossman, Kristin Hadfield, Philip Jefferies, Vivian Gerrand, and Michael Ungar, “Youth resilience to violent extremism: Development and validation of the BRAVE measure,” *Terrorism and political violence* 34, no. 3 (2022): 468-488; “Tools and Resources,” Resilience Research Centre, accessed on August 21, 2023, <https://resilienceresearch.org/resources/>.

38 Liesbeth Mann, Bertjan Doosje, Elly Konijn, and Lars Nickolson, *Indicatoren en manifestaties van weerbaarheid van de Nederlandse bevolking tegen extremistische boodschappen [Indicators and manifestations of resilience of the Dutch population to extremist messages]* (The Hague: WODC, 2015).

39 Kate Barrelle, “Pro-integration: disengagement from and life after extremism,” *Behavioral sciences of terrorism and political aggression* 7, no. 2 (2015): 129-142.

40 Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees Van Den Bos, “Determinants of radicalization of Islamic youth in the Netherlands: Personal uncertainty, perceived injustice, and perceived group threat,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69,

tools with M&E professionals to aid the development of accessible and relevant approaches to measurement,<sup>41</sup> which will eventually allow evaluators to more effectively gauge the impact of interventions.<sup>42</sup>

## Prevailing Assumption 3: M&E of P/CVE Interventions is too Politically Sensitive

### Assumption

The third prevailing assumption is that M&E for P/CVE programmes and policies is too politically sensitive. The fear of negative findings, potential human rights violations, and public backlash has discouraged policymakers and implementers from conducting rigorous evaluations.

### Underlying challenge

The perception of extreme political sensitivity is hindering robust M&E efforts. For example, the sensitivity surrounding P/CVE efforts has led many Dutch municipalities to avoid establishing formal P/CVE programmes on paper.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, this caution can be essential to make a P/CVE interventions work. For example, there were awareness-raising trainings for practitioners with ‘checklists’ on how to signal violent extremism. However, violent extremists have become savvy and are also familiar with the checklists. In the past, ISIS even had special manuals to instruct potential foreign fighters on how not to get caught; it advises them, for example, to shave their beard before travel. These manuals were based on P/CVE trainings and checklists that were made publicly available.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, if P/CVE interventions and programmes are not even described on paper, it becomes extremely difficult to monitor and evaluate them. The sensitivity of describing interventions on paper, coupled with heavy media scrutiny in recent years has created an atmosphere of caution and hesitation. Consequently, policymakers, wary of potential scrutiny and criticism, have refrained from initiating comprehensive evaluation processes. The hesitation to openly address the issue has resulted in missed opportunities for evidence-based decision-making and proactive policy improvements.<sup>45</sup>

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no. 3 (2013): 586-604.

41 Holmer, Bauman, and Aryaeinejad, Measuring up.

42 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity”; Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, Compendium of Good Practices.

43 Amy-Jane Gielen, and Merel Molenkamp, Programmascan gemeente Dronten: Adviesrapport [Program scan of the municipality of Dronten: Advisory report] (Amsterdam: A.G. Advies & RadarAdvies, 2019); Amy-Jane Gielen & Merel Molenkamp, Programmascan gemeente Almere: Adviesrapport [Programme scan municipality of Almere: advisory report] (Amsterdam: A.G. Advies & RadarAdvies, 2019); Amy-Jane Gielen & Merel Molenkamp, Programmascan gemeente Lelystad: Adviesrapport [Programme scan municipality of Lelystad: advisory report] (Amsterdam: A.G. Advies & RadarAdvies, 2020); Amy-Jane Gielen, Programmascan Rotterdamse aanpak radicalisering [Programme scan of Rotterdam’s approach to radicalisation] (Woerden: A.G. Advies, 2017); Amy-Jane Gielen, Programmascan Huizense aanpak polarisatie & radicalisering [Programme scan of Huizen’s approach to polarisation & radicalisation] (Woerden: A.G. Advies, 2018).

44 Gielen, “Cutting through complexity”.

45 Cyril Rosman, and Tobias den Hartog, “Twintig miljoen voor aanpak radicalisering: ‘Geen goed zicht op effecten’”, [Twenty million to tackle radicalisation: ‘No good view of effects’] Algemeen Dagblad, June 1, 2019, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/twintig-miljoen-voor-aanpak-radicalisering-geen-goed-zicht-op-effecten~afdfbac3/>

## Good practices to overcome the challenge

A good practice to overcome this challenge is to embrace transparency and proactive communication.

### Proactive transparency and communication

In more recent years, notable examples demonstrate that being transparent and proactive in conducting evaluations can be beneficial despite the political sensitivity of P/CVE efforts.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the City of The Hague adopted a case-based approach for deradicalisation and disengagement of violent extremists and had it externally evaluated. Similarly, the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Safety, responsible for terrorist prison wings, subjected their deradicalisation and disengagement programmes to review.<sup>47</sup> Surprisingly, these evaluations, which were made publicly available and sent to the respective city council of The Hague and the Dutch Parliament, did not receive significant media attention. Despite both the City of The Hague and the Ministry of Justice and Safety being under heavy media scrutiny at the time, the transparent evaluations did not attract public backlash. The examples above underscore the importance of embracing transparency and proactive communication with the public and stakeholders. This does not mean that risks associated with publishing sensitive information should be discarded. But if these risks are minimised – by applying anonymisation and confidentiality protocols, following regulations on secure storage and the use of sensitive data, sharing summaries of the reports, or publishing them after the intervention was finished – openly discussing the evaluation process and the significance of data-driven decision-making can itself effectively counteract challenges posed by political sensitivity.<sup>48</sup> When stakeholders are informed about the rationale and methodology behind evaluations, they are more inclined to support these efforts and recognise the merits of evidence-based policy decisions. Drawing inspiration from past evaluations conducted with transparency can further bolster confidence in such processes. By reflecting on these experiences and addressing potential concerns related to political sensitivity, policymakers can pave the way for enhanced and more resilient evaluation practices.

## Prevailing Assumption 4: We Don't Have the Time

### Assumption

A lack of time often emerges as a common argument for not conducting M&E or evidence-based approaches to P/CVE.

### Underlying challenge

The perception among policymakers and implementers that M&E is a time-consuming process is a significant challenge. This perception creates a barrier to evidence-based decision-making,

<sup>46</sup> Annebregt Dijkman, and Amy-Jane Gielen, *Pionieren in veranderende complexiteit: Evaluatie van de persoonsgerichte aanpak contraterrorisme, extremisme en radicalisering (CTER) gemeente Den Haag* [Pioneering in changing complexity: evaluation of the person-centred approach to counterterrorism, extremism and radicalisation municipality of The Hague] (Amsterdam: Sherazade Advies en A.G. Advies, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> *Evaluatieonderzoek: Interventies voor deradicalisering en disengagement binnen de Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen* [Evaluation study: Interventions for deradicalisation and disengagement within the Custodial Institutions Agency] (Amsterdam: RadarAdvies and A.G. Advies, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, *Compendium of Good Practices*.

hindering the integration of M&E into programme and policy implementation. This became particularly clear in a study conducted among policymakers of the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs. Through surveys and interviews (N=28) the study made clear that integrating M&E from the outset (design phase) was not part of their standard practice as P/CVE policymakers felt it was too time consuming and saw it as an extra to-do on top of their already heavy workload.

## Good practices to overcome the challenge

By strategically planning M&E activities, outsourcing when appropriate, capturing institutional knowledge, and engaging in proactive communication about results, stakeholders can effectively manage the challenge of perceived time constraints. Emphasising the importance of evidence-based decision-making and the value of M&E for programme and policy improvement will empower stakeholders to allocate sufficient time and resources to achieve more impactful and successful P/CVE interventions.

### Strategic planning and resource allocation

Overcoming time challenge requires strategic planning and resource allocation. Stakeholders must recognise that investing time in M&E is essential for understanding programme and policy effectiveness and achieving meaningful results. By setting aside dedicated resources and time for M&E activities in the design phase, the process becomes more manageable and less burdensome. The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs invested in an initiative which included training and coaching on the job to help policymakers design evidence-based interventions and improve M&E of their P/CVE activities. In their evaluation of the coaching, policymakers indicated that it had actually helped them to save time, particularly when they received questions from management or Parliament.<sup>49</sup>

### Working with external M&E experts

Stakeholders can mitigate the time burden by outsourcing M&E activities to specialised professionals. Monitoring is often conducted by internal staff, but external experts can efficiently conduct evaluations, allowing internal resources to focus on implementation. Outsourcing also ensures that evaluations are conducted impartially and according to rigorous standards, enhancing the credibility of evaluation results.<sup>50</sup> The Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, and the Ministry of Social Affairs have dedicated a special budget that municipalities can request to evaluate their overall local approach or specific local interventions, in that case.<sup>51</sup>

### Capture institutional knowledge

M&E efforts also help capture institutional knowledge. Evaluations and evaluation departments can play an archival role by documenting what has been done.<sup>52</sup> These evaluations provide valuable insights into programme and policy strengths and weaknesses, facilitating evidence-

49 Malon Peeters, and Amy-Jane Gielen, Implementatie en borging Evidence Based Werken. Eindrapportage. [Implementing and securing Evidence Based Work. Final report.] (Amsterdam: RadarAdvies en A.G. Advies, 2021).

50 Nigel Simister, and Vera Scholz, Types of Evaluation (England: INTRAC, 2017); Mattei, and Zeiger, Evaluate your CVE results; Asena Baykal, Sarah Bressan, Julia Friedrich, Giulia Pasquali, Philipp Rotmann, and Marie Wagner, Evaluating P/CVE: Institutional Structures in International Comparison (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2021).

51 “Versterkingsgelden voor 2023 én 2024 zijn toegekend”, [Reinforcement funds for 2023 and 2024 have been allocated] NCTV, December 8, 2022, <https://www.nctv.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/12/08/versterkingsgelden-voor-2023-en-2024-zijn-toegekend>

52 Lotte Levelt, and Nicky Pouw, “Speaking truth to power: Exploring a Ministry’s evaluation department through evaluators’ and policymakers’ eyes,” *Evaluation* 28, no. 3 (2022): 379-395.

based improvements.<sup>53</sup> By systematically documenting evaluation results and lessons learned, stakeholders can build institutional knowledge over time.

### Proactive communication

Stakeholders can further reduce the time burden by engaging in proactive communication about evaluation results, while minimising the risks associated with publishing sensitive information. Making evaluation findings publicly available and sharing them with relevant parliamentary bodies can minimise the need for repeated inquiries. Transparent communication also demonstrates a commitment to accountability and evidence-based decision-making, fostering public trust and support for P/CVE efforts.

## Case Study: Addressing M&E Assumptions with the Dutch Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation

For policymakers aiming to ensure robust M&E practices in P/CVE, the Dutch “Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation” offers an insightful model.<sup>54</sup> Conceived by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) in collaboration with the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) in 2019, this online resource assists municipalities with knowledge, lessons learned, practical tools, checklists, and formats to evaluate, adjust, and further develop their prevention policies. The aim of the Toolkit is to ensure that policies are evidence-based, demonstrably effective, and capable of countering radicalisation and extremism. The Toolkit helps address some of the challenges underlying the four assumptions discussed above.

The first common assumption is that prevention and non-events cannot be measured. The Toolkit challenges this notion by pioneering a proactive approach to evaluation. It offers resources to assess the efficacy of preventive measures at three distinct phases: pre-implementation, during execution, and post-completion. This ensures that initiatives are not just evaluated based on events that transpire, but also by the potential incidents they prevent. Included within are lessons on resilient parenting, building resilience through theatre interventions, training for frontline practitioners, and constructing a multi-agency strategy against violent extremism. All the lessons learned in the Toolkit can help shape a Theory of Change (ToC). For instance, the Toolkit’s examination of interventions for parents pinpoints effective strategies that elevate knowledge, awareness, and response abilities – fundamental tools in amplifying prevention and early detection. By accentuating measurable outcomes, even those manifesting as “non-events,” the Toolkit underlines the crucial role of prevention in combating violent extremism.

A second assumption is the perceived difficulty of operationalising abstract concepts in P/CVE efforts. The Toolkit addresses this by introducing structured formats for plan, process, and effect evaluations. These templates guide policymakers to define SMART indicators. Further facilitating this, for each P/CVE intervention – be it resilient parenting, training for frontline practitioners, or others – the Toolkit offers pre-filled formats for designing interventions. For instance, if a

<sup>53</sup> Dawson, Edwards, and Jeffray, Learning and Adapting; Ris, and Ernstorfer, Borrowing a wheel; Sinai, Fuller, and Seal, “Effectiveness in Counter-Terrorism”; Amy-Jane, Gielen, Executive Summary. A Road Map for Monitoring and Evaluation of PVE policies in Belgium (Brussels: Open Society Foundation, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> “Toolkit evidence-based werken bij de preventie van radicalisering,” Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit. [“Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation,” Social Stability Expertise unit].

policymaker is framing a P/CVE strategy for resilient parenting, they can derive inspiration from these pre-populated formats, showcasing potential SMART indicators tailored for that specific intervention. This approach ensures that abstract notions are translated into tangible, measurable attributes, synchronising with overarching programme objectives and underpinning robust evaluations.

Addressing the third assumption that political sensitivities hinder effective M&E, the Toolkit emerges as a powerful tool for fostering both transparency and accountability in the volatile realm of countering violent extremism. Recognising the delicate interplay of politics, the national government took a proactive approach: they not only launched the Toolkit but also organised workshops for local policymakers and mayors. By endorsing the Toolkit on a national level and emphasising its value in promoting transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in local municipalities, the government eased potential political sensitivities. This was further bolstered by the national government's provision of financial support for external evaluations, thereby countering any objections related to financial constraints. By fostering a culture of evidence-based decision-making and promoting structured, transparent evaluation processes, the Toolkit ensures that policies are not just politically palatable, but also robustly effective.

Challenging the final assumption that M&E is cumbersome and overwhelmingly time-consuming, the Toolkit introduces an elegantly streamlined approach that dispels the notion of M&E as a lengthy and tedious process. By offering specialised templates, including those specifically tailored for external evaluations, the Toolkit transforms the traditionally daunting evaluation journey into a more manageable and efficient one. Furthermore, the national government, recognising the importance of hands-on guidance, established a working group with local authorities and organised workshops with multiple municipalities. These collaborative sessions were designed to familiarise local authorities with the Toolkit's resources and to foster a culture of practical, evidence-based evaluation. To further bolster local initiatives, the national government provided tailor-made services, allowing municipalities to draw on the expertise of independent P/CVE M&E specialists. These measures ensured that municipalities not only had the tools but also the necessary support and expertise to tackle their unique M&E challenges effectively.

For those involved in policymaking and practice in a non-Dutch context, there is a burgeoning array of toolkits and guidelines that facilitate M&E activities in P/CVE<sup>55</sup> programmes and policies. Noteworthy contributions include the EU-UN Compendium of Good Practices on measuring results in P/CVE, UNCCT's toolkit for M&E of P/CVE action plans,<sup>56</sup> and the RAND and UNDP/International Alert M&E toolkits for P/CVE interventions.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Hedayah's "Evaluate your CVE Results: Projecting your Impact" and the MASAR app help create M&E plans by providing pragmatic insights and formats.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, resources such as IMPACT Europe's evaluation toolkit enrich the global dialogue by offering valuable tools for professionals in the CVE field.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Holmer, Sutherland, and Wallner, Compendium of Good Practices.

<sup>56</sup> Sidonie Roberts, and Mohammed Elshimi, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Toolkit to Support Action Plans to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (New York, NY: UNCCT, 2023)

<sup>57</sup> Todd C. Helmus, Miriam Matthews, Rajeev Ramchand, Sina Beaghley, David Stebbins, Amanda Kadlec, Michael A. Brown, Aaron Kofner, and Joie D. Acosta, RAND program evaluation toolkit for countering violent extremism (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017); Joanna Hofman, and Alex Sutherland, Evaluating interventions that prevent or counter violent extremism: A practical guide (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); Holdaway, and Simpson, Improving the impact.

<sup>58</sup> Mattei, and Zeiger, Evaluate your CVE results; "MASAR," Hedayah, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://hedayah.com/resources/masar/>.

<sup>59</sup> "An evaluation toolkit for professionals working in the counter violent extremism field," IMPACT Europe, accessed August 21, 2023, <http://www.impact.itti.com.pl/index#/home>.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In the face of ever-evolving threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism, the role of M&E for P/CVE programmes and policies cannot be understated. This policy brief explored four prevailing assumptions of M&E in P/CVE, highlighting the complexities and challenges inherent in each. These prevailing assumptions highlight the need for a deeper understanding and more nuanced approach towards M&E in P/CVE. Addressing these challenges is essential for advancing the field and enhancing the efficacy and impact of P/CVE programmes and policies. The complexities identified in each assumption underscore the importance of careful consideration and tailored strategies in the development and evaluation of P/CVE initiatives. This policy brief provided comprehensive solutions based on the Dutch experience. The good practices and case study can be used to empower policymakers to embrace rigorous evaluation methods. For this purpose, we recommend the following:

1. **Adopt a Nuanced Approach to M&E:** Adjust M&E systems to acknowledge and value the preventive successes rather than focusing on non-events. To address the prevention paradoxes, and measure prevention and non-event outcomes effectively, stakeholders should co-create a Theory of Change (ToC) and link specific preventive activities to outcomes. This can be used as the basis for M&E frameworks to effectively measure possible pathways of change. By integrating existing tools, learning from good practices, and utilising M&E toolkits that have been developed globally, a deeper understanding of how preventive actions lead to desired outcomes is achievable.
2. **Operationalise Abstract Concepts:** To ensure that abstract terms of the ToC are turned into tangible results, stakeholders should employ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) indicators from the outset. By leveraging indicator banks and structured formats from resources like the Dutch “Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work to Prevent Radicalisation”, this process can be further streamlined, ensuring all objectives are aligned with measurable outcomes.
3. **Promote Transparency and Communication:** Political sensitivities can be mitigated by championing transparency in all stages of a policy or programme. Engaging in proactive communication not only fosters public trust and support for P/CVE efforts, but also counteracts potential assumptions.
4. **Optimise Resource Allocation for Efficient M&E:** Combat the assumption of M&E being overly time-consuming by prioritising strategic planning and resource allocation. Consider outsourcing M&E activities to specialised professionals, enabling internal teams to concentrate on policy or programme implementation. Additionally, adopting a structured M&E framework and consistently documenting institutional knowledge can expedite processes and reduce redundant efforts.
5. **Embrace Evidence-Based Decision-Making:** The Dutch Toolkit for Evidence-Based Work stands as a testament to the potency of data-driven choices in P/CVE initiatives. Policymakers globally should harness its insights, emphasising evidence-based decision-making to bolster international cooperation and enhance the overall effectiveness of P/CVE programmes and policies.

As we navigate a dynamic threat environment, such rigorous evaluation practices will be pivotal in shaping resilient and well-informed responses.

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Amy-Jane has worked for the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission, where she authored the first edition of the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices. She has also participated in RAN working groups focusing on the internet, social media, and foreign fighters. Furthermore, she has delivered workshops and keynote speeches to over a thousand practitioners and policymakers across Europe on (the evaluation of) P/CVE. On behalf of the Dutch Ministries of Safety and Justice and Social Affairs, she co-developed a P/CVE evaluation toolkit for municipalities. Amy-Jane has also worked as an intervention provider in family support for foreign fighters and exit programmes. These combined experiences enable her to translate her academic work to various levels of government and practice.

### Aileen van Leeuwen (M&E Officer & Research Fellow)

Aileen van Leeuwen joined ICCT in 2022. Her focus is on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of the impact and implementation of CT and P/CVE programmes, policies and strategies. In this position, Aileen combines her thematic knowledge on CT and P/CVE and the M&E experience she gained at various international NGOs.

Previously, Aileen provided policy research, advice and evaluations to Dutch professionals concerned with (violent) extremism, radicalisation, polarisation and reintegration. She also supported risk assessments of potential (violent) extremists. Additionally, she worked on designing and implementing M&E frameworks for the exiled, Sudanese media house Dabanga, and supported political dialogues between armed groups, governments and international organisations at the Dialogue Advisory Group (DAG). She also co-founded the start-up Acume, which brings academic insights to policy-makers and practitioners, facilitating innovative and evidence-based decision-making. On the side, she is a photographer and founder of the photography project Portraits for People.

Aileen holds an MA in Conflict Studies and Human Rights and a BSc in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences (with honours) from Utrecht University in The Netherlands. Her MA thesis (published as a peer-reviewed article) focused on the reintegration process of ex-paramilitaries in Medellín, Colombia, and was based on 3-month field research and interviews with ex-paramilitaries.



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