



Innovative evaluation approaches for secondary and tertiary prevention and insights for practitioners

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Introduction

The recent years have been characterised by a serious concern, at European and global levels, related to terrorist attacks as well as to radicalisation paths promoted by extremist organisations online and offline. In the attempt to prevent and counter possible threats, governments, local communities, NGOs and private organisations have multiplied prevention interventions aimed at vulnerable subjects and towards subjects already radicalised or already involved in violent conduct (divided into numerous forms of approaches that include deradicalisation, desistance or disengagement).

Despite the proliferation of projects, policies and strategies implemented in Europe and worldwide for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), no consensus has been reached so far on what really works in the field (Marsden et al., 2017), in terms of positive results obtained, which are scientifically verifiable and sustainable. In other words, the evaluation of the implemented approaches is still in its infancy (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; van Hemert et al., 2014).

This lack of awareness is strictly linked to some circumstances that will be considered in the present paper but that can be briefly pointed out, starting from the lack of a common definition about relevant categories (such as terrorism, radicalisation, disengagement, deradicalisation), the complexity of the involved extremist phenomena, the lack of resources invested for evaluation purposes and the difficulties to find a common aim for the evaluation process between all the different stakeholders, due to the fluidity of the concept of evaluation itself (Bellasio et al., 2018).

Starting from the very beginning of the expansion of the field of P/CVE evaluations, scholars (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Gielen, 2017; Lum et al., 2006; Marret et al., 2017; Nelen et al., 2010) have criticised the use of the evaluation techniques of the proposed approaches, noting that evaluation of and strategies for P/CVE advanced at different rhythms within the countries. For example, as is argued in the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) study (Baykal, 2021), while countries such as Canada, Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have an established tradition in evaluating P/CVE broadly, noticeable differences exist even within this group when it comes to reaching robust findings and actually implementing evaluations' recommendations in the field.

This is particularly true for the evaluation of tertiary prevention approaches, as some authors (Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al., 2021) clearly show. The interest in assessing progress in the implementation of measures and the achievement of intended results is something shared among all the involved stakeholders (Junk, 2021) as well as confirmed by the European Commission (2018).

The most obvious consequence of this two-speed system is the current limited information about scientifically oriented evaluation designs/approaches able to return objective data on what works and what does not work in the P/CVE sector. This is also true for evaluations that focus on economic efficiency and it is especially true for those focusing on efficacy (European Commission, 2018).

The present paper aims to discuss the state of the art in the field of evaluation of P/CVE strategies in secondary and tertiary prevention, in order to summarise available approaches and present obstacles and future challenges.

In recent years ... numerous programs have been deployed to attempt to counter ... [extremist and terrorist] violence by other means [instead of the traditional security response]. Unfortunately, these programs have not been grounded in any clear, rigorously defined conceptual and empirical foundations. (Clément et al., 2021, p. 8)

To free the field from possible misunderstandings, it is worth to briefly recall the distinction between secondary prevention and tertiary prevention, both sectors considered in the analysis of the evaluation processes to which this document refers:

- **Secondary prevention:** focuses on individuals who are already considered to be at risk of radicalisation and aims to prevent the escalation to violence.
- **Tertiary prevention:** focuses on individuals who are considered to be radicalised and, very often, already extremist offenders. The aim is their deradicalisation and their disengagement to prevent reoffending (Molenkamp et al., 2018).

The approaches of primary prevention that focus on early prevention of radicalisation and normally involve general public or specific groups of the society considered at risk, such as schools, are particularly difficult to evaluate due to the generic nature of the actions put in place, and for this reason they are not considered in the present paper.

Notes on evolution of the evaluation of P/CVE approaches and its methodological challenges

The field of evaluation, according to Shadish and Lullen (2005), finds its roots so far back in time that it can be considered as old as human activity and the discussion about its possible use has been central for a long time (Alkin & King, 2016).

One of the most relevant academics of the field defined evaluation as “the judgment of merit and worth” (Scriven, 1967), clarifying that a programme may have merit but not value for a specific context, thus introducing the idea that evaluation is a context-driven process. This understanding is crucial for fields like P/CVE, where the specific context in which the preventive strategy is implemented is of supreme importance.

The P/CVE field is quite new; it has seen an increase in the applied approaches over the last two decades, with a concentration on huge investments, in attempts to show strength in the management of the risks posed by violent extremists around the world. Its relatively young nature has pushed researchers and stakeholders to consider models already evaluated as effective in neighbouring fields such as public health, crime prevention (even if, also in this case, authors underline how information on the identification and use of indicators in the evaluation process of crime prevention projects is nevertheless currently lacking (Rummens, 2016), juvenile delinquency, and even peacebuilding (Holmer et al., 2018) and gang-related intervention (Davies et al., 2017).

In regard to public health models, it is worth underlining that applying this model to P/CVE offers some advantages such as: 1) a framework for the analysis of push and pull factors (Schmid, 2013); 2) an easier effort for the mapping of P/CVE programmes according to clusters of services that refer to primary, secondary and tertiary levels of public health models (Harris-Horgan et al., 2016); and 3) the collection of pivotal data about possible gaps in the coordination of the involved inter-agency and multidisciplinary team as well as on the community engagement that is a key element for the positive implementation of P/CVE strategies (Hassan, Brouillette-Alaire, Ousman, Savard et al., 2021).

The gang-related intervention field offers a way through quasi-experimental designs that have been already efficiently used to face the difficulty of finding appropriate counterfactual or at least understanding of what would have happened without implementation of the intervention (Clawson & Coolbaugh, 2001; Davies et al., 2017).

Some authors (LaFree & Miller, 2008) have pointed out that there are similarities between some types of crimes and terrorism, hypothesising that, therefore, there may be a possibility of transferring some research methodologies in the field of criminology to the field of terrorism. In particular, it is possible to find similarities between gangs and terrorism under the point of view of demographics, recruitment, group dynamics, behaviour and desistance. Due to the findings of a specific literature review that shows the rigorous way in which evaluations are developed in the field of gang interventions (Davies et al., 2017) against the low quality of the ones in the field of P/CVE where no high-quality examples were identified, it is plausible to believe that positive outcomes could come from the comparison of evaluations from adjacent sectors, with the aim to lead to a quality improvement also in the area of evaluation of P/CVE (Davies et al., 2017). In fact the

mentioned literature review shows that 30 % of the analysed evaluations of gang interventions were of high quality (meaning that empirical data was collected using a multi-method approach comprising multiple instruments), 55 % of medium quality (meaning that empirical data was collected but the circumstances would allow for a more advanced data collection), and only 15 % of low quality (meaning that no empirical investigation was conducted while circumstances would allow for a more thorough methodological assessment to answer key evaluation questions, assuming availability of sufficient financial and human resources).

Considering that 85 % of the mentioned evaluations appear to be of medium-high value, it is possible to argue that some positive stimulus for the development of evaluation practices in the field of primary and secondary P/CVE could be recognised.

In short, the models deriving from the aforementioned sectors have made it possible to combine new approaches with the more traditional ones promoted by the intelligence sector and the law enforcement one. Even if learning lessons from comparable fields represents a useful resource when dealing with a fairly new field, evaluators should be aware of the characteristic specificities of extremism and tailor the approach in line with them, avoiding slavish application.

Knowledge of the best practices in P/CVE is still not encouraging and the effectiveness of the implemented ones is still mostly unknown (Horgan & Braddock, 2010), due to the lack of an aforementioned evaluation practice, applied according to a criterion of continuity and precision that makes it possible to effectively understand the strengths and weaknesses of the vast number of P/CVE practices that are implemented in numerous and different contexts. In this regard, the analysis of the available literature, starting from the very first collection of practices (Lum et al., 2006) to get to the most recent ones (such as Hofman, J., & Sutherland, A. (Eds) (2018) and Madriaza et al., 2022), returns an almost discouraging picture: if it is improving it is doing so too slowly, compared with the huge amount of money invested in the field of P/CVE (Bellasio, et al., 2018; Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al., 2021).

When it comes to considering secondary and tertiary prevention approaches, this poor scenario is particularly true for the specific challenges that evaluators have to face. In fact, secondary approaches require special attention in the evaluation of the control groups to be selected in order to avoid political, religious or ideological stigmatisation. Moreover, the intrinsic difficulty in assessing what would have happened without the preventive intervention does not offer specific elements to create certain causal links between the results obtained and the actions undertaken. Tertiary prevention approaches, often linked to controversial concepts such as radicalisation, deradicalisation and disengagement (Ris & Ernstorfer, 2017), have to consider numerous challenges: the large part of the available studies shows, in fact, that “the effectiveness of tertiary prevention programs remains to be a matter of informed opinion rather than clear empirical evidence” (Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al., 2021, p. 13).

Why is this lack of reliable data on tertiary prevention so difficult to fill? Zeuthen (2021) refers to the fact that this specific field is relatively new, while Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al. (2021) focus on the confusion underlying the lack of clarity about the objective of the approach where complex terms such as deradicalisation, disengagement, disentangling and social rehabilitation are mentioned within the same P/CVE project. This makes it difficult to understand what the main objective pursued by the implemented strategy is and how to link the individual proposed actions to the sub-objectives. Other authors (Madriaza et al., 2022; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016) point out the lack of access to primary data that are considered sensitive by governments, or to reports published internally when it comes to work on literature/systematic review, or the impossibility to reach participants in an action, having access only to the records. In addition to all these limits, Horgan and Braddock (2010) underline that defining the success of a tertiary prevention programme is particularly difficult due to the fact that, if recidivism is a controversial criterion to be used even in related domains such as desistance from crime (Lussier et al., 2015), when it comes to evaluating terrorists, researchers have to face additional challenges linked to the fact that data about those people are normally considered as classified information by the governments and rarely accessible. And if recidivism is a concept that creates numerous problems as an indicator in the field of P/CVE, deradicalisation is an even worse one, due to the fact that the outcome is poorly defined and difficult to measure so much so as to determine the use of proxy indicators in the 89.1 % of cases considered in the Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al. (2021) systematic review on the outcomes of tertiary prevention programmes and direct indicators only in 38.3 %. Another specific problem relates to the definition of “success” when dealing with tertiary prevention approaches, especially when it comes to defining attribution: how can, for example,

the contribution of an exit programme to a person's deradicalisation process be measured? "Measuring a negative" (Lewis et al., 2020, p. 16) is a particularly complex operation in P/CVE approaches.

Evaluation

Starting from the identification of the lack of evidence-based studies, programme evaluations (Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, Ousman, Savard et al., 2021) and data in the field of P/CVE, well emerging from the relevant literature (Clément et al., 2021), it is worth trying to understand some specific points as regards evaluation itself:

- 1) **What is evaluation and how can it be defined?**
- 2) **What is its purpose?**

As regards point 1), in the available literature it is possible to find different definitions of this concept, but the one that is probably the most applied in the relevant literature belongs to Scriven (1991), later adopted by the American Evaluation Association (AEA, 2014): "Evaluation is the systematic process to determine merit, worth, value, or significance". Another definition that has reached a large consensus is the one proposed by the OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation:

Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors. Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program". (OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation, 2010, p. 4).

The uncertainty around the definition of evaluation makes it difficult to move from "good practices" to "best practices" that still do not exist in the field of evaluation in P/CVE, due above all to the fact that the scarcity of evaluation practices prevented the emergence of models that are generally perceived as efficient.

The evaluation can focus on different levels:

- **Project level:** lowest level; it refers to specific projects, by taking into consideration only selected aims and objectives and returns limited results
- **Programme level:** involves the evaluation of many projects or of a whole portfolio of actions implemented by an organisation
- **Policy evaluation:** it is the most comprehensive level because it concerns an entire policy field, considering the appropriateness, the effectiveness, the efficiency and the sustainability of the key policy choices, processes and structures (Baykal et al., 2021)
- **Evaluation management:** this represents the organisational level for which it entails the decision about what and how to evaluate (selection of evaluators, decision about the accessibility of data, etc. (Baykal, 2021)

Irrespective of the level, a constructive evaluation culture plays a pivotal role: the norms and expectations shared among all the stakeholders. If this culture is built on a constructive perspective, it makes it easier to work on mistakes and to face new challenges (Baykal et al., 2021). Constructive evaluation culture can develop in a specific field/place and determine the way in which the climate of collaboration between the different stakeholders develops, also facilitating sharing of possible errors and malfunctions of the implemented approaches as well as the willingness to experiment with new strategies.

In these regards, funders play an important role in nurturing a culture of trust among all the relevant stakeholders and the willingness to see evaluation as a learning opportunity. The Netherlands, where such a culture of trust is well established, offers a good example of such an approach (Baykal et al., 2021). Encouraging the development/establishment of a culture of trust helps in feeling comfortable when sharing

possible mistakes that occurred during the implementation of a project because this openness does not lead to punishment/negative consequences (for example, in terms of reduction or elimination of financing by the funders). Sharing what did not work should represent a moment of growth and learning for all the involved parties, an important step towards the promotion and the improvement in the achieved results through the changes made also thanks to the sharing of what did not work.

Funders should also guarantee the independence of the evaluators from those who manage the evaluation results as well as from those who have to be evaluated. Looking at learning as the central point of evaluation, nevertheless, does not mean that accountability has to be completely abandoned but, rather, that for the two purposes evaluators and stakeholders must find the right balance.

Focussing the attention on point 2), it is important to know that understanding the purpose of evaluation is pivotal when it comes to planning an evaluation strategy because, according to the key questions that the evaluation intends to answer, the project design will be different.

According to Clément et al. (2021), the purpose of the evaluation can change according to the different, involved stakeholders:

- **For practitioners**, evaluation can provide ideas for improving their practices and, in case of tertiary prevention approaches, especially exit programmes; evaluation helps them to understand which elements are most effective and in which situations, in terms of applied methods and tools as well as of reached level of quality.
- **For researchers**, it can help in understanding the dynamics that are underpinned to the success or failure of the interventions. In the case of tertiary prevention approaches, they are also interested in understanding how and why the selected theories of change apply and which are the other elements belonging to different approaches that work best.
- **For policymakers**, it can help to make a better use of their (or public) money, according to the evaluation findings. Being accountable for the safety of their citizens, they are specially interested in effectiveness when dealing with tertiary prevention approaches (also because they are often the commissioners as well as the funders of the considered strategies) (Wouterse & van de Donk, 2019).

Clarifying the purpose of the evaluation from the beginning can help to avoid misunderstanding among all the involved stakeholders and can facilitate the collection of useful data.

Apart from the specific meaning that each stakeholder can give to evaluation, it is important that for all the involved parties the idea of applying a specific model of evaluation is oriented to the achievement of a higher standard of learning, in relation to the implemented P/CVE approach and its effects.

According to the practical guideline for policy-makers and practitioners regarding evaluations in tertiary prevention in the field of islamist extremism (European commission, n.d) « Evaluations help practitioners reflect on what they are doing by providing an outside perspective, and give policy-makers valuable insights into the inner workings of a programme or project. They also allow for the acquisition of valid and reliable data that enable practitioners and policy-makers to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of implemented measures and policies. »

Evaluation may particularly help policymakers and practitioners to reach:

- i. An empirical insights and solid understanding of the work being done ;
- ii. The knoweldge of good practices while providing a structured process of learning from approaches that did not yield the desired result;
- iii. The success of a project by providing instruments for monitoring and intervening while it is still running (if implemented in the active phase) and
- iv. A coherent explanation of « the logic of a programme or an implemented measure, and show how and why prevention works (and also demonstrate the pitfalls, challenges and limitations of work in tertiary prevention, and its evaluation) will help ensure continued political and public support. At the same time, it lays the groundwork for increased efficiency of public expenditure. (European Commission, n.d)

Specific evaluation models that can be implemented in the field of P/CVE

The available literature on evaluation offers a wide range of useful models and tools that can be analysed from different perspectives, being aware that their real utility has still been poorly investigated. The following points show the most common kind of possible evaluation models, according to different variables such as:

- 1) The implementation moment (Table 1)
- 2) Types of methodologies and methods (Table 2)
- 3) The most common Indicators (Figure 1)
- 4) The purpose (Figure 2)

1) The implementation moment

The time at which the evaluation will be carried out is particularly important to determine the possible use of the collected data and the type of professional evaluators that should be involved.

An *ex ante* evaluation (a form of baseline assessment) is a good starting point for the following implementation of a P/CVE project (Molenkamp et al., 2018). Its principal aim is to clarify the context, in which an intervention is to be performed, in order to orient the relevance and the focus of useful strategies, as well as to gather more information on the phenomena that are present in the implementation environment. An *ex ante* evaluation can include also baseline studies to establish the prevalence of certain contextual influences or, for example, input factors of clients participating in secondary/tertiary P/CVE interventions.

Formative evaluation (that is normally implemented before the intervention or at its very early stages and can be implemented as an *ex ante* evaluation procedure) can help in incorporating the outcomes of the evaluation into the ongoing planning or to redesign the process (UN, 2023). On the other hand, final or summative evaluation that is normally scheduled near the end or after the completion of the whole process can help to inform the development of future projects as well as to verify accountability for the implemented approach.

Mid-term evaluation, instead, has a double purpose: formative and summative because the acquisition of data near the middle of the whole implementation of the approach can help “to guide the remainder of the intervention and to adjust direction if needed” (UN, 2023, p. 46).

Ad hoc evaluations are not connected to a specific moment, but rather to a specific purpose, so they can be implemented whenever the need arises.

The different types of evaluations are not necessarily alternative: they can be mixed and used on the same approach, for example, if the questions that need to be answered are different, according to the different stakeholders (this is the case, for example, of a mid-term evaluation carried out internally with the aim to discover possible aspects that can be ameliorated during the implementation of the actions, while the final evaluation can be conducted by external evaluators to collect data about the sustainability of the process itself).

Table 1: Implementation moment

| Time of implementation of the evaluation | Type of evaluation |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early phases | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative evaluation and ex ante evaluations |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-term evaluations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interim evaluation |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near the end or after completion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final or summative |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the end of the project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ex post evaluations (or post hoc) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ad hoc evaluation |

2) Types of methodologies and methods

The **methodology** describes the conceptual approach and principles that have to be applied when developing an evaluation and identifies how the data collection and the analysis will be structured and undertaken, while the **methods** refer to the particular techniques used to collect and/or analyse data (UN, 2023). A single evaluation can use more than one method in order to meet the triangulation purposes.

The most common methodologies and methods that have been applied in evaluation procedures are listed in Table 2.

For both methodologies and methods, the decision about which one should be applied is strictly connected to the evaluation purpose and to the questions that the evaluation must answer, but it is also true that, unfortunately, limited time and restricted resources to carry out the evaluation can heavily influence the final decision. Applying a well-structured theory of change and implementing more than one evaluation model, exploiting the positive effects of triangulation (Lewis et al., 2020) with regard to the collected data, especially when it comes to secondary and tertiary prevention, can be the winning choice to counteract the chronic lack of useful data, detected in all the relevant studies, and ensure greater argumentative robustness for the proposed evaluation narrative.

The possibility, also in terms of the economic feasibility, of planning an evaluation design that can take into account a longer period of observation would guarantee the consolidation of the collected data in terms of what really works for the proposed impact. It is therefore recommended to funders and practitioners alike to plan for long evaluation periods whenever possible and sensible in the project context. Obviously, especially with regard to tertiary prevention approaches, this path is strictly subordinate to the willingness of the involved persons to maintain contact with the stakeholders who have implemented the P/CVE project. This specific criticality is in line with the evaluations of what works in terms of prevention of recidivism in the general criminal justice field: the follow-up of the implemented approaches with people who come back to freedom, after prison or probation, is based on the possibility to stay in touch with the involved person, which is by no means a foregone conclusion.

Table 2: Methodologies and Methods (1)

| Types of evaluation according to the methodology | Types of evaluation according to the methods |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory-based • Participatory • Case study • Developmental evaluation • Randomised controlled trials • Outcome mapping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document review • Literature review • Survey and questionnaires • Interviews • Key informant interviews • Focus group discussions • Observation • Benchmarking • Social media analysis • Participatory methods • Quasi-experimental design |

3) The indicators

The use of clear indicators is pivotal for the assessment of the reached results: the level of achievement of the intended results is evaluable through variables and benchmarking that must be expressed in quantitative or qualitative form, specific to what is being measured, meaningful, observable and measurable (UN, 2023). The most common types of indicators are presented in Figure 1.

However, it is very difficult to select indicators on which there is broad consensus in literature and practice: identifying behavioural and attitudinal elements capable of accounting for the effectiveness of a specific approach, in terms of verifiable changes, is in fact extremely controversial.

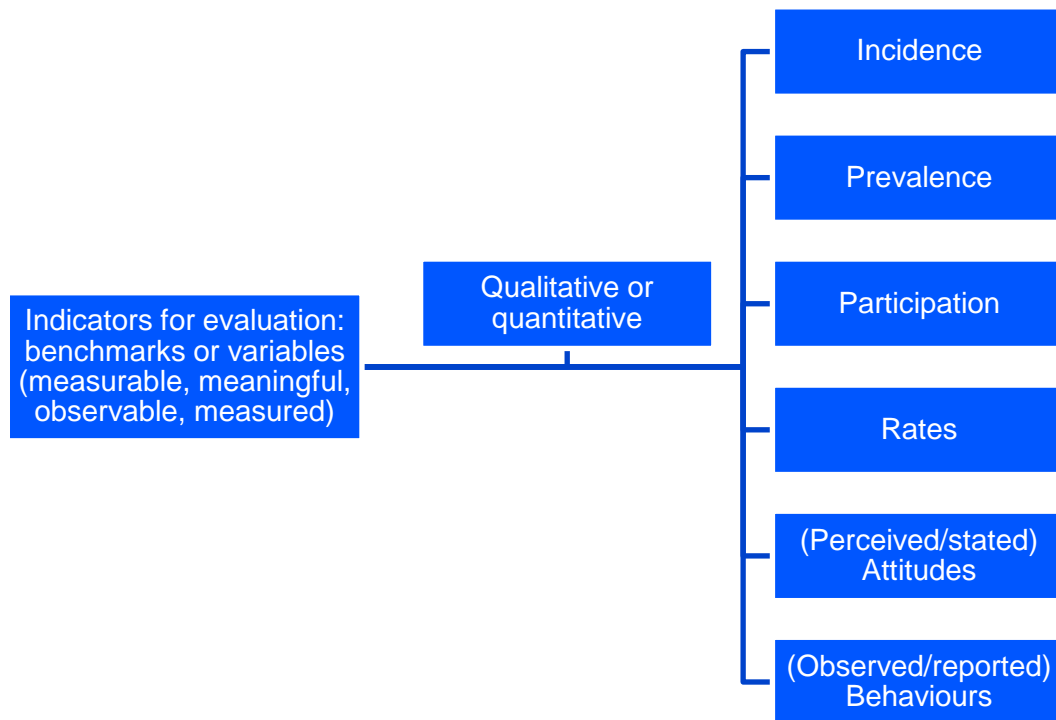
Moreover, even if some indicators are identified as useful for evaluation, it is necessary that the evaluators are able to correctly interpret the collected data, in order to support the success or failure of the implemented action. This operation is certainly not easy since the subjective and environmental variables that influence the implementation of the P/CVE approach are certainly not always linear.

In addition, the behavioural changes that are precisely those which secondary and tertiary prevention approaches try to affect are not easily detectable and evaluated with a high degree of certainty. The same must be said for the evaluation of emotional and attitudinal changes whose level of modification, a fortiori, may not be immediately perceptible. Deciding what should be evaluated (the decrease in violent behaviour, lower tolerance towards violent behaviour, level of satisfaction of the project participants, etc.) determines different results of the evaluation itself: if some indicators can be easily evaluated (i.e. satisfaction of the participants with the proposed action), others are practically impossible to create or to consider satisfactory (this is the case, for example, of indicators for measuring deradicalisation - Clément et al., 2021).

To approach this specific challenge, some authors (Lewis et al., 2020) suggest considering what happens in the medical field where one opts for a patient-centred approach for the evaluation of the impact of the action implemented. This perspective is based on the consideration of functional, social, psychological and emotional outcomes. Transferring this logic to the P/CVE sector would be a matter of exploring “whether participants gained a better sense of their identity, or in the case of convicted extremists a better understanding of their offence, through engaging with an intervention” (Lewis et al., 2020, p. 11).

(1) For a detailed analysis of all the mentioned methodologies and methods it is possible to consult, among others, : Bellasio et Al. (2018) and impact.itti.com.pl/index#/inspire/search For theory-based approach, especially for theory of change discussion, please see Wouterse and van de Donk (2019).

Figure 1: Examples of different indicators for evaluations



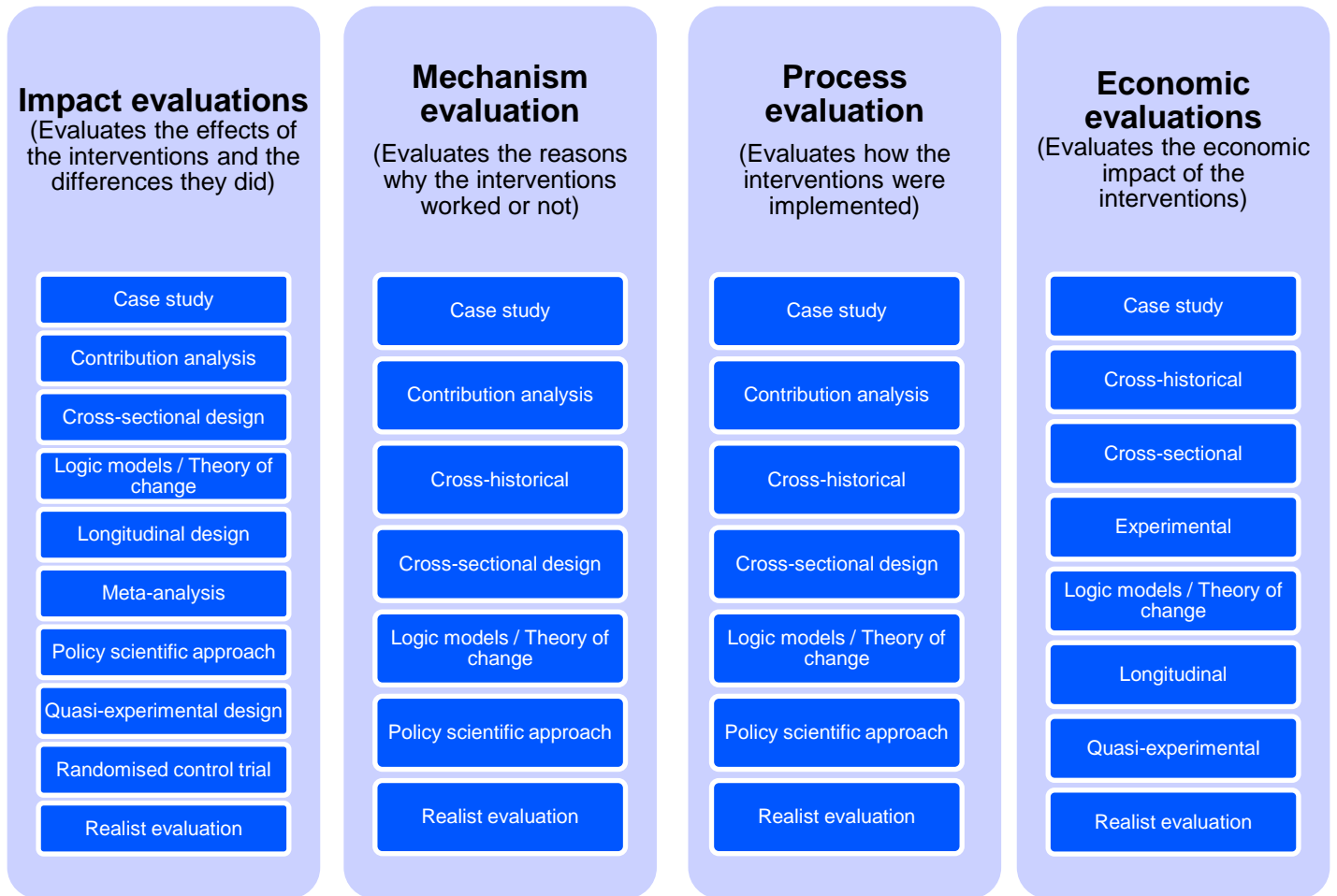
4) The purpose of the evaluation

As has already been said, the purpose of evaluation acquires a fundamental specific weight both for the understanding of the logic underlying the implementation of the P/CVE approach with regard to its operational peculiarities (target involved, place of implementation, type of prevention for which it seeks to offer a response) and to guarantee adequate responses to the different questions formulated by the various partners involved. According to the available literature (Hofman & Sutherland, 2018), almost four different purposes of the evaluation can be mentioned and, for each one, a certain number of different approaches can be implemented (Figure 2).

Regarding the impact evaluation purpose, it must be remembered that attributing changes only to a particular intervention, categorically excluding that other factors could have had a role (marginal, complementary or determinant), can be very challenging so the evaluation should focus rather on the changes that the intervention is able to control. Lastly, in relation to the economic evaluations, in secondary and tertiary prevention approaches it is not always easy to find useful indicators because the categories that are involved in the approaches are not always monetisable, such as deradicalisation and disengagement. For example, comparing the economic value attributable to the lack of recidivism of the former terrorist with that of the sum spent to implement the tertiary prevention strategy may not be a simple and meaningful operation to implement. Moreover, there are many ethical issues that need to be carefully considered when evaluating a P/CVE approach which cannot be underestimated. For example, the evaluation of the behaviour of the involved person, following the conclusion of a tertiary prevention path, presents a potentially grave intrusion in the context of private life that must be carefully balanced with the purpose that the assessment itself pursues (Holmer et al., 2018).

On the other hand, when looking favourably on the use of evaluation methods such as the quasi-experimental design, one cannot fail to consider the ethical repercussions: imagining selecting two groups of subjects at risk and proceeding with the development of the P/CVE project only with regard to one of them, in order to compare them to be able to evaluate its effectiveness, would mean accepting the risk of putting the safety of the individual and the community itself at stake if the lack of involvement in the P/CVE project produces violent consequences. Imagining corrective measures for situations like these therefore becomes an element of fundamental importance for the management of the underlying ethical issues of the evaluation process.

Figure 2: Evaluation methods according to the purpose



To facilitate the approach to the planning and management of the evaluation it is considered useful to summarise, as in Table 3, the elements elaborated and available in detail on the IMPACT Europe database, which offers a significant range of evaluation practices implemented in numerous European countries and concerning very varied prevention approaches in the field of P/CVE.

Thanks to six specific evaluation characteristics, each one linked with a specific number of sub-categories, the IMPACT Europe Database offers to practitioners and stakeholders the possibility to find good evaluation examples from which to learn how to develop a good evaluation strategy. Obviously, each option presents pros and cons that must be carefully considered before starting an evaluation and are linked to the specific elements of the P/CVE approach (for example, considering the kind of evaluators that the project can involve, according to both the previously selected strategy and the funds allocated to the evaluation process, the database allows you to consult evaluation models involving external or internal evaluators, in order to take advantage from them according to your needs).

Table 3: Summarising some evaluation characteristics ⁽²⁾

| Evaluation characteristics | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation method | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data mining, focus group, meta-analysis, observations, qualitative interview, quantitative interview, survey |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case study, cross-sectional, cross-historical, experimental, longitudinal, meta-analysis, quasi-experimental, realist evaluation, theory of change, contribution analysis, policy scientific approach |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence source | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family and friends, multiple professionals, intervention target |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic, impact, mechanism process |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal, external |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High, medium, low |

Examples of evaluation formats that can be used in secondary and tertiary P/CVE approaches

As mentioned, the practice of evaluating P/CVE interventions is still at an early stage and needs to acquire rigorousness and robustness with regard to the data collected and the results obtained. Favouring the path of affirmation of the fundamental role of evaluation in the P/CVE field is certainly the fact that today this practice can count on a large number of tools from neighbouring sectors, many of which have already been extensively tested in the field. This awareness, combined with the (albeit numerically limited) positive experiences already existing in the field of secondary and tertiary P/CVE interventions, has allowed to overcome the idea that the fields of terrorism, radicalisation and deradicalisation were sectors for which it was impossible to hypothesise the application of scientifically relevant methods of evaluation.

With the awareness of not being able to give adequate space and prominence to all applicable models, this section aims at considering only some of them already applied in the field and those whose application could lead to an advancement of knowledge of what really works in secondary and tertiary prevention approaches and what does not.

⁽²⁾ Table completed with data from impact.itti.com.pl/index#/inspire/search For specifications relating to the evaluation methods mentioned, please refer to the provisions of note 1.

Formative evaluation

a.1) Approach: This format is one of the most applied by practitioners dealing with the evaluation of P/CVE approaches, especially in cases where an evaluation assigned to external parties has not been budgeted or when, although budgeted, it has not yet been started. This kind of evaluation allows practitioners to learn from their own work, by confronting each other and by developing awareness of what has not worked in the approach in order to modify it *in itinere* and take full advantage of it in terms of improving the final impact.

a.2) Aims and objectives: The principal aim of this specific format is to reach a higher level of knowledge about what works and what does not in the proposed intervention. Among other specific tools, interviews can help in testing the logic of the action, in case of new projects as well as the fine-tuning of exit programmes, to decide about its possible implementation in another country (Hofman & Sutherland., 2018).

a.3) Prerequisites and challenges to successful implementation: For a good application of this evaluation format it is important that all involved stakeholders (first of all practitioners and frontline workers) have developed a feeling of mutual trust and understanding of the proposed evaluation tool, so as not to identify the evaluation moment as an action aimed at stigmatising errors, inefficiencies and lack of capacity to achieve the objectives pursued by the project. A good culture of evaluation, which allows to share, first of all, the instructive purpose that the evaluation pursues, is the necessary starting point for collecting data that is significant and therefore usable.

a.4) Results uptake and potential benefit for practice: An interesting research carried out by UNESCO in 2021 (Clément et al., 2021) took into consideration, among numerous other elements, the perception of practitioners in regard to the value of evaluations of their implemented approaches in the field of P/CVE and highlighted how a majority of those involved declared themselves sceptical towards its role, especially towards the summative forms (focused exclusively on the overall effectiveness of the project), thus suggesting a greater propensity for the formative one, on the contrary aimed at understanding how the project itself can be improved.

Due to the fact that there are several moments in which the formative format can be implemented (i.e. during the design of the action, before the action starts or during its development), it is easy to recognise its positive impact in terms of the possibility of improving the approach during its implementation and possibly re-proposing it in other contexts, without the critical points identified.

In the absence of well-established protocols, the practitioners correct their practices whenever they identify a problem. Regarding success criteria, they state that learning through experience is important (EUR04), and that they are always learning from one another (ASI01). “We’re always learning by doing. So there’s no academic approach. We develop our approach by experimenting, and we can always draw connections between our own discoveries and more macro analyses.” (EUR15 and EUR17). (Clément et al., 2021, p. 18)

An example of formative evaluation applied in an intervention, in Germany, for the prevention of religious extremism can be found in Möller and Neuscheler (2018).

a) Process-oriented evaluation

a.1) Approach: The approach aims to understand how a programme is implemented (Wholey et al., 2010) and to which extent it has been implemented according to the initial design (Williams, 2022). Understanding the functioning of each part of the implemented approach and relating them to each other is a basic element of the study of P/CVE approaches and their useful evaluation. To achieve this knowledge it is necessary to identify whether the planned actions have actually been implemented and also whether they have achieved the desired results. Having these evaluative elements is particularly useful in cases where the approach has not led to the expected results and it is therefore necessary to justify its partial or total failure in a clear and precise manner to all the involved stakeholders. Highlighting the critical areas of the entire application process can also be useful to underline specific elements of the proposed approach that, instead, produced better results than the expected ones. These last ones, if evaluated only in terms of results achieved at the end of the project, would instead remain completely underestimated.

a.2) Aims and objectives: The specific aim of this format is to highlight what did not work within the application process of a P/CVE approach, establishing precisely in which step the problem was created, thus offering to the person sponsible for implementing the project the possibility to work on the gaps and improve the progress of the entire project performance. Furthermore, the process-oriented evaluation is able to identify particularly high-performance areas of intervention, capable of functioning as driving elements for the entire approach.

a.3) Prerequisites and challenges to successful implementation: Due to the relevant valuative elements it is able to provide, some form of application of the process-oriented evaluation format should be foreseen for each P/CVE approach. This does not exclude the possibility of combining this procedure with other evaluation models. Obviously, the specific approach on which each evaluation model is based can lead to different results: on the one hand, it can make the data collected more robust but, on the other, if the characteristics of each implemented model are not correctly evaluated, it may result in misleading conclusions.

a.4) Results uptake and potential benefit for practice: Process-oriented evaluation presents numerous application advantages, especially when the expected results have not been fully or partially achieved. From this point of view, the process-oriented evaluation format allows the (partial) failure to be presented to the financiers in useful details, also offering them practical tools to understand what went wrong and where. Instead of simply communicating a failure to achieve set objectives, the process-oriented evaluation, thanks to its saving grace (Williams, 2022) — the ability to turn negative results into a starting point for improvement — allows “stakeholders to understand where a lack of program fidelity or underperformance, has occurred” (Williams, 2022) and gives them the possibility to work towards better and more satisfactory implementations in the future.

The aforementioned potential “saving grace” of process evaluations underscores the importance of knowing not only what outcomes a given P/CVE program produces, but how those outcomes are produced ... (Williams, 2022, p. 271)

A good example of this evaluation model is offered by a British experience in the field of P/CVE among young people and presented by Christmann et al. (2012).

b) Developmental evaluation

b.1) Approach: This kind of evaluation is quite new if compared with the formative or summative model. It stems from the intuition of scholars (Patton, 1994, 2006) who underline how the standard evaluative approach, aimed at verifying whether the action has determined the desired results, is not always applicable and meaningful, especially in situations defined as highly complex: that means “highly emergent (difficult to plan and predict) highly dynamic (rapidly changing) and refers to the relationships that are interdependent and non-linear (rather than simple and linear (cause-effect) (Dozois et al. 2010) such as the ones that involve P/CVE interventions. When the progression from problem to (possible) solution is not linear, traditional evaluation models are not the best option to be implemented, while developmental evaluation offers a more flexible and meaningful approach. When it comes to dealing with such situations that are characterised by intrinsic uncertainty about the outcomes such as it happens with P/CVE, it creates suitable ground for the implementation of this evaluation model.

b.2) Aims and objectives: The principal aim is to provide real-time feedback and generate learnings to inform development and identify new measures and monitoring mechanisms as soon as the knowledge of the situation and its main specificities becomes clearer and the goals of the implemented approach emerge. (Dozois et al. 2010). Differently from the traditional evaluation approaches, accountability to an external authority is not the prior aim, even if a certain level of accountability is always at stake in evaluation.

b.3) Prerequisites and challenges to successful implementation: Being an adaptive, content-specific approach, it is not possible to indicate a specific methodology for the implementation of this type of evaluation model. There is no standard model for its development and the strategies put in place can derive from neighbouring sectors, related disciplines as well as from previous experiences. For this reason, evaluators must be flexible enough to imagine being able to work on an ongoing project, without being able to follow pre-established schemes and well-tested procedures.

However, although it is a model that requires a high level of individualisation in design, it is possible to identify some functions and practices that are often associated with its implementation. Another important prerequisite is the position of the evaluator who, in this specific evaluation model, is fully embedded in the team’s work to help the involved professionals in decision-making, also through the facilitation of the learning.

b.4) Results uptake and potential benefit for practice: Due to this specific framework, developmental evaluation is able to offer new elements that are added and tested in an ongoing feedback cycle. The fact that the evaluator and the project developer in this evaluation model are supposed to work together represents a strengthening point both for the evaluation and the implementation of the different actions, also by facilitating collaboration and cooperation between professionals with different expertise. Applying this method offers a clear path towards improving current and future P/CVE programming while simultaneously generating objective data evaluating the efficacy of this programming.

Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions and gathering information to provide feedback and support developmental decision-making and course corrections along the emergent path. The evaluator is part of a team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design and test new approaches in a long-term, on-going process of continuous improvement, adaptation, and intentional change. The evaluator’s primary function in the team is to elucidate team discussions with evaluative questions, data and logic, and to facilitate data-based assessments and decision-making in the unfolding and developmental processes of innovation. (Patton, 2006, p. 28-30).

An interesting example of this evaluation model is offered by the United Nations Development Programme – Regional Service Centre for Africa (Robertson & Assale, 2022).

c) Quasi-experimental evaluation designs

c.1) Approach: This kind of evaluation, unfortunately rarely applied in P/CVE project evaluation paths, is based on observations about an intervention, made through the use of control groups not created using random assignment (this is the difference with experimental evaluation that is based on randomised groups and offers a superior level of reliability and generalisability of the collected results). The proposed approach is much more complicated than the non-experimental one but it grants the collection of more robust information about possible cause-and-effect relationships. The evaluators compare outcomes related to the people receiving a specific intervention with the ones of people belonging to a group that is as similar as possible to the treated one. Quasi-experimental designs include approaches that use a comparison group (in the forms of the *matched group designs* or of the *regression discontinuity designs*) as well as approaches that do not (in the forms of *single-group interrupted time-series* and of *single case designs*) (Hofman & Sutherland., 2018). Other authors talk about “*non-equivalent groups*” design, “*proxy pre-test*” design, “*switching replications*” design and the “*regression point displacement*” design (Braddock, 2019).

c.2) Aims and objectives: The main purpose of this model is to establish with the greatest possible certainty the existence of a cause–effect relationship between the action implemented and the change occurred as a result of the specific treatment. The quasi-experimental approach aims to attribute a meaning, in terms of effectiveness, to a P/CVE path by studying the subjects of the group that was involved in the action and comparing them with those who, although presenting similar characteristics, in principle, were not involved.

c.3) Prerequisites and challenges to successful implementation: Quasi-experimental evaluation can take place prospectively or retrospectively but can also be applied during the implementation of the approach. Anyway, an early planning of the evaluation timeline is a pivotal prerequisite for the timely collection of baseline data, referable to the initial situation — the “before” of the action — that is an essential element for the identification of a well-defined moment of comparison, in relation to the results of the action implemented — the “after” the action moment. When dealing with P/CVE secondary or tertiary interventions, some ethical (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021) and security challenges can be at stake if some people considered at risk of radicalisation (or already radicalised) shall be excluded from access to the offered support in order to “determine if an intervention was effective” (Lewis et al., 2020, p. 4).

c.4) Results uptake and potential benefit for practice: The benefits associated with the use of this model are well known in the field of gang-related interventions where it has proven to be able to offer particularly relevant data. In the context of P/CVE, although still little implemented, it is believed to represent a valid tool for its suitability to offer some advantages such as the ability to evaluate cause–effect relationships even when it is not possible to randomise the subjects in the “intervention” and in the “control” group.

Of utmost importance is the need to evaluate intervention programs intended to turn individuals away from violent extremism; quasi-experimentation is uniquely suited to assist in these kinds of evaluations. A recent example of the utility for quasi-experimental methods in the evaluation of radicalisation intervention is a study performed by David Webber and his colleagues. (Braddock, 2019, p. 16)

An interesting example of this evaluation model is offered by the Centre for Community Development and Research Network, Nigeria (2021).

Trends and Needs

In order to better understand what is still missing in the field of evaluation of secondary and tertiary prevention, it is worth mentioning some additional key points: measuring the impact of P/CVE approaches means facing at least two sets of challenges: analytical and practical. With regard to the former, reference is made to the identification of causalities, the complexity of the sector, and the selection of the appropriate indicators to collect reliable data about, among others, deradicalisation, disengagement, disentangling and recidivism but also to the identification of counterfactuals (Holmer et al., 2018). While the practical challenges relate to the impossibility of “measuring a negative”, accounting for the large number of variables that may affect the implementation of the approach in a negative or positive way and collecting reliable first hand data is also a challenge

At least for the first set of still existing challenges, the need is to deepen the issue from a practical and theoretical point of view in order to ensure a more widespread culture of evaluation within P/CVE, to be able to find a common agreement on which are the best strategies and the tools to pursue them.

With regard to the mentioned practical challenges, instead, when counterfactuals are particularly challenging or control groups are not possible, other evaluation models such as theory of change or logic models, contribution analysis and policy scientific approach can be a good alternative. These models are all theory-based and have a specific structure in common based on the relation of the involved elements on a cause–effect basis (“if.....then”-structure). The principal purpose is to measure the change that the P/CVE approach has produced. As working in P/CVE (and especially in secondary and tertiary prevention) can be very challenging, according to the above-mentioned obstacles, a single evaluation method may not be enough for the collection of reliable data. For this reason, triangulation (and mixed method approaches) to strengthen the collected evidence may offer a valuable support. In fact, applying more than one evaluation method can help to overcome the lack of robust data that often characterises the field of evaluation of P/CVE. This suggestion belongs to the observation of the gang-related intervention field in which triangulation of data is very common.

In addition to the mentioned challenges for the selection of the most suitable strategy in reaching a clear evaluation of an approach, it is pivotal to consider evaluation as a learning experience for all the involved stakeholders and not the final step of a P/CVE project. Gaining insights into what worked and what did not is an added value in terms of the possibility of correcting and improving the implemented proposal, with the aim of achieving more satisfactory results. Moreover, looking at evaluation as a learning opportunity helps in increasing the level of knowledge on good practices in the field of P/CVE.

Theory-based approaches ask for a specific consideration of the ethical issues in order to grant, for example, a correct use of the methods chosen to collect the data (such as interviews, focus groups, case studies and literature reviews) or the risk to fall into hindsight bias when reconstructing the programme theory. “Hindsight bias occurs when people feel that they ‘knew it all along,’ that is, when they believe that an event is more predictable after it becomes known than it was before it became known” (Roese & Vohs, 2012, p. 411).

Among the most important issues, the one related to the confidentiality of personal data (above all when dealing with tertiary prevention programmes) must be at stake since the very first moment of the evaluation design because of the sensitive nature of the data that are going to be analysed and collected. For this reason, all the involved stakeholders must take into great consideration the specific legal framework and the specific existing codes of conduct that they are supposed to work with.

Conclusions

Within the landscape of P/CVE evaluation, secondary and tertiary prevention approaches represent perhaps the most complex challenge to be faced in order to achieve a good level of awareness on what really works and what does not. The need to proceed with caution and specific attention in order to guarantee as much as possible transparent and independent evaluation paths, capable of providing robust data, is a need increasingly felt by all stakeholders: practitioners, funders, evaluators and policymakers. The possibility of looking at positive evaluation experiences from similar fields to probe their transferability becomes an operation to be looked at with confidence, without however setting aside the obvious specificity of the field in which one operates.

After considering all the challenges and obstacles presented in the paper, evaluation in this area should not look like an impossible practice. On the contrary, the bordering disciplines (such as the study of criminal gangs) offer interesting applications of evaluation strategies and tools that, transferred with the necessary corrections and implemented in the P/CVE sector, represent a positive stimulus for the consolidation of good practices, capable of offering useful results. When starting to plan an evaluation of the impact of P/CVE, specifically related to secondary and tertiary prevention, it becomes particularly important to exactly understand what is being evaluated because very often the quantitative evaluation of the project activities and the satisfaction of the participants is confused with the one about the impact of the actions implemented. However, since the primary role of the local context cannot be overlooked, since the dynamics of radicalisation are strongly influenced by the context in which they develop, it is considered appropriate and useful to develop also locally informed lexicons and indicators in the field of P/CVE evaluations.

Lastly, a strong involvement of scholars and academics, alongside a widespread implementation of existing evaluation methods, may lead to the collection of more precise and robust data, a fundamental condition for the application of increasingly effective P/CVE projects.

“For whom were these evaluations carried out?” The purpose of an evaluation is not to write a report, but to provide a body of knowledge that will enable better decisions to be made and better programs to be delivered. (Madriaza et al., 2022, p. 96)

Key Lessons

- 1. Little is known about what really works in P/CVE:** The most relevant evidence belongs to adjacent fields such as criminal justice, gang-related interventions, juvenile justice and health. For what concerns P/CVE, uncertainty about what really works is still widespread even if, starting from 2016, the number of studies published on evaluations is considerably increased (Madriaza et al., 2022). In regard to secondary and tertiary prevention, these unsatisfactory outcomes are amplified (Zeuthen, 2021).
- 2. Definition of success in tertiary prevention programmes is difficult:** The fact that recidivism is one of the most applied indicators of success of a deradicalisation path is particularly controversial for the lack of a clear definition of the term recidivism itself and for the fact that data related to recidivism in the field of terrorism and violent extremism are not easily accessible (they are often considered as classified information).
- 3. It is often difficult to consider counterfactuals when dealing with secondary and tertiary P/CVE evaluation:** This is due to the difficulty to start from a common definition (i.e. what exactly does “recidivism” mean in the field of counterterrorism, when dealing especially with deradicalisation paths?) and to take into consideration all the possible variables that can contaminate the implementation of the selected approach, deciding what would have happened in the absence of the intervention.
- 4. P/CVE evaluation faces analytical and practical challenges:** To face all these challenges it is useful to look for inspiration in related sectors that have already reached a higher level of experience in the evaluation field.
- 5. Triangulation forms the basis of robust, high-quality evaluations:** this is achieved by seeking corroboration, correspondence and convergence of results from different methods (Greene et al., 1989).

Recommendations

- 1. Plan and start evaluation as soon as possible and look for a more robust evaluation design:** If the evaluation starts at an early stage, it can offer useful data to improve performance *in itinere*, modifying those parts of the process that are not very (or not at all) effective. In addition, a better evaluation design can help to understand how to collect more useful and meaningful data.
- 2. Focus on changes and not on what is done in terms of activities:** What really matters when dealing with secondary and tertiary prevention approaches is to induce or facilitate a change (deradicalisation, disengagement, a low level of violence behaviour acceptance, a more critical stance towards extremist forms of thought, etc.). On the other hand, the mere verification that, for example, an exit strategy has been implemented in accordance with the provisions of the project does not guarantee that the same action has led to the hypothesised change in accordance with the implied theory of change.
- 3. Promote a constructive evaluation culture:** The evaluation should not be a tool to generate prejudices or to stigmatise practitioners for any failures, but a learning moment that increases the general level of knowledge of the dynamics involved in the approach.
- 4. Look at related fields to implement new evaluation models:** Fields such as gang-related interventions or peacebuilding can offer good suggestions about how to conduct evaluation in secondary and tertiary prevention.
- 5. Use triangulation (and a mixed methods approach) to strengthen the collected evidence:** Applying more than one evaluation method can help to overcome the lack of robust data that often characterises the field of evaluation of P/CVE, especially in secondary and tertiary prevention. This suggestion comes from the observation of the gang-related intervention field in which triangulation of data is very common.
- 6. Consider evaluation as a learning experience:** It is able to improve the impact of the implemented actions and of increasing the level of knowledge on good practices in the field of P/CVE.
- 7. Consider ethical issues:** For example, when dealing with exit programmes, involving a control group with people who should have been deradicalised (or at least treated with the aim to deradicalise or disengage), but did not receive that support is simply not acceptable. A way to overcome this problem is, for example, to apply a switching-replication design in which the initial control and treatment groups are switched during the evaluation process.
- 8. Promote a participatory approach to evaluation:** All the relevant stakeholders should be involved from the very beginning, in all the phases of the evaluation, and should be aware of and agree with the evaluation purpose(s).
- 9. Promote a greater usefulness of the evaluation:** Finding an insightful way to present the evaluation outcomes to all the relevant stakeholders is pivotal to inspire a change in policy and practice of P/CVE. Prioritising learning objectives and elaborating lessons from the evaluation can also help “the active use of evaluation findings to enhance the efficacy of the intervention” (EU-UN, 2023, p. 65).

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