EX POST PAPER

Monitoring & Evaluating counter- and alternative narrative campaigns

Summary

Keywords: Monitoring, evaluation, counter narratives, alternative narratives, campaigns

How can you be sure a counter- or alternative narrative campaign is not causing harm, but doing good? Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential when wanting to know whether a counter- or alternative narrative campaign has been effective and impactful. A clear M&E framework makes it possible to quickly adapt a campaign to changing circumstances and to assess whether its goals have been achieved. Practitioners, however, often struggle with how to make monitoring and evaluation possible in a practical, feasible and doable way without enormous budgets.

A key recommendation to properly evaluate the impact of a campaign is to invest enough time, money and expertise in the planning and monitoring phase. It is also important to establish a proper baseline assessment and theory of change. Furthermore, campaign owners and donors should work together in the campaign proposal phase to establish a realistic framework and expectations for M&E.

This ex post paper builds on the lessons learned from the RAN C&N meeting on *'Monitoring & Evaluating counter- and alternative narrative campaigns'.* It is written for **first-line practitioners, communication specialists, campaign developers and evaluation experts** who are planning a counter- or alternative narrative campaign.

This paper is a product of the RAN Centre of Excellence and the RAN C&N Working Group.
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Introduction

> **Tip: Think about MEAL**
>
> A good evaluation framework always covers the following:
>
> - Monitoring
> - Evaluation
> - Accountability
> - Learning

Many actors in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) have conducted **counter- or alternative narrative (CN/AN) campaigns.** A **robust** monitoring and evaluation process can lead to improved campaigns that attain their **goal**. Even with all these efforts being made, the question remains whether these campaigns are, indeed, proving to be **effective**. For many actors executing CN/AN campaigns, **monitoring and evaluation (M&E)** seem to be difficult to incorporate in a campaign's design and implementation. This may lead to an M&E framework that is incomplete or unable to answer the desired questions. This contrasts with the **increasing need for evidence-based interventions**: donors are increasingly requesting effective evidence-based projects and interventions. In addition to growing requests from **donors**, M&E is also essential for **accountability** and **learning** within an organisation itself.

In the past, the RAN Communications & Narratives (C&N) working group has looked into the **effect** of counter- and alternative narratives to see if they actually work, how they work and when they work. During a 2017 meeting on how to measure the impact of an online counter- or alternative narrative campaign, RAN C&N took a first step in exploring how to **measure** the **impact** of a CN/AN campaign by means of the **GAMMMA model**, which later on added a "**+**" for 'monitoring and evaluation'. The 2017 meeting resulted in an M&E **checklist** for the GAMMMA model, with **questions** and **tips** that assist practitioners in implementing a basic **monitoring** and **evaluation framework** for their campaign. However, despite this checklist (and many others), there remains a need for more guidelines on how to conduct robust and evidence-based evaluation of CN/AN campaigns, especially in the design and monitoring phase.

This paper further specifies the challenges that practitioners encounter and the various planning, monitoring and evaluation aspects that are relevant in different phases of a campaign or project. The paper will differentiate between four phases: before, testing, during and after a campaign. The **before** phase includes important M&E elements that need to be done before receiving **funding** for a campaign. This is followed by a **testing** phase, in which the idea is tested and **adjusted** where necessary. After testing follows the actual **implementation** of the campaign, that involves **monitoring activities** and data **gathering** throughout the duration of the campaign. The phase **after** the campaign focuses on the **evaluation** of the results and how to **interpret** and **disseminate** these.

What challenges do practitioners encounter in M&E?

As indicated above, monitoring and evaluation bring several challenges for practitioners setting up or conducting a campaign:

- Proper impact measurement and measurement of a desired behavioural change is often difficult to achieve, as campaigns usually have a short-term focus (and resources), whereas the sustained change of behaviour can only be seen after a longer period of time
- Practitioners often start with their M&E process only at the end of the campaign and can, therefore, not adapt it while it is still running

- M&E resources, such as funding, time and qualified staff, are often not sufficiently taken into account during campaign planning
- Practitioners often feel that they do not possess the knowledge and expertise required to monitor and evaluate
- Donors are often not experts on M&E and may, therefore, set unspecific or unrealistic expectations of what the project should achieve

What are key elements to take into account when conducting M&E?

When individuals think about setting up an M&E framework, they tend to do the following:

- they start with this only at the end of the campaign and, therefore
- focus mainly on the evaluation of the end results

By focusing only on the actual evaluation, they skip the planning and monitoring phases. However, these phases are crucial to ensuring that the campaign can be adjusted so as to confirm it is going in the right direction, reaching its goals and can be properly evaluated in terms of its impact. This paper, therefore, emphasises the lessons that can be learned with regards what to take into account before (especially), during and after a campaign and how to do this in order to assess the campaign's actual outcomes and impact.

Definitions

Input: the resources used to begin with activities that will lead to outputs. Input can relate to funding, human resources or material; anything used to execute the intervention.

Impact: the long-term measurement of a campaign's effect indicates how it has contributed to behavioural change within its target audience, among other factors.

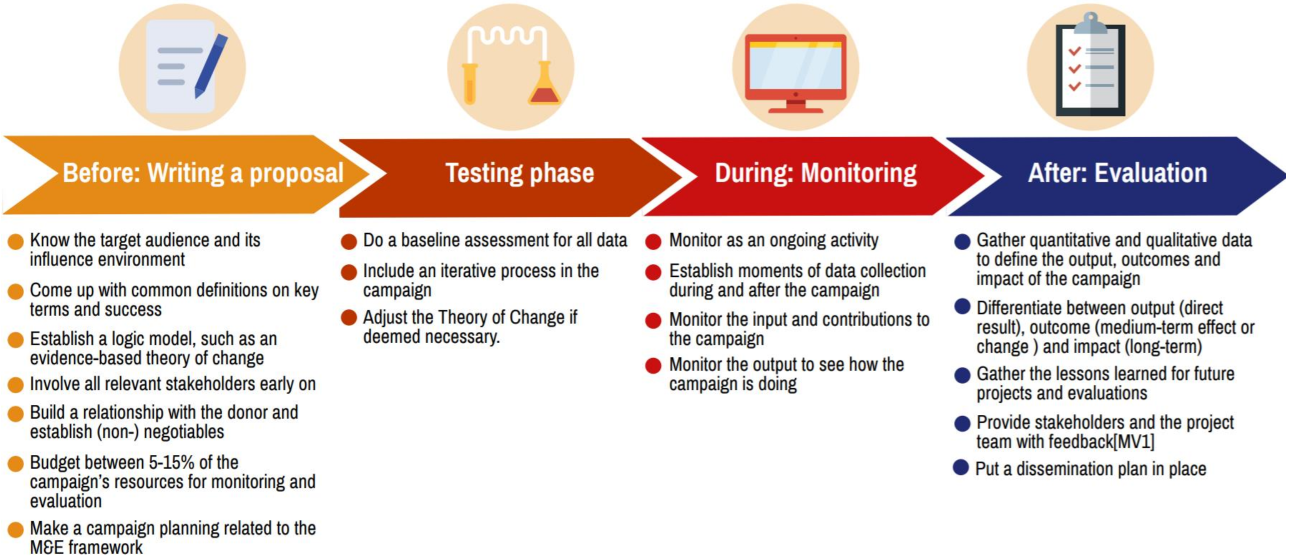
Output: measurable, tangible and direct products (usually quantitative) of the activities which provide information on the concrete results of campaigning efforts.

Monitoring and evaluation: Monitoring refers to data collection, continuous indicator assessment and adaptation of the campaign, if needed. Evaluation focuses on effect and impact assessment at the end of the campaign and seeks to draw learning outcomes for future campaigns.

Outcome: a measurable change that is not a direct result of the intervention but within the sphere of influence of campaigners. Outcomes usually combine quantitative and qualitative factors and are derived from the baseline assessment.

Theory of change: an evidence-based causal logic model. This describes how and why an intervention will lead to the expected output, outcome and the change foreseen. It follows the logic: 'If..., then ..., thereby ..., contributing to...'.

Below, the four phases outline the lessons learned:



Before: Writing a proposal

Before starting with the campaign's activities, there are several important elements to consider when preparing and drafting the campaign proposal.

Know the target audience and its influence environment

Make sure you thoroughly understand the target audience before starting with any campaign activities. Conduct desk research and gather additional localised insights from the target audience itself and practitioners working with the target audience. In order to support a causation assessment (determine in the end what specific results are caused by this campaign), ensure to map the influence environment[1] of the target audience.

Come up with common definitions of key terms and success

Define the important terms of the campaign and set indicators that reflect how to achieve these. Establish a shared vision together with stakeholders on when the campaign is considered a success.

Establish a theory of change

[1] For more information on stakeholder and influence mapping, see the IMPACT Europe toolkit: http://www.impact.itti.com.pl/index#/repository/36/whatisit.

An evidence-based theory of change will help to clarify the input, output, outcome and impact of the campaign, as well as the causalities between the different elements. Within this, make sure to establish your ambition: what do you want to achieve and what is realistic?

The more specific and targeted the goals, the higher the chances of achieving them. Define how you will make use of the campaign evaluation. How will the findings be used? What should they lead to? Eventually, the campaign goal and the purpose of evaluation will define what type of evaluation suits best[2]. The assumptions underlying the theory of change can be reviewed during the testing phase.

Involve all relevant stakeholders early on
Map all relevant stakeholders that should be involved in the campaign and involve them at an early stage. Remember to always include a member of the target audience in the campaign as well.

Build a relationship with the donor and establish (non-) negotiables
Not all donors are experts on campaigns or in M&E. As such, they may have unspecific or unrealistic expectations. One should guide them through the process, manage their expectations and ensure to satisfy their appetite for more M&E. What is their reason for funding the campaign? What do they expect from the evaluation? Together, establish realistic recommendations. Make sure to set (non-) negotiables with the donor in advance: decide what elements are essential to you and what can be negotiated in the campaign or the M&E framework.

Budget between 5-15% of the campaign's resources for monitoring and evaluation
This includes money, time and staff to ensure a proper M&E framework and follow-up.

Design the campaign planning with an M&E framework in mind
Before embarking on the campaign, determine who should do what and when. Plan the testing phase and baseline assessment, the moments of data collection and results analysis.

Before: Writing a proposal | **Testing phase** | During: Monitoring | After: Evaluation

Testing phase

Once the campaign budget is received and the proposal is approved, it is useful to carry out a testing phase. This will allow you to test and adjust the campaign where necessary before actually implementing it. Below are important elements to take into account during the testing phase:

Do a baseline assessment

[2] Radicalisation Awareness Network (2018). Ex post paper "Guideline evaluation of PCVE programmes and interventions".

Conducting a baseline assessment can be an opportunity to test whether the campaign is effective and to reiterate the theory of change, where needed. In doing so, both quantitative and qualitative indicators, as well as indicator trackers, should be established[3]. If a baseline assessment is not possible in this phase, outcome harvesting (see 'after' phase) can be used in the evaluation as a basis for the attribution of outcomes.

Include an iterative process in the campaign
Reiteration is essential throughout the entire process because it provides the ability to shift and adapt the campaign to a quickly developing communications environment[4]. The testing phase is also an opportunity to further develop audience insight, as it helps to *"better understand what subject matters resonate most with those you are communicating with"* and to *"gather further information on what channels and platforms are best suited for reaching your audiences, when you should release/post new content and with what frequency."*[5]. The iterative process is an important element of the learning process in M&E.

Baseline assessment

A baseline assessment is an assessment of the current situation vis à vis the campaign's current framework and should be conducted before the campaign starts. It contains the specifications against which the outputs are measured. The baseline assessment includes the current behaviour or attitude that the campaign will address and identifies who needs to be reached. The assessment can be done through a combination of desktop research, focus groups and interviews, among other elements. Establishing a baseline assessment allows a comparison of the situation before and after the campaign took place, which makes it possible to indicate what has changed. By comparing outcomes with the baseline also allows for statements on attribution to be made. Without a proper baseline assessment, measuring campaign outcomes is difficult, as outcomes are described as a measurable change that is an indirect result of an intervention.

Test the input and contributions to the campaign
Determine whether variables such as time, tone, content approach and contextual and external influences need to be adjusted or removed. These elements can influence the campaign's effectiveness but are not included in the Theory of Change. It is, therefore, important to check whether the campaign has the right tone that resonates with audiences or whether the timing of content posting is effective.

Adjust the Theory of Change if deemed necessary
A robust testing phase allows you to review underlying assumptions of the Theory of Change (ToC). If during the testing phase these turn out to be false, the ToC can still be adapted prior to the actual implementation of the campaign. If the testing phase does not allow you to check assumptions, the results from monitoring can be used to revise the ToC and adjust if necessary.

[3] For more information on baseline assessments, see: http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1323-what-is-a-baseline-assessment.html.
[4] ESCN (2018). *Monitoring and Evaluation for Effective CVE Stratcomms.* ESCN Insight Paper. P.5
[5] ESCN (2018). *Monitoring and Evaluation for Effective CVE Stratcomms.* ESCN Insight Paper. P.5

Before: Writing a proposal | Testing phase | **During: Monitoring** | After: Evaluation

During: monitoring

Monitoring is carried out during the campaign and is an ongoing activity. Monitoring allows you to check how the campaign is doing and adjust it along the way, if necessary. This is part of the learning process linked to monitoring and evaluation. When it comes to monitoring, the following aspects need to be taken into account:

Monitor as an ongoing activity

Just like the testing phase, monitoring allows for a feedback loop and thus iteration. As it is an ongoing activity, one must put in place a designated team for monitoring and evaluation that can continuously monitor and analyse campaign inputs, outputs and outcomes. Make sure everyone sticks to the campaign planning and adjust where necessary.

Establish moments of data collection during and after the campaign

Ensuring rigorous, standardised data collection can assist in assessing outcomes. Think about what data can be collected, what is useful to collect, when or how regularly to collect this and how data can be managed safely. Additionally, think of how this data can be assessed later. Online and offline components of data collection should be combined. Further to assessing the data during the moment of collection, it is wise to establish several moments for post-assessment of the data (collecting data e.g. one month, three months or more after the campaign took place), so that long-term change can be measured. Practitioners indicate that measuring the impact of a campaign is often difficult, due to limited scope and the time in which campaign needs to be executed. Therefore, discuss the inclusion of post-assessments in the M&E proposal with the donor in the project proposal phase.

Monitor the output to see how the campaign is doing

One benefit of monitoring output is that unintended consequences can easily be identified at an early stage.

Before: Writing a proposal | Testing phase | During: Monitoring | **After: Evaluation**

After: evaluation

When the campaign is completed and it has been monitored throughout, it can then be evaluated. Even though this takes place at the end, incorporating M&E aspects in the campaign proposal is essential to carry out a proper evaluation. This will ensure the necessary data is provided. Such a robust evaluation is beneficial in terms of demonstrating accountability to different stakeholders, as it provides evidence-based justification of the campaign. When evaluating a campaign, take into account the following steps:

Gather quantitative and qualitative data to define the output, outcomes and impact of the campaign

A mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data is commonly used to evaluate CN/AN campaigns. According to practitioners, this quasi-experimental evaluation method is often utilised in campaigns[6].

Differentiate between output (direct result), outcome (medium-term effect or change) and impact (long-term)
Practitioners indicate that there is often unclarity on what these terms mean, especially regarding outcomes and impact. As mentioned, this should be clarified in the proposal phase. When a baseline assessment is lacking, **outcome harvesting** can provide a solution.

Outcome harvesting

When a baseline assessment is lacking, **outcome harvesting** can provide a solution. Outcome harvesting describes the change visible in the target audience and their actions and to what extent this campaign has contributed to that change. Outcome harvesting can assist in substantiating, validating, discussing and analysing this change and coming up with solutions.

Gather the lessons learned for future projects and evaluations
When evaluating the campaign internally, there is a risk of demonstrating internal bias which might result in too positive an evaluation. It is, therefore, crucial to be both positive as well as critical in the evaluation to ensure that you do not believe your own hype. Establishing what worked and what did not work in this campaign will benefit future evaluation processes, allowing the organisation to learn from previous campaigns.

Provide stakeholders and the project team with feedback
Further to collecting lessons learned, debriefing the campaign team can assist in assessing what has been done, what was effective, what could be improved and in what way. This provides the team with an opportunity to learn and improve collaboration. Further to this, it can be very useful to submit the evaluation for peer review in order to learn of possible criticism from other reviewers.

Tip: Tools and methods

While full standardisation of evaluation processes is not desirable, some guidelines on how to carry out MEAL would be useful for practitioners. Below are some possible tools and methods that may help:

- Hedayah guideline "Evaluate your CVE results" and MASAR app
- C&N 2017 checklist M&E GAMMMA
- RAN 2018 Guideline evaluation of P/CVE interventions
- ISD counter narrative handbook

Put a dissemination plan in place
After the evaluation is complete, think about what information needs to be communicated to which stakeholders and in what way. Take into account that the evaluation and the pitch of the campaign do not necessarily need to be identical: reflect on which key messages are relevant to share with the donors and stakeholders. Framing is an important element in this. This concerns the results (both positive and negative)

[6] See the Impact Europe Toolkit for more information on quasi-experimental evaluation methods: http://www.impact.itti.com.pl/index#/repository/39/whatisit.

as well as the design of the evaluation report (reflect on language and visuals; make it accessible without oversimplifying).

Evaluating impact – Counterfactual evaluation designs

Counterfactual evaluation designs can help to attribute cause and effect between the campaign and the outcomes. Counterfactual evaluation measures what would have happened to the audience in the absence of the campaign. Impact is measured by comparing the counterfactual outcomes with those affected by the campaign. There are several ways of measuring this, including the following:

- **Experimental design:** This can be done through Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). Impact can be measured by comparing average scores of the treatment group and a randomly selected control group (for which there is no selection bias). Even though this is considered a solid form of evaluation, there are ethical dilemmas in place when applied to P/CVE.
- **Quasi-experimental design:** This is the most-used design in social sciences. Matching and regression modelling are used to remove selection bias. This can also be done through measuring the difference-in-differences. This uses the baseline assessment and data gathered after the campaign for both the treatment group and a comparison group. The counterfactual measures the difference in average scores of both groups.
- **Qualitative design:** Examples of evaluation methods are Most Significant Change and Contribution Analysis. The counterfactual is measured by explaining the mechanisms through which causal relationships arise.

Conclusion

A clear and workable M&E framework allows one to quickly adapt the campaign to changing circumstances and to assess whether its goals were achieved. In addition to evaluating and monitoring, learning and accountability are key elements for the evaluation process.

While many toolkits and evaluation methods focus on how to evaluate and measure the impact of a campaign, overall planning, baseline assessment and monitoring are often not sufficiently taken into account. However, these phases are crucial to ensuring that the campaign can be adjusted to ensure it is moving in the right direction, achieving its goals and can be properly evaluated in terms of impact. Therefore, key conditions for a successful M&E process involve investing enough time, money and expertise in the planning and monitoring phase, and establishing a proper baseline assessment and evidence-based theory of change. With regards to resources, one should budget between 5-15% of the campaign's resources for the entire M&E process.

Measuring the impact of a campaign is often perceived to be difficult due to limited scope and time in which campaigns need to be executed. A post-assessment should be carried out and longterm moments of data collection should be included in the planning and campaign proposal.

Finally, donors are often not M&E experts and may have unspecific or unrealistic expectations if they are not guided through the process thoroughly. One should, therefore, manage their expectations and understand their appetite for M&E: Why are they funding the campaign? What do they expect from the evaluation? How do they define success? Campaign implementers and donors should, therefore, establish realistic recommendations for M&E together. In this process, (non-)negotiables should be established in advance:

implementers should decide which M&E elements are negotiable and which are essential from their perspective.

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