LASER PULSE

PREVENTING/COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM MONITORING, EVALUATION, & LEARNING (MEL): **METHODOLOGY**

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About LASER PULSE

LASER (Long-term Assistance and Services for Research) PULSE (Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine) is a 10-year, $70M program funded by USAID's Innovation, Technology, and Research Hub, that delivers research-driven solutions to field-sourced development challenges in USAID partner countries.

A consortium led by Purdue University, with core partners Catholic Relief Services, Indiana University, Makerere University, and the University of Notre Dame, implements the LASER PULSE program through a growing network of 3,700+ researchers and development practitioners in 86 countries.

LASER PULSE collaborates with USAID missions, bureaus, and independent offices, and other local stakeholders to identify research needs for critical development challenges, and funds and strengthens the capacity of researcher-practitioner teams to co-design solutions that translate into policy and practice.

About the Armed Conflict and Violence Prevention Learning Agenda

The Conflict and Violence Prevention Learning Agenda Implementation Team (CVP LAIT) was tasked with co-creating and implementing a bureau-wide learning agenda that:

- **Establishes the evidence base for effective approaches to armed conflict and violence prevention;**
- **Identifies opportunities for CVP investments that would produce new knowledge to fill gaps in the existing literature;**
- **Provides USAID staff with events, tools, resources, and/or guidance to incorporate learning agenda findings into their work; and**
- **Conducts original research into armed conflict and violence prevention.**

Through an intensive, multi-stakeholder consultation process with USAID Washington and mission staff, preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) was identified as an effort that, if backed by sound evidence and guidance, could benefit program design, outcomes, policy, and knowledge generation.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

As part of the Conflict and Violence Prevention Learning Agenda Implementation Team (CVP LAIT), the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) carried out a scoping and synthesis of indicators and relevant forms of measurement for preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming to complement a series of systematic mixed methods review on P/CVE. The CVP LAIT was tasked with co-creating and implementing a bureau-wide learning agenda that establishes the evidence base for effective approaches to armed conflict and violence prevention; identifies opportunities for CVP investments that would produce new knowledge to fill gaps in the existing literature; provides USAID staff with events, tools, resources, and/or guidance to incorporate learning agenda findings into their work; and conducts original research into armed conflict and violence prevention. Through an intensive, multi-stakeholder consultation process with USAID Washington and mission staff, P/CVE and associated Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) was identified as efforts that, if backed by sound evidence and guidance, could benefit program design, outcomes, policy, and knowledge generation.

Violent extremism (VE) stands as one of the most significant security threats facing the international community, with the frequency of violent acts and atrocities perpetrated by extremists escalating across the world. Despite the threats and known impacts of VE, universal agreement on how to define, discuss, and respond to it remains elusive. Over the past 20 years, the peacebuilding field has advanced its understanding of the drivers of VE. It is now understood that radicalization is a fluid, nonlinear, highly individualized process, and the field has developed a series of approaches for P/CVE. However, despite these advances, designing indicators and measuring change in P/CVE interventions is inherently complex due to its multifaceted nature. These programs operate within intricate socio-political landscapes, making direct attribution of outcomes to specific interventions challenging. While quantitative indicators might offer clarity, they often miss nuanced changes better captured by qualitative measures. Establishing accurate baselines is also problematic, especially where data on VE is limited or unreliable. The fluidity of definitional boundaries in VE and its actual manifestation, combined with varying perceptions of success among stakeholders, further complicates consistent indicator development. Moreover, data collection poses many difficulties, including both sensitivity and security risks, and there is a persistent tension between achieving measurable outcomes and making genuine, albeit less tangible, impacts. Developing and maintaining appropriate sampling frames, particularly with populations in flux, poses considerable difficulties when attempting to conduct longitudinal studies and establish more rigorous evidence. As such, creating universally accepted and effective indicators for P/CVE requires a nuanced, adaptable approach that respects the diverse and evolving contexts in which these programs operate.

While substantial research has been completed to date on P/CVE, the field is still in its emerging phases, particularly using explicit program logic, ToCs, and established indicators and measures. As a result, there is ambiguity in documenting and assessing the impact of many interventions against explicit ToCs, making it challenging to assess the effectiveness of various methods in achieving VE objectives and leaving the effectiveness of different approaches largely unassessed, especially in relation to VE goals. The overall absence of uniform indicators and measures to gauge intervention outcomes and participant change magnify other methodological and logistical challenges to P/CVE evaluation, hindering the field's ability to aggregate evidence and articulate what works. To address these deficiencies and build on the emerging base of P/CVE measurement, this research aims to better understand the current state of measurement with regards to three primary P/CVE programming responses: (1) *prevention* (*PV*); (2) *containment/interdiction* (*CI*); and (3) *disengagement, deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration* (*DDRR*). This research applied the following Learning Agenda Question to achieve the above-mentioned objectives:

Learning Agenda Question: ***What are evidence-based approaches for measuring the impact of armed conflict and violence prevention, mitigation, and reduction programming (across different levels individual-community-national-system)?***

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research conducts a scoping and synthesis of indicators and their relevant measurement information across the three primary P/CVE programing responses: PV, CI, DDRR. The approach to this research involved: (1) resource scraping; (2) determining eligibility of collected resources; (3) indicator scraping; (4) type of change analysis; (5) level analysis and validity of measurement; and (6) conducting thematic coding analysis and synthesis.

1. Resource Scraping and 2. Eligibility

The research parameters were defined by the included resources for the P/CVE Systematic Mixed Methods Reviews, as outlined in the P/CVE Systematic Mixed-Methods Review: Methodology report. A total of 129 resources were finalized through an intensive scraping process informed by a Population, Intervention, Control, and Outcomes (PICO) framework. Of these 129 resources, only the resources that provided explicit indicators were included for this research. Based on this eligibility criteria, 103 resources were included; 26 were excluded.

3. Indicator Scraping

Using the 103 included resources, the research team manually scraped each to collect their indicators and related MEL information, including associated measures,[1] measure options,[2] data collection tools used, and disaggregation methods. A total of 1,445 final indicators were identified and included.

As part of the scraping process, an additional 226 indicators were identified from other resources not included in the P/CVE mixed methods reviews, but were prominent in the P/CVE literature base. Additionally, this research references other recognized global MEL P/CVE frameworks, such as the United States Institute of Peace's Measuring Up: Monitoring and Evaluating P/CVE Programs, the European Union's Compendium of Good Practices for MEL, the United Nations Development Program's PVE Indicator Bank, and United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism's new measurement guide presented at the 2023 Counter Terrorism Week to more robustly understand the state of P/CVE MEL. In total, 1,671 P/CVE indicators were scraped for inclusion.

AfP used Microsoft Excel to track references and code key characteristics documented for each resource. This method allowed researchers to quickly access information in one place, check each other's work to avoid duplication, and efficiently evaluate characteristics of each resource against the inclusion criteria.

4. Type of Change Analysis

P/CVE programs aim to affect change across multiple dimensions, from shaping attitudes to altering behaviors and relationships. To better understand the landscape of change prevalent across P/CVE evaluative literature, once indicators and their associated MEL information were collected, the research team applied a type of change analysis to each indicator. This research analyzed and coded all 1,671 indicators across three distinct dimensions: (1) attitudes; (2) behaviors; and (3) relationships and social networks.

With regards to P/CVE at the attitudinal level, resources aim to reshape individuals' knowledge and perceptions of VE, challenging established viewpoints. On the behavioral front, these initiatives work to deter individuals from engaging in VE activities, such as consuming extremist materials. Instead, they encourage participation in constructive actions that promote peace and

1 "Indicator measure" is the exact question (either quantitatively or qualitatively administered) that collects data to evaluate a specific indicator.

2 "Indicator measure options" are the exact options provided to answer an indicator measure, such as a Likert scale or specific coded answers. Close-ended questions typically have explicitly stated measure options.

tolerance. The third dimension, relationships and social networks, recognizes that an individual's environment, defined by their interpersonal connections and community ties, can substantially sway their path toward or away from extremist tendencies.

Following this type of change analysis, several distinct indicators did not fall into these categorizations. These indicators referenced the development of knowledge and/or skill sets and were categorized as a fourth type of change: capacity building. Within this fourth type of change, it is often impossible to differentiate the actual dimension of change (i.e., if the capacities built or impacted attitudes, behaviors, and/or social networks and relationships). Hence, it was maintained as its own category. Examples of indicators that fell into each of these categories are elucidated below in the table.

Table 1: Type of change indicator examples

Type of Change	Indicator Examples	Related Measure Examples	Related Measure Options
Attitudes/ Perceptions	Personal perceptions towards violent extremism and peace narrative	Under what condition(s) do you think it is justified to engage in violence? You can choose more than one.	• When myself or my family is insulted or threatened • When my belief or religion is insulted or threatened • When my ethnic background is insulted or threatened • When my ideology or political choice is insulted or threatened • When my voice is unheard • When my livelihood is threatened • Others
Behavior	The total number of initiatives around tolerance and diversity, which training participants took the lead in organizing	Q1. To your knowledge, how many initiatives around tolerance and diversity have training participants organized in your area? Q2.. Who led the initiatives?	Refer to Q1: Open ended Refer to Q2: • Government • Non-government/civil society organizations • Women • Youth • Community leaders • Myself
Social Relationships/ Network	Support system within community	When I feel lonely, there are several individuals I can talk to.	Likert-type scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*)
Capacity Building	Impact of training	# of trainees whose livelihood opportunities are improved as a result of participation in Somali Youth Livelihood Program training, within 3 months of completion of training	Count

A researcher applied these categorizations across all the included indicators. A total of 35 indicators were excluded from this coding structure if they were nondescript or were not connected to any of the categories highlighted. Indicators that were applicable to more than one category were coded to each relevant category. A second researcher validated the initial coding structure. Any disagreements between the researchers were resolved through discussion with the wider research team.

5. Level Analysis and Validity of Measurement

Ensuring the quality of indicators is a challenging endeavor due to the inherent complexity of many phenomena they aim to capture, which often resist straightforward quantification. Some concepts, particularly related to P/CVE, are inherently complex, making it difficult to capture them succinctly with a single or even multiple indicators. This is compounded when attempting to assess the quality of indicators discreetly across a corpus of indicators, rather than in reference to indicator quality within a single resource that could include many measures. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of real-world contexts means that what is deemed a valid indicator in one context is less relevant to another. Balancing the diverse perspectives and interests of multiple stakeholders involved in indicator development can introduce further complexities, potentially leading to biases or inconsistencies in measurement. While high-quality indicators are indispensable for their myriad benefits, ensuring their quality is a nuanced task due to these complexities. As an initial attempt to assess the validity of indicators used across the corpus, the research team applied a *level analysis* that looked at the alignment between interventions and their respective indicators.

Both P/CVE interventions and their measures encompass a multi-level approach to counter radicalization and VE. These tiers—spanning from individual factors, through community dynamics, to national and systemic issues—represent the levels of change a program aims to achieve and subsequently measure. At the individual or micro level, interventions focus on the personal circumstances, attitudes, and ideas that might push someone towards radicalization. This granular approach seeks to understand and alter the intrinsic motivators and vulnerabilities that may predispose an individual to extremist ideologies. At the communal or meso-level, the emphasis shifts to building community resilience, providing them with the tools and knowledge to act as bulwarks against the pull of VE. By nurturing communal resilience, these interventions aim to create environments where extremist ideologies find it hard to take root. Lastly, at the macro-level, the approach widens to address the larger structural and systemic conditions, often embedded in societal norms, governance frameworks, or economic systems, that inadvertently provide fertile ground for VE to flourish. Together, these levels create a holistic P/CVE strategy, merging personal transformation, community resilience, and structural adjustments to tackle the complexities of VE.

However, there can frequently be a disconnect between the intervention level and what a program is actually measuring based on their reported indicators. For instance, a program designed to impact community resilience against VE influences may only assess individual attitudes or knowledge acquisition—i.e., change at the individual level. This incongruity between the change a program is designed to impact and what it is actually assessing may lead to misleading interpretations by underestimating or overestimating a program's impact. More broadly, incongruity between intervention and measurement scale can distort evaluations, leading to misallocated resources, inaccurate outcomes, and potential stakeholder mistrust. Such misalignment can result in overlooking nuanced changes at targeted levels, further fostering misleading interpretations of impact. Additionally, this disparity can hinder refinement opportunities and may misalign with broader strategic objectives, undermining the collective efficacy and credibility of P/CVE efforts.

To assess alignment between levels of indicators and their interventions, resources were analyzed and coded by level of indicator and level of intervention using the following definitional parameters adapted from the Social Ecological Model:[3]

1. Micro: *Addresses or assesses changes occurring within the personal/psychological realm, including individual changes* in *people's attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, and personal identity.*

3 Kenneth E. Powell et al., "Public Health Models of Violence and Violence Prevention" in Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict (Second Edition), 2008.

2. Meso: Addresses or assesses changes occurring within or between communities (including subgroups of a community) that move beyond singular individuals, including changes in community engagement/integration, relationships, attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and identity.

3. Macro:

    - *Addresses or assesses changes occurring at the national or macro-level, including country-level trends that move beyond individual communities.*
    - *Addresses or assesses changes occurring to the policies, practices, power dynamics, social norms, or mindsets that underlie societal/development issues.*

Once indicators were coded, levels were summarized across each resource to assess the distribution of levels within a singular resource. Interventions and indicators could be coded into more than one level. To assess whether a resource's intended level of intervention matched their indicator levels, resources were coded as either mis-match, match, or exceeded, wherein:

1. Match: refers to level of indicator = level of intervention
2. Mis-match: refers to level of indicator < than level of intervention
3. Exceeded: refers to level of indicator > than level of intervention

Two separate researchers conducted the level analysis as part of the validity of measurement assessment across the corpus. A third researcher validated the applied coding structure. Any disagreements were resolved through discussions across the research team.

6. Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

Following full-text coding of 1,671 variables, researchers employed an inductive thematic analysis approach, paired with computerized theme and descriptive analyses of the included resources, to synthesize findings across relevant resource characteristics, including indicator key themes, research methods, analysis methods, types of change, and indicator and intervention levels.

Two coding teams separately conducted an inductive thematic analysis using a traditional card-sort theme extraction method across relevant characteristics.[4] Through this process, thematic categories relating to each characteristic were created inductively through a method of open coding. Once thematic categories were developed, the data was coded and restructured within relevant thematic categories for final category-based analysis. The two thematic analyses were compared and minor differences between the two were reconciled using cross-team discussion. The findings of these thematic analyses are reported across the PV, CI, and DDRR MEL reports.

4 Meline, Timothy. 2006. "Selecting Studies for Systemic Review: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria." Contemporary Issues in Communication Science and Disorders 33 (Spring): 21–27.

FINALIZED CORPUS

Overall, 106 resources were included for this research effort. In practice, many of the resources and their indicators overlap, attempting to address key aspects of PV, CI, and even DDRR within a single program.

These documents were scraped from a variety of locations, with 64% located through online hand searches (34% found on non-governmental organizations' websites, 30% on Google Scholar, 27% on government websites, and 13% on academic electronic databases), 34% from AfP developed corpora and databases, 2% through using citations, bibliographies, and references of collected resources, and 1% from recommendations by subject-matter experts. The finalized resources were split between journal submissions (19%) and self-published evaluations (81%). Journal submissions were identified as resources that had an ISSN/ISBN/DOI or similar journal serial number. Self-published evaluations referred to program final, mid-term, or endline evaluations. Mid-term reports were only used when final or endline evaluations were not available.

Once the P/CVE corpus was finalized, each of the 129 included resources were assigned their respective programming response: 115 within PV, 50 within CI, and 25 within DDRR. Only resources that had explicit indicators across each of the programming responses were retained, totaling 106 resources. Due to the cross-coding of resources and indicators across programming responses, the total N of each response with indicators (144) is greater than the N of resources (106), and the total N by response of indicators (2,077) is greater than the N of total indicators (1,671).

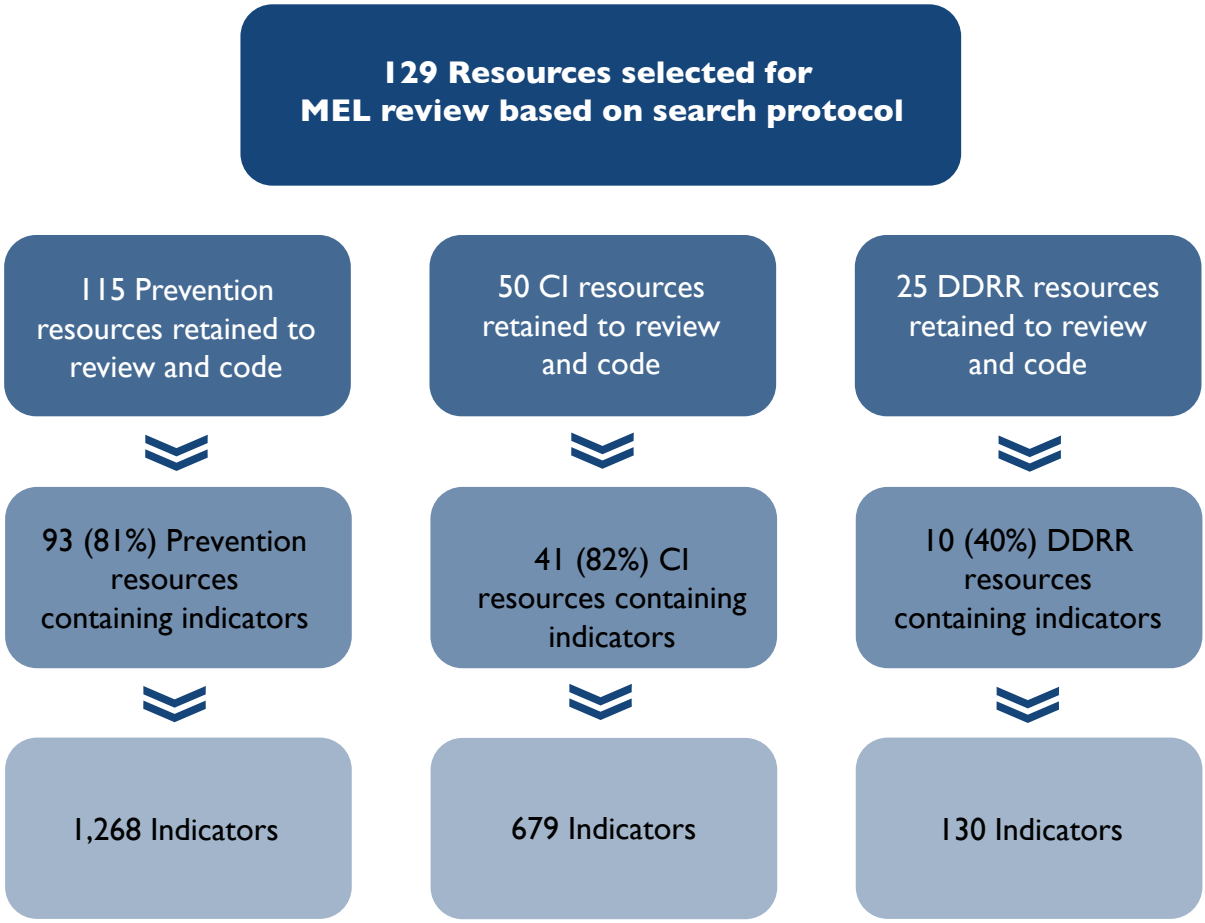

Figure 1: Number of resources included

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

In addition to the research limitations presented in the P/CVE Systematic Mixed Methods: Methodology report, this additional research has two unique limitations:

1. The indicators included for this research represent all available indicators across finalized resources and are not indicative of a quality assessment of each indicator. This research aimed to follow an abridged form of the USAID's Performance Monitoring Indicator Criteria Checklist with particular attention to the Data Quality Assurance Framework categories, namely: validity, integrity, precision, reliability, and timeliness. However, due to lack of consistent information on indicators and their relevant MEL aspects across included resources, this analysis could not be completed in its entirety. While the research aims to initiate a conversation around quality of indicators via validity analysis methods, validity alone does not guarantee overall quality of indicators. Therefore, this report does not purport that any single indicator presented in it would or should be used to evaluate complex P/CVE outcomes or impact, but rather more robust indicators in combination should be considered. Additionally, the individual use, value, and application of each indicator is dependent upon context and should be considered prior to use.

2. While multiple resources did differentiate between output, outcome, and impact indicators used for evaluation, the lack of consistent information is prevalent across the corpus. Additionally, different resources have different definitional parameters for classifying their indicators, making it hard to distinguish between output, outcome, and impact indicators across the corpus. Due to these limitations, an analysis on types of indicators prevalent across the corpus could not be completed.

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