

Beyond Religion

Learning From the Shift Toward a
Wider Understanding of
Extremism in P/CVE Programming

Study by Abigail Watson

On December 20, 2024, Taleb al-Abdalmohsen, a 50-year-old Saudi-born man living in Germany, drove into crowds at a Magdeburg Christmas market, killing six people and injuring 323 others. Raised Muslim but now an outspoken critic of Islam (with sympathies for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland party), al-Abdalmohsen's case illustrates the broader and growing prevalence of extremism that defies traditional classification.

Survey results among international experts¹ underscore a rising concern about the prevalence of hybrid forms of extremism, ranging from conspiracy-fueled violence around COVID-19 to the incel movement² and to actors who mix racist, misogynistic and anti-establishment views with personal grievances or trauma. These forms of extremism do not neatly fit the traditional ideological categorizations ("Islamist," "right-wing," "left-wing," "ethnonationalist") that most "preventing and countering violent extremism" (P/CVE) models have previously relied on.

But is this hybrid extremism really a break from the past? Or is it older, but historically obscured by the desire to neatly categorize and label complex human behavior? As many governments across Europe and the US sought to weed out the threat of terrorism following a series of tragic terrorist attacks in the early 2000s (9/11, the 2004 attacks in Madrid, the 2005 attacks in London), P/CVE models were dramatically expanded upon, predominantly framed around Islamist extremism. It eventually became clear that the use of rigid, religion-focused categorization not only misdiagnosed threats but also led to ineffective programming, the marginalization of individuals and communities, and hamstrung evaluation models that were unable to highlight faults in the approach.³

Many governments eventually course-corrected, adopting wider understandings of the drivers of extremism and developing programming and evaluation systems that embraced the complexity of radicalization pathways. This report seeks to understand this shift: Why did it happen, and what role did evaluations play in it? In theory, evaluations in P/CVE should be the key instrument through which organizations learn what works (and what does not).⁴ In practice, however, the impact of evaluations has often been limited. As previous work by GPPi has found, there are a number of reasons for this lack of impact, ranging from poor political and economic investment to an unwillingness to learn from

¹ Sofie Stoffel et al., *Holding Ground in Preventing Violent Extremism* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2025), <https://gppi.net/2025/08/12/holding-ground-in-preventing-violent-extremism>.

² Mark Follman, 'Here's the Key Missing Piece to the Megahit Show "Adolescence"', Criminal Justice, Mother Jones, 14 September 2025, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2025/09/adolescence-netflix-threat-assessment-violence-prevention/>.

³ Larry Attree, 'Shouldn't YOU Be Countering Violent Extremism?', Saferworld, March 2017, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/long-reads/shouldnat-you-be-countering-violent-extremism>; Christopher Wakube et al., 'Inside Kenya's War on Terror: Breaking the Cycle of Violence in Garissa', Saferworld, accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/long-reads/inside-kenyaas-war-on-terror-breaking-the-cycle-of-violence-in-garissa>; Thomas Nyagah et al., 'Inside Kenya's War on Terror: The Case of Lamu', Saferworld, accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/long-reads/inside-kenyaas-war-on-terror-the-case-of-lamu>; Aries Arugay et al., *An Explosive Cocktail – Counter-Terrorism, Militarisation and Authoritarianism in the Philippines* (Saferworld, 2021), <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1351-an-explosive-cocktail-counter-terrorism-militarisation-and-authoritarianism-in-the-philippines>; Jordan Street and Larry Attree, *No Shortcuts to Security: Learning from Responses to Armed Conflicts Involving Proscribed Groups* (Saferworld, 2022), <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1389-no-shortcuts-to-security>.

⁴ Milena Uhlmann, *Strategic Enhancement of Deradicalisation / Disengagement Approaches within a Comprehensive Framework of Preventing and Countering Violent Islamist Extremism and Violent Right-Wing Extremism* (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2021), https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/publikationen/2021/strategic-enhancement-deradicalisation.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5.

past mistakes.⁵ By exploring why evaluation has had limited impact in recognizing the flaws in governmental approaches to countering extremism, this study aims to help policymakers develop evaluation models and cultures that are better equipped to adapt to incoming evidence. Doing so will not only improve programming and evaluation aimed at religious extremism, but also those targeting other complex, emerging forms of extremism.

This paper first explores the above-mentioned shift in European and US national policies. Then it asks why, over the course of many years, evaluation systems and cultures failed to highlight flawed governmental approaches. It distills the following three learnings from this analysis (taking aim at both the evaluation systems and the wider cultures in which evaluation was rolled out):

1. **Evaluation systems could not dispel the belief that religion was the main motivating factor behind extremist pathways, because they were asking the wrong questions.** Questions tended to focus on attitude change (e.g., how much people's opinion towards religion had changed over the course of programming), which meant it was difficult to understand whether other factors (like a desire for a sense of belonging or employment prospects) had a big(ger) impact on their decision to join extremist groups or commit acts of violence.
2. **Evaluation systems often relied on output-oriented, quantitative measures,** which limited their ability to raise complex issues (such as the multiple and interconnected drivers of extremism) or to record unexpected results, which may have challenged established wisdom on the importance of religious beliefs.
3. **Cultures surrounding these systems were not open to change.** Even as research from academics and civil society highlighted the importance of considering factors beyond religious beliefs, governments could only have changed their approach if they had engaged with such external actors – which they did not.

Finally, the paper turns to how relatively inexpensive changes to programming and institutional structure have dramatically improved evaluation systems' ability to see the whole problem and avoid pigeonholing results based on researchers' and donors' assumptions:

1. **An iterative learning approach** which allowed practitioners working with donors to constantly learn from past programming, ask difficult questions about whether their model for assessing success was still valid, and draw up strategic lessons from these conversations.
2. **A threat-agnostic approach** prevents making the fatal mistake of prioritizing certain drivers (and therefore, certain types of programming) above others and allows for a more adaptive approach.

⁵ Stoffel et al., *Holding Ground in Preventing Violent Extremism*; Asena Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE: Institutional Structures in International Comparison* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), 2021), <https://gppi.net/2021/09/01/evaluating-p-cve>; Sarah Bressan et al., *How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism?* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), 2024), <https://gppi.net/2024/07/08/how-do-we-know-what-works-in-preventing-violent-extremism>.

3. **Meaningful coordination between key stakeholders** (especially frontline practitioners) ensured that all perspectives on key drivers of extremism were accounted for and that strategic lessons could be learned.

This report is based on a literature review of global P/CVE approaches, as well as on semi-structured interviews with 23 policymakers, practitioners and experts based in the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, and Kenya. It considers both domestic and international programs, including those funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US State Department. It draws on experiences and voices from the development sector, acknowledging that domestic P/CVE programming has much to learn from this sector.

What Are the Drivers of Extremism?

Experts from within academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and beyond have produced strong evidence that there is a wide variety of reasons for (violent) extremism. These include:

- **Structural Factors**, such as state repression, weak governance,⁶ real or perceived injustices,⁷ political exclusion and discrimination, corruption, or inequality. Nor are these just internal policies. Dr. Shamila Ahmed has also analyzed how the militarized or abusive *foreign* policy of a citizen's state can have an impact.⁸
- **Individual Incentives**, such as trauma, a desire for revenge,⁹ mental health, a desire for adventure or a sense of belonging,¹⁰ economic¹¹ or security status,¹² and extreme religious, racist, misogynistic¹³ or anti-government beliefs.¹⁴

⁶ 'States of Fragility 2016', OECD, 30 November 2016, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/states-of-fragility-2016_9789264267213-en.html.

⁷ Luca Raineri, 'If Victims Become Perpetrators: Factors Contributing to Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in the Central Sahel', *International Alert*, 5 June 2018, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/if-victims-become-perpetrators-violent-extremism-sahel/>; Randy Borum, 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories', *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1%253C/p%253E>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1%253C/p%253E>.

⁸ Shamila Ahmed, 'The Middle East: Terrorism, International Law, and the Cosmopolitan Myth', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 18, no. 2 (2025): 400–423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2461727>.

⁹ *Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State* (International Crisis Group, 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>.

¹⁰ Arie W. Kruglanski et al., 'The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism', *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014): 69–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163>.

¹¹ *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa>.

¹² Keith Proctor, 'Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence', Mercy Corps, 2015, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment>.

¹³ Stoffel et al., *Holding Ground in Preventing Violent Extremism*; David Meiering et al., 'Connecting Structures: Resistance, Heroic Masculinity and Anti-Feminism as Bridging Narratives within Group Radicalization', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.18452/22454>.

¹⁴ *Journey to Extremism in Africa*; Taylor Cilke et al., 'Beyond Belief: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in America', File, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/reports-and-publications/beyond-belief-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-america.pdf/view>.

- **Enabling Factors**, such as exposure to radical mentors¹⁵ or recruiters (who might use coercive recruitment tactics¹⁶), and the beliefs and actions of a person's wider social networks (online or offline).¹⁷

While religion can certainly be a relevant factor in developing extremist views (as a framework for understanding grievances or an easy entry point to radicalized networks), it is just one of many factors that can drive people to extremist acts.¹⁸ It is also important to differentiate between religion and ideology. The latter is a broad set of beliefs “with collective properties and purposes,” which help people make sense of the world and find a language for their concerns, fears and sense of injustice.¹⁹ Research shows that many with extremist views (whether they be religiously or politically motivated) don't necessarily have a substantial knowledge of religious texts or doctrine, but rather are attracted to what extremism offers people emotionally: a broad sense of purpose and identity.²⁰

A Governmental Shift in Approach

In many parts of Europe and the US, the immediacy and reach of the damage caused by Islamist terrorist attacks led to an overemphasis on addressing extremist Islamist thought, ignoring any other structural drivers of extremism.²¹ In 2014, Prime Minister David Cameron framed counterterrorism as a “generational . . . battle against a poisonous ideology.”²² A year later, US President Barack Obama argued that the main objective when combatting Islamist terrorism was “to confront squarely and honestly the twisted ideologies that these terrorist groups use to incite people to violence.”²³

In many countries, the P/CVE strategies emerging in the early 2000s placed a strong emphasis on Islamic religious views. A 2011 update of the UK's original, 2003 P/CVE strategy zeroed in on “Al Qa'iada and groups and individuals who share the violent Islamist ideology associated with it.”²⁴ Similarly, reeling from attacks in their own countries or worried about their citizens returning home after fighting for Islamic State in Iraq and

¹⁵ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of's* (Ecco, 2010).

¹⁶ ‘Nigeria: “Our Job Is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill”: Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North East Nigeria’, *Amnesty International*, 14 April 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1360/2015/en/>.

¹⁷ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, ‘Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367>.

¹⁸ Anthony Ware et al., *Appropriate International Development Responses to Address Violent and Hateful Extremism* (Plan International Australia and Deakin University, 2021–2026), <https://adi.deakin.edu.au/project/addressing-violent-and-hateful-extremism/>.

¹⁹ Donald Holbrook, ‘The Bonds of Belief: The Relationship between Terrorism and Ideology’, in *Conceptualizing Extreme Beliefs and Behaviors: Definitions and Relations*, ed. Rik Peels and John Horgan (Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197760222.003.0006>.

²⁰ Till Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung: Einsichten aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*, no. 9 (PRIF, 2018), <https://www.prif.org/publikationen/publikationssuche/publikation/herausforderung-deradikalisierung-einsichten-aus-wissenschaft-und-praxis>; Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung*.

²¹ Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung*.

²² Donald Holbrook, ‘The Bonds of Belief: The Relationship between Terrorism and Ideology’, in *Conceptualizing Extreme Beliefs and Behaviors: Definitions and Relations*, ed. Rik Peels and John Horgan (Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197760222.003.0006>.

²³ Holbrook, ‘The Bonds of Belief’.

²⁴ *Prevent Strategy* (2011).

Syria (ISIS), the worry about Islamist extremism came into focus in many places across Europe.²⁵ These worries tended to focus overwhelmingly on individuals' ideological beliefs rather than spur a careful assessment of the structural drivers of extremism. According to Professor Peter R. Neumann (the then-Special Representative on Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), this skewed focus was due to a lack of national introspection: "When states speak about terrorism in other countries, they are quick to highlight underlying conflicts, structural problems, and government policies which are said to have given extremist groups opportunities to radicalise and recruit. When talking about their own countries, however, they angrily reject such suggestions, preferring to blame 'evil ideologies' and external influences."²⁶

The impact of focusing on individuals' religious beliefs at the detriment of a structural approach is well documented across Europe, the US, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel.²⁷ At best, it has been proven to be a waste of resources because it tends to target unlikely to ever commit violent acts (even if they may have been sympathetic to the views of extremist organizations).²⁸ At worst, focusing on religious beliefs was actively counterproductive, leading to more grievances among Muslim communities. By creating a "suspect community" of Muslims in many parts of the world,²⁹ governments further alienated many individuals and made them more vulnerable to the recruitment tactics of extremist groups.³⁰

This impact was magnified because it was often compounded by other problematic policies, such as an overly securitized approach toward, or surveillance of, these "suspect communities."³¹ In 2021, GPPi found that "false referrals" of individuals suspected to be vulnerable to radicalization "can contribute to marginalization and, potentially, even radicalization."³² A 2023 review of the UK P/CVE strategy concluded that "work has sometimes given the impression that Muslim communities as a whole are more 'vulnerable' to radicalization than other faith or ethnic groups"³³ Further, this has had "a detrimental effect on participants and the extent of their potential resilience to radicalization."³⁴ In Kenya, one expert told me – when discussing heavily securitized

²⁵ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

²⁶ Peter Neumann, *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation That Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region* (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2017), <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/346841>.

²⁷ Sébastien Brouillette-Alarie et al., 'Systematic Review on the Outcomes of Tertiary Prevention Programs in the Field of Violent Radicalization', *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 42 (March 2025): 140–93.

²⁸ James Khalil et al., 'The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2022): 425–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793>; Holbrook, 'The Bonds of Belief'.

²⁹ Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, 'The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities', *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 25, no. 3 (2011): 151–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2011.617491>; Raineri, 'If Victims Become Perpetrators'; Abi Watson et al., 'Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK's Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia', Saferworld, October 2022, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1405-how-to-scale-up-the-ukas-persistent-engagement-strategy-in-kenya-and-somalia>.

³⁰ Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung*.

³¹ Fahid Qurashi, 'The Prevent Strategy and the UK "War on Terror": Embedding Infrastructures of Surveillance in Muslim Communities', *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0061-9>; Watson et al., 'Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK's Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia'.

³² Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

³³ *Prevent Strategy* (2011).

³⁴ William Shawcross, 'Independent Review of Prevent (Accessible)', GOV.UK, February 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-prevents-report-and-government-response/independent-review-of-prevent-accessible>.

policing tactics against Muslims and Somali people in the country – that “violence against those who hold extreme views makes them violent.”³⁵

Over the last two decades, a shift in approaches has occurred in many countries, leading governments to increasingly consider a wider number of drivers in P/CVE policy. This shift happened not only in Europe and the US, but also in countries that received extensive international support for their P/CVE programs (such as Kenya, Somalia and Pakistan). A number of European countries already viewed extremism in a more holistic manner, informed by their longer histories of addressing non-religious political violence (left-wing and right-wing groups in Germany and Italy, for instance, or ethnonational groups in the Basque region of Spain) that well preceded 9/11. For these countries, then, this shift should be seen less as a new approach and more as a reacquaintance with their past policies.³⁶

Some disclaimers on the universality of what the paper deems a “shift”: since the early days of P/CVE, many actors *have* run programs that were based on the understanding that extremism is complex and driven by much more than merely religious beliefs. Even within one national context, different P/CVE actors had different learning curves because of varying degrees of experience in other types of extremism, leadership priorities or organizational culture.³⁷ Many development actors, for instance, led programs with a nuanced understanding of extremism, often stemming from years of personal and organizational experience and knowing the importance of conflict sensitivity and local drivers of violent conflict.

It is also important to note that this shift does not apply to all European countries; some, like France and Germany, have not meaningfully adapted their approach. While Paris has shifted away from “de-radicalization” (attempting to change individuals’ beliefs) to “disengagement” (changing violent behavior, regardless of ideology), its anti-extremism policies have been heavily criticized for continuing to disproportionately scrutinize Muslims.³⁸ Similarly, a study in Germany found that there were stark differences in how P/CVE dealt with Islamist extremism on the one hand, and other types of extremism on the other. A review of referral cases (where young people had been referred to P/CVE programs because of extreme views) found an institutional tendency to overreact when the referred person was Muslim, but that “there are no reports of societal overreactions to left-wing or right-wing extremism. In these two contexts in particular, statements and/or actions that appear extremist are often downplayed or tolerated as ‘pubertal rebellion.’”

³⁵ Watson et al., ‘Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK’s Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia’.

³⁶ Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge University Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527555>; Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139043144>.

³⁷ Carys Evans, ‘Gangs, Criminal Exploitation and Violent Extremism: Exploring the Crossover to Prevent Youth Violence’, in *Researching the Evolution of Countering Violent Extremism*, ed. Farangiz Atamurdova and Sara Zeiger (2021); Till Baaken et al., ‘Dissecting Deradicalization: Challenges for Theory and Practice in Germany’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)* 14 (2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3808>.

³⁸ Fatima Lahnait, *Combating Radicalisation in France: From Experimentation to Professionalisation* (CIDOB, 2021), <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/combating-radicalisation-france-experimentation-professionalisation>; Rim-Sarah Alouane, ‘Publicly French, Privately Muslim: The Aim of Modern Laïcité’, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 13 May 2021, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/publicly-french-privately-muslim-the-aim-of-modern-laicite>.

However, the review found that this same consideration “is often not taken into account in relation to Muslim youth.”³⁹

Even if the shift cannot be understood as a universal, clean break from the past, it is nonetheless evident, and quite striking, in several countries:

- **United States:** In contrast to its earlier post-9/11 strategies, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) put out a 2011 policy paper that categorized drivers of violent extremism as “push” factors and “pull” factors, as a way to better tailor interventions. Continuing this more nuanced approach, USAID and the Department of State developed a joint strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in 2016, which aimed to address the root causes and factors that contribute to violent extremism. Even this year, the FBI’s *Beyond Belief* report repeated that extremism is driven by a complex range of push and pull factors.⁴⁰
- **United Kingdom:** Following a 2011 review, the UK’s Prevent strategy refocused from communities at risk (heavily focusing on Muslim communities) to looking at a wider range of individual drivers.⁴¹ In a 2023 review of Prevent, it was noted that “ideology, if acknowledged at all, was treated as a secondary factor and a derivative of a wider psychological or social issue. Put simply, ideology was not seen as an essential part of the trajectory towards terrorism, instead it was viewed as one of many potential radicalising factors.”⁴² This has not been without its controversies. In particular, the measure (introduced with the so-called Prevent Duty in 2015) that placed a legal obligation on frontline professionals like teachers, health care providers and social workers to report individuals considered vulnerable to radicalization was met with criticism.
- **Canada:** Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made prevention and countering “radicalization to violence” a national priority and directed the Canadian Minister of Public Safety to establish what would become the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (Canada Centre, for short), which formally opened its doors in 2017. Unlike predecessors in other countries, it took a threat-agnostic approach;⁴³ its design avoided assumptions about causality, instead prioritizing flexible, context-responsive frameworks capable of addressing diverse forms of extremism.

Success has not been linear, and there are already signs that improvements are being reversed. Counterterrorist expert Bibi van Ginkel (the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, ICCT) argues that “the recent, sector-wide decline in P/CVE funding, coupled with shrinking political space, is unprecedented and unsustainable.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Till Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung: Einsichten aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*, 9 (PRIF, 2018), <https://www.prif.org/publikationen/publikationssuche/publikation/herausforderung-deradikalisierung-einsichten-aus-wissenschaft-und-praxis>.

⁴⁰ Cilke et al., ‘Beyond Belief’.

⁴¹ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁴² Shawcross, ‘Independent Review of Prevent (Accessible)’.

⁴³ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁴⁴ Bibi van Ginkel, *Under Pressure: Rethinking Comprehensive Approaches to CT and P/CVE in an Age of Austerity and Instability* (ICCT, 2025), <https://icct.nl/publication/under-pressure-rethinking-comprehensive-approaches-ct-and-pcve-age-austerity-and-instability>.

In the US, there is a danger that lessons, hard-won over two decades of programming, will be forgotten as agencies are restructured or defunded following the start of President Trump's second term. Alongside the closure of USAID, the State Department's Office for Countering Violent Extremism (formerly part of the Bureau for Counterterrorism) has been closed and, with it, decades of learning around what works in P/CVE have been lost. According to a former State Department official I spoke to, in the lead-up to the Office's closure, the Trump administration's approach toward people radicalized to violence was to assume that they were "ontologically evil" and "cannot be fixed."⁴⁵ They allegedly preferred kinetic responses to populations assumed to be radicalized "beyond repair" over investing resources to address drivers of radicalization.⁴⁶

In the UK, the 2023 review of Prevent showed that Prevent seemed to have moved in the direction of its earlier position, increasingly following a logic focused on ideology and religion. The report criticized Prevent practitioners for their "failure ... to understand fully the nature of ideology as the primary driver in Islamist radicalization."⁴⁷ My interviewees noted that the US and the UK responded to shrinking budgets by investing what little they had in projects that could be directly linked to *immediate* national security, deprioritizing projects whose national benefit would come to fruition in the longer term. In the case of FCDO-funded programs in Kenya, this meant they were being asked to demonstrate success in terms of national security priorities (i.e., whether the lives of British citizens in the UK were being protected). Not only is this hard to prove, but it forces assessments to be based on arbitrary metrics, rather than those that evidence suggests are most critical for addressing the spread of violent extremism.

The Role of Evaluation in the Shift

As demonstrated, several countries changed course in their approach to P/CVE, shifting from a focus on religion to a wider understanding of structural drivers of extremism. But why – after years of status quo – did governments start to acknowledge this need to widen their lens and adapt their programmatic and policy approaches to more effectively prevent extremism? And to what degree were the evaluation and quality assurance systems set up around P/CVE programming instigators of change?⁴⁸

While most of my interviewees agreed that evaluation was important (according to a 2021 German Interior Ministry report, its very objective is "to learn in order to improve"⁴⁹), they found that evaluation was rarely the most important factor in instigating this shift. Often, the very systems established "to learn in order to improve" did not actually help governments to reflect on their policies – either because of design flaws within the evaluation systems or because of the cultures within government institutions: (1) evaluations often asked the wrong questions, (2) focused on output-oriented, quantitative metrics for success and (3) were circulated in government institutions unwilling to learn from external expertise.

⁴⁵ Online interview, 31st July 2025.

⁴⁶ Online interview, 31st July 2025.

⁴⁷ Shawcross, 'Independent Review of Prevent (Accessible)'.

⁴⁸ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*; Bressan et al., *How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism?*

⁴⁹ Uhlmann, *Strategic Enhancement of Deradicalisation / Disengagement Approaches within a Comprehensive Framework of Preventing and Countering Violent Islamist Extremism and Violent Right-Wing Extremism*.

1. Narrow Evaluation, Narrow Findings

In a number of ways, the very fabric of an evaluation affects what metrics are visible, and what can and cannot be observed as a relevant cause of extremism. Most fundamentally, my interviewees seriously questioned whether it was even *possible* for the evaluations used to catch the problems related to an overt focus on religion in P/CVE programs; none of these evaluations were based on a sound theory of change, making it near-impossible to highlight the oversight.

This issue, pointing to a bigger challenge with P/CVE evaluation, has been flagged in several previous studies. The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which connects frontline practitioners from across Europe, noted that it “is often noticeable that programmes and projects are not based on an underlying Theory of Change.”⁵⁰ The brief continues, stating that “central questions around ‘What is the change we want to promote?’ or ‘How do the project’s activities lead to meaningful change?’ often remain insufficiently answered.”⁵¹ A 2021 systematic review of P/CVE evaluations concludes the same, noting that there is “a tendency not to formulate proper, smart outcome indicators.”⁵² An evaluation’s goal is often “to prevent and counter radicalization and to create more resilience,” but is often not complimented by substantial discussion of how to measure whether a certain goal has been reached and how to “create this theory of change.”⁵³

A central challenge in developing theories of change in P/CVE: evaluators aim to assess whether individuals are likely to engage in extremist violence without asking this question directly. After all, people are extremely unlikely to tell an evaluator if they intend to join an illegal group. Making the issue even thornier is the effect of place on those interviewed. As researcher Rory MacLeod points out, “what participants say and do in the safe space of a workshop may be very different from what they are willing or able to say and do once they are back in the often-unsafe space of their own communities.”⁵⁴ So, instead, evaluators are dependent on finding proxies – related questions which might give some insight into whether people are vulnerable to recruitment while avoiding the million-dollar question.

Proxy questions, however, are far from perfect.⁵⁵ One issue is that some proxies (especially those that focus on attitudes toward religion) often gloss over the material or emotional reasons someone might join an extremist organization (for example, to gain employment, a sense of purpose or belonging). In a 2022 assessment of recent P/CVE programming,

⁵⁰ Paulo Teixeira, *Consolidated Overview on: Evaluation of Secondary and Tertiary Level P/CVE Programmes* (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2023), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/ran_paper_paulo_teixeira_evaluation_secondary_tertiary_level_pcve_programmes_102023.pdf.

⁵¹ Paulo Teixeira, *Consolidated Overview on: Evaluation of Secondary and Tertiary Level P/CVE Programmes* (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2023), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/ran_paper_paulo_teixeira_evaluation_secondary_tertiary_level_pcve_programmes_102023.pdf.

⁵² Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke., 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524_Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁵³ Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke., 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524_Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁵⁴ Rory MacLeod, ‘Engaging Communities in P/CVE Projects in Fragile and Conflict Affected States’, in *Researching the Evolution of Countering Violent Extremism* (2021).

⁵⁵ Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung*.

James Khalil, John Horgan and Martine Zeuthen sounded the alarm about the blind spots created by focusing solely on attitude change in individuals, noting that they found some example cases where “material incentives, status-seeking, adventure, fear, revenge and other individual-level drivers” were essentially neglected.⁵⁶

These evaluations are not only incomplete; they risk becoming self-reinforcing by measuring only what the designer deems important. Ultimately, this could also skew the measurement of program success. Let’s say an evaluation focuses solely on a certain population’s attitude toward violence, then a program could appear to be (un)successful by relevant metrics; if a program is failing to meet these metrics, the program design can be shifted to better deliver on the desired metrics. Similarly, an evaluation that measured changes in attitudes on religious extremism might suggest programmatic success if they measure changes in attitudes; but, if they fail to measure other impactful factors driving recruitment (job insecurity, for one), these influences will remain invisible within the evaluation. This could lead evaluators to miss a more important driving factor, simply because that factor is not getting measured. The consequence: the evaluator will have no way of knowing whether the program is improving in areas ultimately deemed most important.

2. The Incompleteness of Output-Oriented Quantitative Measures

The problem sketched above is exacerbated by the fact that evaluations are overly preoccupied with output-oriented quantitative metrics, which can rarely account for the multiple and, often unforeseen, reasons why people become radicalized. An assessment by RAN stated that monitoring and evaluation in P/CVE initiatives “tend to focus heavily on activities and outputs, not on assessing outcomes and broader impact on trends toward radicalisation or violent extremist activity.”⁵⁷ P/CVE evaluations *do* use other types of research methods – a systematic review of P/CVE evaluations found that “out of the 219 studies, 55.3% used quantitative methods (either alone or in mixed-methods designs), 41.6% used mixed-methods designs, and 43.8% used purely qualitative designs.”⁵⁸ Still, both my interviews and previous GPPi research underlined that many evaluations indeed relied heavily on short-term, quantitative metrics.⁵⁹

This design choice for quantitative metrics can have major implications. If evaluations do not leave space for exploring unstructured lines of questioning – either because there is no space to measure new metrics or because the current systems do not leave room for unexpected or hard-to-quantify results – they will not show the significance of drivers that the program designers did not anticipate. And if non-religious factors are made invisible – and therefore remain unaddressed – measuring whether a program is addressing extremism effectively becomes extremely difficult.

⁵⁶ Khalil et al., ‘The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism’.

⁵⁷ Teixeira, *Consolidated Overview on: Evaluation of Secondary and Tertiary Level P/CVE Programmes*.

⁵⁸ Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke., 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524_Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁵⁹ Evaluating P/CVE: Institutional Structures in International Comparison.

Recognizing that people commit extremist acts or join extremist organizations for many reasons is about embracing the complexity of radicalization pathways; if evaluations are unable to account for this, they will likely be insufficient.

3. The Lack of “Learning Culture” in Government Institutions

One of the key reasons evaluations were largely unable to reveal how flawed governmental approaches were, had nothing to do with the evaluation set-up, and everything with the culture in which the evaluations were conducted. The best evaluation in the world is unlikely to be effective if government institutions are unwilling to listen to, engage with and learn from its findings. Following the terror attacks in the early 2000s in the US and Europe, many governments were so set on religious beliefs as the root cause of extremism that they were unwilling to engage with any evidence to the contrary.

This evidence did exist. Experts from across civil society, academic research and think tanks argued persuasively that governments needed to change their approaches. The civil society organization Saferworld continuously challenged internationally delivered P/CVE, while NGOs like Liberty and Amnesty International were calling out domestic practices in the UK.⁶⁰ In fact, many of my interviewees mentioned the role of civil society (working in communities affected by extremism and violence) in explaining programming challenges and advocating for more strategic change.⁶¹ Academia, too, has been important. RAN notes that “most of the newer, considered to be more rigorous tools associated with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for P/CVE have been developed in academic environments.”⁶²

Learning from research and listening to civil society is only possible within a governmental culture that is open to external experts and is willing to have frank conversations about what is working, and what is not. Interviewees noted that such a culture can pivot quickly following new pressures, leading to greater openness to examining contrary evidence. Samantha Power starting as head of USAID, for example, had a major effect on USAID’s approach to P/CVE; skeptical of P/CVE, Power brought organization-wide change by demanding a greater understanding of its impact and, more broadly, by exploring a more development-oriented approach to P/CVE. Similarly, Kenya shifted its approach to P/CVE in accordance with donors seeking a new approach to P/CVE programming. When the US, the UK, the EU and others started to invest in better approaches (most notably in Mombasa), Nairobi, too, began to recalibrate its national approach.

In many cases, however, there is not such willingness to learn from civil society and reassess. This reflects previous GPPi work, which found that the relationship between civil society and government is often strained for a number of reasons, including the fact that many practitioners and policymakers do not necessarily encourage evaluations, out of fear

⁶⁰ ‘The Prevent Duty and Its Chilling Effect on Human Rights’, Amnesty International UK, 4 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/prevent>; ‘Prevent’, Liberty, n.d., accessed 22 September 2025, <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/fundamental/prevent/>; Larry Attree, ‘Shouldn’t YOU Be Countering Violent Extremism?’, Saferworld, March 2017, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/long-reads/shouldnat-you-be-countering-violent-extremism>.

⁶¹ *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe* (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2018), <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/400241>.

⁶² Teixeira, *Consolidated Overview on: Evaluation of Secondary and Tertiary Level P/CVE Programmes*.

that they may have negative consequences.⁶³ A closed-off governmental culture limits frank dialogue, has stunted funders' ability to learn best practices from implementers,⁶⁴ and has negatively affected other governments' and practitioners' ability to learn from past mistakes. A systematic review on the outcome of prevention programs noted that evaluations which were government-led and only internally released, leaves a wider understanding of success "incomplete."⁶⁵

The closed-off nature of P/CVE evaluations was especially prevalent in the UK. While there have been a few strategic reviews of Prevent, calls for program reviews "are usually not public and often go straight to a list of registered service providers."⁶⁶ Worse, any evaluations submitted "often face extensive edits by the Home Office," with some being practically rewritten.⁶⁷ Previous GPPi research found that there is an internal government process for sharing evaluation results and creating learning opportunities within teams, but that these discussions rarely reach beyond. With no follow-up and no external pressure, understanding of success – and, arguably, space for improvement – remains limited.⁶⁸

In such constrained learning environments (and with evaluations that are limited and limiting), it is unsurprising that it took so long for many governments to change their approach and recognize that radicalization is driven by more than just religious beliefs.

How to Improve Approaches to Evaluation?

Despite evaluations' failures to address the way governments' P/CVE singled out extreme religious beliefs as a sole driver of extremism, governments have become more aware of P/CVE shortcomings. As they have become increasingly confronted with the reality that rigid categorizations of extremism do not serve them, they have sometimes pushed for new approaches. In this section of the brief, I identify three relatively inexpensive changes governments have made which dramatically improved institutions' ability to see the whole problem and avoid fatal assumptions: (1) adopting iterative learning models, (2) threat-agnostic approaches and (3) meaningful coordination between key stakeholders. All three changes dramatically improved the ability of governmental systems to learn and evolve based on an improved understanding of the challenges faced.

⁶³ Sarah Bressan et al., *How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism?* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2024), <https://gppi.net/2024/07/08/how-do-we-know-what-works-in-preventing-violent-extremism>; Asena Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE: Institutional Structures in International Comparison* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2021), <https://gppi.net/2021/09/01/evaluating-p-cve>; Sofie Stoffel et al., *Holding Ground in Preventing Violent Extremism* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2025), <https://gppi.net/2025/08/12/holding-ground-in-preventing-violent-extremism>.

⁶⁴ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*; Bressan et al., *How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism?*

⁶⁵ Brouillette-Alarie et al., 'Systematic Review on the Outcomes of Tertiary Prevention Programs in the Field of Violent Radicalization'.

⁶⁶ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁶⁷ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁶⁸ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

1. Adopt an “Iterative Learning Approach”

One way to improve the effectiveness of evaluations is by bringing together practitioners, policymakers and donors on a rolling basis. However good an evaluation is, it will be much less effective if it is only done once. An iterative learning model, on the other hand, enables constant tweaking of its program design, theory of change, and methodology, ensuring that evaluation and programming alike are focused on the most pertinent areas and issues.⁶⁹ The multi-country initiative Collective Resilience Against Extremism (CREATE) provides an example of how iterative learning can be implemented well. This 2019 program, run by Mercy Corps in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Uganda and funded by the FCDO, sought to engage “local and national government, local civil society organisations and communities to mitigate the drivers, enablers and narratives of violent extremism in East Africa.”⁷⁰ The team drew “on highly localized, up-to-date context analysis...to inform iterative programming.”⁷¹ Dersi Wanaag is another example: this three-year project, implemented to promote peace and stability in the Kenya-Somalia-Ethiopia borderlands, has purposefully designed project monitoring and evaluation methodology to remain fluid, “with an adaptive results framework that is adjusted iteratively.”⁷²

Iterative learning not only requires solid frameworks, but also qualified people and personnel continuity to implement said learning. As a former US State Department official explained, one of the reasons why iterative learning was so effective in their department was because they could lean on “veterans” in the space, with decades of experience to reflect on what had worked and what had not.⁷³

This is precisely why the closure of programs and teams in the US State Department (and the closure of the whole of USAID) has been so damaging. Not only were many programs terminated halfway through their cycles, leaving practitioners with valuable lessons but no funding or time to write up or share them, many of the most experienced staff were forced out. With entire research departments dismantled, the limited programming that will continue, will happen in a vacuum without the benefit of iterative, “lessons learned” systems.

2. Implement a Threat-Agnostic Framework

Taking a more threat-agnostic approach would mean adopting an open, less predetermined framework about the range of drivers and sources of violent extremism. Some institutions have started to implement such an approach. As former FBI Director Christopher Wray has stated, the FBI “[doesn’t] investigate ideology no matter how

⁶⁹ Teixeira, *Consolidated Overview on: Evaluation of Secondary and Tertiary Level P/CVE Programmes*; Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO -PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke., 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524-Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁷⁰ ‘CSSF CREATE AUDIT - Questions and Answers (Q&A)’, accessed 5 August 2025, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/CSSF%20CREATE%20AUDIT%20-%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20%28QA%29.pdf>.

⁷¹ Babu Ayindo et al., *Connected Communities, Collective Response: Mercy Corps’ Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism* (Mercy Corps, 2023).

⁷² Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones, *Integrated Programming: Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Deris Wanaag Policy Brief, Nairobi: Deris Wanaag Consortium, 2025).

⁷³ Online interview, 31st July 2025.

repugnant. We investigate violence. Any extremist ideology, when it turns to violence, we're all over it."⁷⁴ Relatedly, a former State Department official spoke of "a large-scale shift toward looking at CVE through other frames," such as the need to take a public health approach to P/CVE, recognizing the impact of wider factors such as governance, peacebuilding, education, and gender inclusion.⁷⁵

The Canada Centre is another example of an institution that has implemented a threat-agnostic framework. Recognizing the failings and oversights associated with an over-emphasis on Islamist extremism, the Centre avoided making any programming recommendations without sufficient proof that it would actually be effective. What's more, they remained open to funding different formats for capacity-building and exchange. This allowed practitioners to set their own priorities in a bottom-up process.⁷⁶

The Canada Centre has also established an evaluation and data analysis team, which seeks to systematically track P/CVE approaches across different types of extremism to create an overview of the impacts of programming models across the board. Ultimately, the Centre was able to incorporate a wide range of extremism types into existing funding models, including religiously-motivated, right-wing and gender-based extremism. While this is still a work-in-progress (previous GPPi research has highlighted some worries that there was still a bias towards Islamist extremism),⁷⁷ the Canada Centre has demonstrated how an open-ended and curious approach to the causes of extremism has allowed for more flexibility in adapting to emerging challenges.

Similarly – and in contrast to the UK's Home Office – many of my interviewees highlighted how open the UK's international departments have been in adopting a more flexible and reflective stance. The FCDO and especially the Department for International Development (DfID) (before it merged into the FCDO) were considered comparatively open to engaging with external expertise and willing to revisit assumptions about program design and evaluation.⁷⁸

The FCDO's willingness to adapt extended to the programs they funded; the Mercy Corps's P/CVE work, for example, takes a broad approach to understanding and addressing structural, political, social, and economic drivers of violent extremism. Its theory of change further aims to reduce individual risk factors and support peacebuilding and reintegration. It considers influences such as social cohesion, community-government relations, equitable service delivery, and a sense of belonging among marginalized groups – none of which relate to ideological or religious views.⁷⁹

Adopting a threat-agnostic approach to P/CVE, then, helps institutions and governments to address a wide range of structural, social, and governance drivers of violent extremism, enabling more flexible, context-responsive and inclusive programming.

⁷⁴ Cilke et al., 'Beyond Belief'.

⁷⁵ Online interview, 31st July 2025.

⁷⁶ Online interview, 26th August 2025.

⁷⁷ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁷⁸ Online interview, 10th July 2025; online interview, 11th August 2025.

⁷⁹ Ayindo et al., *Connected Communities, Collective Response: Mercy Corps' Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*.

3. Strengthen Coordination with Stakeholders

A third way evaluations could be made more effective would be by fostering coordination between different stakeholders. This has been continually recommended by P/CVE practitioners;⁸⁰ previous GPPi research has explored how evaluations can be dramatically improved by fostering better relations between civil society and government (and how evaluations themselves can play a part in building this trust).⁸¹

The Canada Centre, for example, has benefited from its openness to engage with external expertise. It made engagement with external experts a central pillar of its approach; in 2021, GPPi was told that Public Safety Canada (the overarching organization the Canada Centre is part of) is “very good at listening to researchers.”⁸² In early 2019, Canada established a National Expert Committee on Countering Radicalization to Violence, which consisted of non-governmental actors. It also funds research and initiatives that connect a wide range of stakeholders, such as the Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV), a network of researchers and health and social services professionals.⁸³

Many countries were able to improve their National Action Plans on P/CVE by engaging with civil society. Andhika Chrisnayudanto, Deputy for International Cooperation at Indonesia’s National Counter Terrorism Agency, for example, stated that “[civil society organizations] provide valuable inputs and play a critical role in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the National Action Plan.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Finland’s National Cooperation Network fosters cooperative, non-hierarchical collaboration among the government, police, researchers, and NGOs, and recognizes the importance of all these perspectives.⁸⁵

This multi-stakeholder approach should include engagement with practitioners on the frontline of programming. Frontline workers have “extensive knowledge of the local dynamics, trends and drivers of violent extremism, and present the best ‘early warning’ mechanisms for emerging threats.”⁸⁶ Meaningfully engaging with them, then, has the potential to dramatically improve programming, evaluations and impact. Similarly, cooperation with local civil society will likely prove to be beneficial to the quality of evaluations. A review of evaluation models found examples of evaluators engaging with community members – even going as far as to give them veto power over questions – which ensured “that every step of the way,” the team was “doing things in a way that was the most

⁸⁰ Sofia Koller, *Good Practices in Evaluating Tertiary PVE Programs* (German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), 2020), <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/good-practices-evaluating-tertiary-pve-programs>; Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO -PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke, 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524_Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁸¹ Sarah Bressan et al., *How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism?* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2024), <https://gppi.net/2024/07/08/how-do-we-know-what-works-in-preventing-violent-extremism>.

⁸² Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁸³ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁸⁴ ‘Preventing Violent Extremism in Indonesia: UNODC Study Sheds Light on Collaboration’, accessed 5 August 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/indonesia/2025/04/preventing-violent-extremism/story.html>.

⁸⁵ Baykal et al., *Evaluating P/CVE*.

⁸⁶ *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism*.

culturally synchronic for everyone.”⁸⁷ For this reason, Dersi Wanaag has also linked local civil society organizations with state actors (within the realm of its granting mechanism).⁸⁸ Likewise, the Tony Blair Institute’s Supporting Leaders program worked with religious and community leaders in Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt “to build the resilience of communities against religious extremism.”⁸⁹ Through CARE International’s Community Score Card (CSC) system (“a participatory tool for continuous assessment, planning, monitoring, and evaluation”), the organization was better able to understand community priorities and adjust programming accordingly.⁹⁰

These examples demonstrate the importance of bringing a broad group of perspectives together to improve programming and evaluation. Interestingly, a silver lining of the current landscape of diminishing funds may be that evaluation approaches will become more collaborative. Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones quoted one practitioner who explained that less funding for evaluations and programming will necessitate more cooperation: “We don’t have the money... to do it any other way... [our interventions] must be tied together as much as possible.”⁹¹

Improving Evaluations to Fit Today’s Landscape

Following the tragic events of 9/11 and the early 2000s bombings in London and Madrid, policymakers reached for easy and clean interpretations of the drivers of extremism. They clung to flawed assumptions about the importance of extreme religion views in driving people’s decision to join extremist groups or commit acts of violence, ignoring the many other reasons one might be drawn to extremism.⁹² The evaluation models – meant as a system of checks and balances – were unable to highlight that these neat interpretations and flawed assumptions were not properly addressing the problem of violent extremism, both because of how evaluations were set up and because of the learning cultures that surrounded these models. In fact, clinging on to this hyperfocus on religion was potentially making things worse.

As governments and practitioners attempt to grapple with new types of hybrid ideologies – which are seemingly even more complex and fluid than before – they can learn a lot from past mistakes. Knowing the past would certainly help to sound the alarm on governments returning to its older policies, like the Trump administration’s shift back towards

⁸⁷ Pablo Madriaza et al., *Improving Evaluations of Programs for Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: An Exploratory International Study* (UNESCO chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV Chair) in collaboration with the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, University of Sherbrooke., 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359661524_Improving_evaluations_of_programs_for_prevention_of_radicalization_and_violent_extremism_An_exploratory_international_study.

⁸⁸ Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones, *Integrated Programming: Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Deris Wanaag Policy Brief, Nairobi: Deris Wanaag Consortium, 2025).

⁸⁹ Rory MacLeod, ‘Engaging Communities in P/CVE Projects in Fragile and Conflict Affected States’, in *Researching the Evolution of Countering Violent Extremism* (2021).

⁹⁰ MacLeod, ‘Engaging Communities in P/CVE Projects in Fragile and Conflict Affected States’.

⁹¹ Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones, *Integrated Programming: Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Deris Wanaag Policy Brief, Nairobi: Deris Wanaag Consortium, 2025).

⁹² Wakube et al., ‘Inside Kenya’s War on Terror’; Nyagah et al., ‘Inside Kenya’s War on Terror’; Arugay et al., *An Explosive Cocktail – Counter-Terrorism, Militarisation and Authoritarianism in the Philippines*; Jordan Street and Ali Altioq, *A Fourth Pillar for the United Nations? The Rise of Counter-Terrorism* (Saferworld, 2020), <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>; Lola Aliaga and Klóé Tricot O’Farrell, ‘Counter-Terror in Tunisia: A Road Paved with Good Intentions?’, Saferworld, 2017, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/long-reads/counter-terror-in-tunisia-a-road-paved-with-good-intentions>.

politicizing P/CVE and the UK's re-adoption of some past fatal assumptions. Conversely, there is much to be gleaned from the improvements that have already been made. Through the impressive work of academia, civil society and dedicated practitioners, national policies have changed, and officials and practitioners have adapted their approaches, increasingly recognizing the multitude of individual and structural drivers which lead people to join violent extremist organizations.

As this policy brief has shown, they did so by adapting their evaluation models to better reflect the nature of radicalization pathways, and by ensuring that their departments and institutions were more open to learning, adapting and improving based on evidence from programming. This brief has identified three relatively inexpensive changes institutions and governments have made to improve their evaluation systems, which can and should be used as a guiding light for future improvements:

1. **Iterative learning models:** Short-term, one-off evaluations are insufficient; iterative learning structures, however, enable policymakers, donors and implementers to adapt and improve regularly based on evidence. To implement iterative learning, programs must:
 - Build flexibility (and the time supporting said flexibility) into their planning to ensure the lessons learned from evaluations can be adapted.
2. **Adopt threat-agnostic frameworks:** Governments and donors cannot and must not presume the ideological roots of extremism in program design, funding and evaluation. More successful programming is characterized by an openness to the wide range of factors that might push an individual toward extremism (both the structural, individual and enabling factors). Governments should avoid prescription and ensure flexibility. To adopt such an approach, they must:
 - Demand evaluations be grounded in robust, context-sensitive theories of change;
 - Encourage and support rigor in evaluations – including mixed-methods, as well as participatory and qualitative tools – to ensure the real threat is properly understood, and not merely assumed.
4. **Enhance coordination across institutions and sectors (including those on the frontline of programming):** The drivers of extremism are cross-cutting; to understand them well, evaluations must engage with external experts and facilitate honest learning. Relevant stakeholders – especially at the local level – must be involved in efforts to assess what worked and what did not. Programming should:
 - Build in time for regular multi-stakeholder learning and information-sharing in program design and evaluation (and ensure such engagements include frontline practitioners and local civil society);
 - Consider a reference group or an evaluation board that can advise on potential changes to programming, evaluation and investment.

While these potential fixes seem easy, the current conditions for change are deeply unfavorable. All over the world, P/CVE programming is under pressure; in many cases, programs and governmental teams are facing cuts and closures.⁹³ The very experts central to effective policy and programming are losing their jobs or have had to end evaluations before lessons could be documented and published. Meanwhile, some governments have never been able to adapt their approaches to meet the complex reality of radicalization pathways;⁹⁴ others are backsliding, once again using the well-known crutches of blaming ideology and religion, despite decades of systematic evidence showing this approach fails both the governments and the citizens they are supposed to serve.

Experts across the board agree: extremism is spreading fast (especially through online networks, increasingly detached from real-world social ties), and the P/CVE systems meant to track the programs addressing extremism are outdated and underfunded. With these defenses down, we are underprepared for future terror attacks.

Under these circumstances, strong evaluation systems are of paramount importance. This report has highlighted best evaluation practices, ranging from Canada's threat-agnostic approach and CREATE's iterative and community-led design to the participatory methods of Dersi Wanaag and the Tony Blair Institute. These examples demonstrate that a transition toward an open and self-reflexive evaluation process is not only necessary, but possible – even in times of scarce budgets. They show that embracing uncertainty, pluralism and local knowledge can lead to more nuanced, cost-efficient programming, smarter evaluations, and ultimately, safer and more resilient societies.

⁹³ Bibi van Ginkel, *Under Pressure: Rethinking Comprehensive Approaches to CT and P/CVE in an Age of Austerity and Instability* (ICCT, 2025), <https://icct.nl/publication/under-pressure-rethinking-comprehensive-approaches-ct-and-pcve-age-austerity-and>.

⁹⁴ Ben Knight, 'Security Questions over Christmas Market Attack in Magdeburg', DW, 22 December 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/security-questions-over-christmas-market-attack-in-magdeburg/a-71138203>.

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