POLICY BRIEF

Evidence-led violence prevention
Principles and guidelines for practice

Violence Prevention Forum

This policy brief presents lessons from the South African Violence Prevention Forum on how to design a multisectoral violence prevention intervention for communities. While knowledge is growing about what works to prevent violence, little is available on working with multiple stakeholders who have different knowledge, experience and expectations. This brief shows how to involve practitioners, researchers, government departments and community members in designing a violence prevention project.

Key findings

▶ Who is in the discussion matters: The gender, background, culture, beliefs and experience of participants inform what emerges. The more diverse the group thinking about the problem is, the more difficult the process, and the greater the need for skilled facilitation. A diverse group will however produce more creative and informed outcomes.

▶ Skilled facilitation is essential: Skilled facilitators ensure that respectful, productive meetings are held where all voices are heard. They ensure that tensions that arise are addressed.

▶ Invest in understanding the context: The histories, resources, needs, practices and beliefs of communities must inform measures to prevent and reduce violence in a particular context. Plug-and-play programmes cannot simply be implemented, even if they have proven effective in other places.

▶ Meaningful partnerships are key: Building trusting partnerships takes time and effort, but is essential. Getting this right is crucial to addressing complex social problems.

▶ Don't be afraid to fail: Government institutions and donors tend to discourage experimentation and failure, but failure is inevitable and necessary for innovation. Failing fast allows groups to reflect, learn and make different decisions, quickly. Those involved in developing and guiding community-level change need to be enabled to support one another in the face of failure, and learn from it.

▶ It is not easy, but it is possible: It's difficult for diverse thinkers with different backgrounds and knowledge to work together to solve complex social problems, but it is possible. It helps if they have pre-existing relationships and clear values to guide their interaction.

Recommendations

▶ Multisectoral groups seeking to partner and collaborate to prevent and respond effectively to violence need to take time to establish trust between one another and within the community in which the intervention is to be located.

▶ A diverse group of partners and stakeholders must work together to understand the context in which the intervention is to take place, envision the change that is required, and plan for it.

▶ It is vital to involve skilled and experienced facilitators from the start of any process to address complex social problems such as violence.

▶ A simple set of commonly understood and shared rules and values must be created to enable effective partnerships and collaboration.

▶ Reflective learning should be built into any process to address violence. It is essential to learn as an intervention unfolds. Failure must be seen as necessary, and should be recognised early and used to learn from.

Introduction

In 2018 women in South Africa marched under the banner of the #TotalShutdown movement to demand a presidential summit to address the national crisis of gender-based violence.[2] Sustained high levels of violence, especially gender-based violence,[3] and the apparent inability of the criminal justice system to respond adequately spurred the protest action.

A presidential summit was held towards the end of 2018. A Declaration against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide was issued after the summit, in which President Cyril Ramaphosa committed the country to the development of a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide.

Existing policies and plans emphasise the need for collaboration between sectors to address violence. These include the White Paper on Safety and Security,[4] the National Development Plan 2030,[5] the Integrated Urban Development Framework[6] and the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, along with strategies like INSPIRE (to end violence against children)[7] and RESPECT (to end violence against women).[8]

They call for multisectoral and multifaceted interventions. Yet there are very few examples in South Africa, or globally, where this has been successfully achieved.

If responsibility for preventing and reducing violence is to be shared by all sectors – government, civil society, development partners, donors, the private sector and individual citizens – success will depend on their effective collaboration and on strong multisectoral partnerships.[9]

Collaboration and partnerships in turn require strong, trusting relationships. Building enduring and meaningful relationships across sectors has been a key focus and outcome of the Violence Prevention Forum since 2015.

Taking the next step

In 2018 the Violence Prevention Forum identified six factors that stand in the way of preventing violence in South Africa. These are:

- A lack of coherence and agreement about what constitutes violence prevention

- A lack of knowledge about existing violence prevention interventions and programmes

- A lack of agreement on what interventions should be prioritised for implementation.

- A workforce in need of healing

- Inappropriate resource allocation

- A lack of knowledge about how to scale up interventions that work[10]

In 2019 the forum mapped existing policies, programmes and interventions to prevent and respond to violence against women and children in South Africa.[11,12]

Building on this foundation, in late 2019 the forum explored how non-governmental organisations, researchers, international organisations and government departments might collaboratively approach the design of multifaceted violence prevention interventions to respond to specific communities' needs.

Two very different settings were the focus of this exercise: a dense urban area with a history of gang violence and high levels of substance abuse and poverty; and a rural area with traditional governance structures and high levels of gender-based violence. The aim was to deepen our collective understanding of the challenges of undertaking such a task and learn from it, while identifying a set of principles and guidelines for practice.

This policy brief documents the learnings from this two-day process.

Insights from practice

Who is in the discussion matters

The gender, background, ethnicity, rank,[13] beliefs, culture and experience of those who participate in a process to design a response to violence will strongly inform what emerges.

High-level thinking about how to approach a complex social problem like violence does not come easily to everyone. Yet having a diversity of knowledge and perspectives in such a process is necessary. It is therefore important for a multisectoral group

undertaking such an exercise to be guided by a clear, structured process and capable facilitators.

There were stark differences in the way participants (from government structures, research institutions and implementing organisations) thought, processed information and came to conclusions. This is to be expected, and welcomed.

Some participants in a process like this will want to focus on solutions or on sharing their knowledge. They may struggle to be fully present in the process of examining the issues from multiple perspectives in an attempt to gain insight and knowledge. Yet for others, a slower exploratory process is necessary and more comfortable.

In the forum, participants found the process of agreeing on a problem statement and identifying steps towards designing an intervention challenging and uncomfortable because of these differences.

> Good facilitators ensure that all perspectives are equally shared and valued during meetings

A diverse group of people with a range of perspectives increases the richness of the outcome. Without the experience of implementers, researchers may not have the crucial on-the-ground knowledge about the practicalities (problems and opportunities) of working in challenging environments.

Policymakers and civil servants on the other hand work within complex hierarchical structures, and their knowledge of state systems and how they work is essential to designing multisectoral interventions.

Practitioners and officials, however, may not have been exposed or have access to what existing research says about effective interventions or programmes.

Area experts provide an essential source of information and may be a sounding board for testing whether or not certain ideas or approaches would be appropriate in a given context.

Individual and group characteristics also play a role in how a conversation unfolds. Extroverts (or those who

hold rank) are likely to be outspoken, especially in group settings, and may tend to dominate conversations.

The influence of culture and upbringing also plays a role. While some cultures encourage speaking up and standing up for one's opinions and ideas, others encourage communal decision making and disapprove of public disagreement and individual opinion. This can be a cause for tension or conflict, or the withdrawal of participation by those who feel excluded.

There is strength in diversity – the more diverse the group thinking about the problem is, the more difficult the process, and the greater the need for skilled facilitation; but the outcome is likely to be more creative and informed.

Skilled facilitation is essential

The foundation laid by facilitators is crucial to ensuring that all perspectives are shared equally, and valued, in meetings. In the Violence Prevention Forum this is achieved by creating a common set of values to guide interactions that include respect, empathy and active listening, and by creating opportunities for all participants to speak.[14]

Tensions in the group are noticed and addressed before they fester or become conflicts. This way of engaging is consistent with the change participants would like to see in society.

Skillful facilitation enables meetings to be creative and generative, while leaving participants feeling fulfilled and invigorated.

> 'You've got to really put the needs of the community at the centre of any violence prevention intervention that you develop.'
>
> Prof Shanaaz Mathews, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

Invest in understanding the context

The evidence that has been and is being developed to show what kinds of programmes or interventions are effective in reducing the risk factors for violence, or preventing violence directly, has to be adapted to particular contexts.[15]

Multisectoral groups must take their time to fully understand the context in which an intervention is to be undertaken before attempts are made to apply solution-driven thinking. The context will determine:

• What a community needs

• How the problems and their causes are understood

• What a community will find acceptable

• What is appropriate at a given time

• What is most urgent[16]

In the Violence Prevention Forum an understanding of the context was achieved by sharing background papers about the two communities prepared by experts before the meeting. The papers were discussed at the meeting and people who live, or have lived, in the communities were present to provide additional insights and answer questions.

The groups then generated challenge statements (based on a design-thinking approach) to hone their focus on key issues that emerged from their understanding of the communities.

> *Urban area problem statement*
>
> How might we reduce violence given that gangsterism offers meaning and economic benefits to large portions of the community, when interestingly, there is community will and existing interventions that have been able to reduce violence?
>
> *Rural area problem statement*
>
> How might we get co-ownership in addressing gender inequalities in a community, given that unequal gender norms that are hurtful and harmful have been normalised, when interestingly, women feel forced to accept and condone them in order to maintain status or favour in their relationships, with family and within the community?

The two examples of statements generated by the groups demonstrate how the different contexts informed the focus.

Meaningful partnerships are key

Effective collaboration between partners is important when hoping to craft solutions for deep-rooted social problems. Here, 'effective' refers to a manner of working that is built on trust and respect, and allows for all partners to feel equally valued in the process to design (and later implement) an intervention.

When working as a collective towards a goal, it is important that participants agree on what their priorities are, and have a shared vision. From this priorities and next steps can emerge. The following are also important for effective partnerships:

• Trust cannot be assumed. A lack of trust is often at the heart of social dysfunction (which may manifest in violence). Building trust takes time, a thoughtful process and a credible convener. The first real shift is seen when consultation transitions to collaboration and partnership.

• Building the partnerships and relationships that are necessary to drive a process towards sustainable solutions takes time and effort. Getting this right is a crucial step towards ultimately addressing the issues.

Don't be afraid to fail

Failure is an inevitable and necessary part of innovating – from failure we can learn. Government institutions and donors tend to discourage experimentation and failure. If innovation is to be encouraged, those involved in developing and guiding community-level change need to be enabled to support one another in the face of failure, and learn from it.

> It's possible for a group of diverse thinkers to work together effectively in a short period of time

The faster failure is identified and addressed, the faster the learning. This requires trusting partnerships and safe meeting spaces. If meetings are punitive or antagonistic people tend to hide their mistakes and try to justify their actions or failures, fearing that they will be penalised and blamed for a mistake instead of the failure being seen as an opportunity for learning.

It is not easy, but it is possible

Although difficult, and at times taxing, it is possible for a group of diverse thinkers with different backgrounds, experiences and knowledge to work together effectively in a short period of time to make progress in designing a process to solve complex problems. It helps if they have pre-existing relationships and clear values to guide their interaction. This is no different in community settings.

Dr Barbara Holtmann[17] reflects on her experience in working with multisectoral groups to resolve complex problems using a systems approach:

'One of the things we found through working in communities is that it takes a long time to build trust and to actually have people prepared to share what they know, how they know it, [and] what they think should happen about it. It is not something that we have ever been able to do in one and a half days. There is a tension between people saying, "I don't want to be at a talk shop. We have all talked too much," and the enormous need we have to listen to each other. That is something that really needs to be balanced. Even in a setting where you have community members who are asking you to drive a process, it's really about pace and about getting to a point where you can really call each other partners. Without this, your action plans fizzle and it becomes a blame game. We need to get into a place where people are actually prepared to really understand what they are committing to when they engage in a collaborative strategy and that takes time.'[18]

Conclusion

Collaboration between multiple sectors is challenging but necessary if we are to successfully reduce and prevent violence in South Africa. A wealth of knowledge and experience is brought to bear when people from different backgrounds and with different knowledge and experience come together to think about and work on a common goal.

Agreeing on exactly what comprises a shared goal or destination will take time, innovation and careful

facilitation, but this is what is required if multifaceted multisectoral violence interventions are to be successfully conceptualised and implemented in South Africa.

About the authors

Chandré Gould and Diketso Mufamadi, Justice and Violence Prevention programme, Institute for Security Studies

Janet Hayward, Department of Anthropology, Rhodes University

Elizabeth Dartnall, Executive Director, Sexual Violence Research Initiative

Nwabisa Shai, Gender and Health Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council

Sinah Moruane, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF

Judy Connors, VPF facilitator

Janet Austin Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at Rape Crisis

Major General Oswald Reddy, SAPS Eden Cluster Commander

Katharine Frost, Executive Director at Ububele Educational & Psychotherapy Trust

Elmarie Malek, Head of General Paediatric Specialist Services Tygerberg Western Cape Government

Tshepiso Machabaphala, Gender Focal Point at the National Department of Health

Zithobile Ngidi, educator at Vikingozi Secondary school in KwaZulu Natal

Ajwang Warria, Professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand

Wilmi Dippenaar, Director of the Seven Passes Initiative

Joan Moeketsi, Component Manager SA: Partnerships for Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls in Southern Africa at GIZ (the German development cooperation with South Africa)

Shanaaz Matthews, Director of the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

Thulani Mahlangu, Senior Technical Advisor, Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention at GIZ

Likho Bottoman, Director: Social Cohesion and Equity at the Department of Basic Education

Thamsanqa Mzaku, Director, Phaphama Initiatives

Barbara Holtmann, Director, FIXED Africa

Neo Modise, research consultant, ISS

Notes

1 See www.violence-prevention.org, last accessed 26 February 2020.

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13 Rank refers to 'one's position in any given system or context, relative to others in that system'. N Molefi, Rank power and privilege, presentation at the Convention of the Actuarial Society of South Africa, Cape Town, 24 and 25 October 2018, www.actuarialsociety.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-RANK-POWER-PRIVILEGE-Nene-Molefi.pdf, 2018 (accessed 26 February 2020).

14 The values of the Violence Prevention Forum are: respect, commitment and courage, collaboration and partnership.

15 C Hsiao, C Gould, H Loening-Voysey, P Burton, A Lewaks and N Shai, Reducing violence in South Africa: from research to action, Institute for Security Studies, https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/reducing-violence-in-south-africa-from-research-to-action, 2017.

16 E Howarth, K Devers, G Moore, A O'Cathain and M Dixon-Woods, Contextual issues and qualitative research, *Health Services and Delivery Research,* 4 (16), 105-20, 2016.

17 Barbara Holtmann has a PhD, Management of Technology and Innovation, Da Vinci Institute for Technology Management 2010 (Thesis: Safe communities of opportunity: A strategy for a safe South Africa) and an MM, Master of Management (Public and Development), University of Witswatersrand, 2003 (Dissertation: Gender bias in service delivery to victims of crime). Over the past 20 years Holtmann has worked with complex social problems in South Africa and internationally, in civil society, the private sector, the non-governmental organisation sector, national government and at the national Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). She now consults on sustainable social systems, matters of collaboration, integrated interventions, vulnerability and fragility, social and community intervention, empowerment of girls and women and community safety and development.

18 Barbara Holtmann, speaking at the Violence Prevention Forum meeting in Johannesburg, 19 September 2019.

Authors

Chandré Gould, Diketso Mufamadi, Judy Connors, Janet Hayward, Elizabeth Dartnall, Nwabisa Shai, Sinah Moruane, Janet Austin, Oswald Reddy, Katharine Frost, Elmarie Malek, Tshepiso Machabaphala, Zithobile Ngidi, Ajwang Warira, Wilmi Dippenaar, Joan Moeketsi, Shanaaz Mathews, Thulani Mahlangu, Likho Bottoman, Thamsanqa Mazaku, Barbara Holtmann and Neo Modise.

The Violence Prevention Forum

The Violence Prevention Forum provides a regular meeting place for researchers, community-based organisations, government departments, development partners, international organisations and other stakeholders concerned about the prevention of violence in South Africa. The forum engages in a long-term process to build relationships and shared understandings across sectors with the goal of promoting and enabling the use of evidence to inform countrywide interventions to prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa.[1]

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