

POLICY BRIEF



**Participatory Research Capacity-sharing
For Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE),
Conflict And Peace Practitioners And
Activists: Insights From An International,
Collaborative Project Focused On PVE,
Youth And Interfaith**

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Executive Summary

Preventing violent extremism and research capacity-sharing

Initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE) are increasingly criticised for approaching the topic from a top-down perspective, sidelining local actors and civil society voices, including notably youth, women, faith actors and people based in the Global South.

Similarly, knowledge production on PVE tends to be dominated by secular and Western researchers, while faith actors, practitioners, activists and actors based in the Global South often remain excluded and marginalised from research and evidence production on PVE. Research capacity-sharing approaches can help address this by allowing local actors to build their research skills collaboratively, supporting them to engage critically with existing research and produce evidence themselves. It can enable civil society actors from diverse backgrounds, including marginalised communities, to challenge existing discourses and practices. However, research capacity-sharing activities are rarely included in existing capacity-building initiatives or prioritised as stand-alone interventions.

Without the critical insights, experiences and knowledge of people on the ground – most notably young people, women and faith actors – PVE initiatives are unlikely to be effective in creating long-lasting, meaningful social cohesion, justice and peace and risk causing harm to communities.

The Brief

This brief is aimed at policymakers, practitioners and donors working on PVE, conflict and peace and/or research capacity-sharing. It summarises key learnings from a PVE-focused collaborative research capacity-sharing project implemented by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), with funding from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). As part of the project, the JLI team worked with 12 young people from practitioner and activist backgrounds from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East over three and a half months in 2022. The policy/practice brief outlines the approach taken by the project, which had three main aims:

- 1.** Collaboratively build the research skills of young practitioners working on PVE, conflict, peace, faith and youth, allowing them to contribute to knowledge production on PVE, youth and faith, therefore helping to establish them as experts in this area
- 2.** Create original, independent, locally led research and evidence to help build the evidence base of creative and innovative community-led approaches to PVE with a focus on youth and religion, including reflections on barriers and challenges
- 3.** Strengthen the ability of key civil society actors involved in PVE to counter violent extremism in their communities

Key Learnings

1. In practice, local actors pragmatically engage with PVE, conflict and peace work, opening a window of opportunity to avoid the contentious term PVE.
2. Participatory research capacity-sharing is facilitated by integrated, long-term approaches that address barriers to full engagement.
3. Participatory research capacity-sharing can benefit participants of all skill levels, including in mixed-ability groups.
4. Nurturing critical and creative approaches to research capacity-sharing and PVE takes time.

Recommendations For Policymakers, Practitioners And Donors

1. Consider adopting peace and conflict frameworks rather than a PVE focus.
2. Prioritise integrated, long-term, inclusive research capacity-sharing approaches.
3. Work with participants with varying levels of previous research experience to strengthen the participatory nature of research capacity-sharing.
4. Invest time and resources to slowly nurture critical and creative approaches to research capacity-sharing and PVE.

1

Addressing Violent Extremism And Harm Caused By Preventing Violent Extremism

There are few societies across the globe where violent extremism¹ in one ideological form or another – ranging from right wing to left wing, secular to religiously motivated and non-state to state-executed forms of violence – is not a threat to social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and just societies.

However, initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism are increasingly criticised for approaching the topic from a top-down perspective, sidelining local actors and civil society voices (including notably youth, women, faith actors and other marginalised groups), prioritising security at the expense of rights, relying on conceptually ambiguous terms such as extremism and radicalisation and perpetuating racism and Islamophobia (Deventer, 2016; Satterthwaite and Huckerby, 2013; Beydoun, 2020; Shepherd, 2022). Therefore, by attempting to tackle one problem – violent extremism – another set of challenges is often created through poorly conceived and implemented PVE initiatives.

An integral part of the problem is that most knowledge production on violent extremism and PVE is dominated by researchers who do not have practitioner backgrounds and are usually not from the communities most affected by violent extremism and PVE (Clarke, 2019; Russo and Selenica, 2022). Civil society voices and those bearing the brunt of violent extremism and PVE often have little opportunity to contribute to the evidence base. This gap and bias in the existing evidence on violent extremism and PVE compound the challenge of exclusionary PVE practices, as local actors and civil society groups, including notably those marginalised because of their faith, race, gender, age, location or profession, have little leverage to correct the narratives on violent extremism and PVE that are not reflective of their perspectives, experiences and priorities but tend to influence policy and practice.

¹ Violent extremism is a contested term lacking conceptual clarity. Its use is heavily politicised, usually with a strong bias against non-state (rather than state) actors. It is often employed to discredit opponents and justify government action rather than to provide analytical insights. For criticisms of the term and related concepts, such as radicalisation, see Kundnani, 2012; Bak et al., 2019; Derfoufi, 2022; and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.. We used the term in this project and policy/practice brief due to how widespread it is amongst policymakers, practitioners and donors; however, this should not distract from the need to critically engage with the term.

Research capacity-sharing approaches that allow participants, including those not working as researchers, to build their research skills collaboratively could help non-academics engage critically with existing research and produce evidence themselves. However, although capacity-building is a part of many PVE interventions (Frank and van Zyl, 2018; van Zyl and Mahdi, 2019; Reshetnyak and Omelicheva, 2022), research capacity-building initiatives remain rare (Ellis and Abdi, 2017, Krentel and Wilson, 2018). Participatory approaches that allow participants to shape the scope and focus of the intervention and set priorities according to their needs are particularly scarce.

2 A Collaborative Research Capacity-Sharing Project On Preventing Violent Extremism

This policy/practice brief adds to the evidence base on collaborative research capacity-sharing and PVE by reflecting on the key learnings from the PVE, Youth and Interfaith research capacity-building project² implemented by the JLI³ from September to December 2022. The project aimed to:

1. Build the research skills of young practitioners working on PVE, conflict, peace, religion and youth, allowing them to contribute to knowledge production on PVE, with a focus on youth and religion, working with them to (further) establish themselves as experts in this area.
2. Help build the evidence base of creative and innovative community-led approaches to PVE with a focus on youth and religion, including reflections on barriers and challenges.
3. Strengthen the ability of key civil society actors involved in PVE, conflict and peace work to counter violent extremism in their communities

The project involved working with a group of 12 young people with practitioner and activist backgrounds from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East with experience in PVE and faith over the course of three and a half months, from late September to early December 2022. All participants had previously undergone the Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove) capacity-building programme run by GIZ and the African Union⁴. Throughout the project, participants received training in basic research methods, covering research planning and design, data collection, data analysis, research ethics, literature review writing, research communications and research proposal writing. The exact focus of the trainings was confirmed in consultation with the participants in order to reflect their priorities and needs accurately.

Participants then got the opportunity to plan and implement small research projects on various topics related to PVE, conflict and peace, with a focus on youth and/or religion, to help consolidate their learning. The research projects focused on four main thematic areas chosen by the participants. These included religion, storytelling, education and mental health at the intersection with PVE, conflict or peace work. The majority of the projects focused on the cross-cutting theme of youth. During the planning and implementation of their research projects, the participants were accompanied by the JLI team of research and communications experts. In parallel to the planning and implementation of their research, participants learned about different ways of communicating research, including research reports, academic papers, policy/practice briefs, blog posts, storytelling and arts-based and creative approaches.

² The project website with detailed information about the project, participants, research conducted and research outputs can be found here: <https://jliflc.com/pve-youth-interfaith-project/> (Accessed on 25 December 2022).

³ The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development, humanitarianism, peacebuilding and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partnerships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

⁴ More information about the iDove programme can be found here: <https://au.int/en/idove/about> (Accessed on 25 December 2022).

They then planned individual research outputs and collaboratively organised a webinar presenting the findings of their research to an international audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Weekly group meetings allowed the participants to share updates about their work and receive feedback from the JLI team and other group participants. Additional research support and feedback mechanisms included a WhatsApp group where participants could ask for advice and exchange tips and a research buddy system based on peer support principles. Activities were implemented with funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) via GIZ.

3 Key Learnings

In practice, local actors pragmatically engage with PVE, conflict and peace work, opening a window of opportunity to avoid the contentious term PVE

PVE is a relatively new approach. However, in practice, the boundaries between PVE and related fields such as conflict prevention, conflict transformation and peacebuilding are often blurred. The participants of the PVE, Youth and Interfaith project had previous experience in a variety of different areas related to PVE, conflict and peace. They chose to focus their research projects on a similarly wide range of topics, all through the lens of preventing politically motivated violence and promoting just and peaceful societies. The difference between the various approaches was more in name than nature. This reflects existing research findings highlighting that many practitioners tend to approach PVE frameworks pragmatically, adapting to international trends and donors' funding priorities (Gelot and Hansen, 2019). Considering the negative impact of many PVE initiatives, the risks related to relying on conceptually vague yet extremely polarised terms, such as extremism, and increasing criticisms, including by actors in neighbouring lines of work, such as peacebuilders (Jayaweera and De Silva, 2018), the blurred lines between PVE, conflict and peace may in practice open up a window of opportunity for actors in the field to reconsider the use of the term in favour of alternatives such as conflict prevention or peace work. However, this may be hindered by the priorities of funders who require a focus on PVE specifically.

Participatory research capacity-sharing is facilitated by integrated, long-term approaches that address barriers to full engagement

One of the main characteristics of the PVE, Youth and Interfaith project was the full, enthusiastic engagement of participants during the weekly research feedback and advice sessions, where the groups' research projects were planned and their implementation and dissemination discussed in a collaborative, caring and constructive space. The group required very little time to break the ice, and the atmosphere was friendly, inclusive and caring from the very beginning. The vast majority (nine out of ten) of participants who completed the end-of-project evaluation stated that the friendly, supportive and authentic group learning sessions were their favourite part of the project. To some extent, this was due to how the project team built a welcoming and participatory space, stressing authenticity and participation in their interaction with the group, and integrated additional peer support systems into the project, such as the WhatsApp group and research buddy system, which encouraged participants to support each other throughout the project.

In addition, it is likely that the fact that participants were recruited from the pool of iDovers – meaning they had previously completed the several month-long iDove capacity-building programme on PVE, religion and youth (albeit not a research-focused programme) – also facilitated this immediate deep engagement. The JLI's PVE, Youth and Interfaith project was able to build on these existing bonds, highlighting the benefit of integrating research capacity-sharing measures into long-term approaches. While the PVE, Youth and Interfaith project itself was relatively short-lived, the JLI is now in the process of planning the set-up of a new JLI Conflict and Faith Learning Hub that will allow the group to continue engaging with each other, the JLI team and wider network, as well as other stakeholders⁵.

⁵ A description of the Learning Hub concept and a list of previous and current JLI Learning Hubs can be found here: <https://jliflc.com/about-jli-learning-hubs/> (Accessed on 25 December 2022).

Moreover, participants' engagement during the project was facilitated by bursaries to cover costs relating to participants' attendance (mostly related to improved Internet access) and research expenses and access to recorded sessions and presentations in a shared folder. The online format facilitated the international character of the project, kept project costs low and allowed participants to attend regardless of visa restrictions.

Participatory research capacity-sharing can benefit participants of all skill levels, including in mixed-ability groups

Prior research experience was not a requirement for participation in the project. Instead, our work focused on supporting participants at the level that they were at when they joined the group. Our baseline evaluation revealed that 35% of participants had little or no prior research experience, 43% had some experience, and 22% had a good amount of experience.

How would you rate your experience of doing research?

14 Responses

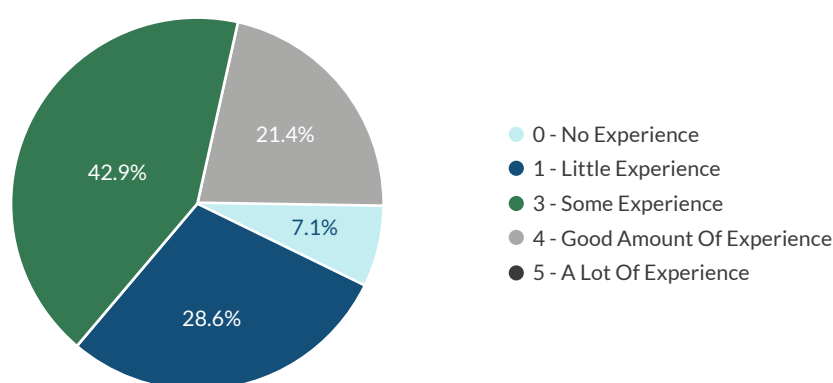


Chart: JLI.

Working with a group with such a wide range of prior experience required a considerable amount of flexibility from the project team. At the same time, it also strengthened the capacity-sharing aspect of the project, whereby participants were encouraged to not just look to the project team for learning and support but also to get advice from and provide feedback to other participants. The aim of the project was therefore not necessarily to make all participants into full-fledged researchers by the end of the project but to increase their understanding and appreciation of research and evidence-based approaches and give them an opportunity to try these out themselves with hands-on, practice-focused learning of the practicalities of research, evidence and knowledge production. In line with this approach, participants' final research-based publications included reports, research papers, policy/practice briefs and storytelling-focused narratives, depending on how participants chose to engage with the various forms of research dissemination they had discussed and learned about in the research sessions.

Nurturing critical and creative approaches to research capacity-sharing and PVE takes time

In line with critical perspectives on conflict and security, the team's approach to the project involved a focus on the harm inflicted by both violent extremism and PVE. Critical engagement with violent extremism and PVE was encouraged throughout the project; however, very few participants chose to base their research projects on more critical approaches, which could have, for example, questioned some of the exclusionary terminology uncritically used by many PVE actors or explored the harm inflicted by PVE. Research-practice collaboration and localisation also mean realising – or, in our case, being reminded – that not all critical approaches held up by academics and some activists are taken up to the same degree by practitioners on the ground. Similarly, while the project team actively encouraged the translation of research findings into creative outputs, such as blog posts, comics, pictures and photo collages, participants prioritised more traditional formats, such as research papers, policy/practice briefs and reports. Our conclusion from this experience is that critical and creative work must be nurtured slowly, which was difficult in this case due to the short duration of the project.

Either way, participants' priorities should always be at the heart of participatory work, even if they do not fully match the ambitions of donors or implementers. The pedagogical principle of meeting learners where they are means that sometimes some aspirations need to be sidelined in favour of the priorities of the participants, who have the right to decide what is useful and necessary for their work on the ground. Nurturing critical and creative approaches to PVE and research is best integrated into long-term learning processes rather than based on short-term projects.

4

Recommendations For Policy, Practice And Donors

The aim of this policy/practice brief is to help policymakers, practitioners and donors see the value of creating opportunities for participatory research capacity-sharing. Research capacity-sharing can help local and civil society actors, who are often marginalised from PVE-focused practice and research, to gain ownership of knowledge production on PVE, therefore strengthening community voices and helping to prevent and counter the harmful effects of both violent extremism and PVE.

Based on the key learnings from this project, we make the following recommendations to policymakers, practitioners and donors on how to approach participatory research capacity-sharing on PVE:

1. Consider adopting peace and conflict frameworks rather than a PVE focus.

PVE has become a trendy topic that attracts significant policy attention and funding. However, in many parts of the world, PVE is a contentious topic, and there is increasing evidence that PVE causes harm. Considering that alternative frameworks, such as violence prevention, conflict transformation and peace work, are available, and given that local participants navigate these various frameworks pragmatically, avoiding PVE frameworks in favour of conflict or peace approaches may be a preferable option that allows for work with a broader range of relevant actors, including critics of PVE.

2. Prioritise integrated, long-term, inclusive research capacity-sharing approaches.

When planning participatory research capacity-sharing work, initiatives that build on and are integrated into long-term partnerships should be prioritised, as participation is facilitated in environments where participants have already had an opportunity to build relationships and trust with one another. Possible barriers to engagement should be considered, and elements to address them should be incorporated. These could include attendance bursaries, recorded sessions, WhatsApp groups and shared online folders to allow participants to engage with each other and the provided resources outside the sessions. Sustainable partnerships and practical means to address barriers to participation require long-term donor investment.

3. Work with participants with varying levels of previous research experience to strengthen the participatory nature of research capacity-sharing.

Research capacity-sharing is not just for researchers. Most practitioners and community members can benefit from increased knowledge and experience in research, as they are all exposed to data and evidence in their work. Working with participants with various levels of previous research experience can support the participatory nature of research capacity-sharing if participants are encouraged to support each other and see their varying levels of experience and diverse backgrounds as a strength rather than a weakness.

4. Invest time and resources to slowly nurture critical and creative approaches to research capacity-sharing and PVE.

Critical, creative thinking is a requirement for good research and, therefore, for good research capacity-sharing. Developing and implementing effective, sustainable interventions aimed at preventing violence, building peace and promoting justice equally rely on critical thinking and creative solutions. However, critical and creative approaches require time and, at times, may need to be nurtured slowly, especially if participants do not currently prioritise them.

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Acknowledgements

Author and project lead: Jennifer Philippa Eggert (JLI)

Project coordination, research communications, and admin support: Rima Alshawkani, Zainab Chamoun, Sadia Kidwai, Florine de Wolf (JLI)

Research assistance: Susanna Trotta (JLI)

Peer review: Sheku Chundung (Nigeria), Moti Daba (Ethiopia), Regina Mutiru Mwendwa (Kenya)

Collaboration: Yasmine Amal, Elena Harlos, Mona Hein, Jonas Lucas, Petra Magnum, Laura Schmitz, Moustafa Tawfik (GIZ)

Funding: BMZ, Germany

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About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partnerships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

Suggested Citation

Eggert, J.P. (2023). Participatory research capacity-sharing for preventing violent extremism (PVE), conflict and peace practitioners and activists: insights from an international, collaborative project focused on PVE, youth and interfaith. Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities.

