



# Evaluating multi-agency networks in the field of P/CVE

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## Evaluation in P/CVE Multi-Agency Working

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### I. Introduction: What to avoid in evaluation

Research on evaluation has a long history, which has always been shaped by societal and political trends. By definition, the potential for social innovation is a key element of the evaluation outcome (Logvinov, 2021, 33), meaning that one possible result of evaluations is to trigger social improvements and innovations of the programmes at hand. Evaluation is also highly relevant in itself and for knowledge production, especially in the field of P/CVE where it concerns a phenomenon with far-reaching consequences and great social impact in terms of fear, anxiety, feelings of insecurity and polarisation. Furthermore, there are many actors concerned with the prevention of radicalisation. Governments often finance external projects in order to test methodologies or to gain specific expertise on radicalisation, often by establishing new funding sources. Given the constantly changing landscape and programme requirements within the field of P/CVE, programmes may be implemented through new organisations or staff within and outside of government that do not always have much experience in setting up, running and evaluating programmes.

Evaluation and its methods are an essential part of the legitimisation of implemented policies and therefore powerful tools for policymakers and influential stakeholders. Evaluation and insights into which projects and measures work therefore have important consequences for resource distribution. Lastly, evaluation can identify unintended consequences. Intervening too early, too extensively or with the wrong actors in a radicalisation process can have adverse effects. Well-intentioned measures can run the risk of stigmatising certain groups. In short, the security risks in this policy domain, the proliferation of actors involved and the vulnerability of the target groups require a thorough evaluative process. (Flemish Peace Institute, 2020). Evaluation and its implementation is therefore a highly discussed topic in many fields.

Yet, there is little research and few examples of how collaborative process evaluation can be executed successfully, especially in evaluating MAW in P/CVE. Moreover, practitioners appear to have made plenty of negative experiences with regard to evaluation. For example, during an EMMA workshop on evaluation, participants from various institutions participating in local MAW were asked to think of bad evaluation practices. Over the years of their longstanding experience, a rather long list of bad practice was accumulated. Participants found that a purely external motive for evaluation, such as funding or legitimacy, was considered bad practice. Rather, evaluation was seen as more promising in cases where it supported the improvement of MAW for the actors involved, the quality of implementation practices and contributed to a long-term, internal improvement. External motivation is just one point on a rather exhaustive list of bad practices in the evaluation of MAW.

Another point on the rather exhaustive list of adverse experiences with evaluation participants mentioned were ill-fitted time frameworks of evaluation processes. In practice, these meant executing an evaluation for no good reason during periods of high workload, or executing it too often or in odd cycles (e.g. every ten years). It was also mentioned that placing the workload mainly on practitioners is considered bad practice, as it impairs their ability to handle everyday tasks. Furthermore, it was highlighted that informal or formal hierarchies can affect evaluation outcomes as they sometimes pressure interviewees or participants to answer in certain ways. Not knowing the purpose of an evaluation and receiving feedback only on output indicators (such as numbers of cases and meetings) were also mentioned as bad practices in evaluation. Participants also criticised cases where evaluators had unrealistic expectations such as participating in case-conferences, which is often not possible due to security clearances and data-protection. Finally, opaque financial relations between donor and evaluator were considered to jeopardise objectivity of evaluation results. Participants mentioned similar concerns regarding the mixing of political issues or goals with evaluation objectives. Given this rather long list of bad practice that practitioners had experienced with regard to evaluation processes, one might wonder how evaluation in MAW can succeed. This paper will therefore highlight and propose guidelines and good practice in evaluating MAW in the context of P/CVE.

## **II. What has been done so far: Research and existing tools**

In recent years a variety of efforts have been made by a range of state and civil society actors to prevent and counter violent extremism, and the importance of developing tools and knowledge for evaluation in P/CVE is constantly increasing. It has become clear that a comprehensive development of initiatives to provide flexible evaluation tools is necessary. From a scientific point of view, there is little research on MAW in the context of P/CVE. According to a presentation by Klima et al. on the EMMA project at the 26<sup>th</sup> German Prevention Congress, there are only eight pieces of expert literature that deal with MAW in the context of P/CVE. Other publications can mainly be classified as reports. Furthermore, Klima et al. (2021: 16) highlight that the most discussed recommendations focus on information sharing, collaboration between actors and the composition of actors. In an article published by Hardyns et al. (2021: 32) in the context of the EMMA project, the authors highlight that there are no 'blueprints' or existing tools for teams practising MAW to evaluate their own work as an alternative to external evaluation.

Due to this lack of research, findings on MAW evaluation in adjacent fields such as prevention programmes, criminology and desistance are insightful bodies of knowledge. Additionally, research on natural disaster management and health-related MAW also offers some insights into MAW evaluation. Insights from the evaluation of multi-agency anti-crime partnerships may offer pointers for theory, design and measurement issues that could be taken into account when considering the evaluation of MAW in the field of P/CVE. For example, "responsiveness to the

causes of complex problems, [...] ability to encourage interagency cooperation", "the ability to attack problems from multiple sources of influence", "to target multiple causal mechanisms, and their potential for satisfying the public's growing desire for input, information sharing and connectedness with local government" (Rosenbaum 2002: 18) could be considered as factors in evaluating MAW. In addition, evaluation may be based on meeting the needs of stakeholders, relatively unbiased reliable and valid results, trustworthy results in terms of controlling for distorting factors and generating generalizable results, and should include context variables (Rosenbaum 2002: 193, 212). Additional variables to consider are activities and processes via categories, which may be measures via variables such as type of partnership, leadership, structure, decision-making responsibilities, partnership-dynamics, other partnership traits or implementation activities (Rosenbaum 2002: 201-207).

It is important to continuously and rigorously monitor the effects of prevention work, as this may prevent undesirable consequences by discovering malfunctioning systems or interventions early on, as evaluation in the field of disaster aid demonstrates. This hints at the need to connect evaluation and monitoring in order to track changes, a good practice mentioned by participants at the workshop mentioned above. The report also highlights that changing team leaders and main contact persons has caused continuity problems. This problem is not limited to disaster relief MAW, but may be extended to MAW in P/CVE. This is in line with what discussions and peer-to-peer work in EMMA showed, therefore, we recommend that continuity of personnel (including, e.g. processes in place to ensure continuity in cases of staff change) should be an item for evaluation. The report also suggests a focus on impact and outcome rather than output (4f.). Building upon the importance of impact, the most crucial element in a MAW evaluation is developing and communicating the purpose of the evaluation for the MAW and specific benefits for stakeholders. Since most examples of MAW in P/CVE lack human and financial resources, and since evaluations are time consuming, there is a pressing need for a meaningful process from which each stakeholder can profit (Sylvestre et al. 2016: 217).

Although these points may help in evaluating MAW, there are numerous challenges in evaluation such as the complexity of interventions and variables, the changing nature of interventions, the diversity of intervention processes and outcomes, and the problem of not having a controlled lab-like environment for experimental research (Rosenbaum 2002: 192). While quasi-experimental designs and using control groups whenever possible is a sound argument from a scientific viewpoint, we would like to emphasize that this is not possible in C/PVE since the field is connected to high risks for society. Case studies, as in the EMMA self-evaluation tool, are a desirable alternative to the experimental framework if conducted thoroughly and in depth (Rosenbaum 2002: 195).

"While inputs, processes, and short-term outcomes are critical components of any evaluation, we cannot lose sight of the fact that partnerships are formed to alleviate specific social problems and are often expected to produce tangible long-term results. Furthermore, partnerships represent only one approach to social intervention

(versus, for example, the independent actions of separate agencies). [...]The complexity of inputs, processes, and outcomes associated with multi-agency partnerships should not be used as an excuse to avoid precision in conceptualization and measurement or to argue that "anything goes" when it comes to evaluation." (Rosenbaum 2002: 212).

These examples show that research concerning the evaluation of MAW is available, yet the research does not consider P/CVE MAW. Additionally, there appear to be no tools or standards on how to evaluate MAW in P/CVE. The EMMA project attempted to take a first step in closing these gaps in research and evaluation methods by developing a tool to evaluate MAW in C/PVE. The tool addresses several pitfalls and the bad practices mentioned above. First and foremost, it is an internal evaluation tool and is specifically designed to obtain and analyse information concerning features of the MAW such as information sharing, cooperation and case management. The tool was developed using feedback loops between developers and users, thus taking users' critique and perceived problems into account. It is intended for use by different MAW approaches in Europe regardless of their set-up and individual characteristics (Hardyns et al. 2021: 22). While it is a promising approach, the tool still has to prove itself.

### **III. Good Practices - Workshop outcomes and literature analysis**

In the workshop mentioned above, a section was dedicated to developing best practices. Participants discussed how evaluation should ideally be carried out as a basis for developing good practice. The following elements of best practice were identified, organised chronologically:

- Before an evaluation, meetings should be held to establish an agreement concerning the indicators, the research questions and the goals (formative approach).
- Indicators should be outcome indicators and of qualitative nature (such as level of expertise, turnover, training).
- The role of evaluators should be clear: Evaluators can either be external partners, which would facilitate an objective view, or members of other cities that deal with similar problems. In either case, evaluators must be independent.
- The motivation for evaluation must be internal, such as improving the processes or work in general and generating long-term impact.
- Concerning the time-frame, participants of the workshop highlighted that continuous evaluation is perceived as more useful instead of annual evaluation, as it offers the possibility to link it closely to monitoring and to implemented changes.
- In terms of timing, evaluation should be carried out before decisions are made.



From an academic point of view, context variables should be considered as they may help determine the source of problems in MAW and hint at how problems can be addressed. Even though there is little research and practical experience on evaluating MAW, one cannot just follow an 'anything goes' approach, especially as the bad practices mentioned may do more harm than good. An alternative to standardized evaluation could be detailed case studies.

#### **IV. Putting things into perspective and a proposed guide to evaluating MAW**

When evaluating MAW, one faces a considerable number of scientific, practical and organizational challenges. But evaluation remains crucial to improving MAW. Nevertheless, some experience exists, which helps in constructing the following guide:

1. Establish an understanding of why evaluation is important. If there is no shared understanding of the importance, motivation will probably be low.
2. Decide on the goal of the evaluation. This will determine which kind of evaluation is to be done (e.g. outcome evaluation vs pragmatic evaluation) (Gielen 2017: 114).
3. Make sure that the resources required are available, such as time, expertise and evaluation tools fit for MAW-specific needs and interests. This should be clarified before the evaluation to allow real engagement in the evaluation process and to plan ahead.
4. Make use of available resources such as existing research and evaluation reports (Gielen 2017: 4).
4. Establish an atmosphere of trust, in which MAW members are able to express critical thoughts with minimal influence from factors such as hierarchies.
5. Do something with the results of the evaluation. For example, try to address deficiencies or problems and monitor whether this changes later evaluation results.
7. Use network resources, e.g. those generated via EMMA and icommit, to tackle identified problems.
8. Expectation management: Do not expect an evaluation to show an impact that your MAW will not be able to achieve. If your MAW deals with individuals at risk of radicalization, do not expect the evaluation to demonstrate successful change of root causes. Therefore, formulate a theory of change on what the MAW intends to achieve and how (Gielen 2017: 114).
9. If you intend to use external evaluators, demand an extensive evaluation plan. If possible include the evaluators before the project or intervention has started (Gielen 2017: 114f.).
10. Combine smart indicators. This means including structural indicators (an essential condition such as educating social workers on the topic of radicalization, so they are aware of the problem), activity indicators (e.g. that X meetings of the MAW took place to enable exchange about current challenges concerning radicalization in the municipality) and outcome indicators (e.g. that the number of crimes associated with extremism is reduced by X percent) (Gielen 2017: 115).

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