

Colloquium on Measuring Effectiveness in Counterterrorism Programming

February 9-10, 2012
Ottawa, Canada

PRELIMINARY MEETING NOTE

Prepared by the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation¹

Background

- On 9-10 February the government of Canada hosted a colloquium on measuring the effectiveness of counterterrorism programming, in particular, programs to prevent terrorism and violent extremism. The colloquium was organized by the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation and co-financed by the governments of Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Participants included a broad range of experts and practitioners from approximately fifteen governments, as well as representatives from academia, aid organizations, the private sector, and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations. The discussions offered an opportunity for attendees to exchange lessons learned and insights from national practices as well as other fields where monitoring and evaluation (M & E) tools may have some applications for counterterrorism and terrorism prevention efforts. Given the importance placed on evaluation and measurement within the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) Working Group on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), the outcomes of this colloquium could make a valuable contribution to the efforts of the GCTF as well as the International Center of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism, to be established in 2012, and other national and international stakeholders, like the United Nations.
- Many states have undertaken efforts to develop programs to prevent terrorism and elaborate strategies to counter violent extremism. Governments are concerned to know whether these prevention strategies - which are a relatively new addition to the counter-terrorism toolkit - are effective. At the same time, governments are facing budgetary pressures and are keen to deploy limited resources in an optimal fashion. States and program administrators therefore confront the need to evaluate them and consider the development of indicators against which effectiveness of ongoing programs might be assessed. Participants in the colloquium

¹ This document contains the Center's preliminary observations only. The information in this document is not a finalized record of the colloquium in Ottawa and it does not reflect the official position or endorsement of any of our sponsors.

acknowledged the timeliness of this discussion and were eager to see it continue and allow for greater cooperation and collaboration among governments and relevant experts.

- In reflecting on current practices, speakers noted that states have undertaken evaluations of their counterterrorism and terrorism prevention initiatives for many reasons, including internal M & E, and at the request of government bodies (such as parliaments); the reasons for undertaking the evaluations shape the objectives of the assessment and therefore the indicators utilized. For example, participants noted that it may not only be the impact that is evaluated, but the cost and efficiency of the program.
- To date, there is variation in the approaches utilized by states with different levels of target audiences, ranging from the individual to the group to the community; few have articulated a specific strategy to address terrorism or violent extremism that sets out a clear list of objectives for CT/CVE programs which could be used to develop indicators for evaluations. The strategy and the objectives of the programs also inform the unit of analysis for subsequent M & E efforts.
- In sum, as discussions of CVE continue at the domestic level and within multilateral fora, there are several opportunities, including in the short term, to advance knowledge products and facilitate collaboration towards the goal of enhancing practices of M & E in the field of terrorism prevention.

Challenges of M & E in programs to prevent terrorism and counter violent extremism (CVE)

- As a subset of counterterrorism, programs to prevent terrorism or counter violent extremism pose a particular challenge for program designers and evaluators as the outcomes are often difficult to identify and attribute to specific interventions. For example, participants emphasized the importance of specifying up front the intervention logic for CVE programs, i.e. what are the "theories of change" and how can we test these?
- Where the desired outcome is an absence of terrorism or violent extremism, in many ways a "non-event," practitioners are confronted with the challenge of "measuring the negative." Consequently, the question of causality posed a particular challenge in relation to terrorism prevention and CVE because a broad range of activities undertaken by states and their partners might contribute to these objectives; moreover, many of these initiatives are undertaken without being labeled "terrorism prevention" or "CVE." How then to measure the impact of such activities?
- Indeed, the question of causal attribution attracted much discussion, i.e. how do we know that CVE programs have been responsible for any changes in the propensity towards radicalization among vulnerable individuals and groups? Further, participants debated the standard for "effectiveness," i.e. how much can and should we expect CVE programs to alter vulnerability to radicalization? These are difficult - but by no means impossible - questions to answer. To date, states have sought pragmatic responses that draw on a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches. But there was consensus that more work will need to be done to reconcile the need for both pragmatism and rigor in designing M & E studies of CVE programming.
- Given the difficulties of measuring preventive programs, one participant noted that it could be even more difficult to measure wanted/unwanted side effects that might arise as a consequence of preventive interventions.
- It was noted by one speaker that the expectation of change was an important consideration in assessing the effectiveness of a CT intervention; even small changes, in contexts where any change is deemed difficult, might constitute a great success. As another participant put it, "any positive movement is good [when thinking] about prevention."

Finally, as global events unfold, states and consequently national counterterrorism practitioners have to address “moving goal posts” and changing priorities; how can medium-long term programs be designed and evaluated to accommodate such changes, asked several participants.

Lessons learned from current practices in related and other fields

- The colloquium was structured to gather insights from a broad range of related and other fields, where the challenges of "measuring the negative" have been confronted. Participants found that there are significant opportunities to learn from practitioners in these fields, including youth gang violence reduction, strategic communications, public advocacy and aid effectiveness. Many of these addressed the difficult challenge of effecting behavioral, societal and attitudinal changes and faced a number of common challenges in M & E the impact and outcome of these efforts. Indeed, the commonality of challenges across various fields confronted by the challenge of measuring intangible outcomes – “the negative” - indicated the possibility of developing some common principles and tools that can help guide M & E practices in CT/CVE.
- Some practitioners noted that it is possible to try and measure the impact of an intervention on the general discourse – online, for example – or on the perceptions and feelings of communities towards certain groups, individuals or initiatives. By undertaking surveys before and after an intervention, practitioners could make some preliminary qualitative assessments of the impact.
- The need for relevant and context-suitable indicators was voiced by a number of practitioners; in order to develop these, it was important for program designers to help articulate their intervention logic and theories of change so that some criteria for progress could be established.
- Speakers noted a greater comfort in some quarters with qualitative data, including the use of anecdotal evidence. While there was a broad recognition of the value of quantifiable data, it was also widely accepted that qualitative assessments could make a contribution to an overall assessment of effectiveness or impact. As one speaker observed, “not everything that counts can be counted.” A number of participants argued that mixed methodologies were particularly useful in M & E efforts in such difficult contexts.
- Practitioners from a number of fields noted that program staff may be resistant to M & E for a number of reasons (e.g. it takes time away from program delivery) and that programs/departments often found it challenging to be evaluated against criteria that were beyond their control, or set by external evaluators with little understanding of the program and its objectives.

Moving forward: possible areas of collaboration on M & E

- Participants recognized the need for and importance of international coordination and collaboration.. Participants acknowledged the need for tools to facilitate the sharing of current practices and the identification of good practices. In particular, some participants noted the pressures confronting practitioners and policymakers to act, and noted they would benefit from “shorter learning cycles,” where states might draw on each others’ experiences and practices, or common methodologies and indicators, so that they would not have to develop new ones from scratch each time there was a need for M & E. This may take one of several forms, such as a database recording current practices or a series of thematic papers surveying and informing state responses to date.

- The need for greater training and an investment in providing capacities and guidance for evaluating CT/CVE efforts was highlighted by a number of speakers. These would eliminate the need to develop new methods each time an evaluation was needed and contribute to some uniformity across M & E practices, thereby increasing their comparability
- The importance of building in M & E at the outset of program design was raised by a number of participants; this would help program designers lay out their assumptions, articulate the intervention logic and develop criteria against which to measure progress going forward.
- There may be opportunities to collate these insights from the colloquium, and to extend them (through further interaction with relevant M & E professionals), towards the development of guidance for CT/CVE officials seeking to assess their programs.