



# POLICY BRIEF

## Preventing violence in South Africa Contributions from an intersectoral dialogue

Matodzi Amisi

The Violence Prevention Forum is a multisectoral platform that promotes the use of evidence in violence prevention in South Africa. The forum has strengthened relationships between researchers, government, NGOs and development partners. As a result, information can be shared more easily, which has influenced national and provincial policy and practice. This policy brief highlights the importance of co-producing knowledge, building relationships and creating a safe space for dialogue.

## Key findings

- ▶ The VPF is a multisectoral platform for ongoing dialogue and relationship building with the aim of strengthening evidence-led violence prevention.
- ▶ Over six years, 10 government departments, 16 research institutes, 14 NGOs and two development partners have consistently taken part in forum meetings.
- ▶ The forum is adaptive, iterative and responsive because it does not use a membership format.
- ▶ The VPF's launch was successful because the convening organisations were credible and already had relationships with government, NGOs, researchers and funders.
- ▶ The VPF has been sustainable because of strategic leadership by an ISS senior researcher, management by a capable and responsive secretariat, steering by a multi-stakeholder driver group, and communication and administrative support.
- ▶ The forum is mindfully and skilfully facilitated, and value driven. It allows difficult conversations to be held in a safe space.
- ▶ The diversity of sectors and roles represented in the forum enables it to generate, collate and make sense of vast amounts of information, experiences and research evidence.
- ▶ Co-producing easily accessible outputs, such as policy briefs, has demonstrated the value and knowledge contribution of the forum.
- ▶ The forum has influenced national and provincial policies, and NGOs' practice.

## Recommendations

### How the forum can be strengthened

- ▶ Government participants and partners should connect the forum with government coordination and decision-making structures. This could include presentations to relevant cabinet committees, the Forum of South African Directors-General and other structures.
- ▶ The driver group should engage with Parliament. This includes sharing insights and recommendations with relevant parliamentary committees and involving parliamentary researchers in the forum, for example.
- ▶ Since the forum fills a substantive gap in multisectoral dialogue and promotes violence prevention, it will remain valuable as the country implements the National Strategic Plan for Gender-based Violence and Femicide. It should therefore continue its work, with some adjustments.
- ▶ For this to happen, financial partners should continue providing flexible financial support.

## Introduction

Since 2015 the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has convened the multisectoral Violence Prevention Forum (VPF). The forum encourages collaboration between policymakers, researchers, community-based organisations, development partners and international organisations. It works to ensure that effective programmes and interventions on preventing violence are both available and sustainable across the country in the communities where they are needed.

In 2020 the ISS evaluated the forum's methods, principles, practices and impacts. The primary objective of the evaluation was to look at how the forum worked, how it achieved results and what those results were. This policy brief gives a summary of its findings.

## How the VPF was evaluated

A mixed-method approach underpinned by realist evaluation theory was used. A realist evaluation begins by setting out the programme theory in order to appropriately evaluate an intervention. Crucial to this is the assumption that not all programmes work everywhere. Instead, interventions work in specific contexts and are influenced by how participants respond to them.

Realist evaluation asks not what works, but what works for whom, why and where?<sup>1</sup> This epistemological position resonated with the nature of the forum, its processes and anticipated change. The evaluation was guided by four questions:

- What are the principles, methods and practices of the VPF?
- In what ways has the VPF shaped/influenced violence prevention approaches in South Africa (by government departments, non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and international organisations) and what other impacts has the forum had?
- How have the principles, methods and practices of the VPF contributed to the impact it has had?
- In what way has the broader context shaped the work and achievements of the forum?

The evaluation was conducted in four phases:

- Inception phase: Contracting, clarifying the scope and approving the inception report that set out the evaluation approach.
- Design phase: Clarifying the VPF as an intervention to be evaluated, the undesirable social condition it aimed to address, the strategies it used and outcomes it hoped to achieve. A report was produced that articulated the problem statement, which was a product of consultations with driver group members and illustrated the forum's implicit theory of change (see Figure 1). This was used to frame the research process and refine the methodology and analytical framework.
- Data collection phase: Answering the research questions and testing the hypothesis as articulated in the design phase. Data used in the evaluation included the VPF's recorded performance, financial data, forum participation records, participants' feedback forms over the years and meeting minutes. In addition, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted and a survey undertaken (20 participants completed the on-line questionnaire).
- Finally, the data was analysed and synthesised, and an evaluation report submitted to the driver group that leads the forum.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the ISS ethics committee.

## VPF theory of change

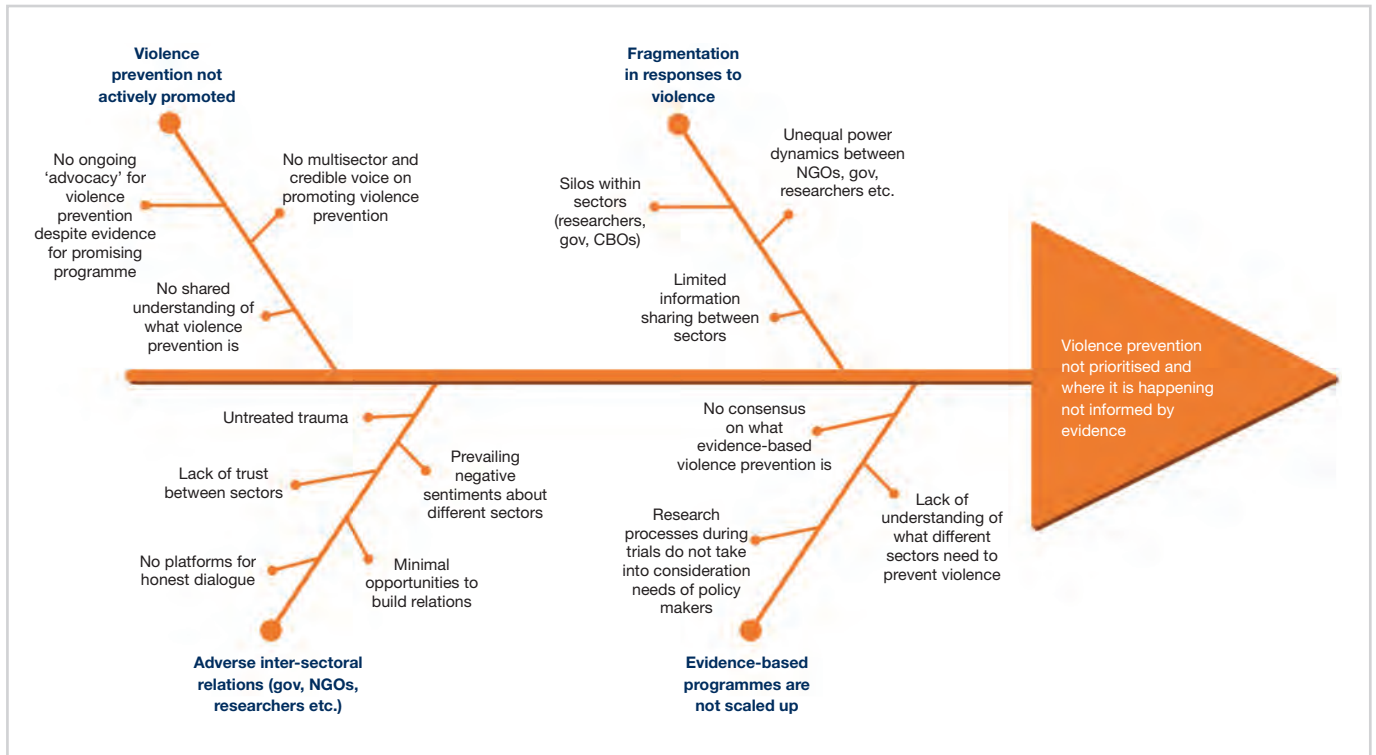
The VPF can be defined as a multisectoral platform for ongoing dialogue and relationship building. Its purpose is promoting action towards the prevention of violence that is informed by evidence and the collective knowledge of stakeholders in South Africa. The VPF is not a membership organisation or a formal network. Rather, it is a loose network of practitioners in the violence prevention sector.

The VPF's ultimate goal is to support the large-scale implementation of evidence-informed interventions to prevent violence in South Africa. It has three pathways for achieving this:

- Building trusting relationships between policymakers, NGOs, researchers and others
- Generating, translating and brokering knowledge
- Supporting the people who work in the sector



**Figure 1: The undesirable conditions that necessitated the VPF**



Source: Author, developed with the driver group.

The assumptions that must hold for this theory of change to work are that:

- The forum will be convened competently and with legitimacy
- It will be facilitated skilfully and mindfully in ways that enable participants to recognise the filters created by their own personal experiences, and acknowledge their ability to act differently
- It needs to be steered by a multisectoral group with the authority to make decisions

### Evaluating the forum’s potential for impact

The evaluation used an analytical framework that conceptualises evidence use as behaviour change<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 2). It drew on Dore, Robinson and Smith’s tools for studying multi-stakeholder platforms.<sup>3</sup> In this framework a successful platform must have:

- A desirable context (convener, political support, etc.)
- A desirable process (deliberative, facilitated, inclusive, etc.)
- Desirable content

These themes were used to study the methods and approaches of the VPF.

In addition, realist evaluation theory posits that interventions (like the VPF) do not produce change. Rather, change happens because within a certain context the intervention offers participants tools and resources which, using their reasoning (mechanism), they decide to act on.

Therefore, to understand how the VPF is shaping South Africa’s response to violence, the evaluation explored which mechanisms – using Langer and Weyrauch’s definition<sup>4</sup> – are activated as participants take part in the forum.

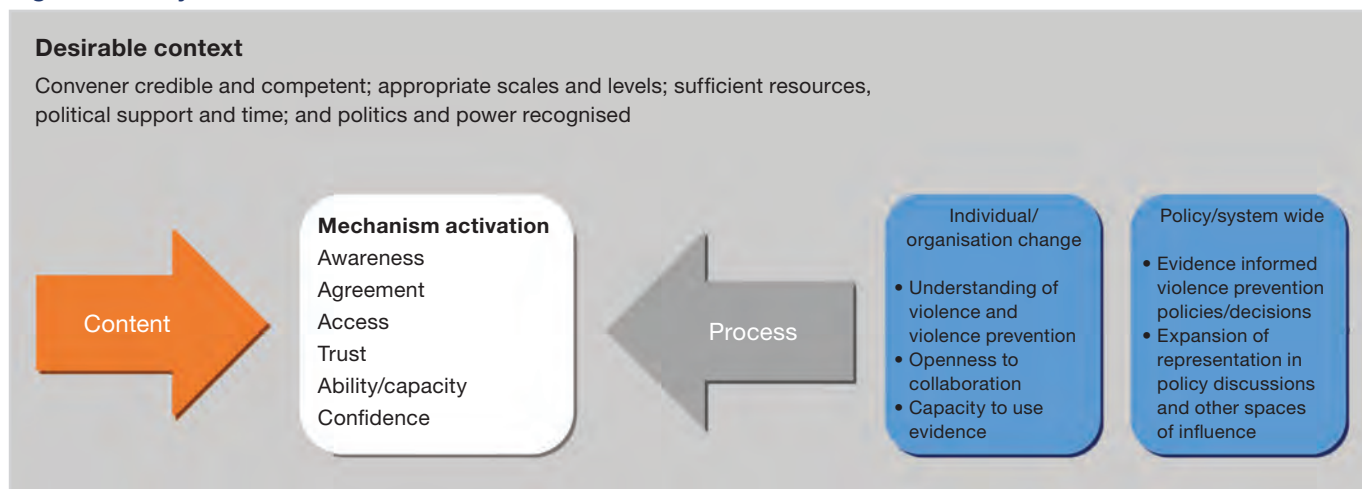
Finally, the analytical framework included the wider outcomes and impact statements as set out in the theory of change.

### What the evaluation found

#### Evolution of the VPF

The forum evolved organically over five years (2015–2020) (see Figure 3). The evaluation found that the forum was successfully initiated because of

**Figure 2: Analytical framework**



Adapted from L Langer, I Goldman and M Pabari, 2020

the combined reputation of the institutions involved. As initiating partners, UNICEF and the ISS both had established relationships with government, NGOs, researchers and funders that enabled them to credibly convene the early meetings.

Most of the early participants were researchers and NGOs implementing parenting programmes. Over time the forum expanded to include more government participants, development partners and representatives from the private sector.

At the time the VPF was initiated, no forum in South Africa provided for multisectoral dialogue on violence prevention

The focus of the forum has also evolved from an emphasis on violence experienced by children, then women and children, to talking about interpersonal violence, as understanding grew of how all forms of interpersonal violence are closely linked. However, there is still a special focus on violence experienced by women and children.

The forum held 10 meetings between 2015 and 2020.<sup>5</sup> These were on various topics determined by participants and on an up-to-date analysis of policy developments. The meetings were hosted by participating organisations and one government department. As a result, the forum has met in three provinces to date.

The VPF is convened by the ISS’ Justice and Violence Prevention programme, which is managed by a programme head who oversees other research work related to crime and the criminal justice system. The evaluation found that the ISS senior researcher’s legitimacy, capability and strategic leadership were important elements that enabled the growth of the forum. The forum is also supported by a capable and responsive secretariat, a role fulfilled by a junior researcher employed full time by the ISS.

A multi-stakeholder volunteer driver group worked closely with facilitators and the convener to strategically steer the forum. Additional communication and administrative support provided by the ISS and a specialist communications consultancy enabled it to develop quality outputs with clearly articulated messages.

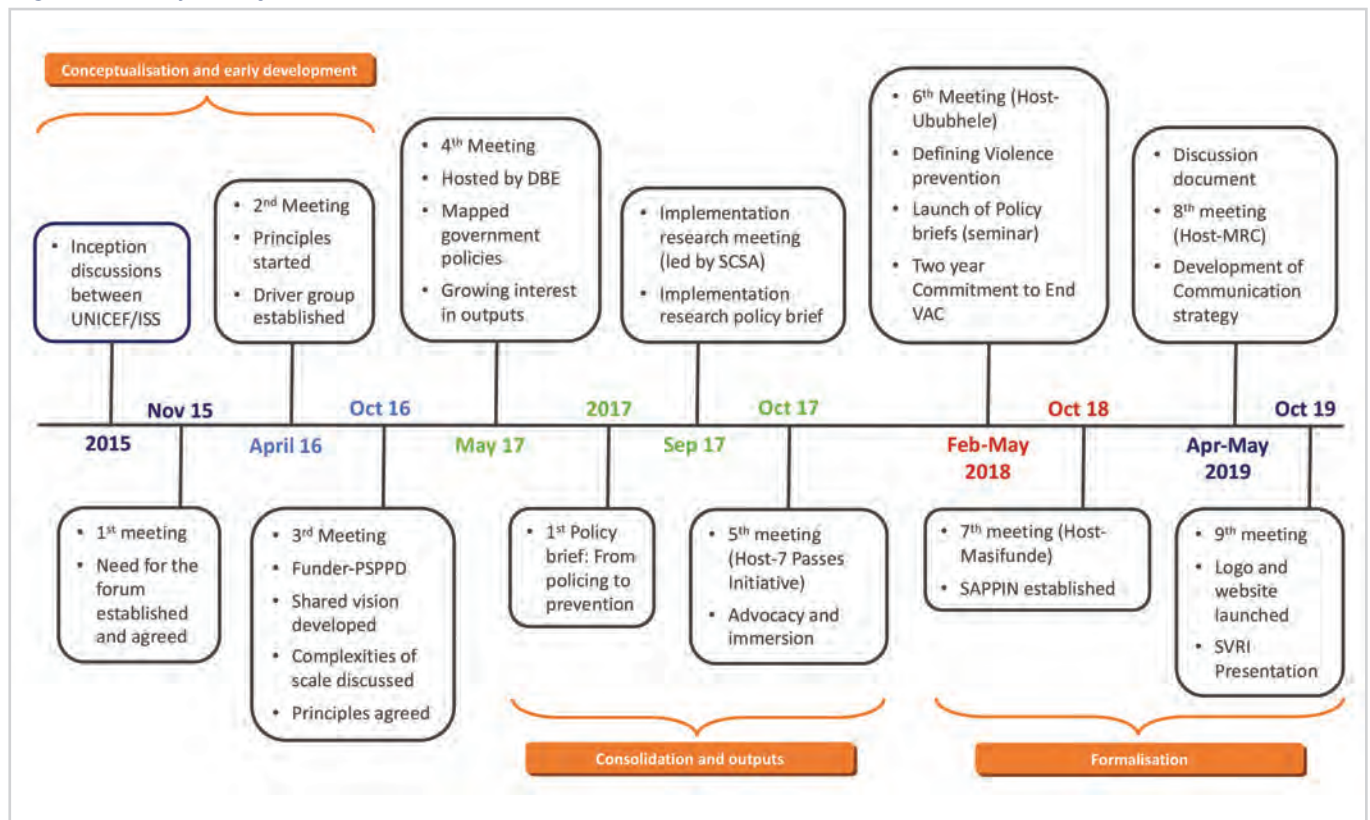
The evaluation found that the VPF filled a major gap in the sector. At the time the VPF was initiated no forum in South Africa provided a space for multisectoral dialogue on violence prevention. In addition, many of the organisations working to prevent violence were not networked.

By not adopting a membership format, where members are obliged to participate in meetings, and choosing an organic and fluid arrangement, the forum was able to be adaptive, iterative and responsive.

### Who attends the forum

Over six years, 10 government departments, 16 research institutes, 14 NGOs and two development

Figure 3: VPF journey since 2015



partners consistently participated in forum meetings. Individual participation fluctuated slightly. In total, 122 people participated in meetings over the five years; 51% attended one meeting (guests, rotation within one department, etc.) and 49% attended more than one meeting.

The forum is both multisectoral and multidisciplinary. For example, government representation includes finance, health, planning and monitoring, gender/women and social development sectors. NGOs that participate in the forum address different risk factors for violence in their communities. Some organisations provide parenting support, others work in peacebuilding, and others work with men, for example. Even the researchers who participate in the forum have diverse research interests.

### How the forum meets

VPF meetings last two days and take place twice a year. No more than 40 participants attend each meeting. The number is kept low enough to facilitate interpersonal connections yet high enough to accommodate key stakeholders.

Participants sit in a circle with no tables, and are encouraged to be fully present by limiting the use of mobile phones and laptops. Formal presentations are discouraged unless the content makes it absolutely necessary. Discussions are interspersed with strategically designed exercises and games that build community and trust, and facilitate open sharing.

The quality of content presented, combined with how the forum is facilitated, enables participants to learn

The process followed in the meetings is interrogative and deliberative. Participants are given ample time for reflection and sense-making. This is done through meditative reflections, small group discussions and plenary processing of information presented. The forum meetings are facilitated by two external facilitators. The facilitators are experienced and skilled, drawing on a range of methods and approaches.

Lastly, the forum is value driven. Seven values co-developed by participants were described as ‘owned’ and ‘lived’ by the group. Because participants know what to expect from others, and trust that if the values are violated there will be recourse, they can have difficult conversations with one another, raising uncomfortable truths and dialogue in ways that are respectful. Recurrent themes both in feedback forms and in interviews with respondents were that the VPF made participants feel respected and safe.

### What the forum discusses

Respondents felt that the content presented at the forum is useful and relevant. In particular, they noted that the forum provided them with access to information that would not have been available to them otherwise. Information participants regularly referred to included how government budget processes work, challenges experienced by NGOs in implementing programmes, government policies, etc.

The content balances dialogue and practical work. Practical work includes doing things like mapping government policies and frameworks (in the fourth meeting), and mapping programmes implemented by NGOs and government (in the eighth meeting).

Four policy briefs have been published by the forum and an evidence map and a report were completed in 2019

An example of dialogue is a deep democracy process undertaken at the fourth meeting to define what stands in the way of the country’s preventing violence.

The combination of the nature and quality of content presented and how the forum is facilitated enables participants to learn. Learning something new was frequently mentioned in feedback forms and interviews with participants as one of the benefits of participating.

By discouraging formal presentations and encouraging seating in a circle, hierarchies of knowledge are lowered and participants are motivated to share different types of information, not only research

evidence. This enriches the discussions, generating new insights and knowledge that is published in policy briefs or further developed in new research projects.

Four policy briefs have been published by the forum.<sup>6</sup> In addition, an evidence map<sup>7</sup> and a report that formed the basis of South Africa’s country report as a pathfinder country were completed in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

### Impacts on approaches to prevent violence

The evaluation found that, as an intervention, the VPF has been effective. Three instances where the forum influenced policy were identified:

- Three VPF participants participated in the Interim Steering Committee that drafted the National Strategic Plan for Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP).<sup>9</sup> There is evidence that their participation in the NSP process furthered the inclusion of children and violence prevention in the plan.
- Forum participants informed the development of a provincial safety policy, helping to ensure that evidence use and prevention were emphasised.
- The forum contributed to the decision by National Treasury to increase the budget of the Department of Social Development (DSD) in 2018. The DSD used evidence from the government-led Diagnostic Review on the state’s response to violence against women and children to motivate for a budget increase for prevention interventions. (The review had found that funding in the sector is biased towards criminal justice interventions.) At the time the National Treasury budget analyst for national DSD was participating in the forum. As a result, he gained a better understanding of both violence prevention and the impact of poor funding on NGOs’ implementing programmes.<sup>10</sup> This contributed to the official’s supporting the DSD budget proposal and motivating for the national budget to allocate more to violence prevention.

In addition, the forum has had the following impacts:

- Trusting inter-sector relationships have been built and strengthened. As a result, more information is now shared between and within sectors.
- A mutually supportive community that promotes violence prevention has been created. New networks such as the South African Parenting Programmes Implementers

Network have been formed. Participants reported feeling supported (i.e. less likely to feel overwhelmed or see their efforts as futile) as part of a community of practice working towards a shared goal.

- One of the important contributions of the forum has been building empathetic understanding of other sectors. Instead of seeing each other as problems and obstacles to change, participants reported having gained an appreciation of the challenges and limitations other sectors experience.
- The supportive community is generative. New ideas and insights have been generated. Because participants feel safe and trust both the process and the other participants, they are more likely to ‘allow’ their perspectives to be challenged and to hear different views.
- The forum is influencing practice. This includes participating organisations that have adopted the forum’s mindful and deep democracy principles in how they work. Some organisations have, by participating in the forum, gradually begun to see how their work fits within efforts to address violence in the country. There are examples of organisations that have reoriented their programmes to make the connections to violence prevention clearer.

### Why has the VPF been successful?

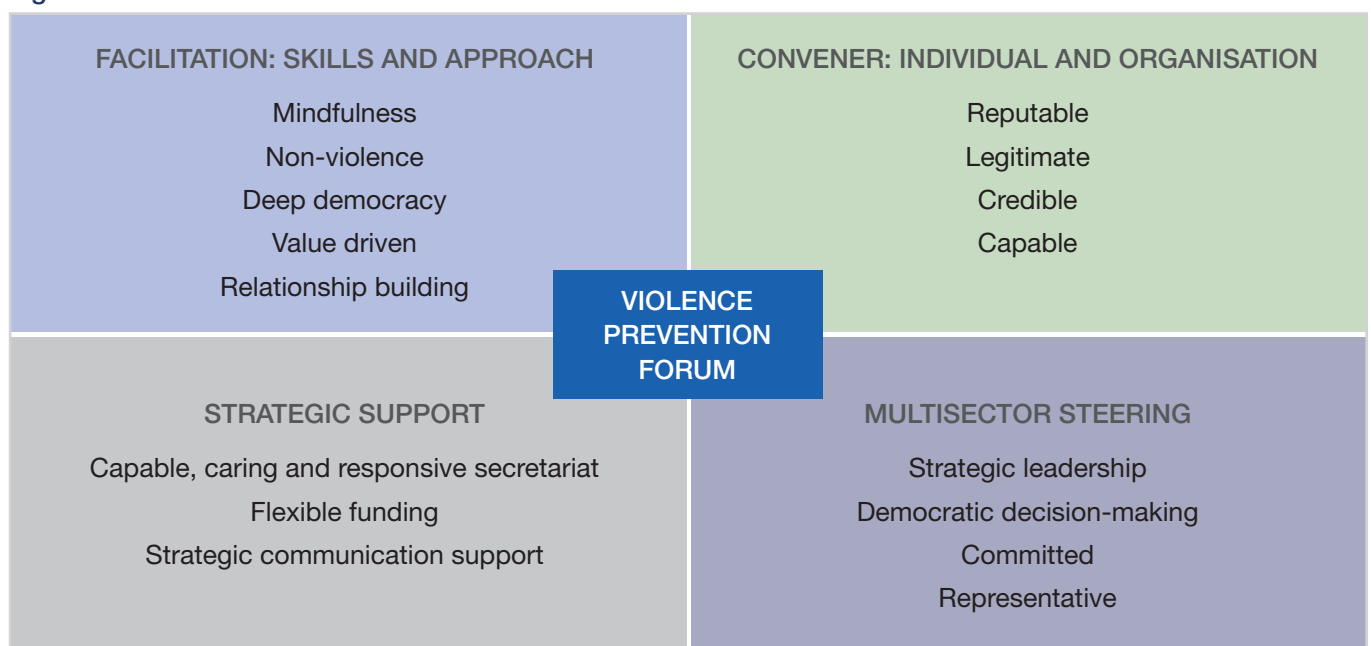
The evaluation found that the VPF theory of change is generally working, and that six mechanisms were activated through participants’ involvement in the forum. An additional mechanism not initially part of the analytical framework was uncovered during analysis: participants reported that the forum was contributing to healing from collective and personal experiences of trauma. The mechanisms at work are set out in Table 1.

The evaluation found that the theory of change worked owing to:

- Empathetic and capable leadership
- Mindful, value-driven facilitation
- Strategic and democratic decision-making through the driver group
- Strategic support from the secretariat and communication team

The four elements worked together, underpinned by intentional effort to support and strengthen relationship-building between participants. All four elements were equally important to the functioning of the forum. If one element had been removed or underperformed the model would not have worked as it had.

Figure 4: Violence Prevention Forum elements of success





**Table 1: Mechanisms working in the VPF**

MECHANISM	DESCRIPTION
<b>Awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants who were not aware of research evidence and its importance in violence prevention, now are.</li> <li>• Participants are more likely to demand evidence use in their own organisation and integration of evidence in their programmes.</li> <li>• The forum is building awareness of, and positive attitudes towards, research evidence.</li> </ul>
<b>Agreement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By co-producing knowledge products and reflecting on existing knowledge, the forum has cultivated a shared understanding of violence and the need to prevent it.</li> <li>• Although participants do not agree on everything, there is enough agreement to move the forum's work forward.</li> </ul>
<b>Access</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants have access to individuals they would otherwise not have.</li> <li>• The forum discourages the use of jargon and other exclusionary communication.</li> <li>• When presentations are made they are followed by individual and collective sense-making activities, such as small group discussions.</li> <li>• Insights and new knowledge from the forum are summarised in easy-to-access policy briefs.</li> <li>• This helps to make research or information on complex government processes accessible to participants.</li> </ul>
<b>Trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal sharing, dinners, playing games, etc. have all been incorporated into the forum's methodology to encourage relationship-building and empathetic understanding between decision makers, implementers and researchers.</li> <li>• Results show that participants have developed empathy for colleagues in different sectors, are building relationships with individuals whom they would otherwise not have, and report seeing each other as collaborators rather than competitors or adversaries.</li> </ul>
<b>Ability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The forum has supported decision makers in developing skills and in accessing and making sense of evidence.</li> <li>• Researchers understand the policy environment better and can thus improve their research and communication.</li> <li>• Implementers understand government processes and how their work relates to policy.</li> <li>• Through modelling deep democracy and encouraging self-awareness, the forum builds participants' skills to engage with dissenting voices in other settings.</li> </ul>
<b>Healing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the context of high levels of stress and trauma (vicarious, collective, historical, etc.), the forum has created a safe space that contributes to healing. This was experienced by participants from all sectors.</li> </ul>
<b>Confidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging all voices to be heard and respected, facilitating respectful dialogue and lowering knowledge hierarchies have helped to build and strengthen participants' confidence in their individual capabilities, and their ability to speak about evidence-informed violence prevention.</li> </ul>

## Challenges

The VPF faces some challenges that limit its impact. Two of these are:

- **Achieving even representation:** Provincial representation is uneven and some leading researchers do not participate (preferring traditional forums, like conferences, and because these meetings do not enable them to meet their measures of impact). This is despite the fact that some took part in the formative meetings in 2015/16. This is to be expected for a voluntary forum in a sector so wide and fragmented. There is also tension between expanding participation

and ensuring the quality of the facilitation process. There are other ways the forum has been partnering with organisations and researchers not participating in forum meetings, and perhaps these need to be showcased more to counter perceptions of exclusivity.

- **Sustained political support:** The forum is not adequately linked to government and political structures and at times is viewed as a ‘parallel’ process. The driver group is aware of this and has been exploring ways to strengthen such support. In the future, knowledge sharing with cabinet, the Forum of South African Director Generals and relevant parliamentary committees could improve linkages.

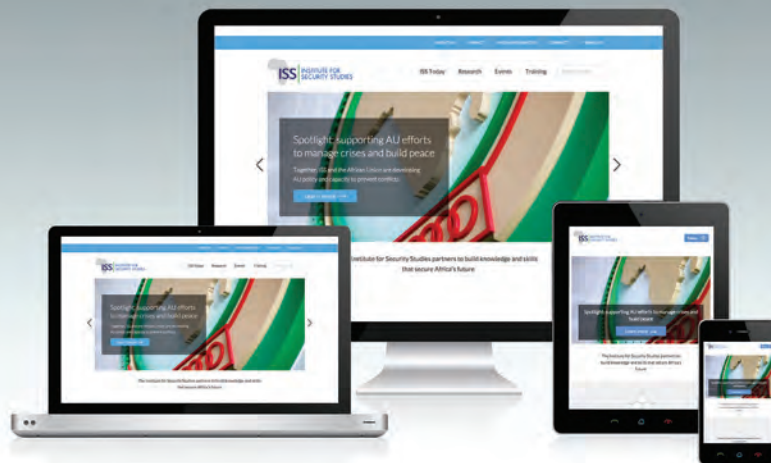
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## Notes

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- 2 I Goldman, M Pabari and L Langer, Analytical framework used to guide case study research, in I Goldman and M Pabari (eds.), *Using evidence in policy and practice: lessons from Africa*, London: Routledge, 2020.
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