



“Violence prevention is the whole of society working deliberately and sustainably to remove sources of harm and inequality, and heal woundedness, by intentionally growing an ethic of mutual care, respect and inclusion to build peace.

*Violence Prevention Forum*

# POLICY BRIEF

## What is violence prevention? A new definition

Violence Prevention Forum

This policy brief provides a definition of violence prevention developed by NGOs, researchers, government officials and representatives of development partners and the private sector. It aims to catalyse discussion, support policy development and advocacy, and encourage all South Africans to ask themselves what they are doing to prevent violence. The process of developing the definition was as important as the final product, entailing intensive knowledge exchange, debate and compromise.

## Key findings

- ▶ The development of a shared understanding and common definition of violence prevention is a key step towards arriving at a common agenda and catalysing action.
- ▶ The style and language used in the definition must be clear, understandable and free of jargon.
- ▶ The tone must be proactive and affirmative and emphasise the need for action to stop or, at least reduce, violence.
- ▶ The definition is intended to support advocacy and policy development and stimulate dialogue in the country.
- ▶ The actions taken must be systemic and involve the whole society.
- ▶ Defining violence prevention will enable government, NGOs, the research community, development partners and the private sector to determine and make the case for the way in which their work contributes to addressing one of the most significant challenges South Africa faces.
- ▶ This definition is a strong building block for dialogue and advocacy and will lend itself to the development of measures for programmes and interventions across the country.

## Recommendations

- ▶ The Violence Prevention Forum must ensure that the definition of violence prevention is accessible to all children. Children and young people should be encouraged to engage this definition and start thinking about what they can do and what they can expect others to do to end violence.
- ▶ Opportunities to disseminate the definition globally, nationally and provincially should be sought. These opportunities include processes related to the implementation of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF) and the development of the NSP-GBVF's prevention strategy.
- ▶ There is a need to address the underlying and deeply entrenched structural causes of violence, which include poverty, inequality, racism and prejudice.
- ▶ Civil society and government should use the definition to stimulate dialogue and inform policy and advocacy aimed at building a movement in support of ending violence in South Africa.
- ▶ The Violence Prevention Forum must make the definition available in all 11 of South Africa's official languages and in sign language.

## Introduction



The national Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) arrived at this definition in 2021 after a process of discussion and debate. Participants in the forum, representatives of government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academia, international organisations and development partners, donors, the private sector and children shared their knowledge, views and insights in an effort to strengthen ways of preventing all forms of violence in South Africa.

### Building shared understanding

Consultations began in May 2021 in the form of sectoral workshops that included children, NGOs, researchers, government officials and development partners.<sup>1</sup> In September the VPF reached a critical milestone in multisectoral collaboration when it arrived at the shared definition of violence prevention – a key step towards creating a common agenda for action.<sup>2</sup>

Defining what it will take to prevent violence is a complex and challenging undertaking. But success in doing so will enable stakeholders in all sectors to determine and make the case for the ways in which their work contributes to addressing one of the most significant challenges the country faces.

The process of developing the definition involved information and knowledge sharing, debate and

compromises between and within the sectors represented. The process was, therefore, as important as the final product.

In the past six years the VPF has found that creating inclusive spaces for collaborative engagement can lead to shared understanding, and overcome adversarial relationships among sectors, while strengthening networks and information flow among institutions.<sup>3</sup> The result is that research, policy and practice become accessible and the various sectors are enabled to share their knowledge and increase collaboration.

This policy brief presents the shared definition of violence prevention and the thinking behind it. The definition is intended to support advocacy and policy development and stimulate dialogue in the country. It gives all South Africans the opportunity to ask themselves what they are doing and what they can do to prevent violence?

While one of the reasons for defining violence prevention is to establish a strong base for dialogue and advocacy, the sector-specific definitions that were building blocks for the final definition, and the accompanying principles, lend themselves to other uses, among them informing the development of indicators and measures of success for programmes and interventions.

Agreeing that the definition must be accessible to and resonate with South Africans of all ages, languages, ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds, the VPF set out the following principles:

- The language must be uncomplicated, concise, inclusive, accessible and free of jargon
- Reference to specific policies or strategies should be avoided
- The definition should be applicable to various settings, contexts and sectors
- The language used should be non-violent
- The tone should be proactive and affirmative
- Any action taken must involve multiple stakeholders in a whole-of-society approach
- The definition should make it clear that no single action or approach will be sufficient to prevent violence; and
- The definition should encourage discussion and debate and should articulate a shared vision or common goal



## Personal definitions

A building block for the shared definition was the development by participants of personal definitions of violence prevention. These reflected their positions, experience and knowledge and strongly influenced the process. Some of these personal definitions were:

Violence prevention is the deliberate action of all society's stakeholders working together in a coordinated manner to stop violence by creating safe, stable and nurturing spaces in communities for relationships to thrive. This includes supporting positive parenting and access to psycho-social support for all adults; changing social and cultural norms that promote violence and promoting gender equality; reducing access to guns and knives through strict laws and enforcement; regulating spaces that provide access to alcohol and have robust education on alcohol and drugs. It includes intersectional understanding and a single backbone of support that will coordinate all of society's efforts. This is achieved through transparency, accountability, care and healing, mutual respect and trust, investing resource. It requires a long-term approach and a shared measurement system<sup>4</sup>

Violence prevention includes:

- deliberate and sustained efforts to empower humans with the interpersonal skillset to transform conflict before it escalates to violence and thus instil a peace-building spirit within the human capital active in the social, economic, cultural, legal and political environment
- building resilient and self-reliant communities with the ability to produce their own food and properly manage circular economy
- attainment of restorative justice, thus facilitating the process of broader healing from apartheid traumas for victims, beneficiaries and perpetrators and attaining gender harmony

and healing, yet constantly thwarting white supremacy, anti-blackness and patriarchy; and

- regular multi-stakeholder engagement and learning exchange programmes aimed at making and amending policies in order to protect basic rights and render vulnerable groups free of fear of repression<sup>5</sup>

Violence prevention requires an intersectional, integrated and multi-stakeholder approach to combat the systemic root causes of violence. Tackling the structural norms, attitudes and behaviour that perpetuate violence remains at the heart of prevention work. Implementing holistic programmes that recognise the inequality that governs the socio-economic architecture of South Africa remains key.<sup>6</sup>

Violence prevention is a cyclical process of designing and implementing a set of approaches (programmes, policies, services) designed to stop the violence from happening, which include redress of previous violence, healing the wounds when the violence has happened and ensuring accountability for the violence already taking place for the perpetrator and each sector that is or should be involved. The approaches should set the country on a course of specific actions that will be implemented through particular mechanisms (collective and singular from a sectoral or multisectoral perspective) and are measurable so as to know whether the actions are working and to facilitate redesign where necessary.<sup>7</sup>

Violence prevention is an act of collectively intercepting any form of violence, intentionally building a peaceful society.<sup>8</sup>

## Reworking sectoral definitions

After considering the personal definitions each sector refined the definition they had agreed on during workshops in May 2021. They identified the elements that were key to their understanding of what is required to prevent violence and accepted feedback and challenges from other sectors.

A shared understanding and common definition is a key step to catalysing action to prevent violence

## Non-governmental organisations

The following definition was developed by four people from NGOs and community-based organisations in South Africa that work to inform and influence policy, directly support community development through interventions, generate evidence about their interventions and provide support and services to victims of gender-based violence.<sup>9</sup>

Building peace and preventing violence requires varied actions by the whole of society to intentionally support and grow an ethic of mutual care, respect and inclusion by reducing all sources of harm and inequality and healing woundedness.

NGO representatives felt that a shared definition should include a reference to limits on the use of power, enable measurement of progress and reflect the importance of accountability and restorative justice.

## Researchers

Four researchers representing South African research institutes, research networks and universities agreed on the definition below. Their areas of expertise include monitoring and evaluation, gender-based violence and public health.<sup>10</sup>

Violence prevention is the systemic delivery of varied and sustainable acts to change the values, beliefs and behaviour of all members of society to reduce individual, relational, structural and other conditions perpetuating violence and promote healing, care and dignity in social systems.

The researchers debated the use of the word 'systemic', noting that it can refer to working with all systems in society or working with a strong emphasis on evidence-informed systems for monitoring and evaluation. They agreed that the definition should be de-colonial (i.e. seek to transform systems of oppression and ensure that all voices are included), trans-disciplinary and reflect the value of equity.

## Policy makers

Government officials from the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Health and the Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities developed this definition:

Violence prevention means living in a way that causes no harm, calling out harm when you see it and building a peaceful society with an understanding of the approaches that prevent violence.

## Development partners and the private sector

This definition was developed by three people from United Nations agencies, inter-governmental development partners and philanthropic funds.<sup>11</sup>

Violence prevention refers to the reduction of violent victimisation or perpetration of violence through direct efforts to remove or reduce the underlying causes. These include the structural drivers of inequality, social and cultural norms, traditional power structures and risk factors at individual, family and community levels by harnessing the policies and programmes that contribute to reducing violence. Violence prevention can only be achieved through a collective social compact that holds relevant stakeholders accountable for reducing the underlying causes and risk factors.

The guiding principles that accompanied the above definition included:

- Commitment to long-term violence-prevention initiatives
- Modelling positive behaviour

- Taking a survivor-centred approach that will enhance the survivors' ability to build resilience and be empowered
- Accelerate investment in creating safe spaces in communities and in the workplace
- Taking an intersectional and feminist approach

## Discussion of the sector definitions

Participants discussed which elements of their definitions they were willing to let go of and which they wanted to retain. Each sector had a chance to defend its definition in a panel discussion and to comment constructively on the other definitions.

All participants agreed that the shared definition did not have to detail all the actors and actions required to prevent violence but should be sufficiently engaging to stimulate meaningful dialogue and allow for contextual interpretations.

The definition of violence prevention is already in use and has been shared globally

They also agreed that the prevention of violence requires intentional and sustainable action by 'the whole of society', which means that everyone has a role to play and this begins with interrogating individual beliefs and behaviour that condone or support the use of violence. There is a need to address the underlying and deeply entrenched structural causes of violence which include poverty, inequality, racism and prejudice.

Areas of disagreement and misalignment were resolved through facilitated discussions. These included a robust debate about the distinction between reducing violence and ending violence. While reducing violence seemed to be a more realistic and achievable goal than ending violence, referring to the reduction of violence alone did not reflect sufficiently the intention to build a society free of violence.

The researchers' definition was criticised for its reference to 'acts to change values'. It was argued that this did not make it sufficiently clear what values need to change and that the phrase might put off people who feel the need to defend their cultural beliefs and values.

It was felt that the definition developed by the policy makers focused too strongly on the individual, and the reference to the need to 'call out harm' did not speak strongly to prevention. The development partners' definition was found to be too wordy and was difficult to relate to.

These differences were easily resolved through discussion and the definition cited in the introduction was adopted.

## Next steps

Participants identified many opportunities to use and disseminate the definition. These included:

- Sharing it at national and international meetings, gatherings and on platforms such as the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide collaborative.
- The Equality Unit at Stellenbosch University<sup>12</sup> is involved in creating policy relating to the institutional response to gender-based violence and developing a gender-based-violence strategy for the institution. There is an opportunity for the definition to be presented to various stakeholders/partners within the university, especially those who work in the fields of violence prevention, gender and transformation.
- Save the Children South Africa will share the definition with its Child Rights Governance networks<sup>13</sup> and with the South African National Child Rights Coalition, a communications and advocacy body representing more than 150 civil society organisations that aims to promote, uphold and champion children's rights as 'an explicit national priority to be actioned by every organ of state.'<sup>14</sup>
- The German development agency, GIZ, has two violence-prevention programmes – the Violence and Crime Prevention programme, which is in its third phase of implementation, and the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls programme, which is in its first phase. GIZ plans to collaborate with social innovation laboratories to provide a platform on which stakeholders can share new ideas to strengthen violence-prevention work.
- GIZ supports the violence-prevention and school-safety work of the Department of Basic Education. The consolidated definition aligns adequately with

this process and will continue to bridge the gap between sectors.

- The consolidated definition was discussed and unpacked at the South African Parenting Programmes Implementors Network conference.

## Conclusion

The VPF definition of violence prevention addresses some the weaknesses identified in other definitions such as that of the World Health Organisation, the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and the 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security.<sup>15</sup> It acknowledges the structural factors and the harmful history of racism and oppression that still play a significant role in the daily lives of South Africans.

The definition will be available in all 11 official languages and sign language. A children's version will be developed by children in a facilitated process. The VPF hopes the definition will inform policy and advocacy to build a movement in support of ending violence in South Africa.

## Acknowledgements

The VPF's definition is a strong building block for dialogue and advocacy and a basis for developing indicators

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## Notes

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- 3 M M Amisi, *The Violence Prevention Forum: a model for intersectoral collaboration to prevent violence*, Evaluation Report, Institute for Security Studies and the Violence Prevention Forum, 2020.
- 4 Tarisai Mchuchu, Director, Mosaic, an NGO providing services to victims of gender-based violence (from the NGO sector).
- 5 Thamsanqa Mzaku, Director, Phaphama Initiatives, an NGO that builds communities by nurturing good human relationships.
- 6 Joan Moeketsi, GIZ Partnerships for Peace Programme (from the development partners sector).
- 7 Dr Nwabisa Shai, Gender and Health Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council (from the research sector).
- 8 Tshepiso Machabaphala, Gender focal point, Department of Health (from the government sector).
- 9 The NGO group included representatives from Phaphama Initiatives, Mosaic, Dlalanathi and Save the Children South Africa.
- 10 The researchers came from the Institute for Security Studies, the Equality Unit at Stellenbosch University, the Medical Research Council South Africa and the UWC School of Public Health.
- 11 The development partners and private sector included representatives from GIZ, Tshikululu and UNICEF.
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