The Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) is a multisectoral platform that supports the use of evidence to inform violence prevention in South Africa. There is growing interest in the VPF model locally and internationally – how it works, why organisations participate, whether the methodology is transferable, and what lessons have been learnt for multisectoral collaboration and dialogue. Using case studies, this report documents the experiences of the research sector in the VPF.
Key findings

- Participation in the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) strengthened researchers’ ability to translate their knowledge and findings for non-academic audiences. They were able to contribute to the collective sense-making of research findings.

- The VPF engages in systems change work because it intentionally embraces context, fosters relationships, disrupts hierarchies of power and seeks to transform sectoral dynamics to improve violence prevention efforts.

- Researchers are motivated to attend by the opportunity to promote evidence-based practices, and share and enhance the impact of their work.

- VPF participation has contributed to researchers feeling more confident in their ability to engage with policymakers and practitioners. It has built their confidence to express disagreement and manage workplace-based conflict in a healthy and transformative manner. It has also enabled them to build new networks.

- The VPF fosters connection and understanding, allowing researchers to empathise with other sectors’ perspectives and challenges. However, researchers had reservations about the activities and discussions that demanded emotional investment.

- Although findings show that the VPF effected change among researchers in several ways, it is less clear what the impact was on their institutions.

Recommendations

- Conveners of multisectoral collaborations or dialogues must create space for researchers to hear other sectors’ experiences, challenges and perspectives. This fosters empathetic understanding across sectors and facilitates the building of trusting relationships.

- Researchers who want to influence policy need to be willing to actively listen to policymakers and implementers to understand their needs. In this way, research can be informed by the needs of the end-users and will be more likely to be used.

- Universities and funders should encourage researchers to learn from practitioners and policymakers and understand their research needs and form partnerships with implementers of programmes and interventions, so that research can inform practice. Researchers should be encouraged to see research knowledge as complementary to practice-based knowledge.
Introduction

In South Africa, interpersonal violence is a serious problem. The South African Police Service’s annual crime statistics show that 25,181 murders were recorded by the police in 2021/22. This is a rate of 42 murders per 100,000 people. From April to June 2023, 895 women and 293 children were murdered.

Violence is a highly complex issue for which there isn’t just one single cause. Poverty, socio-economic inequality, unemployment, hunger and violence-supporting norms are risk factors for violence that are amplified by the legacy of an unjust past, economic exclusion and intergenerational cycles of trauma. The adverse impact of violence on individuals, families and society at large has been established extensively.

Several sectors are actively working to prevent and reduce violence in South Africa, including the government, researchers, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). An innovative model for enabling violence prevention efforts is the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF), which has been convened by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) since 2015. The VPF is a multisectoral platform for continuous dialogue and relationship building among stakeholders working in the broad field of violence prevention in the country. The goal of the VPF is to advance the uptake and scale-up of evidence-informed interventions to reduce and prevent violence in the country.

The public health sector’s emphasis on prevention gave credence to the idea that violence was preventable

The VPF was formally evaluated in 2020. The evaluation found that the VPF achieved its objectives of knowledge translation and brokering, and relationship and capacity building, through skilled facilitation and credible, competent convening. There is growing interest in the VPF model both locally and internationally. There is curiosity about how the forum works; why organisations participate in the forum; whether the methodology is transferable and suitable for scale-up; and what lessons have been learnt for successful multisectoral collaboration and dialogue. This provided the impetus for the ISS to conduct further research on the VPF. Three case studies were conducted to document the experiences of key partners participating in the forum – government, NGOs, and the research sectors.

This case study focuses on research organisations that are partners of the VPF. It seeks to document the impact of the VPF on researchers and their organisations through a systems change lens. This study contributes to the literature on effective multisectoral collaborations and dialogue processes to enhance violence prevention efforts.

The paper begins by contextualising the research sector and the South African violence prevention system, followed by a detailed description of the VPF since 2015. A literature review identifies the critical elements of effective multisectoral dialogue to support violence prevention efforts. The research methodology is then outlined, followed by the findings and a discussion of their implications for the forum itself, for the research sector, and for efforts to replicate the process elsewhere.

Background

In 1996, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared violence a global public health issue. This was a pivotal moment because violence was presented as more than a crime problem. The public health sector’s emphasis on prevention gave credence to the idea that violence was preventable. Subsequently, the ecological model for violence was conceptualised. This model posits that violence occurs as a consequence of a complex interplay between individual, familial, community and societal factors. The model demonstrated that violence could be prevented and responded to at different levels.

Since then, there have been global shifts towards violence prevention. However, this has been incremental at best since criminal justice system responses continue to be the primary mechanism governments use to address violence, despite evidence indicating otherwise.

In 2021, the VPF undertook a multisectoral consultation to co-create a definition of violence prevention. This was necessary because until 2021 the participants had struggled to clearly define violence prevention, and the WHO definition did not adequately address the underlying structural factors that drive violence, emphasising rather the individual risk factors for violence.
The VPF defines violence prevention as ‘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.’ This is the definition used in this study. 

Overview of violence prevention in South Africa

No single sector, nor the government alone, can address a problem as big and complex as violence. Instead, violence can be prevented and addressed by adopting a multisectoral and collaborative approach. Several South African policies, including the 2022 Integrated Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy, the 2020 National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide, and the 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security, recognise this. However, achieving effective multisectoral collaboration requires trusting relationships between sectors in the violence prevention ecosystem.

In its broadest conceptualisation, the violence prevention ecosystem comprises all individuals, organisations and sectors working to prevent violence and create conditions for wellbeing in South Africa. The key sectors in the ecosystems for the VPF are policymakers in health, education, social development and treasury; researchers; and NGO representatives.

Effective collaboration requires trusting relationships between sectors in the violence prevention ecosystem

There is a great deal of violence prevention work happening in South Africa. Policymakers in government create policies to enable the state to meet the country’s needs and achieve its development priorities. NGOs are on the frontline to deliver violence prevention interventions and services to communities.

There are more than 150 000 NGOs in South Africa. Many of these are working to address the risk factors for violence to augment government services. Research indicates that NGOs provide more than 90% of social welfare services. While the government provides some funding to NGOs, it is not enough to meet the demand and survive. There is a power imbalance between the government and NGOs. As such, they have had an adversarial relationship characterised by judgement, hostility and mistrust. In the context of limited resources, NGOs see each other as competition.

The research sector has generated a significant body of evidence of the scale and nature of violence in South Africa. Researchers are also generating a body of evidence on what works to prevent violence and what doesn’t. Researchers intend for this research to inform violence prevention
policies, funding, and the scale-up of interventions. But this has seldom been the case, leaving researchers feeling frustrated that the government does not apply the evidence.18

On the other hand, policymakers have reported that the evidence generated did not address their policy and practice needs. The gap between existing evidence and translation of its use for policy, programming, and practice has led to growth in implementation research. This is research that specifically explores the factors that impact the implementation of programmes or interventions.19

Communicating research findings in academic language can render knowledge inaccessible to government and NGOs

Those who occupy positions in academia and research tend to believe that their knowledge is superior. Because researchers produce evidence and knowledge, they believe and are perceived to be ‘knowledge keepers’ that hold rank and power.20

Rank, as conceptualised by Amy Mindell, refers to the power held by an individual compared to others in a context.21 The elevated rank that researchers can hold may complicate relationships with NGOs and the government. Many researchers do not see value in building and sustaining relationships with policymakers and practitioners, and vice versa, so that research can be informed by the needs of other sectors. When researchers communicate their findings using academic language, it can render the knowledge inaccessible to governments and NGO representatives. Policy makers need the policy implications of research findings to be made clear. However, researchers are not trained to do this, and may inadvertently assume that NGO workers and government officials do not have the knowledge or expertise to engage meaningfully. This risks ‘defensiveness on the part of implementers and policymakers and leaves the implementer or policymaker and the researcher frustrated.’22

For NGOs, research seldom adequately addresses their immediate needs, and may not consider the knowledge, experiences and perceptions held by communities and implementers as important.23 It is widely accepted that practice-based knowledge is not valued in the same way as research evidence is.24 Researchers may undermine or undervalue practice-based knowledge held by government and NGOs despite themselves not always having implementation knowledge or expertise. The disconnect between practice and evidence-based knowledge is a challenge to relevant evidence generation.25 Researchers have increasingly started to recognise this, and subsequently, a growing interest in knowledge brokering and translation work has emerged to fill this gap.26

While multisectoral collaborations were present before the VPF started, the sectors did not understand how each other worked, and much time was spent complaining about what other sectors were or were not doing.27 This was a challenge to meaningful multisectoral collaboration. It was therefore recognised that a different form of engagement was required – one that was meaningful, inclusive and genuine. This is why the VPF was created.

Violence Prevention Forum

The VPF is a multisectoral dialogue for relationship building, knowledge sharing, and collaboration for stakeholders working in violence prevention.28 It was established in 2015. It meets twice a year, over two days. At the time of writing, the VPF had met 17 times, most recently in October 2023.

The VPF theory of change holds that if government officials, researchers and NGOs are to collaborate in pursuit of shared goals (such as reducing violence), then individuals and institutions from these sectors need to be in relationship with one another, and those relationships must be sufficiently trusting. The VPF was based on the hypothesis that building trust and strengthening relationships across sectors would lead to better knowledge generation and sharing, which would ultimately strengthen efforts to prevent violence in South Africa.

The forum has the following objectives:

- Influence and inform national action by sharing and disseminating information about programmes to
prevent violence that have been developed and are being, or have been, tested in South Africa.

- Arrive at a common understanding and agreed definition of what we mean by ‘evidence’ of programme effect.
- Arrive at a common understanding of what we mean by ‘prevention’ and the spectrum of programmes required to address the factors that perpetuate cycles of violence.
- Provide a space within which strong, healthy relationships can be built across sectors with the purpose of enabling the scale-up of evidence-based programmes.
- Identify what is needed to enable such scale-up and work towards creating the conditions in which this is possible.
- Provide a central repository for information about evidence-based programmes that meet the needs of NGOs and government departments that will implement them.
- Provide or facilitate an approach to address violence against women and children that brings coherence and alignment to the services provided at the community level by government and NGOs. In 2020 a theory of change was developed to map the logic of the VPF. It identifies three pathways for achieving the ultimate objective that evidence-informed interventions reduce and prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa:
  - Building trusting relationships across sectors and strengthening the workforce
  - Multisectoral collaboration and partnerships
  - Knowledge brokering and translation

The ISS convenes the VPF. It is responsible for arranging meetings, raising funds, mobilising resources, and setting the objectives for meetings based on an informed assessment of the socio-economic and political environment, and on the needs and interests of those in the violence prevention ecosystem. The convener works closely with the facilitators to develop the meeting process, based on these objectives. The convener is supported by a VPF coordinator, a junior researcher who has administrative, logistical and project management duties.

A multisectoral driver group provides strategic direction to the VPF. The group comprises representatives from research organisations, government, NGOs and development partners. This group informs the assessment of the environment and needs of relevant sectors that guides forum meetings. The group’s role is to offer strategic guidance to the structure, purpose and focus of the VPF and its meetings. After meetings, the group reflects on the meeting to learn lessons, infer future direction, and assess the recent meeting.

Driver group membership is voluntary and flexible. At the time of writing, it comprised 10 members, including the coordinator, convener, and facilitators. The driver group consists of a minimum of five and maximum of 12 members. Two research organisations participate in the driver group.

Chart 1 depicts a timeline of the research sector’s journey in the VPF.

**Participation**

More than 200 people have participated in the forum, and six sectors have engaged since 2015, including:

- Research institutions, including think tanks, academics from universities, and parastatal research institutions
- NGOs that deliver services or implement violence prevention interventions
- Government officials from national and provincial departments
- The private sector
- Development partners/donors
- International NGOs

VPF meetings are defined by a theme or topic. The conveners and driver group inform which specific people and institutions are invited to meetings. Their decisions are based on the theme or topic and its relevance to the intended participant and the contribution they can make to the discussions. Participation is thus fluid and changes from meeting to meeting. However, the conveners ensure that there is sufficient overlap in participation to make the process meaningful and to enable continuity.
Chart 1: Research timeline of the VPF

- **2015**: The SAMRC provides a short presentation on Sishokho, an evidence-based programme to reduce and prevent sexual violence.

- **2016**: Cornerstone Economic Research attends for the first time.

- **2017**: A series of three policy briefs emanating from discussions in the VPF are published. The briefs make the case for violence prevention and identify opportunities for supporting scale-up through multi-sectoral collaboration and research.

- **2018**: The ISS partners with the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results and African Centre for Evidence to map the evidence of interventions to prevent violence against women and children.

- **2019**: The SAMRC hosts the eighth VPF. The evidence map of interventions to prevent violence against women and children is published.

- **2020**: A formal evaluation of the VPF is published. Participation from the Children’s Institute starts to decline.

- **2021**: The SAMRC hosted a stall at the 16th VPF showcasing its research on what works to prevent violence against women, information on a sexual violence risk reduction programme, and other research publications on violence against women and children.

- **2022**: The ISS presents research on the delivery and scale-up of violence prevention programmes in South Africa.

- **2022**: The Centre of Excellence in Human Development at Wits presents research on the impact of experiences of adverse childhood events and violence on human development.

>200 PEOPLE HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE VPF SINCE 2015
Other factors that inform participation include ensuring that:

- Representation from the various sectors is balanced
- There is a racial balance that reflects the country’s demographics
- There is a balance in the gender of participants

The fluidity in participation enables the network to grow and enables participants to meet new people every time they attend. The fluidity also ensures that stakeholders most relevant to the topic of the meeting are present.

The VPF is not a membership-based forum and attendance is voluntary. The forum is intentionally flexible and iterative. This enables it to respond to developments in the country and the violence prevention ecosystem, and thus allows organisations to attend meetings most relevant to them.

Another defining feature of the VPF is its application of values. The VPF is underpinned by seven values that were co-created at the third meeting. Great care is put into ensuring the values are upheld and understood by participants. These values are presented in Chart 2 below.

These values are central to the forum. Since the values were co-created with participants, there is a sense of ownership over them. The application of the values is taken seriously, and if they are disregarded (e.g., if a participant communicates in ways that are disrespectful), the values allow for a discussion about the violation of the value, and for participants to be held to account for their behaviour. A value-driven process aids in defining the rules of engagement of the meetings.

Unlike the other six values, deep democracy is not commonly used in public discourse. Deep democracy posits that all voices and opinions are welcome, including those that are perceived as ‘dissenting’ voices. Its application is important among stakeholders with historically strained relationships. It disrupts power and rank by ensuring no voice is given more credence than others while enabling participants to engage in frank dialogue without fear of judgement or recourse. This way of meeting and of valuing knowledge might be disruptive for researchers, particularly those in academic institutions where rank is concomitant to authority and more voice on a given topic.

**Charts:**

**Chart 2: VPF values**

- Respect
- Empathy
- Deep democracy
- Active listening
- Commitment and courage
- Collaboration and partnerships
- Fun

Meetings are process-led rather than agenda-driven – meaning they’re designed with a process that achieves the objectives of the meeting. Process-led meetings are emergent and flexible as opposed to agenda-driven meetings, which are rigid. This ensures that the meeting achieves its objectives, even if it means a deviation from the original plan.

Since meetings are intended to build resilient relationships across and within sectors, highly skilled facilitators are key to their success. The VPF facilitators have decades of experience in peacebuilding, gender transformation, conflict resolution and leadership development. Through their facilitation techniques, they create a safe, nurturing space for participants to engage.

Meetings are facilitated in a way that deliberately disrupts power hierarchies and breaks down sectoral barriers in two ways. Firstly, there are no preferential seating arrangements at meetings; participants sit in a circle. A senior researcher might sit next to a junior researcher, or a programme implementer. First names are used as opposed to titles to remove rank among participants. Secondly, the forum values all forms of ideas and knowledge. This aims to create space for practice-based knowledge that is often undervalued in formal spaces. Researchers, NGOs and officials alike have an opportunity to share their views, and contributions are valued equally.
In 2021, a new initiative was developed after the ISS noticed that VPF feedback forms showed that participants valued the facilitation method used in the forum, leading to increasing requests for process facilitation from VPF participants. Therefore the ISS, along with two other organisations, Reos Partners and Leadership Pathways, both with expertise in dealing with complex challenges, partnered to develop the VPF facilitation course to build facilitation capacity among those who wanted to bring the VPF facilitation approach into their environments.

The intention was to build a cohort of facilitators across sectors who could design participatory processes, hold more effective and inclusive dialogue, and deepen relationships across sectors. The course was delivered thrice to more than 40 facilitators working in violence prevention, including from research institutions such as the Human Sciences Research Council, South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and Sexual Violence Research Initiative. Course evaluation forms and individual feedback reveal that participants use some of the facilitation techniques in their organisations and have noted positive changes as a result.

**Systems change**

The VPF aims to change the way in which people from various sectors, who all have a role to play in the prevention of violence, collaborate, share knowledge and allocate resources to violence prevention. In this way it aims to enhance the way different components of the violence prevention ecosystem function in relation to one another, and how they might achieve greater societal impact. For this reason, it makes sense to examine the VPF as a systems change intervention. This section provides a brief literature review of systems change as the central theoretical framework used in this study. The literature review also explores what is meant by multisectoral collaboration, relationship building and knowledge brokering as the central pathways to change in the VPF’s theory of change.

Systems change has emerged as a way of thinking about complex social problems. Conventional thinking within the fields of public policy and intervention development tend to adopt a linear, one-size-fits-all, siloed approach to solving social problems. This approach tends to be ineffective when addressing technically complex or politically sensitive issues like violence, and may explain why these kinds of problems persist despite efforts to address them.

Systems change offers a paradigm shift in how complex social problems are understood and addressed. Systems change recognises social problems as, firstly, existing within a system. A ‘system’ is defined as ‘an interconnected set of elements coherently organized in a way that achieves something. It is more than the sum of its parts.’ Therefore, change in one part of the system can result in shifts in an interrelated part. Secondly, a systems change approach recognises that social problems are complex, unpredictable and messy, and that attempts to address them must embrace these characteristics.

Systems change takes a holistic view of the system, focusing on the complexity, depth and scale of problems

At the simplest level, systems change posits that social change occurs by altering *how the system functions*. The logic of the approach is that “significant improvements in the outcomes of a targeted population (e.g., reduced mental health problems in children; increased employment rate for people with disabilities) will not occur unless the surrounding system (e.g., service delivery system) adjusts to accommodate the desired goals.”

Therefore, a systems change approach requires awareness of the people, institutions, norms, policies, events, actions, relationships, and contexts that indirectly or directly have influence on or are affected by a problem. This holistic view of the system means focusing on the complexity, depth and scale of problems.

An awareness of how power operates within the system is essential. More importantly, systems thinking shifts attention to invisible forms of power. For example, unequal power dynamics between people, organisations or sectors, in status, rank and position, will generally exclude marginalised groups in decision-making.
processes. As such, scholars assert that systems change work must deliberately aim to disrupt hierarchies of power and existing paradigms that maintain social problems.\textsuperscript{51}

A focus on disrupting power dynamics within a system is what Cynthia Rayner and François Bonnici refer to as a ‘transformational’ approach to systems change.\textsuperscript{52} It assumes system dynamics must be completely reconfigured, including norms and beliefs that underpin behaviours and actions.

They identify three principles of system change:

- Foster connection: actors doing systems change build new identities and relationships that keep the group together.
- Embrace context: actors doing systems change embrace the complexity and changing contexts of the system and adapt accordingly.
- Reconfigure power: actors doing systems change dismantle power hierarchies to disrupt the status quo.\textsuperscript{53}

The VPF seeks to bridge gaps in the system that may hamper the use of knowledge to prevent violence

Various theorists explain how interventions, like the VPF, occur within, and need to be aware of how they operate as part of, a system. Penelope Hawe and colleagues posit that interventions are ‘events in a system’ because they do not exist independently of the system they are trying to change.\textsuperscript{54} Graham Moore et al. argue that interventions aim to alter social conditions and ‘can only be defined with reference to the system dynamics it attempts to disrupt.’\textsuperscript{55} Context is, therefore, essential. Overlooking context or failing to understand how an intervention interacts with it will likely undermine all efforts.\textsuperscript{56}

This conceptualisation of interventions requires participants in systems events to be cognisant that they are also part of the system. Practically, this means each organisation recognises their function in the system and how their actions impact others.\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, an orientation towards the interrelationships between components and how they connect to the broader functioning of the system is key to identifying leverage points for change.\textsuperscript{58}

Through its design, the VPF emphasises connections between individuals and organisations and seeks to bridge gaps in the system that may hamper the use of knowledge and evidence to prevent violence. It was particularly important to the VPF that researchers be connected to the sectors their research aims to influence, and in ways that are mutually beneficial. The VPF conveners (including the driver group) recognised that research institutions are part of the knowledge economy. They are shaped by how research is funded, what is considered credible knowledge, and the incentives that exist or are absent for academics to engage with other sectors.

**Multisectoral collaboration**

Research shows that multisectoral collaboration is an important element of systems change work.\textsuperscript{59} This makes it an essential component of successful violence prevention efforts. Multisectoral collaboration is an intentional process in which people from different sectors work together to achieve specific outcomes or goals.\textsuperscript{60} It is not an extractive or consultative process. Collaboration is fundamentally about multi-directional influence and communication between stakeholders in mutually beneficial relationships.\textsuperscript{61} Importantly, in collaboration participants have dual roles, as participants of a collaborative process, and as representatives of their respective organisations.\textsuperscript{62}

Research reveals many benefits of using multisectoral collaboration to achieve strategic change. It is based on the premise that people can achieve more by working together than alone.\textsuperscript{63} Multisectoral collaboration intends to open participation to a broader range of stakeholders.\textsuperscript{64} It enables groups to pool their collective expertise and resources to analyse problems comprehensively.\textsuperscript{65} Research by Hardy et al. and Pennie Foster-Fishman et al. demonstrates that this enables stakeholders to examine the problem from multiple, often competing, perspectives, which can shift how the problem is conceptualised, and allows space for creative solutions.\textsuperscript{66}

Research has identified several elements of effective multisectoral collaboration. The first is what Chris Ansell and Alison Gash call ‘institutional design’ and refers to the structure of the collaboration.\textsuperscript{67} They assert
that collaborations must be defined by agreed-on rules of engagement. Multisectoral collaborations must also be value-led.\textsuperscript{58} Research underscores the importance of having inclusive multisectoral processes, that should accommodate differences in demographics, experiences, resources and information.\textsuperscript{59} This means deliberately including marginalised groups since they are usually excluded from decision-making and solution-orientated processes. Creating space for marginalised voices can illuminate dissenting insights into the problem and enables inclusive decision making, as embodied by the application of deep democracy.\textsuperscript{70} Relatedly, decisions \textit{must} be made collectively.\textsuperscript{71} This creates ownership of the decision. Applying these aspects of institutional design legitimises the collaborative process and shows that it is fair and open.\textsuperscript{72}

Inclusive multisectoral processes deliberately include marginalised groups since they are usually excluded from decision-making and solution-orientated processes

Multisectoral collaboration also requires leadership that is open, trustworthy and accountable. Leaders are responsible for convening and guiding the collaborative process.\textsuperscript{73} Ansell and Gash show that successful collaborations tend to have governance structures rather than one leader. The VPF leadership structure is an example of this.

Hardy et al. identify three challenges facing multisectoral collaboration.\textsuperscript{74} Firstly, it requires participants to collaborate despite being from separate organisations with different working methods and possibly opposing philosophies. Secondly, it brings together stakeholders who are not only different but often also have strained relationships and unequal power relations (e.g., government and researchers).

Expecting meaningful multisectoral engagement in a context of historical inequalities may seem unrealistic. However, the aim of multisectoral collaborations is, among others, to transform strained relationships. This depends on whether participants are willing to work on these issues.\textsuperscript{75} For this reason, the VPF puts concerted effort into breaking down sectoral barriers and rebuilding trusting relationships.

This understanding of systems change and collaboration is used in this research to assess the participation of research institutions in the VPF and the contribution of the VPF to changes in violence prevention in South Africa. This will be discussed in greater detail after the findings in this report.

\textbf{Methodology}

This research took a case study approach which aims to generate rich data that embraces complexity, thereby enabling an analysis of the "uniqueness of the individual case."\textsuperscript{76} By homing in on details, it allows the research to
uncover distinctions and comparisons of experiences. Understanding the case of researchers in the VPF provides insight into how to maintain the participation of research institutions and strengthen the forum’s work.

This case study forms part of a large research project that includes case studies of government and NGO participation in the VPF. The three case studies were carried out by three researchers in a way that was independent but mutually reinforcing. Weekly project meetings of the three researchers and the lead investigator enabled sharing of learnings and reflections on all three sectors.

This case study draws inspiration from the realism framework pioneered by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley. Realism is concerned with how interventions work and in what context. It is ideal for researching interventions with evidence of impact, but that lack clarity on how and why the impact occurs, as is the case with the VPF. The realist framework seeks to illuminate the underlying mechanisms that lead to impact. Pawson and Tilley’s four-point conceptual framework on interventions closely aligns with the aforementioned systems change approach:

- Interventions are theories – because they are based on theories about what results in social problems and how to address them.
- Interventions are embedded in a context.
- Interventions are active in that they require action by participants.
- Interventions are ‘open systems’ – meaning external developments and events shape them.

Realism recognises that interventions are situated within systems and seeks to understand how change occurs within a system.

Cases were selected based on the individual researcher and their institution having participated in the forum for at least two years. The driver group approved the selection of the cases. Six potential research participants were invited to participate, and all accepted. All researchers who participated in the study were in senior positions.

Since 2015, some participants have transitioned roles between sectors. One participant interviewed for the NGO case study, for example, had moved into a position in the research sector. For this reason, data that was relevant to understanding the research sector was shared with this case study by the researcher who conducted the NGO case study, with the respondent’s permission.

A total of ten individuals agreed to participate in the case study.

- Two individuals from Cornerstone Economic Research
- One current and one former researcher from the South African Medical Research Council
- One current and one former researcher from the Children’s Institute
- One former researcher from Save the Children South Africa who has since moved to a position at the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS)
- The two primary VPF facilitators (Leadership Pathways and Phaphama Initiatives)
- The convener (ISS)

Four research organisations participated in the study. A brief profile of each organisation is provided below.

South African Medical Research Council

The SAMRC was formed in 1969 and is a leading public health and clinical-focused research organisation in South Africa. The SAMRC aims to produce evidence-based research to influence health policy and practice to improve the country’s health and address health inequities. The organisation comprises many research units. The Gender and Health Research Unit is an active participant in the VPF. The unit produces evidence-based research relevant to understanding, responding to and preventing gender-based violence (GBV) and its associated health and social impact on South African women. The research is intended to inform GBV and related policies, healthcare services, develop GBV and related interventions, and improve health outcomes for women. The SAMRC has participated in 13 VPF meetings since 2015 until present, and is also represented on the driver group.
Children’s Institute

The Children’s Institute is located within the University of Cape Town and is committed to the interests of children. The institute informs law, programmes and policies that realise the rights of children, and protect them, through advocacy, training, technical support and research. Explicitly evidence-based, the institute’s research areas consist of five thematic areas: childhood poverty and inequality, early childhood development, violence against children, children and COVID-19, and the intersections between violence against children and violence against women. The Children’s Institute participated in nine meetings from 2015 until 2020. It resumed participation in 2023.

DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development

The DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development is located at WITS. It aims to produce quality research on human development issues in the country and how to create conditions for human wellbeing. To achieve this, the centre is inter-disciplinary across social, psychological, biological and public health disciplines. It focuses on three research areas: life course development, inter-generational development, and socio-ecological and transformational development. The person who has attended and participated in the forum on behalf of the centre previously worked for an international NGO that was also a participant in the forum. The participant attended three meetings in the previous position, and one representing the centre.

Cornerstone Economic Research

Cornerstone Economic Research has been at the forefront in developing costing methodologies and Excel-based costing models that enable policymakers to plan implementation with a better understanding of the costs of the targeted outcomes. The costing of policies, especially social policies with outcomes that promote equality and redress, is a key step in ensuring that governments can deliver on their commitments. Cornerstone also works with NGOs to advocate for expanded access to public funding for violence prevention programmes, child protection and children’s rights. It has attended 13 meetings since 2017 and is a member of the driver group.
Data

Primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews consisting of pre-determined questions and allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. An interview guide was developed in preparation for the interviews. Participants were interviewed virtually, via Zoom, or face-to-face. The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were recorded with participants’ permission. They were transcribed using Cockatoo, an artificial intelligence transcription software. Transcripts were manually edited for accuracy.

One interview had two participants. The three researchers conducted three group interviews: one for each VPF facilitator and one with the convener.

An extensive document review was conducted. It included VPF meeting reports, driver group meeting minutes and VPF meeting evaluation forms. The document review was used to triangulate the interview data. Using multiple data sources enables a more thorough analysis of the research topic.

Ethical considerations

The ISS’s research ethics committee provided ethical clearance for this project. During the interview, participants could state whether anything they revealed should not be included in the study. Participants were informed that due to the small number of cases, it was likely not possible to anonymise responses fully. Doing so could remove the meaning of the findings and limit their usefulness. Participants were given the opportunity to review a complete draft of this report and could request reasonable amendments or remove references to their responses.

Findings

Motivation to participate in the VPF

Over the past eight years (2015 to 2023) the research organisations represented in this case study have maintained high and stable participation in the VPF.

• Cornerstone Economic Consulting has attended 10 meetings
• SAMRC has attended 15 meetings
• Children’s Institute has attended nine meetings
• WITS’s participant has attended two meetings, and three meetings in her previous position

Two central themes emerged regarding researchers’ motivations for attending the VPF meetings: to promote evidence-based practices by sharing research evidence to drive violence prevention forward; and to enhance the impact of their work.

Researchers see the VPF as a platform to promote evidence-based research and share their expertise on how to best prevent violence, as described in these two quotes:

Initially, my sense was that I was contributing what I knew, my evidence to that group [the VPF]. I was able to provide some of my insights.
– Researcher 6 (R6)

We were invited, initially, to discuss how to promote evidence-based programmes … whatever learnings we got around interventions and how to understand what impact there is and also how to get the ball rolling on people adopting evidence-based programmes.
– R3

Narrative analysis ‘is particularly powerful for understanding the fullness and uniqueness of human existence’

The data was analysed using a thematic narrative approach. Narrative analysis recognises how people use stories to make sense of their lives, convey meaning, share knowledge and create connections. It offers insight into sense-making and is ‘particularly powerful for understanding the fullness and uniqueness of human existence.’ Narratives provide rich descriptions that reveal how participants attributed meaning to their experiences.

Thematic narrative analysis is concerned with the content of stories. It involves coding narratives and identifying themes and subthemes within them. The approach enables analysis ‘not just across but also within the narratives told by one person or a number of people about a similar issue, such as experiences’ of the VPF.
While researchers recognised the importance of promoting evidence-based interventions to NGOs, it was equally important to be able to present their findings to government.

We had always been grappling with how to engage government and also NGOs to use evidence-based programmes. — R3

Engaging with government officials was viewed as particularly important because government had not been allocating sufficient resources to violence prevention interventions and services. At the same time, research showed that some interventions were ineffective or created further harm – this was also important for government officials to know.

You’re able to call people from those networks to ask for information, and those are networks that I would not have had before attending the VPF. So, from that point of view, I think it’s been very beneficial. — R1

The VPF enabled researchers to have access to and engage with people they would otherwise not have known. This has opened up new relevant audiences for their work and also provided access to further information and resources to enhance the quality and relevance of their work to these new audiences.

This finding supports the ‘relationship-building pathway’ captured in the VPF’s theory of change. The pathway theorises that through the VPF, participants can foster good, trusting relationships with each other. Relationships are built within and across sectors, resulting in an exchange of information and evidence. This facilitates increased multisectoral collaboration and improved communication and coordination between sectors.

One researcher explained that the VPF motivated her to consistently disseminate her work to get the message to land.

We’re so focused on writing papers, and you have to publish. But once you write it and you publish it, it’s done. But with [the convener], often I have presented the same presentation. And I’m like, again? We’re literally pushing the message, which also became a realisation that you have to push your message. You have to get it out there. You can’t publish something and then say the evidence is there. — R7

The VPF allows researchers to present their work to a multisectoral audience, including decision makers.

It was important for the conveners of the dialogue to remain attuned to gaps in participants’ knowledge and to notice what information would be valuable for participants of the forum. For example, it became clear in the third meeting of the forum that participants needed to understand how the government budgeting process worked. In response, and with support from a development partner (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH), Cornerstone Economic Research delivered a series of workshops on the government budget processes, NGOs, researchers and officials.

Researchers were also motivated to participate in the VPF because it provides an opportunity to enhance the impact of their work by building relationships and accessing a wider network.

There’s always investment in networks and time to maximise the impact of one’s work. That’s one of our primary concerns. We want to see the work that we do having impact. And the Violence Prevention Forum is one of those channels where we can build relationships that enhance the impact of our work. — R2

The VPF allows researchers to present their work to a multisectoral audience, including those with decision-making power, like development partners and policymakers. Though this is not entirely unique to the VPF, the VPF offers a space where there is genuine engagement with the research so that the information is understood by and is useful to policymakers and practitioners. Also, unlike seminars and academic conferences, the VPF offers the opportunity for researchers to learn from practice and understand the policymaking process and the constraints policymakers face.
face. Through the VPF, researchers learn how to frame their messages and their work so that it is accessible to a diverse audience with different needs and interests.

**How the VPF impacts researchers and their work**

The findings indicate that various benefits and positive experiences result from researchers’ participation in the VPF. Three themes emerged around what worked for researchers.

- The VPF creates a space conducive to multisectoral collaboration
- The VPF fosters connection and empathetic understanding across sectors
- The VPF is shifting how researchers translate their research evidence

**Space for multisectoral engagement in violence prevention**

Researchers appreciated how the VPF creates an enabling space for people working in the violence prevention ecosystem to hear and see each other’s work and perspectives.

With violence prevention, you’ve got little bits in various departments, and I think the VPF kind of creates a space for the different pieces to come together. It’s not always as effective as you would like it to be, but it does create that space of a sort of coordination body where we can formulate a direction because there is not one department that directs violence prevention. – R2

They’ve [the VPF] been really good at convening, bringing people together ... I think they’ve done that incredibly well. It was important for us to be part of the VPF because I think bringing those role players together is important. – R6

Participants recognised the uniqueness of the VPF in bringing stakeholders together to engage in dialogue in ways that do not privilege research-based knowledge. One VPF facilitator explains why the simple act of creating space is significant.

In the meetings, the main thing was to open that space where people can really share what they’re noticing. We all came with what we’ve grabbed from different spaces, but then, in the meeting, the space was not just about experts talking about research. It was also for people to bring relevant issues [on violence prevention] and the implications of it. Implementers or people within the community talking about what’s happening ... Because of the creation of that space, the learning to keep up with everything in the space [the ecosystem] was accelerated because of the nature in which the meetings are held. – R9

‘The nature in which the meetings are held’ refers to how meetings are conducted. This links to the second reason participants valued the VPF: they recognised the value of creating an environment for empathetic, inclusive dialogue.

Whoever came up with the idea of bringing in facilitation skills was right on point because I believe it was the same facilitation skills that harmonised the space and [made] it more inclusive for all the voices to be heard. – R4

Researcher 4 highlights how the VPF methods foster inclusivity. The embodiment of deep democracy and sitting in a circle was perceived to level the playing field by disrupting rank between participants.

I think the circle format is very important because it levels the playing field. And that is especially important when one is dealing with the government vis-à-vis NGOs. – R2

First of all, everyone matters and every voice matters. There are principles that help guide that to make it a reality, like deep democracy. The VPF is levelling the hierarchy. This doesn’t mean taking away people’s titles that they have whether they had government officials or companies or a CEO in that space [the VPF], ‘everyone matters’ means we are equal thinkers and contributors. So that means that practically when you are engaged with, you are not engaged with as a CEO or as a local practitioner; you’re engaged with as an equal thinker that has an equal contribution to the conversation. – R9
By genuinely upholding the co-developed values, the VPF successfully enables dialogue on tough issues in the ecosystem.

It’s about opening spaces where there could be open dialogue on difficult issues. I think the VPF does that well. They’re recognised for what they’re doing in that way, of bringing partners together, being able to get a common understanding around certain issues and moving the agenda forward.

– R6

I’ve been working in the field but not properly equipped to be able to deal with the dynamics. What the [VPF facilitation] course actually helps you to do is to create a conducive environment for us as GBV practitioners or as researchers.

– R4

**Fostering empathetic appreciation**

Prioritising relationship building fosters empathy and understanding across sectors. With the help of skilled facilitators, and the application of values, participants feel safe enough to be themselves. Participants are encouraged to bring their personal lives into the meetings. Although this is an unconventional way of meeting, researchers recognised that it enabled them to have better relationships with other sectors.

You see people in a different light from just the cold heart. When you email someone and all you know about them is professional, you don’t know anything [about them]. But now, I see her in a different light. Not in a judgemental light; you realise that you’re all human, so your approach is different.

– R1

Each meeting begins with a round of check-in questions that all participants answer. The questions are reflective in nature and often require participants to share experiences or feelings.

I sometimes think, especially in the intro in the morning, it’s not just the normal sharing your name and your organisation, it’s sharing something massively deep and personal as well. It takes forever. Sometimes I think, ‘Let’s just get on with it. There’s work to be done.’ But then other days I feel like this is also the work. I don’t know where the balance is. Hearing 30–35 people sharing a five-minute thing can sometimes be frustrating, but you have to understand it serves some purpose.

– R1

Considerable time, roughly an hour, is allocated for the check-in session, which results in researchers feeling it is too time-consuming. Due to the personal nature of the sessions, it can become emotionally intense. Moreover, participants question the extent to which the forum has mechanisms to contain the emotionally charged aspects of the meeting sufficiently.

So, they demand of you to be emotional and dig deep, but I feel like there’s not enough protection.

– R1
You can only be vulnerable to each other if you provide a platform for closure as well and for holding those feelings. And it’s too far apart for it to be meaningful, to be honest. I come from a counselling background, and I think if you open up something in a room, unless you close it well and provide that holding environment through a space afterwards as well, you can’t do that with the kind of forethought that you’re wanting. – R6

For researchers, it is unclear how the emotional intensity of the VPF assists in driving the violence prevention agenda forward.

How do you then move forward if you’ve cried together? If you’ve dealt together with some of the issues that we all struggle with, and we need those spaces to do that, certainly, but is that what we need to move the agenda forward on violence prevention? Healing is important. How will that strategy enable us to strengthen our violence prevention response? – R6

While researchers understood the value of humanising the space, there were nonetheless reservations about it as well.

The VPF allows you or demands you to be very vulnerable and emotional and dig deep inside, so just the way they structure the meeting … I get frustrated sometimes. I want us to talk about action points and not feeling points. – R1

The touchy-feely stuff for me is hard; that’s just not my personality. So that is difficult for me. But I don’t necessarily think it has to change because I think I’ve gotten more comfortable with it. It’s still uncomfortable but it seems to bond the group. – R7

A possible explanation for participants’ reservations towards the personal aspects of the meetings is the expected objective nature of the research inquiry. Researchers are, for the most part, trained to be objective in their work. The widely accepted view of research and knowledge production is that researchers collect and analyse data objectively. In other words, a researcher’s individual opinions or feelings should have no place in the evidence-generation process. One can begin to see how the VPF, in actively aiming to disrupt this practice, can be challenging for researchers.

**VPF is shifting how researchers translate their research evidence**

Researchers said that understanding other sectors transformed their work across sectors and their communication.

The VPF changed how they translate their knowledge and evidence. Not only did the forum give researchers an opportunity to showcase their work to a multisectoral audience, but it also enabled them to know how to do so effectively.

I would say that the VPF’s impact has definitely been how our organisation thinks about and does our communications on research. I can’t really say how we develop research ideas, but definitely, the language used to communicate with different people. Doing knowledge translation in a way that really carries meaning that different audiences can understand. The VPF has done something else in terms of widening the scope of our relationships, people that we are able to talk to now, people that we are able to inform sometimes just on different things that we’re doing. There’s a lot of pride in the involvement in stakeholder relationships and the ease with which nowadays we can talk to people. – R3

For Researcher 3, being better able to translate their research enhanced the possibility that decision makers would engage with and apply their findings and recommendations, although they have not tracked their impact.

Participating in the VPF made the research organisation aware of the limitations to the way in which they had been communicating their research findings and enabled them to change their approach. For Researcher 7, knowledge translation meant making her research more meaningful and useful to policymakers and implementers. Researcher 7 explained that she created an infographic specifically for VPF participants because she understood that participants would be in a better position to understand her findings in a simple, visual format.
But also [what was valuable] was making more concrete the idea of research being useful. So translating it in ways that are useful. – R7

The VPF gives researchers awareness of the knowledge needs of practitioners which informed how the two institutions approached research communication. It also offers them an opportunity to tailor-make communication material for the practitioners in the VPF. This can have a direct impact on NGOs and policymakers in the VPF.

**VPF participation leads to personal and professional growth**

Researchers revealed how VPF participation led to personal and professional growth. Nearly all participants said it enabled them to grow their confidence, as shown in these quotes:

From a personal growth level, I think it [the VPF] assisted me in coming out of my shell a little bit. Building my own links, getting my own contracts, a lot of that has specifically come from working with the VPF group and maybe not completely just the VPF, but it played a big role in that personal development for me. – R1

Researcher 7 also referred to how the VPF increased her confidence:

Personally, it even gave me more confidence because I hate interacting with people. I’m not a social person. So being forced to do it and then getting such good feedback was really helpful. It built a lot of confidence, especially coming into my new role [at university]; I think I’ve carried more VPF with me [into the new role] than when I worked for an NGO. – R7

Researcher 3 reported a similar growth in confidence, saying the VPF enabled her to build the courage to express differences in opinion even with ‘very high-level people’ (R3). The growth in confidence attributed to participation in the VPF suggests that the forum is empowering. The convener offers an explanation for why this is important.

This methodology also forces you to confront your arrogance in a way. I think the kind of people who are drawn to research and academia are often introverted or often have a way of being that they won’t [let] their guard down. Ego and protecting yourself are like the rules of academia. Now you’ve walked into a space where … you’re important but no more important than that person, and your knowledge is nice but you don’t own the knowledge production in that space. I think it’s hard for researchers. – R10

A facilitator explained how initially researchers displayed their high rank in meetings, and how that had changed over time.

In the early years, they were a dominant voice, and they were also quite arrogant at times. That shifted completely. Now they bring their research with humility, and they ask, how can we support the implementing agents better? – R8

This was corroborated by the experience shared by one participant of how she became more aware of power relations while conducting research and her own positionality in the violence prevention ecosystem.

This approach also worked in changing our quality of research. It’s been a combination of ensuring that the power dynamics between the researchers, research assistants and participants get minimised, or if we are unable to minimise them … at least understand the positionalities of different people … there’s a new project that I’m going to be working on, on understanding violence. It’s going to use an approach that is more participatory and ensures inclusion of research participants’ voices. It’s going to get participants to become co-researchers in the work. What’s important is that it’s also strengthening the way I work in a way that is a bit more inclusive in how I do the research. – The participant requested anonymity for this section of the interview

The report of the 12th meeting shows that strengthening researchers’ awareness of their rank was discussed and ‘the researchers unpacked their positionality and concluded that they would need to work in reflexive ways and be aware of the multiplicity of other voices.’

It’s clear that the VPF led to personal and professional growth, and transformed how individual researchers...
communicated and undertook research. However, what’s less clear is what the impact was on their institutions, and it may be difficult to tell particularly for researchers who represent large institutions in academia. Only respondents from one research institution reported that their participation in the VPF shifted engagement with external stakeholders. Other respondents reported that their institutions were already engaging with the government prior to participation in the forum.

Benefits of the VPF facilitation course

The findings indicate that investment in the facilitation course complemented the VPF capacity-building workstream. There were four rollouts of the VPF facilitation course. Fourteen researchers representing five research organisations participated in the course. For Researcher 4, participation in the VPF facilitation course had a significant impact on the unit where they worked.

I think … the greatest impact was that because my colleagues had been learning about facilitation skills from the VPF, and including myself, we [took] some of the lessons back to the team. Over the years our team has become more cohesive. There was greater openness because of the benefits that had been observed from the VPF. Because of that, there was now openness even to talk about very sensitive issues. We went through a period where we had these sessions where we would just interrogate issues. There [were] a lot of issues that had been brought to bear that colleagues had been struggling with, mostly at an interpersonal level. But now this safe space was created for us. For the first time, I felt part of the team and the entire environment got transformed. It became an inclusive space that was respectful of the diversity that we had in the team.

– R4

Specifically, the course enabled the researcher and her colleagues to deal with interpersonal conflicts in a healthy way. In this way, conflict was transformed into a learning opportunity, which resulted in the unit being more inclusive while valuing diversity.

We always go into these facilitation spaces as people who have got it all together. And yet it’s not always true. From an equity point of view, why would we expect other people to be vulnerable with us as facilitators when we’re not willing to be vulnerable with other people. So, I feel like in that way that brings some level of equity and that it harmonises this space because we know that we have been vulnerable with other people.

– R4

The researchers recognised the strength and vulnerability required to share personal experiences of violence with the group, and reported that this further fostered empathetic understanding.
Challenges researchers’ experience in the VPF

Researchers pointed to a paradoxical and unintended consequence of building empathy and understanding between participants. Creating a harmonious, generous environment can make it difficult to raise disagreement, as exemplified in this quote.

“We’re all just very nice with each other. So it’s very difficult to disagree with or not hear someone’s, not include someone’s, voice if someone says something. I questioned why some sectors were left out of this particular study and then having to give an answer that sort of keeps everybody happy, I feel, is counterproductive. I don’t know, we’re all very nice.” – R1

This concern was also raised in the driver group. The minutes of a meeting held in January 2021 show that a researcher was ‘struck by a contradiction that was drawn between our intention and principle to engage in a deep democratic way and the observations that somehow the facilitation style of the forum may be silencing people and not allowing people to raise dissenting opinions.’

An example of this paradox is illustrated in the development of the shared definition of violence prevention. For the first six years of the forum, it operated without a shared definition of violence prevention. It developed a shared definition in 2021. Meeting evaluation forms show overall support for the process and definition. Participants expressed appreciation at the development of the definition:

“I like the fact that the VPF took time to define what violence prevention is. It’s a definition that was not available in the country.” – R4

The wisdom to get to a violence prevention definition has really great potential in getting everybody to pick a spot in the ecosystem and to own it. – R3

One researcher expressed challenges with the definition because it was too accommodating.

“It’s far too accommodating. It just covers every opinion that was raised during the process as opposed to providing some structure that enables one to move forward. There’s no harm in having an inclusive process. To move forward, one needs to be strategic at times and make choices that don’t necessarily make everybody happy.” – R2

While relationship building was valued, some organisations had good relationships with other sectors prior to VPF participation. The Children’s Institute already had strong relationships with state institutions before the VPF that enabled them to act strategically, as this participant explained.

“Our relationship [with government] changes. Sometimes we can be openly hostile. Sometimes they ask us to litigate against them. We have close enough relations that they can say, ‘Why don’t you take this matter to court?’ Because they know it’s the only way we’re going to get progress. Sometimes we work for them, but without ever being beholden to them. Sometimes we are adversarial within spaces or sometimes we’re in partnership with them.” – R5

Are there limits to dialogue?

Researchers also raised questions about the limitations of dialogue.

“There’s still a question mark for me about the power of dialogue, right? I think it’s incredibly important. In fact, it’s essential. And I’m not in any way suggesting that it shouldn’t happen. And the VPF does that superbly. But where I have question marks is, how far does it take us and what else is necessary to put in place?” – R5

This suggests that while the VPF is undoubtedly addressing a problem in the ecosystem, gaps remain. Researchers said they believed the VPF needed to be more advocacy- and action-oriented.

“It’s important for the VPF to continue working on … building … bridges. But in the same vein, there’s also going to be a need for more action coming out of the VPF.” – R6

Sometimes there needs to be a more adversarial approach [in engaging with the government]. Someone who’s in a position to be more directly aggressive with government has to do it. I can walk out of there [the VPF] going, ‘It doesn’t matter if we burn our bridges, we’re doing the
right thing. I will rebuild the bridges, but we have to burn the bridges.’ But the VPF can’t always do that. – R5

While this was a challenge, it was acknowledged that the VPF could not be everything for everyone, and that the driver group ultimately had to determine the parameters of the forum. Nevertheless, stronger connection and understanding of contextual realities also appear to have a positive impact.

We’re not frontline researchers or implementers; being in that group [the VPF] also helps us understand both sides of the implementation flow … it also just gives us a better understanding of the work when we sit in front of the computer. – R1

For people who have participated in VPF meetings from all sectors, shifting those relationships so that they have become more compassionate and empathetic, more understanding, and more trusting. – R10

Discussion

This study found that the VPF effected change among researchers in several ways: it supported personal growth and increased confidence, enabled knowledge translation, supported new approaches to research questions and practice, and fostered empathetic understanding across sectors. What follows is a discussion of the findings using Rayner and Bonnici’s three principles of systems change and feedback loops. These principles demonstrate how the VPF achieves impact – or the mechanisms used.

Fostering connection

Rayner and Bonnici explain that fostering connection is important because it cultivates new identities and relationships among sectors in the system. The VPF does this by prioritising relationship building and cultivating empathetic understanding. The findings show this was a benefit and a challenge for researchers.

Studies indicate support for this paradox. David Chavis describes it as the paradox of ‘unity and diversity’ and argues that it is an inevitable part of the process. Developing a shared definition of violence prevention is one example of this paradox. Each sector developed a definition relevant to them, and together they had to grapple with creating a definition relevant to all participants. Although this was achieved, the findings show that the definition is too broad and abstract to be applicable to some of the key partners. For example, Cornerstone Economic Research requires tight definitions of concepts in order to cost policies/programmes, or to analyse how budgets are spent against set objectives.

This example shows how inclusivity can have its limitations as it often requires compromise to accommodate varying needs and perspectives.

Disrupting hierarchies of power relating to decision making, values and opinion is required to achieve systems change

Research shows that dealing with disagreement is a vital part of successful multisectoral collaborations. Creative tension that arises from disagreement can be energising and an opportunity for group learning because it reveals conflicts within the system. This is how tension can be transformative. When a group works through conflict successfully, the collaboration is strengthened, and trust is built. When this happens in the VPF, relationships between sectors change. Regarding systems change, interactions between system parts (i.e., relationships between organisations or sectors) shift and enable the system to function in new ways (i.e. with strengthened and trusting relationships).

Reconfiguring power

Reconfiguring power involves disrupting hierarchies of power relating to decision making, values, voice, and opinion. This is required to achieve systems change. Findings show that the VPF reconfigures power in three ways. Firstly, it disrupts rank: the findings show that researchers have improved awareness of their rank in the system and that this has resulted in the application of participatory approaches to their research.

Secondly, the VPF disrupts hierarchies of knowledge. Researchers are aware that their evidence may have been inaccessible to certain audiences. Realising they
are not solely responsible for knowledge production in the system, they have learnt to translate their work to be more accessible, and have come to understand the motivations and constraints on other sectors, particularly in relation to policy development and implementation.

Thirdly, the VPF practises deep democracy and diversity of opinions. In this way, researchers described the VPF methodology as ‘harmonising the space’ and ‘leveling the playing field.’ Including all voices ‘within a system’s boundaries can significantly challenge dominant system values.’ Moreover, awareness of power in systems change interventions is a way to illuminate dubious behaviours in the system.

**Embracing context**

Systems change interventions must embrace context by being adaptable to the constant changes and complexities of the system. If interventions are not agile, they risk being redundant. By analysing and reflecting on the violence prevention ecosystem and larger South African context to inform how the sectors act, see the problems, and respond, the VPF is considering context to inform its direction and actions. Making decisions based on contextual needs is key to this principle. This was demonstrated when the VPF hosted a series of budgeting workshops when it was identified that most NGOs and researchers don’t understand government budget processes despite wanting to influence how government allocates resources for violence prevention.

Researchers have come to understand the motivations and constraints on other sectors, particularly in relation to policy development and implementation.

Additionally, the VPF actively seeks to ensure that practice-based knowledge, including about policy development, is shared and understood. More importantly, perhaps, the VPF shows that practice-based knowledge complements research-based evidence and helps ground research in contextual realities. In this way, the VPF is carving out a space for fruitful and equitable practitioner/NGO-researcher partnerships.

**Positive feedback loops**

Researchers’ mutually beneficial relationships with the VPF indicate an important feedback loop. Even though researchers’ participation in the VPF ebbed and flowed over time, they remained motivated to attend the forum to share their knowledge and expand the reach and impact of their work. Through participation, researchers learnt how to translate and disseminate their work more effectively, which changed how they did research and increased its reach. Benefits are experienced, and participation is sustained.
Scholars have highlighted the role of feedback loops in systems change interventions. The benefits of forum participation are what Hawe et al. call positive feedback loops. Positive loops drive the system to the desired change and encourage positive action. For example, researchers adopt a new way of working (knowledge translation) that facilitates the desired change (evidence is made more useful and digestible for government and NGOs, researchers’ work reaches a broader audience, with better change for evidence uptake).

Social change is an incremental process and positive changes, however slow, are steps in the right direction.

The development of feedback loops and successful multisectoral collaboration in general, while achievable, is often challenging. Chris Huxham states that “even where successful outcomes are reported, stories of pain and hard grind are often integral to the success achieved.” Conceptualising and implementing a multisectoral process is time-consuming and rarely produces immediate results. In an environment where outputs and pressure to publish drive researchers, taking time to slow down in a deliberative process can be challenging.

Conclusion

This study explored researchers’ participation in the VPF and how it impacted them. It also examined whether the forum could be described as a systems change intervention. Findings clearly show how the VPF led to personal and professional growth and transformed how researchers communicated and undertook research. What they don’t show clearly however is how this translates to changes in how their institutions carry out research, and whether the changes could be sustained if those VPF-participating researchers left their organisations. It may be too early to tell.

Regardless, the individual-level impact is not insignificant. It is likely that change must happen in individuals in order for it to be diffused to institutions. Social change is an incremental process and positive changes and impact, however slow, are steps in the right direction.

The VPF can be described as a systems change intervention. It embodies the three principles of systems change that together transform sectoral dynamics in the ecosystem to better enable violence prevention efforts. The forum is also a practice- and evidence-based intervention. Demonstrating that multiple forms of knowledge can coexist, function and complement each other bridges a major barrier in violence prevention, implementation and policy work.
LESSONS FOR ENGAGING RESEARCHERS IN A VIOLENCE PREVENTION PLATFORM


44 Ibid., 13.


46 Ibid., 197.


50 Ibid.


53 Ibid., 38–47.


59 Ibid.


65 Ibid.


73 Ibid.


80 Ibid.

About the author
Jody van der Heyde is the global INSPIRE Working Group Coordinator and a Research Consultant in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.

About the ISS
The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa’s future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Acknowledgement
Matodzi Amisi guided and oversaw this project. Her input was invaluable. Prof Catherine Maternowska reviewed this report and provided important insights and critical feedback.

Development partners

This report is funded by the World Childhood Foundation. The VPF is supported by funding from the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.