Participating in the Violence Prevention Forum
Experiences of government officials
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This report documents the experiences of government participants in the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF). It describes what attracts government officials to participate in the multisectoral dialogue platform, assesses whether the VPF can help transform the violence prevention ecosystem, and deepens understanding of how the VPF's methods inform government efforts to prevent violence.
Key findings

- The Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) has enhanced collaboration between government departments, and has strengthened public officials’ relationships with practitioners from non-governmental organisations and researchers. Government participants have been able to build stronger relationships and develop coordinated violence prevention initiatives.
- By providing a space to think critically, reflect and collectively make sense of information, the forum enables officials to change their working practices and environment. Since attending VPF meetings, officials can critically engage with evidence and have a deeper understanding of violence prevention.
- The VPF has changed how a government department has defined, monitored and evaluated violence prevention interventions.
- The VPF has enabled officials to begin to model the change they would like to see in South Africa and their spheres of influence. This is a systems shift.
- The VPF exposes officials to inclusive methods for holding meetings. They learn skills in active listening, effective communication and negotiation.
- The VPF’s methods, techniques and style of meeting have not worked for all government officials. Some were discomforted by the often emotionally demanding nature of meetings.
- The forum has contributed to informing national and provincial spending on violence prevention.

Recommendations

- Convenors of multisectoral dialogue who want to enable government officials to use research evidence and practice-based knowledge effectively, need to create a thinking space. The kind of space that government officials need is one that does not move too fast, one that allows time for individual and collective sense-making, one which allows critical thinking, and one that does not only consist of experts talking at people.
- Convenors of multisectoral dialogue forums should be intentional about setting core values and creating a space for connection. For government officials to connect with violence prevention work in a meaningful and productive way, they need to feel that they are in a supportive space that is free of judgement.
- Convenors of forums should invite participation from people holding different levels of authority, and not necessarily only those holding the highest positions in their organisations or with the greatest decision-making power. People can have influence from wherever they are in the system (regardless of their position of authority).
Introduction

The government has a vital role in creating safer communities through policies, funding, policy implementation and coordination. This case study, undertaken by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), explores and documents the experiences of government officials who participate in the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF). The VPF’s primary goal is to ensure that evidence-informed interventions reduce and prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa.

The study seeks to understand what attracts government participants to attend meetings of the VPF and to determine whether it is an intervention for transformation in the violence prevention ecosystem. The aim of the research is to deepen an understanding of how the VPF’s methods influence and inform individuals from the government sector and their departments.

The ISS has been convening the national VPF since 2015. The VPF has held 17 meetings, created a community of individuals and institutions that are committed to the prevention of violence, and understand that prevention and response are both needed to break cycles of violence. The VPF has enabled government departments and agencies, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and researchers, to think, share knowledge and plan collaboratively. Over the past nine years more than 90 government officials have attended 11 VPF meetings.

The study shows that government officials participating in the VPF seek to act with courage, hope and determination. In the context of constrained state resources, it is essential that violence prevention efforts are focused, collaborative and evidence-informed. The best way to coordinate these efforts is to ensure that state, civil society and private sector stakeholders work collaboratively. Despite there being national and global evidence for the type of interventions, programmes and policies that can prevent violence, opportunities for preventing violence are often missed because multisectoral collaboration is difficult to achieve.

This report describes government officials’ experience of participating in the VPF, a multisectoral collaborative platform. The state’s response to violence could be strengthened in numerous areas. However, this study shows that government officials participating in the VPF seek to act with courage, hope and determination.

It also explores the challenges that government officials face in their work environment. Government officials work in a bureaucratic environment where they have to fulfill development mandates with limited resources and minimal collaboration within and between departments, ministries and state agencies.

The case study contributes towards the knowledge about the value and limitations of inclusive multisectoral dialogue on complex social problems, like violence.

What is the VPF?

In 2015, convenors of the VPF observed that relationships between government officials, researchers and NGO representatives working in the violence prevention ecosystem were mostly absent or strained. There was a deficit of trust and ineffective communication between sectors. This presented a challenge for practitioners in the violence prevention ecosystem.

In particular, there was a gap between the generation of knowledge and evidence and its use to inform the scale-up of programmes to prevent violence. The convenors of the forum hypothesised that to address this gap, a platform for dialogue and relationship building was necessary so that policymakers, researchers and practitioners could use and apply research evidence in policy and practice.

Government officials, researchers and NGO representatives did not know of each other’s challenges and had unmet expectations of each other. Researchers and implementing organisations did not understand the motivations of policymakers, the constraints they faced or what they needed. Yet no single organisation or sector could address violence in South Africa alone.

Resources had been poured into testing interventions to prevent violence, and researchers were generating evidence for what kinds of interventions could address the risk factors for violence, but it seemed this was not used by policymakers to inform policies.
and interventions. What was needed was a space for ongoing dialogue between researchers, government officials, NGOs, the private sector, international organisations and donors. That is, a place where people could build the relationships and trust required to share information and learn from each other. This led to the establishment of the VPF.

The objective of the forum is to improve the use of evidence to guide violence prevention policy, funding and programmes. Over the years, the forum has built a network and productive relationships with more than 200 participants from government, NGOs, development partners, research institutions and the private sector.

Government officials work in a bureaucratic environment characterised by limited resources and a lack of collaboration in and between departments.

The VPF is led and guided by people who participate in it. A driver group made of committed participants from various sectors was established in 2016 to provide strategic guidance. Members of the driver group help sustain the VPF’s momentum by taking stock of what is happening in the ecosystem, advising the convenors and facilitators, and by providing input into meeting processes.

The VPF is centred around the following values: respect, empathy, deep democracy, active listening, commitment and courage, collaboration and partnerships, and fun. The values were collaboratively developed and agreed on in 2016.

In 2021, the VPF launched a facilitation course that aimed to train and support a cohort of facilitators in systems and process thinking. This course was conducted with the belief that creative, courageous and empathetic facilitators were necessary in all sectors, including government, NGOs, international organisations, research institutes and the private sector. The course was one of the ways the ISS and its partners sought to scale up the VPF praxis.

The work of the VPF is guided by its theory of change (see Chart 1). The main goal of the VPF is to ensure that evidence-informed interventions reduce and prevent inter-personal violence in South Africa. It aims to achieve this through three pathways:

- Relationship-building pathway: Relationship-building contributes to the VPF’s main goal, because building meaningful and trusting relationships across sectors leads to improved relational expertise, information sharing and collaboration between and within sectors working to prevent violence in South Africa. Essentially, relationships built on trust support the flow of information and are the basis for effective collaboration.
### Chart 1: VPF theory of change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ultimate goal</strong></th>
<th>Evidence-informed interventions reduce and prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policies and decisions aimed at preventing violence are informed by evidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased collaboration and information flow between individuals and organisations</td>
<td>A mutually supportive network of people who understand violence prevention is created and maintained</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships are built between individuals in different sectors that allow information to flow between different sectors</td>
<td>Participants have confidence to communicate privately and publicly about violence and its prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants are likely to use evidence in their work and promote the use of evidence in their organisations</td>
<td>Participants have an evidence-informed understanding of violence and its impact on society, and what is needed to prevent it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants apply skills learned in the Forum in their work and when engaging in difficult discussions on violence prevention, even with dissenting voices</td>
<td>Participants learn self-mastery and skills to engage with dissenting voices in violence prevention</td>
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| **Expansion of who is represented/participates in policy discussions and other spaces of influence** | |
| Multi-sector driver groups conduct regular situational analysis, ensures content and process remains responsive to member needs and external context | Workshops offer experiential learning |
| Individuals get to know and trust each other | Sectoral differences are acknowledged and empathy is built |
| Individuals are invited to participate because of their expertise, skills, attitudes, openness to be challenged, and ability to influence change in their organisations | Participants engage in translation and collective sense-making of the evidence |
| Participants spend time in relationship-building activities (dinner, introspection, sharing in pairs/threes, etc.) | All awareness (emotions, experiences, etc.) and voices acknowledged during Forum discussions |
| Government, researchers, NGOs, etc. all share knowledge, information and evidence | Facilitators are skilled and participate equally |
| Evidence from programmes being tested and other evaluations presented in the Forum | Meetings facilitated using deep democracy and AVP principles |

| **Relationship-building pathway** | **Evidence generation, translation and brokering pathway** | **Strengthening the workforce pathway** |
| Convenor is competent and credible | Existing evidence and established relationship base to draw from |

Source: Violence Prevention Forum Evaluation Report, M Amisi, 2020
• Evidence generation, translation and brokering pathway: This pathway facilitates the flow of knowledge from research to practice and policy, leading to more effective and informed decision making. This pathway ensures that politicians, donors, development partners and the private sector have access to synthesised and easy-to-understand information about violence prevention.

• Strengthening the workforce pathway: This pathway supports leaders and facilitators to hold and enable dialogue and problem solving within their organisations and communities, and to manage conflict non-violently. Moreover, discussions in the forum are aimed at building a community of practice committed to preventing violence.

The timeline on page 7 demonstrates some key events that involve departments that have participated in the VPF.

Literature review

This section will discuss three concepts that underpin the VPF theory of change to frame the nature of the VPF intervention in the violence prevention ecosystem. These concepts are multisectoral collaboration, systems change and relational work in systems change. The conceptual framework developed will be used later in the report for the assessment of whether and how the VPF operates as a vehicle for transformation and systemic change for government departments working to prevent violence in South Africa.

What is multisectoral collaboration?

According to Catherine Alter and Jerald Hage, multisectoral collaboration is an effective and critical strategy in both profit and not-for-profit sectors to help organisations, networks and movements acquire resources, power and knowledge.® Collaborative relationships that bring together sectors such as government, NGOs, research, development partners and the private sector to confront complex social issues can provide numerous benefits. For instance, collaborating allows partners to see the different angles of a problem so that they can discover solutions “that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.”® Collaboration can promote innovation by enabling organisations to interact with a wide range of resources and expertise; and encourage open participation by a wider range of stakeholders.

Multisectoral collaboration is necessary for addressing complex problems because solutions require diverse expertise, a holistic approach, resource sharing, stakeholder engagement, innovation and enhanced ownership. Preventing violence requires interventions from a wide range of sectors, such as housing, education and social services.11 By leveraging the strengths and perspectives of multiple sectors, more effective and sustainable solutions to violence can be developed. It is critical to ask what it takes to bring the different parties together to collaborate and prevent violence.

Collaboration promotes innovation by enabling organisations to interact with a wide range of resources and expertise

According to the World Health Organization, the enabling conditions for collaboration include a series of conversations (what the VPF refers to as dialogue) between people representing a variety of organisations from different sectors, around a particular issue.12 Cynthia Hardy and Nelson Phillips’s research on the Canadian refugee system established that to increase the potential for collaboration, the conversations should grapple with the intrinsic tension between the collaborators’ obligations to their partners and their obligations to the organisations they represent.13 This means the dialogue must embrace all contributions in a way that doesn’t ignore tensions but rather leans into tensions.14 Leaning into tensions in dialogue means actively engaging in areas of disagreement, conflict or discomfort. It also encourages participants to confront tensions openly and honestly, with the goal of promoting mutual respect and understanding.

To achieve meaningful collaborative action, partners need open dialogue to come to a shared understanding of the problem and possible solutions. Open dialogue refers to a style of conversation where all participants are encouraged to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions freely and without judgement. Open dialogue also emphasises
Chart 2: VPF government timeline

1. 2015
   - Conceptualisation & Early Development
   - Representatives from the Department of Social Development (DSD) and DBE attended the first VPF meeting

2. 2016
   - National Treasury, Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities (DoWYD) and the Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation started attending the VPF

3. 2017
   - Stabilisation & Growth
   - DBE hosted the fourth VPF meeting
   - National Treasury drafted a proposed framework for researching prevention and early intervention
   - Mapped government policies

4. 2018
   - New allocation in the DSD budget for additional funds for provinces to address violence against women and children
   - Participation from Western Cape Government increased

5. 2019
   - Established & Expanding
   - The VPF was consulted on the development of the prevention chapter in the National Strategic Plan (NSP) on Femicide and Gender Based Violence (GBVF)
   - VPF was invited by the South African Police Service (SAPS) to promote the forum’s work

6. 2020
   - DBE hosted the VPF government workshop to define ‘violence prevention’
   - Officials from DSD, DBE and SAPS began using the skills learned from the VPF facilitation course to facilitate their meetings and workshops
   - Participation from National Treasury declines
   - Further support for NSP on GBVF

7. 2021
   - DBE hosted roadshows about bullying and violence. VPF policy briefs were featured in the agenda of these meetings
   - VPF supported DoWYD to develop a ToC for a national prevention strategy in line with the NSP on GBVF

8. 2022
   - Participation from National Treasury increases again
   - VPF was invited by the DBE to exhibit the work of the forum and workshop on the definition of violence prevention to their partners

9. 2022
   - VPF convenors worked with the Western Cape Government to develop a strategy on how evidence-informed violence prevention parenting programmes can be upscaled and strengthened in the province
   - National Treasury invited the VPF to present the parenting programme costing model, the cost-benefit assessment of community-level violence prevention interventions and related work to a team of officials working on resourcing policing
   - Recognition that government may be underrepresented in the driver group
   - Involvement with the new sector funding policy
   - Began developing relationships with local government

>90
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS
HAVE ATTENDED
11
VPF MEETINGS
empathy, active listening and an openness to diverse perspectives. Without open dialogue, powerful partners can use their influence and power to dictate their definition of the problem and its solution, excluding alternative views from other participants.

It is not uncommon for tensions to emerge in multisectoral forums like the VPF. Multisectoral initiatives bring together partners from different institutions with different approaches, backgrounds and goals, in which the distribution of power may be highly unequal. The unequal distribution of power needs to be acknowledged and managed to avoid tensions between participants which can affect commitment to collaborating. Skilled facilitation is one way to manage tension to enable it to be productive.

Government, as a policymaker and programme implementer, is an important stakeholder in the violence prevention ecosystem. In South Africa, government regulates NGOs and their service delivery by partially or fully funding some of their programmes and services.

Although the negative perceptions are based on experiences and media commentary, they have a profound impact on how officials view themselves and the antagonism with which they might engage with other sectors.

This case study explores how the VPF has engaged with government officials as individuals and the organisations they represent; and how that interplay translates, or does not, to policy influence. The research also explores what VPF convenors have done to ensure that government doesn’t become a dominant voice within the forum and how the forum has retained interest and participation from government departments.

**Systems change**

The VPF focuses on understanding and transforming complex systems in order to address persistent societal challenges and create positive, sustainable outcomes. The VPF itself is not a programme that prevents violence; rather it’s a multi-actor platform within the violence prevention ecosystem that enables the balancing of power and relationships between organisations. In this way it seeks to create an enabling environment for the implementation and resourcing of evidence-led programmes, policies and interventions. This case study uses a systems change lens to understand the impact of the VPF on government partners to determine whether and how the forum functions as a vehicle for transformation in the system.

The theoretical framework guiding the VPF is based on an understanding that violence is deeply rooted in the structures and dynamics of societal systems. Engaging with systems change involves examining the underlying systems, structures and norms that contribute to violence, and working towards transforming them.

At a rudimentary level, ‘systems are generally considered to be a collection of parts that, through their interactions, function as a whole.’ The ‘system’ is a set of settings, actors and activities that are indirectly or directly affected by or have influence over a given problem. Pennie Foster-Fishman, Branda Nowell and Huilan Yang describe systems as the organisation of human effort and resources to achieve a set of tasks. Systems change refers to a deliberate process designed to modify the status quo by adjusting and realigning the
function and form of a targeted system. Communities, organisations and service delivery networks are usually the systems targeted in such efforts. For systems change to occur, the structures and mechanisms that function within a system, such as the relationships, values, resources, policies and power structures, should be modified. According to François Bonnici and Cynthia Rayner, the three principles of systems change are to:

- Foster connection: this principle entails actors establishing a collective identity to stay together while learning.
- Embrace context: this principle entails encouraging a plurality of solutions that meet the emerging needs of actors and ensuring that primary actors can respond to and adapt to daily complexities.
- Reconfigure power: this principle ensures that primary actors (i.e., those most affected by a problem) are in a position of decision making and that resources are placed in their hands to influence decisions.

Relational work in systems change

Managing relationships is paramount to achieving systems change. In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Adrienne Maree Brown puts forward the idea that relationships between individuals are the whole system. She argues that focusing on relationships and their quality is crucial for understanding and shaping complex systems. Systems are comprised of multiple interactions between different components as well as between interconnected elements and stakeholders. Therefore, the quality of relationships among those involved can greatly influence the success and effectiveness of systems change initiatives.

Understanding the nature of social relationships between actors in a system is crucial to understanding system functioning. Indeed, systems theorist Brenda Zimmerman said, ‘The most important unit of analysis in a system is not the part (e.g. individual, organization, or institution), it’s the relationship between the parts.’ Research across an array of disciplines has sufficiently documented how weak relationships between key stakeholders have deterred systems change efforts.

Systems change is what the VPF is arguably trying to accomplish, but systems change theory does not offer much in the way of ‘how’ to achieve it. Scholars such as Joe Raelin and Wilfred Drath who write about leadership-as-practice, collective leadership and relational dialogue, get us a little closer to the ‘how’. According to Drath, leadership is comprised of social interactions that result in specific pragmatic outcomes. Of interest is how the work is resourced and organised among organisational members. Thus, the work of leadership is more likely to be found in the everyday discourse of human exchange than in managerial actions.

The quality of relationships can greatly influence the effectiveness of systems change initiatives

Leadership-as-practice is concerned with the everyday practice of leadership, which includes its relational, emotional and moral aspects as opposed to its objective, technical and rational ones. Moreover, leadership-as-practice embodies the ethos of collective leadership because it is less about what one person does or thinks and more about what people may achieve together. Leadership-in-practice has four benefits:

- Collectiveness: this considers the extent to which everyone in a group can serve as a leader.
- Concurrency: this refers to the degree to which members of a group within an organisation are serving as leaders simultaneously.
- Collaboration: this acknowledges the extent to which people are co-creating. Collaboration also reviews the essence of a dialogue in which the people in the group decide together what needs to be done and how to do it.
- Compassion: this refers to the commitment to preserving the dignity of everyone within a group regardless of their status or background.

According to Drath, relational dialogue is an important feature of leadership practice. Relational dialogue refers to how ‘people construct reality through their interactions within world views’. Put differently, relational dialogue considers how people make sense of reality.
through relating with one another in processes. All kinds of leadership can be enhanced by relational dialogue. For instance, new ways of acting, thinking and talking could help people work together better in a highly diverse world. The VPF aims to make sense of its ecosystem by incorporating relational dialogue in its processes.

**Methods**

This research took a case study approach. Case study methodology provides a rich method for investigating a single case. This case study intended to answer the following questions:

- How has participation in the VPF affected or shaped government violence prevention work?
- How is the VPF functioning as an intervention of transformation in the system?

The objectives of this case study were to:

- Explore the experiences of government officials who participate in the VPF
- Develop a better understanding of what incentivises the continued participation of government officials in the VPF
- Understand how government departments are shaped or influenced by their participation in the VPF
- Determine whether the VPF is functioning as an intervention of transformation in the system
- Develop guidelines on what the VPF does and its impact

This case study is part of a bigger research project that includes two other case studies focusing on the NGO and the research sectors’ engagement in the VPF.

**Data collection**

A review of various VPF documents, reports and assessments and literature about knowledge brokering, multisectoral collaboration and systems change was undertaken. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the VPF convenor and facilitators, and government officials working for, or who previously worked for, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Western Cape Government. DBE officials who participated in this case study represented the following four units within the DBE: Social Cohesion and Equity in Education, Safety in Education, Partnerships in Education, and Sport and Enrichment in Education.

The two Western Cape Government officials worked in the Department of the Premier, in the Policy and Strategy Unit. Officials invited to participate had been actively involved in VPF processes (e.g., VPF meetings, driver group meetings or the facilitation course) for a minimum of two years.

New ways of acting, thinking and talking could help people work together better in a highly diverse world

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The questions focused on the interviewee’s background, understanding the VPF’s impact on the government departments and understanding how the forum has influenced the professional and personal lives of government officials. Most of the interviews were an hour to two hours long and were done virtually using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Two interviews were conducted in person. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data analysis**

This case study used a narrative analysis approach to interpret the interviews and secondary data. The data was organised, coded and categorised using ATLAS.ti. According to Kimberly Oliver, narrative analysis is a powerful research methodology to ‘understand the uniqueness and fullness of the human experience.’ People construct their realities and make meaning through storytelling. Therefore, this case study aimed to capture and analyse these stories to uncover common themes, patterns, ideas and underlying meanings. By taking a narrative analysis approach to the case study, it was possible to uncover nuance in the experiences, perspectives and impact of the VPF in individual government officials’ work and their institutions.

**Limitations**

It was the intention of the researcher to include the National Treasury as a participant in the research, but permission was not granted in time to conduct interviews with the officials. Therefore, National Treasury officials...
were excluded from the study. However, the two departments included in the case study offer a richness of experience to provide adequate data to respond to the research questions.

The case study research received ethics approval from the ISS ethics committee. Research participants gave consent to be recorded and for their institution and identifying information to be included in the report. Because of the nature of the VPF and the purpose of doing the case study, it was not possible to grant complete anonymity to respondents. Respondents reviewed the draft research report to ensure it accurately reflected their contributions.

Profile of selected departments

National Department of Basic Education

The DBE is responsible for providing quality education to all learners from grades R to 12. The department develops and implements policies, curriculum frameworks and guidelines for schools, teachers and learners. Some of the DBE’s goals include improving literacy and numeracy skills, promoting inclusive education, addressing educational inequalities and fostering a participatory approach in education policymaking. The DBE has participated in VPF meetings since its inception in 2015 and is represented on the driver group. The department has co-hosted two VPF meetings, in 2017 and 2021. Two DBE officials participated in the VPF facilitation course.

The DBE plays a crucial role in primary violence prevention by promoting safe, nurturing and inclusive learning environments to enable the wellbeing and dignity, and to uphold the rights, of learners. The department has also implemented initiatives to address various forms of violence, including developing policies, integrating violence prevention content into curricula, training and capacitating teachers, conducting awareness and education campaigns on violence and how to prevent it, and establishing reporting and response mechanisms and protocols to respond to incidents of violence in schools.

Western Cape Government

South Africa is a semi-federal state with three spheres of government, where some functions are shared between the spheres and some are not. Provincial governments play a significant role in governing and administering their provinces. The Western Cape Government is responsible for the governance of the Western Cape province in South Africa. Provincial governments operate under a parliamentary system.

The Western Cape Provincial Strategic Plan 2019–2024 identified five Vision-Inspired Priorities for the province. These were:

- Enabling the economy and jobs
- Building safe and cohesive communities
- Public transport, mobility and spatial transformation
- Empowering people
- Innovation and culture

The Western Cape Government began participating in the VPF in 2017 and at least one representative has attended five meetings of the national forum. In 2019 VPF participants from the Western Cape asked the forum’s convenors to create a provincial VPF to form stronger partnerships between government, researchers and NGOs in the province. The intention was for the provincial VPF to facilitate the provincial scale-up of evidence-based interventions and programmes to prevent violence. The Western Cape VPF was established in 2020 after extensive consultation.

Findings

This section presents key findings and narratives to explore the experiences of government officials who have participated in the VPF and develop a better understanding of what incentivises their continued participation in the forum. The narratives weave in both personal and professional experiences of public servants. The key findings that emerged from this case study are organised into the following themes:

- Motivation to participate in the VPF
- Working differently: informal ways of connecting
- Time to think
- The paradox of respite
- Discomfort with some VPF methods
Motivation to participate in the VPF

Government officials participate in the VPF for various reasons. Officials’ personal experiences and histories often shape their interest in preventing violence. This case study found that government officials attracted to the VPF were those with a desire to shift the status quo in society, achieve a better society for future generations, and influence their partners/stakeholders to make a difference. They generally understand that their work deals with people’s lived realities, which should be approached with care and are more important than the bureaucracy of the public service.

Personal motivation was identified as a driver for interest and participation in the forum. For example, one government official indicated profound uneasiness with the high levels of inequality experienced and witnessed by South Africans. This uneasiness motivated her to do violence prevention work and participate in the forum to work with others to find solutions. This government official remembered her parents’ financial struggles while growing up and that she had access to protective factors such as free quality education, free healthcare and free public transport – something that millions of lower- to middle-income South Africans do not have access to.

Another official said she connected deeply with her violence prevention work because of her upbringing. This official was raised by a single mother and grandmother who were both domestic workers and grew up with few protective factors in an area where violence was rife. Because of the physical, economic, emotional and psychological violence that she faced, she was motivated to prevent violence in South Africa.

I have been touched by violence on so many different levels throughout my whole life – physically, emotionally, mentally, economically and psychologically. I know what it [violence] is and I know what it means. So I think what motivates me to do my work is I personally understand the impact [of] having protective factors and how those factors can mitigate future damage or prevent violence. – Government official 4

This government official’s nine-year journey with the VPF is quite unique. She coordinated the national VPF for six years and convened the Western Cape VPF for two years before being head-hunted by the provincial government. She also participated in the first rollout of the VPF facilitation course. Before working for the Department of the Premier in the Western Cape Government, she facilitated workshops between government officials, researchers and NGO representatives, to give life to the evidence-informed family strengthening programmes in the Western Cape. This intervention (also referred to as a parenting programme intervention) aims to reduce violence in the province and is guided by the Western Cape Government’s Provincial Strategic Plan 2019-2024 and the 2020 Recovery Plan, which recognise the need to strengthen families who are vulnerable to violence to enhance society’s wellbeing and long-term safety.

I had just finished the VPF facilitation course and became a facilitator at the same time as when government started becoming interested in parenting programmes. But at the time, the sectors were fragmented and there was a recognition from the Western Cape Government who had participated in national VPF meetings that how people meet is very important – that is when I began facilitating for them.

– Government official 4

To facilitate these workshops, the official drew on her learnings from the VPF facilitation course. One of the most valuable skills she learnt through the course and that she subsequently transferred to other government colleagues, was how to have difficult conversations. At the time of writing this report, the Western Cape Government was engaging NGOs and researchers in a process to develop an implementation plan for a new family strengthening policy, drawing on the evidence that supporting families can reduce the risk factors for violence.

Ultimately, the Western Cape Government enhanced its ability to have difficult, uncomfortable, courageous and honest conversations with NGOs, researchers and other government officials. This fostered increased trust and collaboration between the sectors.

During one of the workshops convened by the provincial government, a difficult conversation arose.
NGOs were asked to adapt their parenting programmes by drawing on the evaluative evidence about effective programmes. NGOs who had been delivering programmes for many years found this both confronting and intimidating. While this tension might have been avoided or ignored, skilful facilitation enabled an honest conversation between officials and NGOs that resulted in the government agreeing to support NGOs by reviewing their parenting programmes. A lesson that the government officials working in this workshop process learnt is that the more time you spend building relationships, the better the outcome.

**Government officials attracted to the VPF were those with a desire to shift the status quo and achieve a better society for future generations**

We’re working with the NGO sector and we have been able to build trust like I have never witnessed before. [That day], it was tense and [my colleague] told everyone that we were going to have a difficult conversation. I am in awe of how she was able to pull that off.

– Government official 3

These findings suggest that officials have been able to use the skills obtained during the VPF meetings and facilitation course to facilitate intersectoral collaboration and to see the value in that collaboration to solve shared problems.

**Working differently: informal ways of connecting**

This study found that government officials who have participated in the VPF meetings and the VPF facilitation course appreciate how the forum allows participants to connect with each other in informal ways. Officials were surprised by the fun and lightness they experienced in forum engagements.

VPF facilitators encourage connection between participants through songs, dance, games, energisers, and check-in and check-out prompts that encourage participants to share something personal. Below are examples of check-in and check-out prompts/instructions that have been used in meetings and that were designed for participants to connect more deeply and to foster trust:

- From the fifth VPF meeting: ‘Choose a partner whom you don’t know and stand back to back. Without speaking just allow yourselves to feel the gentle rhythm of each other’s breathing and heartbeat, as you begin to synchronise with one another. After a few minutes, go for a walk with one another outside and ask one another the following questions as you walk (giving each other five minutes to share as the other listens deeply): What concerns you deeply at this time in humanity’s history? Where do you draw your strength to face the challenges in your life?’

**Participants understand that their work deals with people’s lived realities, which should be approached with care**
• From the ninth meeting: ‘Something I have recently done I am proud of.’

• From the 15th VPF meeting: Inspired by a conversation held by bell hooks and Thich Nhat Hanh, facilitators asked participants the following questions for the check-in: ‘What is something valuable I learnt in my childhood about love from a significant elder? Where is the place in my life where I still feel anger or resentment or shame and how can I hold it to turn it into compost for my garden?’

Government respondents felt that participating in informal activities such as check-ins and check-outs with people from donor agencies, research institutions, the private sector and NGOs made them feel heard and seen. As a result of feeling ‘heard and seen’ in the VPF, government officials have found community with other VPF participants from different sectors. In the VPF, officials do not feel stereotyped as ‘lazy or corrupt’;45 instead they receive support and work together with participants from other sectors. Because of the safety that has been built through the VPF’s practice of allowing participants to connect informally, officials felt confident in reaching out to the VPF network whenever they needed assistance regarding violence prevention matters (as demonstrated in the quote below).

We recently had a fruitful meeting with DBE, where it seemed like there were so many linkages. They are learning so much from our [family strengthening programmes] process and [the DBE] would like to present their CSTL [Care and Support for Teaching and Learning] framework to us. It is because of the national VPF that we have this relationship with the DBE.

– Government official 4

The quote above shows how the VPF has enabled officials from national and provincial departments to come together in a way that they would not have had they not met in the VPF.

Government officials value that they can attend meetings that intend to discuss a difficult topic of violence, in a ‘human and honest’ way. Moreover, some government officials enjoy VPF meetings and find them to be refreshing because they are not driven by a rigid agenda where the needs of participants are ignored.

They experienced the VPF meetings as co-created. Although each VPF meeting is carefully planned and has clear objectives, facilitators will often adjust the agenda if required to address tensions, resolve conflict, or if important ideas that need further exploration emerge from the discussions. Essentially, the process can change to achieve the meeting’s intended objectives in a way that meets the needs of participants.

The way in which the VPF meetings are conducted was different from what I was used to. The meetings created a space where we as participants of the forum would be very vulnerable in the way in which we interacted with one another. I think that is why I kept going back – I wanted to be part of an intimate forum.

– Government official 2

In the VPF officials do not feel stereotyped as ‘lazy or corrupt’; instead they receive support

I think that the work that our facilitators do is world-class, but it is also unique, heartfelt, unbelievably generative, relaxing and intense. I think [it] is brave for the Violence Prevention Forum to stick with that style.’

– Government official 1

The VPF’s practice of fostering connection between participants has influenced some government employees to adopt similar practices in their work environments. For instance, a senior DBE official does not initiate unnecessary meetings anymore. She now prefers to initiate fluid and emergent conversations where the agenda emerges organically based on the needs of the team. She has established that these kinds of conversations with her colleagues have enabled a culture that foregrounds deep respect and egalitarianism.

The VPF has shown me that it is okay to break the formal routines of the business environment and you can still actually maintain professionalism. My managers remain motivated and they are giving the best of themselves because they are allowed to think and use their agency.

– Government official 1
The co-created nature of VPF meetings seems to be important for some government participants because of the often rigid, hierarchical and rank-oriented public service sector.

Some government officials experience the VPF as a welcome break from the norm, which offers them an opportunity to think and reflect on their work in ways not possible in rule-based government settings. However, it is important to note that this way of connecting is not suitable for all government officials. For some public servants, the ways the forum operates is too big a departure from their norm, as they can find it difficult to work without bureaucratic rules, consideration for rank and the organic structure of processes. For it to work, the method has to align with officials existing values and views on power.

**Time to think**

This study found that the VPF provides an opportunity for government officials to pause and reflect, personally and professionally. In particular, the VPF’s ‘therapeutic approach’ and seating in a circle for discussions have been beneficial in creating a safe space for engagement and addressing trauma for officials. Officials felt it was important for them, as people who work in the violence prevention field, to be able to reflect honestly on the experiences that have shaped who they are.

The opportunity to reflect and think was regarded as especially essential for officials because they struggle to find time to pause, think and reflect in their own work environments due to their high workload and political pressures. Officials saw that when they engage with their trauma, they are able to engage in healthier interpersonal work relationships, be more productive at work, contribute to better teamwork and generally contribute towards more of a positive work environment. Here, one can see that the quality of thinking informs the quality of doing.

I think most of my memories of the VPF are an observation of how we (as groups) were able to reflect honestly about our traumas. It hasn’t always been easy to share. In 2021, I was hijacked after one of the VPF meetings. Thereafter, the forum became a place where I knew I could feel safe, but sometimes it felt very tense listening to heavy and highly emotional stories.  – Government official 2

A senior government official reported that she introduced all the managers in her unit to the VPF and its methodology because although some meetings can be triggering for people, attending the meetings often surfaces their own trauma and sheds light on unhealthy situations that they could be facing. According to this senior government official, when her managers attend VPF meetings they are able to connect their hearts back to their work.

The VPF has a profound impact on my professional life because it pulls me out of lengthy agendas to engage in constructive dialogue, which gives me the opportunity to turn on my emotional intelligence. I go back to work rejuvenated and I remember that people are emotional beings before they’re intellectual beings.  – Government official 1

The practice of pausing, thinking, unpacking and reflecting in the VPF has been critical for one official working in the Western Cape Government’s Department of the Premier, who has participated in the forum since 2017. When she reminisced over her first VPF meeting, she recalled sitting in a circle with a group of people, doing group work, thinking deeply and journaling. In those moments, she realised that she loved the VPF because, ‘We can actually think critically about what we do and how it impacts our work.’ As a consequence of that realisation, the VPF has become a symbol and tool of personal transformation in how her new team conducts their policy work. She went on to say that had the VPF not existed, the Western Cape Government would not have some of the strategies that it has.

Because of my experience in and with the VPF, I was able to contribute to the development of key provincial strategies, including the ability to really put evidence-based violence prevention on the map of our policy response to safety.  – Government official 3

The VPF has been a personal transformation in how we do policy work.  – Government official 3

One official said the practice of introspection within the VPF had influenced how she interacted with her family. Since she’s started attending VPF meetings, she has become more aware of how she talks to and disciplines
her children. She expressed that she is now less prone to yelling at her children and is more cognisant of not behaving in any violent ways or ways that could even be perceived to be violent.

Participating in the forum was found to stimulate renewed interest and commitment to the work. Some respondents reported that since participating in the VPF, they found it easier to connect their pieces of violence prevention work. These officials have a better understanding of what violence prevention work involves and they are less likely to see certain activities as not being part of their mandate or line function. They now know how to better find the links and make the connections between different workstreams in their directorate.

For instance, in the DBE the chief directorate that has been participating in the VPF changed the way in which they monitor their work. Previously, the department only used to monitor school safety. After participating in the VPF the chief directorate co-designed a monitoring tool that integrated sports and enrichment, gender-based violence and social cohesion, into one tool.

Due to the integration of these different pieces of work, monitoring teams with representatives from different divisions of work were established. These diverse monitoring teams travelled to various districts and provinces over the course of three years. As a result, officials learnt about each other’s work and had a 360-degree view of the areas of work done in the department and how it connects to each other. They also now know what type of support districts need to implement policies.

I think when you attend a Violence Prevention Forum meeting and sit in a complex circle of people from different sectors, who relate differently to a particular priority that may be centred that day, it makes you see the connections. This is because when somebody who you would never normally speak to speaks to something that matters a lot to you, you suddenly see the connections in fresh ways. I love that for my team.

– Government official 1

The findings show that by providing a space to pause and reflect, the forum has enabled officials to start changing their working practices and environments. They also show that through exposure to others working in the same field, but in different departments and sectors, their understanding of violence prevention expands and their knowledge of what they should be doing to prevent violence in their areas of work (e.g., schools) increases.

Paradox of respite

Some respondents indicated that their department’s work culture was unhealthy, stressful and toxic. Working in such environments can make it difficult for government participants to reconcile deep democratic and mindfulness practices they learn and experience in the VPF with their daily work environment.

Participating in the forum seems to raise officials’ awareness of the unhealthy patterns in their departments. They have started to think about how their environments could be different and healthier. For instance, one respondent said how she was physically and emotionally attacked by protesters at her workplace. She found that the way the department responded to her attack was inadequate and this eroded her trust in the institution. After her attack she experienced her department as a ‘cold’ and unsafe environment. She indicated how participating in a VPF meeting where violence was being defined helped her to grapple with how violent her work environment was.

In some working environments, people are so caught up in their positions and their protocol that they sometimes forget to show some humanity, compassion and empathy. At times, I have not experienced that humanity, compassion and empathy. How do you work with people that have just not given you the support that you needed … when you really needed it?

– Government official 6

What makes my job hard, I think, is that we have no power; we only have influence. So, we always have to be nice to people, even if they are unkind.

– Government official 6

The above quote shows that participating in the VPF challenges officials to think about how to reengineer the public service to introduce an ethic of care as part of public sector reform. This goes to the heart of what the VPF is trying to do – to show that it is possible for individuals working within the violence prevention
ecosystem to engage with respect and care and therefore model the change they want to see in society. This is the reason why VPF processes pay attention to personal transformation. VPF processes are designed to encourage participants from various sectors to communicate with one another in ways that are constructive and solution-oriented.46

Discomfort with some VPF methods

This case study found that the VPF facilitation style and way of meeting do not suit all government officials who attend. For instance, while some respondents appreciated the uniqueness of the VPF methods, they also expressed concerns about its limits. They felt that the methodology could create cognitive dissonance for officials, because it differs so much from any other approach they are used to. For example, one respondent felt that the discussions on how people were feeling and their personal challenges, could feel like the meetings focused too much attention on peripheral issues and not the problem of violence.

The VPF facilitation style reminds me of a time when I was in the health sector. I have outgrown that kind of way of doing things. Sometimes it feels like we are not dealing with the real issues yet. During plenary discussions I think we should just keep it straightforward.
– Government official 5

Other respondents said it could be difficult to process the amount and range of emotions that may arise during the meetings; this was found to be especially true for first-time participants. At the same time, because of the way VPF facilitators engage with the range of emotions that may surface at meetings, some respondents feel more equipped to respond to other people’s triggers.

Through the VPF, I have learnt about the role of space and how to hold people when they are triggered.
– Government official 1

Some respondents also found the mindfulness exercises challenging. Mindfulness exercises are techniques that promote calm. This mental state is characterised by focused attention on the present moment, without judgement or distraction. Such exercises are designed to help individuals cultivate an awareness of their thoughts, emotions, sensations and surroundings, which aims to enhance one’s wellbeing and leads to increased self-awareness.47

Some government officials said they either struggled to connect with exercises such as meditating, mindful journaling or mindful breathing, or they found it uncomfortable:

My mind just does not connect to mindfulness exercises and I don’t really know why.
– Government official 7

Perhaps some government officials struggle with mindfulness exercises because of the kind of environment they work in – an environment that is time-sensitive and is characterised by great pressure and stress, which makes moments to pause and reflect feel like a waste of time. It is also possible that for some, self-focused practice is culturally dissonant. For most African people, the self is not an atomised entity, but exists in community with others.

The VPF facilitation style resulted in some participants feeling more equipped to respond to other people’s triggers.

Alternatively, it may be that government officials struggle because of the difficulty of connecting the VPF methods with their work culture. It is vital to note that there are people for whom mindfulness exercises are difficult, frustrating or even annoying, regardless of the sector they come from. Sometimes practising mindfulness exercises is in contradiction with many people’s values and core beliefs.48

Discussion

Is the VPF a vehicle for transformation?

One of the research questions this case study intended to answer was whether the VPF is an intervention for transformation for government officials and the units or departments they represent. To answer this question, the research explored how the forum has changed the way that government partners think about, do or approach their work and has transformed government participants’ personal behaviours, attitudes, norms and beliefs.

When an intervention is referred to as a ‘vehicle for transformation’, it means it has been designed...
intentionally to modify the status quo or disrupt the norm by realigning the form and function of a targeted system.\textsuperscript{49} Systems that are usually targeted in such efforts include organisations, communities and service delivery networks. An intervention that acts as a vehicle for transformation aims to ensure that the change/transformation is deep and can be sustained over a long period.\textsuperscript{50} The forum is a catalyst or enabler for transformative processes to take place in government departments that are designing policies and programmes for violence prevention.

The VPF helps create an enabling environment for violence prevention to be prioritised by government

Through the forum, participants from government engage in discussions, share ideas and collaborate with researchers, NGOs, international development agencies and other government departments. Relationships are built, knowledge is gained and skills are strengthened by participating in the forum. Officials have used the knowledge, skills and relationships to drive meaningful change in their departments by initiating new policies and strategies, changing the way they monitor their work, expanding the way violence prevention work is defined and framed, and by collaborating with others.

The case study shows that the VPF offers techniques and methods to support personal transformation. Creating a safe space for officials to share and make sense of their experiences of violence, receive support from a community, hear from practitioners about the work in communities and be exposed to research knowledge, provides a strong basis for shifting perceptions, beliefs and practices. The findings demonstrate that even in large bureaucratic institutions, individuals can and do make a difference and can bring about significant change.

At the same time, the findings suggest that the methods applied in the VPF that emphasise personal transformation, deep democracy, dialogue and relationship building can be experienced as emotionally taxing and uncomfortable by some. The methodology might not be suitable for all public servants. It is particularly not suitable for those who are not keen to challenge their positionality and recognise their contributions to levels of violence in the country, both as an actor in the government and in their individual capacity. This suggests that to get violence prevention prioritised, funded and implemented at the scale needed in the country, the VPF alone is not sufficient, and can complement other more traditional public sector reform efforts. However, it appears that the VPF does contribute to creating an enabling environment for violence prevention to be prioritised.

But VPF meetings are not the only way the forum contributes to the development of policy and practice. The forum impacted policy, for example by participating in the 2022 Presidential Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide and hosting a workshop using the interactive methods to generate recommendations about prevention. It also did so by working with the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities to develop a theory of change for the prevention sector.

Challenges with transforming government

Government can be a difficult system to transform.\textsuperscript{51} According to Don Tapscott, Anthony Williams and Dan Herman, ‘transforming the deeper structures of government is proving to be an intractable challenge.’\textsuperscript{52} They also say there are ‘often more penalties than incentives for innovative behavior in the public sector.’\textsuperscript{53} Transforming government is challenging due to a combination of structural, cultural, political and historical factors. For instance, in the context of South Africa, public service institutions are driven by annual performance plans and are incentivised by positive audit findings. Such a culture limits the space for creative and innovative thinking. Furthermore, political tensions between different political parties or fractures within the governing party can limit collaboration and cooperation between spheres of government.\textsuperscript{54}

Politics of power and survival also hinder ministers from thinking of long-term solutions, and instead, they are prone to be attracted to more visible and short-term interventions. These limit the space for innovative thinking and impede the process of enacting significant changes in government and broader society that require longer time frames.
Moreover, the government system is difficult to transform because of the bureaucracy and hierarchy, institutional inertia, political considerations and budgetary constraints that exist in the system. For example, at the time of writing this case study, the National Treasury had announced that severe budget cuts would be initiated due to the state being in a fiscal crisis. Dozens of civil society organisations and policy analysts have urged the government to pause the budget cuts as they fear the constraints will lead to social instability, food insecurity and worsening unemployment.

Government departments and agencies such as the DBE and the Western Cape Government’s Department of the Premier, often have complex hierarchical structures and bureaucratic processes. In these environments, decision making can be slow and can require multiple levels of approval, making it difficult to implement swift and agile changes. Government institutions tend to have long-standing traditions, practices and established ways of doing things. These entrenched norms can resist change and hinder the adoption of new approaches.

Sometimes it is also difficult to transform government systems because of complicated power dynamics and government’s highly politicised nature. Transformation can be hindered by partisan agendas, conflicting priorities and the need to gain political support. Transformation in government can also be made difficult by budget constraints. Initiating transformative violence prevention changes may require a reallocation of resources, which can be politically and administratively challenging.

**Is the VPF strengthening government relations with other sectors?**

As iterated by Brown, managing relationships is crucial to achieving systems change, and relationships between individuals are the whole system. To a large degree, paying attention to and understanding relationships and their quality is critical to shaping complex systems and understanding systems functioning. This is something the VPF does. By focusing on relationship building and relationship management, the forum ensures that relationships between organisations and individuals in different sectors are channels through which information circulates between sectors, new insights are generated and evidence is used.

The strengthening of relationships between individuals from different sectors is an enabler of evidence use in policy and practice. Interpersonal and organisational relationships that are trusting, appreciative and reciprocal facilitate intersectoral information sharing that is necessary for different types of evidence to be used in policy and practice.

One key impact that the VPF has had on its government partners is that it has enhanced collaboration between government and other sectors. For government officials, the VPF has enabled them to collaborate with researchers and NGOs. What we observe from the government VPF participants is that they have fostered stronger relationships and partnerships with people from different sectors to develop comprehensive and coordinated violence prevention initiatives.

The VPF has also helped government participants appreciate the value of spending time on building relationships. They recognise that the more they spend time on building relationships within government and with other sectors, the better the work they do in violence prevention. Establishing relationships is a demanding and ongoing process. Even when trust has been established, it can be eroded easily. Thus the VPF has had to invest significantly in building and sustaining relationships. This speaks to the systems change principle of fostering connection.

**Thinking differently**

It can be contended that the VPF supports government officials to see, think and do things differently. It can also be contended that observable changes in behaviours and practices of individuals from government officials who attend the VPF can signal that systemic shifts are underway. According to Jake Lomax, all one needs to know to analyse system change/systemic shifts is the prevalence of people in the system ‘doing things differently, and the extent to which they benefit from and maintain these behaviour changes.’ He lists six steps to analysing systemic shifts:

**• Define what your system is.**
**• Describe who is doing what and how they are doing it.**
• Determine the performance and how well they are doing it.
• Define who needs to do what differently.
• Describe what is stopping them and how this will be overcome.
• Determine the endurance – will the changes last?

Steps one, two and three are concerned with the actors and actions in a system and are curious about how the system changes. When steps one to three are repeated over time, they can give one a measure of scale. Steps four, five and six are focused on behaviour changes and attempt to understand why the system changes. Over time steps four to six can help one understand sustainability.

Some VPF government officials’ comments speak to how they have experienced increased cross-sector collaboration and how they have engaged more with other stakeholder groups (such as NGOs). This indicates a move towards more integrated and holistic violence prevention solutions. Moreover, the changes in the relationships and interactions among government officials and other stakeholders within the VPF system also signal that there may be shifts in the overall system dynamics.

The VPF has transformed government officials’ personal and professional lives by providing a thinking space for them that has allowed them to introspect and has ultimately shifted some of their behaviours, norms, beliefs and values. The VPF is transformative and valuable to government officials because it serves as a good ‘pause and reflect’ space. For instance, during meetings space is provided for collective sensemaking so that participants have time to absorb information that is presented.

The pause and reflect space is essential for government officials for several reasons. It provides opportunities for introspection, learning and strategic thinking, which often helps them navigate the fast-paced and often demanding environment of government work. VPF offers an opportunity for government officials to step back from their daily tasks, engage in self-assessment and consider the ‘bigger picture’.

Some government officials have incorporated pause and reflect spaces into their government practices. This is an acknowledgment of the importance of intentional thinking, self-care, and continuous improvement for the officials’ wellbeing and the overall quality of governance within their units. When officials have the space to think and are not constrained by time or strict agendas, they have more room to better interpret the work they are doing. The VPF has drawn on a practiced Nancy Kline’s principles for creating a thinking space.

Kline’s 10 key enablers to improve thinking:

• Attention: listening with palpable respect and without interruption
• Diversity: encouraging divergent thinking and diverse group identities
• Feelings: allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking; offering freedom from internal urgency
• Appreciation: practising a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism
• Equality: ensuring equal turns to think and speak
• Incisive questions: finding and removing untrue assumptions that distort thinking
• Information: supplying the facts and dismantling denial
• Encouragement: giving courage for cutting-edge thinking by removing internal competition
• Ease: offering freedom from internal urgency
• Place: creating a physical environment that says to people ‘You matter’

Multisectoral forums like the VPF encourage creative problem-solving. Participants come with diverse viewpoints and approaches, which can lead to innovative solutions or new ways of working that they may not have been able to conceive of without the interaction. The VPF participants adopt new ways of working through exposure to these practices and through specific training that focuses on the development of ‘soft’ skills. Soft skills are the traits, personal attributes and behavioural or interpersonal non-technical competencies that enable flexibility and improved relational practices.
The case study found that government officials have adopted VPF practices to reduce power differences and increase participation. Examples include holding meetings in a circle, incorporating mindfulness activities into meetings, having boundary agreements, or beginning and ending meetings with check-ins and check-outs. This suggests that the VPF is shifting ways that participants do their work.

Furthermore, VPF interventions such as the facilitation course have enabled government officials to facilitate difficult conversations and manage conflicts constructively through applying active listening, effective communication and negotiation skills. This means that even when conflicts arise, officials are equipped to find creative and mutually beneficial solutions. Effective facilitation heightens inclusive decision making, which can lead to more equitable outcomes.

The VPF has enabled officials to begin to model the change they would like to see in society and their spheres of influence – this is a systems shift. Although this study found that change is being realised on a relational and personal level, it would be unrealistic to expect that participation in the forum would result in a dismantling of power hierarchies altogether.

However, the VPF’s content and methods have been highly instrumental in informing how government departments such as the DBE and the Western Cape Department of the Premier approach their policy work. New policies, regulations or guidelines that affect the functioning of the system suggest that systemic change is possible and is underway. Ultimately, systems change is characterised by lasting impact rather than short-term fixes. This research contributes to knowledge about how inclusive practices and improved relations influence how government officials and units in departments undertake their work.

**Conclusion**

This case study provides insights into the complex dynamics at play in questioning whether the VPF is functioning as an intervention or vehicle of transformation in the system. By documenting the unique journeys of government officials from DBE and the Western Cape Department of the Premier in the VPF, this study reveals that the forum has had a range of positive personal and professional benefits for government officials.

Officials often work in stressful, hierarchical, pressured, bureaucratic and challenging environments, and yet some are able to apply their learnings from the VPF and model the inclusivity and compassion they would like to see in South Africa. The findings indicate that soft skills learnt through participating in VPF meetings and the VPF facilitation course are being diffused to the units officials work with. This includes holding meetings in ways that make space for dialogue and hearing different voices, using the VPF values in their personal and professional lives, and resolving conflict when it occurs in multisectoral projects.
This case study also found that not all officials benefit from the VPF techniques and methods. This tells us that there may be a certain type of official for whom this forum works and a type for whom it doesn’t. Those who feel able to exercise discretion and have the confidence, or the power, to bring about change, or who work in environments that encourage inclusion and innovation, are more likely to benefit.

This case study found that there were observable changes in behaviours, norms, patterns, values and practices of individuals from government who attended the VPF. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the VPF is transforming the way in which government officials do their work, and transforming relationships between government and other sectors. In the units that are participating in the forum, this is transforming both how they manage their work and also the kinds of policies or programmes they implement. These policy changes are likely to shift how government intervenes in communities and schools to prevent violence. Therefore, the VPF is supporting systems change.

Notes

7 Ibid.
8 Deep democracy is an attitude that focuses on the awareness of voices that are both central and marginal. Unlike ‘classical’ democracy, which focuses on majority rule, deep democracy suggests that all voices, states of awareness and frameworks of reality are important.
12 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
26 E Pence and M Shepard, Developing a coordinated community response, In E Pence (Ed.), Coordinating Community Responses to
Domestic Violence: Lessons from Duluth and Beyond, California: Sage, 1999.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.


32 Ibid, 136.

33 Ibid, 151.


35 The documents reviewed included 15 VPF meeting reports, 28 driver group meeting minutes, six evaluation forms from the VPF facilitation course and the VPF evaluation report.


42 Ibid.

43 Energisers are brief and interactive activities designed to boost participants' energy levels, engagement and focus.

44 A ‘check-in’ in a meeting refers to a brief and informal process where participants share their thoughts, feelings or updates at the beginning of the meeting. It is a way to create a sense of connection, establish a positive atmosphere and help participants transition from their activities into the meeting.

45 This phrase was extracted from an interview conducted with a government official.

46 Ibid

47 Mindful, What is Mindfulness, Are you supposed to clear your mind or focus on one thing? Here’s the Mindful definition of Mindfulness, www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/, 2020.


53 Ibid, 2.


56 Ibid.


60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.


64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.


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