This report describes how the Violence Prevention Forum has contributed to changing the relationship between the state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and how it has empowered NGOs to use research knowledge and to engage with and inform policy.
Key findings

- Participation in the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) has improved relations among non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and between NGOs and participating government departments and researchers. This can be attributed to how VPF meetings are designed and facilitated, which has increased empathy and understanding between sectors.

- There has been a shift in how NGOs view their role in the long-term goal of reducing high levels of violence and align their work with government policy. NGOs have also realised the power and importance of research and evidence, and are making better use of it.

- NGOs collaborate more with other organisations and sectors as a consequence of their participation in the VPF. The quality of collaboration between organisations participating in the VPF has improved because of how the Forum invests in building trust between participants.

- NGOs apply the facilitation tools and techniques they gain at the VPF in staff and project meetings, and use the research in organisational reports and presentations.

- NGOs that have participated in the VPF feel valued because the Forum appreciates both practice-based knowledge and research findings. At VPF meetings, new knowledge and research are presented and discussed openly, and decisions are made transparently and collectively.

- The knowledge and skills gained from participating in the VPF meetings are more likely to be used and applied in NGOs if the person participating in meetings holds a decision-making role in their organisation, is passionate about their work and if there is alignment between the organisation’s interests and goals and the VPF focus.

Recommendations

- Collaborations for social change must involve practitioners or other primary actors in the decision-making process as they are immersed in the social challenge and bring important insights into how the problem manifests.

- To foster commitment to engagement, convenors and funders of multisectoral collaborations must invest time and resources to build and nurture relationships between stakeholders, especially if there is a history of conflict and mistrust.

- A multisectoral collaboration aimed at influencing how partners do their work must ensure that the partners’ goals and values are aligned with those of the collaboration, and representatives have the decision-making capacity and drive to implement change.

- Given the complexity of social problems, funders, convenors and partners in a multisectoral collaboration must invest time to understand the problem they are trying to address and engage with those who are most affected and closest to the challenge.

- Collaborations must document and share progress. Sharing progress and milestones motivates partners to continue participating, as they feel part of an effective body.
Introduction

There is growing consensus globally that multisectoral collaboration is crucial to overcoming social challenges like poverty and violence, and achieving positive social change. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are key to achieving social change, especially in developing countries. Since the 1970s, the NGO sector has grown in number and scope and has increasingly played an active role in development efforts. Initially, the sector was seen as an alternative rather than complementary to the state. But, as the world changes and social challenges become more complex, there has been a shift towards recognising that the NGO sector needs to collaborate with the state and the private sector to achieve societal change.

There is limited literature on what makes collaboration for social change effective and on what incentivises or discourages NGOs from participating in multisectoral collaboration. This research report aims to fill this gap by sharing the lessons from NGOs in South Africa participating in a multisectoral dialogue forum.

South Africa has a large NGO sector that is the backbone of its social welfare services and is key to preventing violence

The Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) is a South African multisectoral platform established in 2015 to strengthen efforts to prevent violence in the country, and to address the divide between knowledge, research and practice. By 2023, the VPF had convened 15 meetings. The first VPF meeting, in 2015, was attended by 18 participants. At this time, the VPF was a network of 204 people, representing civil society organisations, social movements, donor organisations, government departments, research institutions and the private sector.

A 2020 evaluation of the VPF found that the Forum had largely strengthened collaboration between the sectors. VPF participants also had better relationships and were likely to share information and work together to deliver projects. The evaluation also found that the VPF had influenced policy and funding for violence prevention.

These results sparked interest from donors, development partners and researchers in how the Forum worked, what motivated participation, and whether the VPF model was transferable to other contexts or could be scaled up.

In 2023, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) conducted three case studies to explore what motivated policymakers, NGOs and researchers to participate in the VPF and the impact of their participation on their work. This report reflects the experiences of the participating NGOs.

Violence in South Africa

South Africa experiences high levels of violence and has one of the highest murder rates in the world. The prevalence of violence in South Africa is connected to the country’s past and the persistent economic exclusion that traps communities in cycles of poverty and inequality, as well as entrenched patriarchal norms. The country has a large NGO sector that is the backbone of its social welfare services and is key to preventing violence. There have been policies, frameworks and interventions by the government to address and prevent the high levels of violence since 1994.

Crime prevention was one of the priorities of the newly elected democratic South African government. The country was emerging from a long history of state-sanctioned violence under apartheid and a liberation struggle. In 1996, the government launched the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) to tackle crime holistically and prioritise prevention. The NCPS was drafted in consultation with researchers and the NGO sector. It highlighted the linkages between crime and socio-economic conditions, thus emphasising the complexity of the problem it was trying to solve.

However, by the end of 1998, crime in South Africa was high, and an election was pending in 1999. This put pressure on the government to act. Focus and resourcing shifted away from what was perceived as ‘soft’, long-term approaches to crime prevention towards hard, security-oriented approaches like law enforcement, which were thought to deliver results more quickly while appeasing the electorate.

The impact of the change in approach was minimal and undermined by the persistent socio-economic
challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. Although the annual murder rate decreased by 55% between 1994 and 2011, in 2012, it began to rise again.

In 2014, the government commissioned a diagnostic review by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) to assess the effectiveness of government interventions to address violence against women and children. The review found a persistent challenge to be the poor resourcing and precarious funding of NGOs, most of which relied on short-term, competitive donor funding.

The VPF brings together NGOs, policymakers, researchers, development partners, donors and the private sector to share knowledge and build relationships

The NGO sector is the backbone of service delivery. Therefore, challenges in the sector translate into challenges in services delivered, especially to low-income citizens. The review also found a lack of coordination between the government and NGOs, and that despite a comprehensive framework of laws and policies, there was inadequate political will to drive the changes required.

The review noted that while policies, plans and laws were in place to address violence against women and children, implementing them remained a challenge. A bridge was needed between legislation, research and implementation. The VPF sought to bridge the gap.

Violence Prevention Forum

The VPF was established by the ISS in partnership with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2015. At the time of its establishment, there was no forum in South Africa that provided a space for multisectoral dialogue on violence prevention. The VPF brings together NGOs, policymakers, researchers, development partners, donors and the private sector to share knowledge and practice and build trusting relationships with the aim of turning them into effective partnerships. VPF meetings are facilitated by skilled facilitators. The Forum’s long-term goals include that:

- Policies and decisions aimed at preventing violence are informed by evidence
- There is an expansion in who is represented and participates in policy discussions and other spaces of influence.

The ISS convenes the VPF, and a multisectoral ‘driver group’ (steering committee) provides strategic guidance and direction. Participation in the VPF and the driver group is by invitation, nomination or voluntary. The VPF is not membership-based; who is invited is influenced by the focus of the meeting and informed by the driver group.
In the beginning, the VPF focused on understanding the challenges to implementing and scaling up violence prevention programmes. A number of important challenges became apparent, including:

- There was no agreement within or between sectors on what constitutes violence prevention, or which interventions and programmes should be prioritised.
- The existing knowledge and research evidence on what it would take to prevent violence was not being translated into policy and practice.
- The frontline workforce (NGOs and government officials) experienced high levels of trauma and was in need of healing.

Overcoming these challenges is not easy. Relationships between the government, research and the NGO sector have become fractured over time, exacerbated by failed policy implementation. In addition, the NGO sector, which delivers most of the violence prevention programmes and interventions in communities, faces serious challenges.

A 2020 evaluation found that the VPF had begun to impact the national violence prevention ecosystem.

According to NGOs participating in the VPF, the key challenges were funding shortages and constant worry about organisational sustainability. High levels of stress and burnout due to being understaffed. Staff members often experience vicarious trauma as they witness and encounter violence as part of their work. NGO practitioners felt undervalued. They felt that their knowledge and expertise was not valued as highly as research evidence; and that they had little influence over policy.

Aware of the difficult relations between sectors, the VPF uses the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) facilitation approach to hold its meetings. The AVP started in the 1970s as a response to a group of inmates in New York who were looking for alternative ways to engage and resolve conflict, rather than resorting to violence. The VPF convenor and facilitators considered this approach appropriate to what the VPF was trying to achieve.

The VPF is a platform that aims to foster effective partnerships between sectors that have a history of competition and mistrust. The Forum’s meetings are driven by the VPF values, which were agreed upon by participants and guide discussions during meetings. Deep democracy is the belief that all voices matter and are important to understanding how a larger system operates. Therefore, it is essential to listen to even the minority voice.

Since its inception, the VPF has achieved notable milestones (Chart 2).

A 2020 evaluation of the VPF found that it effectively brokered knowledge and evidence, enabled relationships to be built within and between sectors, and that participants gained skills through participation. In addition, it found that the VPF contributed to participants finding healing from collective and personal experiences of trauma, due to the way in which meetings were facilitated. Ultimately, the VPF was achieving the medium-term goals in its theory of change (see Chart 3 and the appendix).

The evaluation also found that the VPF had begun to impact the national violence prevention ecosystem. For example, three VPF participants were members of the Interim Steering Committee that drafted the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide (NSP on GBVF), elevating the lessons learned in the Forum.
Chart 2: Journey of the VPF

**Starting conditions**
- A history of state-sanctioned violence under apartheid
- High levels of poverty and inequality, and economic exclusion
- Stakeholders working in silos
- Uncoordinated efforts to prevent violence
- Competition between NGOs for resources and funding

- **2015**
  - VPF established
  - Held the 2nd meeting focused on developing relationships between sectors
    - Driver group established (including NGOs 2 and 3)
    - NGO 1 participated for the first time
  - Held the 3rd meeting
    - VPF values proposed and agreed upon

- **2016**
  - Formed the driver group and agreed on values
  - Held the 4th meeting to explore what programmes and policies exist to prevent violence
  - Held the 5th meeting focused on the importance of advocacy and was hosted at an NGO’s offices
  - Published a three-part series of policy briefs on reducing violence in South Africa

- **2017**
  - First VPF publications
  - Changed the name to The Violence Prevention Forum
    - Held the 6th and 7th meetings at NGO offices
    - NGOs shared the challenges they face as a sector
    - NGOs 2 and 3, together with other NGOs participating in the VPF, established the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPRIN)
    - The VPF supported the drafting of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide through the participation of the convenor and NGOs 1 and 3

- **2018**
  - Milestones
  - Formalisation of the driver group
    - First draft of the Terms of Reference (TOR) outlining the role and function of the driver group
    - Launch of new logo and website
    - Holding the 8th meeting, where participants mapped out resources for preventing violence
    - Held the 9th meeting, where participants discussed what violence prevention looks like in different contexts

- **2019**
  - Formalisation
    - Held the 10th meeting online, focused on the issues and opportunities for the VPF at present during the pandemic
    - Held the 11th meeting online, focused on healing the wounds of gender-based violence and racism

- **2020**
  - Milestones
    - Held the 12th meeting workshop series to develop the VPF violence prevention definition
    - The VPF published a policy brief on what violence prevention is
    - NGO 3 joins the driver group

- **2021**
  - Milestone: Scaling
  - Establishment of the Western Cape Violence Prevention Forum, supported by NGO 1
    - Establishment of a local dialogue at Touwsrants and Howick
    - Held the 13th meeting online to share and engage on the VPF definition

- **2022**
  - Held the 14th meeting to unpack the definition further
    - The 15th meeting was held at NGO 3 in Soweto and focused on sharing knowledge and ideas about a national communications campaign
    - SAPPRIN part of a workshop to draft a provincial family strengthening strategy in partnership with researchers and policymakers
    - SAPPRIN hosts the first national families’ initative, which brings together NGOs, donors, policymakers, researchers, and civil society

>90% OF SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA ARE RUN BY NGOs
Chart 3: Medium-term goals of the VPF’s theory of change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 3: Medium-term goals of the VPF’s theory of change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increased collaboration and information flow between individuals and organisations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A mutually supportive network of people who understand violence prevention is created and maintained</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants are likely to use evidence in their work and promote the use of evidence in their organisations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants apply skills learned in the forum in their work and when engaging in difficult discussions on violence prevention, even with dissenting voices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships are built between individuals in different sectors that allow information to flow between different sectors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants have confidence to communicate privately and publicly about violence and its prevention</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants have an evidence-informed understanding of violence and its impact on society, and what is needed to prevent it</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants learn self-mastery and skills to engage with dissenting voices in violence prevention</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evaluation identified the following elements as contributing to the Forum’s impact:

- Having a value-driven approach to facilitation and skilled facilitators
- Having a reputable and credible convenor, as well as a multisectoral driver group that steered the Forum
- Having capable and responsive strategic support, such as flexible funding and a caring and responsive skilled coordinator.

However, the 2020 evaluation also identified challenges and areas that needed attention. These included the fact that the Forum needed to be more engaged with the country’s political and policy systems. VPF meetings were thoughtfully curated, and invitations were extended to a select group to enable interactive processes. However, there was a perception that the VPF was exclusive because the number of participants was limited, and only NGOs delivering evidence-based programmes or evaluating their programmes could participate.

The current research aimed to build on the evaluation findings, including exploring what incentivised NGOs to join the VPF, how NGO participation has changed since the evaluation and what has sustained NGO involvement.

**History of the NGO sector in South Africa**

South Africa has a large NGO sector, which has grown exponentially over the past 30 years. In 1994, there were an estimated 5 000 registered non-profit organisations (NPOs), which grew to over 250 000 by 2022.

Resourcing has been a persistent challenge in the NGO sector. During apartheid, government support was limited to NGOs that served white communities. The NGOs that served black and coloured communities or were fighting against apartheid were neglected, banned or harassed by the government.

The number of non-profit organisations grew from an estimated 5 000 in 1994 to more than 250 000 by 2022.

The 1980s were a turning point for South African NGOs. The South African financial market was more open to foreign income and investment, which led to an influx of international funds into the country. This increased financial support for South African civil society organisations that served black and coloured communities, and the number of NGOs rose. NGOs began playing a variety of active roles in development and liberation projects, such as providing social services and advocating for human rights.

Following the advent of democracy, NGOs have continued to play a key role in serving communities. Over 90% of social welfare services in the country, in areas such as healthcare, education and providing support and protection to women, children and other vulnerable groups, are run by NGOs. Due to their reach, NGOs make up the majority of the violence prevention frontline actors in the country. The sector has also played an accountability role, making sure that the state delivers on its constitutional mandate.
However, a sharp shift in international donor funding from civil society towards the government to support the development of the country post-1994 created a funding shortfall in the NGO sector.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, a number of NGO leaders joined the new democratically elected government, leading to a lack of skilled leaders in the NGO sector.

Post-1994, the relationship between the state and the NGO sector in several service areas has been characterised by competition and mistrust, punctuated by short-term attempts at collaboration.\textsuperscript{37} The lack of effective collaboration between the state and the NGO sector to address social problems like violence has been one of the barriers to achieving large-scale systems change. Overcoming this challenge requires an understanding of how systems work, how system change happens and why collaboration matters.

**Collaboration for social change**

Social problems like violence are often called wicked problems because they are complex. They impact society on a large scale and are deeply immersed in the historical context of the place or persons. Due to their complexity, scale and depth, social problems are almost unsolvable and rarely have a single solution. In its efforts to reduce and prevent violence, the VPF is fundamentally pursuing social change. In their book *The Systems Work of Social Change*, Cynthia Rayner and François Bonnici define social change as ‘the intentional restructuring of social and environmental arrangements to improve society’.\textsuperscript{38}

Social change requires system change, and the first step is understanding how systems work.\textsuperscript{39} At the basic level, a system can be defined as a combination of parts, activities and actors that are linked directly or indirectly, and together have an influence.\textsuperscript{40} When systems no longer achieve the desired outcomes, there are often attempts to change them.\textsuperscript{41}

Rayner and Bonnici distinguish between technical and transformational approaches to systems change.\textsuperscript{42} Technical approaches see social systems as machines and systems change as being achieved by altering or introducing new parts, such as a new policy or actor.

A transformational approach sees the system as a dynamic web of interlinked parts. Changing one part does not guarantee a shift in another part. Therefore, transformational approaches attempt to change a system by radically restructuring the system as a whole. Radical restructuring might include the transformation of relationships between the actors in the system.\textsuperscript{43} Rayner and Bonnici emphasise that both the technical and transformational approaches have advantages and disadvantages and that an effective approach is one that matches the nature of the problem.\textsuperscript{44}

Due to their complexity, scale and depth, social problems seem almost unsolvable and rarely have a single solution

Rayner and Bonnici define systems work as the day-to-day principles and practices that guide the actions of organisations and individuals as they undertake to change the system.\textsuperscript{45} They developed three principles of systems work which enable organisations to create systems change (Chart 4).

The first principle of transformative systems change is fostering connections. In the projects they observed, Rayner and Bonnici noted that as the number of stakeholders in the collaboration expanded, especially

**Chart 4: The three principles of influencing systems work**

\[\text{Source: C Rayner and F Bonnici, The systems work of social change: How to harness connection, context, and power to cultivate deep and enduring change. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021}\]
when primary actors were included, the view and understanding of the social challenges also grew. They defined primary actors as the people most immersed in the context of a social issue, often with lived experience of the issue itself. Examples of primary actors are NGO workers, communities and frontline workers.

Collaboration between primary actors and supporting actors such as professional managers, funders, policymakers and advisors is necessary to achieve social change. Collaborators must spend time fostering connection, which includes spending time understanding the problem and partners. Fostering connection also includes developing a shared identity and building solidarity amongst the stakeholders. When stakeholders have a shared identity and togetherness that transcends organisational interest, they are more likely to respect the collaboration and act in its interest. However, collaborations do not occur in a bubble. They are embedded in history and contexts, and these greatly impact the success of the collaboration.

Where there is an imbalance of power, collaborations must invest in a strategy to empower the other stakeholders

Collaborative governance experts Chris Ansell and Alison Gash identified some key factors that impact the success of collaboration efforts: the history between stakeholders, the incentives to collaborate, and the balance of power and resources, which they call the starting conditions. They propose that for collaboration to be sustained, where there is a history of conflict and mistrust, the leaders in a partnership must invest in building trust. Ansell and Gash advise that face-to-face meetings and achievements, no matter how small, are necessary to facilitate trust-building. Seemingly small wins like agreeing on the project objectives can be key to sustaining the momentum, especially in cases where stakeholders have a history of conflict or mistrust. In instances where there is a real or perceived imbalance of power, collaborations must invest in a strategy to empower the other stakeholders, such as collaborative governance – navigating decisions and changes together can help to build trust among partners.

The second principle of systems work is embracing context. Social challenges occur in a dynamic context. Something will change, such as a new event, policy or programme, and primary actors are usually the ones to implement or respond to the change. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the communities and NGOs on the ground had to respond to the crisis. Often these actors are ill-equipped to respond. Thus, the second principle emphasises the importance of equipping and supporting primary actors to embrace and respond to a dynamic context.

The last principle is the reconfiguration of power. This principle is about shifting the power dynamics within the system, giving more decision-making power and resources to the primary actors. Power imbalance is often a stumbling block in collaborations, and collaboration expert Chris Huxman proposes that part of the challenge is how partners view power. He suggests that instead of partners focusing on who has power and who does not, assuming that power is absolute, they should identify leverage power points – times and situations where different partners have and use their power.

For example, at the start of the collaboration or engagement, organisations that invite participants and bring in financial resources may have more power and influence. But, as the partnership evolves, organisations with more technical expertise may have more power to direct the partnership. Towards the end, stakeholders that have monitoring and evaluation expertise may have more power.

The current research used these three principles of systems work to test whether the VPF functions as an intervention for social change.

Methodology

The objectives of this research were to:

- Gain a better understanding of what motivates and incentivises NGOs to participate in the VPF
- Assess if and how VPF participation has changed the way that NGOs contribute to preventing violence
- Assess whether the VPF is functioning as a vehicle for transforming the violence prevention ecosystem
Three NGOs that met these criteria were selected from the 36 that had participated in the Forum:
- NGO 1: provides prevention and response services to address domestic violence and has been participating in the VPF since 2016.
- NGO 2: builds non-violent and sustainable communities and has been participating in the VPF since 2015.
- NGO 3: promotes and advocates globally for children’s rights and has been participating in the VPF since 2015.

The interviews were open-ended and included questions about the organisation, the interviewee's career journey, how they came to participate in the VPF, what motivated them to continue participating and any challenges they faced concerning their participation. On average, interviews lasted an hour and a half. The interviewees were partially anonymous. Some of the interviewees’ personal information is not shared in this report due to the anonymity clause. Chart 5 gives an overview of the interview participants. As can be seen,

## Chart 5: Overview of NGO participants in the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Number of VPF meetings attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NGO 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1: Director and member of the driver group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2: Project manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3: Project manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NGO 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4: Director and member of driver group</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NGO 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5: Former CEO and member of the driver group</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6: Acting CEO and former head of programme</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7: Former senior researcher and former participant in the driver group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitators and convenor</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 8: Former NGO 2 director, VPF facilitator and member of the driver group</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 9: Former NGO 2 director and VPF facilitator</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 10: Convenor of the Forum and member of the driver group</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
all the interviewees had decision-making power in their organisations, and most were part of the VPF's governing body, the driver group. The researcher also studied the websites of the selected NGOs to learn more about their work.

The interviews were used to develop organisational narratives, presented below. The narratives describe the NGOs’ participation journey, as well as the results of participation in the VPF.

The ISS Research Ethics Committee approved this case study research. The research does not claim to represent the experiences of all NGOs participating in the VPF.

Findings

NGO participation in the VPF

NGO participation in the VPF has grown and diversified since the 2020 evaluation was undertaken. In 2020, 21 NGOs had participated in the VPF; this increased to 36 by 2023. The type of NGOs participating also diversified. Initially, NGOs that were delivering evidence-based programmes or evaluating their programmes participated, and most were delivering parenting programmes.

In 2023, participating NGOs included those delivering response services to survivors of domestic violence and rape, those offering community development programmes; social movements and advocacy groups.

In 2019, the focus of the VPF meetings was on understanding violence. Participants came to share the understanding that it is not possible to prevent violence against women and children or gender-based violence (GBV) while men experience high levels of violence and the rate of political violence is high. This led to a broadening of focus from violence against women and children to all forms of interpersonal violence.

Following the 2020 evaluation, efforts were made to develop a shared understanding and language of violence prevention. In 2021, the Forum hosted a series of consultative workshops with the NGO sector, government, research, development partners, the private sector and children to develop a definition of violence prevention. 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.*

Before this, the VPF had been operating without a definition of violence prevention. The definition recognises structural drivers of violence, intergenerational trauma in South Africa and the need for collective efforts to address violence. Using the definition has provided the basis for expanded participation, and the original criteria for NGO participants have been relaxed.

As noted, participation in the Forum is purely voluntary and not mandatory or membership-based. Individuals participate as representatives of their organisations. Therefore, the value that the organisation derives from the Forum is influenced by who participates and the frequency and quality of their participation. Chart 6 depicts participation in the Forum by NGOs since 2015, and Chart 7 provides an overview of participation by sector.

The types of NGOs participating in the VPF have diversified, influenced by a changed understanding of the drivers of violence

Changes in the VPF, as set out in Chart 2, occurred organically. Initially, the VPF did not seek to formalise itself and chose to be flexible. Priority was given to growing participation, building relationships amongst participating sectors, and developing a shared understanding and ownership. Early VPF meetings were dedicated to unpacking questions like, ‘What will it take to prevent violence?’. Driver-group meetings were dedicated to building relationships among the driver-group members and developing an understanding of each sector’s needs and approaches.

On average, 32 participants attend a VPF meeting. The number of participants fluctuates (see Charts 6 and 7) depending on the topic. For example, meeting 12 was the VPF definition workshops with different sectors, which took place between 1 and 25 May 2021. Overall, 54 participants took part in those workshops. The mixture (and ratio) of sectors in the meetings has been more consistent (see Chart 7).
Chart 6: Number of NGOs participating in VPF meetings, 2015 – 2022

Source: Compiled by the author using VPF signed registers since 2015

Chart 7: Participation in the VPF by sector

Source: Compiled by the author using VPF signed registers since 2015
‘A flame that warms you…’

NGO 1 was established in 1993 in response to the high levels of GBV in South Africa. The organisation exists to empower survivors of GBV by creating enabling environments, supporting them through their healing process, and ensuring that they become positive and active drivers of change in their own lives. The following story of its participation in the VPF was compiled from interviews with the organisation’s director and project managers.

‘When I received the invitation from the VPF, I was already a fan,’ said the organisation’s director, describing how she came into the VPF. When she attended her first VPF meeting in 2016, she had been a long-standing activist and was deputy director of a different NGO. Her career choice was informed by a visit when she was a university law student to a correctional facility that housed child detainees who were awaiting trial. Witnessing the horrific conditions that young children in prison faced sparked frustration and questions about the country’s approach to justice and drew her into activism.

I remember the detainees wearing clothes from when they were arrested six days ago, kids aged 14, 15 and 16 not attending school. Some had committed heavy crimes, and others were detained for minor crimes such as shoplifting. What got to me the most was the children’s ages and the fact that they came from the township. I was from the township. I remember thinking, this could have been me.

— Respondent 1: Director and member of the driver group

Following the visit, she began building a local branch of an international organisation that seeks to prepare children and youth in conflict with the law to make the transition from incarceration back into society. Part of the rehabilitation process included creative art mapping. Children would map out their lives by sharing moments when their relationships with adults changed (e.g. a death) or deteriorated (e.g. domestic abuse). The children began to look for belonging elsewhere, like in gangs, or they started to experiment with substances and drugs like alcohol. This was a turning point for the director; she recalled realising the value of prevention work and developing an interest in violence prevention.

When the VPF was established in 2015, she had a long-standing relationship with the UNICEF co-convenor, as they had worked together on previous projects. She had also engaged with the ISS co-convenor and admired her work. The ISS convenor had published a monograph on the life stories of violent offenders, titled Beaten Bad,50 which shared stories similar to those she had heard during her prison visits. This affirmed her observations that exposure to violence and failed relationships with adults in children’s early years greatly influenced their trajectory and made them susceptible to being victims or perpetrators of violence.

THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ATTENDING A VPF MEETING

32
The relationships she had with the convenors, influenced her decision to accept the invitation to the VPF: ‘I knew the UNICEF convenor, who was one of the pioneers. We had a strong relationship at the time. I had engaged with the ISS convenor’s work, so both were quite interesting. I was a fan.’

The first meeting she attended was the second VPF meeting held in April 2016. The focus of the meeting was on building empathy between the different sectors. This was done through an exercise called Lands Work, where participants were divided into imaginary ‘lands’ (‘NGO land’, ‘researcher land’ and ‘government land’). Inhabitants of each land shared what it was like in their land – the privileges and the challenges. While each sector shared, the other sectors listened quietly without comment or questions. After their sharing, the inhabitants from the other lands figuratively visited the sharer’s land and put themselves in their shoes. The director of NGO 1 described the exercise as an ‘eye-opener’ and ‘game-changer’.

Being an activist who had fought with a government department to improve conditions in prison, the director carried anger and frustration towards the government. However, listening to officials share their struggles, how they felt overwhelmed and out of control, and at times silenced and not listened to, she began to challenge her assumptions of the government sector and empathise with the government officials’ challenges.

I remember that initially different sectors were accusing each other, saying ‘researchers do this, the government doesn’t do this.’ We had to stand in each other’s shoes in the next session. So, as an NGO, some of us had to be like the government, and you had to share, listen and reflect as government. And I started to get to know people. And some accusations or misconceptions I had of people in their work were shifted. This influenced how I engaged going forward…my activism flame is still there, but now it warms you; it does not burn you.

— Respondent 1: Director and member of the driver group

After attending her first meeting in 2016, she went through a career transition which led to a break in participation in the Forum. When she returned to the VPF in 2021, she was the director of NGO 1. Describing her return, she jokingly said, ‘I bumped into the ISS convenor at an event and asked her…hey, is that VPF thing still happening, and can I come back?’

At the time of her return to the VPF, her organisation was grappling with several challenges. These included the lack of implementation and enforcement of protection orders for survivors of domestic violence and the poor conditions or absence of victim-friendly rooms at police stations. To address the challenges, the NGO established local dialogue platforms in three communities. The local dialogue brought together first responders to domestic and intimate partner violence. Participants included local police, clerks, magistrates, social workers, religious leaders, health practitioners and prosecutors. These participants had a history of conflict and mistrust. NGOs were frustrated with how the police responded to survivors, and police officials and court clerks felt overwhelmed and misunderstood, claiming that sometimes cases were sent to them incorrectly.

The local dialogue brought together first responders to domestic violence who had a history of conflict and mistrust

During the dialogue meetings, participants unpacked the issues that were at the heart of the mistrust between NGOs and government officials and co-created solutions. The local dialogue had a set of meeting values, and meetings were held in a similar way to those of the VPF – participants sat in a circle, and every participant was afforded an opportunity to speak. The results were open sharing of information between the participants, and the creation of a WhatsApp group for information sharing about services and personnel changes. This ensured that survivors, supporters and the community accessed accurate information from any first responder they approached, which improved service accessibility and reliability in the three communities.

Clear similarities existed between these local platforms and the VPF. When asked what had motivated the use of the approach to meetings, the director said that she had learnt about systems change in her previous job. This, coupled with her experiences at the VPF,
had informed her choice to focus on relationships and creating empathy between service providers to enable better collaboration. Through her participation in the VPF, the director also became conscious of how real and perceived power and resource imbalances negatively impacted collaboration.

**Participants unpacked issues causing mistrust between NGOs and government officials and co-created solutions**

Upon rejoining the VPF in 2021, the director began to utilise resources and lessons gained at the VPF to strengthen the organisation’s work. This was done in two ways. Firstly, the organisation engaged facilitators trained by the VPF to lead a meeting where the local platforms engaged provincial officials. At the time, the local platforms had been meeting for over a year to solve challenges in responding to survivors of GBV, but they had realised that overcoming some challenges required buy-in and action from provincial departments.

They wrote a memorandum of action with their list of demands to the provincial Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Police Service (SAPS), with a response deadline. The provincial departments were then invited to a meeting to share their response to the demands. Asked about what influenced the decision to bring in VPF-trained facilitators, the director explained that in the past, meetings with provincial departments had been characterised by conflict and antagonism and that, given their proximity to the demands, they were not a neutral partner. Having neutral external facilitators was key to having conducive discussions, a lesson she had learnt in the VPF, which also had independent facilitators.

During the meeting, the local practitioners and provincial officials from the DSD and SAPS were given the opportunity to share their challenges before co-creating solutions. The results were a deeper understanding of communication and service gaps. The group could see how incorrect assumptions about ‘who is meant to do what’ could result in inaction. A solution was to create a database clarifying the roles and responsibilities that would be shared with all partners.

Secondly, the organisation started to use the VPF definition of violence prevention to frame their work. The creation of the VPF definition was a critical moment in the director’s relationship with the Forum. The definition provided clarity on how and where the different sectors and service providers could contribute to violence prevention and where the work of her organisation fitted into the puzzle. During the interview, the director reflected on how the organisation’s response work, as well as the healing centre, contributed to preventing violence.

Before the definition, there was no clarity on how the different sectors came together. The definition made it clear; it says preventing violence takes the whole of society. I could see how my work can contribute to violence prevention.

– Respondent 1: Director and member of the driver group

In 2021 and 2022, the organisation expanded its work and hired two project managers. The director very quickly connected them to the VPF. In 2022, one project manager attended the provincial Forum, and the following year, both attended the VPF facilitation course. Asked about the impact of participating in the Forum and attending the VPF course, the project manager responded that he saw the VPF as a community that adds tools to your leadership toolkit. He also said that the facilitation course assisted him in navigating conflict and power in the local dialogue platforms.

The VPF definition of violence prevention has also become part of how the organisation’s manager situates the organisation’s work, especially when engaging external stakeholders. The VPF definition and VPF values are displayed on their notice board in the office, and she explained that she refers to them during presentations:

I give a lot of presentations about our work to people whose focus may not be GBV. The definition helps me explain how responding and preventing GBV links to a broader goal of preventing violence. The VPF is helping us refine how we see the bigger problem and our role in solving it.

– Respondent 2: Project manager
The director said that for her organisation, the VPF is more than a platform – it is a community for knowledge and information sharing with a shared vision:

As an executive director, I need to be supported in different ways. In the VPF, I have people I can call and share ideas and think with. Whether I’ve been with Organisation X or Organisation Y, I find myself coming back to VPF or being part of the VPF community.

– Respondent 1: Director and member of the driver group

When asked about their participation challenges, the representatives of the organisation said there was nothing that challenged or limited their involvement. This was attributed to the organisation having sufficient funding to cover its participation costs and that the leader prioritised participation in the VPF. However, implementing the lessons learnt at VPF meetings was not easy.

At the time of conducting the interview, the organisation was proposing to the board that they change the name of the organisation from ‘training and healing centre for women’ to ‘training and healing centre’ as they had come to understand that focusing only on women excluded other groups that may be victims and survivors of GBV. Receiving buy-in from the board was challenging. The organisation was founded to support female survivors, so there was resistance to change. However, the director felt that she had a strong case for the change, which was supported by research and knowledge she had gained in the VPF.

From competition to cooperation

NGO 2 is a social investment enterprise based in the heart of Soweto. Born out of the struggle for human rights and equality, it is a self-sustaining NGO that offers training in community development, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), and Gender Reconciliation. The NGO generates income through local tourism and consultations but is still subjected to the funding challenges in the sector. Participants thus valued the travel and accommodation support provided by the VPF. The VPF facilitators were former directors of NGO 2. Their AVP facilitation style and approach were influenced by their experience at NGO 2.

NGO 3 is an international organisation that started in 1919 and advocates for children’s rights. It opened a South African branch in 2013. They offer a range of child protection and violence prevention programmes and interventions, and their mission is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. They have been participating at the VPF since 2015, and have been part of its driver group since its inception. The organisation’s representatives in the driver group have changed over time.

The interviewed leaders from NGO 2 and NGO 3 had a history of activism. They had participated in the South African liberation movement. Prior to joining their current organisations, one worked for NGOs that advocated for human rights, and the others worked in government. They had been impacted and influenced by the country’s past: ‘I come from Soweto, so I’m that generation that grew up in that chaos. I got to high school in 1990. As soon as you got to high school, you were politicised.

‘I came from Soweto ... Since school, my preoccupation has always been how we attain justice’

Since school, my preoccupation has always been how we attain justice’, said respondent 4, NGO 2 Director and member of the driver group.

Both organisations valued the diversity of participation in the VPF – that there was a mixture of sectors. The directors valued how the diversity and engagements broadened and challenged their views and understanding of the main drivers of violence.

According to the former CEO of NGO 3:

Somebody in my position, a CEO, needs to know a lot more than just what our organisation is doing and what’s in front of us. In order to have a strategic mindset, you have to understand trends and what’s happening in the environment around you. So, the VPF is one of those opportunities for us to do that.

– Respondent 5: Former CEO and member of the driver group
The organisations felt that they had a voice within VPF. Forum meetings were a space to learn and discuss new research and policy. These discussions were often rigorous and thought-provoking. The Forum also created space for both practice-based knowledge and research evidence to be presented and discussed. Decisions were made openly and collectively. Policy briefs published by the VPF were co-authored by representatives from all sectors. This was important for NGOs that had not published research, as they got to document their experiences and lessons.

The organisations also felt valued. In instances when the Forum had been approached by policymakers, development partners or the private sector to collaborate, the convenors deliberately opened these opportunities to NGOs and consulted with them or advocated for them to be represented. This was evident during the NSP on GBVF drafting process. Between 2018 and 2020, when the NSP on GBVF was being drafted, VPF participants who were part of the process drew on the knowledge generated from VPF meetings to inform the strategy.

In addition, they regularly shared developments in the NSP and consulted with VPF participants on the best way to represent some of the ideas to the broader NSP group. The balance between diversity and valuing different voices and forms of knowledge was what made the VPF a unique space for NGOs. The director of NGO 2 stated: ‘As an NGO, we wouldn’t be the automatic people or the automatic sector that one goes to if they want a think tank. And now, because of the VPF, there is a strong connection between practice, research, and policy.’

The NGOs collaborated with other participating organisations, which is one of the VPF’s medium-term goals and values. The organisations experienced partnerships formed with other VPF participants as being ‘authentic’ – which suggests that they are based on trust and shared goals and values. They stressed that the VPF values were put into practice, and not just a list on paper.

One example of this is the establishment of The South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN), a network of NGOs implementing evidence-based or evidence-informed parenting programmes across South Africa. It was established in 2018 by NGOs participating in the VPF, to strengthen the voice of civil society working with families. Both NGOs 2 and 3 are members of SAPPIN.

Respondents from NGOs 2 and 3 reflected on the second VPF meeting, which they described as a turning point in how the different sectors saw
themselves and each other. Before this, NGOs had seen each other as competitors for funding. However, the VPF meetings had made the benefits of collaboration clear—that together, they had increased negotiating power and possibly increased access to funding.

SAPPIN and VPF meetings were facilitated in a similar manner and by similar facilitators. The use of a similar methodology allowed the two platforms to be mutually supportive. A SAPPIN and VPF participant reflected on how having a space to pause and reflect has strengthened her leadership and improved her well-being, which has motivated her to advocate for employee wellness within her organisation:

“The VPF gives us an opportunity to look into ourselves and to calm down because, at times, we become apprehensive and want to rush. SAPPIN has also set up a one-hour check-in session for the supervisors. There, we talk about nothing else except ourselves. So, for me, both platforms value and practise reflection, which has helped me to reflect on and strengthen my leadership. I am now advocating for employee wellness in my organisation.”

– Respondent 6: Acting CEO and former head of programme

The benefits of collaboration were clear: together, NGOs had increased negotiating power and access to funding

Lastly, the NGOs said that SAPPIN enabled them to have a collective voice when engaging with the government and researchers. In 2023, SAPPIN was a registered NPO with a portfolio that included research, advocacy, capacity building and convening events to share and learn from best practices. A strong example of the power of this action emerged in 2021, when a provincial government set out to scale up evidence-informed family-strengthening programmes in the province to give effect to a family-strengthening strategy. This was one way in which the province sought to contribute to the prevention of violence.

Often, implementation strategies are developed without the direct involvement of stakeholders, including NGOs, civil society and researchers. However, in this case, the process was consultative and inclusive from the onset. The lead policymaker had been participating in the VPF, and had been exposed to research evidence showing that exposure to violence in childhood increased the likelihood of becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence in adulthood. The policymaker had developed strong relationships with researchers and NGOs, and was able to draw on this as a resource in the development of the strategy.

In 2022, the province contracted the ISS and Southern Hemisphere, a social sector consultancy, to assist the government in convening and facilitating three workshops to draft an implementation, monitoring and evaluation plan for the strategy. The three workshops included NGOs and academics, sought to understand the context and challenges in which parenting programmes are delivered and to co-create the guidelines for implementation. The draft guidelines were approved in 2023, and R45 million was allocated by the provincial treasury to enable the scale-up of programmes, with SAPPIN as a key partner.

Discussion

Participation and impact drivers

The two narratives presented show that participating in the VPF impacted the work of all three organisations, and the extent of the impact was attributed to a set of common factors. All three NGOs pointed to similar incentives and conditions that sustained or limited their participation. These are summarised in Chart 8. However, the factors that sustained participation were ranked differently by the organisations. They varied depending on the type of NGO. For example, the multinational NGO 3 ranked the diversity of sectors and knowledge in the Forum at the top of the list, while for local NGOs, it was how the Forum paid attention to the history between sectors and nurtured relationships.

What motivated NGOs to participate was there being sufficient alignment between the content and focus of VPF meetings and their organisation’s interests, the reputation of the convener and past experiences of the meetings. In instances where representatives were replacing a colleague, the experience of a colleague also mattered. Positive experiences in
Incentives and motivations to participate

- Reputation of the Forum and the convenor
- Past experiences of meetings
- Alignment with organisational needs and goals
- Participation support (i.e. travel funding)

Conditions that sustained participation

- Paying attention to the history between stakeholders
- Diversity of sectors and knowledge in the Forum
- Nurturing of relationships
- Being authentic – practising of values
- Progress (winnings)

Drivers of impact

- Position and history of the representative
- Timing and alignment

meetings encouraged participants to come back. A negative experience at a meeting could impact future participation. One of the challenges to participation was being able to afford to attend meetings. However, this was mitigated by the convenors providing flights and accommodation for NGO participants.

One factor motivating and sustaining participation was the access VPF meetings offered to a diverse spectrum of relevant role players from government, other NGOs, and academia. Also key was how the Forum convenors and facilitators acknowledged the tension in relations between sectors and actively worked to enable empathy and understanding to be built between and within sectors.

The NGO participants continued to participate in the VPF because there was a balance between learning and ‘nurturing’. Nurturing referred to the attention that the VPF paid to the history between participants, who was in the room, how participants were sitting and how meetings were facilitated. The VPF put effort into ensuring maximum participation.

During meetings, there was a balance of formality and informality. Participants shared research and knowledge, played together, and shared stories of activism. Some of the stories reflected the secondary trauma that participants carried. In the early meetings, the VPF prioritised building empathy between participating sectors. However, due to the change in participation in meetings, this had to be a deliberate, constant practice.

The VPF was described as an authentic space that ‘lived its values’: respect, empathy, active listening, deep democracy, collaboration and

WAS ALLOCATED BY THE PROVINCIAL TREASURY TO SCALE-UP FAMILY-STRENGTHENING PROGRAMMES
Participants felt they could be fully themselves in the meetings. NGOs could openly and honestly share their assumptions about other participating sectors, discuss their challenges and frustrations, and play and have fun with other participants.

The Forum also documented its progress. Sharing progress and small and big wins motivated and sustained participation as participants felt they were part of an effective body. The VPF consistently shared meeting reports and had a website where policy briefs, research and event reports were also shared. At the time of writing, the Forum had a newsletter and a LinkedIn account where new research, events and job opportunities were shared with the VPF network and the public.

Is the VPF transforming the violence prevention ecosystem in South Africa?

Rayner and Bonnici argue that systems change interventions need to focus on systems work and the day-to-day practices of the system’s actors. They offer three principles to shift these practices: fostering connections, reconfiguring power, and embracing context (see Chart 4). The research found that the VPF has addressed all three in less than a decade.

Fostering connection

Fostering connection is the recognition that addressing social challenges requires collaborative efforts; who participates in the collaboration impacts how the challenge is viewed. Therefore, expanding participation in the partnership to address a social problem, especially involving primary actors, often leads to a better understanding of the challenge.

Fostering connection is also about investing time in building a shared identity and understanding amongst participants, one that values the partners equally instead of deeming some partners as experts and others as not. Often, practitioners are not valued as experts, and their perspectives are lost or their ideas not heard.

The VPF has intentionally created a platform for inclusive dialogue space where NGOs can participate as contributors to knowledge about what works to prevent violence in South Africa. NGOs interviewed in the case study reported feeling heard, seen and valued within the VPF. Thus, the VPF has fostered connections between NGOs and other sectors that are important in violence prevention.

An example is how project managers at NGO 2 used the definition of prevention developed in the VPF and applied the facilitation approach in the local intervention meetings they were working on simultaneously.

The researcher noted that the impact was even more amplified when all of the factors above were aligned: the organisation’s representative was senior enough, passionate, and participated at a time when the VPF discussions were aligned with the organisation’s focus, and the meetings were facilitated in a manner that upheld the VPF values.
between NGOs and researchers, and among NGOs themselves. NGOs coming into the Forum faced funding challenges and were in competition with each other. In addition, they had become cynical about the ability of the state to implement its policy and law to address social problems like violence, which remained prevalent. NGOs felt as though their expertise was less valued than the research knowledge of academics. They were overwhelmed by high workloads, and many reported experiencing secondary trauma from hearing and witnessing the stories of survivors.

Given these starting conditions, the Forum invested time in creating a shared identity, ownership and a common understanding of violence and its prevention. This investment resulted in the participating NGOs feeling valued as experts and partners. The VPF also prioritised relationship building and knowledge sharing, which equipped NGOs to navigate changes in context.

Organisations need to adapt to changing contexts to ensure that interventions remain relevant

Violence is complex. Often, different partners work on different parts of the problem, and may not see the whole ‘elephant’. Participating in a multisectoral dialogue platform with researchers broadened how the NGOs viewed violence and its drivers. This translated into changes in how they approached and positioned their work.

Embracing context

The second systems work principle argues that successful social change efforts equip primary actors with the tools to embrace contextual shifts and challenges. Violence happens within specific contexts and interventions to address violence are also shaped by the social, economic, political and organisational context. Organisations need to adapt to changing contexts to ensure that interventions remain relevant.

The interviewed NGOs were part of the VPF driver group. This group regularly analyses changes in the political, economic and social context in order to determine the content of discussions for meetings, identify which research evidence is to be presented, as well as who will participate in the meeting. This ensures that the VPF is responsive to the needs of participants and remains relevant.

Through the VPF facilitation course and exposure to the AVP methodology practised in the VPF, participants have learnt constructive approaches to engaging with other sectors. This is particularly useful as NGOs participate in policy processes that are characterised by negotiations with organisations that might want different outcomes.

Reconfiguring power

Sustainable social change efforts reconfigure power in a system, often by placing the primary actors at the centre of decision-making processes. A facilitation methodology that prioritises deep democracy and building empathy among participating sectors has enabled the VPF to reconfigure power relations. NGOs have formed mutually beneficial relationships with one another and with other sectors, grounded on shared understanding and compassion. The establishment of SAPPIN, which aimed to elevate the collective voice of the NGOs in the ecosystem, was reported to be a step forward for NGO collective power.

The study found that the expertise of NGOs has also been assimilated into policy through growing consultations between participating policymakers and practitioners and, at times, the hiring of practitioners by government departments.

This case study found that participation in the VPF is shifting how NGOs do their work and, thus, the impact they have in the communities they serve. However, given the dynamic and flexible nature of the Forum, timing and alignment between organisational needs and the VPF focus also matters. Who represents the organisation matters significantly and impacts the sustainability of participation. Practitioners who have decision-making power and are passionate and driven can quickly adopt and implement what is learned in the forum.

Given the flexible nature of the Forum, where the focus and group make-up at meetings changes, each meeting was significant. A negative experience at a meeting could greatly impact future participation.
Careful attention needs to be constantly paid to balancing the needs of new and returning participants and acknowledging the history of participants. However, while the flexibility allows for broader participation and improved understanding of the drivers of violence, the Forum needs to constantly revisit its boundaries to avoid broadening its participation too much and being overwhelmed by the challenge.

Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of this research was to document the experiences of NGOs participating in the VPF, a multisectoral dialogue, to document what motivates them to participate and the impact on the organisations. The research intended to establish whether the VPF functions as a vehicle for systematic change in NGOs. The researcher found that the VPF is indeed fulfilling this functioning.

The VPF fostered connections between different stakeholders working to prevent violence, bringing them together as equal participants.

Systems change requires a change in how actors in the system do their work. The VPF fostered connections between different stakeholders working to prevent violence. Participating NGOs described it as a unique space where researchers, NGOs and the government came together as equal participants to share knowledge and research and build relationships. Secondly, the VPF equipped practitioners with new knowledge about policy and research. Participating NGOs felt valued as experts, and in turn valued the evidence that was shared by researchers and applied it in their work.

The Forum also equipped participating practitioners with skills. The value-driven way in which meetings were facilitated, prioritising equality and empathy, was carried over into work meetings. Finally, the VPF reconfigured power. In policy development, NGOs are often consulted but are seldom equal participants. The VPF helped to facilitate stronger relationships among NGOs, who then collaborated to establish a network of NGOs that could represent their collective needs and be a collective voice in policy discussions. The network has already influenced policy frameworks, helping to design guidelines for evidence-informed parenting programmes.

The VPF offers lessons for violence prevention practitioners, policymakers and development partners hoping to replicate this work and build a multisectoral dialogue or partnership. These lessons are also applicable to NGOs, the VPF governing bodies and the broader network.

The following are recommendations for stakeholders who are or want to engage in multisectoral collaborations or dialogue for social change:
• Collaborations for social change must involve practitioners or other primary actors in the decision-making process as they are the most immersed in the social challenge, and bring important insights into how the problem manifests.

• Convenors and funders of multisectoral collaborations or dialogue platforms must continuously invest time and resources to build and nurture the relationship between stakeholders, especially if there is a history of conflict and mistrust, to foster sustained commitment.

• NGOs and convenors must carefully choose the leaders they bring to multisectoral collaborations for social change – their history, stress levels, decision-making power and character. This is an important driver to organisations subsequently implementing the lessons they learn at these collaborations.

• Funders, convenors, and participants of multisectoral collaborations must invest time in understanding the problem and marking its boundaries to avoid being overwhelmed by the scale and scope of the social problem.

• Collaborations must document and share progress. Sharing progress and milestones motivates partners to continue participating, as they feel part of an effective body.
Appendix: VPF theory of change

Ultimate goal
Evidence-informed interventions reduce and prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa

Policies and decisions aimed at preventing violence are informed by evidence

Expansion of who is represented/participates in policy discussions and other spaces of influence

Increased collaboration and information flow between individuals and organisations

A mutually supportive network of people who understand violence prevention is created and maintained

Participants are likely to use evidence in their work and promote the use of evidence in their organisations

Participants apply skills learned in the Forum in their work and when engaging in difficult discussions on violence prevention, even with dissenting voices

Relationships are built between individuals in different sectors that allow information to flow between different sectors

Participants have confidence to communicate privately and publicly about violence and its prevention

Participants have an evidence-informed understanding of violence and its impact on society, and what is needed to prevent it

Participants learn self-mastery and skills to engage with dissenting voices in violence prevention

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

Participants engage in translation and collective sense-making of the evidence

All awareness (emotions, experiences, etc.) and voices acknowledged during Forum discussions

Individuals are invited to participate because of their expertise, skills, attitudes, openness to be challenged, and ability to influence change in their organisations

Facilitators are skilled and participate equally

Participants spend time in relationship-building activities (dinner, introspection, sharing in pairs/threes, etc.)

Government, researchers, NGOs, etc. all share knowledge, information and evidence

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

Source: Violence Prevention Forum Evaluation Report, M Amisi, 2020
Notes


4 Ibid.


8 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


27 Ibid.


31 Ibid.


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