



POLICY BRIEF

How business can help build a safer South Africa

Lessons from the Violence Prevention Forum

Marcel Korth

Violence affects employees, workplaces, supply chains, communities and the wider conditions in which businesses operate. Drawing on the Violence Prevention Forum's 2025 engagement with business, this policy brief shows how companies can contribute to prevention as partners, not only funders. It argues that research, practice-based knowledge and facilitated, sustained dialogue across sectors can build trust, deepen mutual understanding and enable business to contribute meaningfully to preventing violence.

Key findings

- ▶ Violence is not external to business. Violence affects employees, families, workplaces, supply chains, communities and the wider conditions in which companies operate.
- ▶ Business can contribute to preventing violence beyond funding. Companies can support prevention through workplace culture, employee well-being, evidence-informed investment, responsible procurement and long-term NGO partnerships.
- ▶ Effective partnerships require understanding each other's realities. NGOs, researchers and businesses work with different mandates, incentives, risks, timelines and decision-making cultures.
- ▶ Relational conditions are essential for collaboration. Effective multisector collaboration depends on trust, shared understanding and psychological safety, which must be deliberately created.
- ▶ Dialogue with other sectors can shift how business understands its role. Reflective, well-facilitated dialogue can help business actors move beyond a funding role and begin to see how their own systems, relationships and influence connect to violence prevention.
- ▶ Multiple forms of evidence strengthen engagement. Combining research, lived experience, site visits and practice-based knowledge makes violence-prevention evidence more accessible and actionable across sectors.

Recommendations

For business:

- ▶ Understand business exposure and responsibility. Companies should assess how violence affects their employees, workplaces, value chains, customers and communities, and how their operations and relationships may contribute to violence or its underlying conditions.
- ▶ Work with research and implementation partners from the start. Invest in context-appropriate interventions with clear prevention goals and long-term learning, and contribute through workplace platforms, procurement, supply chains, communication reach, partnerships and leadership – not funding alone.

For NGOs and violence-prevention practitioners:

- ▶ Engage business as a partner in prevention, not only a funder. Bring companies into dialogue and link prevention to workforce well-being, safety, productivity, social stability and long-term value without diluting the work.

- ▶ Make specialist expertise visible and usable. Co-design interventions early, and be clear about what safe, ethical, trauma-informed and sustainable implementation requires.

For convenors of multisectoral platforms:

- ▶ Build trust and address power differences. Use skilled facilitation to surface assumptions, flatten hierarchy and create psychological safety so that business does not crowd out the knowledge of communities, NGOs, researchers or government.
- ▶ Combine evidence and experience through sustained engagement. Bring research and practice-based knowledge together through site visits, dialogue and structured reflection, and resource sustained engagement so collaboration becomes long-term partnership rather than one-off meetings.

Introduction

South Africa's persistently high levels of interpersonal and structural violence cannot be addressed by government alone. Researchers have generated a significant body of evidence on the scale and nature of violence in South Africa,¹ what works to prevent violence and what does not.² Studies reference the importance of a whole-of-society, multisectoral approach to violence prevention.³

National policy increasingly recognises the need for a co-ordinated, multisectoral response and identifies the private sector as a partner in prevention. The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, for example, recognises a critical role for business beyond funding, including through workplace practices, supply chains, community engagement and leadership in shifting harmful social norms.⁴ Yet business engagement remains inconsistent and often confined to funding, rather than positioning companies as systemic actors able to help change the conditions that give rise to and sustain violence.

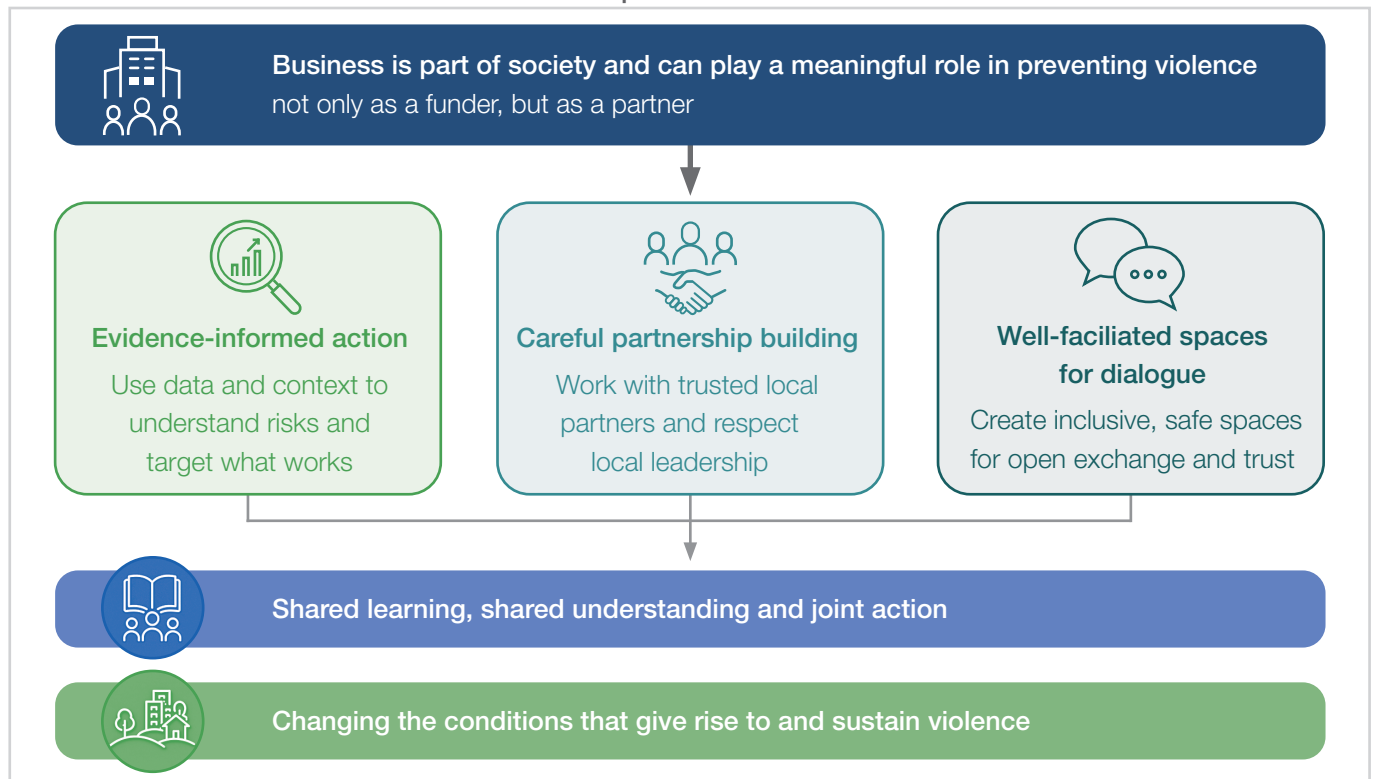
Building on the 2024 Institute for Security Studies (ISS) policy brief *Lessons for multisectoral collaboration to*

prevent violence, which emphasised trust-building, shared sensemaking and joint problem definition,⁵ this brief focuses on insights from the 2025 Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) meetings. These meetings brought private-sector actors into the violence-prevention ecosystem. This brief examines how the VPF's model of shared purpose, collective learning, values-based practice and reflective engagement helps lower barriers, challenge assumptions and build trust across sectors.

It is intended primarily for business leaders and teams considering how they can contribute to violence prevention, while also offering insights for NGOs seeking to engage companies as partners and convenors bringing business, civil society, researchers and government into dialogue.

Business can play a meaningful role in preventing violence as one partner within a wider prevention ecosystem. This requires evidence-informed action, careful partnership-building and well-facilitated spaces for dialogue, shared learning and joint action, so that business engagement is not reduced to funding, visibility or control of the collaboration.

Chart 1: How business can contribute to violence prevention



Source: Author

Why preventing violence matters – even for business

For business, violence is not abstract. It affects operating environments, the routes employees travel, surrounding communities, the well-being of families and the trust underpinning markets and institutions. The July 2021 unrest in South Africa showed how quickly social and political volatility can disrupt supply chains, destroy livelihoods and close businesses.⁶ More recent anti-immigrant mobilisation and threats of violence show how economic frustration, scapegoating and mistrust can place people, communities and businesses at risk.⁷

These examples do not mean that businesses should approach violence prevention solely as risk mitigation. They show, rather, that business has a stake in building the social conditions that make violence less likely and in strengthening partnerships that help build those conditions before a crisis emerges.

South African civil society organisations face growing funding pressure. In 2025, almost a third of the nonprofits surveyed by Trialogue reported decreased income, while corporate funding was the largest reported source of income among respondents.⁸ This raises the stakes for how partnerships are formed. If business helps fill the gap, prevention work should not be shaped mainly by corporate visibility, short timelines or reputational priorities. Instead, partnerships should use evidence of what works to address risk factors for violence and commit to building capacity for sustainable delivery at scale.

South Africa has a growing body of evidence on the drivers and prevention of violence, generated through research and practice over the past decade.⁹ Yet translating it into sustained, system-wide action remains difficult. In complex systems, stakeholders hold different forms of knowledge, authority and resources, with few spaces for dialogue and collective sensemaking. There are also few off-the-shelf solutions: local contexts, capabilities and resources shape what is possible and consistent with the available evidence.

The VPF offers one way to bridge these divides. By bringing business, civil society, researchers, government and development partners together in deliberately designed spaces, it combines relationship-building,

knowledge brokering and collective sensemaking. This approach enables stakeholders to engage more honestly across different institutional realities. In 2025, this model was used to bring business more deeply into the prevention ecosystem, rather than engaging companies mainly as funders.

The key question is therefore no longer whether business should help prevent violence and build safety, but how it can participate in ways that are ethical, evidence-informed and transformative.

What makes the VPF model a good fit for business

The VPF, convened by the ISS since 2015, is a national multisectoral platform supporting evidence-informed violence prevention in South Africa. It brings together researchers, civil society organisations, government, development partners and, increasingly, business. It meets twice a year and has held 23 meetings, averaging 32 participants. Its significance lies not only in who participates, but in how they engage.

The VPF model is relevant for business engagement because it does not require sectors to arrive already aligned

The VPF is deliberately designed as a learning and relationship-building space for sectors that share a mission to prevent violence but often work separately amid competition, failed partnerships and unequal power dynamics. Sustained dialogue allows participants to deepen their understanding of one another's work, engage with evidence and build trust and stronger partnerships. Its theory of change links three functions: building trusting relationships, generating and translating knowledge, and strengthening the capacity of violence-prevention leaders.¹⁰ Together, they are intended to support advocacy for evidence-informed interventions and their uptake and scale-up to reduce violence and build safer communities.

What distinguishes the VPF from other multisectoral platforms is that relationship-building, engagement with evidence and reflective dialogue are treated as one process.¹¹ Formal presentations are limited, leaving time

for structured dialogue, small-group work and facilitated reflection, allowing research evidence to be interpreted alongside practice-based knowledge. Facilitation intentionally lowers hierarchy: participants sit in a circle and are invited to listen, reflect and consider different perspectives, guided by collectively determined values and meeting-specific rules of engagement.

The VPF model is particularly relevant for business engagement because it does not require sectors to arrive already aligned. Instead, it creates conditions in which actors can ask difficult questions, acknowledge uncertainty and engage without immediate institutional defensiveness. For business actors, who may be used to more transactional or performance-driven spaces, this creates a different kind of entry point into violence prevention by prioritising learning, trust-building and shared responsibility. In complex systems, how actors interpret a problem shapes how they respond to it.¹² Shifts in underlying paradigms are a key leverage point, because they influence how problems are defined and addressed.¹³

The VPF helps business actors engage with evidence on violence prevention, understand themselves as active participants in the prevention ecosystem, understand other organisations' realities and see how they can contribute beyond funding.

What the VPF shows about engaging business

In 2025, the VPF deliberately invited private-sector actors to meetings 21 and 22.¹⁴ Together, the meetings combined recent research on crime, violence and their drivers with facilitated reflection and two site visits to violence-prevention interventions.

Business engagement needs deliberate process design

The meetings accommodated established VPF participants and business newcomers while creating space for dialogue, shared learning and relationship-building. One private-sector participant said the meetings made 'a huge impression' because they were 'very, very different ... from the usual kind of ... meetings.'¹⁵ Another said that although there was structure, 'it felt ... more breathable.' Participants also described the VPF as 'very

welcoming,' said its facilitators 'can hold very powerful space,' and referred to a 'safe container.' As one put it, 'It really levels the playing field.'

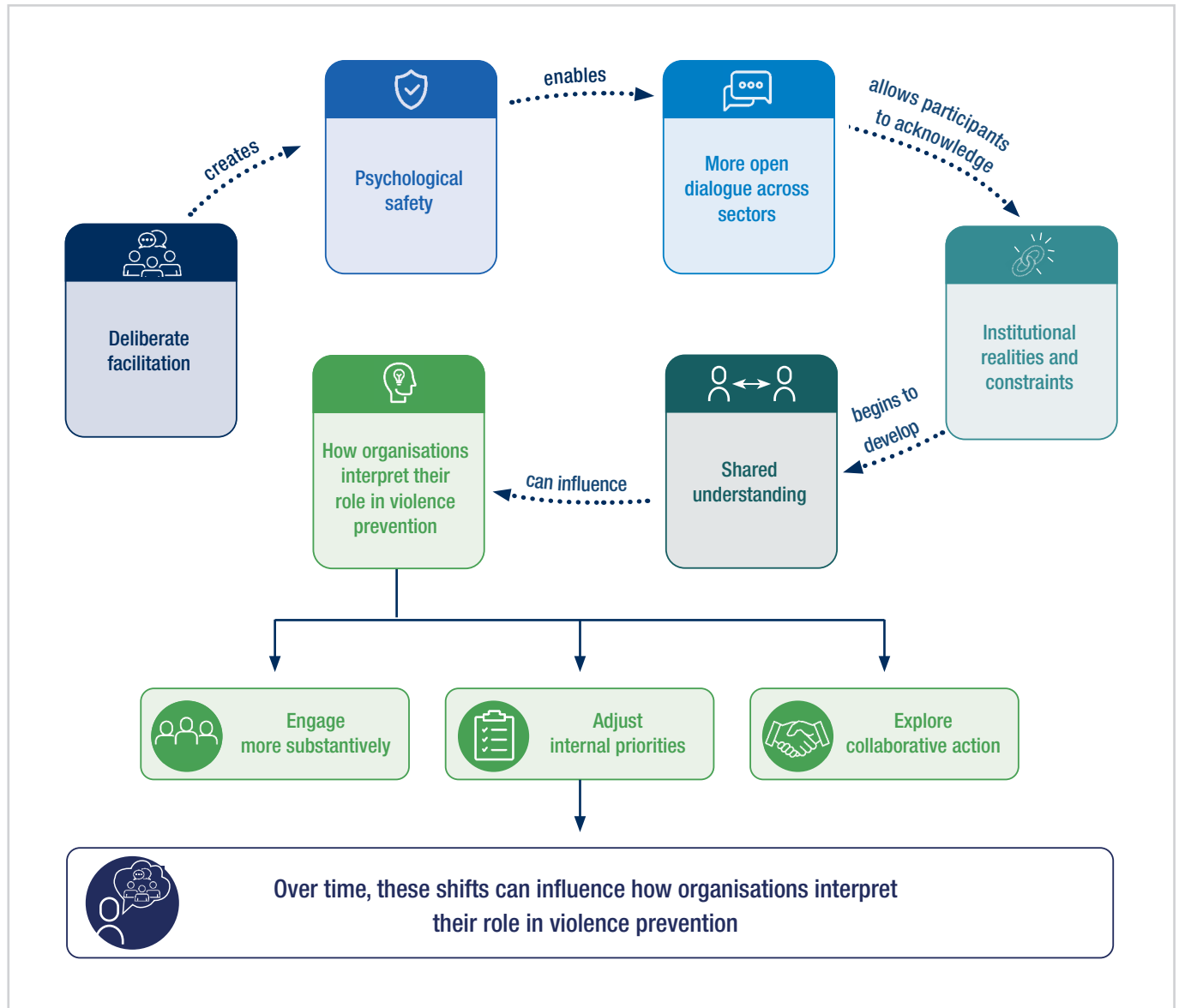
Bringing different sectors together does not automatically produce collaboration, even when they share a concern and have access to evidence. Different organisational cultures, values, power relationships and political contexts can impede the flow and use of knowledge. Chris Ansell and Alison Gash argue that collaboration requires face-to-face dialogue through which trust, commitment and shared understanding can develop over time.¹⁶ This is especially important where sectors have different institutional cultures and ways of knowing. The 2025 meetings illustrated that attendance matters, but deliberate facilitation, psychological safety and honest dialogue enable participants to work across these differences.

Collaboration requires face-to-face dialogue through which trust, commitment and shared understanding can develop over time

For private-sector participants, this created a rare space to discuss difficult issues without immediate reputational defensiveness. One participant valued being able 'to pause and reflect and not rush into the next activity.' Framing business actors as members of a learning community, rather than primarily as sponsors, donors or technical experts, reduced transactional expectations and allowed them to ask questions, acknowledge uncertainty and explore how violence prevention intersects with their organisational realities. As trust developed, participants appeared more willing to acknowledge internal constraints and challenges that might carry reputational risk, including how violence manifests within their own spheres of influence.

The VPF experience suggests a practical sequence. Deliberate facilitation can create the psychological safety needed for open dialogue. As institutional realities and constraints become more visible, participants can build shared understanding and reduce the risk of misalignment and unrealistic expectations.

Chart 2: The VPF experience suggests a sequence of interrelated shifts



Source: Author

Perspective-taking helps sectors see each other's realities

Structured reflection also helped participants understand the institutional realities within which others work. A Lands Work exercise at meeting 21 invited participants into one another's sectoral 'lands' to explore what was working and what was challenging, imagine and speak from others' perspectives and build empathy. After each visit, participants from the sector concerned reflected on what their visitors had understood or missed, before the full group considered what to carry into their shared land, South Africa.

Participants experienced this movement from perspective-taking to shared ground as significant. As one private-sector participant reflected, 'There's always common ground to be found if you really, really are trying to find it,' suggesting that structured dialogue could help identify shared priorities that sectoral assumptions or differences might otherwise obscure.

The reflections brought out each sector's strengths and pressures: NGOs' proximity to communities and frontline expertise alongside funding insecurity and fatigue; researchers' evidence-building role alongside funding and knowledge-translation

pressures; government's ability to act at scale alongside bureaucracy and political mandates; and business's systems, scale and role in job creation alongside planning cycles, competing priorities and defined strategic mandates. For participants, this challenged the assumption that companies can readily release funds and showed that internal champions may first need to make the relevance of crime prevention to business priorities and its potential return on investment clear.

The exercise also prompted reflection on the place of business in the wider prevention ecosystem, beyond that of an external donor. One participant observed, 'corporate – you give funding. But ... you also house a lot of the individuals [that play a role] in the communities.' For some, this brought a less comfortable recognition that violence is present within workplaces and in employees' lives, not only in community-facing work.

Evidence may need to be translated into frames that resonate with business decision making without losing its substantive meaning

Shared ground did not remove every tension. Participants remained aware of uneven experience, different motivations and the difficulty of translating dialogue into collaboration. One private-sector participant was struck by the knowledge in the room, but also by the challenge of turning 'all this knowledge, all this information, all the research' into action in their own contexts.

Research lands better when it is interpreted together

Participants suggested that reflective engagement strengthened how evidence was received. One described the data as 'just so eye-opening' and said, 'I've been quoting that research.' Another found experiential evidence, including site visits and hearing 'real impacts in people's voices,' especially compelling because it helped 'create a better kind of understanding.'

Evidence may need to be translated into frames that resonate with business decision making without losing its substantive meaning or values base. This does not mean reducing prevention to business metrics; rather, it means helping actors connect evidence to internal mandates and strategies. Earlier ISS work on shared value similarly argued that violence prevention becomes more sustainable when companies recognise social well-being and business functioning as mutually reinforcing.¹⁷

The Free to Grow programme illustrates this in practice.¹⁸ It translated evidence on family violence prevention, parenting support and relational skills into a workplace-based intervention delivered during working hours. Prevention therefore became relevant not only as a social impact intervention but as support for employee well-being, healthier workplace relationships,



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reduced conflict and improved organisational results. This example shows that careful adaptation to context can strengthen, rather than dilute, prevention practice.

Dialogue can shift thinking inside organisations before formal partnerships emerge

Updates at the opening of the second 2025 meeting showed continuing conversations within companies about violence prevention and where it intersects with business mandates. Although tentative, these shifts indicated that the dialogue was generating internal sensemaking.

One private sector participant described using meeting insights in internal conversations and strategy discussions and engaging with a civil society counterpart as a possible step towards collaboration. Others were beginning to reframe prevention from an external social issue to one connected with employee well-being, workplace culture and operational risk.

Companies should take a long-term perspective, grounding their investments in research and partnerships

These developments show that value can emerge before formal partnerships and accumulate through repeated interaction, reflection and follow-up. Consistent with Ansell and Gash's account of a virtuous cycle in which small wins deepen trust, commitment and shared understanding, participants can test assumptions, recognise shared ground and consider practical next steps.¹⁹ In complex systems, such relational shifts are foundational because they can shape whether organisations mobilise resources, adjust priorities or collaborate over time.

Systems-change literature similarly describes convening spaces as catalytic when they help actors see a shared problem differently, recognise interdependence and identify where movement is possible across institutional boundaries. Sandra Waddock and Steve Waddell argue that transformation catalysts contribute less through direct control than by connecting actors, strengthening coherence and helping them see where their efforts can reinforce one another.²⁰

Recommendations

The 2025 VPF process shows that business has an important role in violence prevention and that this role can deepen through dialogue, evidence and partnership. Meaningful participation depends on companies understanding their contribution; NGOs, researchers and practitioners engaging business as partners; and convenors creating conditions for trust, mutual understanding and continued learning. The following recommendations set out practical steps.

For business

- *Recognise violence prevention as relevant to business leadership.* Boards and executives should understand how violence relates to workforce well-being, productivity, reputation, organisational culture, human rights and long-term stability, and use this understanding to inform decisions and investments.
- *Understand where violence touches the business system.* Companies should examine how violence affects employees, families, workplaces, contractors, suppliers, customers, transport routes, communities and the broader conditions in which they operate.
- *Work with evidence and implementation partners from the start.* Companies should take a long-term perspective, grounding their investments in research, practice-based knowledge and partnerships with organisations that understand violence prevention in context.
- *Invest in interventions with clear prevention objectives.* Companies should ask what an intervention is trying to change, who is best placed to deliver it and how its contribution to violence prevention will be measured over time. Awareness campaigns can help but should not replace longer-term programmes that address the conditions that give rise to violence.
- *Invest in employees as people, parents and caregivers.* Workplace-based programmes that support well-being, communication, conflict resolution, positive parenting and psychosocial safety can contribute to safer homes, safer communities and healthier workplaces.
- *Use business capabilities beyond funding.* Companies can contribute through workplace platforms,

procurement, interventions across supply chains, communication reach, sector influence, local partnerships and leadership voice.

For NGOs and violence prevention practitioners

- *Engage business as a partner in the prevention ecosystem, not only as a funder.* NGOs and practitioners should intentionally bring companies into dialogue and knowledge-sharing as part of a whole-of-society approach. Companies can provide resources, workplace platforms, supply-chain reach, communication channels and influence, but they need partners who understand violence prevention, community contexts and violence data.
- *Translate data without diluting the work.* Practitioners should show how prevention connects to employee well-being, safety, productivity, social stability, ESG and long-term value, while keeping the focus on evidence-informed practice and first-do-no-harm principles.
- *Make specialist prevention expertise visible and usable.* NGOs and practitioners should clearly articulate their expertise, including contextual understanding, trusted relationships, trauma-informed practice and implementation experience. This helps businesses choose partners, manage risks and support safe, ethical and evidence-informed interventions.
- *Co-design from the start.* Partnerships with business should be shaped early with practitioners, researchers and communities, in context, rather than adapting programmes only after funding or visibility priorities have been set.

- *Protect evidence, ethics and implementation integrity.* NGOs should be clear about what makes prevention effective, what can be adapted and what support is needed for safe, trauma-informed and sustainable delivery.

For convenors of multisectoral platforms

- *Build trust before asking for partnership.* Convenors should use skilled facilitation to help stakeholders examine their assumptions and understand one another's realities, creating the trust needed to identify practical areas for collaboration.
- *Use evidence, practice-based knowledge and dialogue together.* Research presentations should be combined with experiential and relational methods, including site visits, dialogue and structured reflection, to help different sectors interpret evidence together and make sense of violence prevention in practical terms.
- *Give intentional attention to power differences.* Convenors should ensure that business participation does not crowd out other actors' knowledge. Facilitation should deliberately lower hierarchy, manage pace and create a psychologically safe space for reflection.
- *Sustain dialogue, learning and follow-through.* Multisector engagement should be treated as a long-term learning and partnership-building process, not as a one-off meeting. Convenors should allocate sufficient resources to preparation, repeated engagement, synthesis, documentation and follow-up, with opportunities for mixed-sector exchange and sector-specific reflection.

Notes

- 1 These authors discuss crime and violence trends in South Africa, drawing on a synthesis of data from sources such as the South African Police Service crime statistics, Statistics South Africa's Victims of Crime Survey, the South African Medical Research Council's mortality and homicide studies and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Study on Homicide:
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D Bruce, Targeting firearm crime will make South Africa safer, *Policy Brief* 191, 2024, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1730722440229-PB-191.pdf>.
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World Health Organization, UN Women, the UN Population Fund, the UN Development Programme and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *RESPECT women: preventing violence against women*, 2019, www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-RHR-18.19.
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- 4 Republic of South Africa, *National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide*, 2020, <https://gbvf.org.za/publications/nsp-2020-2030/>.
- 5 S Bengu, A Mazibuko, C Gould, J van der Heyde and M Amisi, Lessons for multisectoral collaboration to prevent violence, *Policy Brief* 188, 2024, <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-briefs/lessons-for-multisectoral-collaboration-to-prevent-violence>.
- 6 The July 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng remains an important warning of how political contestation, economic insecurity, social instability and failures in public order can escalate into widespread violence, with the South African Human Rights Commission reporting more than 350 deaths and economic losses of about R50 billion. See: South African Human Rights Commission, *Report of the South African Human Rights Commission on the Investigative Hearing into the July 2021 Unrest in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal*, 2024, www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/JULY%20UNREST%20REPORT%20FINAL_29%20JAN%202024.pdf.
- 7 Anti-immigrant mobilisation in 2026 showed how unresolved grievances around unemployment, crime, service delivery and state authority can be channelled into xenophobic intimidation and violence, including threats against migrants, attacks on people and property, obstruction of access to public services, displacement and fear-driven closures of businesses and transport. See:
Human Rights Watch, *South Africa: new waves of xenophobic attacks*, 2026, www.hrw.org/news/2026/05/20/south-africa-new-waves-of-xenophobic-attacks.
N Peyton and S Sishi, South African cities shuttered as anti-migrant protests spark fear, *Reuters*, 30 June 2026, www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-cities-shuttered-ahead-anti-migrant-protests-2026-06-30/.
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- 9 Also see publications by the Interrupt_Violence initiative, a multi-university, three-generation longitudinal study on intergenerational violence here: <https://interruptviolence.sps.ed.ac.uk/>.
- 10 VPF, *Theory of change*, 2020, <https://violence-prevention.org/impact/theory-of-change/>.
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- 15 Participant quotations in this section draw on follow-up interviews with VPF participants and facilitators conducted in February and March 2026.
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POLICY BRIEF

How to prevent violence in South Africa

Violence Prevention Forum

Violence in South Africa has an enormous cost on individuals, health and social protection systems, and the economy. There is growing evidence about the substantial return on investment that violence prevention can deliver, and about what works to prevent violence. Now is the time to invest in evidence-based interventions to prevent all forms of violence. This policy brief summarises lessons learnt from research, policy and practice over the past three years.



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POLICY BRIEF

Future-proofing South African business against corruption

Colette Ashton and Erin Klazar

In a context of systemic corruption, business needs to lead the search for solutions. This policy brief highlights new research showing that integrity is in the long-term financial interests of companies. It presents two international good practice methods that business can use to proactively reduce corruption risk: anti-corruption collective action to prevent corruption in sectors; and anti-corruption compliance programmes to prevent and detect corruption in companies.



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POLICY BRIEF

Free to Grow: benefitting businesses where it matters most

Thandi van Heyningen

Not only is it feasible to deliver programmes that prevent violence against women and children during work hours, it also benefits businesses. By focusing on improving interpersonal relationships, lessening parental stress and nurturing parent-child relationships, such programmes can prevent family violence, decrease workplace conflict and increase productivity.



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POLICY BRIEF

Shared value: how business can support children and prevent violence

Kamesh Flynn, Chandré Gould, Celia Hsiao and Sara Naicker

As the world seeks sustainable solutions to rapid urbanisation, looking to redesign and create smart cities, identify strategies to alleviate climate change and develop future-fit children through the Sustainable Development Goals, most South Africans remain trapped in survival mode. In this policy brief the authors look at how South African businesses can create shared value through supporting early childhood development.

About the author

Marcel Korth works as an independent consultant specialising in social impact strategy and implementation, environmental, social and governance and cross-sector partnerships, with a focus on human rights, gender equality and violence prevention.

About the ISS

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