



# POLICY BRIEF

## Lessons for multisectoral collaboration to prevent violence

Matodzi M Amisi, Chandré Gould, Jody van der Heyde, Senzekile Bengu  
and Ayanda Mazibuko

Over the past nine years the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) has facilitated collaboration and partnerships within and between sectors, maintained ongoing engagement and influenced policy, practice and funding for violence prevention interventions in South Africa. This policy brief presents findings from three case studies that assessed why researchers, non-governmental organisations and government officials participate in the VPF and the impact this has.

## Key findings

- ▶ The Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) narrows the gap between evidence, practice and policy by creating an inclusive platform for dialogue and by building trusting relationships between people from different sectors.
- ▶ Some participants find the relationship-building aspect of the VPF challenging and do not always understand its importance for violence prevention work. However, the investment in relationship-building is key to why the VPF has achieved impact.
- ▶ The VPF has maintained strong participation from researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the government for different reasons.
- ▶ Participation in multisectoral forums must yield tangible benefits to participants and outweigh the costs of doing so.
- ▶ Consensus-based decision making and collective ownership of the VPF ensure sustainability and responsiveness to participants.

## Recommendations

- ▶ For conveners of multisectoral platforms that bring NGOs together with other sectors perceived to have more power, such as government, research institutions and donors, it is important not to reinforce power inequalities by giving more space for presentations by researchers or government officials. Such collaborative engagements should be inclusive and not undermine the expertise of NGOs.
- ▶ Conveners should regularly communicate the achievements of multisectoral efforts. Some of the early achievements might seem insignificant, so it is important to have a system in place to document them and share with participants in order to maintain momentum.
- ▶ Funders of research need to create incentives for researchers to participate in multisectoral spaces and engage in dialogue with practitioners. Dialogue with practitioners and policy makers can strengthen the usefulness and relevance of policy research.

## Introduction

South Africa's high levels of violence, as evidenced by one of the highest murder rates in the world, cannot be addressed by the criminal justice system or by the government alone. For this reason, since 2015 the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has convened the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) to provide a platform for ongoing dialogue and relationship-building among violence prevention stakeholders from government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academia, development partners and the private sector. The goal of the VPF is to advance the uptake and scale-up of evidence-informed interventions to reduce and prevent violence in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

There has been growing interest in the VPF model because for almost a decade it has effectively enabled collaboration and partnerships within and between sectors; sustained engagement across sectors; and positively impacted policy, practice and resourcing for violence prevention interventions. Areas of interest in the Forum include how it works; what lessons have been learned over the nine years of its existence; why researchers, NGOs and government officials participate in the Forum; whether the approach is transferable to other contexts; and if and how the approach could be scaled up. These issues informed research conducted in 2023 by the ISS.

### Organisational culture, political context, differences in value systems and power differentials can hinder collaboration

Three case studies were undertaken to assess how the VPF impacts research institutions, government departments and NGOs.<sup>2</sup> Participants in the research were selected on the basis of having attended at least one VPF meeting and having worked in an organisation that has been involved in the VPF for at least two years. In total, ten NGO representatives, seven researchers and eight government officials were interviewed. In addition, the two VPF facilitators and the convener participated in a group interview. Primary data collection was complemented by an extensive literature and document review. The case studies build on an earlier formal evaluation of the VPF completed in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

This policy brief draws on the findings of the 2023 case study research to describe how the VPF has fostered and enabled collaboration and partnerships between and within sectors to strengthen efforts to prevent violence.<sup>4</sup> A key finding of the research was that the Forum has created enabling conditions for collaboration and partnership between and within sectors, by lowering barriers to collaboration and building trusting relationships. Learnings from the VPF may be of value to other multisectoral platforms.

### Why collaboration matters

Globally, evidence-based frameworks for the prevention of violence, such as INSPIRE,<sup>5</sup> RESPECT<sup>6</sup> and collectives like the Prevention Collaboration<sup>7</sup> have stated that effectively preventing violence requires coordinated, or at least aligned, efforts by governments, NGOs, donors and other stakeholders. South African policies, including the 2020 National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide (NSP on GBVF) and the 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security, also recognise the need for multisectoral responses to violence.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, achieving multisectoral collaboration is not easy. There is little guidance on how to enable collaboration, and examples of effective models are not well documented. Opening up spaces for participation does not imply that people will be enthusiastic to participate. Factors such as organisational culture, political context, differences in value systems, and power between sectors and personalities can hinder the flow of information, knowledge and lessons between stakeholders, and this in turn undermines the use of evidence in practice and policy.

Conveners of multi-stakeholder platforms often under- or overestimate the abilities and motivations of stakeholders to participate<sup>9</sup> and the relational competence participants need to engage with others.<sup>10</sup>

### Conditions for collaboration

Several key elements support effective multisectoral collaboration. In this section we detail the theory pertaining to collaboration and how it is practised in the VPF.

The first element is what Chris Ansell and Alison Gash refer to as 'institutional design'. This refers to the structure of the process.<sup>11</sup> It includes clarity on who participates, how they participate and the objective of the

multi-stakeholder platform. Design elements that increase the likelihood of the success of multi-stakeholder forums include having agreement on the rules of engagement that will guide and bind the group, having clear values, transparency in leadership and decision-making, and diversity and inclusivity of participants.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of the VPF, by the third meeting, clear inclusion criteria had been set for participation. These were later codified in the Forum's Terms of Reference (ToRs).<sup>13</sup> These criteria ensure that there is a transparent rationale informing participation in the Forum. Careful attention is also paid to ensuring a balance in representation from the key sectors at each meeting. A clear, collectively determined set of values are applied in meetings, and

Chart 1: VPF values



often these are augmented with rules of engagement specific to a particular meeting.

Platforms that enable collaboration need to avoid creating echo chambers.<sup>14</sup> They need to guard against ideological biases by intentionally including participants who are demographically, experientially and ideologically diverse, and who have different sources and forms of knowledge and information. A diversity of perspectives, and in particular the inclusion of marginal perspectives, can bring to the surface diverse views and unique insights into a complex problem. In addition, decisions must be made collectively.<sup>15</sup> These aspects of institutional design legitimise the process and show that it is fair and open.<sup>16</sup>

The VPF has a well-established practice of making decisions by consensus. For example, in a process to develop a shared definition of violence prevention, the Quaker principles for consensus decision-making were applied to great effect.<sup>17</sup>

Ansell and Gash's second element for effective multisectoral collaboration is having a shared vision and goal. They underscore the importance of shared understanding in a collaborative process, which includes a shared understanding of the problem at hand.<sup>18</sup> Social problems like violence are understood and experienced differently depending on a range of factors. Developing a shared understanding of the problem and what is required to solve it enables a group to move forward.<sup>19</sup>

Chart 2: Quaker principles for beyond consensus decision making



This need for developing a shared understanding was acknowledged by the conveners of the VPF from the outset. In the first six years of the Forum’s life, there was no shared understanding of violence prevention, and a wide diversity of understandings were offered. However, not having a shared definition hampered the development of criteria for violence prevention programmes and interventions, and advocacy efforts to have violence prevention prioritised.

In 2021, the VPF held a series of consultative sector-specific workshops to develop a shared definition of violence prevention.<sup>20</sup> This culminated in a workshop where each sector shared their definition and agreement was reached. The process of co-creation was as important as the definition itself in building a shared agenda for action. The definition is being used to stimulate dialogue, advocate for prevention and inform policy.<sup>21</sup>

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

The final element is transparent leadership. Ansell and Gash explain that leaders are responsible for convening and guiding the collaborative process. However, successful leadership is collective rather than individualist.<sup>22</sup> This is the leadership model the VPF adopted. The Forum is led by a convener, a multisectoral driver group and facilitators. Consultative, inclusive and ethical leadership that is capable of decision-making is essential for the success of the Forum, and for facilitating group dynamics, maintaining rules of engagement, building trust and promoting active participation.<sup>23</sup>

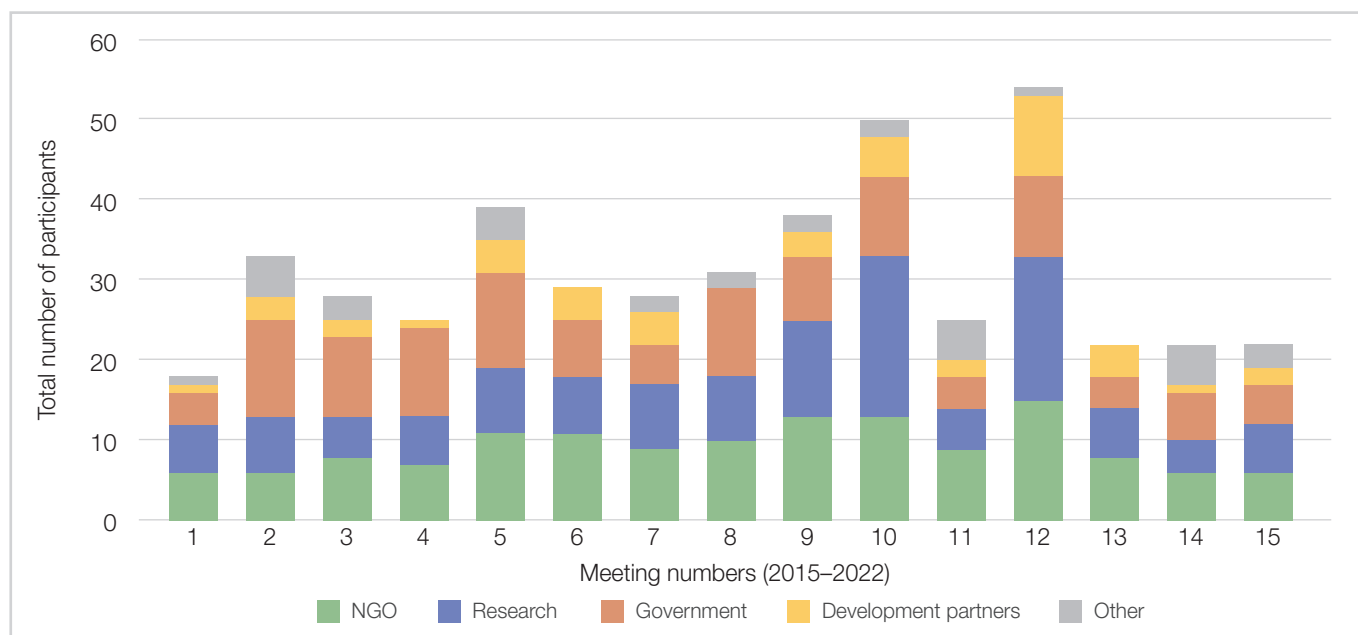
### VPF: Creating space for collaboration

#### Who participates in the VPF?

Between 2015 and 2020 when the VPF was first evaluated, 122 people had attended at least one Forum meeting. By 2023, a further 82 people had attended meetings. These individuals represent researchers, development partners, government, NGOs and private sector companies. On average, 32 participants attend each of the two biannual VPF meetings.

The VPF is not a membership-based platform and meetings are defined by topics that are relevant to the three sectors at any time. Consequently, who participates changes from meeting to meeting. The sectoral balance in participation is presented in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Participation in VPF meetings by sector, 2015–2022



The majority of participants are from research institutions and NGOs, followed by the government, development partners and the private sector. The composition of Forum participants reflects both the sector dynamics and the focus of the Forum. The VPF has focused on knowledge generation and translation and promotion of the use of evidence in violence prevention interventions, an area dominated by researchers and NGOs.

### **Motivation for participating in the VPF**

Participation in multi-stakeholder forums is shaped by individuals' changing and multiple professional roles, the professional and personal incentives that motivate them, and the value they expect from participating.<sup>24</sup> Findings from the three case studies suggest that motivation to participate in the VPF varies between and within sectors.

By reducing the number of formal presentations, the VPF ensures that participants have ample time for reflection and sense-making

For researchers, the VPF provides a platform for promoting their research evidence and sharing knowledge with government and NGOs on how to best prevent violence. The VPF provides opportunities for researchers to enhance the impact of their work by building relationships and accessing a wider network of implementers than they would otherwise. The VPF offers a platform for researchers to disseminate their findings to a multisectoral audience, including those with decision-making power like development partners and policymakers. It has also offered important learning about how to reach different types of audiences with research evidence. Some of the researchers reported that they have changed the way they communicate their research findings because of their participation in the VPF. Government officials reported that they valued the VPF because of what they learned about research evidence and practice in meetings.

For government officials, the VPF provides a thinking space, to critically engage with emerging evidence together with researchers, NGOs implementing programmes and other partners in a non-judgemental space. Through discussions, officials can examine evidence and the experience of practitioners, better interpret the work that they are doing, and expand their understanding of violence prevention in their areas of work. This is important because the government's work is often driven by bureaucratic rules, plans and an audit culture which does not encourage innovation or reflective practice. On the other hand, researchers and NGOs get to understand the factors that influence and inform policy making, as well as how policy is relevant to their work.

A common motivation for NGOs is connection with other NGOs and stakeholders. NGOs that found the VPF discussions relevant to their work



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were motivated to continue to participate. However, NGOs would not be able to participate to the same extent if the VPF did not cover their participation costs.

The findings across the three case studies suggest that individual experiences and character also contribute to continued participation. The VPF seems to be attractive to individuals who are activists, oriented towards finding solutions and are comfortable with embarking on personal transformation. A key assumption in the VPF theory of change is that:

individuals invited to participate will have expertise and skills, have the attitude and openness to be challenged and the ability to influence change in their organisations.<sup>25</sup>

Across the three sectors participants view the VPF's role in the generation and translation of different forms of evidence as important in building knowledgeable practitioners in the sector. There is also an appreciation for the way the VPF values both research-based and practice-based knowledge. The VPF provides a facilitated and deliberative space for collective sense-making of both practice and research-based knowledge.

By reducing the number of formal presentations, the Forum ensures that participants have ample time for reflection and sense-making. This ensures that the VPF is an effective space to translate sometimes complex research or policy processes so that participants can acquire new knowledge and insights.

### **Fostering connection between individuals**

The VPF method emphasises building relationships between individuals to build trust and enable information sharing and collaboration to solve problems. To this end, each meeting begins with a round of check-in questions that each participant is invited to answer. The question is always reflective in nature and often requires participants to share experiences or feelings. Considerable time, up to an hour, is allocated for the check-in session.

The check-ins serve several functions. First, by answering the check-in question each participant speaks and is heard by the group from the start, lowering the barrier to further participation as the meeting unfolds. Second, the check-ins encourage participants to open up to one another as human beings, beyond the official or formal roles they hold professionally.

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

Check-in from the 5<sup>th</sup> VPF meeting – Choose a partner whom you don't know. Go for a walk with one another outside and ask one another the following questions as you walk (giving each other five minutes to share as the other listens deeply): What concerns you deeply at this time in humanity's history? Where do you draw your strength to face the challenges in your life?

Participants from NGOs and government departments were more likely than researchers to be comfortable with these more emotional or personal aspects of the VPF practice. Government participants felt that participating in informal activities such as check-ins and check-outs with people from donor agencies, research institutions, the private sector and NGOs made them feel heard and seen. However, researchers reported being unsure of the usefulness of spending up to an hour of meeting time doing check-ins and having personal discussions.

The emotional intensity of the discussions was also experienced with some ambivalence. For example, researchers questioned whether personal connection was necessary to enable the uptake of evidence. Yet, they valued the connections they made. This indicates that while this aspect of the VPF theory of change might not be well understood, or may be difficult for researchers whose role is often that of 'objective' observers studying VP interventions, it is critical to achieving the outcome of improved interaction and relationships between and within sectors.

## Implications for multisectoral collaboration

We conclude the policy brief with some lessons for those interested in building multi-stakeholder forums.

### Offer incentives to participants

Participation in multisectoral forums should result in tangible benefits for the participants. The benefits of participating have to outweigh the costs. Incentives to participate can be material, social, developmental and/or purposive.<sup>26</sup> Conveners of multisectoral forums should be open and flexible to allow participants to generate benefits that might not have been anticipated or planned for.

### Participation in multisectoral forums should result in tangible benefits for the participants

The case studies found that participants who continue to invest in the VPF were able to identify the incentives. Developmental opportunities such as acquiring new skills and knowledge were reported by all three sectors, although with different emphases. Also important were purposive benefits or how the VPF assists in the achievement of their organisational goals. Participants enter the VPF with their own organisational agenda and have to balance that with their dual role as participants in the Forum. Therefore, continued participation is more likely when they see both personal and organisational benefits.

Conveners and facilitators of the VPF have intentionally created incentives for participation, including the opportunity to co-author policy briefs that showcase and communicate learnings from the VPF; to share research findings; and to encourage and enable input into policy. For example, provincial government officials used the VPF to test out thinking for new policy and then engaged participants in the policy development process to inform its content.

Organisations stop participating in the VPF when it no longer serves their organisational interests. This is expected and appropriate. Contradictions and paradoxical experiences are inevitable in multisectoral collaboration. What works for one stakeholder may not

work for another. The same VPF processes can illicit different responses from participants. David Chavis describes it as the paradox of 'unity and diversity' and argues contradictions are an inevitable part of the collaborative process.<sup>27</sup>

No forum or network will meet all the needs of all the stakeholders in the sector. Nor will it address all the challenges in the sector. It is important to be focused and to accept that some things might remain outside the influence of the network.

### Avoid echo chambers and group think

Multisectoral spaces need to avoid group think. Group think happens when the 'desire to avoid conflict take[s] precedence over the struggle to work through divergent understandings.'<sup>28</sup> To avoid group think, tensions must be raised and dealt with. This must be skilfully facilitated and requires the application of the groups' values to prevent individuals with power from dominating.

The driver group and facilitators of the VPF take care not to allow silencing of differences in opinion. The leadership of the Forum is transparent when conflict takes place between participants or between organisations. Conflicts are openly discussed and feedback provided to participants.

### Focus on relationship building

The VPF opted for a methodology that places great value on relationship-building. It is at the centre of the VPF's theory of change. This is because the VPF theorised that the quality of relationships between individuals in different organisations greatly influences the success and effectiveness of violence prevention efforts. Evidence shows that weak or antagonistic relationships between key stakeholders can negatively affect development efforts.<sup>29</sup>

There are many ways that networks can build relationships between participants. The VPF borrows from the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) approach, which is 'experiential rather than conceptual, and spiritual rather than behaviouristic.'<sup>30</sup> The idea is that people must experience connection and relationship building interventions should not only be performative. This is achieved through a set of processes and activities that affirm self and others, encourage listening as an

important part of communication, foster cooperation not competition, and push participants to focus on solving problems.

Central to this is AVP's approach to managing conflict: the concept of 'transforming power,' which refers to the ability to resolve conflict non-violently, in a way that builds rather than harms the relationship. The VPF invests in these processes because an ability to work through difficulties is vital for interactions to be authentic, sustained, stable and productive.<sup>31</sup>

## The quality of relationships between individuals greatly influences the success and effectiveness of violence prevention efforts

The findings of the case studies show that building relationships is an ongoing process that takes time and careful curation. Although the participants value the outcome of stronger relationships, they do not always appreciate the process of how relationships are built.

### Challenges to multistakeholder dialogue

#### Perceptions that change is slow

In several instances, case study respondents indicated that the VPF contributed to significant change, including contributions to changes in government policies, government monitoring processes and the practices of NGOs. However, these achievements were mentioned alongside frustrations that dialogue processes do not produce change. This indicates the difficulty in demonstrating the change that multisectoral forums contribute to, as well as the frustration within the violence prevention arena with what feels like an intractable social problem.

#### Leading through personal transformation is not an established way of working

The personal nature of the check-ins and some of the exercises can be difficult for some participants. The methodology is particularly difficult for individuals who find comfort in formality, structure, predictability and a controlled environment with clear separation between personal and professional identities. Development practitioners often perceive social problems as being separate from themselves and view their role as being to bring change to external systems. The VPF's approach emphasises personal transformation as the foundation for preventing violence and building more caring research, NGO and government systems. This is not always comfortable.

However, the methodology is intentional and an important part of the theory of change of the VPF. As a result, the driver group has opted to retain the methodology and work with stakeholders within the violence prevention ecosystem who see value in the approach. The Forum uses other tools outside of the two annual meetings to partner with stakeholders who might not feel comfortable with meeting approaches.



PERSONAL  
TRANSFORMATION IS  
THE BASIS FOR CREATING  
CARING NGO AND  
GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

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## Conclusions

Spaces for organisations from different sectors to meet each other, share information and learn together are needed in order to find innovative solutions to complex social problems. The VPF has pioneered a method that integrates personal transformation, interpersonal relationship strengthening, knowledge translation and brokering, and collective sense-making to promote violence prevention in South Africa.

### VPF method integrates personal transformation, interpersonal relationship strengthening, knowledge translation and collective sense-making

The research shows that the logic that underpins the VPF is valid and produces anticipated changes:

- Through participation in the Forum, participants have gained relational skills that have been applied in other contexts.
- Knowledge gained in the VPF has also informed government policies and funding opportunities.
- Relationships built through the VPF have catalysed new networks such as the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN).<sup>32</sup>
- Participants are taking the method and applying it in their places of work.

However, as anticipated in the theory of change, the method works for certain individuals and is consistent with some organisations' ways of working or aspirations, but not all. What motivates participants to attend meetings is both individual and whether the Forum meets organisational needs.

An important takeaway from the research is that conveners can anticipate incentives and build them into the institutional design of collaborative forums, such as the VPF balancing relationship-building elements with tangible outputs such as policy briefs and providing training workshops for participants. However, some of the incentives will be identified by participants themselves when opportunities arise to align their organisations' work with the dialogue's objective.

## Recommendations

- When creating spaces to bring NGOs together with other more powerful sectors such as government, research institutions and donors, conveners of multisectoral platforms must avoid reinforcing power inequalities, for example by giving more space for presentations by researchers or government officials. Ensure that processes of sharing and making sense of information do not undermine NGO expertise.
- Conveners should regularly communicate the achievements of multisectoral efforts. Some of the early achievements might be intangible, so it is important to have a system in place to document them and share with participants in order to maintain momentum.
- Multisectoral forums are often characterised by endless presentations with inadequate space for reflection and learning. Funders and governments that want to enable multisectoral collaboration in violence prevention should thus think carefully about how meetings are held and knowledge is shared, value different types of knowledge and create space for discussions.
- Funders of research need to create incentives for researchers to participate in multisectoral spaces and engage in dialogue with practitioners. Dialogue with practitioners and policy makers can strengthen the usefulness and relevance of policy research.

## Notes

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- 32 SAPPIN is a network of NGOs that use evidence-based research to develop parenting programmes across South Africa. It promotes mutual support and learning and advocates for the importance of quality parenting programmes in communities where they are needed. See <https://sappin.org.za/>.

## About the authors

Matodzi M Amisi is a Senior Research Consultant at the ISS in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme.

Chandré Gould is a Senior Research Fellow at the ISS in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme.

Jody van der Heyde is the INSPIRE Working Group Coordinator at the ISS in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme.

Senzekile Bengu is a Junior Researcher at the ISS in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme and convener of the Western Cape VPF.

Ayanda Mazibuko is a Junior Researcher at the ISS in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme.

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