

Violent Extremism and Stabilization: DT Lessons Learned and Best Practices from Syria, Iraq, and Yemen

Lessons Learned – What Worked

Focus on local researcher sourcing and training

While it requires more time to identify and train local researchers, having access to their knowledge and contextual understanding of their communities is invaluable – particularly during data analysis. The quality of the data collection justifies the time expenditure and increases overall efficiency.

Grantees' knowledge of and buy-in to countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches

By sharing all relevant research with civil society organization (CSO) grantees and inviting them to participate in DT's Sensus training and CVE workshops, we were able to establish trust and build rapport. This gave our partners a better sense of how to design and implement their projects to address the root causes of radicalization at the community-level.

Soliciting concept notes from nascent and lesser-known CSOs

DT identified organizations (local councils, CSOs, etc.) that enjoyed local support and found others that were conducting relevant research, hosting workshops, or implementing small projects but were lesser known. The selected grantees were creative, flexible, and forward-leaning in their CVE project concepts.

Lessons Learned – What Did Not Work

Large sample sizes for data collection

DT could have truncated the data collection period by reducing the number of quantitative surveys and tightening our survey instrument questions without impacting the overall findings. Good data is important, but it must be balanced with the increased risks assumed by researchers in conflict environments.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) in active conflict environments

Validating our radicalization driver analyses is a critical step in DT's approach. However, organizing FGDs in active conflict environments presents risks to both researchers and participants. DT recognized the risk to researchers and replaced FGDs with smaller, private interview sessions which produced similar results to larger FGDs but with a much lower public profile.

Tight grant activity timelines

The inclusion of multiple stakeholders in project design, the lengthy vetting process, and local violence and shelling all impacted the implementation timeline, resulting in some activities starting later than anticipated. DT was therefore forced to reduce the activity implementation timeline. Given the difficulty of operating in conflict environments, additional time should be built in to grant activity timelines to account for unforeseen circumstances.

Best Practices

Conduct rigorous, local stabilization and CVE research

This does not have to take long; snowball sampling is effective and efficient. A mixed-methods approach provides the best balance of substantive results while reducing risk to the researchers. Research on the front end optimizes program outputs and outcomes.

Use technology — but adapt the tools to the environment

Technology is inexpensive compared to its benefits. It is mobile, tailorable, and can provide compelling and powerful data visualizations. But, it is important to choose the right tool for the research environment.

Donors should allow flexibility for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL)

Developing outputs and outcomes after research is complete provides context specific, tailored indicators which account for unique local conditions. Donors should also be willing to adjust the results monitoring plan (RMP) as conditions on the ground change.