

HCSS Security

## Policy Brief: Measuring the Impact of the Lifestory Approach on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed understanding of the policy paper, please read the report on Measuring the Impact of the Lifestories Approach on P/CVE.

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Preventing and countering violent extremism is a complex task, which must be given primary importance to maintain peace and security. The successes from the so-called Islamic State gave rise to thousands of citizens leaving their homes in Europe and attempting and often going to Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State. Today, with the territorial fall of the Islamic State, some of these individuals are returning to Europe, raising a growing concern on how to deal with returnees. This policy brief aims to provide a framework to assess the impact of one of the tools to prevent and counter violent extremism, namely, the lifestories approach.

The lifestories approach which is to be measured consists of the dissemination of the lifestories orally or but also through videos (1-2 min.), face-to-face and online. These stories are authentic and derive from personal struggles that present the human side of the directly affected individuals by violent extremism. Therefore, they are assumed to induce empathy and humanize others.

The broad aims of the lifestories approach are: to decrease the radicalized individuals' extremist views; to prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing; to decrease stigmatization of formerly convicted individuals and support reintegration; to inspire the potentially radicalized and vulnerable individuals, inside and outside prisons, and policy makers to use lifestories; to change public perceptions about vulnerable individuals and radicalized individuals (in and outside prison); and to increase the level of knowledge and awareness on disengagement, de-radicalization and reintegration among local ordinary citizens and governmental authorities. Generally speaking, these aims contribute to bridging the gap between citizens and policy makers.

More concretely, the lifestories approach targets three groups: practitioners, violent extremists, and directly affected individuals/vulnerable individuals. For practitioners, the goal is that the lifestory videos cause an attitude change that results in them being less stigmatizing towards violent extremists (if they are stigmatizing to begin with). Polarization and stigmatization lead to radicalization (i.e., extensive CT measures in France),<sup>3</sup> meaning that this constitutes a useful measurement of impact within the P/CVE. For violent extremists, the goal is that the lifestories elicit a change in attitude which results in them viewing violent extremism in less sympathetic terms. Given that radicalization is a complex and gradual process, changing attitudes towards ideology and behavior is seen as being crucial for de-radicalization,<sup>4</sup> disengagement, and, consequently, reintegration. For vulnerable populations/directly affected individuals (individuals approached by terrorists and/or exposed to terrorism (i.e., youth, family members, community members, ethnic, and religious leaders)), the goal is that the

<sup>3</sup> Witold Mucha, "Polarization, Stigmatization, Radicalisation. Counterterrorism and Homeland Security in France and Germany" *Journal for Deradicalization*, September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Clubb and Marina Tapley, "Conceptualising deradicalisation and former combatant re-integration in Nigeria", *Third World Quarterly*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1458303>.

lifestories elicit a change in attitude which results in them viewing violent extremism in a less sympathetic way.

The policy brief proposes to measure the impact of the lifestories approach through mixed methods. The tools used for it are interviews, ethnographic observations, questionnaires, and project activities reception (please see Figures i and ii). The proposed methods are complementary, therefore providing an in-depth assessment of the intended impact. For example, questionnaires provide a solid evidence-based measure on how videos changed the perception of stigmatization or attitudes towards violent extremism, while ethnographic observations provide richer data on how the communities seem to be affected by the lifestories and how the P/CVE is progressing.



Figure i: Measurement tools to understand the impact of the lifestories approach.

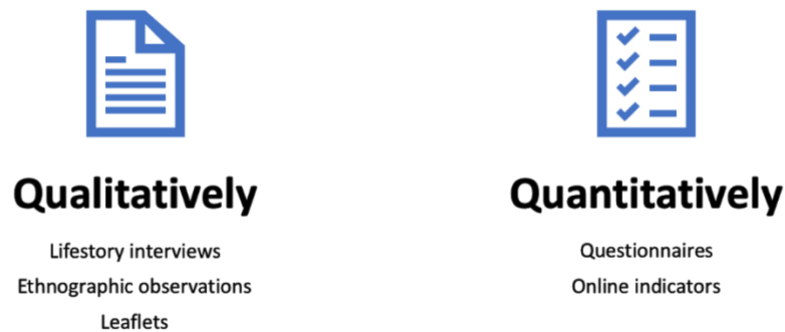


Figure ii: Mixed-method approach to measuring the impact of the lifestories methodology.

More concretely, the impact will be measured across three groups of the population: a) violent extremists, b) directly affected individuals, and c) practitioners. To measure the impact of interviews, interviewees will be asked regarding their feelings towards the lifestory interview and reflections on the lifestories at the end of the interview. Moreover, ethnographic observations will also be recorded, where the interviewers will record noticeable reactions and body language throughout the interview. Questionnaires, on the other hand, will be given before and after viewing the lifestory videos and conducting interviews. In this case, questionnaires will be aimed at measuring impact across the

variables of stigmatization and support for violent extremism. A positive impact would be registered if the interviewees report a lower score on stigmatization and support for violent extremism after watching the videos.

Finally, project activities will also be measured for their reception. In order to measure the impact of project activities, quantitative data will be employed. In this regard, measurements such as the number of publications, reports, books, and news articles with relation to the activities will be included. Moreover, the presence of the activities in traditional media, such as TV, radio, or newspaper, will also be reported. Finally, online indicators such as the number of likes, views, shares, citations, comments, and Google searches will be of key importance to measuring the impact and reception of the activities in social media and will therefore also be considered. Videos will be disseminated through channels such as the lifestories website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and other instant messaging apps (i.e., WhatsApp).

To conclude, these mixed methods used for impact measurement are necessary tools to provide evidence-based approaches to assessing P/CVE and their programs' impact, such as through the lifestories approach.