



Joint Final Independent Project Evaluation

Supporting the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalisation to Violence in Prisons

Location of intervention: Kazakhstan, Tunisia, and Uganda

Timeframe of intervention: December 2017 to December 2022

Funders: the European Union, the Government of the Netherlands, and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) (as a steward of contributions to the UN Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism)

Implementing partners: the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UNOCT through its United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT). The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) acted as associated partner

Date of evaluation: October 2023 - November 2024

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URLs for evaluation report: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/publications;>
https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/evaluation/reports_year_2024.html

Background and Context

UNODC and UNOCT/UNCCT launched this project to assist selected Member States in strengthening their prison management of violent extremist prisoners (VEPs) and in effectively preventing prisoners' radicalisation to violence. It aimed to increase the capacity of prison agencies to effectively manage VEPs by enhancing:

i) Safety and security mechanisms in prisons	iii) Pre-release prison-based disengagement and rehabilitation programmes
ii) Systems and skills in prison administration to assess risks and needs	iv) Post-release social reintegration services

Following the approval of the project design, Kazakhstan and Tunisia were first selected as the beneficiary Member States, with work plans endorsed by national prison agencies in March 2019 and July 2020, respectively. Uganda was selected next and its work plan was approved in January 2020. The project identified pilot prisons in each country housing VEPs: eight pilot prisons in Kazakhstan (one female and seven male); three in Tunisia (all male); and six in Uganda (one female and five male).

The project implemented a variety of activities, including capacity building through the delivery of new training courses on VEP management for prison staff, and embedding new courses in training institutions. It also focused on developing and piloting security audits and risk-needs assessment (RNA) tools, implementing disengagement interventions for VEPs, and procuring equipment for prison agencies and training institutions.

The project was centred on the premise that VEP management must comply with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules, NMRs) and the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules).

Key Findings

Relevance

The evaluation found that the project came at the right time given the challenges and capacity gaps in managing VEPs in the three beneficiary Member States. The project was also aligned with their needs to develop RNA tools and deliver prison-based rehabilitation programmes and post-release services. In addition, it was pertinent to their policy priorities, such as strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). Moreover, the project was congruent with key global strategic documents, such as [the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy \(GCTS\)](#), [the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#), [the UN Security Council Resolution 2396](#), [the NMRs](#), and [the Women, Peace, and Security agenda](#).

However, some limitations to the project's relevance were also found. The project architecture offered a holistic approach to managing VEPs, but largely centred on the delivery of activities over substantive outcomes. The development of the project architecture before the selection of beneficiary Member States limited the options for national counterparts to fully engage in the project design and to prioritise the proposed approaches. While the project was flexible to adapt to COVID-19, it fell short in adjusting to the changed political landscape in Tunisia.

Effectiveness

The extent to which the project achieved its intended results was mixed. Kazakhstan achieved a good record of progress across all four outputs: *security audits (i)*, *RNA tools (ii)*, *pre-release rehabilitation programs (iii)*, and *post-release services (iv)*. In Uganda, there was some good progress across the first two outputs, and there was good progress on enabling reform measures, though very limited progress against the final two outputs. Given that this was a five-year programme, the effective implementation period in Uganda was no more than 18 months. This was due to a delayed start, disruptive COVID-19 restrictions, and the non-approval of a second no-cost extension, which hindered the project's full delivery. Due to delays in securing the required clearance for the evaluation team to visit Tunisia, it was hard to ascertain the level of progress there.

Three factors contributed to the difficulty project-wide in demonstrating results. First, the project's limited Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) system did not support the collection of evidence of change. Second, the project-as-funded was intended to address VEPs in prison. Yet the three country work plans designed many objectives of a general criminal justice reform character, which meant direct effects upon VEPs (the intended objective) were set further back time-wise. Third, the beneficiary Member States were very different, and different effects were achieved in each, making any overall conclusion on effectiveness difficult to draw. Differences between beneficiary Member States were associated with programming time, counterparts' capacity to engage simultaneously in four thematic areas, and the overall capacity of the prison systems to support and absorb change. Moreover, the UNOCT's decision (UNOCT Program Review Board) not to approve the second no-cost extension meant several activities were not implemented, which impacted the achievement of further results.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the project's benefits varies among the Member States due to differences in the launch dates, the level of ownership, the progress of piloting instruments, and the absorption capacity for change. The evidence indicates that Kazakhstan shows a strong level of sustainability. The VEP management courses were integrated into

the national curriculum. All 8 pilot prisons in Kazakhstan institutionalised the RNA tools. The government's decision to implement the psychology-related component of RNA in all prisons in Kazakhstan will facilitate its scaling out. The sustainability of the project deliverables is less evident in Uganda, except for the training modules introduced at the Prison Academy and Training School (PATS). The same time constraints that had an impact on effectiveness similarly influenced sustainability in Uganda. The sustainability of project benefits in Tunisia could not be measured due to the evaluation team not being able within the agreed timeframe to visit Tunisia to assess and verify the implementation of the project-supported instruments and their ongoing use.

Human rights, gender equality, disability inclusion, and LNOB

Promotion of human rights and specifically, NMRs in managing VEPs was central to the project design and implementation. The project supported NMRs through training modules, capacity-building events, and the UNODC online course on NMRs. As a result, a large number of prison staff in the three Member States increased their awareness of NMRs. The RNA tools also supported the NMRs and provided the prison staff in Kazakhstan with a more integrated approach to addressing the needs of prisoners, including their medical and mental health concerns, delivered in a gender-sensitive manner in women's prisons. However, specific indicators to measure the project's impact on the enjoyment of human rights by VEPs or improvements in the behaviour of prison staff in treating VEPs were missing in the project design. This shortcoming and limited sharing of data related to VEPs by Member States hindered the evaluation team from assessing the extent of changes concerning NMRs.

A relatively high percentage of female prison officers (slightly over 30% in Kazakhstan and Uganda) took part in workshops. This is a good accomplishment in a male-dominated prison sector. Kazakhstan also established gender-responsive RNA tools, in-prison rehabilitation programmes, and training courses. In Uganda, the project supported compulsory training modules at the PATS that integrated gender considerations and the Bangkok Rules. In Tunisia, the project did not appear to have made significant progress, except for raising awareness of female prison staff. LNOB principles were promoted through training modules and the RNA tool implemented in Kazakhstan.

Key Lessons

Progress toward effective management of VEPs and prevention of radicalisation to violence in prisons is viable	Projects that benefit from comparable Member State's experience, where human rights compliance and gender-responsive approaches are integral, with an appropriate range of targeted interventions, implemented in a timely fashion, through high-quality relationships with Member State, leveraging non-state stakeholders and using a broad cohort of experienced experts, can lead to positive change in the management and treatment of VEPs.
Alignment of project and policy frameworks	Operational and procedural changes with adaptations in staff practice in a prison system are much more likely to deliver progress when there is conceptual clarity and directives issued at a policy level of the national partners.
Continuity of human resources within projects	When dealing with complex and sensitive programming areas that are viewed as national security issues by the national counterparts, implementing agencies (IAs) benefit from project team stability, timely appointments, and retention of staff, to enable the establishment of trusting professional relationships.
Technical assistance inputs	Where inputs (e.g., proposed tools) are provided by the project, the greater extent to which national counterparts and national experts contribute to their development, adaptation, testing, and application is of positive consequence to their final integration into a system.
Procurement	When procurement processes are delayed and there is no clear explanation to national counterparts, it undermines trust and harms levels of cooperation.
Equally relevant does not correspond to equally important	Issues that are clearly relevant because they correspond to the Member States' strategies or are identified as areas of need, simply because prison systems have multiple and complex needs, do not always mean equally shared priorities between all project stakeholders. The development of country work plans assists in prioritization and is a positive approach.

High-quality results-based management (RBM) design supports effective programming	A programme logic clearly communicated by theories of change assists, guides, and makes transparent why the things done are being done, including via reference to evidence-based empirical research underpinning programme approaches and choices, in addition to normative instruments.
Delivering training does not correspond to creating change	Programme planning should include independent measurement of training effects, such as behavioural change among prison officers, to evidence outcome-level change.
Indicator data supports in-programme MEL	Establishing from inception a database of high-quality indicators allows programme managers to track progress towards programme goals and supports responsive and adaptive programme management. In a project, where some anticipated indicators are less accessible, IAs, donors and national counterparts should reach an agreement from early in implementation to find and agree on alternatives and incorporate these into project documentation, and MEL.
Better planning for the joint implementation modality	To ensure greater coherence in projects jointly implemented by UN agencies, sufficient time should be allocated during the inception phase for the planning and distribution of implementation functions.
Project adaptability due to changing context	When projects face changes in a political context or confront complex bureaucracies, employing adaptive decision-making allows adjustments to work plans and re-allocation of resources into areas that can bring more effective change for the beneficiaries.

Recommendations

- 1. Technical assistance input processes should be reviewed:** The IA's project teams should integrate and ensure quality control of technical assistance inputs. Steps should include IAs testing inputs for organisational, cultural and practice influences, capacity, and regulations, and robust engagement with national counterparts and experts to assist development, test the inputs, project design evaluability and measurement systems, and revise as required.
- 2. A more comprehensive and inclusive policy framework is required:** The IAs should develop due diligence processes to directly link concepts, terminology, and practices to existing legislation and regulation in beneficiary Member State and ensure this is part of engagement with senior officials to foster an enabling environment for change.
- 3. Human resources and procurement constraints should be reviewed:** The IAs should undertake a detailed review of the challenges that occurred during implementation to maintain project team posts as operational and to understand the procurement performance where it fell well below satisfactory standards of timeliness and continuity.
- 4. Relevance and prioritization are not static and require a more flexible programme design:** The IAs should more fully and collectively engage with national counterparts throughout the project duration to ensure they can hear directly views and justifications for suggested adaptations in prioritisation and approach particularly at times of change in the national context.
- 5. High-quality RBM should be implemented to support effective programming:** The IAs should develop or reinforce support systems for the project teams and compliance management at the project approval stage to ensure alignment with the UNODC RBM guidance and the visibility of empirical evidence-based supporting technical assistance design, anticipated outcomes, and risk mitigation strategies.
- 6. Training delivery should be accompanied by robust systems to measure training effects at the level of behaviour change and to ensure training-effect maintenance:** UNODC should support programme design capacities both centrally (in Vienna) and in field offices by (a) developing and continually

updating best practice guidance based on the professional-training research literature, including training-effect measurement; and (b) ensuring compliance systems for alignment with this guidance are in place in the project approval systems.

7. **A robust MEL system should be adopted to support programme managers in tracking the effects of their activity and where appropriate making responsive and adaptive shifts to work plans:** From project inception, an in-programme MEL database should be constructed and suitably resourced, including via specialised MEL staff expertise. A modifiable template for such a MEL system should be developed and made available across UNODC. It should be rolled out with suitable technical support, and provision should be made (e.g., via fields for entering hyperlinks) for source verification, such as to documents from Member States, statistical collections, and verifiable evidence.
8. **Better planning for the joint implementation modality is necessary to foster stronger coherence in delivering results:** At the project planning stage, the IAs need to devote sufficient time to discussing the role of each agency in the implementation of project interventions (e.g., through an inception workshop). The outcome of such discussion should be the development of a work plan outlining the responsibilities for the delivery of concrete project activities.
9. **Implementing a flexible programme model to adapt projects to changes in the political context should be considered:** Since projects are often implemented in a complex political environment, the programme models should allow for suitable adaptations to be made. Thus, it is recommended to assess new risks and make necessary modifications to the work plan throughout the project.
10. **Human rights, gender equality, and LNOB considerations should be more broadly integrated into projects as fundamental components:** The project objectives and outcomes should explicitly address these considerations, while the project framework should detail how they will be assessed.
11. **Human rights, gender equality, and LNOB considerations should build explicitly on those elements that exist within the national legal framework** in combination with international human rights standards, guidance, and good practice.
12. **Gender equality can be deeply impacted by very specific and localized laws and customs:** Projects should ensure that gender-based programming and activities fully account for these local factors.
13. **It is necessary to enhance the capacity of project teams and beneficiary Member States on human rights, gender equality, and LNOB considerations to ensure their effective mainstreaming.**
14. **The IA partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) working on sensitive PCVE issues, particularly rehabilitation and reintegration, should have safeguards in place,** such as transparency, protocols, and documented permissions to ensure that their legitimate activities, as protected under international human rights law, are not restricted by the Member State and to ensure protection and avert risks for the CSOs working in this space.

Methodology

To ensure the triangulation of evidence, the evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach. Specifically, desk review, semi-structured interviews (KIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and site visits were used. The desk review involved the examination of 130 documents. The evaluation team travelled to Kazakhstan and Uganda to conduct KIs, FGDs, and site visits. To physically observe the use of instruments supported by the project, the evaluation team paid visits to two prisons in Kazakhstan (one female and one male) and one male prison in Uganda. While the evaluation team was not able to travel to Tunisia and hold interviews with the national counterparts, the evaluation team conducted virtual interviews with the project staff and CSOs in the country. In total, **93 individuals** took part in interviews, FGDs, and prison visits in three Member States.