Applying Behavioural Science to

Support the prevention of violent extremism:

Experiences and Lessons Learned

United Nations Development Programme

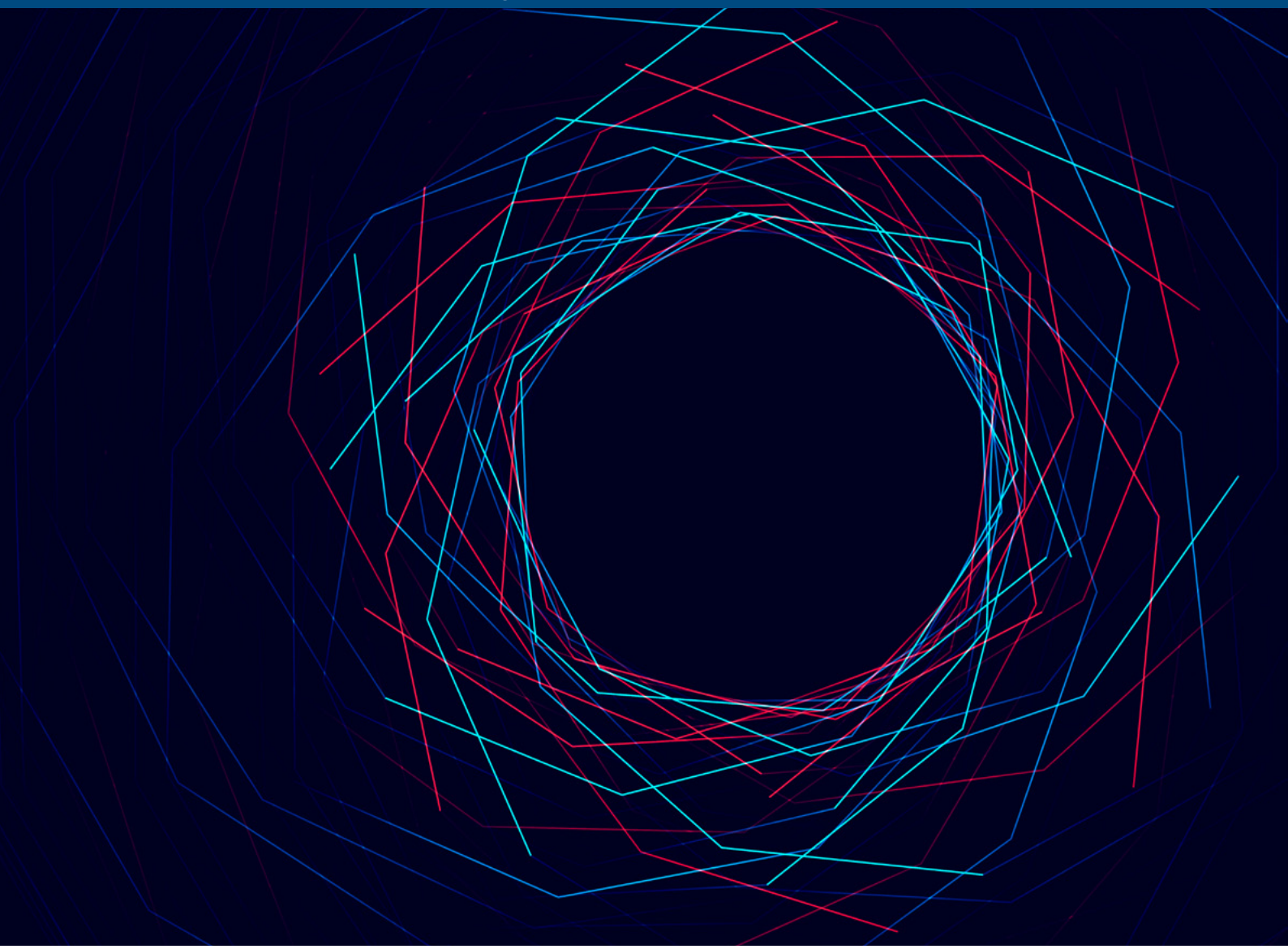

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 5
Introduction to Behavioural Insights 9

Stage 1 Define the overall parameters 15
Introduction 15
Steps & Tools: What aspects of PVE do you hope to support? 15
Output: Overall Parameters 22

Stage 2 Identify the target population 27
Introduction 27
Steps & Tools: Who will you be working with? 28
Output: Target Personas 30

Stage 3 Select entry points 33
Introduction 33
Steps & Tools: What project "Entry Points" can BI enhance? 34
Output: Entry Point(s) 38

Stage 4 Recognise the behavioural barriers & biases 41
Introduction 41
Steps & Tools: What behavioural barriers and biases are most important? 42
Output: Behavioural Barriers & Biases 46

Stage 5 Choose the behavioural tools 49
Introduction 49
Steps & Tools: What behavioural tools / interventions can help? 50
Output: Behavioural Tools 55

Stage 6 Design a measurement approach for the experiment 59
Introduction 59
Steps & Tools: How will you measure the outcome? 60
Output: Evaluation Framework 63

Iterate 67
Lessons Learned 68
Conclusion 71
Notes 72
Additional Resources 75

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INTRODUCTION

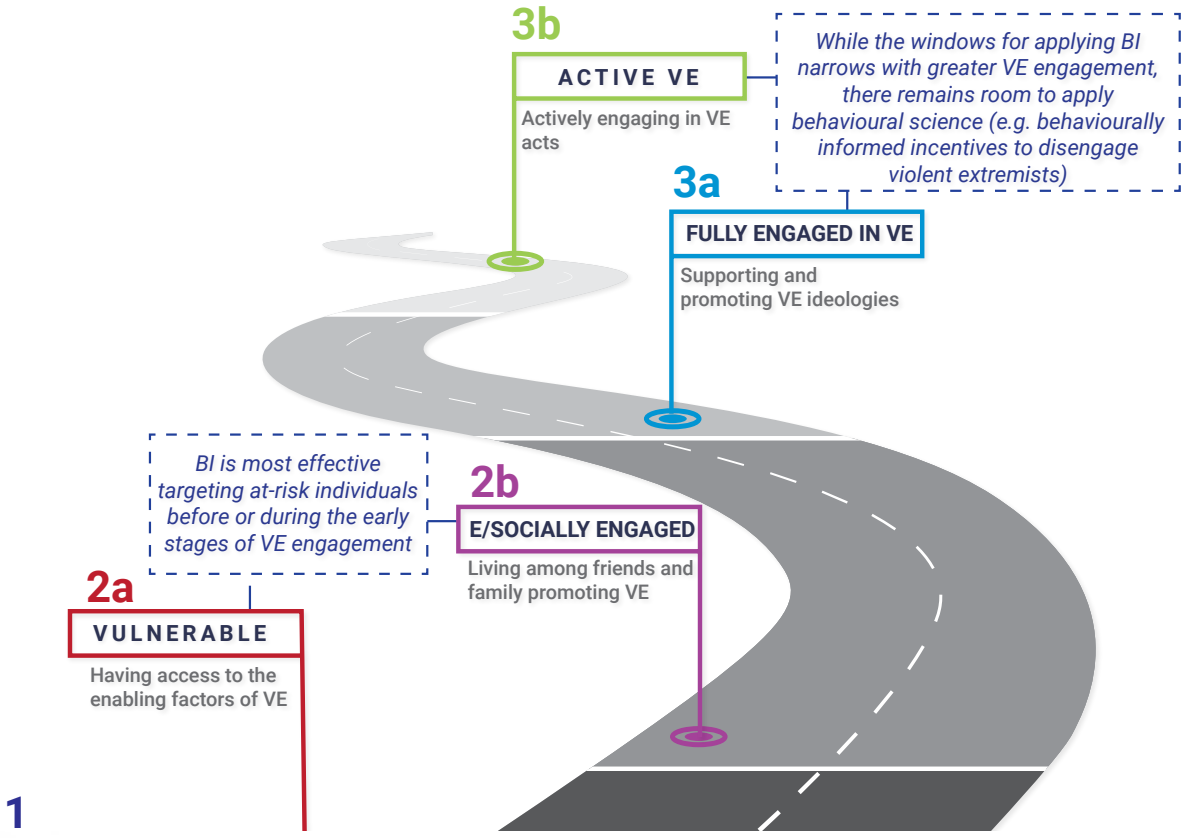
This document provides step-by-step suggestions for practitioners who are looking for ways to make use of findings from the behavioural sciences to address violent extremism —particularly through the strengthening of preventative measures. These suggestions are based on the experiences of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) applying behavioural methods to prevent violent extremism (PVE) in Sudan and Yemen.

There is no universally accepted definition of the term *Violent Extremism* (VE), and attempting to define it remains a challenging task for both academics and practitioners.[1] UNDP notes that whether based on religious, ethnic or political grounds, extremist ideologies glorify the supremacy of a particular group, and oppose a more tolerant and inclusive society.[2] Violent extremists are willing to support or wield violence to achieve ideological, political, religious, social, or economic goals.[3] This may occur with isolated individuals or through organized groups.

As has been well documented by researchers in this area, our understanding of the mechanisms that lead into and out of violent extremism is limited and nascent.[4] The fraction of any population that engages in violent extremism is extremely small. Even in contexts where social cohesion is strained, and governments are repressive or negligent, engaging with violent extremism is rare.[5] As such, it is difficult to understand the protective factors, risk factors, and specifically behavioural factors associated directly with engagement in violent extremism. Also, the scarcity of the phenomenon means that PVE programmes, even when focusing on populations at risk, need to reach large populations to have a better chance of being effective. It is commonly understood that a confluence of multiple factors including structural, personal, and social drivers need to come together to lead to engagement in VE.[6]

This document is primarily focused on how behavioural insights can support policies, programmes and projects that assist in building resilience by helping individuals engage in positive behaviours that could be used to address some of these drivers (especially individual and social ones) thus contributing to the prevention of violent extremism.[7]

In this document, when we speak about PVE, we have in mind a variety of efforts that can further be divided into *primary prevention* designed to enhance prevention among the broader population, *secondary prevention* tailored for specific at-risk groups of individuals, and *tertiary prevention* designed to help those who have been involved in violent extremism to disengage and remain disengaged, thus preventing recidivism into future violent extremism.[8]



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