

EU-UNDP

“Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Maldives and Sri Lanka”

Final Project Evaluation, January 2022

Discussions with religious leaders, Sri Lanka



Philip Peirce
Independent Consultant

Project Information

Project Title	Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Sri Lanka			
Atlas ID	0010865			
Corporate Outcome and Output	<p>Output 1: Data and Trend Analysis is available to stakeholders to identify early signs of radicalisation and violent extremism.</p> <p>Output 2: Improved linkages between Government and civil society to inform inclusive frameworks that respond to the challenges of violent extremism.</p> <p>Output 3: Increased knowledge and tools available to communities to counter hate speech and intolerance.</p>			
Country	Sri Lanka			
Region	South Asia			
Date Project Document signed	Dec 2019			
Project Dates	Start Date	End Date		
	December 2019	December 2021		
Project Budget	Item	Amount (USD)		
	<i>Total cost of the Action as per Agreement Budget - (PVE South Asia - SRI LANKA)</i>	1,815,990		
	<i>Total Programme Budget (2020 & 2021)</i>	1,678,350		
	<i>Total Expenditures / eligible costs incurred in 2020</i>	990,950.25		
	<i>Budget as per work plan for 2021</i>	687,399.75		
	<i>EU Contribution as per Agreement</i>	1,678,350		
	<i>For BRH</i>	419,587.57		
	<i>For Sri Lanka</i>	1,258,762.43		
Project Expenditure at the time of Evaluation	Output	Expenditures	Budget	% of Total
Funding Source	Data and Trend Analysis	535,101.21	467,137.36	114.55%
Implementing Party	Devt of Policy Frameworks	547,176.24	582,451.26	93.94%
	Countering hate speech	582,191.20	766,401.38	75.96%
	TOTAL	1,664,468.65	1,815,990	91.66%
	Staffing/Direct Costs	405,305.84		
	EU Contribution	1,678,350.00		

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Project Expenditure at the time of Evaluation	Output	Expenditures	Budget	% of Total																																													
Funding Source	Data and Trend Analysis	249,865.45	274,460.97	91.04%																																													
Implementing Party	Devt. of Policy Frameworks	281,110.40	359,409.56	78.21%																																													
	Countering hate speech	430,060.49	432,114.74	99.52%																																													
	Returning Terrorist Fighters (RTFs)	157,863.66	164,614.74	95.90%																																													
	TOTAL	1,118,900.00	1,230,600.00	90.92%																																													
	Staffing/Direct Costs	332,074.76																																															
	EU Contribution	1,118,900.00																																															

Evaluation Information

Evaluation Type (project/outcome/thematic/country programme, etc)	Project Evaluation	
Final / midterm review/other	End of the Project Final Evaluation	
Period Under Evaluation	Start:	Completion
	December 2019	December 2021
Evaluator	Philippe Peirce	
Evaluator Email Address	Philippe.Peirce@undp.org	
Evaluation dates	Start	Completion
	November 2021	January 2022

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Acronyms

AWF	Affected Women's Forum (Sri Lanka)
BRH	Bangkok Regional Hub
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EU	European Union
GEN 2	Gender Marker 2 - gender is mainstreamed in all project activities
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MNU	Maldives National University
NAP	National Action Plan for PCVE
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Committee (Maldives)
PCVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (EU)
RTFs/FTFs	Returning Terrorist Fighters/Foreign Terrorist Fighters
TORs	Terms of Reference
UC	United Creatives
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOCT	United Nations Office for Counter Terrorism
UNW	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
VE	Violent Extremism
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

Executive Summary

The final evaluation of the EU-funded, UNDP implemented project “*Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Sri Lanka and the Maldives*” was conducted between November 2021 and January 2022. The evaluation assessed the intervention according to standard OECD criteria – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability – as well as UNDP criteria in regard to how well issues of human rights, gender and vulnerable groups were mainstreamed in design and implementation. The evaluation seeks to identify lessons learned and makes a number of recommendations in regard to potential future phases of assistance.

The overall conclusion of the evaluation is that the intervention achieved mixed results, more successful in the Maldives than Sri Lanka, with results constrained by two significant implementation challenges: election of a new Government in Sri Lanka, which had little interest in taking the developmental approach to PVE inscribed in the UN Secretary General’s Plan of Action¹, upon which the project was based; impact of the global COVID pandemic in the two countries, which disrupted the work planning and implementation schedule, diverted the attention of national counterparts, and precluded face-to-face meetings with and between stakeholders.

The intervention was conceived by the EU in response to the terrorist bombing of three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday 2019. While forming a single contract with the EU for administrative purposes, the intervention was subject to preparation of two related but distinct UNDP project documents for the individual countries. The two documents share the same project approach, theory of change and three outputs, a conceptual **design** which required further customization by the UNDP Country Offices to local realities and needs. While it is understood that the relative newness of the work meant that many baselines were lacking, Results Frameworks for the projects are almost entirely inputs-based and make no meaningful attempt to set or measure impact, negatively affecting project evaluability.

The **relevance** of the intervention differed significantly between the countries. While the design of the project responded to the stated intentions of the Government of Sri Lanka at the time of formulation, the Government formed after the November 2019 elections dissolved all line ministries and government institutions managing issues relating to national integration, peace and reconciliation, and all PCVE and peacebuilding-related work was brought under the purview of the Ministry of Defence. The first two project outputs in support of a developmental approach to PVE – a multistakeholder platform data and trend analysis; inclusive and participatory approaches to policy-making – were no longer relevant or appropriate. Importantly, however, the project provided timely and material assistance to civil society to promote community tolerance and diversity at a time when its space to do so was otherwise shrinking.

In the Maldives, the project proved highly relevant when Government accelerated PVE efforts in the wake of a high-profile attack on the Speaker of Parliament. While drafting of the National Action Plan (NAP) predates provision of assistance, the project was able to respond directly to requests from the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) to support the mainstreaming of PVE across Government, as well as to initiate a “*whole of society*” approach to NAP implementation. Careful ‘framing’ of the intervention supported civil society organisations to engage on the issues in a difficult and potentially dangerous climate, in which Government support can still not be taken for granted.

The project delivered strongly in the Maldives and is appreciated by all parties interviewed in the course of the evaluation. The evaluation found that UNDP was **effective** in providing nimble and timely

¹ [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism | Office of Counter-Terrorism](#)

response to Government requests for assistance and has built relations of trust and credibility with the, the NCTC and key line Ministries, as well as with the limited number of civil society partners available. Important first steps have been taken to establish a multi-stakeholder approach to data collection and analysis, and to enshrining both “*whole of Government*” and “*whole of society*” approaches in the way that the NCTC takes forward implementation of the NAP.

In Sri Lanka, the project is assessed as having been only partially effective, given the change of approach to PVE by the Government and that Outputs 1 and 2 as originally envisaged became essentially unachievable without Government involvement. This is not to say that good results were not achieved, however: customisation of the UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard to the country is set to deliver an important early warning tool to inform advocacy and programming efforts; non-violent communication training has been added to the curriculum of the Kotelawala Defence University; a raft of valuable and often innovative civil society initiatives were supported to promote tolerance and diversity, and to counter hate speech.

In terms of **efficiency**, the project was implemented as well as could have been possible within the context of a global health crisis, with delivery rates in each country of over 90% following a six-month no-cost extension, a significant achievement in the circumstances. The EU and UNDP moved quickly and to develop and agree a COVID-mitigation strategy, reflected in a contract addendum request, but the pandemic still had a significant impact on project implementation: repeat national lockdowns and social distancing requirements prohibited individual and group meetings; field research was delayed, dislocating the ability to inform other activities; key national counterparts in the Maldives were reassigned from PVE to emergency pandemic response; the role of Bangkok Regional Hub in organising knowledge exchange and deploying international expertise was muted. Crucially, the sensitive nature of PVE programming requires relations of trust to be built between actors, especially in the early stages of a national effort, and many evaluation respondents noted that online working is a poor substitute for the in-person meetings necessary to achieve them.

The evaluation finds that results achieved in the Maldives are **sustainable**. While much remains to be done to establish a self-sustaining platform for data and trend analysis in the country, a capable long-term partner is engaged on establishing it, and strong national ownership is evidenced by the working group set-up to guide it. The NCTC, institutional owner of the NAP, is convinced of the necessity of a ‘*whole of society*’ approach to its implementation, with plans for bi-annual PVE meetings to review and coordinate policy and programming. Evaluation respondents deemed it likely that interest stimulated by the trainings, NCTC renewed commitment to a ‘*whole of society*’ approach, and increased donor funding for PVE now available for the country, will translate into a broader based effort in support of NAP implementation in future.

In Sri Lanka, many of the project activities can be considered sustainable contributions to PVE, even if Output-level development pathways were blocked by Government. Important and useful research was undertaken into the drivers of violent extremism and the incidence of hate speech that has built the evidence base for their prevention. The project inspired and supported Kotelawala Defence University to establish a degree course in non-violent communication, the first of its kind. Civil society capacities have been built and a range of products was created – from mobile games and virtual museums to NVC toolkits and the *Extreme Lives* docuseries – that will provide ongoing support to civil society efforts to promote peace and tolerance and maintain the health of public discourse in Sri Lanka, even if this is no longer formally articulated to an inclusive national framework for PVE.

The evaluation found that all UNDP implementing units – Sri Lanka and Maldives Country Offices, Bangkok Regional Hub – paid close attention to issues of **human rights and gender** during the course of project implementation, while doing less well in respect of issues of disability and targeting of

vulnerable groups. These are no-where defined in either project document or the Results Frameworks. There is no disaggregation of baseline and target data according to vulnerable groups or gender, and no gender marker is given for each output or the project(s) as a whole. There is thus no direct way for the evaluation to quantify or assess the degree to which project results made a difference.

It is difficult to draw **lessons** from the experience of the project in Sri Lanka, other than the need for patient and sustained international advocacy to convince Government of the efficacy of complementing security responses with a rights-based, developmental approach to PVE. In the meantime, vital support to civil society to promote tolerance and diversity can continue to be provided under other rubrics, such as strengthening of social cohesion.

Lessons learnt in the Maldives are in line with those identified by UNDP elsewhere – the importance of careful ‘framing’ of PVE activities to respond to the national context, the benefits of having a resident project team to encourage and sustain Government efforts on a day-to-day basis, and the importance of UNDP’s neutral convening authority in establishing a “*whole of society*” approach.

While it is **recommended** to re-badge work in Sri Lanka until conditions are more favourable, with a focus on social cohesion and maintaining the health of civic discourse, the Maldives Office should continue the good work done under the current PCVE project, with outputs that seek to build the evidence-base for the national effort and support the Government in taking forward “*whole of Government*” and ‘*whole of society*’ approaches. Ideally, a new project would include activities to broaden the current range of civil society stakeholders and make targeted interventions to build capacities of both Government counterparts and civil society for NAP implementation. Specific support could be provided to increase levels of transparency and accountability in the process, including support to the NAP M&E regime and budgeting process with the Ministry of Finance, as well as to Parliamentary committees and other oversight bodies.

It is also recommended that Bangkok Regional Hub should reconsider process in regard to formulation of any new regional PCVE projects, strengthening the role and responsibility of Country Offices in the drafting process. Country Offices are best placed to develop Results Frameworks for projects given the level of detail and disaggregation required in respect of baselines, inputs, beneficiary groups, indicators and result targets, and the need for accountability in regard to project delivery and impact. Project formulation should be accompanied by specific identification and analysis of target groups to be addressed by the project. All Results Frameworks should meet minimum mandatory requirements in regard to gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) as well as monitoring in regard to participation of, and impact on, specific vulnerable groups.

Finally, the EU should continue the conversation with UNDP in regard to supporting NAP implementation in the Maldives, and more generally in regard to developmental approaches to PCVE, an important counterpoint to more security-oriented counter-terrorism assistance. Collaboration on PVE is in many senses a natural partnership between the UN and the European Union, which models the soft power of both institutions to mutual benefit, expressing joint commitment to fundamental human rights and common values, the maintenance of peace and democracy, promotion of pluralism and tolerance, and defence of the health of public discourse. In spite of its weaknesses, and the many challenges of implementation, the project evaluated has taken that partnership forward.

1. Introduction & Overview

This report presents a programmatic evaluation of the EU-funded and UNDP-implemented Programme, “*Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Maldives and Sri Lanka*”. The project document for the intervention calls for a closing evaluation to be undertaken in the final quarter of the implementation period.

The author was contracted to undertake the evaluation at the end of October 2021, and interviews were held with key stakeholders through November and December following initial briefings by the Regional Programme Manager and EU Regional Coordinator. An initial draft of this document was prepared over the New Year break and validated through a number of de-briefing meetings with key respondents, prior to formal review and feedback from an Evaluation Reference Group established for the purpose.

The primary stakeholders to the evaluation are understood to be Senior Managers of the EU and UNDP, at country and regional level. All stakeholders share an interest in independent assessment of progress made toward project objectives through the effective and cost-efficient use of public funds, lessons learned in the course of implementation, and recommendations as to potential next steps in programming.

This report comprises a number of sections. The next section, Section 2, presents a summary of the intervention being evaluated, providing the basis for report users to understand the contexts, the intention, nature and approach of the projects, the logic of intervention and the results to be achieved, who was involved, who was to benefit, how and at what cost. It will note the actuality of project implementation against the risks and assumptions made and examine flaws in formulation and design.

Section 3 will briefly recapitulate the scope, primary objectives, criteria and main questions of the evaluation, drawn from the TORs given, and will provide an overview of the approach and methodology utilised, including limitations thereof.

The main findings of the evaluation are presented in Section 4, organised according to the given OECD-DAC and additional mandatory UNDP cross-cutting criteria, and based on analysis of the data collected.

Section 5 outlines conclusions and lessons learned, drawn from the findings: Section 6 then offers a number of practical, feasible recommendations in relation to the formulation, programming and implementation arrangements of any future phases of intervention.

The evaluation was carried out entirely from remote, due to travel restrictions imposed by the UN in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultant wants to thank colleagues at BRH and in the two Country Offices for all their substantive inputs, administrative and logistical administrative support, as well as all interview respondents who were so generous with their time and responses. Needless to say, any inadequacies of the evaluation in regard to its understanding and findings are those of the author alone.

Philip Peirce
Independent Consultant
January 2022

2. The Programme to be Evaluated

2.1 Background and Summary Information

The evaluation herein concerns the EU-funded and UNDP-implemented project, “*Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Sri Lanka and the Maldives*”, an 18-month intervention for implementation between December 2019 until June 2021. Project duration was later increased to 24 months by contract addendum, to cover delays to activity implementation consequent upon the COVID pandemic.

The project was conceived by the EU in response to the terrorist bombing of three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday 2019. While forming a single contract with the EU for administrative purposes, the intervention was subject to preparation of two related but distinct UNDP project documents for the individual countries. Both include activities of, support and oversight from, a central programme unit of UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub, funded from the separate accompanying country budgets. The budget for the action in Sri Lanka was \$1,815,990 US Dollars, in Maldives \$1,230,600.

2.2 Project Logic and Results to be Achieved

The first point to note is that the projects to be evaluated are almost identical, with the same overall objective, to “*assist Government and other stakeholders in understanding and preventing violent extremism, building community resilience, and promoting peace and tolerance*”. The projects share the same approach, theory of change, objectives and three outputs, relating to improved data and trend analysis, partnership working between Government and civil society to inform policy frameworks, and capacity development of communities to counter hate speech and intolerance. The Maldives project includes a fourth output to strengthen understanding and policy options in regard to managing Returning Terrorist Fighters (RTFs). The basis of the initiative is thus clear, as a conceptual model for regional application, aligned with international frameworks and standards and informed by global good practice and lessons learnt, for customisation to national context in the two countries concerned.

2.3 Project Structure and Implementation Arrangements

The model for project implementation replicated that already in place for the EU-UNDP PVE Programme for SE Asia (“*Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Southeast Asia Phase I*”), essentially a “wheel and spokes” configuration in which a central unit in Bangkok Regional Hub supported decentralised implementation of activities by project teams in each country.

The Regional team in Bangkok had a specific role to support Country Offices in the implementation of regional activities – *United Creatives, Extreme Lives, Regional Knowledge Exchange* etc – as well as responsibility for narrative and financial reporting, coordination with UNDP HQ, regional and HQ units of UNOCT and UN Agencies, and liaison with the EU Task Manager. In addition, BRH assumed primary responsibility for project assurance, to ensure substantive consistency, coherence and quality control.

Country teams, reporting to UNDP Country Office management, were responsible for the detailed design of activities at the national level, according to the broad outline given in the Description of the Action, and according to a budget division between countries established by the Bangkok Regional Hub.

The project was conceived as a partnership between the EU and UNDP, and a Joint Steering Committee was proposed to ensure that the EU had direct engagement with UNDP and its partners on the choice and steering of activities. The project aimed to promote collaboration and engagement between UNDP and the EU in project implementation.

2.4 Implementation Challenges

The course of project implementation was affected by two significant challenges, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and the election of a new Government in Sri Lanka more focused on building capacities of security forces to counter potential terrorist threats rather than the mobilisation of a ‘*whole of society*’ developmental approach to addressing the drivers of extremism and radicalisation as foreseen in the project document. The impact of the change of Government in Sri Lanka is addressed in Section 3.1, *Relevance*, while the impact of COVID on project implementation and achievement is explored further in Section 3.3, *Efficiency*.

2.5 Flaws in Formulation and Design

While the projects were designed as a regional intervention, and it therefore makes sense to evaluate the projects together, the common design has implications for project methodology and findings.

Although the context analyses in the first sections of the documents are distinct, and present useful overviews of the situation in each country, neither attempts to marshal the material to substantiate the five elements identified as the development challenges in the concluding graphic representation, which is again common to both documents: grievances due to lack of political participation, disenfranchisement from existing social and political systems, radicalisation due to lack of positive alternatives, absence of economic opportunities and gender inequality.

The theory of change of the projects is presented in the form of another graphic, which asserts that UNDP “*employs an inclusive and human rights-based approach to prevent and mitigate violent extremism that is specific to the regional context*”. Although presented as structural factors in the Development Challenge graphic, lack of economic opportunity and gender inequality are not referenced in the theory of change proposed by the projects. The theory of change recapitulates the development challenge in terms of citizen disconnection and disenfranchisement from/by the State, the inability of citizens to engage with each other and with authorities in a positive manner, limited understanding and capacities to support such engagement, and the arguable proposal that local grievances are susceptible to exploitation by transnational extremist groups.

Project outcomes (‘solutions’) are framed for each of the challenges identified: increased interaction and communication between government and disenfranchised citizens; national frameworks and policy support bring government and citizens together; citizen’s capacity strengthened to articulate and air grievances in a positive way; greater voice and participation in social, political and economic spheres, reducing grievances.

The actions necessary to achieve these solutions form the three outputs of the projects: 1) Enhanced capacity of institutions to identify early signs of radicalisation and violent extremism; 2) Improved linkages between government and civil society to respond to the challenges of violent extremism; 3) Increased knowledge and information available to communities to counter hate speech and intolerance.

A fourth output of the Maldives project – Enhanced knowledge, understanding and policy options for government to respond to returning terrorist fighters – appears rather specific in the context of the other more generalised outputs, but is otherwise consistent with the ‘solution’ in favour of national frameworks and policy support.

While all outputs appear relevant to the context of the countries, providing a suitable umbrella for Country Offices to domesticate the concept and approach locally, the relative lack of customisation presented in the project documents is considered problematic. Indeed, the Results Frameworks of both projects are so limited that they challenge the viability and utility of the evaluation exercise.

Indicators are almost all inputs-based, designed to measure whether an activity has been conducted rather than what the activity has achieved. Baselines are uniformly established as zero, and the number of activities undertaken is established as the target to be achieved. The only indicators of tangible results relate to establishment of the Platform (Maldives)/Functional Centre (Sri Lanka) to improve early warning, and concomitant schedule of reporting. These are still input indicators, however, given that the “*data and trend analysis... available*” should support identification of early signs of radicalisation, and whether they do or not is not monitored. In sum, the Results Frameworks of the two projects present no meaningful attempt to measure what will change, for whom, and how.

While analysis of the Results Frameworks and what has been done will help in establishing the efficiency of the project, it will not support evaluation of the effectiveness of the projects in the way that it should because insufficient data is provided. Without quantified baselines and quantifiable indicators, little quantitative analysis can be undertaken to assess change. The evaluation has instead been reliant on project reporting and views expressed in the interviews with key interlocutors to reach qualitative judgments instead.

3. The Evaluation

3.1 Evaluation Scope & Objectives

As per TORs given (Annex I), the evaluation has attempted to assess progress toward the achievement of project objective and outcomes as specified in the project document. The evaluation has also sought to assess the implementation approaches, progress made, and challenges encountered, to draw conclusions, identify and document the lessons learnt, and to make specific recommendations on next steps.

The evaluation follows the four OECD-DAC evaluation criteria - Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Sustainability. UNDP requires Human Rights and Gender Equality to be added as cross-cutting criteria. As per the consultant’s TORs, *inter-alia*, the evaluation covers the following areas:

- *Relevance of the project: its progress against its purpose, objectives, outputs and indicators, as per the project documents and its components, such as the Theory of Change, Results and Resources Framework, M&E framework, and whether assumptions and risks remain valid.*

- *Effectiveness and efficiency of implementation approaches: review of the project's technical as well as operational approaches and deliverables, quality of results and their impact, alignment with national priorities and responding to the needs of the stakeholders.*
- *Review of the project's approaches, in general and with regards to mainstreaming of gender equality and social inclusion, with particular focus on women and marginalised groups.*
- *Review and assessment of the risks and opportunities (in terms of resource mobilization, synergy and areas of interventions) related to future interventions.*
- *Review of external factors beyond the control of the project that have affected it negatively or positively.*
- *Review planning, management and quality assurance mechanisms for the delivery of the project interventions.*
- *Review coordination and communication processes and mechanisms with the stakeholders.*

The Evaluation has also looked into programme and budget adjustments made in response to COVID-19 challenges and make recommendations for the design and focus of a potential second phase of the programme.

3.2 Evaluation Approach & Methodology

Five sets of stakeholders to the project, and thus the evaluation, were identified:

- A. Senior Managers & Relevant UN/UNDP Experts, including the Regional Project Manager at BRH, UNDP Senior Management at BRH and in the two Country Offices, Resident Coordinator or delegated representatives and relevant UN Agency colleagues in each country as deemed appropriate by UNDP.
- B. Project Teams, including Project Managers in each country and team members responsible for key activities.
- C. EU Project Manager and Focal Point in the EU Delegation Sri Lanka, and other donor community representatives engaged in PCVE programming at the discretion of the Country Offices.
- D. Government counterparts at central and local levels.
- E. Project implementing partners and contractors, CSO representatives and representatives of project target groups, including the most vulnerable.

As far as possible, the evaluation aimed to ensure gender parity amongst respondents as well as representation of vulnerable groups.

The following methods was used to collect, structure, and analyse data for the evaluation:

- i. **Document Review and Analysis** (Desk Review). The desk review comprised initial examination of the project documents and budgets, progress reports, activity plans and reports with a focus on project baselines, indicators and targets, quality and adequacy of project approach versus its objectives and the outputs.

- ii. **Semi-structured interviews** of stakeholders, undertaken with informed consent, with questions in advance, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The TOR includes a set of guiding questions to be answered by the evaluation. These have been used to identify specific sub-questions to be asked of proposed interviewees, presented in the Evaluation Matrix (Annex II).
- iii. **Focus groups sessions** to validate evaluation findings and discuss recommendations for future work. Country Offices were requested to invite representatives of stakeholder groups A-E to validation meetings prior to finalisation of the report.

The evaluation began with a briefing by the BRH Regional Programme Manager, the Project Managers of each country, and the EU Project Manager in the Bangkok Delegation.

The evaluation proceeded via data triangulation of the desk review of project documentation and interviews with key stakeholders to build plausible associations that could be validated throughout the evaluation assignment. Interviews were conducted with the stakeholder groups identified and proceeded in a semi-structured way to answer questions posed in the evaluation matrix (Annex II). The questions were designed to capture various levels of information including before and after experiences, stories of change, unquantifiable, tangible and measurable impacts of the project with close care for building attribution to the project's activities. Respondents were encouraged to speak freely, as individual responses would remain anonymous and respondents would be specifically requested to approve citation or quotation of particular remarks. Based on findings, lessons learnt and recommendations for future programming were extracted and collated.

Not all interviewees were asked all of the questions, with certain questions specific to certain stakeholder groups. The evaluation also sought to be culturally competent and gender responsive in terms of how it was undertaken as well as in terms of what it examines. Project Managers were requested to consider gender balance and representation of vulnerable groups while selecting interviewees.

It should be noted that the evaluation methodology is almost entirely qualitative rather than quantitative, given the nature of the guiding questions posed, the inputs-based nature of the results frameworks of the projects, and difficulties in ensuring adequate and representative data sampling.

A number of other limitations of methodology should be noted. The home-based nature of the evaluation assignment, and specifically the inability to conduct interviews face-to-face, or to travel to project sites, is viewed as a potential limitation on understanding of both context and results. The consultant was reliant on UNDP Offices for the number, nature, or representativeness of interviewees.

The report was finalised following feedback from the Evaluation Reference Group, comprising representatives of the EU, Bangkok Regional Hub, and the two UNDP Country Offices concerned.

4.1 Relevance

Relevance refers to the extent to which the design of the projects responds to the needs of the countries, how well it adopted a policy and context sensitive approach, and whether it was coherent with policy frameworks. It looks at the responsiveness of the project to understanding and capacities of counterparts and partners. Also considered is whether the project has been able to adapt and learn during delivery, and to cope within a fast-changing environment and challenges arising.

4.1.1 Responsiveness

The phenomenon of violent extremism remains both current reality and potential threat in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, as elsewhere in the world, and the concept of programmatic intervention to prevent it remains relevant accordingly.

In Sri Lanka, however, the Easter Sunday attacks that stimulated project development were instrumentalised by majoritarian populists to achieve an electoral success that rendered much of the conceptual rationale of the project obsolete almost as soon as it was launched.

In the wake of the election held November 2019, the Government of Sri Lanka effectively abandoned its previous commitment to taking a right-based and developmental approach to the prevention of violent extremism. The newly formed government dissolved all line ministries and government institutions established by the previous government to manage issues relating to national integration, peace and reconciliation. Furthermore, all PCVE and peacebuilding-related work was brought under the purview of the Ministry of Defence. All other ministries that were vested with peacebuilding related efforts, such as the Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation were also dissolved, together with the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms². At the same time, civil society organisations began to express concerns over increased surveillance of their activities and felt public space shrinking for dissent or alternative ways forward³.

In December 2019, the United Nations Office of the Resident Coordinator together with the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNDP and other UN agencies, with the support of the UN Headquarters, commenced a Human Rights Due Diligence Process (HRDDP) to assess possible risks and mitigation actions regarding politically sensitive areas of intervention. In the light of the HRDDP analysis, UNDP concluded that the reputational risks of continuing to work with Government on PCVE were too high, and project implementation proceeded without direct engagement with Government counterparts.

While this decision was understandable, it effectively made Outputs 1 and 2 of the project unachievable in Sri Lanka. Output 1, *data and trend analysis available to stakeholders to identify early signs of radicalisation*, had to be re-thought – instead of establishing a sound evidence-base for multi-stakeholder action, funds were utilised instead, with EU agreement, to customise UNDP’s corporate Crisis Risk Dashboard (CRD) as an early warning tool to better inform advocacy and programming efforts in the country⁴. Output 2, *improved linkages between Government and civil society to inform inclusive frameworks that respond to the challenges of violent extremism*, could clearly not be delivered

² The Office of National Unity and Reconciliation has since been re-established with new Board and Director General.

³ As documented in a UNDP Sri Lanka project programme report and validated by a number of respondents in evaluation interviews.

⁴ Beyond UN Agencies, CRD data was shared with a CSO Working Group and selected international development partners.

without Government support to a ‘*whole of society*’ approach and UNDP ability to work with Government on convening it. Neither condition existed.

Output 3, *increased knowledge and tools available to communities to counter hate speech and intolerance*, was considered both responsive and timely according to a number of evaluation respondents, given the majoritarian backlash against the Muslim community whipped-up during the election and in the context of additional societal stresses consequent upon the COVID pandemic⁵. Pursuing the Output in an environment in which the Government itself stands accused of stoking intolerance and hate speech for its own ends must have been a finely balanced judgement call. By choosing to present activities as support to social cohesion rather than the prevention of violent extremism, UNDP and its implementing partners were able to successfully navigate the difficult operating environment and deliver them successfully with many results achieved (see Section 4.2, *Effectiveness*).

While responsiveness of the project in Sri Lanka was limited to civil society needs in the absence of Government involvement, the situation in the Maldives was quite different. According to a number of respondents, the attack on the Speaker of Parliament galvanised the National Counter Terrorism Centre in response, expediting approval of the National Action Plan (NAP) for PVE and establishment of the ways and means necessary to its implementation. Project work was highly praised by Government interlocutors for its substantive and timely response, particularly in regard to developing ‘*whole of Government*’ and ‘*whole of society*’ approaches for NAP implementation (see Section 4.2, *Effectiveness*).⁶

Progress in the Maldives remains fragile, however, and the operating environment difficult. A number of evaluation respondents highlighted the prevalence of conservative Muslim opinion antagonistic to perceived import of western values and, in a country of small, close-knit communities in which everyone knows each other’s business, the personal risks run by those accused of doing so. Indeed, violent extremism in the Maldives has to date been more often characterised by attacks on individuals, including that on the Speaker of Parliament, rather than more randomly targeted acts designed to spread terror amongst the population as a whole⁷. In the context, it is a sobering truth that careful framing of the intervention in public was essential not just to gaining the broadest possible buy-in to the work but to the safety and security of project staff and implementing partners.

Treading such a fine line is doubly perilous in a politically volatile environment, in which Government support cannot be taken for granted. While the NCTC and other Ministries appear genuinely committed to the approach, and are both supportive and appreciative of UNDP efforts, progress must be read as still fragile, contingent upon shifting political calculus in relation to management of public opinion: in May 2019, one of the first and only human rights NGOs in the Maldives, the Maldives Democracy Network, was banned by Government following an opposition campaign against its work against radicalisation. In this context, it is notable that the Government has not as yet shared the full National Action Plan with UNDP and civil society partners, choosing instead to share what it considers relevant sections instead: while the NCTC has indicated that this is because the NAP contains sensitive provisions relating to security operations, and that these will be stripped out of a “prevention” version that can be more fully shared, Government hesitation may also relate to concerns over public reaction.

⁵ Interestingly, two evaluation respondents noted that original concerns that the advent of COVID was being inter-ethnic tensions

⁶ Evaluation interviews were conducted with representatives of three Government entities: the NCTC, the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Education.

⁷ Presumably a tactical decision aimed at building, rather than losing, support amongst the broader population. In February 2020, a group of ISIS-inspired assailants stabbed and injured three foreign nationals in North Male Atoll; in April, ISIS itself carried out its first attack in the Maldives, the bombing of Mahibadhoo harbour, in which a sea ambulance, four speedboats and two dinghies were destroyed. In both cases, the targets would appear deliberately chosen to avoid local civilian casualties.

The Government committed to sharing the abridged NAP with civil society stakeholders at the project's final partner round table in December 2021, following calls for more transparency in this regard.

As has been seen in other countries in the early stages of developing a “*whole of society*” approach to PVE, however, different perspectives within Government often manifest in a somewhat schizophrenic approach to civil society, which seeks to instrumentalise the ability of CSOs to work with different communities while increasing levels and mechanisms for surveillance and control. Here, as elsewhere, UNDP's convening role was noted as providing a neutral and safe umbrella for expanding partnership.

4.1.2 Coherence and Coordination

The project was found to be fully coherent with all relevant policy frameworks. As noted in Section 2 above, the design of the project provides a conceptual model for regional application, aligned with international frameworks and standards, and informed by global good practice and lessons learnt.

The starting point for the projects, well presented in the twin project documents, was the UN Counter Terrorism Strategy and in particular the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (2016), which seeks to ensure that security responses to violent extremism are balanced by a human rights approach which incorporates a holistic understanding of violent extremism's root causes. The theory of change graphic common to the projects was clearly designed to respond to the seven key actions noted in the SG's Plan⁸, considered applicable to the efforts of all Member States.

Project work for the prevention of violent extremism is located in UNDP's Regional Programme Document (RPD) for the Asia-Pacific region under Outcome 3, *Structural Transformation for Sustainable Development*, which also appears as an Outcome of UNDP's global Strategic Plan⁹. Paragraph 34 of the RPD states: “*To prevent violent extremism, UNDP will focus on narratives that fuel radicalism and exclusion in sub-regions. Positive narratives and community engagement—using localized information (data and networks)—will be promoted to develop context-relevant solutions for better social cohesion. UNDP is collaborating with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNV, UN Women and the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism to strengthen regional oversight and develop national plans of action on how to prevent violent extremism.*”

In the Maldives, the project was coherent with the National PVE Strategy of 2017 and draft National Action Plan. Within UNDP, the project was added to the portfolio of the Integrated Governance Programme (IGP) to ensure synergy with other relevant interventions and was well coordinated with other UN efforts via a multi-agency UN Reference Group for PVE¹⁰ convened by the Office of the Resident Coordinator (RCO). The new UN Sustainable Development Country Framework (UNSCDF 2022-2026) clearly articulates PVE work to Agenda 2030 and SDG achievement via commitment to build capacities of relevant national agencies to address counter-terrorism threats, and to use the convening authority of the UN to “*convene all stakeholders including civil society, local-based, faith, women and youth leaders, the migrant community, disability groups, and other marginalised persons*”

⁸ 1) Dialogue and Conflict Prevention; 2) Strengthening Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights; 3) Engaging Communities; 4) Empowering Youth; 5) Empowering Women; 6) Education, Skills Development and Employment Generation; 7) Strategic Communications and Media. The project documents are also coherent with Security Council Resolutions 2240 and 2250⁸, as well as with UNDP's own global programme “*Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity*”.

⁹ UNDP Regional Programme Document for Asia and the Pacific, 2018-2021

¹⁰ Composition of the RCO PVE Reference Group includes UNDP, UNICEF, IOM, UNODC and UNOCT. The regional PVE team in Bangkok also participated in relevant meetings.

to actively expand the civic space towards tolerance, peaceful coexistence, non-discrimination and human rights for all".¹¹

In Sri Lanka, while the project was formulated in line with Government intentions and requests for assistance, policy coherence was lost with election of the new Government. Within UNDP, prior work for the prevention of violent extremism had been managed as an aspect of UNDP's work for access to justice but was instead articulated to building social cohesion under the new Country Programme Document for 2018-2022, a better – and safer – fit for the project's focus on promoting tolerance and countering hate speech.

4.1.3 Adaptability

Both projects were required to adapt to changes in their national context, as well as to the global COVID pandemic. The impact of COVID, and the mitigation measures taken in response are covered in Section 3 of this evaluation, *Efficiency*.

In the Maldives, the project adjusted successfully to Government efforts to accelerate approval and implementation of the NAP and was found to have earned the trust and appreciation of all counterparts – the NCTC, the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Youth, Media & Telecommunications – for its timely and responsive assistance.

In Sri Lanka, while COVID-19 must be understood as an exogenous shock that could not be predicted, the outcome of the presidential election, held November 2019, was an endogenous shock that could have been foreseen.

The project document includes a mandatory section on risks which includes the following: *“There is a risk of government/institutional lack of willingness to support PVE programming, or aspects of it, as it might be politically unattractive to them as it potentially costs them political leverage, power, or is seen as unpopular.”* The potential impact of this risk was identified as ‘medium’ and the project document states: *“That risk can be mitigated by working with certain countries on subject we have bilateral experience with and/or where we have existing knowledge of willingness to support programmes or parts of them. The holistic nature of this programme allows us to re-design parts according to country-specifics – which we in most cases are aware of due to experience in programming – without hollowing out the programme.”*

Notwithstanding the fact that the south-south cooperation envisaged as partial mitigation became impossible due to COVID restrictions, the evaluation finds that the impact of the risk involved should have been classified as high, given that Government ownership and commitment must be seen as effectively a precondition for this sort of PVE programming.

While UNDP, with EU agreement, was able to re-design parts of the programme in response to the new political landscape, this did not forestall a *“hollowing out”* of the programme in terms of its stated intentions – Outputs 1 and 2 as originally envisaged became essentially unachievable without Government involvement, and continued implementation of Output 3 entailed a fresh risk of appearing to the new Government as international support to domestic actors largely antipathetic to its populist agenda,

This risk, however, was successfully mitigated by the way in which UNDP Sri Lanka moved to badge activities as contributing to the promotion of social cohesion rather than the prevention of violent extremism. In lieu of Government engagement, the project was re-designed to provide timely and material assistance to civil society to scale-up efforts to mitigate social tensions and promote peaceful

¹¹ UN Maldives [UNSDCF Final for Website \(111021\).pdf](#), page 38.

co-existence, through a variety of activities and means. A great many positive results were achieved (see Section, *Effectiveness* immediately below). The innovative partnership with Kotelawala Defence University, a quasi-Governmental institution, was not only successful in its own right, but was a smart way to ensure the understanding and support of an official pillar of the security establishment. Re-design of Output 1 work for data and trend analysis, to instead localise the UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard as a tool to support early warning and advocacy efforts of international partners, also speaks to the adaptability of project implementation when risk crystallised into reality.

4.2 Effectiveness

Effectiveness refers to the extent to which the projects contributed towards their planned outcomes. This is done through looking at the degree to which the project contributed to the prevention of violent extremism through delivery of its key outputs: 1) improved data and trend analysis; 2) partnership working between Government and civil society to inform policy frameworks; 3) capacity development of communities to counter hate speech and intolerance. The Maldives project includes a fourth output to strengthen understanding and policy options in regard to Returning Terrorist Fighters (RTFs).

In Sri Lanka, the project is assessed as having been only partially effective, given the change of approach to PVE by the Government and UNDP's decision against working with Government counterparts resulting from conclusions of the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Process. The project did, however, broker effective partnerships with and between relevant civil society organisations, with many good results achieved.

In the Maldives, the project delivered strongly and is appreciated by all parties interviewed in the course of the evaluation. The evaluation found that UNDP was effective in providing nimble and timely response to Government requests for assistance and has built relations of trust and credibility with the, the NCTC and key line Ministries, as well as with the limited number of civil society partners available.

The findings below are not intended to record and assess each and every activity undertaken by the project over its 24-month duration, but rather to evaluate the overall approach and selected results which elucidate the later section on Conclusions and Lessons Learnt (Section 4.6), and which underpin the final section on Recommendations (Section 6).

Output 1: Data and Trend Analysis is available to all Stakeholders to identify early signs of radicalisation and violent extremism

While significant steps forward were taking in building the evidence-base for PVE in both countries, neither Country Office was able to deliver the Output as envisaged in the project documents during the project implementation period, mainly due to significant delays to activity implementation consequent upon the COVID pandemic.

In the opinion of the consultant, even without the impact of COVID, design of the Output was likely unrealistic in terms of the results to be achieved within an 18-month timeframe. While the activities that comprise the Output appear logical and sequential in building toward national platforms to monitor incidence of violent extremism and hate speech, project formulation paid insufficient consideration to the complexities of the exercise, in terms of achieving necessary multi-stakeholder consensus as to the nature of data to be collected (often a site of contestation), the need to identify and build relations with

– and capacities of – partners to the collection and analytical process, and the technical challenges and likely timelines of developing online platforms for its dissemination.

While the project document made much of the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) as a model for what was to be achieved, neither Country Office considered this as suited to their particular national context.

In Sri Lanka, the change of Government led to a re-purposing of the Output. The project document proposed a Centre, with multi-stakeholder engagement, “*to achieve a key national priority in understanding the drivers of PVE and develop response mechanisms to diffuse tensions and build reconciliation*”. In the circumstances, and with the agreement of the EU, funds were utilised to develop the UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard in Sri Lanka as an early warning tool, to better inform UN advocacy and programming efforts.

In the absence of Government leadership and involvement, this was clearly the safest and best way to proceed. Given current political sensitivities all products are expected to be shared only between UN agencies and development partners. As one evaluation respondent noted, one of the key indicators that is particularly useful, and has high interest of development partners, relates to land disputes involving minority actors in the north and east of the country. Data can hardly be shared with Government when Government is itself perceived as party to the problem.

The project went ahead with establishing a CSO rather than State-led Working Group (WG) to support implementation of the initiative, comprising nine strong civil society organizations already working on promoting social cohesion and peace building in the country (Activity 1.1).

Eight of the WG members received grants to support their involvement (Activity 1.2). Rather than focusing solely on the issue of improving data availability and trend analysis, however, the grant programme allowed a mix of sub-projects that covered research on drivers of VE, platforms for dialogue on the topic, capacities of youth and women as actors for PVE, and promotion of alternative narratives, in addition to monitoring of the manifestations and incidence of hate speech and extremism and violations of religious freedom and belief.

Some of the results of the sub-projects are especially noteworthy, particularly policy recommendations made by University students following a series of dialogues conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), and work of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) to develop a mobile game for engaging teens on PVE issues and to establish a virtual museum dedicated to freedom of religious belief in the country. The game became the number one downloaded app soon after launch and was well-received by users, parents and teachers alike, while the proposal for the Museum won a global award from the UN’s Alliance for Civilisation for interesting and innovative initiatives. The toolkit of effective responses to hate speech developed by Hashtag Generation might also be mentioned. In general, the results of the grants programme are a useful reminder of the utility of a simple Call for Proposals modality in mobilising capacities and creativity for social change.

In the Maldives, the NCTC recognises the intervention as a timely support to the need to establish a common open-source evidence base for PVE programming. A credible Working Group has been established comprising the Office of the President, NCTC, the Maldives Police Service and National Bureau of Statistics and relevant line Ministries, as well as three CSOs¹² and the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator. The Working Group has three primary roles: to act as an advisory and guidance body for the MNU research team; to provide feedback during the validation stage of the research; to share findings and recommendations of the research within their respective agencies and organisations.

¹² Maldives National University, Transparency International Maldives and ERI Maldives.

Solid steps forward were taken to identify data needs and build partnership with Maldives National University for the design and operations of a data platform, and to contract an international firm for software development. The platform was developed with prototype data, and an orientation given to project partners, including MNU, NCTC, and the Police, to facilitate agreement on next steps. In addition, MNU produced a useful standalone analytical report on radicalisation and VE and, with agreement of the EU, the activity for bi-annual trend analysis was revised in favour of a promising research initiative to establish a lexicon of hate speech to underpin data collection.

In conclusion, while the Output has not been delivered as envisaged, this is considered a consequence of unrealistic project formulation, as much as an issue of COVID hampering activity implementation. In fact, solid partnerships and steps forward have been taken. More work is needed to target data collection, to agree a suitable schedule for data collection, reporting and analysis, and to develop the technical platform solution. However, all primary stakeholder in the Maldives – UNDP, NCTC and MNU – are committed to establishing a sustainable platform for dissemination of data and trend analysis and will seek additional funds to take the work forward.

Output 2: Improved Linkages between Government and Civil Society to inform inclusive frameworks that respond to the challenges of violent extremism

In essence, the Output became unachievable in Sri Lanka in the absence of Government commitment to, and leadership of, a “*whole of society*” approach to PVE. Quarter 7 UNDP reporting on Activity 2.3¹³, might have been applied to the Output as a whole: “*This work has been halted due to the prevailing political context and the risk of exposing CSO partners unnecessarily in an environment civic space for social debate and activities has been reduced*”.

In fact, as with the small grants programme under Output 1, other activities conducted were able to broker interesting partnerships and deliver important results. In addition to the non-violent communication training for women leaders conducted by the Affected Women’s Forum (AWF), which attracted significant interest and positive feedback from participants, good work was done with the Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) to launch a comprehensive programme on nonviolent communication and responsible journalism for state and non-state media actors and University students. Initially developed as a certificate level course for students interested in understanding the ethics on nonviolent communication and responsible journalism, the University is now establishing the course as an undergraduate programme for the long-term in response to student feedback and interest.

Even this creditable success was not without controversy, however, after a Government bill to change the governance structure of KDU was perceived by civil society and academics as a step toward the militarization of higher education. While UNDP facilitated high-level EU participation in the launch of activities, the outcry over the Government bill led UNDP to request KDU not to reference support or utilize logos of the EU and UNDP until the situation was resolved.

In sum, the story of Output 2 in Sri Lanka is that of the project as a whole in that country: while effective partnerships were brokered with civil society organisations, and good work was done to build capacities and provide resources to civil society to engage on the key issues, pathways to change were and are effectively blocked by the absence of Government buy-in and leadership in regard to taking a ‘*whole of society*’ approach.

¹³ Support the Ministry of National Reintegration and Reconciliation, Ministry of National Integration, Official Languages, Social Progress and Hindu Religious Affairs and the Prime Minister’s Office to draft national framework(s) to address PVE and social cohesion based on consultations with CSOs.

In the Maldives, the National Action Plan for PVE was drafted prior to the project implementation period, although it was not approved until June 2020 and only came into force in February 2021. The delays involved, for bureaucratic reasons and due to the diversion of NCTC focus to management of the COVID pandemic, allowed ample time for the project to advocate in favour for a more transparent and accountable multi-stakeholder process. UNDP lobbied consistently for more CSO involvement and, in 2020, partnered with NGO Equal Rights Initiative (ERI) to convene the first joint Government-CSO conference on PVE in the Maldives. The conference focused on two main objectives. First, to identify how civil society works in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, and secondly, to identify challenges for local and international NGOs working in this area in the Maldives. The substantive sessions delved into advisory, educational, community, advocacy and research roles of local NGOs and also brought forward challenges faced by civil society and NGOs in working on issues related to counter radicalization and violent extremism.

The choice of ERI as NGO partner was a smart one here, given the impeccable credentials of the Executive Director as a member of the national deradicalization committee and more latterly Secretary General of the Bar Council. Any early hesitation of the NCTC to move to a “*whole of society*” approach now seems to have been overcome: one NCTC representative interviewed for the evaluation stated that UNDP has “*opened our eyes*” to the potential of working with CSOs for the prevention of violent extremism, and joint conferences are now slated to take place on a bi-annual basis.

In addition to its effective advocacy and material support to a “*whole of society*” approach, the project in the Maldives must also be credited with nurturing a “*whole of Government*” approach, a necessary corollary of the former, but too easily overlooked. Typically, and quite understandably, different pillars of Government see PVE from different perspectives: Foreign Ministries and others concerned with external relations, and the need to comply and align regionally and internationally with treaties, standards and good practice; security agencies with responsibility for counter-terrorism and the monitoring of threats to public order; line Ministries, with varying degrees of understanding as to their relevance to the issue; Finance Ministries, who need to be engaged from the outset if necessary resources are to be made available to NAP implementation.

The project provided solid support to the NCTC in bringing line Ministries on board the national effort, and in building their capacities for its implementation, through specific engagements with the Ministry of the Interior, on FTFs and the engagement of religious leaders with CSOs to detect early signs of radicalization, with the Ministry of Education to develop PVE resource packages, and the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Communications (MYSC), the latter with a particularly large mandate under the NAP. While not all individual activities went smoothly¹⁴, the process itself built awareness and capacities, and all Government respondents to the evaluation were fulsome in their appreciation of project support.

The process followed for implementation of Activity 2.2 was noted as particularly effective. Following consultation with the NCTC and the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment, UNDP Maldives brought together 25 representatives of ten Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) with three civil society groups for a workshop on designing concept notes and result frameworks for initiatives to support NAP implementation. The activity was supported by a Lebanese consultancy firm, with experience of developing policy frameworks to support PVE, and which developed capacity building modules and content on developing concept notes using a system design approach, intended as a sustainable contribution to Government planning efforts. Initiatives proposed by the MDAs are currently under review by the NCTC with a view to inclusion in the NAP implementation plan for 2022.

¹⁴ Implementation of Activity 2.1, focused on development of the PVE resource pack for teachers, was negatively affected by the poor performance of a national consultant; implementation of Activity 2.3, to support definition of a new Digital Literacy framework due to annulment of the MYSC and issues over content. UNDP continues to work with both Ministries to achieve the envisaged results.

Output 3: Increased knowledge and tools available to communities to counter hate speech and intolerance

Output 3 was without doubt the most effective of the outputs under the Sri Lanka project, chiefly because civil society rather than Government was envisaged as the main beneficiary and channel for support. While several evaluation respondents noted the shrinking space available to civil society to work directly on PVE, one legacy of the long history of political violence in Sri Lanka has been a vibrant civil society scene experienced in utilising whatever space is available to work toward peacebuilding and social cohesion on the island. Project support to counter hate speech and intolerance was largely understood, and publicly presented, as an aspect of that work, and by UNDP as a contribution toward achievement of SDG 16, for “*peace, justice and strong institutions*”.

Research conducted by the Marga Institute under the first two activities provided a mapping of the relevant civil society landscape for PVE as well as assessment of a broad range of communities¹⁵ according to the usual terms of conflict analysis, documenting situations that have caused conflicts, the role of youth and women role in peacebuilding, identification of assets and actors that build peace, social cohesion and promote ethnic harmony, as well as actors that cause disharmony¹⁶. A second piece of research by the Marga Institute, into the drivers of hate speech and violent extremism and possible prevention strategies, was another high-quality piece of work, albeit with few surprises in its findings or conclusion that Government should take a stronger lead.

UNDP partnered with Search for Common Ground, to implement a series of dialogues around gendered dimensions of hate speech and violent extremism in Sri Lanka through a series of online trainings which supported young women (18-29) from the districts of Ampara, Batticaloa, Kurunegala, and Puttalam to develop counter narratives against hate speech. Another collaboration, with NGO Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sandasaya¹⁷, supported multiparty dialogues covering ten districts involving religious leaders, civil society actors, youth and women leaders to identify critical issues affecting social cohesion amidst COVID-19. A number of other activities, implemented via the small grants programme under Output 1 (see above) also bolstered achievement of Output 3, notably work of Hashtag Generation¹⁸, aimed at engaging youth to develop counter-narratives on social media; work with the Centre for Investigative Reporting to build capacities of journalists for responsible reporting of conflict; work with the Affected Women’s Forum (AWF) to develop and implement community-based action plans to engage communities to support action against VE.

One respondent to the evaluation commented that the project in Sri Lanka was “*quite clever in using the space for CSOs that was available but did too many little things that have no serious prospects for sustainability beyond the project cycle*”. The author believes such a view to be a little harsh: effective partnerships were mobilised, the awareness and capacities of potential actors – particularly women and youth – was strengthened, and useful knowledge products and other materials were created, many of which comprise sustainable contributions to civil society work for the prevention of violent extremism in the country. Ultimately, however, effective as the project was in this regard, the plethora of activities in support of civil society engagement could not be articulated to any overarching strategic vision for PVE in Sri Lanka in the absence of Government leadership.

¹⁵ Kandy, Kalutara, Gampaha, Batticaloa, Vavuniya and Trincomalee, Jaffna, Kandy, Kegalle, Kurunegala, Colombo, Batticaloa (with several rounds in some districts) with a mix of respondents backgrounds such as University Students, Teachers, Traders/ Shop Keepers, Three Wheel Drivers, Public Officials and Private Sector Employees.

¹⁶ The author was dismayed to note that university students identified international NGOs amongst actors that promote discord, a reflection perhaps of how populist rhetoric has led to an increasingly toxic environment for civil society work.

¹⁷ Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sandasaya (Peace Brigade) is a country-wide youth force consisting of over 100,000 youths dedicated to peace building and community development, dedicated to developing youth leadership toward a disciplined society free of violence and suffering.

¹⁸ Hashtag Generation is a movement led and run by a group of young tech-savvy, socially conscious Sri Lankans advocating for the meaningful civic and political participation of youth, especially young women and young people from minority groups.

In the Maldives, good work was done under the Output by the Maldives National University (research entitled “*Values in Crisis*”, with a focus on the impact of COVID), and in implementation of the BADAHI social media campaign. The latter was established as a holistic social cohesion messaging campaign, utilising Twitter and Facebook to promote peace, tolerance, respect for diversity and national identity that encompasses these values. The Ministry of Interior spoke highly of the reach and impact, with two interventions particularly well received: the Miyaheli Social Innovation Camp¹⁹, and the Youth Vision art workshop, which – although conducted entirely online – attracted the interest of Parliament and led to a meeting between the Speaker and workshop participants to discuss their views on social cohesion.²⁰ Discussions are ongoing in regard to its extension, to be based on further inter-institutional dialogue between Government stakeholders and active CSOs.

In general, a key issue in the Maldives is the relatively small number of civil society actors with interest and experience in working on PVE. Only two civil society organisations were identified to partner on activity implementation, Maldives National University (MNU) and the rights advocacy NGO Equal Rights Initiative (ERI Maldives)²¹. Other civil society representatives did participate in capacity development trainings, however, and the work of the project in awareness raising, framing debate in a publicly acceptable manner, and building capacities of new actors, was judged both relevant and effective.

In addition to activities to be implemented by the two Country Offices, Output 3 also included activities to be led by Bangkok Regional Hub (BRH). Special mention needs to be made of the *Extreme Lives* documentary films, a new series of which was made under Activity 3.4 of the project. *Extreme Lives* has emerged as something of a signature product of EU-UNDP collaboration on PVE in the Asia Pacific region, having been presented as one of a 100 innovate ideas for peace at the Paris Peace Forum, achieving high-level visibility as a result. The new series aimed to tweak its production and direction, and to extract additional value-added by organising preparation of new episodes in local languages as public awareness/learning tools around VE for use by practitioners.

To do this, greater responsibility was given to the Country Offices in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to establish scenarios and identify individuals affected by violent extremism, whose lives and experience would be documented. While planning and production were severely impacted by the COVID pandemic, and UNDP was left racing to complete post-production by the end of the project implementation period, the story was also marked by internal tension between Country Offices, who wished to avoid direct reference to violent extremism and preferred to focus on specific drivers instead, and BRH, which wished to ensure a certain consistency to the product, in line with previous productions for south-east Asia.

There is no easy answer as to where creative control should reside, centrally or with the countries concerned. Ultimately, if *Extreme Lives* is to serve not just as a high-quality visibility product for the institutions behind it, but as a tool to support national efforts to expand awareness around VE and the dangers of radicalisation, then Country Offices need to be trusted to ‘frame’ the intervention correctly for local consumption. What may prove decisive is the interesting work organised by Bangkok, with support of a Behavioural Scientist, to use gamified pre and post exposure surveys to monitor and evaluate the impact of *Extreme Lives* on its audience. If the films in production do prove effective in

¹⁹ <https://www.mv.undp.org/content/maldives/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2021/miyaheli2021concludes.html>

²⁰ <https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/tolerance-and-diversity/en/home/youth-vision.html>

²¹ Transparency International Maldives is the other major NGO also engaged in PVE programming in the country, although was it not selected as an implementing partner to the EU-UNDP project.

nudging opinion and behaviour of viewers in the countries to which they relate, then clearly priority should be given to local customisation rather than transnational consistency.

To date, *Extreme Lives* has been a collaboration between UNP and Facebook, reliant on the latter to provide in-kind contribution of advertising credits to increase visibility of the films and audience numbers. In the wake of the Facebook whistleblower scandal, in which a former produce manager accused the company of routinely putting profits before public safety, this collaboration was no longer deemed acceptable by the EU, and the *Extreme Lives* team will need to find new ways to drive viewings. This will be less of an issue if the films have real utility as materials in support of local peacebuilding efforts rather than serving as a broader visibility vehicle for EU-UNDP partnership on PVE.

Output 4: Enhanced knowledge, understanding and policy options for Government to respond to Returning Terrorist Fighters (Maldives only)

A fourth output on Returning Terrorist Fighters was included in the project in the Maldives at the direct request of Government. Implementation soon became bogged down, however, when Government decision to establish a National Reintegration Centre raised human rights concerns over administrative detention outside of the normal judicial process. While UNDP has a clear role to play in rehabilitation and reintegration, other agencies and entities of the UN system – notably UNOCT in regard to screening, UNODC in regard to prosecution, and UNICEF in regard to the rights of children – have an important role to play, and the Office of the Resident Coordinator in the Maldives moved to ensure a comprehensive and holistic response by the UN Country team as a whole. The project did move ahead with a consultancy to provide analysis and options to the Government on RTFs, an assessment validated at the partner round table held December 2021. A joint UN scoping mission is slated for January 2022.

4.3 Efficiency

Efficiency looks at the extent to which the project delivered its outputs and issues arising from that delivery, including an assessment of whether the results of the project and the benefits attained by project stakeholders were proportional to the efforts invested. It also analyses the adequacy of the project organisation and structure, as well as whether there has been consideration of alternative models of implementation conducive to improved efficiency.

4.3.1 Delivery of Inputs & Issues Arising

The project was contracted to UNDP in December 2019 and project start-up in New Year 2020 – establishment of the financial system and recruitment of staff – coincided precisely with the advent of COVID-19. The global pandemic became the main issue affecting delivery of project inputs.

Under instruction from Brussels, EU management requested UNDP to prepare a COVID mitigation strategy with two imperatives: first, to assess necessary actions to keep the project on track as far as possible; second, to propose how project activities could potentially support national responses to the virus. UNDP worked closely with the EU Regional Coordinator to modify activities, reducing or replacing in-person events, and reconfiguring budgets accordingly. All changes were agreed via a contract addendum request, with text boxes added to project documents describing the challenges and detailing the changes to be made.

While the evaluation concludes that introducing a COVID mitigation strategy was of course necessary, and notes that its preparation and implementation was smooth and collaborative throughout, it is undeniably the case that the pandemic and responses to it severely hampered project implementation, the delivery of inputs and consequent achievement of outputs: *inter alia*, travel restrictions undermined deployment of international expertise; repeat national lockdowns and social distancing requirements prohibited individual and group meetings; field research was delayed, dislocating the ability to inform other activities; key national counterparts in the Maldives were reassigned from PVE to emergency pandemic response.

In particular, and as noted previously, the sensitive nature of PVE programming requires relations of trust to be built between actors, especially in the early stages of a national effort, and many evaluation respondents noted that online working is a poor substitute for the in-person meetings necessary to achieve them.

The projects concluded with approx. 92% funds expended in Sri Lanka and 91% in the Maldives, which must be considered a significant achievement in the circumstances. While revision of activities in the contract addendum made this possible, it was the joint effort of project teams and civil society partners in each country that made it a reality.

All interviewees from civil society representatives in both countries, as well as Government counterparts in the Maldives, were asked for their candid appraisal of UNDP performance in terms of whether their views were taken on board in activity formulation, whether relevant rules and procedures were explained clearly, and whether payments were made in timely fashion. Results were striking: all respondents commended the UNDP project teams for their approach and efficiency, with only rather minor instances given of administrative delay (eg, a procurement process on behalf of Kotelawala University in Sri Lanka, now resolved).

Overall, the consultant found no issues with resource expenditure. In terms of key activity areas, financial expenditures were as follows:

Sri Lanka

Output	Expenditures	Budget	% of Total
Data and Trend Analysis	535,101.21	467,137.36	114.55%
Devt of Policy Frameworks	547,176.24	582,451.26	93.94%
Countering hate speech	582,191.20	766,401.38	75.96%
TOTAL	1,664,468.65	1,815,990	91.66%
Staffing/Direct Costs	405,305.84		
EU Contribution	1,678,350.00		

Maldives

Output	Expenditures	Budget	% of Total
Data and Trend Analysis	249,865.45	274,460.97	91.04%
Devt. of Policy Frameworks	281,110.40	359,409.56	78.21%
Countering hate speech	430,060.49	432,114.74	99.52%
Returning Terrorist Fighters (RTFs)	157,863.66	164,614.74	95.90%
TOTAL	1,118,900.00	1,230,600.00	90.92%
Staffing/Direct Costs	332,074.76		
EU Contribution	1,118,900.00		

A 7% overhead costs charged by UNDP is in line with UNDP's corporate policy and agreement with the EU under the EU-UN Financial Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA).

It should be noted formally that the project has not yet been audited. However, the consultant has been informed by Bangkok Regional Hub that this will happen during Spring 2022, in line with UNDP's corporate policy for DIM projects.

4.3.2 Project Structure, Organisation & Staffing

Responsibility for project implementation was divided between a regional team based in Bangkok, and small project teams in each country working with Government counterparts and civil society organisations and affected communities under the guidance of relevant UNDP Programme Officers.

This structure mirrored the arrangements already in place for the project's ongoing sister intervention, the EU-UNDP regional Programme, "Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity" (PROTECT), covering Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. While the arrangements of PROTECT were previously evaluated by the consultant as an efficient and cost-effective model, in this case the structure is evaluated as less successful.

The key issue here relates to project 'ownership' within UNDP, and a relative lack of clarity as to the respective responsibilities of Bangkok Regional Hub and the two Country Offices in regard to project formulation and approach.

As noted previously, the project originated from EU desire to fast-track PVE response to the Easter attack in Sri Lanka by building on the approach and project infrastructure already in place for the South-East Asia PROTECT Programme. While it was natural for BRH to take a lead in formulation, so as to ensure the required coherence and consistency, the two Country Offices – who better understood the national context and would have to take responsibility for implementation – had neither the time nor substantive capacity in-house to effectively customise the approach to the local situation. Deficiencies of the resulting project document are outlined in Section 2.5 above.

While the need for a rapid and essentially BRH-driven formulation process may have been a pragmatic approach to establish the project in timely fashion for the donor, the project would have benefited from strengthening the Results Framework during the implementation period, especially when the need to integrate a COVID-mitigation strategy offered an obvious opportunity to do so via a formal contract addendum request.

In general, COVID neutered the ability of BRH to perform many of the roles and responsibilities envisaged in the project document, a model which had proved successful in support of previous national PVE efforts in SE Asia. In particular, travel restrictions negatively impacted opportunities for knowledge exchange, the deployment of international expertise, and the BRH knowledge assurance role, and allowed BRH little insight into the nuances of national context so important to 'framing' interventions successfully.

Interviews with UNDP staff in Bangkok and the two Country Offices reinforce the impression of underlying differences between project teams in regard to understanding of national contexts and approach to be taken. This was particularly notable in relation to the purpose and planning of the *Extreme Lives* films: while BRH sought to maintain consistency of product, according to a vision that built on previous success under the sister project for SE Asia, with films documenting the experience

of individuals directly affected by violent extremism, Country Offices were clearly hesitant at making such explicit connections and wished instead to take a ‘softer’ approach focused on the interaction between potential drivers of VE and individual vulnerability. While different perspectives did not derail the implementation of any specific activities, and effective compromise was achieved in the case of *Extreme Lives*, the process of project implementation would surely have been smoother if the three project teams had been able to develop closer working relations and common understanding.

Two causes can be identified as militating against such an outcome: first, the inability of project teams to liaise in person due to the COVID pandemic; second, the lack of substantive expertise on PVE in BRH to backstop Country Offices as originally envisaged.

COVID-related travel restrictions precluded the ability of BRH staff to undertake missions to the two countries during the project implementation period. While teams were in regular contact by virtual means, and every effort was made to provide support to Country Offices from remote, such arrangements do not lend themselves easily to the development of nuanced understanding of national contexts, the attitudes and capacities of Government counterparts and civil society partners, and the approaches necessary to successfully navigate an intervention as complex, sensitive and politically charged as the prevention of violent extremism.

While it was originally intended that the projects should contribute 25% of the cost of a senior international post in BRH to oversee its peacebuilding and PVE portfolio, this post was not in fact filled until close to the end of the project implementation period²². This was doubly unfortunate given that COVID – as well as Government suspicion in Sri Lanka – precluded in-person deployment of international consultants or much of the south-south cooperation and experience exchange originally envisaged.

4.3.3 Relations with the EU as Partner to the Action

Both project documents call for the intervention to be implemented in partnership between UNDP and the European Union at the regional level (UNDPs Bangkok Regional Hub and the EUs Foreign Policy Instrument Team covering Asia/Pacific in Bangkok) and at the national level (EU Delegation in Sri Lanka, with responsibility both for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and the two UNDP Country Offices), in order for “*the project to benefit from UNDP’s on the ground capacity and networks, and the EU’s political engagement. This partnership also means the EU will have direct engagement with UNDP and its partners on the choice and steering of activities. The project aims to promote collaboration and engagement between UNDP and the EU in project implementation...*”

Proactive and productive relations were established between the regional management of the project and the EU Regional Coordinator under the sister UNDP/UNOCT PVE initiative for South-East Asia and were maintained throughout the implementation period of the project under review. At regional level, the EU expressed satisfaction with standards of UNDP reporting and commitment to EU visibility.

The EU Delegation to Sri Lanka did not respond to requests to participate in the evaluation, so their views are not known. The Delegation was substantively involved during the course of project implementation on at least two occasions, however, in regard to concerns over potential reputational risks arising from putative project support to the Maldives National Reintegration Centre for RTFs as

²² The reason for this was given as UNDP corporate policy to freeze recruitment of all Fixed Term Appointments (FTAs) during the period, partially due to COVID-19.

well as UNDP's partnership with Facebook for the *Extreme Lives Series* (see Sections 4.2 *Effectiveness* above)²³.

The primary mechanism for partnership working was envisaged to be a Joint Steering Committee, co-chaired by the EU and UNDP, to support the overall strategy and planning of the project, expected to meet quarterly in Colombo, with participation of other project partners and beneficiaries. While coordination meetings were called for work in Sri Lanka, the regional Steering Committee was never constituted, however, and no meetings were held. It could be argued that the good relations between the regional programme management and the EU Regional Coordinator obviated the need for regular formal meetings. On the other hand, such meetings might have helped to ensure common understanding and a harmonised approach between UNDP Country Offices and the EU Delegation and given the latter greater opportunity to contribute to the project in a substantive manner.

4.4 Sustainability

Sustainability addresses how and to what extent will the benefits of the intervention continue after project closure, and/or can be considered to be lasting contributions to development. It examines the extent to which stakeholder groups, women and vulnerable people benefit will from the project interventions in the long term, and the extent to which will fresh approaches and resources may be necessary to sustain the benefits achieved by the project.

Assessment of the sustainability of the intervention must be understood in terms of the original design and intentions of the project as well as the resources and time allocated to its implementation.

The prevention of violent extremism is as a long-term effort in every country, typically characterised by the inclusive and participatory preparation of a National Action Plan to be implemented via a “*whole of society*” approach over the course of a set number of years. At the time of project formulation, Sri Lanka and the Maldives were at the very outset of the effort. Rather than aiming at concrete outputs that can be seen to be achieved and considered sustainable, the conceptual nature of the project sought instead to support prerequisites such as a sound knowledge base, the *whole of society* approach as pathway, and the need to strengthen capacities of civil society to contribute, particularly in regard to countering hate speech and promoting tolerance. Such outputs require continual updating, ongoing programmatic adjustment and provision of fresh inputs throughout the period of NAP implementation.

Sustainability of this type of PVE assistance is usually established on the basis of promoting increased national ownership, and specifically the transparent and accountable allocation of Government resources to fund NAP implementation. Continued donor assistance should complement, not substitute, Government financial commitment once a NAP is approved.

The project document for the Maldives recognises the inherent mismatch between the long-term nature of assistance required to sustain a developmental approach to PVE and the reality of short-term project assistance. The section on sustainability states that: “*UNDP's Country Office has a strong relationship with the government and with civil society in the Maldives and will continue to support the implementation of the PVE NAP beyond the scope of this project. National ownership will be ensured*

²³ In fact, a number of *ad hoc* meetings were held in Sri Lanka with the EU, including a multi-stakeholder meeting on 18th Sept 2020 with senior Government representatives, the EU, UN Resident Coordinator, UNODC and Interpol.

at every stage of this project so that initiatives started under the project are continued beyond the lifetime of this project”.

The evaluation finds that results achieved in the Maldives are sustainable. While much remains to be done to establish a self-sustaining platform for data and trend analysis in the country, a capable long-term partner is engaged on establishing it, and strong national ownership is evidenced by the working group set-up to guide it. The NCTC, institutional owner of the NAP, is convinced of the necessity of a ‘*whole of society*’ approach to its implementation²⁴, with plans for bi-annual PVE meetings to review and coordinate policy and programming. More work is required to broaden civil society involvement and strengthen civil society capacities to partner on the implementation of activities, as advocates for policy reform and budget provision, and as monitors of the overall transparency, accountability and efficacy of the national effort. However, evaluation respondents deemed it likely that interest stimulated by the trainings, NCTC renewed commitment to a ‘*whole of society*’ approach, and increased donor funding for PVE now available for the country, will translate into a broader based effort in support of NAP implementation in future. The final section of this evaluation includes recommendations as to further assistance UNDP might consider in respect of capacity development and support to process.

In Sri Lanka, UNDP will continue to develop the Crisis Risk Dashboard technically and will utilise resources available from the UN Peacebuilding Fund to invest in continued data collection. It is anticipated that the CRD will become a key early warning tool to inform international community advocacy and programming efforts. Important and useful research was undertaken into the drivers of violent extremism and the incidence of hate speech that has built the evidence base for their prevention. The project inspired and supported Kotelawala Defence University to establish a degree course in non-violent communication, the first of its kind. Civil society capacities have been built, many of the more successful activities will continue²⁵, and a range of products was created – from mobile games and virtual museums to NVC toolkits and the *Extreme Lives* docuseries – that will provide ongoing support to civil society efforts to promote peace and tolerance and maintain the health of public discourse.

4.5 Cross-Cutting Issues

Since the promotion of **human rights, gender equality, and disability** concerns are guiding principles for all United Nations entities, it is a corporate UNDP requirement that these interrelated issues are incorporated into all evaluations²⁶. The extent to which a human rights-based approach, gender equality and Leave No-One Behind strategies were incorporated in the design and implementation of the intervention is considered, as well as the extent of participation of women, the disabled and other vulnerable groups in project activities, resource allocation and results achieved.

²⁴ The NCTC has approached UNDP for assistance in regard to building civil society capacities for PVE on the atolls, where civil society capacities are recognised as currently weak.

²⁵ A good example being activities of Search for Common Ground, who will continue working with the same set of young women leaders with fresh funding from the Norwegian Embassy, with a focus on the Women, Peace & Security agenda.

²⁶ All evaluations conducted or commissioned by UNDP are obliged to integrate human rights, gender equality and disability issues to meet the requirements of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan (SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women Evaluation Performance Indicator, and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.

The common strategy and theory of change of the projects assert UNDP commitment to the human rights-based approach (HRBA).

Although the projects follow the UNDP project document template, neither document includes the usual sub-section on “Stakeholder Engagement”, which seeks to identify the targeted groups that are the intended beneficiaries of the project and outlines the strategy for engaging with them. Limited references to the need for an inclusive approach to women and to vulnerable groups can be found elsewhere in both documents, however.

While no gender analysis is presented as part of the Development Challenge, the Strategy section of the Sri Lanka project document includes a specific sub section on gender, which affirms the need for a gender-responsive approach to programming surrounding violent extremism, specific actions targeted at understanding the ways in which women are being impacted by violent extremism, as well as efforts to “*prioritize women’s meaningful participation in all mechanisms which relate to community, government, and stakeholder engagement by tapping into the expertise of women’s civil society organizations (Activity 3.4) and creating space for women’s participation in decision-making roles in government and civil society consultations (Activity 2.7)*”.

Gender considerations are absent from the Development Challenge and Strategy sections of the project document for the Maldives. Immediately prior to the theory of change, which omits mention of gender also, an additional paragraph has been inserted in regard to “*prioritizing demographic groups deemed most vulnerable to extremist narratives and messaging, and those segments of society best placed to naturally and strategically obstruct the spread of extremist or violent attitudes*”.

These demographic groups and segments of society are no-where defined in either project document or the Results Frameworks, which seek to measure delivery of inputs rather than impact. There is no disaggregation of baseline and target data according to vulnerable groups or gender, and no gender marker is given for each output or the project(s) as a whole. There is thus no direct way for the evaluation to quantify or assess the degree to which project implementation made a difference.

While Results Frameworks may not be well formulated, however, the evaluation has found that all UNDP implementing units – Sri Lanka and Maldives Country Offices, Bangkok Regional Hub – paid close attention to issues of human rights and gender during the course of project implementation, while doing less well in respect of issues of disability and targeting of vulnerable groups.

The project was subject to UN Human Rights Due Diligence Process (HRDDP) in both countries prior to initiation of activities. In the Maldives, the HRDDP examined risk across the UN project portfolio and required no specific mitigation measures to be taken by UNDP in relation to the PVE project. In Sri Lanka, the UN Country Team decided in January 2020 to conduct a General and Preliminary Risk Assessment of UN support to National Security Forces in Sri Lanka, citing the following: “*On the one hand the terrorist attacks Sri Lanka suffered in April 2019 created demand for UN support in the areas of counter terrorism and prevention of violence extremism and other areas involving capacitation and support of security forces. On the other hand, Sri Lankan security forces have a problematic record of alleged violations of human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law and a poor accountability record in dealing with such violations*”.²⁷

In the light of HRDDP analysis, UN Agencies were invited to carry out project-specific due diligence risk assessments. For UNDP the Government move to put all matters relating to peace, reconciliation and PCVE under the Ministry of Defence triggered concerns over some of the operational and reputational risks identified in the HRDDP, *inter alia*,

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- *The national security narrative brought forward by the Easter Sunday attacks has contributed to “normalize” intrusive surveillance and scrutiny on financing of organizations, including NGOs, as well as investigation of social media profiles and activity*
- *The risk that tools and processes designed to combat terrorism or organized crime are turned into instruments to control political dissent and reduce democratic space is very high. Provision of certain types of support in relation to counter terrorism and prevention of violent extremism could carry a risk of misuse to identify and target persons of interests including dissidents, activists, and victims and their families*
- *UN agencies should be cognizant of the risk of being used (or perceived) as legitimizing practices or services.*

In terms of the project, there was an obvious risk that data to be collected for early warning under Output 1 might be misused, or that data sources might be identified and targeted by security services.

Taking a human rights-based approach requires ensuring that development strategies facilitate the claims of rights-holders and the corresponding obligations of duty-bearers. The concept of civic engagement, as a mechanism to claim rights, is an important aspect in the overall framework, and in terms of PVE programming, translates directly into support to taking a “*whole of society*” approach. While this could be pursued in the Maldives, in the case of Sri Lanka, the new Government was simply not open to such an approach and was actively seeking to monitor and restrict the role of civil society instead. Output 2 became a dead-letter immediately.

Attention to gender issues characterised both projects. In Sri Lanka, Marga Institute research into drivers of VE and possible responses was found to be gender responsive in its conception and findings. While the finding that women can play a key role in countering radicalisation was hardly surprising, it was reassuring that communities are beginning to recognise this. Training in non-violent communications (NVC) proved a useful entry-point for the project for building capacities of women for PVE. The Affected Women’s Forum (AWF) ran a number of popular workshops for women in the east of the country; Kotelawala Defence University Separate integrated a separate section on gender in its NVC Certificate course, noting particular interest of students around issues relating to SGBV; at the regional level, BRH worked with UN Women to develop a training programme to build the nonviolent communication skills of local leaders and women in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh with the stated aim of training community leaders to learn the tools of nonviolent communication to conduct peace and conflict resolution, to increase their understandings of women's needs, gender inequality, and how to work cooperatively with women leaders and community members on issues relating to social cohesion and peace.

UNDP Sri Lanka also partnered with Search for Common Ground to conduct online training which supports young women (18-29) from the districts of Ampara, Batticaloa, Kurunegala, and Puttalam to develop counter narratives to hate speech on social media, and to raise awareness around personal security issues. About 100 young women were involved, with two main results – establishment of a safe space (closed Facebook group) for women to raise their concerns, and development of a toolkit to capacitate and empower young women to use social media responsibly and positively for reconciliation.

In its work to explore potential development of counter-narratives the Centre for Investigative Reporting (CIR) had a strong engagement with women, with interesting and encouraging results from focus groups in 7 districts with very different experience of violent experience. CIR found broad understanding amongst the women of local triggers for violence, if not all concepts around violent extremism; the women saw religious institutions – mosques, churches, temples – as particular polarising forces. One evaluation respondent likened the activity to an oral history project in the way it

documented the experience and views of the women and remarked on the enthusiasm of the participants to play a part in promoting the WPS agenda and act as peacebuilders in their communities.

In the Maldives, issues of gender equality and women's equality were equally well mainstreamed during the course of activity implementation. UNDP Maldives was found to have routinely advocated for and ensured gender representation amongst participants of all relevant activities. *Values in Crisis* research undertaken by MNU was gender responsive, with a particularly interesting findings on perceptions toward gender equality – an encouraging 85% of respondents believed that boys and girls should have equal access to, and priority for, education and employment.

Importantly, UNDP advocacy on gender was well received at the NCTC. In an evaluation interview, one NCTC respondent credited UNDP with encouraging the NCTC to reach out to the Gender Ministry. A Ministry Focal Point for PVE was later established, and the NCTC has started a process of engagement with women's groups. Somewhat intriguingly, the respondent also spoke of bringing a gender and HR lens to “*a very open, healthy discussion*” on terrorist legislation with the attorney general's office.

Youth-lead initiatives and workshops such as Maldives Youth Camp and Youth Vision Art Workshop explored gender and related issues as a main theme and fostered dialogue and critical thinking around the same. Gender equality principles were also extended to all communication and advocacy messaging including the BADHAHI campaign which highlighted lived experiences and stories of women as one of its focus groups. Gender representation was also ensured in visuals as well as voices used as part of the materials.

At the regional level, the *Extreme Lives* documentary series also seeks to consider the differentiated experiences of women and men when it comes to social issues that are also drivers of conflict, tension, and extremism in a country, and were designed according to the following editorial strategy: “*For any stories featuring men as the main subject, women would also be included to provide their own perspectives whether these be through friendships, wives, mothers, mentors, employers, or relatives to ensure that women's voices are heard. Wherever possible, men are requested to show their commitment to women's rights whether through explicit or implicit ways i.e., showing equal division of unpaid care and domestic work, or acknowledging that women bare additional burdens and/or discrimination, or showing unconditional support for their women counterparts in their various pursuits. In addition to this, of the 6 videos, it is anticipated that at least two will focus explicitly on women's rights while one video will make active critiques of stereotypical concepts of masculinity.*”

For the United Creative (UC) programme, the Project team ensured gender balance in the participants they selected, all of whom were supported through mentorship and resources to produce positive social media campaigns that address a variety of topics, one of which was the gendered dimensions of hate speech and social exclusion.

According to UNDP reporting, UC participants included non-binary participants and members of the LGBTQ+ community, but this is one of the rare mentions of vulnerable groups. In the Maldives, the *Values in Crisis* research undertaken by MNU did include focus on persons with disability, as did the BADAHI social media campaign, which consulted with groups for persons with disabilities, and developed specific messages as a result. In Sri Lanka, one evaluation respondent from civil society noted that “*disability as an issue in the post-conflict environment is a story that has not been recognised*”.

4.6 Conclusions & Lessons Learned

i) Project Formulation and Design

In conclusion, the evaluation finds that the design of the projects was deficient, arising from a hurried formulation process in which roles and responsibilities of UNDP Country Offices vis-à-vis Bangkok Regional Hub were unclear or not well understood, and which led to rather conceptual project documents insufficiently customised to the specificities of national context and local change pathways. Preparation of the results frameworks for the projects fell below minimum corporate standards in a number of respects. While major staffing changes within the regional team at BRH during the project formulation period provides a partial explanation, it does not account for why the BRH Local Project Appraisal Committee (LPAC) did not exercise quality control, why the BRH team did not seek to at least address the Results Frameworks, especially after team capacities were strengthened with the addition of Gender and M&E Officers, and why neither BRH nor the Country Officers sought to revise the documents more fully when implementation of COVID mitigation measures offered the opportunity of a contract addendum process with the EU.

ii) Relevance in Sri Lanka

In spite of deficiencies, the design of the project was found to be relevant to context and needs in Sri Lanka, and the conceptual framework responsive to Government requests for assistance to take a developmental approach to PCVE via preparation of a National Action Plan with civil society input. The election of the new Government, however, made project design obsolete before implementation began, raising operational and reputational risk beyond an acceptable level. While political risk was foreseen in project formulation, the impact was miscategorised as medium rather than high – ultimately, continuity of Government commitment to a developmental approach to PVE, and of the “*whole of society*” approach necessary to undertake it, must be viewed as essentially a precondition of UNDP engagement.

In lieu of engagement with Government, and consequent inability to deliver Outputs 1 and 2 as originally envisaged, the project adapted as best as it could, effectively mobilising civil society to engage independently under the rubric of enhancing social cohesion. This was undoubtedly the right way to go, allowing the project to provide timely and material support to civil society groups working for maintenance of peace and the health of public discourse.

iii) Relevance in the Maldives

The conceptual framework of the project was also broad enough to respond to context in the Maldives and was indeed timely provision of support to Government PVE efforts in all areas: the need to develop the evidence-base for intervention; the need to establish “*whole of Government*” and “*whole of society*” approaches; and the need to further capacitate civil society to play its role. While the attack on the former President galvanised the Government into action, and the NCTC and relevant line Ministries appear increasingly emboldened to take an inclusive and transparent approach, there are still risks of offending conservative public opinion, suspicious of external actors and the importation of western values, in a way which may force the Government to backtrack or lose momentum in response. The operating environment also poses a degree of personal risk to staff and civil society partners. As in Sri Lanka, the Country Office wisely chose to present many of the activities of Output 3 as promotion of social cohesion while broadening and deepening civil society capacity to contribute to the national PVE effort as Government gears up for NAP implementation. There is a continued need for UNDP to guide

and support Government NAP efforts to ensure transparency and accountability, as well as an inclusive and participatory approach.

iv) Effectiveness in Sri Lanka

The project was found to be only partially effective in Sri Lanka. Development of a publicly accessible multi-stakeholder platform for data and trend analysis in regard to incidence of hate speech and VE could not be taken forward safely in the post-election environment, and activities focused on the customisation of the corporate UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard as an early warning system instead, in support of advocacy and programming efforts by the UN and broader international community. The project could not be effective in nurturing joint preparation of policy frameworks by Government and civil society after the Government moved away from taking a “*whole of society*” approach. It was more successful, however, in mobilising civil society toward countering hate speech and promoting tolerance, raising awareness and building capacities of women and youth in particular.

v) Effectiveness in the Maldives

The project was found to be more effective in the Maldives than Sri Lanka, in spite of COVID- related challenges to implementation. This was largely due to high levels of national ownership in the wake of the attack on the former President, evidenced in part by the impressive composition of the Working Group established to support data collection and trend analysis. However, the project should also be credited with building relations of trust and credibility with the NCTC, advocating for, and providing assistance to, NCTC efforts to develop “*whole of Government*” and “*whole of society*” approaches to implementation of the NAP. While the number of civil society groups with capacity to work on PVE in the Maldives remains limited, participation of other actors in project activities contributed to raising awareness and capacities for future engagement.

Lessons learnt in the Maldives are in line with those identified by UNDP elsewhere – the importance of careful ‘framing’ of PVE activities to respond to the national context, and the benefits of having a resident project team to encourage and sustain Government efforts on a day-to-day basis.

vi) Efficiency – the impact of COVID-19

Implementation of the project was severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and responses to it. Travel restrictions undermined south-south cooperation and the provision of international expertise; repeat national lockdowns and social distancing requirements prohibited individual and group meetings; field research was delayed, dislocating the ability to inform other activities; key counterparts were reassigned to pandemic management. Development and implementation of a COVID-19 mitigation strategy was a success, revising activities away from in-person events and bringing budget allocations in line, in that it allowed the project to be concluded with funds fully expended. This success, however, was not without cost: more than many interventions, the sensitive nature of PVE requires in-person meetings to develop relations of trust between stakeholders, leading to the conclusion that the project was not as effective as it might have been had it not had to move so completely to online working,

vii) Efficiency – project structure and the role of BRH

While concluding that the ‘wheel and spoke’ organisational structure of UNDP PVE work in the Asia Pacific region remains a tried and tested model, which can maintain a regionally consistent approach

while allowing Country Offices to ‘frame’ initiatives according to national context, the evaluation has concluded that it did not work as well as intended in regard to implementation of the projects under review. Roles and responsibilities of BRH and Country Offices were insufficiently clear in regard to project formulation, with resulting deficiencies in design, while travel restrictions consequent upon the COVID-19 pandemic precluded the ability of BRH to take forward other aspects of its role, notably south-south cooperation, the provision of international expertise, and project assurance function.

viii) *Efficiency – Partnership with the EU*

Implementation of the projects was envisaged as a partnership between UNDP and the EU. The primary mechanism for partnership working was envisaged to be a Joint Steering Committee to support the overall strategy, planning and decision making of the project. Over the lifetime of the project, however, no formal Steering Committee meetings were held, and only *ad hoc* coordination meetings with the EU Delegation in Sri Lanka. While it could be argued that the good relations between the regional programme management and the EU contract manager obviated the need for regular formal meetings, on the other hand such meetings could perhaps have been used to as an appropriate forum for the EU to have had greater opportunity to contribute to the project in a substantive manner.

ix) *Sustainability – PVE as a long-term track of assistance*

Sustainability of the projects must be understood in terms of the long-term nature of PVE in any country, and in particular the need to provide sustained support to the development and implementation of developmental National Action Plans according to a “whole of society” approach. The projects evaluated proposed to provide such support as an initial contribution to what would ultimately be required in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In the case of Sri Lanka, project work to establish the Crisis Risk Dashboard will be sustained by UNDP with resources of the UN Peacebuilding Fund; work to raise awareness, capacities, and engagement of civil society for PVE also represent a sustainable contribution, with key civil society activities to continue with the support of other donors. In the Maldives, the project’s success in building national ownership and civil society participation is also likely sustainable, although much remains to be done, and the operating environment is such that further support is needed to consolidate and extend progress made.

x) *Cross-cutting issues*

The projects were implemented in accordance with the human rights-based approach proposed in the project documents, with intervention in both countries subject to the UN Human Rights Due Diligence process. In Sri Lanka, HRDDP analysis led UNDP to disengage from Government for implementation of Outputs 1 and 2, effectively precluding ability of the project from delivering them as envisaged. While project formulation did not account sufficiently for gender considerations or mandatory requirements in regard to the inclusion of vulnerable groups, making it impossible to adequately assess impact in relation to either, project implementation was found to be otherwise gender responsive. Needs of the disabled, and of other potentially vulnerable groups, were not systematically analysed or integrated into programming, however.

5. Recommendations for Future Programming

In line with TORs given, the author has prepared the following list of recommendations should additional funding become available to UNDP, either from the EU or from other donors.

1. While continuing high-level advocacy in favour of developmental approaches to PCVE in Sri Lanka, in line with the vision and recommendations of the Secretary General’s Plan of Action, UNDP should continue to identify alternative entry points and approaches to address both root causes and enablers of extremism and radicalisation. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Easter Sunday bombings were more likely inspired rather than directed by external groups, and whatever the precise connections involved, the attacks fed a majoritarian narrative of “*the enemy within*” and served as a pretext for Government to launch a hard security response that placed ethnic and religious minorities, and civil society organisations working for peaceful coexistence, under suspicion and surveillance. Global experience – and UNDP’s own primary research on the topic – is clear that over-securitised responses to extremism are almost always counter-productive, reinforcing extremist narratives and exacerbating the perception amongst certain communities that they are treated unjustly by the state²⁸. In such circumstances, UNDP should look to use its experience, expertise and convening authorities to support social cohesion as fully as possible, articulated to the neutral and legitimating framework of SDG attainment²⁹.

Going forward, the main driver of potential extremism in Sri Lanka may well be the Government’s own inflammatory rhetoric, which feeds a majoritarian narrative that too easily descends into hate speech on social media. While the promotion of positive messages in favour of tolerance and diversity is an indisputable public good, fake news and hate speech often works to a different dynamic, traveling at viral speed between the like-minded and establishing a malign culture and influence at the margins of public debate. Maintaining the health of public discourse requires not just renewed emphasis on the promotion and dissemination of liberal values, but also an ongoing commitment to challenge and defeat the message and mechanics of extremist proselytising. UNDP Sri Lanka may wish to consider how best to mobilise civil society, particularly internet-savvy youth, to deliver PVE results online and at scale.

2. Subject to funding opportunities, the Maldives Office should continue the good work done under the current PCVE project, with outputs that seek to build the evidence-base for the national effort and support the Government in taking forward “*whole of Government*” and ‘*whole of society*’ approaches. The NCTC and UNDP should continue to pay careful attention to the ‘framing’ of initiatives, articulating them to the PVE agenda through the lens of promotion of social cohesion. Ideally, a new project would include activities to broaden the current range of civil society stakeholders and make targeted interventions to build capacities of both Government counterparts and civil society for NAP implementation. Specific support could be provided to increase levels of transparency and accountability in the process, including

²⁸ Findings of UNDP’s study Journey to Extremism in Africa suggest that for 71% of interviewees, the ‘tipping point’ which prompted them to turn to violence was Government security actions. *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*, p. 74, UNDP 2016.

²⁹ Specifically SDG 16, Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

support to the NAP M&E regime and budgeting process with the Ministry of Finance, as well as to Parliamentary committees and other oversight bodies.

3. Bangkok Regional Hub should reconsider process in regard to formulation of any new regional PCVE projects, strengthening the role and responsibility of Country Offices in the drafting process. Consultants or staff assigned by BRH to the process should report to, and in the first instance draft on behalf of, UNDP Senior Management in the countries concerned. Projects should be reviewed and approved by Local Project Appraisal Committees (LPACs) prior to any LPAC required at regional level.
4. Country Offices are best placed to develop Results Frameworks for projects given the level of detail and disaggregation required in respect of baselines, inputs, beneficiary groups, indicators and result targets, and the need for accountability in regard to project delivery and impact. While PCVE work has always suffered from the obvious difficulties of isolating and measuring its own success in terms of disrupting radicalisation processes and reducing violent extremism, significant steps forward have been taken in thinking through proxy indicators and data sources by both UNDP and the EU. This includes UNDP work with International Alert in the Arab States³⁰, with more general applicability, as well as EU guidelines for the sector and for IcSP-funded projects specifically.
5. Project formulation should be accompanied by specific identification and analysis of target groups to be addressed by the project, which builds from existing UN(DP) LNOB analysis undertaken for UNSDCF or CCA processes, but which recognises specific vulnerability in regard to VE and potential radicalisation. All Results Frameworks should meet minimum mandatory requirements in regard to gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE)³¹ as well as monitoring in regard to participation of, and impact on, specific vulnerable groups.
6. Notwithstanding the above recommendations in regard to the formulation of new projects, and assuming that the COVID pandemic becomes endemic to an extent that border closures and travel restrictions ease sufficiently, the role of BRH as a hub to support PCVE programming in the region should be further refined and strengthened. The project should support networking and development of a PVE community of practice in the Asia-Pacific region, to further nurture south-south cooperation and knowledge exchange. While substantive management expertise is now in place, BRH should consider developing a roster of international experts and PVE practitioners in the region to promote specific aspects or interventions of the development approach.
7. The new *Extreme Lives* documentaries filmed by the project should be separately evaluated against their updated purpose to capture personal experiences in local languages for use as an awareness-raising tool to support PVE work in each country. Subject to findings, *Extreme Lives* could either be a) integrated into national work streams on a more decentralised basis, project by project; b) continue as a high-quality visibility produce to showcase the EU-UNDP

³⁰ https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/Dem_Gov/improving-the-impact-of-preventing-violent-extremism-programming.html

³¹ Gender markers, introduced in 2009, rate projects on **gender** goals and results with GEN 0 meaning no results, GEN 1- one **gender** activity/result, GEN 2 – **gender** is mainstreamed in all project activities, GEN 3 – **gender** equality is the main project goal. The corporate goal is to increase GEN 1, 2 and 3 ratings and to decrease the number of projects rated GEN 0.

regional partnership on PVE, and potentially be spun-off as a separate project for funding out of separate communications budgets.

8. The EU should continue the conversation with UNDP in regard to supporting NAP implementation in the Maldives, and more generally in regard to developmental approaches to PCVE, an important counterpoint to more security-oriented counter-terrorism assistance. Resident in each country, with experience and track record in building Government commitment and capacities, and able to use its convening authority to nurture the “*whole of society*” approach, UNDP remains a compelling choice of implementing partner. PVE should be understood as a natural partnership between the UNDP and the European Union, which models the values and soft power of both institutions to mutual benefit, while addressing a clear set of needs in the region and globally, to challenge a rising tide of intolerance and maintain the long-term health of public discourse.

6. List of Annexes

Annex I:	TOR for the evaluation.
Annex II:	Evaluation matrix and data collection instruments.
Annex III:	List of individuals or groups interviewed or consulted.
Annex IV:	List of supporting documents reviewed.
Annex Va:	Project document with results framework Sri Lanka.
Annex Vb:	Project document with results framework Maldives.
Annex VI:	Pledge of ethical conduct in evaluation signed by the evaluator.