

Context Monitoring:

Key Lessons & Insights from the REINVENT Programme's Violence Monitoring Component

Christopher Hockey

Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

April 2024

Context Monitoring: Key Lessons & Insights from the REINVENT Programme's Violence Monitoring Component

Despite growing acknowledgement amongst development and security sector reform practitioners that regular context monitoring is essential for ensuring that interventions remain relevant and targeted, projects often fail to perform this function on a routine basis. Perhaps this is because comprehensive monitoring and analysis can be time-consuming. Maybe the associated expense is an obstacle for implementers looking to make their bids more commercially attractive to donors. Frequently, the day-to-day pressures of arranging project activities and dealing with emerging crises simply mean that no time is set aside to pause and reflect. Whatever the reason, even the most comprehensive initial problem analysis conducted during an inception phase is unlikely to still be relevant or accurate by the end of implementation, especially if the programme has a lifespan of more than a year. For interventions to stay relevant and effective, they must adapt to the evolving context by carefully tracking and analysing it.

REINVENT's 'Violence Monitoring' Capability

At its core, the REINVENT programme aims to reduce levels of violence across target counties in Kenya. Recognising how quickly trends in the use of violence change across Kenya, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) sought to embed security analysis into REINVENT from the outset. For the last five years, a dedicated REINVENT analyst has curated a comprehensive database of security incidents across the country, tailoring this to the specific challenges that the project works to address and using it to produce regular context monitoring reports for project staff.

The REINVENT 'violence monitoring' data is grouped into six categories: crime, public disorder, violent extremism, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), mob retribution and intercommunal violence. Law enforcement activity is also included. Depending on the availability of data, the target of the violence, the use of weapons, casualty figures, the actors involved, and motive are recorded. Specific variables of relevance to the project are included at the request of the project implementation team. For example, trends in the use of firearms amongst law enforcement is particularly important in tracking police conduct. Similarly, given the project's focus on violence against women, the gender of any victims is recorded when such information is available.

It would be impossible for a single analyst to monitor incidents across the whole of Kenya. As such, the decision was made to procure data from external providers, in particular from private risk management firms. The data is supplemented by sources within the team, including from amongst regional technical leads based in the field where activities take place. The data is processed by the team's analyst, adapted, and reorganised for project purposes. At all times consistency in the collections plan is prioritised to ensure data is comparable over the project's lifetime.

A variety of context monitoring outputs are disseminated. Reports were initially text heavy, with detailed analysis. However, it became clear that the busy technical team did not have time to read these in full. The focus of reports shifted to graphics and maps which clearly demonstrated trends in time and space. The security incidents were analysed alongside an assessment of broader social, political, and economic developments.

- **Regular analytical reports:** Initially these were circulated on a weekly basis. However, recognising that project adaptation could not match this frequency, a monthly schedule was adopted from the beginning of Year 3. The frequency was again reduced at the beginning of Year 5 due to cuts to the project's budget, with reports released each quarter.
- **Regular team briefings:** The analysts present highlights from the regular reports to the implementation team in weekly meetings.
- **Annual statistics reports:** A graphics heavy report is released for each calendar year summarising activity under each of the categories.
- **Quarterly roundtables:** Briefings are hosted by the project and are attended by the donor and stakeholders working on similar problems. These events provide opportunities to inform a wider audience, arming them with accurate analysis on emerging threats.
- **Political violence trackers:** During Kenya's electioneering period in 2022, regular reports on trends in the prevalence of politically motivated crime and public disorder were released. At first these were circulated on a bi-weekly basis but as developments became more contentious, they were produced every week.

What are the benefits?

From the outset, the primary objective of REINVENT's violence monitoring component was to enable the project to be more evidence-based in its approach to interventions, ensuring that activities are appropriately targeted, proportionate, and effective. Indeed, the violence monitoring data has fed decision-making on beneficiary selection and geographic prioritisation. In this way, the project has been able to make more efficient use of limited resources, especially during the budgetary pressures imposed following the COVID-19 pandemic.

With hindsight, however, a variety of secondary benefits of REINVENT's violence monitoring capability have been identified:

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Incident data has provided a useful high-level indicator in the project's results framework. While it is difficult to attribute changes in the frequency of violent activity to project interventions, the data has demonstrated how the project may have contributed to changing trends.
- **Duty of care:** Providing team members across the country with accurate and timely information on the threat environment has fed into decision making relating to travel.
- **Research:** RUSI's research under REINVENT has been informed by the project's violence monitoring data. For example, an extensive study into al Shabaab's efforts to influence the 2022 elections made extensive use of the database's violent extremism section.
- **Client needs:** The donor has made numerous ad-hoc requests for data analysis to inform broader funding and policy decisions.

An annual survey has been conducted amongst project staff in an effort to assess the impact and utility of the violence monitoring component. This has routinely

Lessons learned

Linking evidence with practice is always challenging. Embedding security analysis within violence reduction programming has undoubtedly made REINVENT more evidence based in its decision making. However, the use of violence forms only part of the context in which the activities are implemented. The regular context monitoring reports have sought to contextualise trends in violence within broader social, political, and economic developments, but a more comprehensive approach

demonstrated that staff utilise the tool in making decisions on where to work and what sort of activities to engage in. Responses to the surveys also suggest that the tool has supported the production of regular reporting for the donor, articulating how interventions remain pertinent.

While specific examples in which the violence monitoring data has directly contributed to project decision-making are identified in the surveys, the broader benefit of improved awareness amongst project staff is less tangible. Monitoring the full utility of the violence monitoring to the programme has thus not always been straightforward. It is hoped, however, that the context reports have provided REINVENT team members with greater perspective in relation to the problem the project seeks to tackle and have designed activities accordingly.

Beyond project planning, feedback from REINVENT staff and partners suggests that the context monitoring, and analysis has been useful particularly in supporting the programme's influencing agenda. The data informs regional teams in their engagements with local elites, demonstrating that the project is responding to the evidence and working in areas where the problems are most severe. This can be particularly important in justifying decision making in response to politically sensitive complaints that certain areas have been left out of interventions in favour of others. The knowledge generated through the team's violence monitoring work has possibly also helped strengthen trust and buy-in from local beneficiaries.

The value of the database itself has arguably increased over time, allowing for longitudinal analysis of the threat environment. Consistency in collections has meant that comparisons can be made between different years of the project. Such long-term data sets are rare.

would adopt an applied political economy analysis (PEA) framework, assessing the different (potentially conflicting) actors and the institutions shaping their power and incentives. This would entail greater consideration of what is realistic for the project to achieve. It is one thing to note that police are particularly willing to use firearms in a certain location, but another altogether to explore why this might be the case.

¹ See Whaites, A., Piron, L-H., Menocal, A. R. and Teskey, G. 2023. 'Understanding Political Economy Analysis and Thinking and Working Politically', *FCDO and Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP)*

While the 'violence monitoring' capability was embedded in REINVENT's processes, ensuring take-up of the tool amongst implementers was challenging. Reports were produced and analysis presented but it took time for context monitoring to become part of the team **culture and mindset**. Experienced programmers are not always used to referring to the evidence-base in making decisions and considerable time was necessary in explaining how the use of data on violent incidents could be beneficial to them. Maintaining momentum has also been difficult, especially considering donor and project staff turnover throughout the five-year project.

There has been a sense of '**mission creep**' in REINVENT's context monitoring tool and uncertainty amongst stakeholder over the primary audience for the reports. Initially intended to focus on violent extremism, the database quickly expanded to include other forms of violence relevant to the project's various workstreams. Moreover, although the aim of the violence monitoring was to inform project decisions, the team was requested to make reporting public or to share it with external stakeholders. Additional requests for bespoke analysis and briefings also stretched the capacity of the activity. However, this expanding expectation was matched by a contraction of available resources from the donor, and difficult decisions were made in partnership with FCDO and the REINVENT delivery team over the frequency of deliverables. This naturally had an impact on the depth of the tool's use.

Consensus across implementation and donor personnel regarding the primary objective of context monitoring is essential from the outset. This must be repeatedly revisited throughout implementation as programme needs and staff change. In particular, determining whether the context monitoring report is internal or for public consumption is important. While internally the focus should be on tracking specific criteria of relevance to project activities, a public facing document requires careful consideration of sensitivities, the highly political nature of the data and greater attention on formatting and presentation. Moreover, there are commercial and contractual challenges when sharing reports outside of the project where some raw data is procured from a third party and subject to confidentiality and copyright terms.

The utility of context monitoring, and analysis is largely dependent on the quality of the **data collected**. In areas where trust is low between the state and communities, security incidents will often go unreported. For example, data in Kenya on SGBV is inconsistent, with the vast majority of incidents not reported to authorities. Statistics relating to the frequency of SGBV incidents normally

reflect reporting trends, rather than the reality. Reporting patterns are in themselves useful to project objectives, as they are indicative of wider and more complex social and cultural norms. However, they are not necessarily useful for dictating where the project implements gender programming. Often, useful details – such as the gender of the victim – are simply unavailable in reports. REINVENT has sought to access the most complete data available, but there is an acknowledgement that quality is inconsistent over space and time.

On a more practical level, the **level of effort required to organise and 'clean' data** for specific project purposes is often underestimated. Considerable time is taken on a weekly basis reorganising the incident database to track criteria needed for implementation decisions. The structure of available data should be considered when selecting data sources at the outset of a new initiative. It is also advisable to automate the data input process as much as possible to avoid disparities in data entry conventions between incidents.

REINVENT has considered the idea of creating an **interactive dashboard** displaying key data to project staff and stakeholders. There are affordable tools through which such platforms can be generated but creating and maintaining them is time consuming. Experience on the project to date would suggest that the level of effort required to maintain the platform is unlikely to be matched by its use among project implementation and client staff. Rather, reports delivered directly to programmers should be tailored to their specific needs.

As the programme nears its end date, the focus has naturally turned to 1) using data to **support evaluation** and 2) **sustainability**. Included as an indicator in the results framework, the data has provided a useful reference point for reviewing how levels of violence have changed over the course of the programme. The database was not set up for this purpose, but as part of an adaptive approach, the programme has made use of additions to the function of the violence monitoring component. The full use case for the data must be established from the beginning of the project if possible.

Efforts towards ensuring sustainability have focused on building the capacity of local partners to maintain databases and to conduct analysis of their own. The resources made available for this endeavour have not been sufficient. Although introductory presentations have been made to law enforcement and civil society, their adoption of evidence-based programming would require a longer-term relationship.

Recommendations for future programmes

REINVENT has demonstrated that monitoring the use of violence across space and time is particularly useful for peacebuilding and security sector reform programmes. This approach would also be beneficial for broader governance and livelihood initiatives particularly those implemented in high-risk environments. However, all context monitoring efforts should be **embedded within a broader understanding of the political economy**. Violence does not occur in a vacuum, and changes in the wider social, political, and economic systems must also be carefully monitored.

- **Projects must purposively build ownership of the context monitoring process amongst all team members.** Context monitoring must not be considered the responsibility of a single team member alone. Ownership can be built through contributions to data collection, training on using associated tools, participation in briefings, contributing analysis to reports and participation in regular discussion linking evidence and practice. If implementers feel that they have contributed to a shared resource, then they are much more likely to have a vested interest in its success and to make use of it in their day-to-day decisions. Team members based in more remote areas often have the greatest understanding of the dynamics on the ground and should be empowered to share their knowledge.
- **Expectations must be managed.** Donors and partners often underestimate the time and resource it takes to collect, collate, and analyse data. Methodologies for all context monitoring must be realistic.

Security analysis should not be used for 'forecasting'. Tracking data provides analysts with the opportunity to identify patterns and to assess the likelihood of different scenarios taking place, but it cannot 'predict' the future. Historical patterns can be analysed to better understand the existing problem and to identify who and where efforts should be focused.

- Being responsive to context is only one part of truly adaptive programming. **Projects must also remain flexible and ensure that learning is purposive.** Moreover,

projects must remain flexible, recognising the need for adaptation in response to changes in the context. This requires actively and systematically building in opportunities to pause and reflect, considering the available evidence in building intervention strategies. Support and buy-in from project management is essential in encouraging the wider team to use available data in their design process.

- **Project-wide consensus is essential during inception on the objective and target audience of analysis and evidence.** A clear distinction is necessary between the potentially conflicting objectives required by public facing documents and those necessary for informing internal programming decisions. Where possible, it should be acknowledged by all that the primary objective is to inform programming, rather than for demonstrating project knowledge to an external audience.

Public release of regular analytical reports should be a consideration during procurement of data, cognisant that this requirement may impact access to the highest quality data (from commercial providers or state partners).

- **Data collections must be consistent throughout programming,** ensuring that statistics accurately reflect the evolving problem. Free-of-charge databases are often of poor quality, lack the geographic specificity necessary for programming and provide insufficient details on the nature of incidents. Alternative sources should be procured, and these databases must be supplemented by collections amongst project staff operating on the ground.
- **Donors must recognise the inherent benefit that context monitoring provides to programmes** and ensure that sufficient budget is provided to this function. Too often analysis is one of the first things to be cut when donors and suppliers are trying to make budget savings. In scoring bids, donors should consider placing greater weight on candidate organisations' understanding of the context and their proposals to monitor changes.



For further information or inquiries, please contact:

 reinventkenya@tetrattech.com

 [@ReinventKenya](https://twitter.com/ReinventKenya)

 [Reinvent Programme](https://www.facebook.com/ReinventProgramme)

 [Reinvent Programme](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ReinventProgramme)