

## **How Do Indonesian Civil Society Organisations Perceive the Success of Their Counter- and Alternative Narrative Programmes?**

Arum Ningsih, Coventry University, United Kingdom  
Serena Hussain, Coventry University, United Kingdom

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### **Abstract**

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, continues to face the challenges of violent extremism. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) respond by implementing counter- and alternative-narrative programmes to promote peace and tolerance. However, limited research has explored how these local CSOs define and assess the effectiveness of their own initiatives. This qualitative multiple case study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of three Indonesian organisations: the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), Muhammadiyah, and Peace Generation. Drawing on document reviews and thirty-five semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis revealed that successful programmes are defined as more than the capacity to change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. CSOs prioritise building community trust, ensuring long-term engagement, and achieving sustained policy influence at institutional levels. This research contributes to the peace education field by proposing a necessary context-sensitive and relational framework for understanding programme success in countering violent extremism.

*Keywords:* counter-narratives, alternative narratives, peace education

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## Introduction

Indonesia has been shaped by a confluence of cultures and religions, with approximately 87% of the population identifying as Muslim, making Indonesia home to the largest Muslim community globally (Hakim et al., 2019). This Islamic identity is intertwined with the nation's ethnic diversity, comprising over 300 ethnic groups, including Javanese, Sundanese, and Batak (Zein, 2018). The coexistence of various ethnicities and religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, contributes to Indonesia's rich cultural tapestry but also presents challenges in terms of social cohesion and religious tolerance (Zein, 2018).

Demographically, Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world, with a population exceeding 270 million (Hakim et al., 2019). The youth demographic is particularly significant, as a large proportion of the population is under 30 years old (Hakim et al., 2019). This youthful population can drive innovation and development, but if not adequately engaged, it may become susceptible to extremist ideologies (Zein, 2018). The interplay between demographic trends and religious beliefs has implications for social stability, as extremist ideologies can find fertile ground among disaffected youth (Zein, 2018).

While the majority of Indonesian Muslims practice a moderate form of Islam, the country has witnessed the rise of radical groups that exploit socioeconomic grievances and political discontent to promote extremist ideologies (Ronaldi, 2023). The emergence of groups such as *Jemaah Islamiyah* and more recent factions has raised concerns about terrorism and violent extremism (Zulkifli, 2024). Terrorist violence in Indonesia has been a significant concern, with notable attacks such as the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing, and the 2009 bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel and the Ritz Carlton Hotel (Kurnia 2023; Subandi et al., 2023). These incidents resulted in numerous casualties and caused considerable concerns for security (Karyadi & Suparno, 2022).

In addition to the terrorist violence, the potential radicalisation of young adults has exacerbated the issue, posing a significant challenge to combat terrorism, facilitated by increased access to the internet and possible exposure to radical content (Hui, 2010). For example, online content that presents violence as a solution to social and political issues can attract individuals who feel marginalised or have grievances with their circumstances (Putranto et al., 2022). Research shows that in the Indonesian context, where many young people face economic and social challenges, such narratives can become particularly enticing and spark desires to engage in terrorist activities (Setiawan, 2023). The spread of extremist narratives also contributes to the normalisation of violence within society. Aprilianti et al. (2022) explain that when violent acts are justified through narratives portraying the perpetrators as heroes or champions of justice, individuals may become more inclined to engage in terrorism.

In Indonesia, extremist groups such as *Jemaah Islamiyah* and ISIS often employ narratives emphasising struggles against oppression or injustice, which can alter societal perceptions of violence by arguing that it is acceptable in certain contexts (Fitrian, 2023). Ulfa and Sugara (2022) indicate that terrorist attacks in Indonesia are often triggered by narratives presenting violence as a means to achieve ideological goals. In some cases, these attacks are carried out by individuals influenced by extremist content encountered on social media or other online platforms (Widowati & Cahyati, 2019).

Extremist narratives can also lead to greater social polarisation in Indonesia. As these narratives spread, they frequently establish boundaries between "us" and "them," exacerbating tensions

between ethnic and religious groups (Rusyidi et al., 2019). In Indonesia's multicultural context, such polarisation can incite conflict and violence, increasing the risk of terrorist attacks against groups deemed as enemies by extremists (Mubarok, 2023).

Several studies have examined how the government and civil society respond to the spread of extremist narratives. Mufida (2020) investigates how the government develops deradicalisation programmes and educational initiatives aimed at raising public awareness about the dangers of extremism. Additionally, Ahmad et al. (2021) explore how civil society organisations promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue as a means to counter extremist narratives. However, these studies primarily focus on the existence and general approaches of these programmes, without exploring whether such programmes are successful in achieving their goals.

The research presented in this paper addresses the gap in the existing literature by examining how an educational institution, an Islamic NGO, and a youth-based organisation in Indonesia build resilience against extremist ideologies. It provides an in-depth exploration of how these entities promote more positive and inclusive narratives and assesses the evidence of their success. The study focuses on three specific case studies: the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), Muhammadiyah, and Peace Generation. Utilising a qualitative multiple case study design, drawing on document reviews, observations, and thirty-five semi-structured interviews, the research found that success is defined not only by changing knowledge, attitude, and behaviour, but also by the ability to build community trust and policy influence. This research contributes to the peace education field by proposing a context-sensitive and relational understanding of programme success.

### **Exploring Literature on Countering Extremist Narratives**

Counter-messaging has emerged as a strategy in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Briggs and Feve (2013) define it as strategic communication aimed at undermining extremist ideologies, propaganda, and narratives, while simultaneously offering constructive alternatives. Such efforts are disseminated through diverse channels—social media, online forums, and conventional media—seeking to disrupt radicalisation processes, prevent the spread of extremist content, and promote peace, tolerance, and resilience. The typologies of counter-messaging can be broadly divided into government communication strategies, counter-narratives, and alternative narratives, which, although distinct, are interlinked in their aim to challenge extremism.

Government communication strategies represent formal, policy-driven efforts to counter extremist propaganda. The U.S. Department of State's campaigns, for example, have sought to clarify misconceptions, debunk conspiracy theories, and emphasise that the United States is not engaged in a conflict with Islam (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Lee, 2020). Such initiatives attempt to shape perceptions, influence public attitudes, and advance security objectives by presenting authoritative information to domestic and global audiences. These strategies are significant because of the legitimacy governments hold, but they also face credibility challenges. Scholars note that official campaigns often risk being dismissed as propaganda, especially when audiences perceive them as politically motivated (Briggs & Feve, 2013). Consequently, while governments play a role in shaping the informational environment, counter-narratives from more credible, community-based actors often resonate more effectively with at-risk audiences.

Counter-narratives represent one of the most direct tools in challenging extremist discourse. Braddock and Horgan (2016) define them as narratives explicitly crafted to refute extremist

themes, while Lee (2020zx) adds that they aim to dismantle extremist propaganda by exposing falsehoods and offering corrective perspectives. The central objective is to reduce the appeal of extremist messages and weaken their legitimacy (Bélanger et al., 2020). These narratives can take several forms. Some target ideological claims, such as extremist misinterpretations of religious texts, while others focus on pragmatic concerns by exposing the contradictions between extremist rhetoric and lived realities (Briggs & Feve, 2013). Survivors of extremist violence, for instance, can highlight the devastating human cost of attacks, thereby delegitimising extremist justifications for violence (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

Credible voices are crucial. Religious leaders, political figures, and community activists who command trust among their constituencies can powerfully refute extremist claims (Zeiger, 2016). Former extremists also play an important role by describing the harsh realities of extremist networks and the futility of violence (Bilazarian, 2020). Similarly, women—whether survivors, relatives of extremists, or professionals—bring unique perspectives that broaden the resonance of counter-narratives (Briggs & Feve, 2013). Yet research shows counter-narratives face limitations. Directly confronting extremist content may cause defensive reactions among audiences, especially those already sympathetic to radical ideologies (Schmitt et al., 2021). Such messages can sometimes generate fewer positive emotions or be less memorable than narratives framed around constructive alternatives. For this reason, scholars increasingly stress the complementary role of alternative narratives.

Unlike counter-narratives, which directly contest extremist messages, alternative narratives promote positive visions without explicitly referencing extremist content. Briggs and Feve (2013) describe them as proactive efforts to emphasise what “we support” rather than what “we oppose.” These narratives often focus on themes of solidarity, shared values, and inclusive citizenship, uniting the “silent majority” against extremism. Alternative narratives are especially relevant for audiences not directly engaged with extremist propaganda but potentially sympathetic to its causes. By highlighting constructive values such as tolerance, interfaith harmony, and civic responsibility, alternative narratives strengthen resilience at the community level (Ramakrishna et al., 2021). Schlegel (2021) stresses that they amplify underrepresented voices, provide inclusive platforms, and foster dialogue across cultural divides.

Educational contexts offer fertile ground for such narratives. By encouraging critical thinking, collective storytelling, and value co-creation, educators can help students engage with diverse perspectives and develop resilience against extremist simplifications (Wieczerzycki & Deszczyński, 2022). Similarly, interfaith and inter-community networks—along with public figures such as athletes, artists, and entrepreneurs—play a central role in disseminating positive narratives (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

## Methodology

This research employs a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), Muhammadiyah, and Peace Generation understand and estimate the success or failure of their programmes promoting peace and tolerance. The multiple case study design enables the identification of both commonalities and divergences in how each organisation conceptualises effectiveness and evaluates outcomes within Indonesia’s diverse socio-religious contexts. Fieldwork was conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, covering the Jakarta and West Java regions, where the organisations’ programmes are most active.

The study adopts a triangulated data collection strategy combining document reviews and semi-structured interviews. This study acknowledges that such perspectives are not objective entities but are shaped by individuals' interpretations, experiences, and interactions. The reality of these concepts is therefore socially constructed through ongoing cultural and institutional processes within the three organisations studied—CSRC, Muhammadiyah, and Peace Generation. While the research is primarily grounded in constructivist philosophy, it does not adhere rigidly to a single epistemological stance; rather, it embraces methodological flexibility to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Accordingly, the research question, which examines how these organisations understand and estimate the success or failure of their programmes, incorporates elements of objectivist reasoning through the analysis of statistical documentary data, while also engaging interpretivist approaches to explore subjective meanings and lived experiences reflected in participants' narratives.

Document reviews included internal reports, training modules, evaluation summaries, and online materials such as YouTube videos, podcasts, and social media content. These sources offered insights into the organisations' formal definitions of programme success, their evaluation procedures, and the extent to which these align with broader institutional philosophies and public narratives. Document analysis also helped trace the evolution of each organisation's approach to monitoring outcomes over time.

Semi-structured interviews formed the primary method of data collection, allowing for an in-depth exploration of organisational perceptions and evaluative frameworks. A total of thirty-five participants were interviewed across the three organisations: twelve from CSRC, thirteen from Muhammadiyah, and ten from Peace Generation. Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in programme design, implementation, or evaluation, including directors, programme coordinators, trainers, and media specialists. Interview questions were designed to elicit how each participant conceptualised programme impact, what indicators they used to assess success or failure, and how these perceptions were shaped by institutional values and socio-cultural contexts.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017), to ensure systematic data organisation and transparency. The analytical process followed six stages: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of thematic coherence, definition and naming of themes, and synthesis of findings. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing key patterns to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing frameworks. Line-by-line coding facilitated the identification of nuanced expressions of how organisational actors described success, challenges, and unintended outcomes.

Themes were iteratively compared across the three cases to identify shared conceptualisations and distinctive institutional logics. For instance, while all organisations associated success with moral transformation and social harmony, the indicators and evaluative mechanisms they employed varied significantly. Reflexivity was integrated throughout the process to mitigate researcher bias, recognising that meaning-making is co-constructed between researcher and participants.

### **Five Dimensions of Counter- and Alternative Narratives**

The discussion begins by examining the five dimensions of counter- and alternative narratives: the nature of these terminologies as employed by the organisations, their target audiences, the

credible voices they mobilise, the media platforms they utilise, and the challenges they encounter in implementation. Through this analysis, the discussion highlights how local actors adapt global peace education frameworks to the Indonesian socio-cultural context, demonstrating that success in counter- and alternative narrative initiatives is understood as a dynamic, contextually grounded, and socially transformative process.

### The Use of Counter- and Alternative Narratives

The study demonstrates that all three organisations employ a combination of counter- and alternative narratives, but with differing emphases and objectives. Counter-narratives are typically reactive and corrective, directly addressing extremist claims, whereas alternative narratives are proactive, offering constructive values that promote inclusivity, compassion, and coexistence. Over time, the three organisations have shifted from a predominantly reactive orientation to one that foregrounds alternative narratives, suggesting a maturation in their approach to peace communication.

CSRC's work represents a structured and analytical approach to counter-narrative construction. It begins with a detailed examination of extremist narratives—particularly those related to *jihad*,<sup>1</sup> *khilafah*,<sup>2</sup> and *takfiri*<sup>3</sup> ideologies—and formulates responses grounded in theological and sociological reasoning. This emphasis on research-based message formulation ensures credibility and accuracy, strengthening the organisation's capacity to delegitimise extremist arguments while aligning counter-narratives with Islamic ethics.

In contrast, Muhammadiyah adopts an integrative model where alternative narratives are embedded within its broader framework of *dakwah berkemajuan* (progressive preaching). Rather than engaging extremist narratives directly, Muhammadiyah advances positive teachings that redefine Islamic devotion in modern, inclusive, and nation-building terms. This

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<sup>1</sup> *Jihad*, usually translated as “religious struggle,” encompasses multiple dimensions, including the study, practice, and teaching of religion, combating evil influences, and struggling against ungodly desires (Masruri, 2024). In Indonesia, Romadlan (2022) has identified two primary interpretations of *jihad*: the first involves physical warfare, offensive actions, and militant endeavours; the second focuses on peaceful efforts, non-physical struggles, and defensive responses. Shamsudin & Yusuf (2019) further differentiate *jihad* into internal struggles against personal desires and external engagements in the defence of faith. The concept of *jihad* has sometimes been misinterpreted as purely aggressive, often due to feelings of marginalisation and grievance (Kotia & Abdallah, 2016). However, the essence of *jihad* includes elements of spiritual and material progress, patient obedience, and readiness to sacrifice for the sake of religion (Maulana, 2022). Ali et al. (2003) argue that *jihad* is not solely about warfare but also encompasses efforts to combat poverty, disease, and others.

<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia, the concept of *Khilafah* has been the subject of interpretation and debate in the political and social spheres. Several movements seek to change the ideology of Pancasila and realise an Islamic state, known as *Khilafah Islamiyyah*, in the political context of the country (Gunawan et al., 2020). Jamhari & Testriono (2021) describe extremist groups in Indonesia that support the establishment of the Caliphate including *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah* (JAD), *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* (MIT), and *Muhajirin Anshar Tauhid* (MAT). These groups align themselves with the ideology of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and aim to establish an Islamic political system based on the principles of the Caliphate (Jamhari & Testriono, 2021). Extremist groups promote their ideologies, which may include the establishment of a caliphate through violent means (Glazzard et al., 2017). These narratives target individuals who may feel marginalised or alienated, exploiting their vulnerabilities to radicalise them (Bilazarian, 2019). Extremist groups leverage the idea of *Khilafah* to appeal to individuals disillusioned with existing governance structures, promising an alternative system based on their interpretation of Islamic principles.

<sup>3</sup> *Takfiri* is a term used to describe discourses that accuse others, including fellow Muslims, of apostasy (Raffie, 2012). This accusation is often used to justify violence against those deemed apostates. The concept of *takfiri* has been associated with extremist ideologies and has been a source of conflict within Muslim communities, particularly concerning interpretations of religious texts.

reflects a strategic choice to prevent ideological polarisation by focusing on moral reconstruction rather than ideological confrontation.

Peace Generation employs a flexible approach to narrative design. Its use of short videos, infographics, and interactive peace education curricula illustrates how counter- and alternative narratives can be adapted for younger, media-savvy audiences. Peace Generation's narrative style is conversational, emotive, and participatory, which distinguishes it from the more formal theological tone used by CSRC and Muhammadiyah. Its focus on empathy, self-reflection, and interpersonal harmony demonstrates how peace narratives can foster resilience against radicalisation by cultivating critical thinking and emotional intelligence.

Collectively, the findings show that these organisations employ counter- and alternative narratives as complementary strategies—counter-narratives to deconstruct harmful ideologies, and alternative narratives to construct a sustainable moral framework for peace. This duality allows them to move beyond reactive responses toward preventive and transformative interventions.

### **Target Audiences**

A number of studies within the global literature on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) employ the classifications of “primary,” “secondary,” and “tertiary” audiences (Barton et al., 2021; Bhui et al., 2012; Mazerolle et al., 2020; Salter & Gore, 2020; Thijssen et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, however, such terminology has yet to be adopted in previous research. Similarly, the three organisations analysed in this study do not explicitly refer to these categories in the design of their interventions. Nevertheless, the audience segmentation in their practices can be mapped onto the primary, secondary, and tertiary frameworks commonly used in the global P/CVE works.

Most programmes from all three organisations targeted the general public and ambivalent audiences,<sup>4</sup> which can be categorised as primary audiences. This approach is informed by the belief that secondary audiences can influence primary audiences, thereby contributing to collective resilience against extremist ideologies (Barton et al., 2021; Bhui et al., 2012; Salter & Gore, 2020; Thijssen et al., 2022). Primary audiences thus encompassed students (schools or Islamic boarding schools), family members, community leaders, educators, and religious leaders, who could influence the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of others. All three organisations also demonstrate an awareness that violent extremism in Indonesia involves not only men but also women. Consequently, their prevention efforts engage both male and female participants as primary audiences.

The secondary audiences—those at risk of radicalisation—receive tailored interventions. CSRC's initiatives for student organisations that espouse exclusivist views exemplify this approach. CSRC encourages participants to separate religious identity from political radicalism, fostering ideological resilience without alienation, by facilitating dialogue and critical reflection. The tertiary audiences, including individuals already associated with extremist networks, are mainly addressed by Muhammadiyah through mentoring and rehabilitation programmes. These initiatives employ alternative rather than confrontational

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<sup>4</sup> Ambivalent audiences refer to individuals who are caught between conflicting ideologies and have to navigate complex choices. For instance, when choosing between the current system and the enforcement of Islamic law, these audiences experienced a dichotomy. They felt inclined towards supporting Islamic law while simultaneously valuing democratic principles and the existing legal structure.

narratives, recognising that moral persuasion and reintegration are more powerful than direct ideological confrontation.

### **Credible Voices**

The success of counter- and alternative narratives depends heavily on the credibility of those delivering them. Across all three organisations, messengers are carefully selected based on their social legitimacy, moral authority, and cultural resonance with target audiences. CSRC leverages the influence of *ustadz* and *ustadzah* within *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), recognising their pivotal role as moral guides and educators. Their religious authority enhances the legitimacy of peace messages, ensuring they are perceived as theologically sound rather than externally imposed. CSRC also engages respected public intellectuals and digital influencers to extend reach beyond religious circles, combining scholarship with accessibility.

Muhammadiyah relies on a wide spectrum of credible voices, including religious leaders, local preachers, and lay activists. Its decentralised structure allows local branches to mobilise figures who embody trust within their communities. Importantly, Muhammadiyah integrates women and youth activists into its outreach, recognising the need for diversity in moral leadership. This inclusivity not only strengthens the organisation's credibility but also challenges patriarchal interpretations of religious authority that can contribute to extremism.

Peace Generation's approach differs in that it foregrounds peer credibility. Teachers, students, and young trainers are central to its dissemination strategy. Peace Generation ensures relatability and sustained engagement by using figures who share similar life experiences with their audiences. Peer messengers are particularly powerful in digital and educational environments where trust is built through shared identity rather than formal authority. These approaches demonstrate that credible voices are not limited to religious authority figures but can include educators, peers, and professionals who model empathy and integrity.

### **The Media Used**

All three organisations utilise a hybrid communication strategy that integrates in-person engagement with digital media. This combination ensures wide reach while maintaining personal connection and trust. Offline methods remain foundational. Training workshops, mentoring sessions, and sermons allow for interpersonal dialogue and contextual understanding. For CSRC, in-person training in *pesantren* provides safe spaces for critical discussion. Muhammadiyah's Friday sermons serve as moral platforms to embed messages of moderation within religious practice. Peace Generation's interactive workshops foster peer learning and empathy building. These face-to-face engagements enable sustained mentoring and a deeper emotional connection that purely digital interventions cannot achieve.

At the same time, online media play a central role in amplifying reach. Websites, online magazines, YouTube channels, and social media platforms allow for continuous engagement beyond the classroom or mosque. *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine and Peace Generation's social media content extend their narratives nationally and globally. CSRC's online presence complements its academic activities, disseminating research-based counter- and alternative narratives in accessible formats. The use of hybrid media not only enhances dissemination but also builds continuity between online and offline spaces. Digital platforms ensure scalability and accessibility, while face-to-face interactions maintain trust and relational depth. This

integrated strategy managed to reach diverse audiences across age, geography, and digital literacy levels.

### **Challenges Faced**

Despite their success, all three organisations confront significant challenges that affect both their reputation and operational effectiveness. A major challenge concerns stigmatisation and ideological resistance. CSRC's association with human rights discourse has occasionally been perceived as a Western import, generating suspicion among several audiences. To mitigate this, CSRC reframed human rights as compatible with Islamic values, thus bridging global concepts and local norms. Conversely, Muhammadiyah has faced reputational challenges arising from the actions of a few members who have been linked to conservative or radical groups. To safeguard its reputation, the organisation employs strategic communication tools—such as social media analytics—to monitor public perception and decide when to respond or remain silent. This pragmatic management of controversy reflects institutional maturity and awareness of media dynamics. Peace Generation, meanwhile, has contended with misconceptions about its name, which some associated with Christian or Jewish organisations. This misunderstanding initially hampered collaboration with certain communities. PeaceGen responded through persuasive communication and the consistent demonstration of its Islamic and humanitarian values, eventually restoring trust and credibility.

### **Understanding the Success or Failure of Counter- and Alternative Narrative Programmes**

Each organisation had nuanced perceptions of what constituted programme success. It's crucial to tease out these differences as they highlight the varied criteria and approaches that each organisation uses to evaluate effectiveness—a principal challenge in assessing P/CVE programmes (Fisher & Busher, 2023).

For CSRC, success was defined as transforming knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours among at-risk audiences. Respondents from CSRC perceived their success to be anchored in the credibility of the individuals delivering the message, the strength of the relationships built with target audiences, and the engagement metrics. They emphasised that compelling counter-narratives delivered by trusted community figures were essential to ensure meaningful engagement. Success metrics included countering extremist narratives, raising awareness, and influencing policies at *pesantren*, universities, and governmental levels.

Muhammadiyah considered success to be measured by community trust and societal impact. They gauge success by the extent of their community engagement, their ability to address global issues with long-term impact, and the cooperation between the government and civil society. Their broader approach encompassed opposing extremist views while building a positive ideological framework to foster inclusion and understanding. Effective outreach effectively extended to underdeveloped and remote areas, thereby challenging the perception of Muhammadiyah as an urban-centric organisation. Additionally, high online engagement, particularly on platforms like Twitter that facilitated dialogue and interaction, was considered a mark of success.

Peace Generation perceived success through the transformative impact on individual participants and societal norms over time. For PeaceGen, success equalled the quantity, quality, and continuity of engagement. They assessed their success based on personal change and

ongoing engagement with their audience. Metrics such as audience reach and the Violent Extremism Disposition Scale (VEDS), which sought to measure participants' personal transformation, were pivotal indicators. Organisational growth and sustained impact since inception were also crucial measures of continuous success.

The findings demonstrate that while each organisation has unique criteria for success, they all highlight the importance of tailored approaches to evaluation. This underscores the extent to which an emphasis on sophisticated evaluation methods has been embedded in the P/CVE sector in Indonesia—a sector that was relatively late in adopting rigorous evaluation practices (Fisher & Busher, 2023).

Literature emphasises the importance of rigorous evaluation methods to assess the effectiveness of counter-narrative interventions (Carthy et al., 2020). In this study, understanding these diverse perceptions and approaches to success highlights the complexity and context-specific nature of evaluating these initiatives. While there is diversity across the programmes in some areas, there is a convergence of opinion around what the key ingredients are for success.

These cases find a consideration from the organisations which assert the importance of tailored interventions and continuous engagement to maximise impact. In addition, success was defined not merely by immediate outcomes but by long-term engagement, behavioural transformation, and community impact. Evaluations through surveys, the Most Significant Change (MSC) method, and qualitative feedback allowed for an impact assessment. While they have all strived to evaluate programmes, the most important long-term outcomes are actually the hardest outcomes to measure.

All organisations also highlighted the importance of sustainability and the adoption of iterative approaches to programme development. For example, PeaceGen emphasised that the establishment of local chapters marks a significant step towards ensuring the sustainability of their organisation. Additionally, they noted that their transition into a social enterprise is a key indicator of their long-term viability. Effective content was defined by its engaging and inspiring nature. The iterative process of learning from failures and implementing training materials underscored the dynamic nature of PeaceGen's approach.

According to their understanding of success, these organisations perceived their programmes as successful works. CSRC considered their programmes successful, particularly highlighting "*Pesantren* for Peace" as the most successful initiative. They recognised this programme for producing positive outcomes by transforming participants' knowledge and attitudes, while motivating them to actively counter extremist ideologies, and advocate for human rights. However, CSRC had yet to assess the impact of these narratives, implemented by their trained alumni, on enhancing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of students within each *pesantren*.

Muhammadiyah regarded their most successful programme to be the promotion of peace and tolerance in their schools, due to the perceived long-term impact. However, they admitted the challenges in measuring it. Although Muhammadiyah did not identify any specific programme as unsuccessful, they observed that counter-narratives were considered less suitable for their target audiences compared to alternative narratives. In addition, PeaceGen considered their training on the 12 basic values of peace to be its most successful programme, viewing it as sustainable since the organisation's inception and having engaged over 100,000 participants.

On the other hand, they regarded the less successful programme as the promotion of peace through the use of posters for early childhood.

These findings hold wider relevance for researchers and policy planners working within the P/CVE field. Generally, success in counter- and alternative narrative programmes has been understood through the lens of transforming knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, alongside the promotion of peace and tolerance through online engagement (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Frischlich et al., 2018; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). However, this research demonstrates a broader understanding. Success is also perceived as the ability to build and maintain community trust in the programme and its actors. This dimension of success is no less critical in shaping long-term legitimacy and receptiveness to narrative interventions, maintain community trust in the programme and its actors.

The fact that each organisation articulated markedly different definitions of success underscores the need to move beyond universal metrics. Instead, evaluative frameworks should be responsive to institutional goals, community dynamics, and cultural context. Understanding success as a locally situated and relational concept challenges top-down assumptions and calls for more adaptive, participatory, and grounded approaches to programme assessment.

### **Conclusion**

This study systematically examined how Indonesian civil society organisations (CSOs) – specifically the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), Muhammadiyah, and Peace Generation – conceptualise and evaluate the success or failure of their programmes promoting peace and tolerance. The findings demonstrate that effectiveness is understood not as a short-term or purely quantitative achievement, but rather as a long-term transformative process encompassing positive changes in attitudes, relationships, and broader social behaviour.

Globally, success in counter- and alternative narrative programmes is frequently understood through the lens of transforming knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Frischlich et al., 2018; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). However, this research shows a broader local conceptualisation. Success is reflected in participants' moral development, strengthened community trust, and the sustained continuity of peace initiatives. A critical finding is that success also includes the ability of these programmes to influence institutional practice and policy, thereby demonstrating that civil society can meaningfully shape broader national frameworks for religious moderation, education, and social inclusion. Furthermore, failure is not viewed as an absolute lack of results, but instead as a valuable space for reflection and learning, which drives iterative programme improvement.

The research significantly contributes to the peace education field by redefining success in counter- or alternative narrative initiatives as contextual, relational, and value-based, moving beyond purely behavioural or technical indicators. This necessitates a shift away from universal metrics, demanding that evaluative frameworks be responsive to unique institutional goals, community dynamics, and the prevailing cultural context. Success thus emerges from the alignment between moral principles, community engagement, and policy responsiveness. Furthermore, the study advanced a constructivist approach that successfully integrated rich qualitative insight with the analysis of limited quantitative documentary evidence, providing an effective model for assessing complex social transformation. Practically, the findings underscore the essential role of CSOs as mediators between grassroots communities and state

institutions, capable of bridging moral education initiatives with tangible policy reform. For future research, it will be imperative to explore the mechanisms through which CSOs sustain their influence over extended time periods, how target audiences ultimately internalise the alternative narratives, and the specific ways in which digital spaces continue to reshape the delivery and reception of peace messaging.

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### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The author states that Grammarly, an AI-based writing tool, was employed solely for proofreading and improving the language of the manuscript. Its use was restricted to correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, as well as refining sentences for better clarity and precision. The author also affirms that no other artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies were utilised in generating the content of this manuscript. All ideas, designs, methods, findings, analyses, and discussions are entirely original and stem from the author's own systematic and rigorous research process.

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