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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Youth & Education (Y&E)

30 November – 1 December 2021, Online meeting

Inclusion through sports

Key outcomes

Sports can play a positive and constructive role in the lives of young people. Physical activity can boost their self-confidence and provide young people opportunities to meet and make friendships with other young people. This can lead to positive identity development and a sense of belonging – two protective factors when it comes to the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). In this way, engaging in sports could help reduce the risk of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. Which elements in sports initiatives have this positive effect? And how can these be utilised by educators and youth workers?

To answer these questions, the RAN Youth & Education (Y&E) working group convened a working session on 30 November and 1 December 2021 to gather insights and tips from sports initiatives on working elements regarding inclusion and PVE. This paper is based on the insights from the working session and aims to provide educators, youth workers and sports organisers with practical tips on how to foster inclusion through sports. The following aspects were highlighted as the key outcomes for working on PVE through sports:

- **Positive identity development:** Provide opportunities to young people to progress, give them leadership roles or the prospect of becoming coaches where possible. Confirm that if they can accomplish something in sports, they can also accomplish it in wider society.
- **Fostering social cohesion:** Involve participants from the broader community, regardless of their socioeconomic status, culture or religion. Build a community around the project that includes children and young people, as well as parents and others from the neighbourhood.
- **Building citizenship:** Make use of the potential of sport to let young people come out of their usual environment. Connect them to wider areas of society by letting them experience new activities, bringing them to places they would normally not go to, and meeting people they would probably never encounter. Foster democratic skills by allowing participants to decide on the rules of the games together.
- **Reaching the target group:** Make sure the coaches and young people in the group are diverse (background and gender). Do not advertise with PVE. The message and incentive to join could be non-material (e.g., have fun or work on personal development), or material (e.g., receive free meals).
- **Forging local partnerships:** The planning phase is essential. Look for partners who understand the needs of the community. Get to know each other, define a common goal well beforehand and do not rush into collaboration.

Highlights of the discussion

Setting the scene: How do sports contribute to PVE?

Sports can contribute significantly to the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). However, it is important to note that sports initiatives do not automatically lead to these positive outcomes. To ensure positive outcomes, sports initiatives should be accompanied by educational programmes and fulfil certain conditions. These include for instance bringing together different groups of young people, providing alternative social contacts, offering daytime activities and success experiences, and focusing on positive identity development.

Presenting at the RAN Y&E meeting, the *UNODC Guides Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sports* authors noted: 'The prevention of violent extremism through sports builds on the unique ability of sport to engage youth actively and meaningfully, and to gain access to young people who are often hard to reach through other, more formal interventions. Understanding violent extremism and why youth may be vulnerable to it can lead to the creation of an informed sports curriculum and opportunities for youth to develop prosocial behaviour and life skills that make them more resilient and resistant to violent extremism' ⁽¹⁾.

Further reading

For a detailed description, practical tools and guidance on how to include PVE elements in sport initiatives, we refer to guides published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC):

- UNODC (2020). [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport Practical Guide](#). Vienna: Publishing and Library Section, United Nations Office.
- UNODC (2020). [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport Technical Guide](#). Vienna: Publishing and Library Section, United Nations Office.

For further reading on risk, protective and promotive factors for radicalisation and violent extremism:

- RAN Issue paper (2015). [Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation](#).

For further reading about local partnerships:

- RAN Y&E (2021) [Towards an effective collaboration](#).

For further reading on sports and PVE:

- RAN YF&C (2019) [The role of sports and leisure activities in preventing and countering violent extremism](#)

How does inclusion contribute to PVE? In short, inclusion is a key *promotive factor*, which contributes to societal resilience. As a promotive factor, it aims to build unity in diversity over (essentialist) identity politics. Promotive factors, such as inclusion, are part of a strength based PVE approach that focuses on developing individual and societal resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Practitioners working on the enhancement of social coping skills (*a protective factor*) such as social needs, talents, and ideals protect youth directly from feelings of exclusion (*a risk factor*) ⁽²⁾.

Subthemes: challenges and recommendations

Before the meeting, participants completed a registration form in which they stated their motivation for participating and the challenges they face when working on inclusion through sports. These challenges have been categorised

⁽¹⁾ UNODC (2020). [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport Technical Guide](#). Vienna: Publishing and Library Section, United Nations Office

⁽²⁾ [RAN ISSUE PAPER Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation](#), 2015

into subtopics. Participants discussed why and how to work on these topics through sport initiatives to foster inclusion and thereby prevent violent extremism.

How to work on positive identity development and sense of belonging in the sport activity?

The search for a sense of identity and feelings of not belonging and not being accepted can push young people to become involved in extremism. While this strong desire to be included and feel supported by a group could be exploited by malevolent actors, sports activities might prevent this by providing positive alternatives. Instead of adhering to an exclusionist and violent identity, young people could also identify with their sports club or the community represented by the sports club.

- Create a sense of belonging among participants by allowing them to take ownership of the project. Participants should be encouraged to co-create activities and take on organisational responsibilities and provide the prospect of one day becoming captains or coaches themselves.
- Contribute to personal development and increase confidence of young people and advance their progress within the specific activity. Celebrate successes and work with affirmations about their ability to accomplish something within the project. This can build confidence in achieving goals in society.
- Focus on the process of personal development. The sports activity is only the vehicle to create a more positive identity. In addition, the longevity of projects is important because building a sense of belonging or developing a positive identity does not occur in a few weeks or months.

How to implement the theoretical and educational aspects of citizenship and social inclusion in the sports activity?

Sports activities teach youth several essential life lessons and values. The essential fair-play aspect of sports has the potential to teach young people the values of democratic citizenship. These values include attitudes of tolerance, dialogue and self-reflection, all contributing to resilience against violent extremism. After all, the capacity to interact and deal with conflict peacefully is central to the desired social development of young people.

- Provide teachable moments and real-life lessons. For example, inherent to sports is the notion of equal opportunity, commitment and discipline to improve. In this process participants will meet their limits and boundaries and try to connect the lessons they learn during this process with situations outside the sports initiative.
- Let youngsters decide on the rules of the initiative beforehand and reflect on these together. This way, participants learn to discuss, find consensus, and reflect.
- Anticipate possible conflicts. Do this through sessions about anger management and showing participants the value of peer mediation.
- Connect youth to the wider society by providing the opportunity to transcend their environment. Encourage them to experience new activities, take them to places they would normally not go to (e.g., a football match, kayak trip), and help them meet people they would not usually encounter (e.g., football players, people from other communities, other sport clubs).

How to strengthen social cohesion in neighbourhoods through sports activities?

Young people tend to be less vulnerable to radicalisation if they grow up in a supportive environment. Sports activities could improve this social cohesion. After all, sport is a low-barrier and indiscriminatory means with the possibility to unite segregated or unacquainted communities. Especially among young people this can improve empathy and resilience against stereotypes. These are considered valuable protective factors in PVE.

- Sports programmes are integrated in the neighbourhood and wider society. Practitioners take into consideration whether participants feel like they are members of the sports club or a wider community.
- Sports activities are visible. If the sport is played outside, other young people may see it and want to join. Also, people in the neighbourhood will see the youth positively engaging with each other.
- Consider co-ownership of the community. Focussing only on the sports activity is not enough. It is possible to strengthen social cohesion in neighbourhoods by creating a community around the sports activities.

- Focus on the connection with the entire population. Target and engage most of the population in your work when working with specific communities that form a minority in society.
- Focus on the similarities that unite youngsters from very different backgrounds, and possibly with prejudices about others. Eventually, the participants overcome their perceived differences. They will also connect this positive experience to the rest of the neighbourhood.

How to engage the 'right' young people in your sport initiative?

Initiatives for young people with a focus on inclusion or PVE might have difficulties reaching the vulnerable young people. Sports, however, are low barrier and attractive activities for a diverse group of young people. The participants of this meeting outlined ways to attract those who might need these activities the most.

- Look for partners that are from the community or those who know the right people and can convince youngsters to join. These could be social organisations, schools, parents, or other individuals with a small social distance to the target group. Personal connections work the best, as to do the activity visibly in the neighbourhood.
- The staff and participants should come from diverse backgrounds. Some youngsters will join more readily if they can see themselves represented. Female coaches can help to attract girls.
- Elements of PVE and fostering inclusion should be part of the activity and not part of how the programme is advertised. Use incentives to attract youngsters and target the narrative of the advertisement to the specific group. For instance, free meals, making friends and prospects for personal development.
- Design the sports programme together with the youth you want to target. Do not design an activity and then try to attract participants. This way it is likely to avoid developing a programme that does not fit with the needs of the specific group.
- Ensure low barriers to participation by keeping costs low and removing requirements for materials, administration, and special skills.

How to develop effective local partnerships between sport initiatives, schools, NGOs, youth work organisations and municipalities?

Various partners in the neighbourhood can play a role in ensuring the overall positive development of young people and in binding them to a democratic society and values. To achieve this goal and to strengthen social capital, it is important that the different parties work together successfully.

- Map all possible partners (e.g., local administration, existing sport clubs, schools and/or youth workers) to gain a clear overview before you start cooperating. Consider the competition between partners. Explore the benefits of collaboration for each partner, and possibly create incentives to participate. Assess each partner and consider whether a partner is needed and how helpful the partnership will be.
- The period before rolling out the programme is essential. Take this time to get to know each other, define the common goal and make sure everyone understands his/her role and responsibilities. An action plan, with clear agreements on means and time is useful. Be transparent, communicate clearly and build trustful relationships. Do not rush collaboration.
- Search for partners who know the area and understand the needs of the community. Collaborating with schools and community organisations can be beneficial to reach the right young people, and exchange experiences about participating youngsters.

Lessons from sports for teachers and youth workers

In a pedagogical civil society, different stakeholders in education can work together, but also learn from each other. This is why participants in the meeting discussed the elements from sports activities that could be useful for teachers and youth workers. The following conclusions were highlighted:

- Learning through play (such as sports) can motivate youth to attend and participate in the classroom or in youth activities. **Sports can be a lot of fun** for participants. However, discipline and structure are necessary for self-improvement.
- In sports activities, coaches regularly take **moments for reflection** to think about the progress made and to discuss opportunities for growth. Learning from previous experience is also important. This is beneficial for schools to improve academic progress, as well as trust within the classroom.
- Failure is an inevitable aspect of sports, which is acknowledged as an inherent aspect, and **dealing with failure** is usually taught by coaches. Learning how to deal with failure and mistakes is an enormous life skill that makes people resilient in life. In school, however, there is less room for failure (bad grades) and how to deal with this on a personal level.
- The opposite of failure is success. Achievements are usually broadly celebrated in sports, whether it is a match, championship, or a new skill. **Celebrating success** is something that could be applied more in schools and youth work to create more moments of joy, and thus more motivation, recognition and engagement. However, make sure everybody is celebrated equally so nobody feels left out.
- A sports team has a big sense of **team spirit** to get the best out of every player. Creating such team spirit could also be applied in the classroom or youth work, for example, as a whole group or through assignments to enhance social cohesion.
- In team sports, **each player has a specific role**. In education, however, the focus is more individualistic. This might lead to rather divisive identities. In class, players might see themselves as a Moroccan or Muslim, while in sports they are the keeper or attacker of the team.

Relevant practices

1. **Kacsakö** (Hungary) organises inclusive sporting camps to bring together children from different social circles, and increase social skills, empathy and self-esteem.
2. **Start in the Streets** (France) organises outdoor sports activities in deprived neighbourhoods, to create social cohesion, confidence, and transmit positive values.
3. **Belgian Red Courts** (Belgium) organises educational football programmes for vulnerable young people to empower them, strengthen intergroup contact and increase social cohesion.
4. **Young European Whistlers** (Ireland) is an educational referee programme for vulnerable youth that aims to increase social skills and enhances social inclusion and cultural integration.
5. **Move In** (Spain) is a social-educational project that strengthens social inclusion and prevents at risk behaviour and radicalisation of youth through sports.
6. **Sport for Prevention of Extremism in Youth (SPEY)** (Spain) is a project that aims to prevent vulnerable young people from radicalisation or engagement in criminal activity by providing them direction and strengthen social inclusion.
7. **Cranford Community College** (United Kingdom) has a range of extracurricular sports activities such as boxing and basketball classes, and actively reaches out for partnerships with professional football clubs including Queens Park Rangers Football Club and Brentford Football Club.

Follow up

Participants raised several issues and challenges and posed questions that fell just outside the scope of the meeting. Two points raised repeatedly are mentioned below.

- The question about combat sports was raised. Can the martial arts also be utilised in PVE? Several projects do use boxing or mixed martial arts (MMA) to foster social inclusion. Participants expressed their interest to connect to these types of sports to PVE. A previous RAN paper on the role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE briefly touches upon the positive role that MMA can play in PVE, however, this could be further explored.
- How to engage youth sport clubs that are more focussed on developing the sport than on fostering social inclusion. What is the best way to approach them and make them aware of the potential and power of their initiative to foster inclusion? If successful, onboarding these sports clubs will generate more positive impact for the youth, their neighbourhoods and society as a whole.