

RAN REHAB

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Rehabilitation Working Group Meeting

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Crises in rehabilitation – safeguarding practitioners and approaches

Key outcomes

Rehabilitation programmes (including probation, exit and deradicalisation work) are at constant risk of crises. Rehabilitation work, like any other social intervention type, will never be able to guarantee a 100 % success rate. This risk concerns multiple levels. Firstly, it concerns individual practitioners, who may become the direct target of reoffending or reengaging (former) extremists with whom they work. Secondly, it concerns the work itself and the organisations or institutions carrying it out. Lastly, it concerns society at large which may also be threatened by such individuals. It has become an unfortunate reality that, unlike any other type of social intervention, rehabilitation approaches as a whole come under public criticism and/or doubt at the slightest suspicion of error. A number of previous RAN events and papers have focused on this tier: threats to society and how to best prevent them within various programmes. Adjusting the focus, this paper will look into the first and second tiers to address the following issues. How to safeguard individual practitioners and prepare them for the worst case of their clients reoffending. How to improve crisis communication and public perceptions of rehabilitation programmes in general to avoid serious reputation damage the entire organisation every time something might happen. Some of the key take-aways include the following.

- **Safeguarding practitioners:** The best way to ensure individual practitioner safety is to always employ a four-eye principal and ensure sound supervision in addition to clear safety and work protocols for all staff.
- **Reducing reputational risk:** Transparency is key. This requires a lot of internal efforts to create and evaluate detailed plans and to be transparent about both mistakes and success.
- **Crisis communication and learning from crises:** Preparation is key. If long-term relationships with trusted journalists have been established, these should be contacted and informed early on. In general, a crisis management team should convene as quickly as possible to conduct internal analysis and publish first press statements to get ahead of the dynamic and keep control.
- **Improving public perceptions in general:** Creating trust in the professionalism along with targeted messaging regarding successes and the realities of this type of work is the key to improving public perception of rehabilitation work.

This paper presents the main highlights of the discussion and relevant recommendations to different target groups along these four main lines of debate: *Safeguarding practitioners*; *Reducing reputational risk for the organisation*; *Crisis communication*; and *Improving public perceptions of rehabilitation*.

Highlights of the discussion

Safeguarding practitioners

The safety of staff should be the top priority for all practitioner organisations. However, when working with violent extremists, risks always remain. This makes it even more important to create clear plans to follow and points of contacts in case of doubt or potential risk to the practitioner, the participant or the public. For instance, many organisations have clear protocols in place about where to meet individuals who pose a violent threat, what type of (personal) information (not) to share. Occasionally, depending on the professional relationships within a multi-agency setting, different practitioner types may be able to support each other. For example, in case a contentious conversation is scheduled with family members of which some are known to be prone to violence, the rehabilitation worker's contact points at the police may be informed in advance to be aware of potential altercations.

Reducing reputational risk

Reputational damage is a constant risk factor for practitioner organisations and institutions working in the field of rehabilitation. Public and political misconceptions on the functioning and efficacy of rehabilitation work may result in harsh and even unsubstantiated public criticism. However, many organisations can still improve their efforts on positive communication regarding their work. They often do not have communication strategies in place and therefore remain too opaque in their communication around crisis and risk management. At the same time, high-level support is often also lacking or not available. Funders have the potential to play a big role in publicly supporting organisations and their work and in reducing misconceptions and unfounded criticism.

Crisis communication and learning from crises

A crisis, while not a daily occurrence, will eventually strike in rehabilitation work. This is why preparation is key. Badly handled crises may easily lead to the end of an approach or even a (small) organisation. When a crisis occurs, practitioners should know exactly who to turn to and where to find instructions. Working in complex contexts and with multiple actors will complicate the situation. Good preparatory communication is required between all multi-agency collaborators. A strong trust between all actors involved will reduce the risk of one actor potentially becoming a scapegoat. Similar to support for rehabilitation work in general, public support and signs of trust and confidence from the government and/or funders may also help practitioner organisations survive a crises.

Improving public perceptions of rehabilitation work in general

Rehabilitation work faces criticism from several societal and political directions. For some, rehabilitation work is a sign of a supposedly soft stance on crime and extremism. For others, working against extremism constitutes a more general problem, sometimes linked to notions of discrimination and stigmatisation of minority groups. And some might want to use external actors in this field merely to deflect blame for cases of reengagement from themselves. As a result, rehabilitation approaches nowadays require solid, long-term communication strategies, both regarding the public and regarding policymakers, to foster a better, more nuanced understanding of this working field.

Recommendations

In this section, clear recommendations related to the different strands of discussion will be presented.

Safeguarding practitioners

1. Develop clear protocols for meetings with potentially high-risk individuals and provide instructions for practitioners about how to work with them.
2. Designate a point of contact in your organisation who will be able to advise and supervise during a crisis or times of doubt.
3. Establish good working relationships with the security authorities to help provide safety and support during critical situations.
4. If there are any indications a person might have reengaged or been involved in any type of problematic behaviour, organisations should follow these steps to manage risk internally:
 - a. Quickly **investigate** to find all available information and get a comprehensive picture;
 - b. **Discuss** this information internally;
 - c. **Confront** the individual in question with the issue and clearly communicate the problem while trying to find a solution together. If no acceptable solution can be found, the counselling process should be stopped for the safety of the individual practitioners and the organisation.
 - d. Clearly **document and communicate** this process to funders as well as security authorities in case of risk.
 - e. If working in a multi-agency setting, similar activities should be carried out jointly with all partners.
5. Do not expose individual practitioners to the press and public by name and/or photograph. Ideally, one person should be responsible for communication and media outreach.
6. Use the four-eye-principle: If any practitioner has the slightest feeling that a risk might exist, they need to contact a dedicated superior to discuss this. Ideally, cases are always discussed with colleagues not directly involved in it to avoid potential blind spots.

Reducing reputational risk

1. Establish clear crisis management plans and protocols. This should be carried out in collaboration with funders and security authorities in order to reduce the risk of misconceptions or a “blame game” during times of crises. Clearly communicate the fact that such plans exist to the public and funders. Public support from the high level is a bonus.
2. Clearly document the steps taken during a specific crisis (see point 4 under ‘Safeguarding practitioners’).
3. Do not associate with potentially problematic actors (certain parties, political groups and religious groups).
4. Do not be too extreme in your public messages.
5. Avoid potentially biased imagery in public relations products (e.g. images of women wearing hijabs as illustrations of projects or texts about Islamist extremism).
6. Do not try to hide mistakes. Develop a constructive error culture to learn from them.

Crisis communication and learning from crises

1. Convene all members of the crisis management team as soon as possible after learning about the specific crisis. The aim should be to:
 - a. Collect all available information and conduct a case analysis to assess whether standards have been met and to create a timeline of the case.
 - b. Convene an internal evaluation group.
 - c. Prepare a press statement in writing, based on previously prepared templates.
2. Designate a “one face to the press” role of spokesperson. They should be a communication expert within the organisation or one of the organisation’s management team.
 - a. During an unfolding crisis situation, security agencies should ensure that one spokesperson receives all relevant information to be communicated. The aim should be to create a climate of confidence among the public to alleviate stress.
3. If working in multi-agency settings, it is recommended to design joint crisis communication plans to avoid conflicting information being leaked to the press. At the very least, it is recommended to ensure that the individual organisations’ plans are complementary.
4. Actively offer the opportunity to discuss the events with local politicians and stakeholders to paint a nuanced picture.
5. Actively reach out to trusted journalists with whom relationships have been established previously.
6. Continuously emphasise the fact that due diligence was undertaken and that rehabilitation unfortunately will never be able to reach a 100 % success rate.
7. Create a spreadsheet with all relevant information that every individual practitioner can readily consult when a crisis unfolds. This could also be in the format of a poster that is hung on the office walls.
8. Provide support to affected practitioners if necessary. Reassure staff they handled the incident exactly as they should have.

Improving public perceptions of rehabilitation work in general

1. Develop trusting working relationships with selected journalists. Invite them to events and hold background information sharing sessions. Positive feature articles about rehabilitation work outside of crisis contexts will have a positive impact on rehabilitation perception in general and during crises.
2. If applicable in the specific context, use statistics regarding your own work. Highlighting successes may help create a positive image.
3. Continuously spread the message that unfortunately rehabilitation work will never have a 100 % success rate – just like any other social intervention. This will manage expectations in the long run.
4. Communicate openly about past experiences, including mistakes, to become visible as a transparent actor to be trusted.
5. If possible, analyse which terminology might be best for your cause: How do public perceptions change when using “deradicalisation” vs. “rehabilitation” vs. “disengagement”?
6. Emphasise how social interventions have the potential to contribute to overall security – even if this is not the main focus of your approach.

Relevant practices

- As concluded during the meeting dealing with a crisis functions, it is considered good practice if preparations are made in advance or are part of the design of a rehabilitation programme. A good approach always will have to be tailor-made: following the set-up of the intervention, the way it is rooted in a structure with other stakeholders and being in line with the arrangements with commissioning partners (governments and other funders).
- If you want to reflect on how dealing with crisis is organised within your rehabilitation work or want to implement a plan for crisis communication, it is advised to look for information regarding crisis communication for NGOs:
 - This blog provides a short overview of what to keep in mind and contains a link to a template that can be used for drafting a guideline: <https://www.allianzcare.com/en/employers/employer-blogs/2020/05/ngo-crises-plan.html>
 - This crisis communication toolkit for NGOs contains checklists and flowcharts: <https://sustainingplaces.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/crisiscomm.pdf>

Follow up

To further support practitioners, RAN published a short paper after this working group meeting, containing background knowledge and recommendations for journalists and reporters based on practitioner experiences. This is intended to foster awareness around key challenges related to reporting on violent extremism and P/CVE and to support journalists in conveying a more nuanced picture. More information on this paper in the further reading section below.

Further reading

In the latest book co-written by Dr Gordon Clubb, [Selling De-Radicalisation. Managing the Media Framing of Countering Violent Extremism](#), researchers examine how deradicalisation work has been portrayed in the media and how communication strategies may support P/CVE organisations in creating a positive public perception of their work.

In a recent RAN specialised paper titled "[Reporting about Violent Extremism and P/CVE. Challenges for Journalists – Recommendations from Practitioners](#)", authors Alexander Ritzmann and Fabian Wichmann address some of the most relevant challenges in this area by introducing key insights and recommendations on how to follow a "do no harm" approach when informing the public, and particularly when reporting about violence.