

04/07/2022

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN YOUNG Platform

24-25 May 2022, Athens, Greece

Engaging and Empowering Young People in P/CVE

How to train and empower young people to formulate project plans in P/CVE?

Key outcomes

On 24-25 May 2022, the RAN YOUNG Platform convened 25 of its members in Athens (Greece). This meeting was the latest in RAN Practitioners' ongoing effort to engage with young actors in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and empower them to advance themselves and the future of the field across Europe. Working in mixed groups representing 14 countries, the young practitioners learned a process for strategic project planning and put it into action by planning an initiative to address a specific issue in P/CVE. This conclusion paper will 1) outline the process shared during this meeting as example for those who wish to engage young people in P/CVE project brainstorming, 2) present the shared outcomes of the youths' project ideas and 3) a set of recommendations for practitioners who hope to engage and empower young people in P/CVE in a similar way. In short, these recommendations are:

- **Let young people learn by doing:** enable youth to directly apply the knowledge and skills you impart throughout a project brainstorm with/by young people. Practically, this makes it more engaging and can lead to interesting outcomes that one could action as a follow-up (such as the project plans that emerged from this event). It also creates space for participants to engage with the material critically and test their understanding, which can enhance learning and retention.
- **Collaborate:** create space for a team to collaborate towards a shared goal in which everyone is equal and everyone has space to contribute. This leads to richer, more creative outcomes and an authentic interchange between participants. Find ways to incorporate networking and collaboration into every activity, both within established groups and beyond them.
- **Sanction creativity as the norm:** Practitioners in P/CVE hail young people for their creativity; however, creativity must be nurtured. Young practitioners, especially those with some experience in formal organisations or offices, are often drawn to established P/CVE practices. Encourage them to break with the norm and push the boundaries on how, where and with whom they seek solutions.
- **Keep it focused:** P/CVE is a vast field and seeking solutions can be overwhelming. Help young people find a clear focus and build good practice for working in targeted and strategic ways.
- **Let youth lead:** To keep it focused, you must have a clear plan for how the event should operate, but be mindful it is not so rigid that it stifles youth leadership. Approach your agenda as a framework: set clear goals and offer structured guidance but retain space and flexibility to allow young people to have ownership.

Highlights of the meeting

The RAN YOUNG meeting in Athens sought to teach the RAN YOUNG members how to effectively plan targeted projects in P/CVE that have a measurable impact on their audience and the surrounding community. During this workshop, they learned a clear process for planning projects in response to a researched understanding of a challenge and the needs of a specific audience, as well as the skills required to both lead and participate in such a process collaboratively. Also, it provided them with the opportunity to broaden their understanding about critical themes in P/CVE and how they affect different European countries and contexts.

While the content of this RAN YOUNG meeting is neither exhaustive nor universally appropriate, the application and the outcomes hold important lessons for anyone who wants to engage and empower young people in P/CVE.

Why and how? - Strategic project planning in P/CVE

Young people are a critical part of P/CVE, both as beneficiaries and as practitioners. In Europe, the field has expanded considerably in the last 7 years to improve youth engagement in both regards: youth-oriented policy and practice have taken steps to incorporate youth to enhance efficacy and build trust, while youth practitioners are moving out of their support role and gaining more authority as partners. As they are given space to play a larger role in defining the P/CVE agenda, young people will require specialised training and support that is just as dynamic as they are.

The meeting focused on strategic project planning, as it includes core skills that practitioners need to possess for many capacities in P/CVE. The workshop introduced a process for planning targeted, impact-oriented projects that address a core issue. The drivers of extremism are complex, and most are deeply entrenched, involving a wide range of actors, drivers, perceptions and consequences. To help participants learn to dissect an extensive topic into an actionable strategy, the agenda was designed to move participants from a broad starting point through a series of exercises that forced them to make strategic decisions and plan strategic outputs on P/CVE-related themes that conformed to a well-defined theory of change. The steps were as follows:

Step 1: Analyse the Challenge. The first session challenged participants to identify causes, contributing factors and consequences to establish how the P/CVE issue manifests in their own context. They then identified specific behaviours associated with the challenge, examining the positive and negative actions of different actors at different points in the challenge. After discussing it within their group and briefing members of other groups, they chose whether they would focus on addressing a cause or mitigating a consequence before agreeing on a behaviour that they would work to address.

Step 2: Define the Audience. Participants developed an audience profile for their project. Having explored different audiences involved in their challenge, each group selected one and listed their demographic information, giving greatest focus to the traits that were most relevant to their chosen behaviour. Then they expanded their understanding of this audience by compiling a list of interests, influencers, experiences, social norms and beliefs that their audience may hold about the issue and their role within it.

Step 3: Set the Strategy. In the third session, the groups established their strategy, setting a goal and SMART objectives that could move their audience to reflect on the challenge and mobilise them to drive change.

Step 4: Brainstorm (Creative) Outputs. Outputs are the outward-facing components of a project, including the activities and content developed for an audience. Using any medium of their choice, the groups brainstormed creative outputs that would enable them to reach their objectives. They were mindful to keep the projects manageable and realistic, considering their own strengths and limitations as practitioners. In addition to working in their own groups, they consulted with other groups to test their ideas and gather input.

Step 5: Theory of Change. A theory of change is a way of describing a project that demonstrates how it will work, why it is effective and what it aims to achieve ⁽¹⁾. In addition to being a useful planning tool, a theory of change,

⁽¹⁾ For more information about evaluating P/CVE programmes and using a theory of change, see, for example, this [RAN paper](#).

or the simpler logic model ⁽²⁾, is a common requirements of many donors, and therefore a useful tool for young practitioners who want to seek funding or contribute to proposal writing. Each group talked through their theory of change and created a logic model that outlined the different elements of their project along with indicators, verification tools, and risks and assumptions. Despite their different topics, the groups started out the workshop with very similar approaches, having identified overlapping causes, contributing factors and consequences. By the end, all five groups had clear, targeted and unique project plans that offered a viable approach to addressing their given challenge.

Topics and outcomes – Strategic project planning in P/CVE

The meeting was oriented around five topics that are critical to P/CVE in Europe: discrimination, political polarisation, online hate speech, disinformation, and conspiracy narratives. Each participant chose a theme that related most to their own interest and field of study/work. This focused the participants' learning around something practical, keeping it grounded in applicable lessons they could apply to their own work and allowing them to exchange experiences from their own national contexts in a structured and productive way. Each group was tasked with planning a small-scale initiative that could help address their challenge. Despite the short time frame and working with people they had never met, every team came up with a unique, creative and detailed project plan. The five plans are outlined below.

Topic 1: Discrimination is unjust treatment based on a personal characteristic. Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibits: "Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation" ⁽³⁾. On a societal scale, discrimination can be systemic, embedded in institutions and organisations in a way that restricts certain persons' access and representation. But as an experience, it can also be personal, manifesting in a person's daily interactions with others. Crucially for P/CVE, whether it is large-scale or individual, conscious or unconscious, discrimination damages a community and empowers extremist ideologies by fuelling grievances and vulnerabilities, normalising hate and fracturing social cohesion.

Project idea: Supporting victims of discrimination

This project would work to address the critical connection point between discrimination and extremism by supporting its victims who may be more vulnerable to extremism as a result. Working with young boys, aged 14-16, the project would create a safe space in the form of a community centre or gym where boys could enrol in different activities and connect with mentors to discuss their experiences in a relaxed environment and identify healthy coping mechanisms. The group's hope is that, in addition to the positive effect it could have on the boys' mental health, the community centre could act as an anchoring point – a place where they could belong and feel connected to their community to counteract the feelings of alienation and othering that comes with discrimination.

Topic 2: Political polarisation is the divergence of political attitudes and beliefs into ideological extremes. Political polarisation is a threat to democracy as it amplifies extreme, often minority opinions, while overshadowing moderate positions. This can result in a gap between politics and the society it is meant to represent ⁽⁴⁾. Polarisation does not always result in fringe "extremist" parties, nor is it intrinsically linked to radicalisation. However, it can enhance vulnerability to radicalisation and is a growing concern within P/CVE as polarised positions are becoming increasingly mainstream. Polarisation feeds on "us vs them" narratives that exaggerate the differences between groups and encourage intolerance and segregation. Furthermore, it propagates black and white thinking that restricts compromise.

⁽²⁾ Mayne, J. (2015). Useful theory of change models. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 30(2), 119-142. <https://cic-ucc.algarey.ca/index.php/cjpe/article/view/31062>

⁽³⁾ See the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#).

⁽⁴⁾ Oosterwaal, A., & Torenvlied, R. (2010). Politics divided from society? Three explanations for trends in societal and political polarisation in the Netherlands. *West European Politics*, 33(2), 258-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380903538880>

Project idea: Supporting parents to educate their children about polarisation

This project, that the youth called Debateable, would encourage early forms of educational prevention by empowering parents to have constructive conversations with their high school-aged children. By working with the schools, the project would conduct a needs assessment to then develop resources — including card games that provoke different conversations and debates — and training for parents and teachers, as well as an online hub offering additional resources and ongoing support, including counselling. The group hopes that by helping parents navigate difficult conversations and establish a rapport with their children, they can build young people’s resilience

Topic 3: Online hate speech: EU law defines online hate speech as “the public incitement to violence or hatred on the basis of certain characteristics, including race, colour, religion, descent and national or ethnic origin.” Most Member States have also extended this law to include “sexual orientation, gender identity and disability” (5). Hate speech is a long-standing threat to democracy and human rights, but the increasing use of online spaces has changed the nature and extent of the challenge. Policymakers and the private sector have struggled to navigate the space between free speech and hate speech, while promoting counter-narratives and empowering users to address hate speech socially where infractions fail to violate laws or the community standards of individual platforms.

Project idea: Reducing violent far-right hate speech in Sweden

This project, that the group named Sons of Valhalla, would aim to reduce incidents of far-right hate speech in Sweden through online counter-narratives aimed at teenage boys who are consuming right-wing content. The project would maintain a presence on YouTube, TikTok, Twitch and 4Chan to build legitimacy across platforms and build a dedicated group of followers. It would share content that mirrors the look and feel of extremist content and speaks to their audience’s interests to draw in viewers and subtly supplant problematic messages with those that are more inclusive.

Topic 4: Disinformation: The European Commission defines disinformation as “the creation, presentation and dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information for the purposes of economic gain or intentionally deceiving the public” (6). In addition to outright falsehoods, this includes biased and sensationalised content, satire and even opinion pieces if they are not presented as such. Disinformation is curated by a range of actors and spread for a variety of purposes, but all with the *explicit intent* to mislead. While disinformation is created maliciously, it isn’t always shared with ill intent. Misinformation is false or misleading content that is shared unintentionally by those who believe it is true. Regardless of intent, disinformation has serious consequences. It is a key theme in P/CVE as it is an important tool for extremists and exacerbates the other issues listed here.

(5) Jourova, V. (2016). *Code of Conduct – Illegal online hate speech. Questions and answers*. European Commission, Directorate General for Justice and Consumers. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/code_of_conduct_hate_speech_en.pdf (p. 1)

(6) European Court of Auditors. (2020). *EU action plan against disinformation*. European Union. https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/ap20_04/ap_disinformation_en.pdf (p. 6)

Project idea: Reducing disinformation on Twitter

This project would work to decrease the amount of disinformation on Twitter by mobilising Twitter users (or online bystanders) to spot and flag such content when they see it. Operating on the assumption that most Twitter users do not use the platform maliciously and are interested in finding and sharing reliable information, this project would seek to mobilise that majority to help protect it. Using entertaining content spanning a range of topics, the project would raise awareness about disinformation and enhance people's capacity to spot it. One example is by buying ads on Twitter where reviewers briefly explain how easy it is to report disinformation online. It would also stress the importance and effectiveness of flagging content to encourage users to take responsibility in managing this common space.

Topic 5: Conspiracy narratives are explanatory narratives that subvert official information and explain events as the result of interference from secret cabals of powerful people who exercise power from the shadows. Conspiracy narratives are rampant globally and spring up around many major events and developments. They span the ideological spectrum and are widely held, reflecting our own insecurities and biases, and reinforcing our understanding of the world and our place in it. While not all conspiracy narratives are rooted in extremism, they are an intrinsic part of extremist ideologies and recruitment. They create a black and white world view in which one group benefits at the expense of others. In assigning blame, they pit groups against each other, fostering societal divisions and exacerbating distrust and intolerance. To insulate themselves from rebuke, followers of a conspiracy will silence dissenting voices by accusing them of being part of the conspiracy⁽⁷⁾.

Project idea: Mobilising former believers

This project would take a train-the-trainer approach to harness a credible messenger who can engage with people who ascribe to conspiracy theories. It would recruit a small number of former believers — people who had at one point been strong believers in a conspiracy narrative and who oriented some part of their life around that belief. Working closely with these former believers, the project would conduct research to better understand what makes middle-aged people in France vulnerable to believing these narratives, and then collaboratively develop a platform and a suite of resources targeted at these believers. The online platform would offer a safe space for discussion about conspiracy narratives where the formers could join conversations and encourage reflection.

Further recommendations for empowering young people in P/CVE

Strategic project planning training is one method to empower and engage youth in P/CVE, but there are many ways to engage with young people and empower them as actors in P/CVE. Below some general key points to keep in mind when doing so and to ensure the best possible outcome when working with young people in P/CVE.

- **Consult with youth:** Find out what young people want and need before designing a programme or policy for their benefit. This goes for safeguarding and capacity building initiatives. RAN Practitioners is in constant communication with the RAN YOUNG members to understand what their needs are and what they would like to get out of the programme. In this way, RAN Practitioners has developed the programme in collaboration with young practitioners, ensuring they have a sense of ownership resulting in high retention rates and meaningful contributions.

⁽⁷⁾ Farinelli, F. (2021). *Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE*. Radicalisation Awareness Network. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_conspiracy_theories_and_right-wing_2021_en.pdf

- **Take a tailored, targeted approach:** Young people have vastly different experiences across contexts and within them. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all programme or policy. To have the greatest impact, take a focused approach catering to groups of young people who have similar needs, desires and barriers so a project can be tailored to them effectively. RAN YOUNG works specifically with young professionals who have similar levels of experience and aspiration, meaning they can participate meaningfully in a given programme and form substantial professional relationships across their countries.
- **Get creative, and in turn encourage creativity:** There are a lot of great models for training and working with young people, but that should not be the end of innovation. This is especially important when working with young people who are experienced and may have been part of empowerment programmes in the past, or for those who are wary of being targeted by safeguarding projects. Find new ways to present information or encourage them to apply that information in new ways so you can keep them engaged and keep them growing professionally and personally. This training, adapted from the Strong Cities Network's Youth Innovation Lab model, is an example of a practice-driven take on traditional workshops designed specifically for practitioners that engaged participants through its activities as well as its novelty.
- **Be inclusive!** If it fits your strategy, think outside the box and find ways to engage young people who have not had the opportunity to participate in P/CVE training before, but who are interested to contribute. Just remember that inclusivity goes beyond recruitment. Consider how a workshop or programme can be structured to make it more appealing to youth who are not pursuing a career in P/CVE but instead want to help support peace in their community.
- **Give them something:** This could be practical skills, tangible takeaways that they build upon later or more substantial support like funding. Theoretical understanding is important, but be mindful to keep training grounded in real-world application and useable skills. Whatever the offering is, make sure it is something that sticks with them well after the programme has ended, so it acts more like a seed that grows into something new than a fully formed plant.

Potential topics for follow-up

The project plans created by the RAN YOUNG participants during this meeting could give direction and inspiration for future RAN Practitioners topics. For example, the project ideas provide insights in the groups/audiences that are important to engage in P/CVE from a youth perspective, such as involvement of parents, gym centres or former believers in conspiracy narratives.

Further reading

- [RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMA+\)](#)
- [Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#)
- [RAN Activities on Youth Work and Education](#)
- [Youth Participation in P/CVE for Local Authorities](#)
- [Galvanising youth in combatting online disinformation](#)
- [Empowering young people to successfully participate in P/CVE](#)
- [Youth Review Panel 2022](#) and [Youth Review Panel 2020](#)