

05/12/2021

## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Practitioners small-scale expert workshop**11 November 2021, online*

# Involving formers in exit work

## Key outcomes

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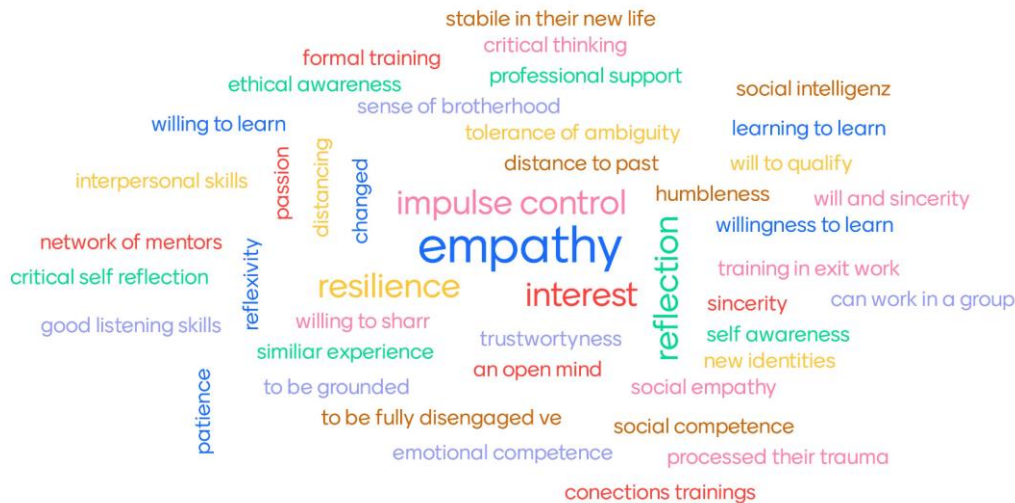
Exit work is a crucial element of strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Former radicalised offenders who have successfully distanced themselves from violent extremism can play an important role in the deradicalisation, rehabilitation and societal reintegration of those seeking to exit extremist groups. For the purpose of exploring the benefits as well as the potential pitfalls of including formers in exit work, RAN Practitioners held a small-scale expert workshop on 11 November 2021, gathering exit and probation workers, researchers and former extremists using their experience in a professional capacity, to compare and exchange practical experiences with engaging formers as colleagues in exit work. Of the 15 practitioner experts who joined the meeting, half identified themselves as former extremists, mostly with a background in violent right-wing extremism, offering their personal experience as well as insights from their work with other formers. Experiences were shared as to selection procedures and training and what skills formers will need to acquire in order to tap into their great potential to be able to engage with members of their former peer group in an authentic and empathetic manner. Some of the key takeaways were:

- When we discuss how to engage former extremists in exit work, we must first define the term *former* as well as **differentiate the scope of work** for them to engage in. While formers might be able to engage in public outreach for an exit organisation without much preparation, working in a disengagement context will require specific training.
- There is **no agreed definition of what the term former means**. It can include anyone from individuals who just recently disengaged, to individuals who disengaged decades ago and have been working professionally for a long time.
- The intentions behind formers wanting to professionalise should be taken into consideration when seeking to involve them in exit work. Some former extremists might be looking for an opportunity to inflate their own ego as opposed to truly helping others.
- When seeking to determine a point in time from which onwards a former extremist is sufficiently disengaged to be engaged in exit work, it can be helpful to think of **disengagement from extremism as a non-linear process**, as opposed to a final destination. In considering more closely what the steps of this process look like, we can determine from what point onwards in their own disengagement process someone will be able to help others.

## Highlights of the discussion

- The discussion started out identifying two aspects of the topic that required further differentiation:
  - o Firstly, to specify the scope and capacity in which a former will engage professionally in exit work, as there are different roles to take on. These include preventive ones, such as giving inspirational speeches or engaging in motivational conversations with the general public, and ones that require more specialised training, such as functioning as a mentor for those seeking to exit or assisting in family support.
  - o Secondly, to determine *when* a former can become engaged professionally. How can we assess at what point someone is sufficiently disengaged from ideology and capable of helping others without jeopardising their own disengagement? Can we identify tangible indicators?
- Concerning this latter point, the group discussed that **disengagement is best understood as a non-linear process** as opposed to a final destination. It can therefore be helpful to determine what the steps of this process look like (forthcoming research on this process was presented during the meeting) and from what point onwards in their own disengagement process someone will be able to help others. In any case, the starting point must be the former's expressed interest in wanting to become active in that way.
- While there is no clear-cut list of indicators to cross-check in order to unambiguously determine a former's suitability to engage with others in exit work, the following indications emerged from the discussion:
  - o Willingness to use one's own experiences in a constructive way and engage in supporting others.
  - o Exhibiting capacity to reflect on one's previous belief system.
  - o Taking accountability for one's actions.
  - o Ability to work constructively in a group/team.
  - o Exhibiting no difficulties acknowledging authority.
  - o Solid footing in mainstream society, including a social network outside of their former peer group, and housing and employment.
- In this context, it should be considered that the values someone held as an extremist (for example, community, duty, courage, freedom, integrity, loyalty, respect, strength, etc.), which might have been the reason that made them engage in the first place, are likely to still be there after disengagement.
- Other professionalised formers can be well suited to determine someone's level of disengagement and stability thereof, as they can draw from their own experience when sounding out the potential weaknesses of the cognitive, behavioural and social disengagement from extremism.
- The group discussed that it will be important for the former professionalising to at some point start identifying as something beyond a former extremist. On a similar note, referring to a former, for example, as *someone who has left a specific group*, puts the emphasis more on the action of leaving as opposed to the fixed identity of former. Discussions about this point also included a more general debate about favouring self-description over external ascriptions.
- Drawing on terminology from the field of cults, another discussion concerned the consideration of referring to someone as a survivor, as opposed to a former, as there might be a similar sentiment of having been able to escape an extremist group. It became clear however that while empathy is a crucial element in the disengagement process, it could be perceived as inconsiderate towards victims and survivors of terrorism to reframe formers as survivors.

## What to look for in a former seeking to professionalise



**Graph 1** depicts answers to the question: *What is the most important skill to have in a former who wants to professionalise?*

- It can be difficult to assess what makes a former suitable for involvement in professional exit work from firm criteria only. Often this has to be tested in practice and is dependent on a range of factors such as the personal abilities of the former, the relation and interpersonal connection between the former and the client, and the setting of the work.
- **Empathy, compassion and authenticity** might be the biggest advantages of engaging formers in exit work, as opposed to regular exit workers. These factors can help avoid judgment, condescension and fear more easily than their colleagues from social work and mental health.
- At the same time, there are also some pitfalls to consider:
  - o What is the former's motivation for engaging in exit work (this can also change over time)? Do they want to use their own experience to support others or do they want to be in the spotlight?
  - o In some cases, formers have gone straight from being high-profile members of an extremist group to being a high-profile former, sometimes even marketing their own exit story.
  - o If someone had a high-ranking position in an extremist group, they might be fuelled by narcissism to engage in exit work. Formers wanting to engage in exit work for narcissistic/egocentric reasons is a red flag.
  - o There is a particular duty of care towards formers engaging in exit work from the teams and institutions engaging them: How are they prepared to manage the proximity of their daily work to their own lived-through experiences?

## What do formers need in terms of skills and care?

### Skills

- The **principle of non-violence** was highlighted as the smallest common denominator and prerequisite to begin the process of engaging a former extremist as a professional team member in exit work.
- **Standards of social work principles** and practices, including trust building (considering that the work will likely deal with strong emotions such as anger, shame and fear), confidentiality and secrecy, and cooperation with other stakeholders must be acquired.
- **Basic pedagogical knowledge** and **communication skills** are crucial in order to engage with clients and better understand the process of teaching and learning.
- **Knowledge about radicalisation and (violent) extremism** in a general sense, as well as about the specificities of the extremist ideology one previously subscribed to. This may also include information on social psychology.
- **Ability to reflect their own personal story** with the goal of growth and development as well as to use one's experiences professionally as a mentor and role model. Along the process of professionalising, formers should learn to explain and remind themselves of why they wanted to disengage in the first place.

### Care

- **Therapy** can be a useful tool for healing one's own wounds and facilitating the necessary growth to be equipped to support others (e.g. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy).
- Learning about **self-care** and meeting one's own needs.
- Engaging in a support group (self-help), meeting other formers in similar capacities and receiving supervision can be helpful.
- It is essential to be mindful of the **risk of re-traumatisation** when encountering stories and experiences similar to one's own lived experiences. Teams and institutions engaging formers as professional exit workers have a **duty of care** towards their prospective colleague in this regard.
- Likewise, different aspects of gaining **visibility as a former** should be taken into consideration. Public perception as well as possible reactions from their former peer group, relatives, friends and acquaintances can be negative and formers should be prepared accordingly.

## Recommendations

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- Make sure to consider the individual needs of the former.
- Think of disengagement as a long-term and non-linear process.
- Consider a vetting process for the selection of formers to engage in exit work that includes other formers.
- The work of involving formers in exit work is best done in a triangular setting, where the former in training works in tandem with another professional together with the client/beneficiary of the programme. This ensures the former will be in a professional setting of learning-by-doing, gives an opportunity for

quality management, and provides multiple perspectives of the client's situation, risks and needs from both the former in training and the professional. Hence, the pair formation offers both increased understanding and perspectives of the case, growth for the former and guidance for the professional.

- Offer supervision, a method aimed at facilitating the reflection of one's own actions in the work context, safeguarding the quality of professional work and thus on training, and therefore enabling continuous education for everyone involved.
- Think about training formers not only with regard to engaging with clients, but also on how to react to possible criticism from media on their background and how they can protect themselves and their family members from possible attacks.

## Relevant practices

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1. The [Swedish method of working with formers in exit work](#) is a long-standing practice providing individualised support to those wanting to leave white power/neo-Nazi environments.
2. The [Evolve Program](#) is an interdisciplinary intervention programme providing support to individuals involved in hate or extremism, as well as to their friends and families.
3. [Stronger After](#) is a free and accessible online support programme for persons harmed in coercive groups and relationships.
4. [Fighters for Peace](#) is an organisation uniting former combatants of the Lebanese Civil War.

## Follow-up

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The meeting could be followed up with a meeting on the concrete steps for civil society organisations to take when taking in formers as staff members. These include what this requires in terms of structures and preparations, how to support them (including a step-by-step process of equipping formers for exit work), how to set up peer/mentorship support for the new staff, etc. Building on forthcoming research presented during the meeting that provided insights on disengagement from extremism, it would be valuable to follow up on this research within RAN once it has been published.

## Further reading

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Clubb, G. (2016). The role of former combatants in preventing youth involvement in terrorism in Northern Ireland: A framework for assessing former Islamic State combatants. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39(9), 842-861. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1144917>

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Scrivens, R., Windisch, S., & Simi, P. (2020, November 16). *Former extremists play a key role in combating extremism*. Rantt Media. <https://rantt.com/how-to-deradicalize-extremists>

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