

20/12/2020

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL – Local strategy in times of COVID-19

30 November & 1 December 2020, Digital meeting

Local P/CVE strategy in times of COVID-19

Key outcomes

The exploratory meeting of the RAN Local Authorities Working Group (LOCAL) on “Local P/CVE strategy in times of COVID-19” took place in a digital setting on 30 November and 1 December 2020. Its aim was to explore the effects and changes that local coordinators and practitioners have encountered in their local multi-agency approach to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and in the detection of early signs of radicalisation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the meeting focused on exchanging innovative ways that practitioners and local coordinators have dealt with the restrictions following the pandemic. This conclusion paper captures those outcomes and provides some tips and recommendations for other local coordinators to continue their local multi-agency cooperation and P/CVE interventions despite the COVID-19 restrictions they face. The conclusion paper is meant for local P/CVE coordinators as well as first-line practitioners working with people vulnerable to radicalisation.

The key outcomes of the meeting are:

- Local coordinators find it difficult to continue the multi-agency cooperation structures, as these usually took place offline. Finding new ways of continued online cooperation with the stakeholders involved requires mutual trust and cooperation from all actors involved.
- The detection of early signs of radicalisation has become more challenging, with, for example, schools and youth centres closed. Local coordinators should reach out proactively to first-line practitioners and support them in finding new ways to reach out to people vulnerable to radicalisation, for example through actively promoting good or inspiring practices or by providing a webinar with an update of signs and trends on the local level (e.g. the spreading of certain conspiracy narratives).
- Use this time to experiment and innovate: find out which new approaches work and which do not, and why. These findings can be used to reiterate the local P/CVE strategy — also for the long term.

Highlights of the discussion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures taken by governments, varying from a few restrictive measures to strict lockdowns, have greatly impacted multi-agency cooperation in P/CVE on the local level and the amount of contact that first-line practitioners could have with people vulnerable to radicalisation. In addition, some local P/CVE coordinators and practitioners have had or are dealing with a reallocation of resources, in both time and budget, making it difficult sometimes to keep a focus on prevention and countering of violent extremism. The most common challenges discussed by the local coordinators present are the following.

- **Staying in touch with first-line practitioners (multi-agency collaboration)**

Multi-agency networks usually gather in face-to-face meetings, facilitating trust between the different partners involved. In many European cities, these meetings could not continue in the offline setting due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Some cities have quickly found ways to create a new digital infrastructure to continue this cooperation with the partners, including ways of dealing safely with the sensitive data shared in the online setting, whereas other cities have had no such meetings since March 2020.

- **Staying in touch with people vulnerable to radicalisation and detecting early signs of radicalisation**

First-line practitioners are the eyes and ears on the local level. With many (social) facilities like schools and youth centres closed, it is difficult for them to remain in contact with people vulnerable to radicalisation and detect (early) signs of radicalisation. This difficulty is increased because most first-line practitioners are not used to operating online, where they can still reach their target audience. Practitioners are also receiving signs of increased social isolation.

- **Dealing with the digital environment**

Prevention work has so far greatly relied on offline, face-to-face contact with the target audience. Practitioners are skilled in these offline contacts, but they feel and are often still unequipped in doing their P/CVE work online. However, due to the closing of many facilities, people and especially youth have been spending their days online, thus increasing the urgency for practitioners to strengthen their online skills.

- **Increasing tensions and polarisation in society (spreading of conspiracy narratives related to COVID-19, anti-vaxxers movement)**

The increase in online activity has also seen an increase of conspiracy narratives being spread through, amongst others, social media channels. Following these online activities, some local coordinators are worried about increased tensions and polarisation in society, leading to protests and demonstrations. Several RAN papers have been published on (COVID-19-related) conspiracy narratives, including some tips on how first-line practitioners can deal with individuals holding such beliefs ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ See, for example, the [short handbook on COVID-19 narratives that polarise](#) focusing on teachers and youth workers, or the conclusion paper '[Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures](#)'.

Recommendations



During the meeting, participants exchanged (practical) tips to detect early signs of radicalisation and to continue the multi-agency cooperation as well as tools that can facilitate their work in the online setting.

What is needed to continue the multi-agency approach in P/CVE?



Jointly finding new ways of alternative communication channels, both for discussing cases with the partners involved in the local multi-agency approach and as an outreach from the local authority to practitioners and the wider audience (such as webinars):

- Mutual trust and cooperation from and between the multi-agency network partners are needed to adapt to the new and changing circumstances.
- The pandemic can be seen as a test of pre-existing networks: the ones with a good connection to local authorities were kept, others were lost.

A combination of an offline and online approach:

- Develop digital ways of working with the usual multi-agency tools, such as the [Hexagon tool](#)(2).
- Expend the online presence from local authorities and first-line practitioners, which also continues after the pandemic.

Facilitate a faster connection between the local government and practitioners in the field.

As first-line practitioners are confronted with ever-changing restrictions related to COVID-19, there is a need for a dedicated contact point, someone who can act as coordinator. This person can keep an overview of the changing governmental rules and their implications for first-line practitioners involved in P/CVE, as well as someone who has an overview of which prevention activities are continued by practitioners and in what way.

As a local P/CVE coordinator, it is worthwhile to **invest in the relationship with first-line practitioners**. Where possible, meet them face to face to stay in contact or to provide trainings in dealing with the online environment.

Refocus for the long term: how does the pandemic affect the way P/CVE is conceived and implemented on the local level? This concerns merging the online and offline worlds, which might lead to redefining the skill set of practitioners.

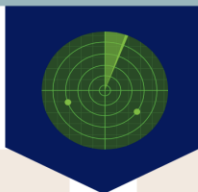


Tip 1

There are plenty of **collaboration platforms and tools** available. Some tools facilitate working collaboratively on the same document online and can be a way to gather input from all stakeholders. Depending on the collaboration platform used, these can be built-in tools like Whiteboard (for Webex, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom) or external tools, such as [Miro](#).

How to stimulate the detection of early signs of radicalisation during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As a local authority, **keep reaching out proactively to the first-line practitioners to support them:**



Reach out to practitioners and other stakeholders regarding the referral process in these times: Let them know where they can send worrying signals, who they can contact.

Include the consequences of COVID-19 in training or communication outlets to practitioners.

Provide an update of signs and trends to the practitioners in your city

For example through organising webinars that focus on the sources of hate speech or conspiracy narratives being spread, and provide training for first-line practitioners to help them understand the risks this causes and how they can tackle these issues.

Be aware that some (ethnic) minorities are not present online and could be more difficult to reach out to digitally.

Actively promote good practices and tools to connect with people vulnerable to radicalisation (youngsters in particular) through online gaming platforms and online (youth) work (3).

Tip 2

Invest in IT infrastructure: practitioners and local coordinators need to have access to a basic IT infrastructure that allows them to have online (video) calls and meet in a safe, digital environment.



How to reach people vulnerable to radicalisation during the COVID-19 pandemic

To the extent possible, **adapt P/CVE work to the digital environment:** organise meetings with the stakeholders in your network online so that cases continue to be discussed.



An example of "sidewalk talks" was given during the meeting,

where practitioners meet with youngsters or others and have a conversation outside by taking a walk. Of course, the matter being discussed and the environment should allow this, but where possible it might create opportunities to discuss, for example, the current home situation of a child.



Tip 3

Experiment! This is a time for innovation: try new things and find out what works, what doesn't and why. These findings can be used to reiterate the local P/CVE strategy not only in the short term but also in the long term.

[2] The Hexagon tool is a pedagogical case assessment tool for analysing case studies of radicalisation leading to violence that can be used in multi-agency contexts, developed by the Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) and the Canada Centre. See more information in the RAN papers of the study visit to Strasbourg and Canada.

[3] See for example the practice of 'WebWalkers' below.

Relevant practices

1. The city of Mechelen invested in transforming offline outreach to the online environment. They established a “passive” online presence, using IT solutions to find out what is going on in Mechelen online regarding radicalisation and polarisation (where they stumbled on legal issues, which are being looked into). And, they established an “active” online presence, reaching out to vulnerable youngsters in the online space. In Mechelen, they organised Zoom meetings with experts on 5G networks and medical experts on COVID-19 to debunk conspiracy narratives, and a Twitch tournament aimed at connecting with youngsters vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism. In this tournament, professionals tried to get youngsters to actively engage in discussions while playing the game at the same time (reflecting the “normal” way that youngsters communicate nowadays). Not many youngsters participated, but the city of Mechelen will continue to keep experimenting with this kind of online presence as they are convinced that having a combined (online/offline) approach in P/CVE is necessary.
2. Tools like the French [‘Hate Mapper’ \(Institute for Strategic Dialogue\)](#) allow to identify hateful, polarising and divisive discourse and geolocate online posts to state, county or city level. This provides granular insights to local practitioners, enabling them to target their responses.
3. [‘WebWalkers’, or ‘Promeneurs du Net’ \(France\)](#): The Promeneurs du Net programme provides an educational internet presence for young people by establishing youth workers on popular online social platforms and offering support where needed. By detecting early signs of radicalised views, this approach also advances prevention of radicalisation and/or violent extremism amongst young people. Promeneurs du Net establishes relationships with teens by befriending them on various online social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.). They make use of instant messaging, email or other contact/communication tools specific to the social network concerned (wall comments, publications, etc.).

Follow-up

Besides the fact that local coordinators can apply the suggestions made to their day-to-day work, a possible follow-up could also be to organise a future RAN meeting on “How to increase your online presence” for local authorities, building on the work done by the city of Mechelen.

Further reading

Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2019). [Mapping hate in France: A panoramic view of online discourse](#).

For more information on the Hexagon tool, please see: RAN Study Visit (2019), [‘Strasbourg’s P/CVE approach and its multi-agency partners’](#), and RAN Study Visit (2020), [‘Digital Study Visit to Canada’](#).

For more information on digital youthwork in a P/CVE setting, see: Jansen, A., Verdegaal, M., & Wouterse, L. (2020). [How to do digital youthwork in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements](#). Radicalisation Awareness Network, 19 March.

For more information about (COVID-19–related) conspiracy narratives and potential countermeasures, see the following RAN publications:

Ritzmann, A. (2020). [Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures](#), Conclusion Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 28 September.

Wansink, B., & Timmer, J. (2020). [Short Handbook. COVID-19 narratives that polarise](#), Conclusion Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network. (for teachers and youth workers)