

28/11/2022

## CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN FC&S Working Group meeting

4-5 October 2022, Stockholm, Sweden

# Preventing Polarisation on a Local Level: Bringing Communities Together

## Key outcomes

The Families, Communities and Social Care (FC&S) Working Group convened a meeting on 4 and 5 October in which participants: 1) explored polarising topics across the EU and the challenges in addressing them; 2) gathered community dialogue initiatives either with a preventive or restorative function to facilitate encounters on a local level, build trust and increase understanding among different individuals in and between communities and prevent polarisation and radicalisation; and 3) formulated lessons learned and recommendations on how to put a dialogue into practice. Participants at this meeting were mainly coordinators and facilitators of dialogue projects working for NGOs and local authorities. The key outcomes of this meeting are:

- Practitioners see a **broad range of developments and topics that cause polarisation** between individuals or between/within communities on a local level. Examples range from the unequal treatment of different groups of refugees, the LGBTQIA+ community and religious groups, to recent key developments such as the housing crisis, the energy crisis and inflation. These lead to a sharper opposition of opinions, a feeling of inequality or a lack of trust in the government.
- **Community dialogue can serve as an instrument to improve social cohesion, find common ground and foster mutual understanding.** Practitioners during this meeting exchanged on challenges related to the coordination and facilitation of such dialogue projects. Examples of discussed questions are how to get the right people involved, how to create a common goal, and how to facilitate a dialogue and making sure it is not counterproductive.
- Some key recommendations before starting the dialogue: **mapping** the situation in your community, **setting up the agenda** together with the communities you work with, and **finding participants** by creating an elaborate network in the communities. Some recommendations during the dialogue: **creating a safe and neutral space**, setting **ground rules**, being **open and honest** as a facilitator, and being **in service of the group**.

This paper outlines the highlights of this meeting, the current developments related to polarisation that practitioners identify within their context at the moment, the challenges practitioners face when it comes to setting up, coordinating and facilitating community dialogue, and recommendations to overcome some of these challenges. Lastly, the paper has included the inspiring practices that were discussed during the meeting.

## Highlights of the discussion

### Polarising trends

Polarisation is a “process where groups in society become adversaries. When there is a sharp psychological division between ‘us and them’. Alienation and hostilities are growing, resulting in a political climate where prejudices, hate speech and even hate crime flourish”<sup>(1)</sup>. As finding ways to counter ‘us vs them’ thinking in society becomes more and more important<sup>(2)</sup>, participants at this meeting discussed the current polarising tendencies that can be observed within the communities that they work in/with. The topics varied from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent treatment of refugees in relation to refugees from other countries, to the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing distrust in governments, the rise of populism, institutional racism, tension between religious and LGBTQIA+ communities, the housing crisis and the energy crisis. Often, these topics relate to each other and in the end go hand in hand with feelings of inequality or uncertainty. Although polarisation and inequalities are neither necessary nor sufficient to fuel a radicalisation process of an individual directly, it can play a role in the broader breeding ground for radicalisation<sup>(3)</sup>. Taking the above polarising trends into account, this meeting has looked into community dialogue as an instrument to improve social cohesion, find common ground, challenge prejudice, reduce fear of the ‘other’ and foster mutual understanding.

### Setting up, coordinating and facilitating a dialogue

Participants at this meeting discussed how community dialogue can best be organised in practice. This can be categorised in challenges and recommendations before, during and after dialogue has taken place.

#### BEFORE

**Preparation – mapping, goals and agenda:** Polarisation can be seen as a complex process that can manifest in different forms and stages. Whereas in early stages only underlying ‘risk factors’ for polarisation may be present, other situations may also occur – for example in which groups/communities feel alienated from each other, in which misunderstandings are visible, or where it is possible to distinguish a very clear ‘us vs them’ division (including visible irritations, negative image of the ‘other’) and people actively avoiding each other. This may even escalate towards public incidents or violence<sup>(4)</sup>. For practitioners organising dialogue initiatives, it is important to first map the situation on the local level in order to decide on the goals of the initiative and to consider if, when and how to approach the more radical sides, and when an approach that focuses on ‘the middle’ is more suitable.

#### Recommendations

- **Map the situation** by reaching out to the communities: what are their grievances, concerns and needs?
- **Set the goals and agenda of the dialogue with all relevant stakeholders**, such as the local authority and the communities themselves. Keep in mind that mediated dialogue does not aim to change people’s attitudes but to bring individuals or groups together in order to facilitate the development of new reference points (which may exist alongside or replace existing ones) and forge change through broadening perspectives and building relationships. Aims can vary: finding a solution for a certain topic, increasing the level of trust, a feeling of attachment or inclusion, encouraging democratic participation, creating a step towards reconciliation — but the fact that the dialogue is taking place between two polarising groups can be a goal in itself as well.
- **Decide who to involve** and consider if, when and how to approach the individuals with more extreme opinions, and when an approach that focuses on ‘the middle’ (the people with a more moderate opinion) is more suitable.

<sup>(1)</sup> RAN Issue paper (2016). [Tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society](#) (p. 3).

<sup>(2)</sup> RAN FC&S (2020). [Preventing Polarisation and Building Resilience by Creating a Shared Identity](#)

<sup>(3)</sup> Franc, R., & Pavlović, T. (2021). Inequality and radicalisation - Systematic review of quantitative studies. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1974845>

<sup>(4)</sup> See also: <https://www.kis.nl/publicatie/theorieen-en-aanpakken-van-polarisatie>

- During peace time, there is a bigger chance that even extreme opinions are willing to engage in a dialogue. This can be a time for reconciliation. Be aware that there is never a time of total consent or peace time: there is always tension, but the level differs.
- Think thoroughly before engaging 'the middle' in this and take into account that they might be pushed to pick a side. Under 'Inspiring practices', please find more information about different approaches.
- Think carefully about **the language you are using to frame the dialogue**: do not label extremes as extremes and/or change the narrative of 'polarisation' in order to see the diversity in the extreme groups.

**Getting the right people involved:** A challenge that practitioners face is getting the right people involved in a dialogue. Difficult questions are, for example, who should be invited to participate in the dialogue and who should not, how to ensure a representative and diverse group, and what the role of local authorities and community leaders is. Especially with these last stakeholders, there is a risk of them speaking/leaving no room for the rest of the group, if they have a strong opinion on the topic discussed.

#### Recommendations

- **Create a broad network** within the communities you want to work with, also in times of absence of problems, or work together with organisations that have such a network in place. Openly communicate about your goals.
- **Open communication and transparency** are especially important when you include a governmental organisation, especially since many municipalities face a lack of trust among certain groups. See specific recommendations for local authorities in the paper '[Engaging with Communities](#)'. Building trust is easier when the organising body is fully neutral: there are successful examples of informal and bottom-up intermediaries, such as '[The Unnamed working group](#)' composed of citizens, social workers and NGOs (more information can be found under 'Inspiring practices').
- When selecting participants, it is not simply about putting opposing groups at one table. A criterion when selecting participants is ideally that they are **open to change and committed to the process** without any hidden agenda.

**Making it a long-term project:** Dialogue should be meaningful and sustainable. Projects should not be short-lived, but a long-term ongoing process (not only after polarising events). However, getting funds for the long term in particular can be challenging.

#### Recommendations

- Try to collaborate with **organisations in your local context that already have a broad network** and involve them in the process. This way, more stakeholders can follow up on a dialogue even when the project itself is ending.
- **Be prepared** for the next opportunity. Even when there are no funds, volunteers may be able to work on the project, be it at a slow pace.
- When negotiating with the authorities that could provide funding, dive into how you can best serve both your own interests for the project and **the interests of the funding authorities** over a long term.

## DURING

**Building trust:** Facilitators who have the right competences and knowledge to be able to deal with dialogue between polarised groups are crucial. Creating a safe space and trust within the group and between the group and the facilitator is a 'must', so participants can talk freely.

#### Recommendations

- Choose a **safe and neutral place** as a location and physical environment for the dialogue.
- Don't have a hidden agenda, be **open and honest** about your goals.
- Try to **step into 'their shoes'** and try to understand where someone is coming from, instead of focusing on assumptions.
- Use a **multilateral community approach**: when there seem to be two clearly opposing sides, try to refer to common values in both identities.
- Try to organise **informal moments** for the individuals to connect. It can, for example, be helpful to buy participants lunch.

**The role and skills of the facilitator:** When bringing groups with different opinions together, there is always a risk that the dialogue will be counterproductive when not implemented, structured and facilitated in the right way. Therefore, taking on the right role and having the right skills to facilitate dialogue are crucial for the facilitator. Specific points that can be challenging are, for example, not empowering discriminatory attitudes (by accident), the balance between following a programme and 'going with the flow', being impartial, being sensitive towards the 'other', and dealing with intersectionality and superdiversity.

### Recommendations

- 'Facilitate'. That is, put yourself entirely at the service of the group, be neutral and professional. So, **don't impose your own opinion or vision** and avoid judgements, threats, making fun of people and interruptions.
- Create and communicate **ground rules**. Let the group decide on the rules (for example on confidentiality) or decide on the ground rules yourself and make these clear before starting the dialogue. An example of ground rules can be found below.



Source: Utrecht in Dialogue (more information can be found under 'Inspiring practices')

- Have an **open attitude**: "Don't say 'no', just say 'oh'."
- Make sure all participants have **the chance to speak** and give space for the participants to express their **feelings**.
- The main skill is the **courage to resist the discomfort of a polarised field**. Make sure you are clearly explaining the usefulness of the dialogue and that discomfort may be part of it.
- Be **'multi-partial'**: equal participation is facilitated and equal attention is given to the multiple identities and experiences of all participants. Social power should be equal among all participants and it shouldn't be the case that one group or participant is receiving more attention to the detriment of another.
- Always take into account the **distinction between the person and their vision or opinion**, between the relationship and the content. If the content of what someone says harms others, don't accept it without question. In doing so, you do not do justice to that person or yourself. Accepting everything and letting it pass also comes at the expense of credibility.

- Throughout the dialogue, be aware of the differences between a dialogue and a debate:

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Explaining Listening Looking for the strength in your opponent Making your opponent feel safe Changing opinion is a sign of maturity Inclusive body language <b>Aim: to understand</b>	Convincing Arguing Looking for the weak argument Make your opponent feel insecure Changing opinion is a sign of weakness Confrontative body language <b>Aim: to win</b>

## CLOSING AND FOLLOW-UP

***Making the end of the dialogue a successful beginning:*** If the goal was to get a meaningful dialogue to take place, the project may already be a success. However, practitioners at this meeting noted that a successful dialogue often feels like it is just the beginning of a process and therefore explored how to ensure a follow-up and encourage a long-term process. Of course, the length of the overall process may be determined by several things, such as:

- funding, which may dictate the number of sessions you can facilitate; or
- the process ending naturally (determined in collaboration with the group).

### *Recommendations*

- Be clear** (and reiterate) throughout the process about how and when the process will end: communicate dates and activities clearly.
- (If appropriate) offer the possibility of an **informal 'check in'** after the process has officially ended.
  - Ask yourself: who needs to talk to whom about what and could I facilitate a follow-up encounter or could participants organise this themselves?
- It is possible to plan **activities** (throughout the dialogue) and discussion formats that explicitly address the topic of closing:
  - Direct questioning, such as "What would you do if someone (from your group, community, context) asks, 'Why have you been mixing with those people?'"
  - Guided discussion about 'returning to our communities' or 'our plans for when this process finishes'.
  - Practice: interactive improvisation through 'role play' activities.
- A possible follow-up could be to **capture the journey taken**, for example, where a facilitator describes and recalls the journey, by sharing and showing photos and evidence from activities or where the group is asked to recall the activities.

## Recommendations for (local) authorities

- Organise trainings for municipality staff to **strengthen a culture of dialogue** and raise awareness about its importance. Without dialogue, it is difficult to expect true participation of citizens and dialogue between citizens. Dialogue is especially important in times of an increased lack of trust in national and local authorities by citizens who feel left out, misunderstood, unequally treated and so on.
- Be aware that dialogue initiatives and other participatory processes **cannot always be framed under the umbrella of prevention of radicalisation**, even though their ability to enhance social cohesion could potentially prevent radicalisation or other security risks. It can help to set a goal with a broad focus, instead of a security angle, and have realistic expectations.
- Give practitioners **the space to structure the dialogue process themselves** together with the participants.
- Be aware that the goals to be met should **not be too innovative, unrealistic or ambitious**. Keep in mind that getting individuals or groups with different opinions at one table for a dialogue is already a goal in itself.

## Inspiring practices

This section provides a snapshot of inspiring community dialogue projects and their approaches that were presented during this meeting.

- **Utrecht in Dialogue (NL)** uses the methods of 'appreciative inquiry': the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they are at their best. It examines what works, uses one's experience-based knowledge, values differences between people, connects people in open conversation on an equal basis and maps concrete actions towards a hopeful future.
- The **Foundation House of Peace [Fundacja Dom Pokoju] (PL)** is an organisation based in Wroclaw. They are involved in the long-term process of building dialogue among groups from radical right to radical left wing in the city. Their methods are open thoughts exchange, empathy and non-violent communication.
- The **Expertise-unit Social Stability (ESS) (NL)** of the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment provides municipalities, primary caregivers and various sections of society practical knowledge on societal tensions. The ESS advises on how to put this knowledge into practice and how to involve other parties that are available for cooperation.
- Mapping is a crucial stage before the dialogue initiative even starts. This **Community Resilience Study** research measures and maps community resilience to extremism in Kumanovo, North Macedonia, across neighbourhoods, age, gender and ethnicity. Resilience in this report is measured based on the BRAVE-14 attitudinal scale based on a representative and stratified sample. While this is a study and not a toolkit, the methodology can be applied by local authorities who wish to measure resilience to extremism in the neighbourhoods.
- The **Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue (NO)** builds bridges within and among communities and provides a safe space for dialogue by using the method 'Inclusive Dialogue'. With a facilitator, this method provides a space for sharing without risk of judgements. Their trainings can be found [here](#).
- The **'Talking Our Way Out of Conflict' (TOWOC) dialogue model (UK)** designed initially as a secondary-level countering violent extremism intervention between individuals active in circles considered to be "extreme-right" or "Islamist", has now been developed into a 'mediated dialogue' toolkit that can be used in a wider set of situations of community tension or conflict. More information about the toolkit can be found [here](#).
- **Lecco Restorative City (IT)** aims to engage citizens in conflict and crime management even when not personally affected. Their working group called 'The Unnamed' aims to disseminate and implement restorative values, principles and practices and offers citizens a space for dialogue on criminal justice and social conflicts.
- In the department for Integration and Diversity in the **City of Vienna (AT)**, people are trained in the skill of 'transcultural competence'. It is a crucial skill for dialogue facilitators that includes tolerance of ambiguity, the ability for self-reflection, empathy and flexible communication in a situation-specific manner. See here the City of Vienna's [Toolbox for Integration](#) with a large number of projects.

## Further RAN reading

- RAN Y&E (2021). [Education and Youth Work: Working with Community Figures both Inside and Outside Schools](#)
- RAN FC&S (2020). [Preventing Polarisation and Building Resilience by Creating a Shared Identity](#)
- RAN Issue Paper (2018). [Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities](#)
- RAN Policy & Practice (2018). [Engaging with communities in P/CVE](#)
- RAN LOCAL & YF&C (2018). [Engaging with communities. Collaboration between local authorities and communities in PVE](#)
- RAN YF&C (2017). [Strengthening community resilience to polarisation and radicalisation](#)
- RAN LOCAL (2016). [How to cooperate with religious organisations and communities within the local approach to radicalisation?](#)