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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Thematic event
22 September 2022, Vienna, Austria

Current challenges and solutions related to working with youth on P/CVE

Key outcomes

In the European and international community, youngsters have been and continue to be a target of recruitment and exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups. Youth from all backgrounds may become radicalised , but there are factors that make some more vulnerable to radicalisation than others. Infinite combinations of personal and external factors may contribute to their vulnerability to radicalisation.   As a result, measures to build resilience and foster protective factors need to be included in youth work early on. At the same time, once a young person has become at risk or maybe even radicalised and/or criminal, guiding and accompanying that person within the scope of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) requires a smooth cooperation between a wide range of working fields and professions, along multiple societal structures.

On 22 September 2022, youth professionals from all over the EU gathered in Vienna to discuss the current challenges and solutions related to working with youth on P/CVE. The focus of this meeting was youth and young adults between the age of 12-18 and professionals working with this target audience on all three levels of prevention.

Key lessons learned from the discussions included the following:

- Youth work is often embedded in a non-problem approach, which **enables positive relationships between young people and youth workers**. This can be a key tool when working on positive youth development and prevention. The concept of "open youth work" provides contacts and interventions initiated and led voluntarily by the young people themselves.

- **Providing safe spaces** for young people is an important protective function of youth work, which also includes non-discriminatory and non-stigmatising attitudes and environments. The labelling of the activity or programme is thus highly relevant, as young people are hesitant to voluntarily and actively seek out programmes labelled as "prevention of extremism", let alone deradicalisation. Moreover, practitioners themselves also prefer to work on programmes aimed at the positive development and safeguarding of youth.

- Reflection on **gender equality and the inclusion of gendered perspectives** are fundamental building blocks in any P/CVE initiative and project. NGOs working with young people need to examine their own position to see how, and to what extent, the gender dimensions are visibly incorporated in their programs.

- Professionals working with youth should find common ground and talk about shared values. **Value-based work** and a positive climate in young people's surroundings are key elements when it comes to working with them and asking them to open up about their issues.

- Young people currently experience stress about overarching crises like climate change, economic crisis and war. Unfiltered and often problematic discourses online add to the complexity of these issues and fuel polarisation. **Therefore, integrating online and offline work is an essential approach** when working with young people, especially with digital natives. As a matter of fact, young people can even be digital experts in reporting suspicious or criminal online incidents.

- In order to implement sustainable prevention with a positive social impact, the current project culture in the prevention and youth work landscape must be replaced **by long-term basic structures with reliable funding.**

Introduction and context

Professionals working with youngsters might encounter radicalisation in different stages of the process. Some youngsters are already fully radicalised and even convicted offenders while others are only starting to develop interest for extremist ideologies, or just have several problems in their personal lives, which increase their vulnerability. Practitioners stressed the importance of staying active on all prevention levels, even in times of crisis. In challenging times, policymakers often have the understandable reflex towards security measures. However, this should always be accompanied by primary and secondary prevention measures, which is the basis for resilient citizens. In the opening panel of the RAN thematic event, the following insights and examples from prevention work for youth were shared:

- A panelist from Vienna shared their youth work approach to illustrate the **importance of primary prevention work** and the interaction between all levels. The positive long-term effect of their open youth engagement showed itself during a time of crisis, namely when the city suffered from a terrorist attack in 2020. A number of young adults returned to the youth work organisation with which they had engaged in sports activities during their teenage years, to offer their help and follow up after the attack. This once again showed that a deep connection and good prevention work should be considered a marathon and requires long-term endurance.

- It is important to **invest in day-to-day dialogue and foster the democratic way of living together.** After the terror attacks in Belgium, however, politicians and experts hyper focused on the societal threat and danger of the terrorists. In deep crisis, people tend to concentrate on higher levels of prevention and neglect the base-line, but for schools, the non-problem-oriented approach is the most relevant for sustainable work. Tensions could be detected in classes during the crisis, but using only repressive reactive measures is not a solution. A school in Antwerp implemented activities and programmes working on active citizenship, participation tools, identity issues, resilience, and communication training in order to prevent polarisation and radicalisation. These efforts, however, can only take effect during crises, if they are started and implemented outside of crisis-contexts and become a part of regular life and youth work measures.

- In 2014, the French government installed national helplines to prevent at-risk individuals from departing to Iraq and Syria. A **helpline for concerned family members** offered help from a mental-health team in a clinical setting with the goal of preventing further radicalisation. Building trust and creating strong relationships can influence radicalising individuals in a positive way. However, radicalised youngsters are often not interested in meeting mental health professionals for their own sake. In these cases, an approach that proved efficient was to motivate them to be a supportive person - for their mothers' depression, for example. Building alliances with family members or friends who are close to the teenager, and understanding the unique family and social situation of the concerned teenager is essential. In some cases, the mental health team never even had to mention the radicalisation issue to the teenager and was able to work on some of their underlying issues regardless.

Key questions, recommendations and inspiring practices

How to prevent extremist 'recruitment' of youth across ideologies in a post-lockdown reality?

According to practitioners, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown and restrictive measures had a tremendous effect on the lives of young people which needs to be addressed in P/CVE. Isolation, mental health problems, questions about complex world affairs, and many hours on the internet have made numerous young people especially vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment, and led some of them into the darkest rabbit holes of the internet. Moreover, the lack of face-to-face social contact has sometimes caused a gap in the socialisation of youngsters resulting in a loss of social and communicative skills. According to some practitioners, this has become noticeable in classrooms, where discussions tend to escalate more quickly than before. Practitioners face challenges in peacefully 'resocialising' these young people in a positive way into an often already heavily polarised society.

Recommendations

The following recommendations refer to both formal education and other types of youth work.

- **Positive social environment**
  In an environment characterised by responsive, caring and supportive relationships, young people will experience safety and acceptance, resulting in a sense of belonging. This is a basic principle and prerequisite for primary prevention.

- **Work value-based**
  This involves communicating ethical principles and basic interpersonal values, and embedding these in your everyday work. After all, the social environment determines how young people internalise certain norms, attitudes, and values. These principles cover equality of all people, freedom and integrity of every individual, inviolability of human life, gender equality, solidarity, safeguarding democracy, critical thinking, constructive conflict resolution, and resisting peer pressure. Moreover, it is important for adults to set a good example by communicating and living up to these principles – simply teaching them in an atmosphere that does not live up to those values will often result in the opposite effect.

- **Work needs-oriented**
  A positive educational context is characterised by responsive, caring and supportive relationships between pupils, families and the institutions. Those around the youngster should be attentive to the needs that are communicated and act upon those. This is especially important in the context of P/CVE, as there are often basic unfulfilled needs and grievances supporting radicalisation.

- **Pupils developing positive environment**
  Check with the young people in your organisation how they experience this environment and whether they feel safe and supported to learn and grow here. This co-creation is a continuous process.

THINK-model, Vasa Real School in Stockholm (SE)

To address the harsher on- and offline behaviour of young people, practitioners promoted the THINK-model as very useful. This model aims to make youngsters think about how they behave on- and offline. The premise here is the question "Do I really have to say what I think?", based on five subquestions: "Is what I am about to say (T)rue, (H)elpful, (I)nspiring, (N)ecessary and (K)ind?" If not, they should reconsider their comment. According to the practitioners, applying this model had made students more aware of the social impact of their behaviour.

Which digital or blended tools do practitioners have and still need to work with youth in a post-digital world effectively?

Many practitioners still struggle to deal with the increasing importance of the online world in young people's lives. And yet, the digital world does offer many opportunities for young people, such as interaction with peers if this is challenging in an offline setting (e.g. due to a pandemic or other social issues). At the same time, there are specific problems tied to online interaction which are hard to act upon on the part of practitioners, and sometimes even difficult to notice. This ranges from general polarisation and desensitisation to certain materials via online bullying to criminal or extremist recruitment. The online world affects the offline world in very complex ways and can cause a gap between friends, families and the social environment. In the lives of most young people today, the online world is thoroughly integrated with the offline world, so youth workers and teachers should be digitally skilful to be connected to the full reality and lifeworld of young people.

Besides the presence and skills for practitioners to be present online and connected to the full reality of young people, practitioners also expressed a need for a digital reporting system for online hate speech, violence or extremist content. Participants highlighted the importance for a reporting system that fits with the platform where the warning signs are being observed. This means that for online concerns, there needs to be an online reporting platform. It was highlighted that a digital reporting system may be more accessible and natural to young people, thus making them more prone to sharing their concerns, rather than via a hotline system or even an office.

Recommendations

- **Stay up-to-date about what is happening online.**
  As a practitioner, you have to be aware of which online trends, topics of discussion, narratives and platforms your young people engage with. Keeping up with this takes much time, so not everyone in the organisation can and should investigate this individually. Appoint (a) specialist(s) within your organisation, and make them disseminate information on current online trends. If this is not possible, policy makers should ensure a widely accessible offer of online trend monitoring, that are suited to practitioners needs and schedules.

- **Involve young people as experts about the online world.**
  When setting up projects with an online aspect to it, invite young people to deliver input and co-create this. They know what will work to reach other young people adequately.

- **Integrate online and offline work.**
  Nowadays, and especially for digital natives, online trends and interactions have so many consequences for real life and vice versa that you have to be active in both these worlds, or/and connect both of them in your engagements with young people.

- **Be present where young people are in the digital space.**
  In offline youth work, it makes no sense to be at the football pitch if the young people you want to reach out to are hanging out at the train station. The same goes for online platforms; there is no use in posting/being present on Facebook if your target group only uses Snapchat and TikTok.

Presikhaaf University, The Netherlands

The Dutch youth work organisation Presikhaaf University keeps its network informed about online trends via factsheets which are developed together with young people as insider-experts. These factsheets explain current online developments in detail and indicate how concerning each of these trends are for public security. These overviews are then shared with professionals from other institutions working with young people in the neighbourhood. This increases knowledge and skills for professionals, as well as for young people in the co-creation process.

What are key elements of gender-sensitive P/CVE approaches when it comes to working with youth?

Reflecting on, and advancing gender equality are fundamental building blocks in any P/CVE initiative and project. When working with young people, there will always be relevant gender aspects and needs which must be taken into account. Gender mainstreaming in practice does not simply include counting the number of participants of a certain gender, nor does it necessarily require carrying out targeted activities for these groups, although this can be important. Sometimes it is already sufficient to be aware of potentially gendered needs and incorporate this knowledge into approaches and measures. The role of youth practitioners is vital in responding to gender-based violence and in the prevention of several forms of radicalisation towards extremism, where gender usually plays a vital role in the core of these ideologies.

The protective role of youth work becomes a challenge when it takes place in a political climate which is not open to gender-sensitive approaches. Youth work is often organised as a part of the public top-down administration, so youth activism is vital in order to get the needs of young people across, and to settle the relevance of youth in the public image. Adults give and negotiate definitions about young people and what measures and offers are made for them. If gender-sensitive approaches are not deemed relevant or are not properly understood by the adults in charge of creating and implementing measures or frameworks (e.g. due to the political or societal context), this may lead to service and participation gaps among young people. It is important to really understand the way young people feel and think about these topics, since there is a large gap between their understanding and the understanding of older persons in charge.

Recommendations

- **Promote gender equality throughout your practice.**
  Frontline practitioners working with youth should continuously promote gender equality in their engagement with youngsters, and be aware of the gender-specific issues young people deal with to be able to effectively connect to them.

- **Be considerate of the setting and issues you work on, and be culturally sensitive.**
  Radicalisation touches various gender-related issues. Working in culturally sensitive and different settings should be considered here. In some instances, more meaningful mutual understanding between boys and girls is needed and mixed groups may be required. In other situations, boys or girls need their own safe spaces to discuss topics that are harder to discuss in a mixed group.

- **Examine your own position as an NGO.**
  NGOs working with young people should also examine their own position to see how, and to what extent, the gender dimensions are seen and included in their approaches. For this, longer-term groundwork should take place in P/CVE instead of short-term project work. Long-term structures make effective and gender-sensitive groundwork possible because it allows NGOs to keep assessing and reflecting their position through continuous and trusting exchanges with the young people involved.

- **Be considerate about how you label and promote your project.**
  For youth work, the appropriate labelling of activities and projects is vital. It is not about funders, politicians or adults feeling attracted to the gender-sensitive interventions, but about young people (i.e. the target group) feeling addressed. Designing non-discriminatory spaces that are appropriate for the target groups is the ultimate prerequisite for youth workers. Focus on diversity, but keep it general at the same time, and skip stigmatising terms. Involve the target groups, emancipate them, make your work transparent, especially to the parents of the young people you are working with.

SPEY, Spain

The Spanish organisation SPEY (Sports for the Prevention of Extremism in Youth) organised a programme for young men and boys from various backgrounds who are interested in football. They combined this sports element with questions which allowed them to open up about their emotions. This experience of opening up about the issues they face as young boys was positive, as they saw that they were sharing the same worries and needs, including the feelings of anger and frustration. Overall, the group felt more comfortable, exchanged more on a personal and emotional level, and created stronger bonds. The aspect of gender here is essential because it is not always easy for young men to talk about how they feel, which might lead to increasing frustration and discontent.

How to deliver timely and appropriate interventions with at-risk youth?

Youth who are labelled as "at-risk" face a number of challenges that do not affect other young people. There are several personal and environmental factors that make them more vulnerable to choosing paths that get them and society into trouble. Some factors on a personal level are insecurity, lack of agency, unstable identity development, mental health issues, and lack of emotional regulation. Some factors that make their environments permissive (e.g. for radicalisation and criminality) are poverty, unstable and dysfunctional family situations, limited community resources, unstimulating school environments, etc. In many cases, interventions are required in order to transition successfully into adulthood and achieve personal and economic self-sufficiency. Young people who are at risk of being radicalised often do not see radicalisation as a problem (or see themselves as radicalising at all), but rather as a solution to their problems. Therefore, they are not often motivated to get involved in counselling processes and are distrustful towards professionals that will help them.

Recommendations

- **Set up interventions for long term engagements.**
  Planning timely and effective interventions for individual cases is always a challenge and can ideally be built on long-term relations and structures e.g. community centres, youth work, and police (ideally in a multidisciplinary approach).

- **Work with role models.**
  Authentic people from the community concerned talk about their troubles and experience, as well as which strategies and networks were useful in their individual case. What youngsters can see in these stories is that other people have dealt with similar problems in familiar situations and that they managed to resolve them in a positive manner.

- **Giving young people a mission that they deem important themselves!**
  For example, in open youth work programmes, it is the young people themselves who decide whether they want to participate or not. They also decide whether they want to contact the youth workers or not. In addition, interventions in open youth work are led by the young people themselves.

What strategies exist to work with juvenile offenders?

A juvenile offender is a person under the age of 18 who has been charged with a criminal offence. Young people in penitentiary institutions are becoming a growing concern as this position might make them even more vulnerable to radicalisation. They can become more vulnerable due to multiple factors such as social dislocation, isolation, or influence from peers in the institution. Practitioners face difficulties in dealing with these youngsters because their situation in the penitentiary system might make them more suspicious

towards any professional. The early identification and referral of at-risk youngsters and potential signs of radicalisation can be the key to the effectiveness of P/CVE approaches, as this makes it easier to intervene early and prevent incidents from happening. If early prevention failed, however, it is important to stay connected to this person and to not lose contact. After all, if a counsellor stops expressing their trust in the young person, malevolent people within the prison might take over and establish harmful relationships.

Recommendations

- **Prevention and early intervention before prosecution** takes place may help youth workers and other practitioners to engage with juvenile offenders. If the relationship is already there, it is easier to stay trusted and involved during the sentence.

- The **professional attitude** of those working with the young person concerned is essential. Is this person   a threat to society or are they someone who needs help and support? If the latter, the focus should be on the problems and personal needs of the individual, which makes the prevention work more effective.

- The focus should not only be on reducing risk factors but also on increasing protective factors. A holistic approach by multi-professional teams in a strong network further enables to **work on positive youth development such as relationships, health, creativity, education, work, community and the future**. This requires professional social support structures, not only in prisons, but also in other relevant systems e.g. families, youth work and schools. It is essential to give the young person a positive perspective on their further life without extremist engagement, for the sake of themselves as well as society.

The CODEX Foundation, Poland

This organisation supports the exit process of (young) people who were radicalised into the right-wing hooligan scene. In their work, they focus on strong personal relationships at an early stage. If an incident then happens, they already have the connection to engage with and guide prosecuted youngsters and adults, and face them with the negative consequences of their actions. Moreover, they also connect to other people in the direct environment of these people, family, for example, and support them. On various occasions the CODEX Foundation succeeded in having people disengage with the movement and adjust their views and actions.

Remaining challenges and follow-up

Some remaining challenges and topics for future RAN meetings when it comes to working with youth were mentioned. The practitioners shared their concerns about the mental health of young people in general, and how this makes them more vulnerable. They also discussed possible approaches to treating and helping young people.

- Youth practitioners still face the challenge of addressing mental health issues of the youth they work with in a setting that is not specialised in mental health.

- In the mental health sector, professionals face the challenge of striking a balance between establishing a relationship and the assessing risk of radicalisation.

- The pandemic has had an immense impact on the mental health of young people. The crisis among young people has worsened and services, which face a lack of resources, are overwhelmed. The mental health consequences of the pandemic have become even worse because of the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis and the economic crisis. This culmination has had an enormous impact on youth and their mental health.

- Besides the vulnerability of the individual youngsters, we should also address the permissive environments they grow up in. Participants described these environments by the following characteristics: poverty, gang violence, lack of future perspectives, lack of prospect and opportunities.

Further reading

1. RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices (2019), Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism

2. RAN Y&E Gender-specific approaches in PVE, Lisbon 31 May – 01 June 2022

3. Manual for Designing Secondary Level Interventions for At-Risk Youths in an Open Setting, April 2022

4. RAN Y&E Integrating the online dimension into offline pedagogical practices, online meeting 08-09 March 2022

5. The role of civil society organisations in exit work, May 2022

European Commission