

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL

29 February – 1 March, The Hague, the Netherlands

Impact of war and international conflict on local P/CVE

Key outcomes

This working group meeting aimed to understand how war and international conflict impact the local environment in Europe as well as the needs of local practitioners. This takes into account the training and practical skills they need to prepare, their institutions, and the future practitioners likely to be dealing with war and international conflict in an accelerating timeframe.

The following key messages from the meeting are worth noting.

- Local authorities should **accept the post-truth era** that they are currently working in, which is reinforced and magnified by ongoing international conflicts and wars, the effects of which spill over into European cities and regions.
- Local authorities should **invest in emotional governance** to manage the outburst of public emotions attributable to war and conflict.
- **Political and administrative misrepresentation and non-representation** during times of war and conflict are fuelling local communities' existing frustrations due to not 'being part of society'. This makes manipulation easier for extremist actors or malign government actors.
- **Local authorities should have some influence in foreign policy decisions** that are visibly spilling over into the local sphere and becoming the responsibility of local authorities.
- Recommended approaches for local authorities should focus on:
 - promoting **empathy**, challenging **biases** and fostering local collaboration;
 - creating **local unity** and **conflict resolution** mechanisms by investing in local customs and safe spaces;
 - creating **guidelines for educators** and forging peace and cultural competence in local communities and among colleagues working in P/CVE;
 - incorporating **trauma-informed care in local P/CVE strategies** and prioritising the mental health of local communities and of practitioners.

Highlights of the discussion

In an interconnected world, the effects of war and conflict often reverberate beyond national borders. Spillover effects, the indirect impact that actions in one region have on neighbouring or distant regions can be positive or negative, affecting various aspects of society, economy and environment.

Besides the clear spillover effect of a heightened extremist and terrorist threat level in several EU Member States, local authorities are also dealing with a high level of visible social polarisation on the street, online, in (perceived) safe spaces for dialogue, and in business. As such, local authorities play a crucial role in managing the impacts of global wars and conflicts and in strengthening peaceful coexistence among different communities at local level.

Meeting participants had previously highlighted a variety of challenges they faced with respect to spillover effects in their local contexts as a result of war and international conflict. In this meeting, local practitioners explored the push-and-pull factors for violent extremism, adapting this classic approach for current and emerging wars and international conflicts. Moreover, they attempted to comprehensively consider the challenges for potential approaches and issues to consider when dealing with local extremist tensions spilling over from war and international conflict.

Before delving into the specific push-and-pull factors related to extremism in the context of the impact of wars and international conflicts on local P/CVE efforts, participants examined the broader impacts and consequences of these events on their local communities. They discussed the various impacts, challenges and needs as well as the efforts undertaken to mitigate these challenges.

Table 1: What certain local authorities in Europe are dealing with in the face of war and international conflict

Impact	Challenges	Needs	Efforts
The implications of conflicts and wars on the local context are multifaceted, spanning across the increase of hate speech and demonstrations and the deepening polarisation within societies.	The absence of constructive dialogue hinders progress, exposing individuals and making them more vulnerable.	There is a pressing need to prioritise harm reduction online and establish governmental standards for public communication. Collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social actors is vital, alongside initiatives promoting inter-religious dialogue and community cohesion.	By actively listening to diverse perspectives and improving political discourse and communications strategies, steps are being taken towards rebuilding trust with local communities by offering support and fostering understanding.
Cognitive politicisation of complicated issues and erosion of trust in institutions exacerbates social polarisation, accompanied by increasing collective trauma and the spread of disinformation.	The amplification of online hate poses significant obstacles, intensified by the lack of effective moderation rules in digital spaces.		The creation of safe spaces and trauma regulation rooms offers support and healing in the face of difficulty.

<p>(Increased) insecurities among local communities due to poverty, energy crises and inflation, fostering fear and frustration.</p>	<p>As social polarisation increases, it has become extremely difficult to find a middle ground for the debate of current issues such as the war in Gaza and Ukraine. The general sentiment is "You have to choose a side".</p>		<p>National governments are making long-term plans to guide policy responses, while embracing local narratives and monitoring the situation on the ground.</p>
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Participants then considered the push-and-pull factors in the context of war and internal conflicts, recognising their potential contribution to the vulnerability of individuals to radicalisation and extremism. It's worth noting that much of the discussion focused on the implications of the war in Gaza, as this was paramount on the agenda of every local authority present. Participants highlighted the considerable challenges they faced in dealing with the profound consequences of this conflict on their local communities.

Table 2: Discussed local push- and pull factors considering the effects of impact of war and international conflict.

Push factors ¹	Pull factors ²
<p>Social marginalisation. Local coordinators noted that individuals within local (Muslim) communities expressed feelings of exclusion from democratic processes and lack of representation by local and national governments; they perceived their government's policies on war to be biased and unfair. This fosters a sense of marginalisation among affected communities.</p>	<p>Social media impact. Participants discussed how extremist groups capitalise on social media platforms to disseminate their message and attract followers. They exploit individual and community feelings of being overlooked and unsupported by their local and national governments. The narrative these groups use asks: 'Do you see how your government is treating you? You do not belong to this country as a Muslim [or any other group that is feeling excluded]'.</p>
<p>Trauma and frustration. Participants highlighted the impact of collective trauma as well as unprocessed trauma. Experiences of injustice and discrimination, exacerbated by collective trauma and biased media narratives, caused feelings of hopelessness and frustration to intensify.</p>	<p>Post-truth era. Participants stressed the need to acknowledge that society is currently in a 'post-truth era', in which the proliferation of misinformation makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. This undermines meaningful discourse and leads individuals to seek answers in questionable sources linked to recruitment and grooming.</p>
<p>Identity factors. Participants noted that religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds significantly shape bias and contribute to a sense of not belonging within society.</p>	<p>Exploitation of grievances. Participants highlighted how extremist narratives prey on existing grievances, such as economic hardship and perceived injustices, to recruit supporters.</p>
<p>Economic hardship. Participants stressed that financial struggles and economic disparities exacerbate feelings of exclusion and isolation, making individuals more susceptible to extremist ideologies. They also noted that economic challenges may lead to resentment over government policies on international wars and refugee influx, further fuelling extremist sentiments.</p>	<p>Manipulation of emotions. Advanced technologies like deep fake and artificial intelligence (AI) were mentioned as tools that manipulate images and videos to evoke strong emotional responses, advancing extremist agendas.</p>

¹ Participants identified these as the underlying conditions or circumstances driving individuals towards extremist ideologies or radical behaviour.

² These are the influences or incentives that attract individuals to extremist groups or ideologies.

Recommendations

Participants discussed practical instruments and recommended training to mitigate the local impact of conflict and war and/or to pre-empt emerging conflicts and wars to develop further spill-over effects in their cities or regions. For local authorities, the overarching approach is to foster public debate and create safe, non-polarising environments where individuals can openly share their frustrations. Additionally, their recommended efforts are focused on bridging divides between affected communities and between these communities and democratic institutions, to mitigate polarisation. Table 3 provides additional detail on the participants' recommendations.

Table 3: Recommendations by the meeting participants including additional information and arguments.

	Recommendations	Additional information
A	Promote empathy, challenge bias and foster local collaboration to mitigate conflict and build resilient communities	
1	Incorporate emotional governance into local P/CVE action plans and P/CVE staff training	Such an approach should also require the assistance of local communities affected by spill-over effects from war and conflict (bottom-up/co-creation procedure).
2	Conduct training sessions to raise awareness about unconscious bias	Biases can perpetuate conflict by influencing decision-making and interactions. Participants want to be equipped with tools to recognise and challenge biases, fostering more inclusive and empathetic communities.
3	Promote empathy and active listening	Promote empathy among community members. Encourage active listening and understanding. Empathetic communication can de-escalate tensions and build trust.
4	Facilitate knowledge exchange between cities to reinforce positive values and conflict prevention strategies	These public spaces should be used as venues for skill-sharing, cultural exchange, and symbolic rituals. These interactions can foster mutual understanding and resilience.
5	Incorporate more national-local cooperation while avoiding over-reliance on national cooperation	While national-level cooperation is essential, avoid excessive reliance on it. Strengthen local networks, partnerships and collaborations. Local actors often have a better understanding of context-specific issues.
B	Focus on creating unity and conflict resolution by investing in local customs and safe spaces	
6	Establish customs and safe spaces not only for individuals but also at societal level	These spaces can serve as platforms for dialogue, healing and conflict resolution.

7	Encourage community members to participate in shared customs that promote unity, understanding and reconciliation	Implement diverse community engagement practices. These may include town hall meetings, focus groups and participatory decision-making processes. Approaches should involve local residents, leaders and organisations, especially those from affected communities, in shaping policies and programmes that address conflict-related issues.
8	Identify the tools at your disposal	Understand the existing resources, capacities and expertise available within your community or organisation. Identify local assets that can contribute to conflict prevention and resolution.
9	Community engagement: a needs identification mechanism	Engage with community members, local leaders and stakeholders to assess their needs and concerns. Carry out regular dialogues, focus groups, and surveys to understand the specific challenges related to conflict and war.
10	Change agents	Identify and empower change agents within the community. These individuals can advocate for peace, mediate conflicts and promote dialogue.
11	Community empowerment and scaling methods	Develop sustainable methods to scale community empowerment initiatives. Involve local leaders, young people, women and marginalised groups. Strengthen community-based organisations.
C	Create guidelines for educators and develop peace and cultural competence in communities and among colleagues	
12	Guidelines for educators	Develop clear guidelines and training programmes for educators. Equip them with conflict resolution skills, trauma awareness and cultural competence. Educators play a crucial role in shaping young minds and promoting peace.
13	Cultural competencies	Enhance cultural awareness and sensitivity. Understand diverse cultural norms, practices and traditions. Cultural competence fosters mutual respect and reduces misunderstandings.
14	Religious competencies	Engage religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts. They can play a pivotal role in promoting tolerance, interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution.
15	Soft skills development	Offer training programmes that focus on soft skills such as communication, negotiation and collaboration. These skills are essential for effective conflict management.
D	Incorporate trauma-informed care in your local P/CVE strategy and prioritise mental health	
16	Mainstream trauma-informed care	Train healthcare providers, social workers and community leaders in trauma-informed approaches. Understand the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Prioritise mental health support.

17	Research the impact of trauma	Conduct research to assess the long-term effects of trauma caused by conflict and war. Use evidence-based findings to inform policies and interventions.
18	Trauma-sensitive care	Implement trauma-sensitive practices across various sectors (healthcare, education and social services). Create safe spaces and avoid retraumatisation. Sensitise service providers to trauma-related triggers.
19	Trauma understanding and affordable services	Ensure that trauma-related services (counselling, therapy, support groups) are accessible and affordable. Address financial barriers to mental health care.

Relevant practices

A practical example from the Netherlands

The Expertise Unit for Social Stability (ESS) is tasked with providing advice, connecting stakeholders and offering practical knowledge to local P/CVE practitioners (among other professions) in the Netherlands.

To effectively communicate with various communities in society and promote inclusive conversations, the ESS has prepared the following conversation guide for local authorities and municipalities addressing the war in Gaza ([source](#) in Dutch, translation provided below).

Main principles

- Active listening. Actively listening is crucial. Show interest in what others are saying and confirm their feelings by repeating and summarising what they share.
- Use neutral language. Employ neutral and inclusive language to prevent polarisation. Use words that foster connection: 'understanding', 'collaboration' and 'common ground', for example. Avoid using loaded terms that may fuel polarisation.
- Pose open-ended questions. Open questions encourage in-depth discussions. They often start with 'how' or 'why', stimulating participants to share their thoughts extensively.
- Adopt a personal approach. Invite participants to share their personal experiences on how the conflict has affected them.
- Maintain balance. Ensure the conversation remains balanced, allowing all participants the opportunity to share their perspectives. Avoid direct confrontation over who is right or wrong.
- Keep it practical. If the conversation aims to achieve concrete results, consider establishing action points or commitments for follow-up.
- Consider safety. Before the conversation, create a safe environment where participants can share their emotions.

Proposed approach for the conversation

- Begin with an introductory statement emphasising that the conversation revolves around understanding, common ground and the pursuit of harmony. Centre the agenda around the local community and emphasise that the conflict in Israel and the Palestinian territories is a subject that requires broad dialogue.
- Allow participants to introduce themselves and share their personal connections to the conflict.
- Ask participants open questions about their views and experiences, encouraging respectful responses. Emphasise that the dialogue is inclusive, underscoring the need for a collective effort to understand the conflict and manage its impact.
- Remind participants that the goal is to promote understanding and connection, not necessarily to find a definitive solution.
- Conclude by emphasising that this conversation is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Avoid taking sides. The conflict may tempt one to choose sides, but this can promote polarisation and undermine the goal of understanding.
- Do not interrupt participants. Allow them to complete their sentences before responding and avoid interrupting or responding before they have expressed themselves.
- Aggressive language. Avoid aggressive language or accusations that may be hurtful or make participants defensive.
- Pressure for consensus. The goal is understanding and dialogue, not necessarily consensus. Respect that people may not agree, and this is acceptable.
- Rushing. Allow enough time for the conversations and allow participants to process their thoughts and feelings before drawing conclusions or taking action.

Follow up

Next RAN LOCAL meeting on 30 and 31 May 2024: Emotional Governance: deconstructing local P/CVE strategies in the face of 'salad bar ideology' extremism and understanding needs and grievances.

