



EX POST PAPER

Cooperation of researchers and practitioners on Exit Work

Introduction

On 16-17 June 2016 practitioners and researchers gathered during a RAN Exit meeting on how cross-fertilisation could improve exit programmes. This ex post paper reflects relevant thoughts brought up at this meeting. Starting point of the discussion were two documents: a literature study on the state of research of deradicalisation and disengagement (included here as an annex) and the Outline for Interventions of Deradicalisation based on experiences of practitioners.¹

¹ see: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-exit/docs/ran_exit-ex_post_paper_london_15-16032016_en.pdf



Cross-fertilisation

The demand to provide effective exit programmes that help people step down from a violent extremist environment and behaviour is high. Although the actual number of returned Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) that left for Syria is quite limited the most inflicted countries put deradicalisation and disengagement programmes in their CVE strategies. They have either set up new exit facilities or adapted and expanded existing practices. The attention and expectations of public and policy makers are high. To safeguard society from persons that might cause harm, former violent extremist should change. The recent attacks in Paris and Brussels in which returnees were involved are even putting more pressure in this sense. The solutions have to come from a field of that both in terms of research as practices is hardly twenty years old. Although in this two decades a lot of practices and insights on exit processes were developed, the number of evidence based approaches and generally accepted theoretical frameworks are limited.

This paper will discuss cross-fertilisation on three levels:

- Making exit programmes testable on effectiveness
- Cooperation between practitioners and researchers
- Missing insights

Making exit programmes testable on effectiveness

Looking at the different exit programmes it is very difficult to compare them. Although for most interventions some data are available – either produced by the project itself or by researchers- there is no commonly accepted approach on what information should be gathered. This makes comparing programmes impossible.

Radicalisation and disengagement programmes are working with quite small caseloads. By consequence validation of an effect would be easier if similar target groups within similar programmes could be studied as one group. A database could raise insights on the participants to exit programmes (background, risk and protective factors), their progress in the programme and to the quality of the intervention as such. The current EU commissioned Countering Lone Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project produced a database of 120 Lone Actors is an example that is useful for getting more information on this target group. As there are more participants to exit programmes and a database on exit work should provide information on results of the project, it would be more complex to construct. The next challenge would be to get all interventions, researchers and its commission bodies to agree on how to standardize data.

On a programme level it is key to be more outspoken in the goals. Quite common in this field is that in public opinion expects deradicalisation - so also abstaining from the radical ideology- where the method actually is focusing on disengagement – leaving an extremist group and violent behavior. There are good reasons to choose for the latter as the potential threat for society is mainly depending on involvement and behavior. Furthermore one might point out deradicalisation is perhaps desirable to shape a further extremist into a perfect citizen, but then who is a perfect citizen? The fact that there is a difference in the perception of the goals inside and outside- or even within- a programme makes it impossible to measure effects.

Cooperation between practitioners and researchers

Practitioners and researchers are dealt with as two different groups in this paper. On a personal

level there is some overlap. Some practitioners also produce academic papers or working on their PhD on one hand and some researchers have some experience in work with clients. So there is no Chinese wall. Sometimes there is some misunderstanding when it comes to the use of the word research. Quite a few exit workers are also doing research as part of their way of working. This is however not intended as delivering general scientific analysis and is rather working on specific case e.g. for a systematically and methodologically justified diagnosis. Bringing this case on case information together, finding patterns, providing feedback and doing suggestions for improvement would be a very beneficial role researchers can provide.

A given fact is the difference in scope in time. Practitioners are looking for instant solutions for those who want to leave a violent extremist environment. Researchers need time for properly following processes of research, validation and so on.

The quantity of research in which researchers are temporarily 'embedded' in exit work providing organisations are limited. This is a pity as it can provide good feedback to the organisation and in the meantime give first hand experiences to the researcher. To achieve this type of research a will to be open is key. Another prerequisite is that other stakeholders (f.e. a prison in which an exit project is run) are willing to cooperate as well.

The before mentioned need for standardization also could benefit the cooperation between practitioners and researchers. As the number of exit programmes and participants are limited sometimes the academic attention is regarded as overwhelming. Filling in almost similar questionnaires and giving interviews over and over again is not rewarding especially if there are no perceived mutual benefits. Referring to previous by other researchers performed standardized research would be helpful here.

Part of the scientific insights will never reach the grass root level of exit work as most of the

practitioners are not reading academic literature. There is a lack of popularization of the academic results into easy to digest forms of communication and/or provision of framework how to act. This missing link is decreasing the impact of valuable academic research.

There is a need for informal learning communities in which stakeholders (practitioners, researchers and perhaps also those who commission exit work) meet, exchange and focus on specific issues. This work could raise quality.

Missing insights

Some parts of exit work have been better explored than others or do –as a consequence of insights- ask for further exploration. A few points at this moment are:

- The root causes of radicalisation leading to violent extremism need broader consent and further elaboration to become a general paradigm.
- To what extent can motivation to change be stimulated? This question has risen as it is common believe that people will not disengage or deradicalise if they are not willing to. Just accepting that people are not motivated is not seen as a good solution as the potential harm to society and the person himself remains. Some programmes therefore are putting more effort in convincing people to change. It is unclear so far how this could be done and what the prerequisites are.
- Dealing with trauma and other psychological issues. Exit workers indicate they signal mental issues among a lot of participants. Often the participants are in denial or not wanting to be treated for this. Another aspect of this subject is that not all behaviour should be patholotised.

Annex 1

Literature study on the state of research of deradicalisation and disengagement

Introduction

For a long time the academic attention for extremism and terrorism was mostly focused on the root causes of radicalisation, so the process upstairs to use the metaphor of Moghaddam's staircase model. Only recently academics started to explore the phase in which doubts on being part of an extremist movement starts and how people leave this environment (disengagement) and the radical ideology (deradicalisation). These studies give insights in root causes for stepping out the radical movements and also formulate prerequisites to put this decision in effect.

Even more scarce are studies on exit programmes that support disengagement and deradicalisation. As people have left radical movements and resocialized themselves or supported by an informal social network, it becomes apparent that exit programmes are not a strict condition for success. On the other hand the process of leaving a radical or extremist environment is a huge challenge for a person to accomplish. It demands changes on a mental and practical level from the person who is responsible for his/her new future in the end. Exit programmes can support and facilitate this personal process.

With the current Islamist inspired extremism and the increasing group of people leaving for, and returning from Syria, the demand for exit programmes grows throughout the EU. Facilities have been established, expanded and or adapted (f.e. based on earlier experiences with rightwing extremism) for this new target group. This development has raised the question of what is the most effective way to work on disengagement and radicalisation stronger than before.

This paper envisages to structure thinking on how 'effective' can be operationalized. What elements should an exit programme contain to raise chances that participants will (re-)socialize? After looking at the question how to measure effect, factors for leaving an extremist movement and ideology will be explored. Then the issue of practical assistance will be dealt with and which effective tools and methods could be part or inspiration for exit programmes.

Challenge of measuring effect

When is an exit programme effective? This question only can be answered when clear goals are set. Is leaving a radical movement and abstaining from violence (disengagement) sufficient or is a change of mindset (deradicalisation) also key? Horgan and Bjørge have noticed that 'there is no clear evidence to suggest that disengagement from terrorism may bring with it de-radicalisation'.ⁱ Ferguson found that some of the former extremists from the Northern Irish conflict seem to have ideologically radicalised further whereas they stopped showing violent behavior and even were involved in prevention programmes to stop youngsters for becoming violent.ⁱⁱ If a programme was aimed to encourage disengagement one would consider it as effective, if it also should change the mind it is not.

As stated people can leave extremist movements and positions autonomously. So exit programmes are merely supporting and encouraging an *intrinsic motivation* of the participant. The effect would be measurable when a control group of non-participants with similar characteristics as the participants would be followed. Studies doing so are limited.

Finally *sustainability* is an important question. Current studies quite often measure effect just after an intervention where it also would be relevant to see if people are still disengaged or deradicalised over time. In difference to the medical sector that has determined after which period a person is considered to be recovered from an illness, there are no generally accepted definitions for this when it comes to exit.

Factors for deradicalisation, disengagement and protection

Based on Pressman Schmid sums up following factors for deradicalisation, disengagement and protective factors. iii

1. *Deradicalisation factors*

- a. Rejection of rigid ideology;
- b. Rejection of violence;
- c. Evidence of replacement of non-violent goals;
- d. Motivation to deradicalise present.

2. *Disengagement Factors*

- a. Belief that violence is a failing strategy;
- b. Disillusionment with spiritual leadership;
- c. Shift in ideology;
- d. Disillusionment with organisation experiences;
- e. Grown away from movement.

3. *Protective Factors*

- a. Family/girlfriend/spouse influence relating to rejection of violence;
- b. Community public opinion moved away from support for violence;
- c. Change of vision of enemy and desired outcome;
- d. Reversal of social alienation;
- e. Non-violent views of significant others.

These factors are reasons for people to reconsider their position. Not every factor will apply to all the cases. This may differ given the person, the group he/she is engaged in and/or the conflict in which the group operates. Most presumably initially people will not be able to formulate which factors makes them want to change. Bjørge describes the state of mind of some who want to leave as a 'burn out', being exhausted from the situation.^{iv} Quite a few factors are negative in a sense that people come to the conclusion that the extremist environment and/or ideology are no longer meeting their expectations. The challenge for exit processes is –depending on the phase- to put thoughts into action and to look for new positive alternatives for the current situation that is rejected. Exit programmes can help to provide structure in thoughts and actions.

Practical prerequisites

In Saudi exit programmes participants are provided a stipendium for a year to facilitate return to society. 'The state also intervenes to find jobs for released participants, the authorities encourage and pay for beneficiaries to resume their education, while also facilitating marriage for single beneficiaries. This aims at engaging them in family responsibilities and to refocus them away from violent extremist activities.'^v In an EU setting not all these measures would be regarded as appropriate actions, especially not if executed by a country itself or being commissioned to a partner organisations. Nevertheless, also for the European situation attention for arranging practical matters is important. It is considered to be important as work, income, education, housing and do contribute to reconnecting

with society. Help can be needed here as often participants have long pathways to go and the starting point is not always favorable. For example chances for a job tend to decrease when you spent time in prison. The radical 'experience' comes on top of this and makes the gap larger.vi Apart from the real distance to the job market, participants often have difficulties to arrange the necessary activities.

Methods and tools

Exit programmes as such might be quite new and therefore not extensively surveyed on their effect, there are effective methods and tools that can be used in deradicalisation programmes. First of all there are other areas that have strong analogies with deradicalisation and disengagement with a longer track record when it comes to interventions and research. Examples are: exit programmes for leaving cults, probation and gang cultures. Although there are obvious differences and programmes might not be applicable 100%, using promising or effective experiences from adjacent fields can prevent fallacies. Secondly assisting people to exit consists of many layers and phases. For each part of this patchwork of activities and processes proven tools for facilitators can be implemented. For example motivational interviewing, NLP (neuro linguistic programming) and Family network approaches can be part of the exit process. Following the principles and proper implementation increase chances for effective approaches.

Notes

- i. T. Bjørgo and J. Horgan (Eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (2009).
- ii. N. Ferguson, *Disengaging from Terrorism: A Northern Irish Experience* (in: Journal for Deradicalization, Spring 2016).
- iii. A.P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review* (2013).
- iv. *Disengaging from Terrorism*.
- v. Hamed El-Said, *De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States* (2012)
- vi. *Disengaging from Terrorism*.