

EX POST PAPER

RAN study visit to Northern Ireland on community engagement and resilience

Introduction

Black and white thinking is part of human nature, whether young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, or part of 'us' or 'them'. In small quantities, this is harmless. The problems begin when this thinking evolves into something more extreme, such as polarisation. Tension and polarisation have unfortunately become a very real challenge in European society, and are creating a breeding ground for radicalisation processes. A heavily divided society with hostilities between groups and strong 'us and them' thinking is the ideal breeding ground for radicalisers and recruiters for extremist ideologies, who exploit feelings of fear and distrust, and the rejection of 'them'. How should we address these sentiments in order to prevent violent extremism? How can we create, and maintain, a cohesive and inclusive society? We need answers and polarisation strategies. RAN led a study visit to Northern Ireland (Belfast, UK) on community engagement and resilience to address these questions on 25 and 26 April.

Introduction

The experience of Northern Ireland is a sad but powerful one to learn from. The study visit zoomed in on the context and lessons learned there, and provided participants from other countries with a platform to share their own expertise and ideas. The focus of the study visit was on **transferable lessons**: what can organisations, initiatives or projects that cooperate and engage with (resilient) communities in other European areas bring to the table?. This ex post paper follows up on the visit's minutes with more extensive insights into discussions at the meeting, and a special focus on the transferable lessons shared by both presenters and participants. The transferable lessons discussed can roughly be divided into four different categories:

- Community-level;
- Communication;
- Police;
- Policy.

Community-level lessons

Communities are potential target groups or even victims of polarisation, but are equally potential agents of change with the powers of engagement and resilience. Those working directly with communities and civil society have an important role to play in recognising and preventing growing segregation, intolerance, hostility and even ultimately hate crime and extremism between different societal groups. These issues can only be addressed at the local level, through a tailored approach. To stimulate resilience and engagement:

- Work on building broad and diverse social networks within communities.

- Approach tangible conflicts as possible opportunities to (re)negotiate democratic space in communities and to address and reframe underlying tensions. Polarising narratives address feelings. What you see on top of the iceberg are arguments, but underneath the surface are feelings.
- Offer a hand instead of pointing a finger.
- Physical (safe) spaces can be used to bring groups together to build new experiences together. Dialogue and mediation can take place in these spaces.
- Focus on building improbable relationships rather than trust. It is natural that conflicting individuals / communities do not immediately trust one another. By focusing on relationships, trust has a chance to grow. There should be trust in the mediator and the process.
- Address the perceived injustices, even if they are not genuine.
- Do not only involve (formal) spokespersons or community leaders, but also informal leaders, such as women and young people.
- Focus on personal experiences rather than collective experiences when working with (post-conflict) trauma.
- Cooperate with credible, respected and trusted mediators / third parties.
- In difficult times, it is important to find and connect people from opposing sides, those who desire peace. Create safe spaces where conflicted people can talk on a different level, negotiate and build new experiences with each other.
- Pay attention to generational trauma – this can create barriers to looking forward / creating peace. Time does not always heal old wounds. Invest in this.

Communication lessons

Certain language used by professionals, be they politicians, public / civil servants or media outlets, can – intentionally or not create further polarisation and fuel radicalisation and violent extremism. Communication is essential to avoid this. How we define groups and how we engage with communities can dramatically impact on people’s perceptions, which in turn can influence outcomes. The transferable lessons on communication can be divided into the following categories:

- Thick and thin narratives;
- Facts versus events;
- Framing;
- Branding.

Thick and thin narratives

‘Thick’ or circular narratives or reasoning give a person the option of starting a dialogue. When ‘us’ **and** ‘them’ slowly turns into ‘us’ **versus** ‘them’, or even ‘us’ **or** ‘them’, we speak of thin narratives. In highly escalated and polarised situations this can even turn into ‘friends’ or ‘foe’. Although interventions such as dialogue can help resolve problems and conflicts, they are of no use at this stage. One should therefore:

- invest in ‘thick narratives’ in communities by supporting broad and diverse social networks;
- show diversity in narratives by breaking down a conflict into a chain of events or by providing people with different narratives;
- ensure internal consistency.

Facts versus events

Sometimes it can be difficult to agree upon the definition of ‘facts’. Avoid such discussions by finding concrete events that can be woven into a narrative to thicken it and thus become part of a broader story. This

can serve as a base for reframing. For example,

- focus more on emotional and symbolic aspects;
- use more stories than arguments, by for example giving a stage to credible voices in the silent middle ground;
- ensure government officials are open to other narratives, instead of focusing merely on their own (factual) narrative.

Framing

‘Frames’ (the way you perceive information) and ‘framing’ (a dynamic process in which perspectives change in interacting) are key concepts in polarisation and conflict theory. Both are important, for they decide how a person interprets facts. They also legitimise a person’s story and actions.

- When negotiation or mediation does not work, go for re-framing: create a third story, keeping in mind that it needs to be rooted in a ‘real-life’ context.
- Have a positive instead of a negative focus. For example, a ‘divided community’ sounds more negative than ‘two communities’. Although people will always have different ways of interpreting language used, it is recommended to use softer and less assuming terminology (e.g. ‘engage’ rather than ‘prevent’ since the last seems to assume someone will do something negative).
- Focus on the end-user when testing the language and tone, alternative podium, image and story-telling.

Branding

Many terrorist organisations are good at branding their ideals and mission and use social media effectively to attracting followers. To provide these potential

followers with a strong counter narrative, one should focus on:

- Listening to the ‘terrorists’ narrative and evaluating whether you are doing the right things to counter this. Focus on the ‘mechanism’ that is getting people to lock on to polarising narratives and try to understand what makes these appealing.
- Not making the situation worse: involve for example a marketing specialist in the creation of a counter narrative.
- Copying their strategy: do not let terrorists see that you are drafting a counter narrative – this is how many terrorists behave during guerrilla warfare.
- Delegitimising their narrative.

Police lessons

Police have an active role to play in engaging with communities. Particularly in local settings, it is the police that are more likely to have strong networks; they know the schools, youth groups and families, but also the individuals and groups fuelling polarisation. Police are key players, and should be encouraged to optimise professional networks and engage with communities. It is important that they understand that their actions and communication can be crucial catalysts for polarisation. Unintentionally, the police can, through their actions, feed polarisation between groups in society, or between groups and the police, or in relation

to authorities.¹ The following lessons learned should therefore be taken into account:

- Invest in ‘soft’ policing. Often this is a lot harder than ‘hard’ security measures. In the longer run, the soft side, through community policing, is indispensable.
- Invest in community policing; these officers are the ones with very good knowledge of local circumstances, who can build positive relationships and trust within communities and neighbourhoods and increase the ‘grey’ – as opposed to black and white.
- Make sure your (community) police corps are diverse and a reflection of society.
- Police should be visible, accessible, and familiar to everyone.
- Pay attention to human rights in relation to police actions.
- Make sure there is an ethical foundation underlying police work.
- Scale the police response closely to the actual situation (be proportionate and upskill the police). Sometimes, only community policing is not enough.

Policy lessons

During Northern Ireland’s ‘Troubles’, the government wasn’t (perceived as) impartial. So, although one of the main lessons is that community engagement and resilience should be addressed at the local level, there are also policy lessons for (national) governments.²

¹ Additional reading: [Ex post paper on successful and effective engagement with communities](#) and [RAN POL’s guide on training programmes for police officers in Europe \(specifically Chapter 5\)](#)

² Additional reading: [Ex post paper RAN Thematic event “The refugee and migrant crisis: new pressing challenges for CVE policies”](#) and [RAN Issue Paper, tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society](#).

- Take the prevention of polarisation and radicalisation off the national agenda; tailoring approaches to the local context is key.
- Invest in soft measures; fund prevention activities that are local, tailor-made bottom-up initiatives addressing individuals and communities.
- The Northern Irish context shows that segregation can be a driver of conflict. Where communities live separately and have little interaction with each other, mistrust and prejudice are likely to grow. Integrating and mixing communities takes away the unknown and can lead to de-polarisation. This is therefore an important steering mechanism for the government. Measuring the presence of relationships at the local level provides an indication of a society's 'temperature'.
- Policy-makers must gain trust within the communities. Furthermore, they should leave communities space to experiment and focus on development rather than try to deliver 'outcomes': where there is space for taking risks, progress will follow.

- Promote structures that enable dialogue between different parties. Give room for internal debates within communities and convince them to show the world that these discussions are taking place.
- Support professionals such as teachers, social services, communication officers and youth workers in understanding the conflict and process, e.g. with training courses.
- Government can be a credible voice, but usually isn't. Work with civil society and support their counter / alternative narrative initiatives.
- Separate 'terrorism' from the cause and address the issue that is creating a breeding ground.
- Stimulate a code of conduct among the media.
- In all societies, there are people with extreme views, and people that support them. They will use provocation to keep a community polarised. If they succeed in provoking the state to overreact, they will gain more support for their cause. So, do not overreact – leave them be and invest in the middle ground.