

EX POST PAPER

Tabletop exercises: Practicing multi-agency cooperation

Summary

RAN LOCAL looked into practicing multi-agency cooperation by using tabletop exercises. During this meeting, local coordinators from EU cities focused on the added value of cooperating with partners on different levels. Which partners need to be involved? Why? And, what does the task division look like? The method of tabletop exercising and different scenarios were tested to see whether these are useful means to practice multi-agency cooperation in your own municipality. This ex post paper contains a brief summary of our most important findings and reflections about practicing multi-agency cooperation.

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Introduction

Multi-agency cooperation: why?

Multi-agency working can be defined as ‘working in collaboration across organisations to enhance services in order to meet complex needs’ ⁽¹⁾ — in short, cross-organisational cooperation in difficult situations. Multi-agency cooperation is a key message within RAN, as working in a consistent and reliable network enables safeguarding individuals at risk and preventing radicalisation. The members of a multi-agency network can share both expertise and information. Each organisation provides a part of the solution; there is no organisation that can prevent radicalisation on its own. A multi-agency approach focuses on creating infrastructures between all relevant players to ensure (early) prevention of violent extremism is in place. It involves support from different sectors across the public and private domains and at both the national and local (or regional) level. Key players might include law enforcement, youth workers, community workers and representatives, community police officers, educators, social workers, healthcare professionals and numerous others ⁽²⁾. While the value of multi-agency cooperation is clear, in practice it is often quite difficult to implement, as it requires adaptability at individual and organisational levels ⁽³⁾.

‘Which partners should be involved? Why? And when and how will you involve them? These kinds of questions are easily overlooked once a crisis pops up.’

Practicing multi-agency cooperation

After setting up a multi-cooperation system, it is clever to take some time and check your multi-agency cooperation. Investment should take place in times of peace, both to prevent crisis and to be ready for it. Questions to be asked when checking your multi-agency cooperation are:

- Do we have all needed partners involved?
- Do we all know from each other which partner can and will do what?
- Do we know what we actually expect from each other?

⁽¹⁾ Sarma, K. M., Multi-agency working and preventing violent extremism I, RAN Issue Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/multi-agency-working-preventing-violent-extremism-042018_en.pdf

⁽²⁾ RAN study visit, Ex-ante paper. Paris, France: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_study_visit_multi_agency_key_paris_22-23_112016_en.pdf

⁽³⁾ Sarma, K. M., Multi-agency working and preventing violent extremism I, RAN Issue Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/multi-agency-working-preventing-violent-extremism-042018_en.pdf

- Do we need to make extra arrangements?

In fact, the central question is: Do we have **the right partners** involved in our multi-agency set-up to prevent and counter violent extremism? Once contact is established with all partners, practicing multi-agency cooperation will help to:

- work towards a shared language and shared goals;
- ensure ownership of the issue of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) by all partners;
- clarify the division of tasks and responsibilities;
- improve teamwork and collaboration skills.

One way to improve multi-agency cooperation in your own municipality is to practice with tabletop exercises.

Tabletop exercises

What are they? ⁽⁴⁾

A tabletop exercise is an activity to prepare participants for a certain (disaster) scenario. It helps participants to familiarise themselves with the process to be gone through in case of an event on the one hand ⁽⁵⁾, and on the other it shows the effectiveness of the response process: is something or someone missing? What could be improved? Are there any gaps in knowledge? A tabletop exercise works with scenarios and is based on discussion or acting. How much time is needed, depends on the scenario. Most often it takes a couple of

Advantages

- Everybody gets to participate: learning by doing;
- Practicing your role and preparing for a real situation or case, while being able to make mistakes;
- Learning from mistakes in a safe space;
- Creating a team spirit;
- Creating awareness of the co-dependence of partners;
- Clarifying the division of tasks and responsibilities.

Disadvantages

- It takes quite some time on the part of the participants;
- It requires a lot of preparation by the facilitator;
- There is always the danger of getting lost in content instead of focusing on the process question: do we have all partners involved?;
- It might lack reality;
- Participants might feel uncomfortable in acting.

⁽⁴⁾ Rouse, M., tabletop exercise (TTX), TechTarget, 2018.

<https://searchdisasterrecovery.techtarget.com/definition/tabletop-exercise-TTX>

⁽⁵⁾ Pate, A., Bratberg, J. P., Robertson, C., Smith, G., Evaluation of a tabletop emergency preparedness exercise for pharmacy students. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, Vol. 80, Iss. 3, 2016, Art. 50.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4857645/>

The purpose of a tabletop exercise is to evaluate an organisation's preparedness for a particular disaster and to inform required participants of their roles in the response.

hours, which is of course a lot shorter than in real life. A facilitator guides the participants through the exercise.

Since a tabletop exercise goes through all response aspects, in the end it becomes clear what an organisation needs to do to improve the process. Thereby, all participants can become more comfortable in their own roles and gain a better understanding of the roles of others as well as everyone's tasks and responsibilities. It is recommended to evaluate the exercise, as participants may feel after-action is needed regarding task division, choice of partners or resources.

Lessons learned

Tabletop like exercises can be valuable tools in practicing multi-agency cooperation, as they prepare a team for a crisis and walk them through the whole response process. Participants learn which partners are needed, what their tasks and responsibilities are and if their action plan is up to date. However, to ensure the exercise is successful, proper preparation is needed. Participants feel more secure when they get sufficient time and information to prepare their roles and receive strong guidance. These exercises work best in groups that are not too big.

What we did during the meeting

Goals and set-up of the exercises

Our goal was to check if and how a tabletop exercise would be useful for practicing multi-agency cooperation. During the RAN LOCAL meeting in Dublin, participants participated in three shortened exercises, based on tabletop theory. The goals of these exercises were to:

1. practice multi-agency cooperation with a focus on the aspect of possible/missing partners;
2. test if tabletop exercises work to check multi-agency set-up with three different scenarios;
3. inspire participants to organise these kinds of exercises in their own municipalities.

The exercises were short and open to an international public. As all participants were local P/CVE coordinators in their own municipalities, and they played a different role during the exercises. Rather than the content, the process was the point of focus. The exercises were organised through different aspects:

- **21 Participants:** 16 local P/CVE coordinators, 2 RAN CoEs, 1 researcher and 2 P/CVE experts.

- **Division of roles:** the participants were divided into groups of players, potential players and observers. The players were assigned a role and the potential players could be asked to perform a certain role when needed by the players:
 - Mayor
 - Local P/CVE coordinator
 - Community police officer
 - Youth worker/family worker
 - Community representative
 - Prison and probation contact
 The observers were divided into groups to look at the following:
 - General impression: how did it go and what stands out?
 - Partners: which partners were involved during the scenario and why? Which partners were missing?
 - Lessons learned
 - Scenario: is this a good scenario to practice multi-agency cooperation?
- **Guidance:** two facilitators provided the participants with the scenario in subparts, guided them in the right direction when they got stuck, asked for time outs and kept track of time.

Playing or discussing

In a tabletop exercise, participants can either play a role and impersonate the role they are given, or they discuss the scenario from the role they are given. Both forms – acting or discussing – can be valuable. It depends on the topic, the context, the scenario and the participants whether it is useful to use acting or discussing. If you decide to act, will participants play their own role or the role of another partner?

Acting the scenario

- ‘You need to understand the role of the other, put yourself in the place of the other. Role play is needed for that’;
- Role play evokes emotions, just as real life events do. It is important to be aware of these emotions and to learn how to deal with them;
- Learning by doing works best;
- Role play ensures active involvement of all participants.

Discussing the scenario

- A scenario is often too detailed to be useful for role play. Discussing might work better, as those details do matter and are realistic;
- Discussing a scenario allows participants to reflect on the process of their responses directly;
- Participants might feel uncomfortable when acting. A feeling of being unsafe harms the outcomes of the exercise.

Scenarios

Practicing multi-agency cooperation by using a tabletop exercise requires a scenario. Although a case should be realistic to ensure the outcomes are useful, a scenario provides space for reflection as it is not a real event. Besides, a scenario forms guidance throughout the exercise and makes people think about the effectiveness of their work. A P/CVE scenario could be:

- **An intervention:** participants discuss what to do in case of an event or an emergency. This form of scenario focuses on the response action plan in place and whether it is sufficient and still up to date. It helps in overseeing the consequences of an event and takes follow-up actions into account.
- **Prevention-focused:** participants discuss how to prevent certain kinds of events or emergencies from happening. This form of scenario focuses on the general P/CVE policies in place and is helpful in deciding whether the right partners are involved in P/CVE and whether cooperation is going well in times of peace.

'No one is against partnership. On paper, everybody agrees to cooperate. However, the point is: How do you get people to actually work together?'

The most repeated feedback received from participants during the meeting had to do with the importance of realistic scenarios. Although practicing in an international setting was interesting, as it provided an opportunity to learn how things are going in other countries, it was not ideal for practicing multi-agency cooperation. The scenario distracted participants from the goal, as details or possible solutions didn't fit in the different contexts. A **tailor-made scenario**, adapted to local circumstances, ensures a smooth process within the exercise and the needed outcomes: do you have the right partners in place in your local/regional context? Is your local/regional action plan up to date and clear for everybody?

Examples of scenarios

The three scenarios that we used during the meeting can be found in the annexes. The scenarios were appealing, because they were based on real-life cases. The first and the second scenario could be used for acted as they were not too complicated and detailed. Therefore the work on resolving the situation could start right away. The third scenario, however, turned out to be way too complicated, multi-layered and detailed for an acting table-top exercise. It might however be a very useful scenario to discuss, as it shows the complexity of a radicalisation case.

Important note: Please adjust these scenarios to your own local/regional context when using them in your multi-agency team to practice cooperating!

Lessons learned

A scenario to practice multi-agency cooperation with is good when it is multifaceted, involves different partners and doesn't contain too many details. Preparation is key. To ensure everybody understands his/her role, preparation time for the participants is needed. Participants could be provided with information about their roles and with background information only they know due to the positions they are in. It should be clear to participants what their aims and responsibilities are. The exercise can be made more dynamic by sharing the scenario in parts. Clear guidance from the facilitator is desirable. The facilitator could, for example, provide answers to questions of the participants during the exercise.

Six tips for a smooth tabletop exercise

For participants and facilitators

1. In the exercise, go back to the **local action plan and context** and always work towards a **goal**: how do we handle cases normally? What is our **stagey in dealing with CVE and PVE cases**? Create an action plan for this case, based on the general approach.
2. Ensure logical **positioning**: who sits where at the table?
3. Participants should **stick to their role** and have their own aims and goals, fitting the role.
4. To avoid chaos and confusion – part 1: appoint **an exercise coordinator**. She/he is responsible for the exercise taking place. The exercise coordinator feeds the scenario to the participants, creates time-outs and is the leader of the evaluation of the exercise directly after it finished with all participants.
5. To avoid chaos and confusion – part 2: appoint **a leader**, or a case manager who coordinates actions and outcomes within the process. This person can help in **prioritising** actions.
6. Let everybody share his/her interpretation of the situation to create as complete a picture as possible and to **avoid jumping to conclusions**. However, you should work with the information you have. In real life, information is also often very **limited**. At some point, stop discussing and take action. A **risk assessment** might help to decide at which moment it is important to act.



'Individually, we had very limited information, but as a team we had a lot!'

Good Practice – HEXAGON

During the meeting, Anamaria Cardona and Valérie Dinh from the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalisation leading to Violence (Canada) presented the Hexagon tool to RAN LOCAL. Hexagon is a pedagogical tool for professionals in a multi-agency team to practice their cooperation in the case of a radicalised individual. The tool makes it easier to explore a case, as it guides participants in approaching the situation from different angles: participants had to look at contextual factors, the different spheres of a person's life, a person's behaviour, vulnerability and protection factors, and key actors in prevention. The colourful tool turned out to be very helpful in both analysing and practicing cases of radicalisation within a multi-agency team.

Finally, do you cooperate with the right partners?

We hope to have inspired you to practice multi-agency cooperation and test your local action plan with your own local team in order to find out whether you are working together with the right partners. Did you think about including social partners? The prison and probation sector? Community workers or representatives? Although some people might be considered 'difficult' to cooperate with, partnering up could prove to have added value. In this case, it works better to invest in the relation in times of peace instead of approaching someone right after an event ⁽⁶⁾. Besides, is everybody in your multi-agency team aware of the roles they have and of the responsibilities attached to these roles? Practicing multi-agency cooperation with a (shortened) tabletop exercise will help to provide answers to these questions. Please feel free to use and adjust the scenarios that can be found in the annexes that follow.

⁽⁶⁾ See: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-local/docs/ran_local_yf-c_collaboration_local_authorities_communities_preventing_violent_extremism_22-23022018_en.pdf

Annexes

Scenario 1 – Right Wing Demonstration

Scenario 2 – Hate Preaching

Scenario 3 – Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighter

Scenario 1 - Right Wing Demonstration

Total amount of time is approximately 1 hr (including timeouts and preparation)

Scenario 1 – part 1: Increasing verbal attacks & undercurrent (20 minutes)

In a city with about 1 million inhabitants, the number of incidents where migrants are verbally attacked has severely increased in the last 6 months. There seems to be an anti-immigrant undercurrent in the city, but it is not clear where it comes from and who is involved. In addition, the name of the city is increasingly coming up in anti-immigrant remarks and as an example of a part of the country where you “don’t feel at home anymore” on social media (Facebook, Twitter).

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Scenario 1 - part 2: March plans (20 minutes)

A group called “Defence League” has asked for permission to organise a march in 3 weeks from now. They want to march against the influx of migrants and for the protection of “our own culture”. They have already extensively announced the march via social media and ask for the right to express their opinion. They claim they have about 5 000 people who would want to participate in this march.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Scenario 2 - Hate Preaching

Total amount of time is approximately 1 hr (including timeouts and preparation)

Scenario 2 – part 1: Spreading hate (20 minutes)

In a small provincial town an elderly imam of Middle Eastern descent is reported to have been giving apocalyptic hate speeches on several occasions at the local mosque. This has presumably caused some youngsters to wave black flags out of their vehicles and take up aggressive behaviour aimed against the establishment. On two occasions youngsters have even taken the trip to the Levant in support of Daesh. The mosque is called “clandestine” by the surrounding Christian majority because there’s no communication coming from the mosque, and the citizens feel they’re frowned upon when walking by.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Scenario 2 – part 2: And getting hate (20 minutes)

Some members of the imam’s congregation have aired their concerns about the Friday speeches of the last 3 weeks to a local community police officer. The police officer has decided to do something to prevent further polarisation in the community. Speaking to the police officer, the members of the Muslim congregation reveal that the speeches are not the only problem; the Muslim society is victimised by weekly hate crimes, for example, pigs heads on doorsteps, racist tags on facades of their homes, etc., and as a result there is a lot of frustration building up.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Scenario 3 – Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighter

Total amount of time is approximately 1.5–2 hrs (including timeouts and preparation)

Scenario 3 – part 1: Returning from prison (10 minutes, to get started)

In 2016, a 24-year-old man, Sami, returns from Syria. He had left 1.5 years ago together with his brother. His brother died on the battlefield. Upon his return, Sami finds his wife and his two young children waiting for him. Sami is arrested and jailed during the investigation and while awaiting his trial. He shares his cell with another returned foreign terrorist fighter.

The investigation and trial take over 1.5 years. Sami upholds his story that he didn't take part in the actual battles in Syria. He says his role was to cook for his group members and drive them around. In the meantime, rumours go around in his hometown that he became an informant to the investigators about his group members. Right before his trial, a video is released that shows he did take part in just more than cooking and driving.

In 2018, Sami gets convicted for affiliation to a terrorist organisation. He is being given a prison sentence. Given his period in pre-detention, he is eligible for parole with conditions. His conditions are not to be in contact with his previous network, to be in touch with the local police frequently, to follow an ideological deradicalisation course and to pursue a sustainable daytime activity. He is coming back to live in your town on 1 December 2018.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Scenario 3 – part 2: Supported reintegration (20 minutes)

Sami and his wife and children now live in your town (his hometown) in a small apartment in a social housing block. Sami resumes his previous studies, and his wife stays home to take care of the children. You as local authority reach out to Sami and his family with some suggestions of programmes he and they could follow. Sami says he has enough on his mind as it is and is not keen on staying in touch more than necessary with the authorities, as he wants to forget his episode in Syria and wants to go back to his previous life ASAP. Because of his conditions for parole, he is appointed a local police officer as his point of contact and starts one-on-one sessions with the imam of a local mosque for his derad programme.

After a few months, the local law enforcement asks for social assistance in the case: the returnee and his wife consider opening a day-care centre in their home. As local law enforcement thinks this would be inappropriate, they think "someone" should go talk to the family.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Special attention to: Which strategies can you apply to "find an entrance" into a case?

Scenario 3 – part 3: Work, finances and threats (20 minutes)

The local authority reaches out to Sami and his family again. Very honestly, they explain why they think opening a day care is not a good idea. However, they offer to find an alternative. It turns out, Sami and his

wife are struggling financially. Therefore, his wife wants to find a job; this doesn't necessarily have to be a day-care centre, but it has to be compatible with taking care of their two young children. The conversation thus turns to two practical aspects: work and finances. There are several moments of contact over these two topics. As conversations go on, it turns out Sami and his family also feel threatened in their neighbourhood: sometimes their car tires are stabbed, their car gets scratched, they get garbage in their mailbox. They suspect the rumours of Sami being a snitch caused this. They didn't alert to these incidents, as they didn't want to attract negative attention with law enforcement. The family would like to move to a better suited housing situation, but they wonder whether they have the right to move. They explain they wouldn't want to attract attention from social housing services and create problems for themselves.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Special attention to: How do you prioritise your actions to avoid starting everything all at once? And, what are the risks and benefits for the involvement of the local authority in this situation?

Scenario 3 – part 4: Next-level reintegration (20 minutes)

The family moves away from the threats in the previous community. Sami decides to quit his studies and find a job instead. He finishes his derad course with the local mosque. He is assigned a new police officer with whom there is a better relation of trust; they have a much better connection. This is the sort of new beginning that everyone needed.

The newly assigned police officer is brought up to speed by the local authority about the current situation of the case and future aims. An issue Sami raised while talking to his police officer was that his child would be going to school soon, and that he was doubtful about how to communicate about his past with his child's school. The police officer was able to turn this into encouraging Sami to see a psychologist. As the local authority was preparing for this, they could provide him an appointment the very next day. Sami was very curious about this psychologist and surprised by the fact that he was able to get an appointment so promptly.

The psychologist briefed the local authority that another issue he observed during his sessions with Sami was the failing communication between Sami and his wife and also Sami's temper during discussions. In the meantime, Sami has to deal with many disappointments as employers refuse to employ him because of his past. His marriage is going through a crisis and he feels useless being unemployed. The local police receive information that Sami's car is often registered on the access road to the airport. They wonder whether he is up to something. Not long after, the attacks on Brussels Airport and in the subway of Brussels happen.

* How do you deal with this situation and which partners do you need to do so? Get them around the table and work the scenario.

Special focus on: Prioritising actions