



C&N

COMMUNICATION AND
NARRATIVES



EXIT

DERADICALISATION AND
RESOCIALISATION

EX POST PAPER

Dos and don'ts of involving formers in PVE/CVE work

Summary

In Bordeaux, France on 26 and 27 June 2017, the RAN C&N and RAN Exit working groups explored the added value of working with formers, by examining their specific qualities and experiences. This ex post paper takes the form of a manual, and contains guidelines (dos and don'ts) for those employing formers as coaches/mentors/practitioners in exit work or as credible messengers in communication.

This paper is produced by the RAN Centre of Excellence.





Introduction

There is often a call for involvement of former violent extremists when considering approaches for the prevention of and/or countering of violent extremism (PVE/CVE). The rationale behind this is twofold. Formers are viewed as 'experts', having personal experience of (de-)radicalisation processes. Moreover, the same experience renders so-called formers credible to the target group of PVE/CVE activities. The combined effect of being knowledgeable and accepted makes formers the ideal candidates to engage for tackling violent extremism.

Indeed, in several countries, formers aid interventions in the field of PVE/CVE, and thereby make a substantial contribution. However, those promoting work with formers sometimes have excessively high expectations. Formers are not always best placed to act in all situations or stages of the radicalisation and disengagement process. Nor are all of them available and/or sufficiently equipped to fulfil the requirements of the task at hand. The question of added value is important: the number of formers capable of and willing to provide assistance is limited. This is especially true in cases where formers from the same/similar area of conflict and ideology are needed. Therefore, a more realistic approach is required to assess how best to realise the unique strengths of formers in work with people who are radicalised or close to being radicalised.

This was why the RAN Communication & Narratives and the RAN Exit working groups took a closer look at the role of formers in PVE/CVE in their fields, during a joint meeting held in Bordeaux on 26 and 27 June 2017. This 'dos and don'ts' document reflects the output from participants' exchanges (formers and practitioners working in the field of communication or exit work). Based on their substantial experience in this field, the document aims to inspire and advise those already working with formers in their PVE/CVE efforts as well as those wishing to do so.

This paper will cover the following topics:

- What is a former?
- What are the advantages of working with formers?
- What are the challenges of working with formers?
- The role of formers in exit work.
- The role of formers in communicating PVE/CVE messages.

Content on opportunities, challenges and added value also applies to formers' role in exit work and communication of PVE/CVE messages. Moreover, the closing paragraphs contain elements specific to both fields. Each paragraph will conclude with a summative 'dos and don'ts' section. Paragraphs on exit work and communication will not repeat findings already set out in previous paragraphs.

What is a former?

A complex question

While extremists may be identified by acts and expressions, formers are notable only for the absence of acts and expressions. There is no commonly defined time period of being free of extremism that prior extremists must fulfil in order to be considered formers. Nor is it possible to prove conclusively whether individuals leaving an extremist group and ceasing physical and mental violent behaviour (disengagement) have also changed their ideology (deradicalisation). As with the path from radicalisation to extremism,



withdrawing from extremism is a process that is a non-linear and unique to all involved. Moreover, people's variable individual characteristics complicate solid diagnoses, e.g. would an individual from a violent background who has withdrawn from an extremist movement be considered a former if he/she still uses violence to resolve issues?

Deciding whether someone is a former is not a simple matter. It takes time to determine whether individuals have indeed moved on from the extremist period in their lives. This is why some programmes allow individuals to undertake volunteer work — to assess their behaviour. Input from other formers can be helpful in the assessment, as well: their experience is useful in gauging individuals' distance from the extremist system. They also may have personal experience of individuals' social networks.

Relapsing is a risk for formers returning to old extremist environments or entering new extremist environments. While the risk of relapse is considered lower for those having been away from the extremist environment for longer, time is not the only factor to consider. Resocialisation and reattachment to society also play a crucial role, as do significant life events.

- ✓ Formers should be involved in everyday, ordinary life. Rules that apply for other staff members also apply for formers, e.g. not working alone without supervision, and debriefing. Like other professionals working in this field, formers must complete their formal education, e.g. social work qualifications.
- ✓ Carry out screenings and risk assessments. Involve other formers in this process.

From violent extremism to preventing and countering extremism

A great deal of literature has explored how and why people radicalise and become violent extremists, and how to leave extremist movements and/or ideologies behind. A much smaller number of publications analyses how and why formers take the next step and actively oppose their old extremist ideology.

Hedayah recently organised a workshop for formers, the results of which were published in 'Mapping the Experiences of Formers to Streamline the Process of Engaging in CVE'. In this publication, the process whereby formers become active in PVE/CVE settings is described in seven stages. This seven-stage model concentrates on the personal ambitions and experiences of formers, and does not reflect others' opinions on whether the formers are ready or suitable to become active in PVE/CVE settings. However, it provides a good account of the pathway, with its merits and possible consequences. This can prove useful as intervention and coaching information.

1. Discover. People learn about the possibility to prevent and counter extremism from other formers or from NGOs. Guilt over past ideology-related actions can trigger the desire to take such a step.
2. Learn. Opportunities to become involved in CVE may become more appealing. However, there is a need to know more about what is involved in doing so.
3. Decide. Formers decide whether they want to engage and if they are ready to do so.
4. Act: Formers either talk about their experiences publicly across various platforms, or become involved at the grassroots CVE level.
5. Cope. Formers must subsequently deal with the backlash from their old organisations, communities and even families. Additionally, the media often questions formers' authenticity and credibility.
6. Benefit. Formers recognise the positive impact they make in addition to the value they contribute to CVE, making them feel proud of their work.
7. Advocate. Formers use their experience and story to engage others.



Working with formers: opportunities

Having been in the same position as the target audience increases formers' credibility and legitimacy in addressing sensitive issues related to radicalisation and violent extremism. This applies to both individual approaches and to campaigns reaching out to the target group. Formers serve as role models and set an example: they show that it is possible to live a different kind of life. Formers can be very helpful in connecting on a personal level with isolated people.

The experience of formers is also helpful for the team: formers are aware of the norms of the radical environment, the mechanisms in place and the meaning of codes. This part of 'interpreter' is useful when assessing target group members' situations. Formers can help staff communicate at the appropriate level. Assessing individuals' degree of radicalisation is key when approaching them. Discussion topics and tone differ greatly when communicating with newcomers vs stalwarts. Formers can also offer advice at intervention development or policy level, as they are aware how actions or measures are likely to be perceived and received by the target group.

Finally, formers are more than their extremist pasts: they can add value thanks to their education, talents and life skills learned outside the extremist environment — all these elements can make formers suitable for work in a CVE/PVE setting.

It may seem logical to involve more formers in CVE/PVE operations as demand grows, but this is easier said than done. Not all who withdraw from extremist environments can prevent others from becoming involved. And those who are willing and potentially able to do so need training and support. The kind of training will depend on the role to be adopted, e.g. learning to make their pasts into appealing narratives, or coaching and conversation techniques.

- ✓ Give victims the opportunity to present themselves as role models. Do this implicitly (i.e. not by labelling them as such).
- ✓ Use the inside know-how of formers for collegial review and development of methods.
- ✓ Tap into the capacity of formers that is unrelated to their extremist pasts.

Working with formers: challenges

Readiness

The first question is whether formers are ready to work in a CVE/PVE setting. Generally, individuals have a fervent desire to take action immediately after leaving the extremist environment. However, often they have not come to terms with their own past. Do they understand how and why they entered the extremist environment, and why they then left it? What is their intrinsic motivation, and is this compatible with the job requirements? Are there any traumas (mental health problems, substance abuse, suicide attempts, etc.) that should be taken into account? Are there any feelings of revenge towards the group they left? Are they free from conspiracy theories and paranoia, and from the narrow focus of extremist groups?



Capacities

As with all staff, there should be confidence that the selected former is the right person in the right place: formers must be as credible as other employees. Also, in terms of requirements, there should be a level playing field. If a position calls for specific competences, the former should fulfil these, and likewise with counselling and intervention. Of course, there will be a tailor-made component here, based on specific needs.

Target group acceptance

Not all radicalised individuals will accept formers. For example, a radicalised person with self-doubt will find the experiences of formers helpful and relevant to their current situation. An enthusiastic newcomer to the radical environment, however, who is satisfied, will not relate to the former, and may regard him/her as a traitor, a deserter or a loser, now working for the enemy (mainstream society or even government). As the ultimate goal is to gain a cognitive opening for change, in those cases alternatives will have to be found. Another factor influencing acceptance might be the roles adapted in the extremist environment, e.g. a leader might reject a former who was a follower.

Acceptance in society and institutions

The acceptance of involving formers can be problematic. Why give someone who was 'wrong' in the past a job? How do we know the person has indeed withdrawn from extremism? To counter questions like this, two elements are needed: a solid explanation of the added value of working with formers; and a set of criteria that formers (and other employees!) must meet, with a description of how this is checked (government clearance, regular interviews, and so on). The involvement of formers in CVE/PVE is often met with disapproval when these individuals are former leaders or key figures of extremist environments. For example, the announcement that Farid Benyettou, former mentor of the Kouachi brothers, had started working in an exit facility, generated a wave of negative attention.

Putting the right person in the right place is not always possible, owing to legal restrictions. As former extremists often have a criminal record, they might, for instance, be denied access to work in the prison system.

Personal aspects

Formers themselves also face challenges. Exposing oneself as a former can have considerable implications for one's future career. An individual's mass media and social media activity leaves traces that can reduce chances of finding employment, negatively impact family members, and so on. On the other hand, speaking up as a former can also attest to the commitment to leave the extremist movement. For prominent representatives of extremism who already have an 'extremist track record', this may be a good option.

There may also be safety risks: the formers' prior group and its supporters might consider them traitors, infidels or opportunists who shifted positions for financial gain. Moreover, old opponents might seek revenge, despite disengagement. This poses a threat at a level that requires attention: it calls for heedful alertness and support for formers.

When involving formers in the role of messenger, it should be considered whether describing experiences is helpful for others, or merely a boost in self-importance for the formers. Sometimes, the person becomes the message. For some, gaining attention becomes a goal per se. This poses the risk for the former of becoming one's entire identity.



- ✓ Assess whether the individual is ready (apart from their own motivation). If possible, guide the individual in their preparations.
- ✓ Be transparent concerning the role of formers. What is their contribution to your work? How are risks like relapse accounted for?
- ✓ Stand behind formers if there is a negative societal reaction.
- ✓ Consider the positive and negative consequences of publicly exposing oneself as a former.
- ✗ Don't make the fact of being a former a career path or new identity in itself.
- ✗ Do not allow formers who may be attention-seeking or self-important to disrupt the CVE/PVE goals.

Formers in exit work

A supplementary role

Formers should not to be used as a method to disengage or deradicalise individuals. Formers provide an additional element to the method already being used with the target group. Therefore, it is vital that formers be well trained as practitioners and facilitators (e.g. using conversation techniques like motivational interviewing) before working with the target group on their own.

Target group understanding

Owing to their experiences as members of extremist groups, formers have an enhanced understanding of the target group, both in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. Formers' backgrounds don't need to be alluded to while working — the focus is on the individual's exit process. Their understanding of the context will be demonstrated implicitly in their reactions. If required, formers may share some of their past experiences, but only when the objective is to move forward the individual's exit process from extremism.

More than one role

Formers can play the part of exit worker or work as part of a team involved in the exit process. The latter instance calls for fewer professional requirements, but skills and screening remain important prerequisites. Moreover, in the latter instance, staff may work with a (different) appropriate person (i.e. with similar experiences) in each phase in the process.

Ideological flexibility

There are examples of former right-wing extremists working in the field of countering Islamist extremism, and vice versa. As the processes of radicalisation and disengagement are quite similar in certain points, this can work, although the aspect of credibility by biography might be less prominent. Aspects as dealing with fear, discontent with the behaviour or total loss of own opinion are present in most experiences in each extremist environment.

Cooperation with (multi-agency) partners

Exit work often calls for a multi-agency setting in which several experts are active. Not all will have extensive expertise on the particular extremist environment at hand. Formers can serve as a good source of information on the expected behaviour, habits and rules in an extremist group. For instance, a therapist



managing trauma can benefit from an enhanced understanding of the extremist setting in which his/her client lived. Such information can be provided on a case-by-case basis, or through training.

Strategically planting seeds of doubt

Generating doubt about radical ideologies and organisations can motivate life changes, but this must be handled subtly, as frontal confrontation is counter-productive. As formers know, moving individuals slightly out of their comfort zone is more likely to stimulate change.

- ✓ Bring needed skills for exit work in at the right level, before working with the target group alone.
- ✓ Use the added value of formers to better understand the target group, help other experts to understand them, and create cognitive openings by eliciting doubt.

✗ Don't allow the former's personal experience to dominate work with the target group.

Formers in communication of PVE/CVE messages

The messenger is a decisive factor in establishing the credibility of alternative or counter-narratives, and ensuring their reach and influence. Is the messenger convincing and plausible to the target audience? Do they choose to listen to him/her? In CVE communication particularly, it is common to work with formers as credible messengers. Formers are often well placed to discredit extremist propaganda, prevent radicalisation, contribute to disengagement and deradicalisation, and through reliance-building, support those who chose to leave a violent extremist movement.

Precise targeting is key

1. Targeted communication: find the right former for the right target audience. The narrower the target audience description, the better matched the former will be.
2. Focused goals: is the objective to prevent violent extremism or to counter it?
3. Simplify and humanise: imagine the character and personality of fictional characters (e.g. a woman: her age, her name, her background, etc.). In this way, the campaign is more refined; the personal story is more important than the ideology per se.

One-to-many or one-to-one basis

Increasingly, the experience of former extremists is included in the narratives of campaigns and other communication efforts. For instance, a former's story may be used to launch a campaign, as in OpenYurEyesToHate (one-to-many basis), or alternatively, formers may be used to facilitate discussion online (one-to-one basis).

In 2015, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue carried out a One-to-One CVE interventions pilot. This project tested the viability of the approach of directly messaging those openly expressing extremist sentiment online and seeking to dissuade them. They brought together former extremists across ideologies into a team that identified users at risk of carrying out violent acts and directly reached out to them online, offering to engage in constructive dialogue. The project designed a methodology for identifying candidates and measuring which messages were most effective in eliciting responses most likely to lead to long-term engagement.



Once online, always online

It is imperative that formers who decide to go public with their testimonies be fully aware of the consequences. Once their stories are online, it is almost impossible to remove them from the internet.

Public versus confidential

Formers can carry out various roles in the field — either publicly or behind the scenes. While they might be a (public) messenger in one case, they could also form part of an advisory team or test panel. Another alternative is to publicise the testimonies of formers but keep them anonymous.

Be aware of the media

The types of media that sensationalise such stories will publicise news as entertainment. Apart from being counterproductive for the campaign, this will generate a great deal of abuse for those in the public eye. This should therefore be taken into account, and aftercare and practical assistance should be made available for formers.

- ✓ Form a focus group, if the former's background is the target audience.
- ✓ Localise your campaign and set a clear goal.
- ✓ Stories are sensationalised in much mainstream media. This is counterproductive and also results in abuse.
- ✗ Don't display judgemental or critical points of view in public.
- ✗ Don't marginalise individuals or groups, and don't exacerbate stereotyping.