

## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Families, Communities & Social Care and Rehabilitation WG meeting  
23 and 24 November 2023, Bucharest, Romania*

# Preparing receiving communities for their involvement in the rehabilitation process

## Key outcomes

When it comes to the rehabilitation of extremist individuals, policy makers, researchers and practitioners will all agree that communities have an important role to play. Despite this apparent agreement, in practice this role is not well defined. For example, who the community is and what the role of the community should entail exactly, remains unclear. Finally, most rehabilitation programmes do work with families and friends of their clients and with communal institutions, however rarely with communities.

The reason for underlining the importance of community involvement on the one hand, while having limited participation in practice on the other, seems to be the elusive character of communities. There is no given structure, hierarchy is fluid, and not everyone regarded as part of a community feels this way themselves. As a result, cooperation is by no means easy. However, it is a necessity, as at the end of the day, the community is the place where rehabilitated, (formerly) extremist, individuals will dock back on to society.

For this reason, the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group and Rehabilitation Working Group gathered to discuss how community involvement can be put more into to practice. Apart from the needs of the extremist individuals there was also attention for the receiving communities. What do they need to play their desired role and how to prepare them? Important outcomes were:

- Not all communities are open to fulfilling a supporting role for rehabilitation or suitable to do so. An important prerequisite is embracing democratic values.
- Community is part of the solution. The individual, the family, the institutions (both judicial and social) are other important stakeholders for rehabilitation.
- Communities are not monolithic, also not on their will and capacity to contribute. In this sense it is important to select the right persons within the community to work with. These are not necessarily the people who present themselves as community leaders.
- Communities need time to prepare for their desired role as well as to overcome doubts and fears.
- The concepts of Restorative justice and Recovery Cities are interesting formats from adjacent fields that could contribute to more solid community involvement.

This paper outlines the highlights of the discussions during this meeting, followed by key recommendations, relevant practices and suggestions for further reading.

## Setting the scene

### Defining communities

What we mean when we are referring to communities in P/CVE can be elusive. On the one hand, formal community actors, such as housing agencies and education or employment institutions, can support a reintegration process by way of fulfilling their respective tasks. Existing networks of more informal community actors on the other hand, such as sports clubs or neighborhood organisations, are specific to every local situation and thus difficult to grasp, let alone involve in a strategic manner in rehabilitation. Communities are understood here as “social units wherein its members share common networks”<sup>1</sup>. These can be for example 1) networks of shared values, interests, goals, and kinship or 2) based on factors such as place, interest, identity, need, religion, practice, or convenience.

### The importance of involving communities in the rehabilitation process

Involving communities in the rehabilitation process can be challenging because of a myriad of reasons:

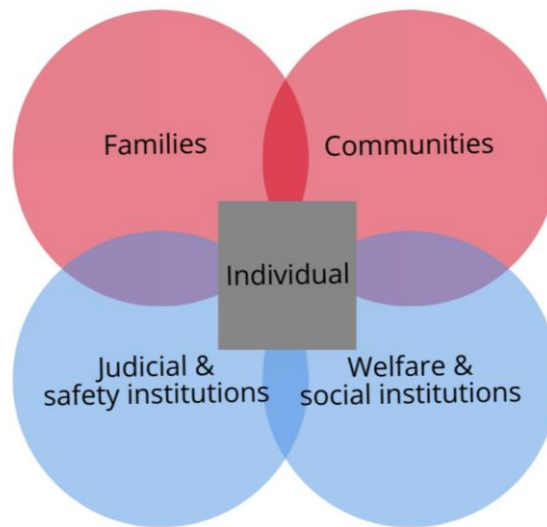
1. Communities are **difficult to systemise** since every local situation and stakeholder landscape is different. Social, cultural and economic contexts differ; therefore one systemised approach is difficult to achieve.
2. Communities are no **formal partners** in the rehabilitation process. The rehabilitation process is generally set in an established and structured procedure, which can make it difficult to involve informal actors such as communities. The fact that they are not part of the formal process, sharing information is also more challenging and not always desirable.
3. Communities are often not aware of the situation due to desired **anonymity** of reintegrating individuals and **GDPR** restrictions. As communities are no formal partners in the rehabilitation process, information sharing is prohibited. This implies that communities are not always aware of the presence of formerly radicalised individuals among them which makes it difficult to involve community members in the rehabilitation process.
4. There is often **fear, stigma and a stereotypical view** within communities, caused by a lack of relevant background knowledge on extremism and rehabilitation. It may lead to a lack of motivation to engage with the reintegrating individual, making it more difficult for practitioners to involve communities in the rehabilitation process.

Radicalisation processes often intertwine with individuals distancing themselves from society, communities, friends, and family. A (perceived) loss of such connections can increase the risk of being susceptible to violent extremist narratives, groups, and ideologies. That is why, apart from trying to re-establish connections with family and old friends, building on (re)creating a social network is essential when working on rehabilitation. The added value of communities is that they are informal entities that individuals can belong to. They have a more humane approach than government institutions and often more able to support basic human needs such as connection. Therefore, it is essential to look into the role communities can play within the rehabilitation process.

## Highlights of the discussion

Before exploring the role of communities, it is important to understand the roles of all different actors involved in the rehabilitation process. Becoming part of the community demands housing, income/work, knowledge of the communities' context, familiarity with societal manners and norms, a sense of belonging and so on. As a participant stated: *'you have to make a human chain surrounding the client: involve everyone concerned in society to embrace them back into the world'*. Four elements have been identified. They are shown in the model below:

<sup>1</sup> Chris Drew, [21 Types Of Communities](#) (2023).



*Model 1: playing field of rehabilitation*

Although all outlined actors are important in the rehabilitation process, this paper – following the focus of the meeting – will put emphasis on the community as its role often misses a clear outline. The roles of the other key actors, including the reintegrating individual, are outlined below.

### *Individual*

For a radicalised individual to return back to society, (re)establishing links is a key aspect of the rehabilitation process as it fosters a sense of belonging and avoids isolation. To be able to return to society, individuals need to be well prepared for coming back into their communities. This means knowing what to expect, such as facing stigmatisation, and difficulties finding a job. For a smooth return into society, an individual ideally has psychosocial support, can get a job and housing, and becomes part of sports clubs or can find other hobbies. This helps the individual establish links and build their self-esteem. This way, the individual can create a new network of people outside of the extremist network. To achieve this, it is essential that the individual has the motivation to change and actively tries to engage with the community, by being open to connect to its members.

### *Institutions*

Professionals who are employed at institutions are often the first point of contact for the individual when returning to society. To make this work, professionals from various kinds of institutions (mostly judicial and welfare) need to build trust with the individual and support them in their first steps into the community. Within the institutional sphere, we make a division within formal judicial and safety institutions such as prison, probation and police, and welfare and social institutions including social work, housing, and employment agencies and CSO's.

### *Judicial and safety institutions*

Formal institutions often focus more on the judicial aspect of the rehabilitation process. Their role in the rehabilitation process lies mostly with safeguarding society, the individual and their loved ones. For them it is important to make sure both the community and the individual are well prepared for the rehabilitation process. For the communities they must make sure that a safety assessment is done and that both the individual and the community can feel safe. Other formal institutions are for example housing and employment agencies. They can play a key role in helping individuals find their initial place within the community by providing the first points of entry through housing and work. They have no direct contact with individuals or communities.

### *Welfare and social institutions*

Professionals in welfare and social institutions are crucial in managing and maintaining contacts between the different actors in the rehabilitation process. When it comes to the individual and the community they can:

1. guide individuals to (re)instate links with people in the community.
2. help the individual find a job and housing.

For communities they can:

1. inform and involve communities in the rehabilitation process. Informing them on deradicalisation helps to decrease stigma and fear towards the individual.
2. provide support to receiving communities and families and enabling them to contribute to the rehabilitation process.

Professionals in welfare institutions often have ties to the community and can elaborate on the importance of their contribution to the rehabilitation process. They can instigate first contacts with the person (re)integrating in their community and guide the process, installing trust. More information on how they can do this will follow below.

## **Zooming in on the role of families and communities**

Social bonds and trust in society shield from crime and radicalisation, while social isolation can create the opposite. Therefore, involving families and communities is crucial in the rehabilitation process. However, whereas the different institutions are part of the official structures of rehabilitation, these actors are informal and not part of this structure. Here we elaborate on how these actors can be involved in rehabilitation.

### ***Family and loved ones***

A first entrance (back) into the community are often family members and loved ones. Therefore, it is important to strengthen or reestablish the bonds between the client and their family and loved ones. Within the group of the families and the loved ones it should be clear who is able to contribute to the rehabilitation process, having the capacity, a pro-democratic mindset and a positive relationship towards the individual, and who is best not involved, for example because they are facing severe problems themselves or are radicalised.

Apart from being helpers, this group might also need assistance themselves. Feelings of being ashamed, guilty, or stigmatised as a consequence of being related to a(n) (former) extremist can be points of attention.

### ***Communities***

Before involving communities in the rehabilitation process, one must assess if the community has the capacity to contribute to the rehabilitation process by asking questions such as:

- Is the community pro-democratic and a steppingstone to further reintegration to society?
- Are people in the community involved in extremist groups or adhering to radical ideology?
- Is there any risk involved for the radicalised person, e.g., revenge from the old extremist group or from groups who were opposed and/or victimised during the time the individual was radicalised?
- Is sufficient social capital available for support; can community members cope with extra tasks?

In general, communities are heterogeneous, and will have both individuals and groups that can play a positive role in the rehabilitation process, as well as individuals and groups that are less capable of doing so. Often the return to a community is a given fact, e.g. because of where family members live, who provide housing to the individual. In this sense assessing the fitness of the community is not about go/no go but rather about what should be considered or mitigated. Communities are not too keen to welcome a formerly radicalised individual in their community. Stigma, stereotypes, and fear can be hindering factors. To be able to properly involve communities in the rehabilitation process, preparation should include the following steps:

1. **Inform communities in time:** what is going to happen and what role is expected of them? Informing communities contributes to community members' preparation and provides transparency. However, it can also contribute to stigma and fear. Therefore, it is important to consider who in the community needs to know, and what they need to know.
2. Have a recent **risk and needs assessment** of the to be rehabilitated individual. It is important that communities feel safe and have trust they are being safeguarded. The results of the assessment should never be shared. However, it is a prerequisite for a tailormade approach that can take concerns away.
3. Increase **knowledge** on the subject of violent extremism and rehabilitation, to make sure that communities understand their importance in the rehabilitation process and understand the dynamics surrounding radicalisation and the P/CVE field.

### Restorative justice

Community dialogue and **restorative justice** practices can also contribute to restoring or creating links between the individual that caused harm and the community, even if direct victims are not part of the receiving community. It allows for conversations between the two actors, creating mutual understanding and social bonds. One example of how professionals can use community dialogue to positively involve the community in the rehabilitation process is as follows: a dialogue within the community discussing their own role, discussing fears and stigma's, offering information. And letting them make proposals on how they can be involved. Empowering them and giving them agency in the way in which they want to be involved.

Restorative justice uses three values that can be taken into account when working on rehabilitation with communities:

1. **Respect** to keep the process safe – all actors involved should feel respected and respect themselves in all stages of the process.
2. **Relationship** – at the centre of every restorative justice process is a damaged relationship. The person who caused harm has negatively impacted the lives of real people and real communities.
3. **Responsibility** – to restore the relationship, each individual must acknowledge their responsibility.

### Recovery cities

The concept of **recovery cities** is based on the principle of a recovery-oriented system of care which is "the complete network of indigenous and professional services and relationships that can support the long-term recovery of individuals and families and the creation of values and policies in the larger cultural and policy environment that are supportive of these recovery processes"<sup>2</sup>. It was initially developed to reintegrate individuals with (former) substance abuse problems. Rehabilitation demands not only personal but also social and collective recovery capital.

<sup>2</sup> White, W. Recovery Management and Recovery-Oriented Systems of Care: Scientific Rationale and Promising Practices. North-East and Great Lakes ATTC (2008).

Therefore, the idea is to build alliances with both institutions and societal parties to create an atmosphere where people feel welcome. This is helpful for motivational reasons to work towards healing or to stay on track.

The communities are taken seriously and sometimes also benefit from actions for the target group. A principal element is also to celebrate recovery. Keeping the stigma of a (former) addict is not stimulating self-esteem. All elements could be used for rehabilitation for radicalised individuals as well. Although celebrating rehabilitation from extremism in a festive way might not be appropriate, some kind of ceremony or ritual that marks the start of a new life could serve as an important element to gain sustainability. The concept of recovery cities may sound purely focused on the reintegrating individual, as it tries to break down barriers for socially excluded persons who did do harm to society (and themselves). However, it does have a preventative aim and it benefits communities as a whole, as these individuals will become part of society again and may be a source of inspiration for those who are considering changing their lives.

## Follow-up

- It could be helpful for social workers to further explore what the role of restorative justice can be when involving communities in rehabilitation.
- There are hardly any described methods and best practices on community involvement in rehabilitation work. This needs further attention from organisations executing rehabilitation programmes, commissioning authorities – such as local governments – and researchers.
- The practice of recovery cities can serve as an inspiring example and deserves further exploration.

## Further reading

- RAN EX Post paper (2020) [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/pages/page/ran-rvt-ran-exit-role-restorative-justice-preventing-and-responding-violent-extremism-dublin-03-04\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/pages/page/ran-rvt-ran-exit-role-restorative-justice-preventing-and-responding-violent-extremism-dublin-03-04_en)
- RAN Paper - [Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work](#) (2022)
- RAN overview paper (2021) [The potential of restorative justice in cases of violent extremism and terrorism](#)
- RAN FC&S conclusion paper - [Challenges and solutions when working with families of FTFs](#) (2020)
- RAN [Rehabilitation Manual - Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first-line practitioners](#) (2020), mainly chapter 5, 6 and 7.
- RAN P&P and RAN YF&C Working Groups - [Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: Community and family acceptance](#) (2019)
- Policy & Practice event conclusion paper - [Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: involving and preparing communities and families](#) (2019)
- Summary on Recovery Cities: <https://wfad.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Recovery-cities-summary-.pdf>