EX POST PAPER

Involving young people in counter and alternative narratives – why involve peers?

Summary

When working in multicultural teams, creating trusting relationships is key. Policy-makers and civil society organisations (CSOs) often share goals. But they might have quite different procedures, approaches and perspectives, and therefore 'cultures'. Young people, an important part of civil society, want and need to be empowered to become more active members of communities preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). They can provide perspectives, insights and a 'spirit' that most established organisations will struggle to create without them.

This paper presents some of the key challenges and opportunities identified at the policy and practice event on cooperation between young people and policy-makers. It also suggests concrete steps for building trusting partnerships and effective multicultural teams.

Introduction

The RAN Policy & Practice event on 25 April 2018 in Madrid, Spain, aimed at fostering a mutually beneficial understanding between policy makers and (young) P/CVE practitioners of their different perspectives and relevant experiences. The meeting had a specific focus on the contributions of young people to the creation of effective alternative or counter narratives. Members of the RAN Communications and Narratives working group (C&N) introduced their 'Lessons Learned' on effective alternative and counter narratives, including on the GAMMMA+ model, which served as a tool to assess the various inspiring campaigns from all over Europe presented in Madrid. The more than 80 participants discussed challenges, opportunities and practical solutions for increasing the number of young people involved in the P/CVE process. Building trusting partnerships when the parties come from different 'cultures' was identified as a key challenge. This paper looks at how to overcome these challenges to build the trusting partnerships required for effective and sustainable P/CVE programmes.

Setting the scene – key topics and actors

1)　　　Propaganda, P/CVE and the role of young people

Propaganda is a structured attempt to manipulate the cognitive and emotional perceptions of a specific target audience. A tool for extremist organisations, it promotes a set of narratives and values, an ideology, that offers a binary perspective of victimhood (us, the in-group) and aggressors (them, the out-group). Extremist propaganda has clear-cut messages that promise clarity, status, adventure, meaning and other emotional and social benefits, such as belonging to a new family, brotherhood or sisterhood. It often follows a specific pattern: diagnosis (what is wrong), prognosis (what needs to be done), and rationale (who should do what and why) [1].

Daesh, for example, claims that Islam and Sunni Muslims are under attack (diagnosis), that a Caliphate must be created (prognosis), and that YOU need to help in any way you can (rationale). Right-wing extremists use the same approach. Their diagnosis involves claiming migration and corrupt elites are a threat to the white or national identity. The prognosis is that only homogeneous societies with high walls can ensure survival. Then they ask their target audiences to join the fight [2] in any way they can. Left-wing extremists follow this pattern as well.

> *"(The UN) urges **Member States to facilitate** an inclusive and enabling environment in which **youth actors**, including youth from different backgrounds, are recognised and provided with adequate support to implement **violence prevention activities** and support social cohesion." [3]*

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[1] *http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2017/role_propaganda_in_violent_extremism_how_to_counter_Alexander_Ritzmann_EuromedSurvey2017.pdf/*
[2] *https://eeradicalization.com/a-tribal-call-to-arms-propaganda-and-what-pve-can-learn-from-anthropology-psychology-and-neuroscience/*
[3] http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2250(2015)

When developing effective counter- or alternative narratives, it is crucial to really understand the targeted audience. Any P/CVE actor involved in planning or executing a P/CVE intervention should be able to answer questions like the following[4]:

- Can you define the key characteristics of your audience?
- Can you narrow down and clearly identify their age range, gender, cultural background, 'group language' and place of residence?
- Do you understand why they would care about your intervention, why they would interact with you?
- Do you understand what might change their thinking and behaviour?
- From where do they get their information?
- Where are their echo chambers that you need to access with your messages?
- What makes them vulnerable? If your aim is to reinforce the resilience of your audience, understanding them also means understanding their vulnerabilities.

Young people are statistically a vulnerable group at greater risk of radicalising and should therefore be involved actively in the prevention of radicalisation.

When addressing audiences below the age of 25, young people might understand the way their peers think and feel much better than others, and could be essential in answering the questions listed above. Involving young people can therefore help improve the effectiveness of interventions and narratives.

2)   The policy and practice context

Policy-makers and practitioners often struggle with the same challenges. Questions over the key 'push and pull'- factors for specific cases of radicalisation, how to avoid interventions having unintended consequences or how to find trustworthy partners when engaging in the creation of counter- or alternative narratives, are particularly preoccupying. Bringing key actors and stakeholders together with young people who work in P/CVE might not only increase the effectiveness of P/CVE projects, but also reduce the chances of unintended consequences and doing harm with well-intentioned P/CVE interventions.

The RAN YOUNG platform, created in March 2017, aims at empowering young people to actively participate in the prevention of (violent) extremism. RAN YOUNG also facilitates in-depth dialogues between policy-makers, practitioners, and young people.

RAN YOUNG identified[5] the internet as the primary area in which young people can contribute to P/CVE

Emerging technologies and credible voices
Young people are more in tune with emerging technologies and more able to innovate than policy-makers and other CVE stakeholders. Young people are frequently the target audience for extremists; they should thus be

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[4] *RAN GAMMMA+ paper, https://bit.ly/2F4zzTT*
[5]*RAN Young Policy Paper, https://bit.ly/2HtnIzS*

consulted more often for focus groups, content testing and campaign development, as well as regularly considered as credible voices.

Critical thinking and empowerment
Young people need to contribute to the debate on free speech and online governance. They also advocate: teaching critical thinking for internet users to reduce the likelihood of extremist material resonating with young people online; engaging a wider cohort of young people in counter-speech production to ensure that counter- and alternative narratives occupy the same space as extremist propaganda.

Cooperation with social media companies
For extremist communications that contribute to radicalisation but are not considered to breach laws or internet service providers' terms of service, young people's innovative technical solutions and narratives should be fostered. The debate on safeguarding versus free speech is particularly pertinent. Also, a more seamless integration between online and offline projects should be achieved.

The RAN Communication & Narratives (C&N) working group has been analysing extremist propaganda from extreme-right, extreme-left and Islamist organisations, and has discussed, collected and distributed lessons learned for practitioners and policy-makers. In Madrid, these were presented and discussed, applying the GAMMMA+ model.

RAN Essentials[6] for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns

• Effective communication campaigns have **goals** that are **clear, realistic and measurable**.
• The messages promoted are relevant and the target audience considers the messengers **credible**.
• The campaign works with the target **audience's preferred medium or online platforms**, and is also present when the audience communicates offline.
• Narrative campaigns in the form of **monologues are unlikely to meet the needs** of an audience that wants to talk or is upset or outraged about a real or perceived injustice.
• Campaigns should offer a **call to action** for those wishing to become involved in the issue at hand, which will facilitate monitoring and evaluation.
• Campaigns aiming to change minds and behaviours offer opportunity for **sustained dialogue** (both online and offline) with those in their audience who wish to talk.
• Campaigns which ensure they **have monitoring and evaluation** components in place from the start can then adjust ongoing activities if needed, and once completed, can assess whether they had the desired **impact**.
• Campaigns that **produce a constant stream of content** for their target audience to interact with increase their chances of having an impact. Authenticity and quantity are more relevant than technical quality.
• **Alternative narratives** promote **positive alternative perspectives**, courses of action and role models, and foster critical thinking. **Counter-narratives**, which aim at **debunking** extremist propaganda, should only be directed at a well-researched and understood audience which is already engaged with extremist content.
• **Prepare for success** and remember to take into consideration all **security risks** for your organisation and partners.
• **Don´t spread extremist propaganda**. Studies indicate that raising young people's awareness of an issue which authorities disapprove of or consider inappropriate or harmful may actually stimulates (more) interest in the issue rather than dissuading them from looking into it. Counter-narratives in particular should therefore only target a well-defined and understood audience that is curious about extremist content or sympathises with it already.
• **Avoid stigmatisation**. When trying to increase the resilience of a specific target audience against extremist propaganda and recruitment, be aware that you might be perceived as stereotyping and mistrusting this group. Ensure you have a good understanding of the sensitivities and concerns of your target audience, so as not to foster polarisation inadvertently.

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[6] *RAN GAMMMA+ paper, https://bit.ly/2F4zzTT*

Key questions discussed at the Policy and Practice event

Creators of counter- and alternative narratives from various EU Member States presented inspiring examples of campaigns in which youngsters were involved. Q&As and breakout sessions looked in depth into the campaigns presented, using RAN´s 'GAMMMA+ Model for effective alternative and counter-narratives' as a navigation tool.

The discussions during the breakout sessions often revolved around these questions:

- How can youngsters remain credible messengers for peers at risk of radicalisation, when collaborating with authorities?
- How can authorities support young people – in criticising extremism and promoting inclusion – without prescribing their messages?
- What are the potential concerns or limitations when working with young people from a policy-maker's perspective?
- How can structured and trusting partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors be fostered?

Key challenges and opportunities

During the course of the event, it became clear that different organisational cultures, perspectives and tools could result in misunderstandings – and in some cases, lead to mistrust. This was addressed in breakout sessions, which focused on ways of enhancing trust to foster sustainable and effective forms of cooperation between young people and policy-makers.

Insights from young people

Amongst the **challenges** articulated by young people were:

1) Working with big organisations, and governments in particular, might kill the 'creative edge and spirit' due to too much emphasis on regulations and procedures.

2) When working on and with target audiences who already sympathise with radical ideas, being close to government actors could be a threat to credibility, and therefore the effectiveness, of young people as P/CVE actors.

Some of the main **opportunities** of working more directly with government actors were voiced as:

1) Potentially more and sustainable funding, plus general support, e.g. the opportunity to work with experienced experts and professionals.

2) Potentially more impact at the strategic level linked to working with policy makers directly.

3) An in-depth understanding of governments' perspectives on key issues and their overall P/CVE portfolios and strategies.

> *"**Youth are … essential actors in finding solutions** to the issues faced by young people in the world today. Their energy and leadership has been demonstrated across the world, and they must be fully engaged in social development themselves and supported in this work by their societies."[7]*
> *UNESCO*

Insights from policy-makers and C&N practitioners

Amongst the **challenges** articulated were:

1) Reputational risks linked to supporting the 'wrong' groups/individuals – those with a perspective on extremism and how to prevent it that goes against the organisation´s policy.

2) Reduced effectiveness of young people as P/CVE actors if they are steered too much, and to the extent that this interferes with the young people´s key objectives and motivations.

Some of the main **opportunities** of working more directly with young people were found to be:

1) If young people are close to the target audience, they could significantly increase the likelihood of any P/CVE intervention being effective whilst reducing the risks of stigmatisation or other unintended consequences.

2) Young people are empowered early on, which helps them develop their full potential as active citizens and democrats in liberal democracies.

Designing a framework to foster cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors

It is first about **trusted partnerships**, then about the project.

Governments should try to set a **strategic framework** based on a clear understanding of the desired 'end game', meaning the shared values and policy objectives.

Within this framework**, CSOs operate independently** and execute their projects according to local *Theories of Change* (see below).

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[7] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/

How to build trusted partnerships between young P/CVE actors and policy makers

Questions on how to foster better mutual understanding and how to build a trusted partnership were found to be very relevant to many of the participants.

The role and importance of trust cannot be underestimated or under-valued. Without a purposeful and consistent effort to foster trust and build strong relationships at every step of the way, even the best-designed and thoughtful engagement processes will almost certainly either fail or fall far short of the success you seek to achieve.

Step 1) Identify potential challenges

Creating trusted relationships and networks bringing together different 'cultures' comes with several challenges. For example, communication styles vary, there are differences in conventions, different approaches to giving feedback and to voicing disagreement.

Other aspects could decrease trust and should be anticipated:

- perceived bias among those convening or facilitating the process, or in the information available;
- limited engagement with, or understanding of, the processes and expectations of engagement;
- political sensitivities and polarisation;
- persistence of 'wicked issues':

"Problem wickedness is not about a higher degree of complexity, it is about a fundamentally different kind of challenge to the design process, one that makes solution secondary and problem understanding central."[8]

Understandings of root causes, drivers and the push and pull factors of radicalisation pathways may also differ. If this is the case, going through a process of creating a **P/CVE "Theory of Change"** (ToC) together for the (hyper) local context or target group(s) might foster trusted relationships.

"A 'Theory of Change' (ToC) is a strategic narrative describing how a driving or mitigating factor identified in a P/CVE assessment can be changed with some type of intervention to achieve a desired impact – in this case preventing or stopping violence." [9]

Many organisations work from an implicit theory of change. P/CVE actors then design programmes based on untested assumptions about what will foster change rather than using research to design evidence-based programmes.

When developing a P/CVE ToC, the drivers and root causes of violent extremism in the local context need to have already been researched, understood and agreed upon between the P/CVE *partners.*

For example:

- IF the local population is vulnerable due to unemployment and extremists pay salaries, THEN employment-oriented activities can be effective.

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[8] https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/problems/complex-or-wicked-issues
[9] http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FINAL-2015-CT-COIN-Theories-of-Change.pdf

- IF a (mis)understanding of religious texts is a key driver, THEN religious instruction for the 'correct' view; knowledge of 'other' religions can be effective.
- IF black and white thinking or lack of capacity to deal with ambiguity is a root cause, THEN promoting the value and benefits of pluralism and civic engagement can be effective.
- IF adventure seeking, need for status or sense of isolation are a push factor, THEN offering alternative avenues, sports, music, arts, youth groups can be effective.
- IF grooming by extremists is present, THEN focussing on empowering credible alternative voices and groups from the community can be effective.

In a nutshell: while fostering employment, for example, is always important, P/CVE budgets and expertise should only be deployed IF unemployment is an evidence-based cause of violent extremism.

For more details and the **"How-to ToC"** process, please consult the recent UNDP Handbook, 'Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism programming: a toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation'. [10]

Building trust[11]

Step 2) How to plan for trust and success

Organisational behaviour scholar Richard Hackman argues that the best way to ensure a positive process in a team is to create initial conditions that set up the team for success [12]. Hackmann sees three pillars for effective multicultural teams:

a) Structure the team for success

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[10] http://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogc/documents/PVE_ImprovingImpactProgrammingToolkit_2018.pdf
[11] https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-illustration-trust-building-business-concept-cartoon-ideas-image46455991
[12] https://hbr.org/2016/06/how-to-build-trust-on-your-cross-cultural-team

For a multi-facetted multicultural team comprising young people and public servants from various backgrounds, the team must have a clear and compelling direction, its members must have access to the information and resources they need to successfully carry out the work, stakeholders in different locations and functions must be on board with the team's agenda, and the team has to be staffed wisely"[13] — ideally with people who have the requisite soft and technical skills.

b) Understand the cross-cultural make-up of your team
Cross-cultural teams need to understand the different cultures, biases, language differences, and 'fault lines' within the team, as well as the potential for misconception and miscommunication.

c) Set clear norms, stick to them and address conflict immediately
Establishing team norms that everyone sticks to — no matter what their personal preferences might be – will reduce the risk of misunderstandings. Creating a 'safe space' to discuss sensitive topics early on will reduce the risk of potential conflicts of interest or opinion escalating.

The participants in Madrid were very much aligned on the relevant factors for effective and trusting relationships between young people and policy-makers:

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[13] https://hbr.org/2016/06/how-to-build-trust-on-your-cross-cultural-team
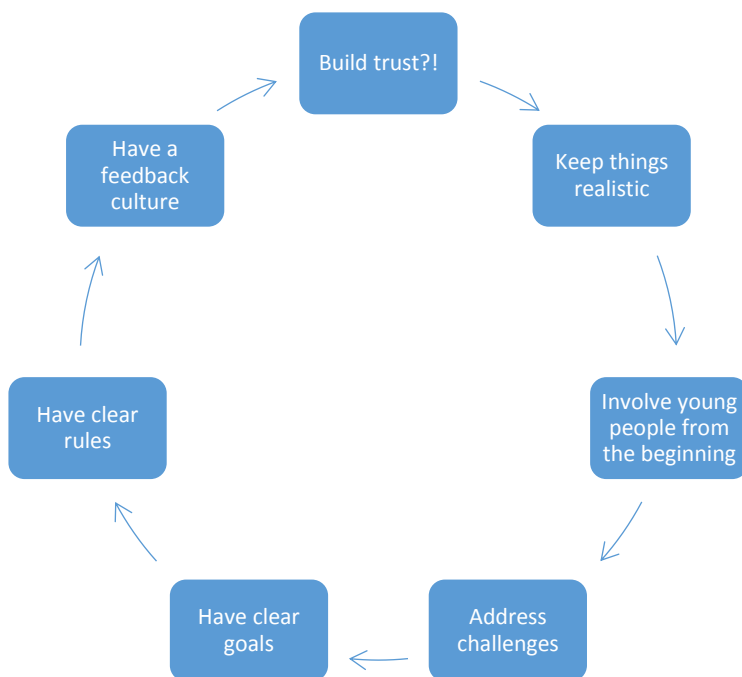
Key findings

- Particularly when addressing audiences below the age of 25, young people might understand the way their peers think and feel much better than others. Young people are also more in tune with emerging technologies and more able to innovate in this sense than most policy-makers and other P/CVE stakeholders.
- Policy-makers and P/CVE practitioners agree that if young people are close to the target audience, they could significantly increase the likelihood of P/CVE interventions being effective and reduce the risks of stigmatisation or other unintended consequences.
- Creating trusted relationships between young people and policy-makers, who might have quite different backgrounds and perspectives, will be key. Without a purposeful and consistent effort to foster trust and build strong relationships at every step of the way, even the best-designed and thought-out engagement processes will almost certainly either fail or fall far short of the objectives.
- In a nutshell: **young people should generally be involved in a more sustainable and strategic way in the planning and implementation of P/CVE interventions, based on the expertise and experience they can bring to the process and the project.**