LOCAL STRATEGY: ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE LOCAL ACTION PLAN TO PREVENT RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM[1]

Marije Meines

RadarAdvies, Senior Expert, Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence*

At-risk individuals who radicalise and become violent extremists or terrorists do so for diverse reasons and through different pathways. They do, however, all live locally and interact with the local community, organisations and perhaps extremist milieus embedded within some local communities. The fact that someone might be in the process of radicalising can best be detected by the (professional) persons in the direct vicinity of him or her and can also best be influenced by those around him or her. This means that at local level – close to those who might be susceptible to radicalisation and close to their peers and relatives – early detection and prevention of radicalisation can be most effective. It is therefore crucial that detection, prevention and interventions are carried out at the local level.

Most countries are aware of this fact and have a national countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy. In most countries, this national strategy provides an outline for local or regional CVE strategy and actions. In one way or another the CVE strategy will have to be translated into actions at the local or regional level. The local level is the domain of the first-line practitioners like youth workers, community police officers, teachers, family support workers, health professionals and exit workers and local or regional authorities. They all carry out their work close to persons who might radicalise or who are radicalised, and close to the peers and relatives of the possibly radicalised person.

The preventive approach (detecting and intervening) needs to be tailored to the needs of the person who is susceptible/vulnerable to violent extremism in his or her local setting. This means different local or regional organisations like youth workers, family support services, schools and community police with different expertise are needed. They all form part of the strategy. This means multi-agency cooperation. The coordination of this multi-agency work can best be carried out by the local authorities. They can form the linking pin between the practitioners' organisations and can develop the needed framework and strategy for this multi-agency cooperation.

Often the coordination of these local frontline practitioners is a major challenge for sustained and effective prevention work. How does one cooperate efficiently when there are different mandates, missions and confidentiality barriers between government agencies? How can we

establish trust in information-sharing, and structure and coordinate efforts? Similarly, what methods exist across different intervention levels of general prevention, with at-risk individuals and those who have already become violent extremists? How can we most effectively engage with local communities and civil society organisations on the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism? An effective local prevention strategy is possible when all the necessary actors from local government and civil society are operating closely together within a specific framework towards a shared goal. To create this situation a local strategy/local action plan must be developed. A lot of regions, cities and municipalities within the European Union have done so or are in the process of doing this.

Every local or regional CVE strategy is developed within the national context and organisational and political setting and should be tailored to the local context and demographics. Due to these differing situations, a one-size fits all blueprint for a local strategy is neither possible nor worth pursuing. There are however common features or elements which should be part of any successful local CVE strategy plan. Several of these elements have been discussed within the RAN LOCAL working group and are described in the RAN Policy Paper "Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles" from November 2016.

This article gives a brief description of five common elements which should be part of any local or regional CVE strategy plan:

• Local/regional analyses
• CVE strategy and goals
• Definitions
• Conditions for multi-agency cooperation
• Description of interventions.

Local/regional analyses

Before drafting the actual local action plan, an analysis of the local context should be made. Every local setting has its own history and setting and possible violent extremist groups or specific at-risk groups with affiliations to extremist or terrorist groups within their local community. These may be violent left-wing, right-wing, animal rights or religiously inspired groups. The analyses should also encompass the socioeconomic characteristics (demographics) of the population in the region, city or municipality as well as facts such as the number of migrants in a community since 2015, historical affiliations within left-wing groups or persons from the local community travelling to Syria and Iraq to join Daesh. The depicting of the local context will automatically lead to assumptions and reasoning about why a local CVE strategy is needed and why emphasis within the local CVE strategy is on certain aspects. The analyses of the local setting will form the basis and reasoning behind the local CVE strategy.

CVE strategy and goals

Alongside the description of the local context and demographics, the local CVE strategy should also provide insight into the beliefs behind the strategy. Why is it important in this context to prevent radicalisation

and violent extremism, and who within the local community should be protected (for example the youth against recruitment, society against radicalised persons or polarisation, etc.)? And how does the preventive approach fit within the local, regional or national setting? This not only provides the several partners needed in local CVE with a framework to jointly work together towards the same shared prevention goals, it also provides the local community with information about the local CVE strategy which they might be able to relate to.

The "beliefs" behind the CVE strategy are mostly a political matter and should be decided on and developed with the political representatives (mayor, prefect or leader of the local council). It might be a challenge to get this political support but investing in it is crucial. Without political support funding for the local strategy and most importantly the interventions can be hard. This RAN Paper gives an overview of tips on how to get political support from local coordinators.

Definitions

Working with multiple organisations within the same framework towards shared goals will benefit from a set of shared definitions. What are the definitions of radicalisation, violent extremism and polarisation, for example? Also, clarification should be made of the different types of radicalisation and extremism that exist in order to ensure that one type of radicalisation (mostly religiously inspired) is not singled out and becomes the focus of a strategy that was meant to also include all types of radicalisation.

Conditions for multi-agency cooperation

The four most important conditions for multi-agency cooperation are shared goals, working arrangements on information-sharing, situational awareness and knowledge about the mandates and work processes of partners, and a coordinator who functions as a point of contact for all organisations. Within the local strategy plan these four conditions should be addressed.

Shared Goals

The shared goals on a general level should be described in the beliefs or introduction part of the strategy. The sub-goals can be described when listing the interventions that may be carried out by the partners of the multi-agency cooperation. It should be part of the working process that at the beginning persons or projects clarify which of the general goals of the strategy this specific project or intervention is working towards and if possible also define the sub-goals within this. Each year the goals should be discussed with all stakeholders and if necessary adjusted.

Information-sharing

To be able to discuss tailored interventions and actions regarding targeted persons it is crucial to be able to share information between employees of organisations about the at-risk or radicalised person and

his or her environment. Most organisations are not easily allowed to share information about persons. One of the biggest challenges of multi-agency work is therefore the accurate sharing of information between the involved partners. To make information sharing possible a framework, an agreement and working arrangements are necessary. An information sharing protocol where these three elements are sorted out and regulated is key. In most cities or municipalities information sharing protocols between organisations already exist. Use these as examples.

Partner Awareness

In the strategy plan there should be a description of all partners involved in the local effort to prevent radicalisation and counter violent extremism. For each partner a description should be made of their specific role, mandate and task regarding the prevention of radicalisation. It is best to develop this part of the strategy plan together with all needed partners. This provides valuable insights into each other's working processes, mandates and possibilities. The involved organisations should decide together whether this part of the strategy plan will be published or not. It is however a crucial condition for effective multi-agency cooperation that the organisations have knowledge of each other's mandates, tasks and role within the local prevention strategy. This RAN Paper contains some insights on how to facilitate cooperation between the local municipality and police.

Coordination

Multi-agency cooperation needs coordination. Only one partner in the cooperation can be the coordinator. The coordinator should be able to count on the acceptance of their coordinating role by the partners. Also, the process of making the cooperation possible – the general working arrangements – should be overseen by the coordinator. The description of the process of cooperation should be part of the (internal) local strategy plan. For example, the working process of the meetings to discuss specific interventions should be described and coordinated by the coordinator. For example, the frequency of these meetings, who takes part in them and what mandate the representatives of the organisations need when taking part should be made clear beforehand.

Another challenge which needs to be faced by the coordinator is the creation of a network within the local or regional setting to be able to cooperate jointly and effectively. In this network the governmental organisations such as police, social services or health organisations and NGOs and civil society should be represented. This RAN Paper contains a description of how local networks can be developed.
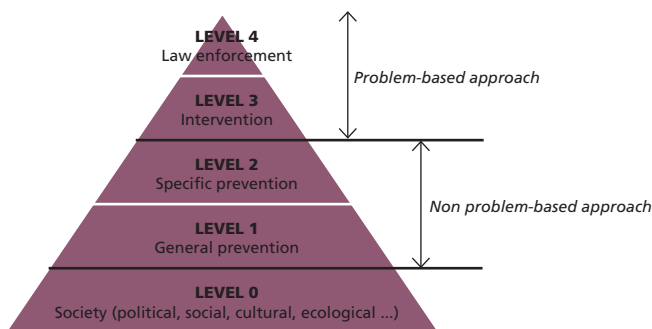
Interventions

Finally a general overview of the interventions that will be used to prevent radicalisation or counter violent extremism should be part of the local CVE strategy plan.

Local or regional authorities can overlook and facilitate the local CVE interventions and actions. As coordinator, they have the capacity and position to overlook what is needed on a local level and how to structure the different projects and initiatives within the local strategy. This facilitates the local organisations and NGOs in developing interventions and taking their responsibility or role in the CVE strategy.

To be able to overlook the interventions and actions these interventions should be analysed and put into the local context with each other. It should be asked, for example, who the target audience for the intervention is, what it aims at, and whether it is a specific intervention or a more general one. Most municipal strategies or action plans operate with a so-called prevention triangle which categorises prevention across different intervention levels. An example of a model to work with is Johan Deklerck's prevention pyramid.

Deklerck's pyramid is used for preventive actions in schools but can be used to rank local preventive actions as well. Deklerck defines 5 types of preventive levels on which actions can take place. The actions can range from very early prevention to law enforcement.

Figure 1 Prevention Pyramid Johan Deklerck

The interventions carried out within the local or regional setting should be categorised before they start. It is important to realise what the aim of the intervention is and whether it is problem-based or non-problem-based prevention. The description of the levels helps the categorising of the interventions.

Level 0 Society: The national and global status quo and development are not something you can greatly influence from the local level. However, you can take stock of what is happening on a national or even worldwide level and how this might affect the local situation (for example the migration crisis or the rise of Daesh). It is good to know who you need to contact if a national crisis affects your local situation, where you can get information, and invest in useful contacts outside your local framework.

Level 1 General prevention: The local habitat and culture impact on the actions of the inhabitants of the city/town/region. If people feel safe and included most of them will engage with their (local) environment in a positive way and be more resilient against polarising views. Actions

2. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-local/docs/ex_post_ran_local_athens_23-24_05_2016_en.pdf

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taken by the local authorities with positive messages, training in skills and knowledge of professionals and general inclusiveness interventions can be seen as actions at the general prevention level.

Level 2 Specific prevention: Actions that target specific possible problems in order to prevent them. For example, anti-discrimination campaigns, awareness-raising about possible radicalisation among the youth or the dangers of violent extremism.

Level 3 Intervention: Actions targeting a specific situation, or targeting one or more specified persons. For example, talking to family members of a right-wing radicalised young man or teaming up with the community against possible recruitment for Daesh around the local mosque.

Level 4 Law enforcement: Law enforcement can prevent the actual planned criminal act to happen if they can come into action before the act is carried out.

In addition to the general framework of the interventions, the local CVE strategy plan could encompass a list of the standard interventions possible within the local or regional setting. This could for example mean a list of mentoring, family support, youth work, mental health and exit support interventions.

These five elements should be part of the local or regional CVE strategy in some form alongside other elements needed or appropriate within the local context.

Once the local CVE strategy is developed and agreed upon the actual work takes place. An effective way to kick off the actual multi-agency cooperation after the local CVE strategy plan is drafted is to plan an annual project. Especially in the first year after the development of the strategy this can be of huge benefit to the partners needed in the local preventive approach. A project with clear goals and steps will streamline the focus of all partners.

To conclude, the overall goal of the local or regional prevention strategy/action plan is to provide a clear mandate for prevention work and to allocate responsibility for specific intervention to individual agencies. The process of co-creation of a local strategy or action plan is inherently useful for diverse local government agencies with different mandates and responsibilities. Getting the right stakeholders around the table to discuss their individual responsibilities and mandates provides the opportunity to create a holistic approach, creating synergies of cooperation and unity of purpose. This will and should be a tailored process and strategy adaptive to the local or regional setting. However national and local governments can learn from each other's experiences and share tips and lessons. The European Union facilitates this exchange via the Radicalisation Awareness Network and in other fora.