

EX POST PAPER

Engaging with communities

Collaboration between local authorities and communities in PVE

Summary

Communities need support from their authorities. Likewise, authorities need to involve the communities they protect, represent and support. Building strong cooperation structures and partnerships will therefore positively impact efforts to **prevent polarisation and radicalisation**.

But in establishing cooperation, both local authorities and community representatives face many challenges. This ex post paper **discusses the challenges, solutions and choices at different stages of collaboration: 1. preparations, 2. establishing contact, 3. selecting partners, 4. dialogue and collaboration and 5. responding to a crisis.**

This paper builds upon the lessons learned previously ⁽¹⁾, as well as findings from the RAN Local and RAN YF&C joint meeting on ‘*Engaging with communities*’.

This paper is written for **local coordinators, community workers and community representatives** interested and involved in the prevention of polarisation and radicalisation.

¹ RAN LOCAL ‘*Engaging with religious communities*’ (2016) and RAN YF&C ‘*Strengthening community resilience to polarisation and radicalisation*’ (2017)

What is a community?

Before discussing community engagement with regard to preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), it is important to have a clear understanding of what constitutes a community, as well as the different types of community. Gerald Delanty (2003) differentiates between three types of communities: location-based, identity-based (moral, interest, ethnicity) and organisationally based communities⁽²⁾. Reality is however more complex than this categorisation would suggest: actual communities can be characterised by different kinds of relations, some existing at the same time. Paul James (2012) recognises this and notes that communities can be nested and/or intersecting; one community can contain another — for example a location-based community may contain a number of ethnic communities⁽³⁾.

When engaging with communities in PCVE, it is important to consider what binds people to a community, and which type of relation is most dominant and relevant. This helps us to understand who is represented in this community, and whether this is actually the group you wish to reach. The Australian Minister for Multicultural Affairs had this in mind when recommending the use of sporting venues rather than places of worship to reach relevant individuals for initiatives to prevent Islamic-inspired radicalisation⁽⁴⁾.

Why are communities relevant to PCVE?

Although governments and public authorities must do their utmost to prevent polarisation, extremism and radicalisation, these issues cannot be tackled effectively without community involvement. Polarisation, which can create a breeding ground for radicalisation, involves growing tensions between communities. Trust and dialogue between communities and authorities can help to prevent and temper this process⁽⁵⁾. Extremism and polarisation thrive more readily when communities themselves do not challenge those who seek to radicalise others. Communities can also offer a sense of belonging, which provides an alternative to the sense of belonging that extremist groups may use to try to seduce vulnerable individuals⁽⁶⁾.

Community engagement is therefore a vital tool in the prevention of polarisation and extremism. But collaboration with local authorities is in the interest of communities as well: by sharing knowledge and resources with local authorities, they can better serve their members and protect them from the influences of extremists.

To initiate and maintain a constructive relationship with regards to PCVE, both local authorities and community representatives must however overcome several challenges.

² Delanty, G. (2003) 'Community' as cited in '[The Moral Heart of Public Service](#)' (2017, p.215)

³ James, P. (2012) as cited in '[The Moral Heart of Public Service](#)' (2017, p.216-217)

⁴ Murphy, C. (2016) '[Community engagement to counter radicalisation is a team effort](#)'

⁵ RAN Ex post paper (2017) '[Polarisation management](#)'

⁶ RAN Issue paper M. (2016) '[The root causes of radicalisation](#)' p. 3.

Community engagement in PCVE: a step-by-step approach

Local authorities and community representatives each face challenges at different stages of their collaboration. Sometimes these challenges differ, and sometimes they overlap. The ex post papers of previous RAN LOCAL and RAN YF&C meetings addressed some of these challenges and solutions ⁽⁷⁾. The RAN Collection also extensively discusses lessons and inspiring practices concerning community engagement ⁽⁸⁾. This paper will now combine these efforts with the findings from the joint RAN Local and RAN YF&C meeting on ‘*Engaging with communities*’. The results is a set of guidelines and considerations on taking a step-by-step approach to setting up and maintaining successful collaboration between a local authority and communities with regard to the prevention of polarisation and radicalisation.



Reality is more complex than this step-by-step model suggests. The dynamic nature of communities implies a continuous need to reflect, retrace steps and refresh the network. This means that considerations and choices presented in the model may come up in a different order or simultaneously, depending on the community and partner involved. It may not be possible to complete some of the steps and preparations due to a lack of time and resources. However, the model should facilitate understanding of the challenges and considerations involved, and provide an opportunity to reflect upon the choices that are part of the process.

⁷ RAN YF&C ex post paper (2017) ‘[Strengthening Community Resilience](#)’; RAN LOCAL ex post paper (2016) ‘[How to cooperate with religious organisations and organisations](#)’

⁸ RAN Collection ‘[Community engagement](#)’

Step 1: Preparations

1.1 Setting the preconditions

Before setting up collaboration with external partners, the local authority should consider:

- 1) what effects it wants to achieve through engagement and collaboration with communities for PCVE;
- 2) breaking down and specifying these effects in measurable/communicable short-term and long-term goals;
- 3) clarifying which resources (both money-and staff-wise) it is willing to spend in order to achieve these effects/goals – do this honestly and realistically.

These three issues (effects, goals, resources) should be anchored internally to ensure that the organisation ‘speaks with one voice in all external communication and action.

1.2 Mapping and research

Once the objectives and preconditions of the PCVE community network have been established, relevant communities can be mapped by the local authority. RAN LOCAL representatives listed numerous channels through which such a mapping exercise can be executed:

- by using the local authority’s existing networks. Colleagues from relevant government organisations can be contacted for information and contact details on communities;
- by searching for communities online on social media, websites and fora;
- by visiting locations in the city where communities might gather or communicate: libraries, supermarkets, youth centres, places of worship, sports clubs;
- by letting communities know that the local authority exists and is interested: putting out flyers with contact details.

If possible, the local authority should already include information on communities, such as local history and points of contact. The more complete the map of relevant communities and the richer the context, the easier it is to make calculated choices when forming a PCVE community network.



Considerations for local authorities

- The largest and most organised communities are often easiest to recognise and reach. But these are not always the most important. Put effort into identifying smaller and organised communities as well.
- Communities are sometimes more diverse and complex than is obvious at first glance. Do not get stuck on labels and respect the pluralism of communities.
- The mapping of communities is a continuous effort. Communities are fluid, and the network should reflect this dynamic. You should therefore constantly check whether your network is still up to date.
- The mapping exercise can be conducted by an intern to minimise the costs.



Considerations for communities

- Reach out to the local authority if your community wishes to engage with it. Sometimes there is a willingness to cooperate, but the local authority is unaware of the pluralism within communities.
- Partner-up and collaborate with other organisations or related communities in order to become organised and visible.

Step 2: Establishing relationships

When establishing contact, it is important that the local authority does not come barging in with the topic of preventing radicalisation. The collaboration between local authorities and communities revolves around building trust. This is not created by imposing an agenda that may be considered stigmatising or uninteresting to the other. Instead, the local authority should start with listening, recognising the needs and interests of the community, and showing genuine interest. Framing is essential.

That does not mean the local authority should have a hidden agenda. Trust thrives on transparency, so the objective of the engagement should be voiced in time. The relationship should grow in a natural manner, for example by local authority representatives first visiting community events such as festivities. This can be followed by one-on-one contact where the needs of the community are discussed. In time the prevention of radicalisation can be addressed. While the engagement between some communities and the local authority remains restricted to such forms of dialogue, others will be more closely involved the local preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) approach.



Considerations for local authorities

- Communities are diverse. Recognise this complexity and try different approaches with different communities and key persons when establishing contact. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.
- Establishing a relationship with communities who feel targeted by authorities is difficult and time-consuming; nonetheless, this constitutes a first step in advancing community engagement, resilience and the willingness to deal with issues such as polarisation and radicalisation.
- Do not approach communities as aliens. Treating people as exotic creates an '*us versus them*' dynamic instead of trust.
- When reaching out to communities, do not come across as condescending towards them. It is important that community representatives feel the partnership is an equal one.
- Some local authorities choose to outsource contact with communities for PCVE to an NGO. There can be less distrust towards a NGO than towards a local authority.



Considerations for communities

- Asking questions about why the local authority is interested in your community, what their incentive is for contacting you is of course acceptable.
- Credible brokers, if seen with the local authority, may lose their credibility within the community. Community representatives should be aware that the rest of the community might not share their new gained trust towards authorities. Pacing is crucial.

Step 3: Selecting partners

Once the local authority and communities have become acquainted, the prevention of radicalisation can be addressed. At this point it can be useful to distinguish different levels of engagement:

- Dialogue:** This is the lowest level of engagement. Participants at the joint RAN Local and YF&C meeting agreed that all communities and organisations should be included in dialogue as isolation is not desirable. This does mean that local authorities should interact with organisations that are not in line with the democratic norms and values of the municipality.
- Collaboration:** This indicates a more intense level of engagement. Communities at this level are included in the local PCVE network.
- Partnership:** Include an organisation or community representative as a cornerstone in the local PCVE approach. This organisation can for instance play an intermediary role in the contact between the local authority and other communities. The community can partake in the co-creation of the local PCVE approach.

When selecting organisations and community representatives to collaborate or partner with, the local authority has to make choices. Since resources are limited, it is important to select the parties that will benefit the local approach to preventing radicalisation the most. However, the reasoning for and communication of these choices must be treated with care to avoid stigmatisation. Damage done at the start of a collaboration takes time and effort to repair.

When working more closely with an organisation or community representative, vetting may be required. Close collaboration with organisations or persons who do not subscribe to democratic values can discredit the local authority. The RAN Local paper '*How to cooperate with religious organisations*'⁽⁹⁾ provides guidelines and questions that can assist local authorities in selecting and vetting potential partners. These are also mentioned under 'Considerations for local authorities' on the next page. The key organisations within the local PCVE community network should be listed in the local strategy or action plan against violent extremism alongside a description of the reason and aim of the cooperation.

⁹ RAN LOCAL ex post paper (2016) '[How to cooperate with religious organisations](#)'



Considerations for local authorities

Vetting

- Vetting should never be the first step in building a relationship with communities. This will only be needed when moving on to a more intense level of engagement.
- Vetting is a sensitive matter. Be transparent on what the procedure entails and why it is needed.
- Look into the funding that the organisations receive, when and how they have been mentioned in the media, look at the website, press releases etc.
- What is their ideology and mission? Who are the main members/followers of this organisation in your local community? What is the organisation's view on pluralism?
- Appraise the role the organisation/representative plays within the local community: who do they represent and what have they already done about countering violent extremism and preventing radicalisation?
- 'Integrity testing' is needed for individuals responsible for community organisations, as funding groups with a poor reputation can jeopardise a wider project.

Selection of partners

- If official recognition is only given to one representative/community/NGO, you might lose the trust of other communities.
- Have a long-term strategy setting out why you are cooperating with an organisation. Be realistic about the resources and outcomes of community engagement.
- Resources are limited. However, the value of network is not limited to PCVE – the network can be useful for many other purposes, therefore it should be possible pool to collaborate with other budgets.



Considerations for communities

- Creating awareness and trust with the local authority can be a frustrating process. Bureaucracy and misunderstandings are part of the process. Patience and transparency are key.
- Questions that form part of the vetting procedure or integrity testing may seem stigmatising. However, keep in mind that the local authority cannot afford to partner with organisations that do not subscribe to democratic values.
- Actions speak louder than words. Collaborating with other organisations and doing good work provides the local authority with concrete examples of the intentions and capacities of your organisation.

Step 4: Dialogue and collaboration

The collaboration between communities and the local authority is based on reciprocity and trust. Both parties should benefit from the engagement. To build such cooperation, it is important to consider what is discussed, when, where and with whom.

What and when? Setting the agenda

Step 2 outlined how the local authority should not immediately direct set a PCVE-focused agenda. Community representatives work on a voluntary basis and are likely to have other priorities. If the engagement with the local authority does not provide them a clear benefit, there will be little incentive to participate. The agenda should therefore first be shaped by the community: what are their concerns? At this point, the local authority should listen and if possible offer solutions. In looking for solutions, proactively looking into the community can be helpful. What are the community's main concerns and issues? Do their members/followers have specific problems? A community representative might be unaware of the assistance that local authorities can provide in response to certain issues.

When the relationship evolves, it is useful to resort to action planning and a clear rationale. Objectives and targets should be well-defined: building trust, creating awareness, information hub, dialogue, resilience-building etc. If radicalisation and extremism remain sensitive topics, is it possible to concentrate on early prevention? If so, it not even be necessary use the terms 'radicalisation' and 'extremism'. Sometimes discussing terms and definitions such as such as 'terrorism' can offer a great opening for discussion and awareness. However, establishing shared objectives alone is not sufficient. The main challenge is finding ways to maintain relationships when the initial purpose for contact is not there. Community agendas move on and keeping communication lines open is tricky. If the collaboration does not meet objectives, the motivation to cooperate will diminish. It is therefore important to share successes, update objectives and continue reciprocity.

Where? Safe spaces and activities

A safe space for cooperation and trust-building is essential in any intervention with communities or community members. A safe space entails:

- a. A physical safe space that does not represent any party's 'territory' (e.g. whether a city hall is considered 'safe' depends on whether people trust the local authority). Sometimes a party's territory can deliberately be chosen as the location as a gesture to a particular community.
- b. The right people to build relationships with, within and between communities. These people need to be credible in the eyes of community members, trustworthy, honest and able to empathise with different perspectives.
- c. The rules/agreements/rituals concerning how to cooperate. This refers to practicalities (whether notes are being taken, whether the press is involved, how sensitive information will be shared and handled, etc.).

Sometimes a safe environment can also be created by introducing an activity. Participants at the joint RAN LOCAL and YF&C event suggested activities such as walking, cooking classes, attending festivities, or even meeting online. This change of dynamic can make a big difference. An important aspect of successful

community work is the 'fun factor'. Attending meetings should be worthwhile; the minimum requirement is some good food.

Who? Capacities and skills

The success of collaboration between the community and local authority depends a great deal on the people involved. Building a relationship is, regardless of the objective and process involved, about human interaction. The local authority will deal with many different communities, each with their own norms, values and customs. One of the most crucial skills for this type of work is the transcultural competence of the community workers and authorities. Both parties should be able to empathise with others, based on a rudimentary knowledge and understanding of cultural differences as well as respect for these differences. A good starting point for mutual understanding is to discuss commonalities: sport, common history, the neighbourhood etc.

It is also important to acknowledge everyone's multiple identity. People are not only a member of a community, but also a professional, a friend, a parent. People branded as being part of a community might not feel that they are. Discussing the multitude of identities is a good way to for everybody to get to know each other. Participants at the RAN YF&C and LOCAL meeting also underlined the importance of keeping the same point of contact within the local authority. As the relationship between communities and local authority is a relationship between people, trust needs to be rebuilt with staff changes. However, both communities and local authorities should be wary that the community PCVE network does not become too dependent on a select group of people.

While cooperation between the local authority and a community may first consist of one-on-one interaction, the engagement can develop into a network in which several communities are connected to each other. Creating trust between communities also has great value for PCVE. However, the dynamic will change when a local authority meets with a mixed group of communities. When multiple communities are invited to the same event, is important to allow room for multiple perspectives; those who are not present are as important as those are. Local authorities can be the facilitator for round table discussions and for dialogue, explaining what legal boundaries are for, and what can be done and said in public. When sensitive topics such as hate crime or ideology are being discussed, it can be useful to invite speakers and/or facilitators from outside of the municipality. This makes it easier for participants to speak freely.



Considerations for local authorities

- Volunteer work should not be taken for granted or used as a 'cheap' form of PCVE work. Community representatives have to put in a lot of effort to retain the trust of their community. Understand and appreciate the effort that community representatives put in.
- Never overpromise what you can deliver as a local authority, as underdelivering will significantly harm the trust that you have built up.
- You might not understand the norms and customs of a community. Be critical about how you do things and don't act offended if you are criticised.

- Creating a safe space is about having an eye for detail: use local entrepreneurs for the catering, adjust language to the audience and use different forms of communication: e-mail is not the obvious communication tool for everyone.
- Be sensitive regarding the position of the community representative and how this is influenced by interacting with the local authority. Some sensitive issues can best be discussed behind closed doors.
- Some community representatives might be more interested in personal gain than in actual collaboration between the community and local authority. It is not necessarily bad if someone has another incentive, but it shouldn't jeopardise the relationship between the community and the local authority. Sometimes the community representative acts as a gatekeeper instead of a broker.



Considerations for communities

- The collaboration has to be interesting for the community representative, but the results should also be clear to the rest of the community. Otherwise you risk losing credibility.
- Be open to the local authority about who you can reach as a community representative.
- Local authorities should be regarded as critical friends. When you are involved in the network, have a platform to provide input for the local PCVE approach, and accept help and resources for the local authority; you should be approachable and open to feedback. Trust is a two-way street.

Step 5: Responding to a crisis

Following (violent) incidents, the first visible action is often a crackdown, or security-related. While these actions help to reduce violence and deter aggressors, it does not suffice. Without dialogue about the incidents and dynamics leading up to them, community issues get pushed into ungoverned, underground places (both online and offline). Instead, local authorities should involve communities after a crisis and work together on recovery. The network should already be in place when a crisis occurs, so response should be the last step in community engagement. Having a network of communities in place will allow for a more sophisticated response when an incident occurs.

The scale of a crisis can differ, and the response should differ accordingly. A crisis can for instance develop due to an escalating demonstration, a hate crime, or in a worst-case scenario, a terrorist attack. Regardless of the type of crisis, the local authority should contact the community PCVE network to check the concerns, needs, fears and needs of the different communities. Affected communities might need reassurance by the local authority, or could receive support through an official press release. Sometimes it is already possible to assemble the PCVE community network to discuss an emergency response together. On other occasions, it may be more appropriate to stay focused on the main goal rather than address the conflict directly. Each partnership and crisis is different and requires an individualised approach to problem-solving and conflict resolution. The key to success is to already have a relationship of mutual trust in place with key figures in the community.

Certain other measures that can be taken to prepare ahead of time for a general crisis. One of the biggest challenges in the aftermath of a crisis is a spike in media attention. If the crisis involves a certain community, they will be targeted by the media. It is very helpful to make sure the messages from the local authority and communities match. Local authorities should communicate with the local community network before communicating with the media. Some local authorities also work with standardised procedures and pre-organised teams who are available should a crisis or situation occur which requires immediate response. These are specialist service providers (dialogue, conflict-reduction experts) who can deploy quickly to engage dialogue and re-orient communities so that they work together on shared problems. Once the heat has died down, the local authority and communities can work on community recovery.



Considerations for local authorities

- Get to know your Counter Terrorism people. If something happens, they will act, and this will impact local communities.
- Assess the impact that the crisis or incident is having on different communities.
- Be resolute and react swiftly against a possible rise in hate crimes following a crisis. Communities must feel safe.



Considerations for communities

Participants at the joint RAN YF&C and LOCAL meeting heard about the impact of a terrorist attack in Manchester on the Libyan community. The preparator had a Libyan background:

- Members of the community were first affected as citizens of the city. There was a lot of fear, anyone from the community could also have been at the attack site.
- The community then became a suspect community. All media outlets wanted to talk to Libyans. People from the community didn't dare to leave their houses.
- There was a rise in islamophobia. Women head their headscarves pulled off. This further increased the fear of going outside – and the risk of increased polarisation.

The Libyan community reacted by showcasing their [positive public actions](#).

The national context

Although engagement with communities is primarily a task for local authorities, they do not operate in a vacuum. National authorities play an important role in creating the preconditions in which the collaboration between local authorities and communities can flourish. National policy, budgets and communication have a direct impact on the conditions with which local authorities and local communities operate. In September 2018, RAN YF&C and RAN LOCAL will hold a policy and practice event during which local PCVE coordinators, community representatives and national prevent policy makers will be invited to discuss how they can best facilitate and strengthen each other's efforts in the prevention of radicalisation.