

Multi-Disciplinary & Multi-Agency Approaches to Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism: An Emerging P/CVE Success Story?

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In the more than seventeen years since 11 September 2001, much like the terrorist and violent extremist threats themselves, global conversations about how best to prevent and counter them have evolved. They have moved beyond an almost singular focus on military, intelligence, law enforcement, and national government-driven solutions focused primarily on the symptoms of the threat. Awareness that security measures alone and treating only the manifestations of the threat are not sufficient has grown. Similarly, the need for a more strategic, inclusive, and preventive approach to the challenge is more apparent than ever. This extends beyond national governments and security actors and recognises that cities, communities, and civil society are critical partners in preventing individuals from being radicalised to violence and recruited into terrorist groups and rehabilitating and reintegrating those leaving such groups and, more broadly, in addressing the drivers of violent extremist and building the societal resilience to prevent the polarisation that violent extremists are trying to sow. Spurred on by the high-level political attention generated by the 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism and the release of the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism, the notion of a "whole of society" approach to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE)¹ has continued to gain traction. Although there have been setbacks², they have not stood in the way of an increasingly diverse set of stakeholders and experts, particularly at the local level, becoming involved.³

While the P/CVE field has received its fair share of criticism,⁴ one particularly promising area of P/CVE practice – and where the "whole of society" approach has had some success in being operationalised – centers on the growing number of multi-disciplinary and multi-agency

collaborations, networks, and initiatives to prevent individuals from becoming radicalised to violence.

These pre-criminal efforts are generally led by a local government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and involve representatives from different local agencies and local organisations, e.g., education, health, social welfare, youth, and, if suitable, police meeting on a regular basis to identify, design, and deliver tailored interventions or support programmes to benefit individuals and their families referred to the unit by a concerned member of the community, including, at times, the police. They are meant to complement the more prevalent, broader-based P/CVE programmes focused on particular stakeholders, e.g., mothers, youth, religious leaders, or police, or themes, e.g., counter-narratives, community engagement, inter-faith dialogue, or education.

Although the UK's Channel Programme and Denmark's SSP (schools, social work, and police) system are perhaps the most well-known examples of the multi-agency/multi-disciplinary preventative approach, these, "hubs," "situation tables," or "safe houses" or "intervention and support programmes" – as they are sometimes referred to – come in different shapes and sizes, becoming an increasingly popular tool for P/CVE.

MUNICIPALITY-LED MODELS

A number of cities across Canada use the multi-agency "situation table" model that has been developed for broader crime prevention purposes. Police departments in Calgary⁵, Ottawa⁶, Peel, and Toronto⁷ have relied on existing or created new "tables", whereby a person deemed at risk of extremism is referred by a police officer or non-law enforcement local official to a "hub" that

consists of medical professionals, faith groups, teachers, and housing and other local officials and NGOs, with the most appropriate members of the hub then designing and leading an intervention, which can include mental, vocational, or spiritual counselling. The idea is to identify people at risk and to intervene before they head down the path to violence. Because of their existing relationships and familiarity with the relevant communities, the local police in Canada often play the lead role in the table.

Some cities, such as Toronto, have layered P/CVE into an existing gang-prevention-focused hub (to avoid the stigma that a P/CVE or counter-radicalisation only programme might create), whereas Calgary opted to create a stand-alone programme focused on radical religious or political ideologies. Although locally-led, the federal government in Ottawa – involvement of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and funding and other support from the Public Safety's Center for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Violence – are often partners in these efforts.

Other notable initiatives include the Anchor Model⁸ in Finland, a multi-agency programme geared toward early intervention (and other prevention-focused work) in juvenile delinquency and domestic violence that, since 2015, also focuses attention on P/CVE. The Anchor teams in each Finnish municipality include a social worker, psychiatric nurse, youth worker, and police officer, as well as an “as needed” basis schools and NGOs. One challenge that the Anchor teams – and other multi-agency programmes that were designed to address other forms of violence or anti-social behaviour – face is ensuring team members receive the necessary training to enable the programme to address violent extremism cases.⁹

The “safe houses” in major Dutch cities offer another example of a locally-driven multi-purpose platform that includes P/CVE as among the concerns on its agenda. Representatives from social welfare, housing, and other municipal agencies sit with “street workers”, and the local police to discuss individuals who have been referred to them. The police role is limited and each safe house has clear information-sharing agreements that enable the sharing of information between non-law enforcement professionals and the police.¹⁰

NGO-DRIVEN MODELS

Although most of the existing approaches are government-led, generally but not always at the local level, there are some examples where NGOs play a prominent, if not leading, role. Examples here include the Center for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence in Montreal: with its staff of psychologists, social workers, and researchers, it looks at all forms of violent extremism, with a focus on providing counselling and psycho-social interventions to individuals exhibiting a risk of violence

rather than those who express “radical” ideas, some of which are referred to the centre via its 24-hour helpline. It also trains front-line workers and community partners to understand the different aspects of P/CVE and equips them to help address them.¹¹

Community Connect¹² is a community-based programme run out of a local children's hospital in Boston. It grew out of an existing partnership between researchers and the Somali refugee community and focuses on addressing the concerns of the community, which include violent extremism. It seeks to reduce stigma, promote engagement and strengthen the sense of belonging in the community and social connections with other communities and the government. It includes mental health providers, community leaders, religious leaders, and educators, who provide the necessary services after an assessment of the individual's needs. The programme also focuses on increasing the capacity of the service providers to support the community. Law enforcement is not at the table and the programme does not receive referrals from the police; however, the programme can share information, following agreed protocols with the police where there is an imminent security threat. Notably, it does not receive U.S. federal government funding but relies on financial support from state and non-governmental sources.

Another prominent example is in Germany, where the Violence Prevention Network (VPN)¹³ – and seven other large German NGO – partners with and receives referrals from the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees, which manages a national radicalisation hotline and conducts an initial assessment before deciding whether to pass the case to one of its partner NGOs. VPN offers individual, religious, and other forms of counselling, and organises workshops about Islam, democracy, and human rights. It also operates its own, direct, and independent hotline, recognising that many families are more likely to reach out to an NGO as opposed to the government for help.

EXPORTING THE APPROACH

Although these multi-agency/multi-disciplinary approaches have emerged primarily in contexts where local agencies, institutions, and NGOs have the requisite capacities and relationships with the local communities – North America, Europe, and Australia – this is beginning to change, as international donors look to support the development of intervention programmes for P/CVE in diverse contexts such as the Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia.

For example, six local prevention networks have been developed in Jordan and Lebanon¹⁴ and represent first known attempt in the Middle East to create a locally-owned model for coordinating local non-law enforcement

and non-security driven P/CVE efforts. The LPNs include teachers, youth workers, religious leaders, and psycho-social intervention providers – law enforcement is not involved due to historic mistrust between the police and local communities. The networks meet monthly to identify risk factors and behaviours in the relevant community and to coordinate local P/CVE efforts and responses to local issues related to violent extremism and implement local outreach activities, such as awareness sessions for youth and families or roundtables for religious leaders on P/CVE and interfaith dialogue.¹⁵

In 2016 the municipality of Gjilan (Kosovo) – which saw a number of its citizens travel to Iraq and Syria – launched the first P/CVE multi-agency referral mechanism in the Western Balkans.¹⁶ According to those involved in managing the programme, it has so far handled eight cases, with all individuals having successfully been steered away from becoming turning to violence. Efforts are underway to develop such mechanisms in other parts of the region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, although it remains to be seen whether the Gjilan or a broader-based model (one that incorporates violent extremism as among the issues to be addressed) is followed and what role law enforcement (compared to social services agencies and NGOs) will play.

CHALLENGES

Although the progress is notable, operationalising and sustaining the programmes, particularly in non-Western settings, are not without their challenges. For example, it is hard to strike a balance between privacy and information sharing, particularly between non-law enforcement professionals and the police, or sustain the necessary level of coordination among an often disparate team where the capacities and incentives for participation can vary considerably. Frequently there are issues in trying to gain, let alone sustain, the trust of local communities, especially if recipients have previous negative experience with security actors. Further, it is difficult to ensure participants in multi-agency teams have the necessary P/CVE expertise. Finally, there can be sensitivities around the process of identifying “at risk” individuals who should receive tailored interventions. Indicators used to identify such individuals need be carefully considered to avoid harmful implications, such as wrongful identification or marginalisation. The UK Channel programme, currently in its third iteration, has faced many of these obstacles.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the increased focus on these types of multi-disciplinary, locally-driven initiatives reflects a couple of promising trends. First, a growing emphasis on the importance of collaboration among professionals in developing tailored intervention and other support programmes to steer individuals away from extremist violence and second, growing awareness that these

programmes can fill a critical gap: between group-focused efforts to build social cohesion and resilience to violent extremism on the one-hand, that are often viewed as too “soft” or “long-term” in nature to have an discernable impact on the threat on the one hand and security-focused counterterrorism measures on the other that are too reactive or, worse, repressive in nature.

LESSONS LEARNED

Given the likelihood that this is an area of P/CVE practice that is likely to grow further, the development of multi-disciplinary or multi-agency intervention mechanisms or programmes for P/CVE should ideally be informed by the following ten lessons-learned to date.

First, careful consideration should be given to whether the mechanism or programme should focus on and be framed around the potentially stigmatising issue of violent extremism or include violent extremism as one among a wider set of violence-related and safeguarding concerns to the relevant community.

Second, a mapping of the resources and capacities of the relevant institutions, organisations, and actors involved in operationalising a multi-agency/multi-disciplinary approach should precede a decision to establish one and inform the decision as to what form (e.g., municipality-, police-, or NGO-led) such a mechanism, if developed, takes.

Third, any such mechanisms or programmes should not be imposed from outside the relevant communities and should emerge following consultations with them. The lead agency or organisation should be one that is trusted by the relevant communities and families and has the necessary capacities to spearhead the effort.

Fourth, team members should represent varied backgrounds and skill sets (e.g., mental health professionals, social workers, teachers, faith-based groups, youth workers), including, where appropriate, the local police. Team members should convene on a regular basis, in a neutral space (i.e., not in a police station) to identify, develop, and implement timely interventions with individuals and families.

Fifth, the mechanism/programmes should rely on evidence-based research to develop a clear understanding of the local context and a common understanding of risk among team members and include transparent criteria for determining which referred individuals merit an intervention. Team members should be trained on how to apply such criteria to individual cases.

Sixth, transparent information-sharing protocols should be put in place to protect individual and data privacy and

allay concerns that the police, if involved, might use information shared with the team for intelligence gather and law enforcement purposes. The instances when information on an individual case can be referred to the police should be clearly defined and limited, e.g., when there is a risk of imminent harm.

Seventh, any such programme/mechanism should include a communications strategy that helps ensure the relevant communities understand the scope of the initiative and what types of cases it will handle. In addition, statistical data related to referrals should be shared, when feasible, to inspire public confidence and incentivise sustained participation from relevant agencies in the intervention programme, in particular, those outside of law enforcement.

Eighth, participants in multi-agency or multi-disciplinary teams – as well as the individuals or organisations that might be called upon to deliver an intervention or support package on an ad hoc basis – should have the necessary P/CVE expertise and these programmes need to incentivise sustained engagement from the diversity of team members while avoiding “tokenistic” participation. Where necessary, training and other capacity-building support should be provided to the relevant professionals and services providers prior to the launch of the programme/mechanism.

Ninth, taking into account the local and cultural context is essential. For example, in some societies there are cultural

barriers to seeking professional help from mental health professionals or social workers, and in some contexts informal actors, such as family members, will need to assume a greater role, particularly in communities are more likely to support non-government led, family-based interventions.

And finally, there is a need to ensure sustainable funding from the government, or other sources, and support from the relevant agencies represented on the team, as well as the community. For example, while international donors are jump-starting the development of these mechanisms in different regions, their sustainability – and ensuring national and local ownership – will likely depend on host governments allocating funding to support them beyond the life of the donor grant.

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