

EX POST PAPER

The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism

Introduction

Young people are an important focus in the prevention of radicalisation as they can be a very vulnerable group. Some particularly vulnerable young people are difficult to reach. **Youth workers and other practitioners working with young people in social settings should be involved**, to detect early signs of radicalisation and to offer alternatives. They can also be positive role models or mentors. Youth workers are trained and experienced in working with youngsters on many problematic topics (drugs, sexual exploitation, gambling, gangs) and can use these skills to contribute to the prevention of radicalisation⁽¹⁾.

In 2017, **several handbooks and toolkits** were produced at European level to aid youth workers active in this area. *'The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation'* by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and *'Young people and extremism pack'* by the British Council and SALTO are examples. These excellent publications follow others, such as *'The preventative role of open youth work in radicalisation of open youth work'* by Werner Prinzjakowitsch.

These efforts were discussed in the RAN YF&C meeting on *'The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation'* of 6-7 December 2017. This ex post paper describes the results of this discussion, and highlights **key recommendations and methodologies**. Youth workers and other experts can use this paper as a guide to essential lessons on PVE in their sector, and consult the references to more detailed material.

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¹ p. 46. DG EAC (2017)

Existing efforts

For 2017, RAN YF&C planned to produce a handbook on *‘The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism’*. This handbook would revolve around involving young people and empowering youth workers to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism (PVE), as well as producing recommendations for policy-makers on this topic. In the meantime several handbooks and guidance documents on this topic were been produced at a European level.

Participants at the RAN YF&C meeting of 6-7 December discussed these publications and concluded that each has its own unique strengths and approach to youth work, and that they complement one another. By combining the methodologies, recommendations and exercises of all these efforts, youth workers will be well prepared and informed about the options for preventing radicalisation as a youth worker. Learning about PVE also allows youth workers to recognise what is not radicalisation and extremism, preventing stigmatisation and unnecessary harm. Participants did underline that youth work should not be overly instrumentalised for endeavours such as PVE. This mirrors the common message coming from these new publications, and will be discussed in this paper: preventing radicalisation can be done by building on the key strength of youth work in general: empowering young people.

The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation – DG EAC

DG EAC published a practical toolbox about the contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation. It argues that youth work *“belongs to the area of (out-of-school) education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders”*. The value of youth work lies in accepting the need for flexibility and addressing the youngster’s reality. Youth work has to play a role in *“building democratic resilience and empowering young people to become active participants in the European democratic society”*⁽²⁾. In the toolbox, DG EAC distinguishes between three types of prevention to which youth work can contribute: generic, targeted and indicated.

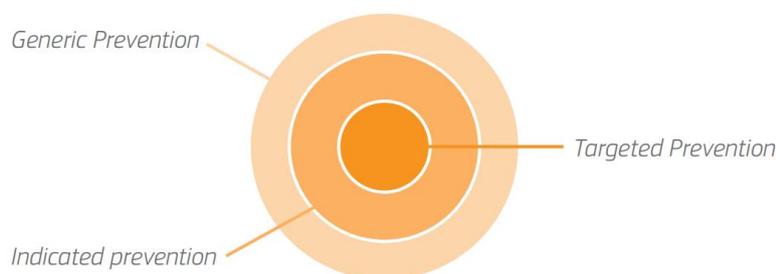


Image 1 ‘Three-level prevention model’⁽³⁾

² p. 46 DG EAC (2017)

³ P. 16 DG EAC (2017)

Generic prevention

Generic prevention targets all young people in an indirect way. Youth work's contribution at a generic level is about equipping young people with the life skills that contribute to their democratic resilience and strengthen their democratic values⁽⁴⁾.

Youth workers at this level should:

- ✓ be the mediators and facilitators when discussing difficult topics or topics they are not familiar with;
- ✓ discuss questions of meaning with young people in a safe environment;
- ✓ dare to discuss taboo topics⁽⁵⁾;
- ✓ know the trends, dare to confront young people, tune in to young people's reality;
- ✓ enable young people to understand human rights and democratic values in practice;
- ✓ be aware of their own values and implicit identity; assess their own ability for self-reflection, critical thinking and emotional resilience;
- ✓ encourage intercultural and inter-faith discussions which underscore common values;
- ✓ make best use of existing training opportunities on processes of violent radicalisation;
- ✓ provide positive narratives to counter extremist ideologies;
- ✓ inform young people about public anti-discriminatory networks.

There is a strong overlap between the objectives and activities of youth work in general, and the objectives and activities of generic prevention. This underlines an important conclusion: youth work as such is already an important tool in preventing radicalisation.

Targeted prevention

Targeted prevention aims to reach young people who show tendencies towards or are interested in anti-democratic, extremist ideologies (or fragments of these ideologies) and propaganda. They can furthermore be close to extremist groups or have already been in contact with such groups⁽⁶⁾. At the targeted prevention level, youth work can be effective both with individuals and in group settings.

Youth workers at this level should:

- ✓ be aware when young people cut off bonds with their social groups: this could be a sign of violent radicalisation;
- ✓ try to identify the signals and assess them correctly: they are often merely a cry for attention;
- ✓ establish/build up a trusting relationship before confronting the youngster with ideological issues;
- ✓ work with the mind-set of youngsters;
- ✓ be familiar with the social context around the youngsters and be ready to intervene on-site;
- ✓ use peer education activities to prevent young people from getting more involved in extremist circles;

⁴ p. 7 DG EAC (2017)

⁵ RAN YF&C Issue paper (2018)

⁶ p. 8 DG EAC (2017)

- ✓ find out about young people's motives and reasons for joining extremist groups and develop strategies and social alternatives;
- ✓ create space for and get involved in dialogue – train in dialogue facilitation techniques;
- ✓ familiarise themselves with the processes and dynamics of violent radicalisation and of propaganda, as well as motives and attraction.

Targeted prevention is not as much part of the day-to-day business of youth workers as generic prevention. It will therefore be beneficial to have some knowledge of the process and signs of radicalisation. The SALTO Handbook⁽⁷⁾ provides some background knowledge on push and pull factors for radicalisation, as well as signs of radicalisation. However, it is advisable to learn more about detecting signs of radicalisation in a training seminar. More in-depth information is also available on the website of the Radicalisation Awareness Network⁽⁸⁾.

Participants at this RAN YF&C meeting mentioned the added value of playfulness at this stage. Youngsters might be so caught up in the extremist ideology at this point, that initiating dialogue can prove difficult. In this case, a more playful approach can create an opening. In the additional material produced by SALTO, many exercises and games are provided that can help youth workers to apply such techniques⁽⁹⁾.

Indicated prevention

'Indicated prevention' targets young people who are already engaged in an extremist group or with extremist ideals and who want to drop out (or who are regarded as being open to receiving support for dropping out). This prevention work should only be provided by experts and youth workers who are specifically trained for this⁽¹⁰⁾. Here, youth workers, along with other key professionals, can support young people to transition out of these groups.

Youth workers at this level should:

- ✓ build a bond of trust with the young people they are working with;
- ✓ be sure that they can meet the challenges before intervening;
- ✓ form alliances with key figures in the community;
- ✓ understand the process, work on the causes and develop alternatives;
- ✓ approach the family, get to know its dynamics and seek the right person to get approval from before intervening;
- ✓ develop security protocols to ensure security for the young person and themselves;
- ✓ collaborate with experts from different sectors such as NGOs, schools, justice, security and social institutions.

As indicated, prevention involves specialised knowledge and skills, not all youth workers will be trained and equipped to execute this type of work. Youth workers who are not trained and equipped to execute indicated prevention, but who do feel it is required, should reach out to a trained colleague or an affiliated expert.

⁷ p. 8 and p. 21-24 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

⁸ Radicalisation Awareness Network website ([Online](#))

⁹ SALTO (2017) 'Additional material'

¹⁰ p. 9 DG EAC (2017)

Young people and extremism: a resource pack – SALTO-Youth

SALTO focuses on the relevance of ‘civic youth work’ in the broad area of youth and extremism. This type of youth work deals with young people in order to bring about change in the issues that matter to them in their daily lives⁽¹¹⁾. It builds further upon the perspective that young people should not only be approached as full citizens when they are adults, but should be approached as ‘citizens now’⁽¹²⁾: they are people with their own capacity to be initiators and agents of social change, and equal partners in making the world a violent extremism free place.

They key elements of civic youth work are the following⁽¹³⁾:

- it focuses more than other approaches on ‘civic literacy’ (what does it mean to be democratic and live democratically?);
- it is a more political approach to youth work: it challenges accepted social norms (what is normal? who decides?);
- it supports young people as they analyse power relationships and challenge power dynamics, particularly in situations where they feel disempowered.

Based on these key elements, the resource pack provides recommendations and different approaches to help youth workers understand and prevent radicalisation, and help youngsters improve their critical thinking⁽¹⁴⁾. The handbook also provides practical exercises for each of these approaches:

- **The youth work relationship.** Although part of the daily work of a youth worker, building relationships is key for PVE. The success of all other activities with young people depends on the trust that is created in this way. For young people as well, the quality of the relationships is key to feeling part of a certain community.
- **Team building.** This creates meaningful relationships between youngsters. Meaningful relationships can create a sense of belonging, which participants at the RAN YF&C meeting deemed essential for the prevention of radicalisation.
- **Group work.** Through group work, youngsters can articulate what they care about, address sensitive topics, improve their critical thinking, challenge stereotypes, myths, beliefs and perceptions. All these skills will help youngsters build the motivation to make a difference and to be active citizens within a democratic society.
- **Civic and/or political engagement.** There are a variety of ways in which young people’s civic and political engagement can be supported. These include: introducing civic and political education in the formal

¹¹ p. 18 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

¹² p. 2 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

¹³ p. 18 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

¹⁴ P. 26-44 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

school environment, creating opportunities to volunteer and serve the local community, ensuring that young people are consulted as part of the policy-making processes and setting up initiatives to encourage young people to register to vote. Being part of social change also helps to address the feeling of powerlessness that young people can experience – and is sometimes prevalent among those who get involved in violent extremism.⁽¹⁵⁾

- **Community engagement.** Young people can sometimes feel disconnected from others in their neighbourhood, particularly if they are treated with suspicion or seen as potential troublemakers. This may drive them away from mainstream society, and make the youngsters more susceptible to extremist recruitment⁽¹⁶⁾. Making youngsters feel part of a neighbourhood or community is a first step in making them feel part of society. This can be done through study visits, exchange projects or by inviting a speaker from a particular ethnic or religious community.

The above-mentioned approaches can help youngsters to build cognitive and emotional resilience to extremism, and behavioural commitment to mainstream society. These approaches can mostly be categorised under general prevention within the DG EAC paper (see page 3). However, the SALTO Handbook also provides some recommendations for approaching individuals who are already under influence of extremism (targeted and indicated prevention):

- **Emotion:** Help maintain the young person's connections with their social environment as well as their education.
- **Cognition:** Discussion and dialogue in order to understand the young person's motivations can encourage them to express and develop themselves in other aspects of their identity, e.g. career aspirations, cultural expression and sport.
- **Behaviour:** Help ensure the young person continues to engage in and is included in youth activities.

Lastly, the SALTO handbook emphasises the importance of understanding the local context. The handbook provides several techniques that can help youth workers to explore and understand their local environment with youngsters: see the chapters about contextual analysis and action research.⁽¹⁷⁾

The preventative role of open youth work in radicalisation and extremism – Werner Prinzjakowitsch

Following the RAN (2016) paper on 'Root causes of radicalisation', W. Prinzjakowitsch (2017) argues that youngsters, when shaping their identity, are looking for spiritual and practical perspective. If any of these are missing, they become particularly vulnerable to recruitment by extremists.

Following this argument, '*open youth-work*' contains specific traits that are important when it comes to the prevention of radicalisation and extremism. The term '*open youth work*' refers to "*enabling youth, meaning*

¹⁵ P. 34 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

¹⁶ P. 2 RAN Issue paper (2016)

¹⁷ P. 44 British Council & SALTO Youth (2017)

to give them the chance to act beyond the requirements of the adult world and the working environment.”⁽¹⁸⁾
It is aimed at enabling self-expression and self-efficiency, and creating an appreciative environment for youth to grow in. The following principles of open youth work gain significant importance when it comes to PVE⁽¹⁹⁾:

- **Openness:** Open youth work is generally open to all young people, without preconditions. There is no pressure or commitment, while anonymity is assured. This makes youngsters feel welcome, even if they feel excluded from society.
- **Create an open but also safe and constructive environment for dispute and discussion:** Take and accept the youngsters as they are, with all their opinions. Provide a safe space to discuss these opinions, without letting the youngsters take over. By providing a safe space to discuss these opinions, they will not be forced to discuss them in areas where extremists can interfere.
- **Have one’s own clear and arguable political position and clearly express it:** Having an attitude of acceptance towards young people does not mean keeping one’s own, maybe different political opinion, private. Youth workers should be authentic. In the sensitive area of extremist ideology, it is not possible to promote standpoints that one does not personally support 100%.
- **Know the world of young people:** Explicit knowledge about the immediate living environment, the social, economic and cultural conditions of young people, is a fundamental precondition to working with them.
- **Have professional knowledge about issues that are important for young people:** In discussions linked to PVE, youth workers might fear that they lack knowledge about religion or a certain ideology. However, it is not deep knowledge, but solid knowledge that is important. This follows for all other themes and issues that are important for young people: you do not have to be a doctor to discuss drugs with youngsters. If deep knowledge is required, invite an expert to provide this.
- **Judge behaviour, not the person:** A permanent professional relationship on a volunteer basis can only work with the mutual appreciation of the people involved. In the case of verbal or physical offence, the misbehaviour of the person must be the focus of criticism and not the person him or herself, especially when it is about violence, glorification of violence or about racism, no matter whether it is verbal or physical.
- **Set clear borders while still respecting the person:** Borders must be explained coherently and should not appear to be random. Violation of those borders must be addressed immediately and in an appropriate way, sometimes also requiring sanctions. For youngsters searching for orientation, clear boundaries are all the more important.

¹⁸ p. 61 W. Prinzjakowitsch (2017)

¹⁹ p. 77-82 W. Prinzjakowitsch (2017)

- **Keep in mind that prevention takes time and continuity:** Do not expect quick fixes. Prevention work needs time and continuity.

Further recommendations

All of the publications discussed in this ex post paper can provide significant assistance to youth workers in understanding and working on the prevention of radicalisation. RAN YF&C therefore advises all professionals working in the field of youth work to take a closer look and benefit from the material available. Each publication has different strengths, ranging from theoretical background to very practical recommendations and exercises. Although not all recommendations might be applicable to each local situation, the abundance of material should provide lessons that are useful to most.

Youth centres and related authorities should provide youth workers with an opportunity to benefit from these publications: dissemination and providing time to read and discuss the material should be proactively encouraged. Facilitating training seminars on PVE in which the existing material is consulted is even better.

Lastly, YF&C meeting participants identified several aspects of youth work that could still benefit from additional efforts with regards to PVE. During the meeting, several projects were discussed that (will) focus on filling these gaps. Some examples, both from this meeting and earlier meetings, are discussed below.

Online youth work

Youngsters are spending a significant amount of their time online. Extremists know how to find them; they provide them with high value propaganda and actively approach and recruit online⁽²⁰⁾. Participants therefore argued that youth workers should also work more online. With regard to PVE, youth workers have multiple ways of operating online: providing alternative narratives and directly engaging with youngsters online, for example on social media, is one example. Participants did agree that online work can strengthen, but never replace, offline youth work.

Jamal el Khitab (AT)

The core team behind the project 'Jamal' consists of nine people (both youngsters and adults), four of whom can be said to be former IS-supporters, or who have turned their backs on the Jihadi milieu. What unites them is that they are all young Muslims who want to take a stance against religiously inspired extremism.

Supported by a team of youth workers and other experts, the team produced a series of videos which tell the story of Jamal, a fictional youngster, who fled to Austria as a child. Jamal discusses the frustration he experiences and questions Islamic identity, providing an alternative to extremist ideology. The videos tell stories taken straight from the youngsters' lives. They can be watched via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJkBZRn82kY>

²⁰ RAN Issue paper (2015)

After posting these videos on online channels where the target group (youngsters interested in extremist ideology) can be found, the youth workers engaged in discussion and reflection processes with those who reacted to the content (online-street work).

WebWalkers (FR)⁽²¹⁾

Inspired by the homonymous programme Fryshuset (SE), the National Institution for Families, young people, youth organisations and families are cooperating to teach what young people can do and what they should not do when they are online, and how to protect themselves. The skills for the online world are provided to youngsters in offline workshops led by youth workers.

Secondly, the programme trains youth workers to engage with youngsters to discuss difficult topics. The programme is being further developed in 2018 to specifically address challenges and topics related to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Detached Youth work

Many of the techniques and methodologies outlined in existing materials require a controlled environment, such as a youth centre. These techniques are less useful for youth workers that work on the street (also referred to as detached youthwork or mobile youthwork). Although the publications of DG EAC, SALTO and W. Prinzjakowitsch still provide very useful recommendations for youth workers, some specific skills may be useful.

Vaja Kitab (DE)

The youth workers of Vaja Kitab seek out youngsters in the public sphere and also work with them on site. It means they meet young people in their own 'comfort zone' in terms of attitudes and behavioural patterns.

The youth workers of Vaja Kitab also work with youngsters affiliated with right-wing extremism. To deal with extremism, elements of mediation, anti-racist and intercultural training, anti-violence training, and training in social and personal skills are applied. Last but not least, activities of common interest (such as sport) are used to bring together members of extreme-right/misanthropic cliques and scenes and persons from outside (extreme) right-wing/misanthropic environments.

Evaluation

Throughout the field of PVE there is a need for evaluation and evidence-based methodology. This also follows for PVE in youthwork.

StopR (BU)

²¹ <http://promeneursdunet.fr/>

The StopR project was launched recently to support youth workers in tackling radicalisation. It helps them to step up dialogue on this topic. The aim of the project is to further build on the capacity of youth workers by using an online education platform. This provides a space where organisations working on the prevention of youth radicalisation can share best practices and experiences that received the quality stamp developed within the framework of the project. Since July 2017 they have developed among other tools a list of quality criteria for methodologies. They have also set up focus groups with youth workers in all affiliated countries. The project is running between July 2017 and October 2018. More information: <http://www.szubjektiv.org/en/stopr/>.

Appendix

British Council & SALTO Youth (2017) 'Young People and Extremism Resource Packs for Youth Workers'
<https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/cultural-diversity/publications/youngpeopleandextremismpack/>

British Council & SALTO Youth (2017) 'Young People and Extremism Resource Packs for Youth Workers - Additional Material'
<https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3567/SALTO%20Cultural%20Diversity%20Youth%20and%20Extremism-Additional%20Materials.pdf>

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2017) 'The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation' <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7f9cdb66-19c4-11e7-808e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Prinzjakowitsch, W (2017). 'The preventative role of open youth work in radicalisation of open youth work'
http://www.newman.ac.uk/files/w3/research-centres/pdf/International_journal_of_open_youth_work.pdf?q=631

Radicalisation Awareness Network Issue paper (2016) 'Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives'
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_cn_oct2015_en.pdf

Radicalisation Awareness Network Issue paper (2016) 'The Root Causes of Violent Extremism'
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf

Radicalisation awareness Network website (online)
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en

RAN YF&C Issue paper (2018) 'Discussing taboos and controversial topics'. This will be available on the RAN website in 2018 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-calendar_en