

# Conference Report

## TACKLING EXTREMISM: DE-RADICALISATION AND DISENGAGEMENT

8 – 9 May 2012  
Copenhagen

# Introduction

8-9 May 2012 the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration in cooperation with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue held a Conference entitled “Tackling Extremism: De-radicalisation and Disengagement”.

The conference brought together 90 people from 20 different countries, including government officials, practitioners, representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers and EU representatives. The conference was chaired by Sasha Havlicek, Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

The purpose of the conference was to share international practical experiences on what it takes to get young people to leave violent extremist movements, whether right-wing, left-wing or militant Islamist.

The conference took its point of departure from two EU sponsored projects:

One Danish project, “Deradicalisation – Targeted Intervention”, a project that has carried out specific interventions and developed a number of tools, documented in the handbook series “Preventing Extremism”.

The other is carried out by Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “European Policy and Practices Exchange Portal (PEP): An initiative of the European Policy Planners network on Countering Polarisation and Radicalisation (EPPN)”, a project which takes a comparative look at the issue of radicalisation thematically and geographically through research, draws together best practice via [www.counterextremism.org](http://www.counterextremism.org) and connects frontline workers and practitioners working in this field together across Europe via a series of practitioner exchanges.

Using personal stories, interactive theatre and a wide range of presentations, the conference attempted to visualize a variety of factors that can play a role when young people enter into or disengage from violent extremist groups.

## **The following questions were key to the conference:**

- What is the potential of direct intervention and mentorship in efforts to assist young people to disengage from extremism?
- How do we make sure that the people who work with young people on a daily and local basis have access to the latest knowledge and methods concerning de-radicalisation and disengagement?
- How do we mobilise the resources of families, communities, social networks, former extremists and the victims of extremist violence in our de-radicalisation efforts?
- What works and how do we measure it?

## Main Findings of the Conference

### **There is a need to mainstream approaches to de-radicalisation and disengagement:**

- Until recently, the issues of de-radicalisation and disengagement have mainly been addressed from a security angle. But in fact they are also very much social issues which have forced a whole range of front line workers to adapt their approach and working methods.
- Efforts to promote disengagement from violence and extremism should build on existing structures for crime prevention and rehabilitation. The efforts may draw on cross sector collaboration between relevant authorities such as police, prison and probation services, social authorities, schools etc. It may also draw on the resources of families, communities and people with relevant personal experience such as former extremists or victims of extremist violence.
- Investment in socially oriented prevention and disengagement programmes should be long term; short term funding arrangements can cause more problems than they solve.

### **Strong and trusted personal relationships are critical to effective de-radicalisation and disengagement:**

- Relationships are essential in most efforts to support a person in disengaging from extremism. The personal character of a mentor or other relational worker is crucial for succeeding in supporting a person in disengaging from extremism. Perseverance, empathy and enthusiasm are some of the most important personal traits of a good relational worker.
- Yet building a trusting relationship and supporting positive change also requires tools and skills that can be taught, including pedagogical and communicative skills. The relational worker or others organising the intervention should also have an understanding for the different types of risk factors, protective factors, motivational factors and ideological factors as well as barriers to positive change that apply in each case. The approach and strategy of the intervention, including for instance a specific mentor-mentee match, should be adapted to fit each case.
- Relational workers may profit from skills to deconstruct and challenge the propaganda and rhetoric of extremist groups, seeking to legitimize violence. Yet, an important principle in mentoring people involved in extremism is to sow seeds of doubt, but not try to win arguments. The mentee must be brought to a point of reflection and must make the change himself/herself.
- A narrative biographical dialogue with the person, focussing on things like family, self perception and ideology, putting emotions into words, may be one example of a useful tool which can achieve this. Positive and negative imagining of a family situation or a possible future may – when confronted with the facts of the current situation – function as yet another stimulus for reflection and change for the mentee.

### **Those disengaging from extremism require practical help and assistance:**

- Providing support and alternatives in a more practical sense is also important. When a person is presented with new and legitimate opportunities, for instance job opportunities, education and leisure activities, providing life experiences and relationships, it might be seen as an attractive alternative to criminal or extreme behaviour, hence contributing to pulling a person back into a lifestyle without extremism.

### **Those disengaging from extremism benefit from support from a rich and varied network of people and organisations:**

- Families and communities can be part of the solution, or they can be part of the problem. Some families and other social networks represent protective factors like resourcefulness and close and positive relations to the person in question. Other families and networks may well represent risk factors in the form of poor resources and relations or even direct negative, ideological influence.
- Former extremists, empathetic to the situation of the person in question, as well as those who have been victims of extremist violence, may have an important role to play in the disengagement and re-integration processes.
- An important perspective for the future is to build and expand new types of networks and partnerships, connecting all these actors, and building bridges across distinctions such as local, national and international, civil and public, professional and volunteer, East and West, hence adding to the efficiency and legitimacy of the efforts.

### **The role of the Internet and social media should not be underestimated:**

- The fact that extremists are recruiting and radicalising online raises challenges for those working to counter violent extremism. It is vital that governments and communities are active online, challenging these narratives and understand how to use social media effectively.
- The Internet and social media also offer opportunities for those working to tackle radicalisation and extremism. Governments and communities need to understand these new tools.

### **We need to adapt our monitoring and measurement methods in regard to de-radicalisation and disengagement initiatives:**

- It is difficult to measure and document what works. A monitoring approach that sheds light on the mechanisms that lead to a good result, rather than a mere quantitative focus on end-effect, may be the answer. Methods and preventive models are not irrelevant. However, one should not rely on one specific model, but adapt work methods to the particular circumstances of the persons and problems at hand.
- In this respect, it is vitally important to share experiences and good practices across national boundaries to enhance the knowledge building process.

# First day of the conference

## Introduction and EU and US Initiatives to Tackle Extremism and De-radicalisation

The first part of the session included an introductory presentation from Permanent Secretary Jesper Zwisler, the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration, and theatrical presentations of personal stories by C:NTACT, an independent organisation dedicated to ethnic, social and cultural integration and education, based at the Betty Nansen Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The session then focused on EU and US Initiatives to tackle extremism and de-radicalisation and featured presentations by Cecilia Malmström, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, and Christopher H. Schroeder, Assistant Attorney General, the US Department of Justice.

### Main points:

- We are confronted with a many-faceted challenge.
- There is a challenge to understand youth, who, in the context of a number of different political and social circumstances, have identity issues and vulnerabilities that might lead them into a radicalisation process. Care must be taken not to demonize them, but to engage, build trust and resilience and provide alternatives.
- At the same time, there are those who are deeply involved in extremism and take steps to commit terrorist or other violent acts. Here, there is a shift towards individual actors, making detection by law enforcement officials more difficult.
- Also the increasingly sophisticated use of the internet and social media to spread propaganda adds an additional layer to the challenges of prevention and maintaining security.
- This gives rise to a new type of response; one that is more comprehensive, involving a wider range of people and organisations.
- Therefore it is crucial to have an effective international exchange of knowledge and experiences regarding security, prevention and disengagement. However, it is not enough that this knowledge circulates in international conferences such as the present one. Local authorities, youth and social workers, prison staff and NGOs play an important role in prevention and in helping young people to leave extremist groups and reintegrating them into society. It is crucial that these people have access to the latest knowledge on effective tools and methods.
- Other important areas are the role of families, social networks and not least victims – it is essential to spread their testimonies to highlight the tragic consequences of terrorist acts.
- The multi-faceted approach to prevention and disengagement is not only the approach of a number of individual EU member states, but also of the EU as such. The EU has launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to support member states in countering violent extremism and support those working at local level.

- Hence, although still of fairly recent initiative, the process of strengthening the international and European cooperation against extremism is growing.

## Targeted Interventions with Young People

The session took its point of departure in the Danish EU sponsored project, “Deradicalisation – Targeted Intervention” and the experience of mentorships and exit talks with young people involved in extremism.

The session featured presentations by Henriette Korf, Project leader and Deputy Head of Division for Democratic Issues, Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration (DK), Jakob Illum, Head of Centre for Prevention, Danish Security and Intelligence Service (DK), Steffen Saigusa Nielsen, Head of Section, Municipality of Aarhus (DK) and Steffen Jensen, Researcher at the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims (DK).

### Main points:

- While recognizing the crucial importance of an interagency and cross-sectoral approach, it is also important to recognize that public institutions have different cultures. For instance, police and security organisations have a different culture to social or school authorities. Sharing knowledge and collaborating on preventive action helps bridge the gaps between those different cultures.
- The important attributes of a relational worker are personal integrity and professionalism, ability to build confidence and trust, ability to tackle personal welfare problems and ability to motivate and support behavioural change.
- Working with the individual young person, the following issues are relevant:
  - How protective factors can be activated to compensate for risk factors
  - How the young person’s own motivation can be used positively
  - How extremist views and ideologies that seek to justify violence can be challenged
  - How physical, mental or social barriers to disengagement can be overcome

## Workshops

### Theme 1: Deradicalisation in prisons

The workshop featured presentations from Colin Mellis, National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, the Netherlands, and Marie Louise Jørgensen, Project Manager, Department of Prison and Probation Service, Denmark.

### Main points:

- Isolation or dispersal: The Dutch strategy is to isolate extremist prisoners to avoid radicalisation of other inmates, whereas the Danish strategy is to disperse extremist prisoners to avoid retention of individuals in an extremist environment.
- Use the existing structures of the prison and probation services rather than isolated efforts.

- Establish clarity on the criteria of success and how these are to be measured in practice. Success in relation to an individual may be determined at a given point of a continuum ranging from the person feeling a bit of doubt to the person undergoing a complete change of behaviour and views.
- Mentors and other relational workers must not only be able to engage with the inmate, but also be able to establish contact with the family and other networks of the inmate.
- Support and assistance must be ensured for the inmate also after release from prison.
- There is a political focus on imams in prisons and the approval and control of these imams. In this connection, it is advisable to treat all religious preachers in prisons according to the same guidelines.

## **Theme 2: Reintegration of extremist offenders**

The workshop featured presentations by Daniel Köhler, Analyst and Research Consultant, Exit Deutschland (D) and Sue Beaumont, Senior Probation Officer, Bedfordshire Probation Trust/Regional Lead (UK).

### **Main points:**

- In order to help and support people who want to turn their back on extremism it is important to give practical aid and assistance in relation to questions regarding personal safety, social problems and individual reappraisal.
- It is essential to help the individual develop new skills and insights by strengthening everything that furthers a more positive future and assist with recognizing the things that do not pay off.
- Help should also be given to seize the chance of a new start. Give advice and show possibilities as well as boundaries, recreate personal relationships in everyday life eg. in school or at work.
- It is important to work with a wide range of partners to deliver programmes and interventions designed to reduce re-offending.
- Be aware of addressing the ideology of the person in question. For many drop-outs from extremist groups it is easier to start with the social problems and then talk ideology later.
- Disengagement can only happen, if the person is open and ready to develop new perspectives outside the extremist environment.
- Behavioural change is often closely related to attitudinal change. Although behavioural change – away from violence – is the objective, it is difficult to influence behaviour without influencing the attitudes that give rise to the behaviour.
- A central aspect of stimulating change in a young person's behaviour is to clearly illustrate the consequences of extremist behaviour on the person's own life.

## **Theme 3: The role of family and network in countering extremism**

The workshop included presentations by Randi Talseth, General Secretary, Voksne for Barn (N); presentations by three representatives from VINK – Knowledge Inclusion Copenhagen (DK): Muhammed Hee, Consultant, Christine Lunde Rasmussen, Project Manager, and Abdulkadir Muhammad Gaal, Job Consultant; and presentations by Rachel Briggs, Research and Policy Director, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK) and Director of Hostage UK (UK).

### **Main points:**

- The parents and the community surrounding a young person involved in extremism are key parts of any intervention.
- However, the role of the family may differ greatly from case to case. Families can be part of the solution, or they can be part of the problem. Some families represent protective factors like resourcefulness and close and positive relations to the person in question. Other families may well represent risk factors in the form of poor resources and relationships or even direct negative, ideological influence.
- When working with families as a resource for disengagement attention should also be paid to the stigma attached to having a person labelled as an extremist in the family. It may lead to feelings of shame or anger and therefore isolation for the parents and family.
- Drawing a comparison with people who have been hostages, those who have been part of extremist groups may also suffer a form of trauma, which should be recognized and dealt with.
- A constructive step could, in any case, be for the parents to be encouraged to develop a close relationship with their child's school and teachers.
- Another way forward is to set up parent support groups led by professionals to offer advice and guidance to parents, as well as peer support groups. This has proved a popular and successful way to support the families and contribute to the disengagement process.
- Former extremists, empathetic to the situation of the person in question, may sometimes also have an important role to play in the disengagement and re-integration processes.
- When it comes to equipping professionals to tackle the work with radicalisation and vulnerable families, VINK is an example of an institution, which provides professionals with access to knowledge, tools and professional networks.

### **Theme 4: Mentoring and individual intervention.**

The workshop featured presentations by Bjørn Harvig, Security Adviser, Centre for Prevention, Danish Security and Intelligence Service (DK) and Sheikh Musa Admani, University Imam (UK), followed by discussions.

### **Main points:**

- A solid basis of human warmth, character and listening skills is crucial for any mentor who wishes to succeed in supporting a person in a process of disengagement from extremism.
- A basic chemistry between mentor and mentee is also essential. Yet building a trusting relationship and supporting positive change also requires skills that can be trained.
- Other than that the mentor-mentee match and the approach adopted in the intervention depend on individual circumstances. Different types of risk factors, protective factors, motivational factors, ideological factors and barriers to positive change may have different weight in each case. Hence, the mentor-mentee match as well as the approach and strategy of the intervention should be adapted to fit each mentee.
- The mentor-mentee relationship can not go on indefinitely. It must be phased out gradually when the process of positive change is under way.



- The Danish booklet “Relational work and mentoring”, part of the “Preventing Extremism” handbook series, provides a further framework of guiding principles and tools in mentoring work.

## Forum Theatre

C:NTACT used the method “forum theatre” to depict and discuss issues about extremism, conflict and marginalisation, allowing the audience to participate actively and suggest alternative actions to resolve the issues.

# Second day of the conference

## Understanding What Works and the Role of Communities

### The session focused on two main themes:

- The factors and processes that lead some to join or to leave extremist environments, including factors in the surrounding community.
- Evidence-based knowledge on what works and how to measure it, when authorities or others attempt to prevent crime and extremism.

The session featured presentations by Dr. Frank Bovenkerk, Professor of radicalisation studies, University of Amsterdam, Professor emeritus of criminology and Tore Bjørgo, Professor, The Norwegian Police University College, followed by discussion.

### Main points:

- A combination of push and pull factors account for why people either join or leave extremist networks.
- Push factors are factors pushing a person away from certain behaviour. For instance, frustration or fear vis a vis perceived injustices or threats may – along with other factors – contribute to pushing a person away from peaceful, law-abiding behaviour and into extremism and violence.
- Pull factors are factors that attract a person towards certain behaviour. For instance, the search for status, role models, identity or togetherness may contribute to pulling a person towards an extremist group.
- Families, communities and their moral standards may play an important role when a person disengages from extremism. A parallel was drawn to ex-pirates in Somalia, where families and communities involved in piracy, find it immoral and un-islamic; a push factor that might also be at play in connection to leaving extremism.
- Likewise, when a person is presented with new and legitimate opportunities, e.g. for education or work and generating income, it might be seen as an attractive alternative to criminal or extreme behaviour, contributing to pulling a person back into a lifestyle without extremism.
- When it comes to more conscious, government led efforts to prevent extremism or promote disengagement, a comparison was drawn to the wider scientific results made in crime prevention and other similar fields.
- Research shows that it is very difficult to document what works. One study into psychotherapy, for instance, showed that only 15% of a desired effect could be contributed to the methodology adopted, whereas 85% was either placebo effect or general factors like the quality of the professional, the personal and social circumstances of the patient, the relationship between therapist and patient etc.
- Apart from the methodological problems of providing evidence of effect, there is an even more basic problem of unclear goals, when it comes to policies to prevent extremism. Is it about improved resilience, social cohesion and civic citizenship in the community at large? Or is it about having fewer extremists? Or

fewer incidents of extremist violence? And how does one translate the absence of such violence into evidence of the success of a certain preventive effort or methodology?

- The solution may be to have a more qualitative, rather than quantitative approach. An approach that sheds light on the mechanisms that lead to a good result. The question to ask is not “what works”, but “why do these particular measures work on this particular person or group”.
- Trust should not be put in one specific method or preventive model. Rather working methods should be adapted to the particular types of people and problems at hand.
- There may certainly be methodological guidelines and skills that professionals can apply in their work, but personality traits of the professionals – perseverance, enthusiasm, empathy – are also extremely important when working with people and trying to stimulate positive change.

## The Role of Frontline Workers

The session focused on the role of first line workers in prevention and disengagement efforts. It included panel presentations by Yousiff Florey-Meah, Chief Executive, RecoRa Institute (UK), Judy Korn, Director, Violence Prevention Network (D), Simon Cornwall, Senior Probation Officer, National Probation Service Central Extremism Unit (UK).

### Main points:

- Youth and social workers do already, as a point of departure, possess important skills and tools, relevant in connection with prevention and disengagement from extremism.
- They may enhance their knowledge on extremism and their dialogue- and other skills, necessary for conducting relational work vis a vis young people involved in extremism. But to a great extent they do not need an in-depth specialized knowledge.
- Youth workers must have a keen eye for the social circumstances of the young people in question, including personal, family-related and social risk factors, as well as the corresponding protective factors that can be boosted to compensate for the risk factors.
- Not least the family and network of a vulnerable youth should be activated as a protective factor.
- For the professional, the skill of building up a relationship is especially important. Many young people involved in extremism have poor relationship skills, and this is part of what has taken them into the extreme groups in the first place.
- Particularly important are empathy and dialogue skills enabling professionals to stimulate reflection and harness the young person’s motivation, e.g. search for identity or togetherness, in a constructive, rather than a destructive way.
- A narrative biographical dialogue with the youth, focussing on things like family, self perception and ideology and expressing emotions, may be a useful tool in the relational work.
- Positive imagining of a future or a family situation may – when confronted with the facts of the young person’s current situation – function as yet another stimulus for reflection and change.

- Likewise negative imagining, e.g. of a crying mother, may provide the youth with an “emotional stop card”, keeping the youth from committing a violent act.
- Legitimizing violence is as important as the act of violence. Youth and first line workers should have the skills to challenge the legitimizing of violence, e.g. by deconstructing the propaganda and line of argument of extremist groups.
- Ex-offenders and former extremists may, in some cases, be enlisted as co-trainers or mentors. They have “street credibility” and may provide a religious or ideological corrective.
- Faith, used to legitimize violence at the outset, could also become a protective factor.
- The first line worker’s personal engagement in the work is essential; young people want to know what your interest is in them.
- By the same token solutions should be adapted to local settings and left to the discretion of local professionals as opposed to being centralized and standardized.
- At the local level there are also better opportunities for joint interdisciplinary and cross sector efforts.
- A special challenge relates to working with prison inmates and offenders in a parole or release phase. Again, a cross sector, or inter agency approach is advisable.
- Authorities should have restrictive and punitive powers allowing them to commit the offenders at an early time in an effectively staged and managed release and rehabilitation process.
- Starting early on in the pre-release period also allows thorough information gathering, establishment of pertinent collaborative structures and engagement of the inmate’s family.

## Tackling Extremist Narratives and a Personal Story by a Former Left Wing Extremist

The session included a personal story from a former member of a left wing extremist group. This personal insight provided a valuable real world example for the conference participants to reflect on.

The session also featured presentations from Dr. René Karpantschof (DK), Rachel Briggs, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK), and Damian Gadzinowski, the European Commission.

### Main points:

- The extreme left, right and militant Islamist groups share a number of common traits in their ideologies, symbolism and messaging, notably:
  - an exaggerated portrayal of “us against them” based on a “grave injustice” or “fatal threat”;
  - identifying and blaming certain enemies/“traitors”;
  - recognising “heroes” of the cause;
  - using violent symbolism and often also violent action.

- The phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism, of course, have important social and political backgrounds. Yet at the same time radicalisation is also essentially a human problem, and for this reason the human stories of former violent extremists and survivors of violent extremist attacks have a significant role to play in understanding the problem and identifying the most effective solutions.
- They have credibility with the audiences. Their stories are inspirational and include some very specific knowledge, which we should align alongside the professional expertise. They are well situated to develop narratives that can counter or provide alternatives to extremist narratives.
- The Against Violent Extremism Network (AVE) provides a framework for these types of testimonies, hence complementing the other areas of action highlighted at the conference. A short film on AVE was presented at the conference and can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeY4vuWFJOo>.
- The project is global and aims to connect 'formers' and survivors who are working to counter violent extremism so that they can learn from each other, explore partnerships, and access much needed funding for their work.
- Another network under development, the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) is designed for practitioners to exchange experience and feedback experiences/lessons to the policy and ministerial level. It's a network of networks that includes members from both statutory and non-statutory organisations, working with topics like community policing, visibility and contribution of victims of terrorism, mental health issues, prison and probation issues and internet and social media. To find out more about the initiative and/or to get involved in one of the networks, participants should contact Omar Ramadan on [o.ramadan@radaradvies.nl](mailto:o.ramadan@radaradvies.nl).
- See also [www.counterextremism.org](http://www.counterextremism.org) and [www.againsviolentextremism.org](http://www.againsviolentextremism.org)

By way of conclusion the new networks represent a trend, which is also in line with the ambition of the conference; to build new partnerships of knowledge-sharing, collaboration and action in the continued global endeavour to meet the challenge of extremism. The ambition for the coming years is to connect persons and efforts across distinctions such as local, national and international, civil and public, professional and volunteer, East and West, hence adding to the efficiency and legitimacy of the efforts.