

Challenges 1 and 2:

Don't criminalise travel (Syria) or ideology. Let's fundamentally change our security paradigm, build a whole-government approach: prevention/mental health collaborate closely with intelligence/police

Challenges 3 and 4:

Invest in human resource/practitioners, not in videos. Relationship, face-to-face is key. Focus widely on all kinds of at-risk youth

(Harald Weilnböck)

Don't criminalise travel to Syria or other places – and don't criminalise any ideology

First-line practitioners experience this continually: if you want to be able to help prevent VE (and FF), *you must not criminalise travel to Syria*. In fact, you must not criminalise travel anywhere (e.g. Ukraine). As a free and human rights based society, we must respect people's freedom to go wherever they want. If we don't respect people's freedoms, then good practice in prevention and rehabilitation *cannot be achieved*. By the same token, *you must not criminalise ideologies*, although you can and should sanction incitement of hatred and violence against others (!). Because, once again, if we don't respect people's freedoms, good practice prevention and disengagement *cannot be achieved*.

Why is this the case? Why can't you practise sustainable prevention/disengagement if you criminalise travel and/or ideologies, i.e. violate civil liberties? There are at least three reasons why not:

Firstly, the field practitioners who facilitate these very skilful and demanding interventions must be totally trustworthy. They need to have maximum integrity - and not only personal integrity but also systemic integrity. That means: the system and society represented by the practitioners must have integrity and be trustworthy.

This is very important because as practitioners, we need to reach out to and engage with young people who feel very alienated and who are highly distrustful. Also, we have to engage them in an intervention process which is very challenging for them. This requires trust, personal commitment, sharing experiences, opening up, total

honesty, exchanging ideas about sensitive issues of violence, victimisation, gender and confrontation of deep-rooted beliefs, etc. This is not easy for anyone, particularly not for the young people we are most concerned about. So practitioners need total trustworthiness, integrity and respect.

Needless to say, if a society criminalises travel to certain places and sanctions certain ideologies, that society clearly does not respect civil liberties and human rights. Hence, in the eyes of some of our young people, that society and its practitioners are not trustworthy. They will look at them and say: “They want to brainwash me!” They are all “brainwashers of the corrupt system”. This is the first reason why you can’t achieve good practice when such criminalising security measures are in place.

The second reason is about making sense of nonsense. Criminalising in general and sanctioning subjects concerning ideology and extremism in particular have always tended to be ineffective. Not only that, it has been counterproductive. It has further radicalised our client group rather than helping to reintegrate them.

What’s more, everybody knows this and our young people are the first to realise that such sanctions don’t work. They look at this and say “are they stupid, or what? That’s nonsense!” And our clients are very tough on nonsense! If you don’t make sense, they will definitely not respect you, let alone engage with you in any trustful process.

The third reason: Quite a few of our young people realise that these sanctions are often not really designed to resolve security problems. So it doesn’t matter that they are nonsense. The true purpose of these sanctions is often to play up to certain elements of the public, whether these are political parties and their electorates, or the media and the customer groups and advertisers to which they play up. Also, the young people instinctively sense that policy makers often don’t even believe in what they are doing themselves. Sometimes they just don’t speak up – and are concerned about their personal careers which may suffer when pursuing reasonable solutions which are disliked by superiors and/or the media or which simply “do not brief well”.

The young people then look at that and say: Not only is this not human rights and respectful, not only are these sanctions nonsense, ultimately this is all dishonest, selfish and cowardly.

Now, let’s think back to our own younger days, when patience was low and feelings were high. Would we have engaged with such people?

This is the third reason why we should not sanction travel or ideologies – quite apart from other possible forms of “nonsense” relating to security and politics. Because if we do so, good practice prevention can no longer be achieved.

How to avoid this? How to make sense? This leads to the second challenge statement:

Fundamentally change our security paradigm, i.e. build an integrated whole-government approach: prevention/mental health cooperate closely with intelligence/police

An integrated whole-government approach means: practitioners from the security and prevention community must exchange and cooperate extensively. What’s more, security legislation, law enforcement and intelligence on the one hand and prevention practitioners in social work, schools, mental health etc. on the other must *build tandems*/small practice units. These units are not put together because we are nice and inclusive. Rather, they will receive maximum support so they can do exemplary work, conduct research and provide feedback to policy level. These tandems work as RAN is intended to work: bottom-up, practitioner-focused, inter-agency, based on first-hand case experiences before producing recommendations. However, these tandems/units do this much more intensively – and they define an integrated action plan, which is also binding for security.

Is that really new? Would this be a fundamental change to the current security paradigm? Yes, because these inter-agency units would be given maximum political authority and attention. Policy makers, top administrators, even politicians would need to liaise regularly with these practice units. Also policy makers would need to be answerable to them in some way, in terms of whether, why and how they implement or not what has been recommended to them. Thus, if practitioners continually prove and reconfirm certain recommendations and if politicians continually fail to act on them, this will then be an issue.

For those who find such far-reaching innovation too risky and somewhat unsettling: One only needs to look at Aarhus in Denmark (also partly to Finland). Much of what is sketched here is already in place there, which is why Denmark does not criminalize

travel to Syria. Hence, one may look at how things are done there, what the success rates are¹, and then take it from there.

In any event, the gap between security and prevention policy will need to be mended. The expertise from both prevention and intelligence experts would be united in the action plan – and together define a new security paradigm.

Invest in human resources/practitioners, not in videos. Relationship, face-to-face is key.

Whenever politicians and policy makers speak about CVE, the first or second thing which most of them say is: we need something on the Internet! We need web platforms! We need counter narratives! These counter videos need to be as compelling as the extremist videos themselves! We need to counter, counter, counter ...

This is really too bad, because all these statements are plain wrong! In fact, they are “nonsense” in the above meaning.

First of all, we don't need these videos and Internet platforms; we don't need counter narratives. In fact, counter narratives don't work! First line practitioners have always known this: counter narratives have no impact on the target audience! They don't even reach them. Empirical research has proved this recently.² And if they do reach them, they tend to make things worse not better. We need to realise that although the Internet does play an important role in radicalisation, this does not mean that it can have an equally important impact in deradicalisation/rehabilitation or in prevention work.

On the other hand, what policy makers almost never say is: we need skilled mentors. We need talented youth workers, dedicated youth mental health workers, trauma therapy practitioners! They need to work inter-agency! We need hundreds of them! We need human resources. Real people. We need them because all successful disengagement/prevention work must be face-to-face and be embedded in a direct relationship. We never hear anyone say that!

1 <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/28/world/europe/denmark-syria-deradicalization-program/>

2 Countering Online Extremism. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-extremism-online/>. The Soufan Group 2013, quoted March 2015.

Secondly, not only do we not need counter narratives, because they don't work. *We don't need all this countering at all!* In fact, practitioners always realise fairly quickly that countering doesn't work. In fact, as a practitioner you must not counter, or else you will lose and your work will fail. Why is that? It is because extremists love countering, they feed on countering. And you will certainly never out-counter an extremist (and a suicide attack closes the debate). In fact, the only thing that impresses young extremists is if you stop countering and start to talk to them.

Hence, good practice doesn't *counter*, it always *builds* things. It takes what is there and then goes ahead and builds. It builds trust, relationships. It builds capacity, it creates offline experience, it builds personal narratives, all sorts of skills. But it never counters. The only other thing it may do is it *confronts* clients about certain issues, but this is done in a very undramatic way, very non-hysterical way, without much insistence.

So let's finally tell our policy makers: stop this countering business or risk being suspected of countering nothing other than our own hidden resentments and fears.

Focus widely on all kinds of at-risk young people

We should not continue to look for *the terrorists* and try to intercept the single most dangerous "lone wolf". We should not run around trying to assess who might be or become a suicide attacker or a foreign fighter. Because this is short-sighted and inconsiderate. The first thing we have learned is that there is no single profile of The Foreign Fighter. We never know from which area of life the next big attacker will come. Secondly, if you are really concerned about European societies, terrorism is not our most serious problem. There are other problems which are equally destabilising for freedom and democracy: organised crime, gangs, drugs, weapons, human trafficking – and these issues all overlap and intersect with violent extremism. In a sense, ISIS is nothing more than a big multinational corporation in organised crime.

So in terms of prevention, let's think big – and focus widely on all kinds of at-risk young people.