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CONNEKT REGIONAL REPORT

Prevention Guidelines for Local Authorities in the MENA and the Balkans

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CROSS-REGIONAL GUIDELINES OF PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION

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Executive background

These prevention guidelines, developed for the benefit of local authorities in their efforts to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism (VE), are based on the research that the CONNEKT team have completed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans over the last three years. The CONNEKT (Contexts of Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies) project was first implemented in early 2020 with the aim of advancing the knowledge on radicalisation and VE in these two regions in a comparative perspective. In addition, the project was designed with the intention that it be useful to the local communities. To this end, the project has developed eight toolkits of prevention for each of the eight countries part of the project, namely Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia in the MENA region, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in the Balkans. The aim of the toolkits was to help civil society actors in providing tools and methods of preventing radicalisation in the local context in these countries, drawing on select local case studies.[1] In parallel with the toolkits, these prevention guidelines aim to create a holistic approach towards prevention and towards building resilience in the community.

The recommended activities within this guideline are informed by research conducted at the macro, meso and micro level in the two regions, as well as extensive regional and inter-regional comparison, which all leads towards an acknowledgement of the need to move beyond the securitised approach adopted by states into approaches that empower young people and create contexts in which they can develop and thrive. Namely, in our research we looked at seven drivers of radicalisation: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, political grievances, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities. The data we have gathered has shown that these drivers are intertwined and work in combination with each other, indicating that no single driver can establish a direct link to radicalisation and VE. In addition, our researchers found that the importance of the social context in which young people work and live cannot be overlooked when developing policies. Indeed, the context in which young people live, created by the interaction of the drivers, is also the objective of these guidelines. Namely, through these guidelines we aim to help local authorities in developing activities and policies which would help young people in becoming more resilient towards VE and radicalisation because they would feel supported and empowered within their local community.

Towards this end, it is important to highlight that local authorities cannot address this issue alone. Namely, in order to address radicalisation and VE adequately and holistically, local authorities need to cooperate and coordinate with other actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, the business community, informal and formal youth associations, educational institutions, and the community itself. Considering the complexity of the issue of radicalisation and VE, a whole of society approach is needed in order to tackle them and in order to ensure that young people have opportunities and support in developing and growing within their communities.

[1] The toolkits for each countrywill be available on the CONNEKT's project website (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming)

Intervention guidelines and policy-making for local authorities

The areas that were most marked for intervention by our researchers when developing their toolkits, based on the findings from the macro-, meso- and micro-level research, are the following four areas: education, safe spaces, economic empowerment, and creative solutions. The interventions in these guidelines are also developed within these four areas to ensure that the efforts of both local authorities and of civil society are harmonised and working towards the same aim.

The structure of the guidelines consists of a brief overview of the interventions identified in the toolkits in the blue boxes, and an outline of activities and considerations for local authorities.

EDUCATION

The issue of education, both in terms of the capacities and the infrastructure of institutions and of the quality and substance of educational material, has been the subject of research and intervention within the project. Namely, at the macro level, schools were considered either as "incubators of violence" (Chirchi et al., 2021:16) or as unsafe and divisive spaces. Namely, the project had several cases at the meso level where our researchers dealt with violence in school (Ralchev and Stoynova, 2022), divided schools (Bakic et al., 2022) or lack of educational spaces.

TOOLKIT INTERVENTIONS IN EDUCATION

Support for young people from the educational institutions.

Digital literacy for a better understanding of the virtual space.

Extracurricular activities to keep young people engaged.

Therefore, it is very clear that more investment is needed in education in order to be able to provide young people with one of the spaces outside of the home where they spend most structured time. Depending on the legal frameworks of each country, local authorities usually have more competencies at the pre, primary and middle education. These are the levels of education which are most constructive to the development of an individual. Therefore, we suggest the following guidelines and activities at the local level.

Suggested activities and guidelines for local authorities:

Encouraging critical education

In order to empower young people to understand complex narratives and ideologies, the best tool is a critical mindset. For a critical mindset to be nurtured, the education system must encourage and support it. Schools need to teach students to think critically and also allow for

the space for them to express their opinions openly and without retribution. Local authorities should encourage the development of curricula at the primary and middle school level that integrate critical thinking in the teaching methods. This can also include training teaching staff on critical thinking methods and creating special programmes for both students and teaching staff until it can become a more ingrained aspect in the education system of the schools.

Digital literacy courses (for students and parents)
Digital tools and the virtual space are developing and expanding quickly, with young people being regular users and consumers. For this reason, it is important to have robust courses or programmes that target digital literacy. The driver of digitalisation in our research was a problem precisely because of the lack of digital literacy, making young people vulnerable to misinformation/disinformation. To address this vulnerability, local authorities should finance and invest in digital literacy courses for students, and preferably also for their parents, so that they too can be properly informed of the development of digital tools and spaces that their children may frequent. Additionally, the local authorities may choose to offer such courses also for local administration employees and teachers.

Supportive network (parents, teachers, mental health professionals)
The educational institutions need to do a better job at offering support to young people and need to feel like safe spaces for them. For this purpose, it is important that there is both a physical and an administrative infrastructure for supporting young people. This included regular parent-teacher conferences and the availability of mental health professionals on school grounds (as well as a dedicated safe space for the counselling to take place). In addition, the local authorities can financially support schools to have annual community events within the school. Such events can be used to renovate the school, to have festivals, to celebrate achievements, or whatever the community considers important for their children.

Education on religion
Our findings have revealed the need for a better education on religion to counteract the narratives that young people may find through alternative pathways. While this guideline is not to be confused with religious education, which falls within the competency of the relevant religious institutions, it does encourage a wider education on religions to foster a better understanding of religion as well as more tolerance of other religions.

SAFE SPACES

The concept of safe spaces emerged as a consequence of the lack of space and freedom within the already existing institutions, whether educational or otherwise, for young people.[2] Namely, our research explored how young people socialise in different groups, such as football fan groups, stadiums (Ralchev and Stoynova, 2022; Bakic et al., 2022; Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022), online communities or informal associations

[2] See UN, Resources on Safe Spaces for Youth, https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/international-youth-day/resources-iyd2018.html

(Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022), because they lack any other free spaces where they can pursue interests or build community. Local authorities are well-placed to address the issue of space because they have the resources at their disposal to create new ones, whether by investing in already existing spaces such as school gyms or in opening them up to civil society actors and youth.

TOOLKIT INTERVENTIONS ON SAFE SPACES

Spaces for extracurricular activities for young people

Formal and informal engagement opportunities for young people

Spaces where young people can feel free to explore their interests and ideas

Safe spaces must offer both physical space and safety for young people irrespective of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or other features of exclusion outside such safe spaces.[3] These spaces have three components: 1. Physical spaces in which young people can meet, engage in activities and build community; 2. Structure to manage and organise these spaces and make them safe, i.e., not just an extension of other spaces, be they private or public, but create a sense of security and participation; and 3. Activities to address the needs of young people, such as entertainment and sport, extracurricular activities that provide skills, and creative outlets for the development of professional skills. Such safe spaces cannot be created by commercial enterprises, as for-profit activities and spaces will be exclusionary, and local authorities should also ensure autonomy for local youth to avoid not responding to the genuine needs of youth.

Suggested activities and guidelines for local authorities:

Creating spaces for extracurricular activities

Local authorities can invest in the creation of spaces for extracurricular activities. These activities may involve sports, arts and crafts or spaces for social activities, such as project work or debate clubs. Informal and formal associations registered with local authorities should be able to use these spaces free of charge or at a very low cost in order to ensure that young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can participate. Young people should also be included in the preservation of these spaces so that they can learn to care for their common environment and be given responsibilities which involve the safeguarding of the space as well. It would be good to have educators who are employed in these spaces so that they can supervise and also offer support to the young people using the space.

Planning public spaces in urban development

In planning new neighbourhoods or developing existing ones, particular care should be paid to preserve or create local safe spaces. These need to supplement formal public structures

[3] USAID, Youth Programming Assessment Tool, Safe Space, https://ypat.fhi360.org/safe-space/

for young people, such as schools, or commercial ones, such as shopping centres. These spaces, such as youth centres, cultural centres or sports facilities, need to be incorporated into urban plans contributing towards more inclusive and safe cities.

Reclaiming unused spaces and giving them to youth associations for management

Local authorities need not necessarily build new spaces, they can also reclaim, provide and renovate spaces which are no longer in use, such as old stadiums, municipal offices or other relevant spaces that are deemed safe for use. These spaces can then be given to a CSO that the local community trust to manage. They should use these spaces exclusively for the social and creative development of young people. Such practices are already being implemented at the local level in one of the countries under research, Kosovo, whereby some spaces in the capital which belong to the municipality (Termokiss,[4] Kino Armata[5]) are being used by young people for young people (Pollozhani and Çeku, 2019).

Make municipal spaces and institutions safe for young people

When referring to safe spaces, it is also important to highlight that the local public institutions need to be freely accessible and safe for young people to approach. This means that local authorities may need to implement trust-building exercises in their communities in order to restore trust or to build it anew. This measure is advisable especially for the police authorities at the local level who need to engage with the local populations, not through the use of force but by implementing softer measures so that young people feel safe in their communities. While the micro-data shows that there is high trust in the police in both regions, the data at the meso level has shown a more tense relationship with police authorities (Pollozhani and Bieber, 2024), suggesting the urgent need for new approaches so that local institutions that are supposed to keep the community safe are trusted by the community itself.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Economic empowerment is one of the areas of intervention that requires a broad coalition of actors in order to make it successful. Namely, in order for the issue of economic empowerment to be tackled there needs to be an integrated cooperation between national, local and private institutions. However, it must be noted that, based on the research, the issue of economic empowerment is not only dependant on job availability but also on opportunities for social mobility and opportunities to access the job market, and have a general sense of wellbeing. Therefore, the toolkits which were addressed towards civil society focus largely on the preparation and professionalisation of young people for the job market. Local authorities can help in creating programmes of professionalisation, as well as help in furthering job prospects in different ways.

[4] https://termokiss.wordpress.com/about-2/

[5] https://www.kinoarmata.org

Suggested activities and guidelines for local authorities:

Regular townhall style meetings with the community

Considering that economic empowerment is tied up with economic deprivation and often poor living conditions, it is important for local authorities to be more engaged with local populations in order to know about their economic concerns. For this reason, it is advisable to have regular townhall style meetings with the local community in order to know more of their concerns and also get an insight into areas that need the attention of local authorities.

Creating internship opportunities for young people

Already at the macro level, our researchers suggested internship programmes or shadowing exercises (following officials in their daily tasks in order to learn from them) in their reports. The local authorities can open internships for young people not only to help in creating future employment opportunities but to also keep young people engaged in policy-making more broadly. However, it should be noted that it would be advisable that these internships are paid, or at the very least that the internships should cover food and travel costs for the interns in order to not create a further burden on the young people who might be willing to be engaged, or reinforcing social hierarchies between those who can afford to work without pay and those who cannot.

Local authorities can also encourage the creation of internship schemes by private businesses and CSOs by offering incentives, such as paying for the travel and food expenses of the interns, or other incentives relevant and applicable in the local community. A further help could be the establishment of practices such as job fairs, organised by the local authorities to connect young people who are job seekers and employers.

Professional training for young people and for older generations

The needs of the job market continuously shift as do the skills required to access them. For this reason, local authorities can cooperate with the local private businesses, local academic institutions, and CSOs to organise training courses for the professionalisation of both young people and older generations willing to re-enter the workforce. This can include training in a field that is highly sought after but where there is a lack of supply, or in areas that are emerging. It would particularly be advisable for women to be also particularly targeted with the training, especially those willing to re-enter the work force after their maternity leave.

Social support services for young people to prepare them for the job seeking process

The lack of job opportunities is not the only obstacle that young people may face. The job seeking process itself can be quite arduous and requires funds that may be inaccessible to some young people. The local authorities can offer help by providing social services, such as covering travel expenses for job interviews or help with preparing for the interview. The city of Seoul in South Korea, for instance, has instituted a suit rental service free of charge for young people who need one for interviews. The initiative has proven to be very successful and

is expanding to more localities.[6] In addition, in the absence of dedicated employment agencies at the national or local level, local authorities can work in tandem with CSOs in providing websites or bulletin boards on employment opportunities for the local population.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

As part of the Connekt project, we have had several workshops for different purposes. In one of the workshops centred on the inclusion of gender in the efforts of preventing VE and radicalisation, one popular area of intervention was art, encouraging the adoption of creative solutions on prevention (Traidi and Vidal Bertran, 2023). The participants said that at times the best way to deal with complex and challenging topics such as VE could be the use of creative events and actions in order to distance the participants from violent spaces and concepts. Therfore, local authorities can be helpful in supporting such initiatives, as well as creating space for them. It is important to consider all of the measures not just as a tool to prevent radicalisation and VE, but to engage with young people who might feel excluded and marginalised. The focus thus should rest with young people's inclusion and participation rather than with preventing violent extremism (PVE), as the latter might be alienating.

TOOLKIT INTERVENTIONS ON CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Role models and ambassadors for youth

Festivals and competitions for young people at the local level

Theatre and shared creative spaces for conflict resolution

Suggested activities and guidelines for local authorities:

Encouraging theatre troupes and investing in theatre initiatives

Investing in local cultural activities is important, particularly in cities that are away from the capital, where most of the arts and cultural activities are usually concentrated. Local authorities can help in this regard in making sure to invest in the development of cultural centres or theatres or in their restoration. The availability of cultural events can offer a new space for young people to get inspired towards positive change. The toolkits have already suggested the use of theatre as a conflict resolution tool. The local authorities can support local initiatives which aim at spreading positive messages and instructive lessons targeted towards young people, and potentially also involving them in the production.

Creative spaces for individual development (painting, music, writing)

We have already explored the need for spaces for extracurricular activities. There can be additional investments in creative alternative spaces as well. This can include a space for instruments, where young people can have access to instruments that they might not afford or have at home, such as shared art workshops.

[6] https://english.seoul.go.kr/expansion-of-free-suit-rental-program-for-young-job-seekers-with-98-6-satisfaction /#:~:text=This%20program%20is% 20available%20to,also%20be%20rented%20for%20free

In addition, local authorities can encourage local artists by commissioning their work for municipal buildings. This is a practice that is implemented in the European Union (EU), including at the city level. One practice, for instance, is the establishment of local cultural offices that make sure that the local art investment is directed in a way that is beneficial to the local population and the local artists.[7] Establishing such local offices for culture that are open to young people and young artists can be a positive practice for local authorities in both regions.

Festivals for youth activities (sports, arts, education)

The organisation of festivals can be formative in building a sense of community. Annual festivals whether they be organised around the arts, education (such as university fairs) or sports are a great opportunity to liven up the community and for young people to showcase their talents. When organising such activities, it is important to make them accessible to everyone, particularly making them free or at a very low cost, and also making transport available to people from more peripheral areas of a given locality. Lastly, it would be important to also engage young people in the organisation of the festivals themselves in order to broaden their sense of ownership and engagement.

[7] https://www.touring-artists.info/en/resources/how-to-mobility-funding/cultural-promotion-in-germany

Inclusion and diversity

Whenever considering any intervention at the local community, whether they are related to VE, radicalisation or other fields, it is important that local actors consider that their policies be inclusive of the needs of different parts of the community, including (but not limited to) women, young people, the elderly, persons with disabilities, members of marginalised communities (ethnic, religious, linguistic, socioeconomic, racial), and so on. This inclusion means the way different communities will be affected by a policy needs to be considered, as well as the ways to integrate them into policy-making and into policy implementation. For instance, do we need to publish a policy or a bulletin post in a different language for it to be more accessible to the local population? Do we need to reach out to a certain geographical location to make the information accessible to a certain community? Do we need to consider further funds for the inclusion of persons with disabilities? These are just some of the questions to ask when considering inclusive policies and outreach.

As an example of what inclusive policy-making can look like, we may take the inclusion of women in the job market. Considerations would include ensuring access to kindergartens for young children so that mothers can work. It may also necessitate a more integrated approach to social care, including the availability of geriatric care centres so that women are alleviated from the additional work of elderly care that is usually assigned to them within traditional patriarchal societies. These are policy considerations that take into account the gendered dimensions of labour, which seeks to remove the additional care-taking duties that women take on, inhibiting their pursuit of professional goals. Therefore, when we refer to inclusion and diversity, we refer to considerations that must be taken into account at the level of policy development, policy-making and policy implementation.

Cooperation with other actors

Efforts to prevent radicalisation and VE and to build resilience in the community need an integrated, holistic approach. This means that for local authorities to be successful in their efforts, they need to engage with a variety of actors, including civil society, international organisations and private institutions, among others.

Civil society actors make for valuable partners in engaging youth at the local level. Their presence in the field and their engagement with the young population means that they understand the challenges young people face and how to tackle them. Civil society actors can also be important in policy development as local authorities may rely on their knowledge of the community to develop inclusive policies.

State institutions are an integral partner to local authorities and an extension of the power to the local community. As such, local authorities need to be in close contact with state institutions, such as the relevant ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry for Youth, Ministry of Economic Affairs, etc.) in order to enable policies at the local level. In addition, local authorities can cooperate with available state agencies (e.g., Agency for Employment) in order to get support for their local initiatives.

Local authorities need to cooperate with the local authorities of other municipalities, cities, governorates, or other local administrative units, in order to expand their efforts and make sure that there is a harmonisation of good practices across various localities.

International organisations also make for useful partners in engaging local communities and in creating opportunities for them. They can help the local authorities in developing policies and in financing particular activities. It is important, however, that the local authorities are able to articulate the needs of the locality that they represent in order to be able to get the most needed support. This can be done if the local authorities are engaged in their local communities and have their trust.

Regional organisations, where applicable, can also be helpful tools. Organisations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE), for instance, which works on security, are particularly helpful. The OSCE has recently developed a toolbox offering an overview of all the OSCE tools at the disposal for conflict prevention (https://toolbox.osce.org). Other regional organisations that target economic development can also be valuable partners, particularly when it comes to measures for economic empowerment of youth.

Private institutions and businesses can be operational partners or sponsors that enable the implementation of initiatives targeted at the local community, which can be beneficial for both the community and the businesses themselves.

Conclusion

Local authorities are the key towards addressing radicalisation and VE as our data has shown that the local context defines the environment in which such phenomena occur, and as such it is this environment that needs to be changed and improved. Local authorities, much like national ones, have overwhelmingly practised hard security approaches in their efforts to prevent VE. Our interventions, based on our data and toolkits, show that there is a need for local authorities to focus on "soft" approaches, including arts, education and empowerment.

These interventions cannot be carried out in isolation from each other or from other actors. Many of the interventions are interconnected or would serve several purposes, such as the creation of spaces for young people to pursue their educational or creative interests, and they are best done with the involvement of diverse partners. For this reason, these guidelines encourage the creation of partnerships across sectors and levels in order to make sure that young people in their local communities are provided with the supportive environment that they need in order to thrive.

Lastly, in developing policies and practices of prevention, local authorities need to be mindful that they develop inclusive practices and use inclusive language. This would enable a holistic approach that would include all of society in the efforts to prevent VE and build the necessary resilience to fight it.

Resources

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CONNEKT

What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being "the problem" into "the key" for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.

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