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MANAGING A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH TO PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Insights from the Flemish case

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Summary

- Adopting a whole-of-society action plan to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) may be a challenging task, as it compels governments to navigate their way across various fields of tension.

- Governments generally have primacy on security but in a whole-of-society approach civil society organisations, local authorities, communities and other actors do. For a government this approach constitutes an opportunity to reflect on how much autonomy it is willing to give to these actors, on its role - initiative-taker, leader, coordinator? – and – more broadly – its relationship with its citizens.

- There is much literature on radicalisation and how to prevent or counter it yet, in practice, attempts to set up a whole-of-society approach may be quite distant from that theory. The Flemish Peace Institute's evaluation of the Flemish action plan helps to bridge this distance by focusing on four crucial components: conceptual framework and vision, multi-stakeholder engagement, flexibility in response to an evolving security context and evaluation.

- From this evaluation two guiding principles emerge:
  - First, policy-makers need to find a careful balance between putting local actors in the driving seat and maintaining a visible and guiding supra-local presence.
  - Second, policy-makers need to strike a balance between responding to a security-driven and urgency-based context and developing long-term preventive solutions to radicalisation and violent extremism, ideally in the form of a well-thought-out and evidence-based strategy.

Introduction

In December 2015, the United Nations Secretary-General called for member states to "consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism".[1] The call aimed to steer the global community's focus towards addressing the root causes rather than the symptoms of violent extremism.[2] Member states were urged to expand their existing security-based measures with a wide spectrum of preventive steps: from general prevention addressing the underlying conditions of radicalisation to the rehabilitation of violent extremists.[3] Such a comprehensive counterterrorism architecture requires whole-of-society engagement. For example, security-focused and prevention-oriented, national and local, and governmental and non-governmental actors each play a crucial role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE).[4]

This comprehensive approach to violent extremism had already emerged before the United Nations' call for action.[5] A decade prior, pioneering countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom had developed national preventive action plans in response to terrorist attacks on their soil.[a] Their attempts to detect and intervene early in the radicalisation process paved the way for what subsequently became known globally as P/CVE. Belgium, in contrast, only developed a similar preventive approach to radicalisation in 2015. Here too, the perception of the need to do so only arose following a security threat: the departure of many Belgian individuals to join extremist organisations in Syria and Iraq since 2012. In total more than 400 Belgian citizens left for the warzone – the highest number per capita in Europe.[6] Concerns over these foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) were further strengthened by the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris between 2014 and 2016, as several of the perpetrators were born and raised in Belgium.[b] In 2015 the Flemish government – within the Belgian state structure responsible in the northern part of the country for most preventive policy domains - adopted its own P/CVE action plan.

A whole-of-society strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism holds a number of strengths. It reflects the understanding that, in a coherent and adequate counterterrorism architecture, a government has three types of instrument at its disposal: prevention, repression and intervention. These different instruments can each be used on the macro-social, meso-social and micro-social levels and will ideally complement each other.[c] A collaborative and multi-sector approach to P/CVE also makes it possible to focus on numerous risk factors for radicalisation. There is no single cause or pathway into radicalisation and violent extremism. Therefore, using multiple capabilities can address the problem from different perspectives and through various approaches.[7] Moreover, intervening early in the radicalisation process may steer the focus towards underlying causes of radicalisation and avoid the stigmatisation that often results from a problem-oriented approach.[8]

The other side of the coin is that devising and implementing a comprehensive P/CVE action plan raises several challenges. First, policy-makers may struggle to adopt a clear conceptualisation of radicalisation and (violent) extremism or of their underlying causes.[9] Often, P/CVE policies are based on vague or undefined definitions of these prob-

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a   In particular, the attack on Theo van Gogh in 2004 in Amsterdam, the controversy related to the cartoons of Mohammed in Copenhagen in 2005 and the London bombings in 2006. The United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy, Contest, was developed in 2003 and contains four strands, among which a preventive strand (under the name Prevent) focuses on stopping people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. There have been three versions of Contest over the years (2003, 2009 and 2011) as the strategy has evolved alongside different threats. In the Netherlands, in 2007 the government adopted the Action Plan on Polarisation and Radicalisation 2007–2011. The action plan focused, among other things, on preventing polarisation and radicalisation, helping administrators and professionals to identify these processes at an early stage by, and developing an adequate approach. Following the example of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, in 2009 the Danish government developed a national action plan to prevent radicalism and extremism.

b   In particular, the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, a foiled attack by a terrorist network in Verviers in January 2015, the Paris attacks in November 2015, and the Brussels attacks in March 2016.

c   The macro-social level includes tools that can be used on the national, regional or city-wide scales. The meso-social level focuses on affective social environments, such as work, family, school and community. Finally, the micro-social level relates to individuals and sometimes to their immediate environment. See, e.g., Koehler, D. (2017), A typology of "de-radicalisation" programmes, in: Colaert, L. (ed.), *"Deradicalisation": scientific insights for a Flemish policy*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, pp. 65–67.

lems. They also frequently do not explain why a specific policy measure would help to reduce the problems.[10] Critics hold that a weak conceptualisation of P/CVE policies may pave the way for an opportunistic and politicised implementation of those policies. In practice, this has been shown to lead to stigmatisation of Muslim communities.[11]

Second, obstacles may also arise from the collaborative approach that is central to the plan. Conceptual issues may arise when different actors approach radicalisation and violent extremism from (too) divergent perspectives.[12] An oft-cited concern is the potential "securitisation" of prevention policies: introducing socio-preventive sectors into security-focused endeavours may securitise these sectors if they are "tasked to act as the arm of the counter-terror strategy".[13] A whole-of-society strategy may also lead to practical challenges. Cooperation and coordination need to be set up along various lines: horizontal (e.g. between stakeholders from different policy domains), vertical (e.g. between national and locally rooted actors) and diagonal (e.g. between government actors and civil society organisations).[14]

Third, critics express their concerns about policy-makers applying a "cut-and-paste mentality" when developing a P/CVE action plan.[15] Counterterrorism is notorious for being a reactive rather than proactive policy field. However, as the abovementioned national action plans demonstrate, even preventive responses to radicalisation and violent extremism are often developed in reaction to an urgent security threat. Yet, when policy-makers devise an action plan resembling a "paper exercise", this may undermine the purpose of contextual responses to local drivers of violent extremism and may thus lose impact.[16]

Fourth, policy-makers may find it challenging to evaluate a broadly based P/CVE action plan. Measuring the impact of preventive policy can be complicated, in particular when objectives are defined very broadly (e.g. preventing terrorist attacks from occurring) or are very diverse (e.g. when interventions are focused on both the general population and specific target groups).[17] Policy-makers may also find it hard to causally relate the "non-occurrence" of a phenomenon to a particular policy. Despite the proliferation of interventions globally to prevent and counter violent extremism, evaluation of their effectiveness has been limited.[18] Similarly, the recent surge of P/CVE national action plans has not been accompanied by adequate attention to impact measurement.

This analysis addresses the abovementioned challenges that may rise in the context of a whole-of-society action plan to prevent and counter violent extremism. It aims to answer the following two-fold research question:

(1) How do these challenges relating to a whole-of-society strategy translate into practice?
(2) How can policy-makers deal with or overcome these challenges when developing and implementing a whole-of-society strategy?

The analysis draws on insights from the Flemish case. This is done based on an in-depth evaluation study of the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation, concluded by the Flemish Peace Institute in 2020.[19] Most cases studies have a dual use: (1) they highlight how theoretical obstacles and strengths are translated into practice and (2) can then serve as building blocks for future (comparative) research on P/CVE. Concerning the first use, this case study provides a real insider's view of how the Flemish action plan was rolled out in practice as it is based on more than 60 interviews with key persons involved in the development and implementation of the action plan. These include representatives of the government, the intelligence and security services, and civil society; academics; and implementers of projects financed through the action plan. Second, case studies also may develop insights useful for other contexts. Context matters a great deal in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism - what works in one context may not necessarily be effective in another[20] – but the need to share good practices remains high in the field of P/CVE.[21]

The Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation

COMPLEMENTARITY WITH FEDERAL ACTION PLAN. In the Belgian state structure, competences to counter terrorism and radicalisation are divided between the different levels of government: the enforcement bodies – law enforcement, the intelligence services and justice – form an exclusive competence of the federal government, whereas most competences related to prevention are situated at the regional level. The Flemish P/CVE action plan should thus be considered complementary to the federal Plan R (Radicalisation), which first saw the light of day in 2002.[a] Given the federal powers, Plan R is focused in particular on the intelligence and security aspects and thus on tracing, monitoring and – where necessary – intervening against radicalised individuals and groups.[22]

DEVELOPED IN A PRESSING SECURITY CONTEXT. In 2015, the Flemish government adopted the "Action Plan for the Prevention of Processes of Radicalisation that Can Lead to Extremism and Terrorism".[23] It was developed in response to the FTF phenomenon and the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels that took place between 2014 and 2016. The Flemish government updated and renamed the action plan in 2017 in light of an evolving context. For example, it broadened the scope of the plan to include the phenomenon of polarisation, which was increasingly present in Flemish society. A third version of the action plan was adopted in May 2021. This recent update pays more attention, for example, to the online dimension of radicalisation and polarisation as well as the reintegration of radicalised detainees.

AN INTEGRATED PREVENTIVE APPROACH. The action plan has a double objective – specifically, "to prevent individuals from radicalising and to detect signs of violent radicalisation as early as possible."[24] Within the Flemish government, the Agency for Home Affairs is the coordinating agency for the implementation of the action plan. However, the government strives for an integrated preventive approach and therefore involves various policy domains, such as education, employment, social welfare and youth work. The action plan is structured along five policy lines: (1) coordination and cooperation, (2) a local approach, (3) the organisation of a person-oriented approach, (4) strengthening expertise and knowledge, and (5) mobilising civil society. Each of these policy lines is further operationalised through specific actions and measures – 62 in total.

AN EVALUATION OF ITS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLEMENTATION. The evaluation study conducted by the Flemish Peace Institute was commissioned by the Agency for Home Affairs, as the evaluation was foreseen in the action plan itself as an explicit action.[25] The evaluation study focused both on the conceptual framework of the action plan and on its roll-out and implementation in practice. The aim was to gather views from the implementing stakeholders to identify which challenges and good practices they encountered in the implementation of the action plan. The study gathered views from actors from various policy domains, engaged in both governmental and non-governmental organisations, and active at local, regional and federal levels.

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a The federal action plan was first published in 2002 – under the name Plan M (Mosques) – but was updated and renamed in 2004 and again in 2015, the latter case in the aftermath of the foiled attacks of the so-called Verviers cell, a terrorist network whose hideout in the city of Verviers was raided. After the raid, links were established between the Verviers cell and the attackers who carried out the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris.

Challenges in the development and implementation of a whole-of-society approach to P/CVE

This analysis focuses on four crucial components in the development and implementation of a P/CVE action plan: (1) the conceptual framework and vision underlying the action plan, (2) multi-stakeholder engagement, (3) the flexibility of the action plan in adapting to an evolving context of radicalisation and violent extremism, and (4) the evaluation of specific measures and actions as well as of the overall action plan. How policy-makers manage these four components may contribute to a successful implementation of their P/CVE action plan.

The following four sections – each corresponding to one of the abovementioned components - are structured as follows. A first section highlights key theoretical insights on how to develop and implement a P/CVE action plan. A second section examines the Flemish case study. Were these theoretical recommendations integrated in the Flemish action plan? How were they implemented in practice? A third section zooms out and reflects on concrete challenges and fields of tension that policy-makers may encounter while translating the theoretical recommendations into practice. A fourth section shares insights from the analysis of the Flemish action plan that may help policy-makers in another context to (partly) manage and overcome challenges and operate in a field characterised by multiple tensions.

An overarching vision and conceptual framework: bridging the gap between theory and (local) practice

A conceptual framework and vision form a necessary basis for any action plan. Key to the conceptual framework is a definition of the problem the plan seeks to address. This enables the plan to focus and prioritise, and it avoids continuous broadening of the scope of the problem the plan aims to prevent.[26] A definition of the problem is arguably especially important in the context of a collaborative and multi-sector approach to P/CVE: there is a need to clearly outline to the different actors the problem the plan seeks to prevent ("What is radicalisation?" and "What causes radicalisation?") and how it aims to do so ("How does the action plan – or the specific actions – contribute to the prevention of radicalisation?").

This may be a complicated task for policy-makers. There are many discussions (and even inconsistencies) in the literature on what radicalisation is and how the radicalisation process works. People also radicalise for very diverse and complex reasons. This may translate into different perspectives when engaging different actors in a broadly based P/CVE action plan. These actors may give different answers to the questions "What is radicalisation?" and "What causes radicalisation?". Nevertheless, significant inconsistencies in how stakeholders understand the problem and the process of radicalisation may hinder cooperation and jeopardise the effectiveness of the action plan.[27] While it may be far-fetched (and perhaps undesirable) for policy-makers to aim to formulate the answer to these questions, they should at least clarify from which vision of the phenomenon they want to address the problem. The existence of divergent explanatory frameworks can make multidisciplinary cooperation "a kind of organised conflict" where contradictions in views on violent radicalisation and its explanatory basis continually play out.

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The conceptual framework and vision of the action plan are then concretised in the policy design. A detailed policy design forms a crucial basis of an action plan: it highlights the objectives ("What do we aim to achieve?"), resources ("How do we aim to achieve the objectives?"), stakeholders ("What role does each actor play?") and timeframe ("When do we expect to reach the objectives?").[29] The policy design should also ideally categorise the types of preventive action based on their desired outcomes – for instance, whether actions are general or specific.[30] The literature also recommends that an action plan is based upon scientific knowledge: research can guide policy-makers with regard to the problem to prevent and its causal mechanisms, and also with regard to the effectiveness of interventions.[31]

The Flemish case study confirms that it is important to have an explanatory conceptual framework and overarching vision in an action plan in order to ensure successful implementation of the plan's measures and actions. The Flemish action plan provides a conceptual framework that defines, for example, "radicalisation", "extremism" and "polarisation". It also points – implicitly – to a multitude of explanatory variables (from socio-psychological dynamics to ideological and religious factors) as well as to the complexity of the radicalisation process. However, these definitions and the implicit explanatory model remain rather vague and are not worked out in a coherent and overarching vision of the phenomena that the plan aims to prevent. While this conceptual vagueness can have the advantage of flexibility during implementation, it can also create confusion among actors in the field. For instance, respondents from

the youth (welfare) sector pointed out how the conceptual vagueness translated into an inadequate framework for action: they shared their insecurities in their work with regard to what radicalisation is, when it is problematic and when they should intervene.[32]

The lack of a shared vision on "radicalisation" and "processes towards (violent) radicalisation" also created barriers to cooperation among practitioners. In some of the Local Integrated Security Cells (multi-agency discussion tables at the municipal level), partners thought and acted within different conceptual frameworks. The existence of divergent explanatory frameworks can make multidisciplinary cooperation "a kind of organised conflict"[33] where contradictions in views on violent radicalisation and its explanatory basis continually play out. In practice, this might mean that one practitioner focuses on adopting a broad approach to the phenomenon while others focus more on ideological and religious factors. As one respondent pointed out:

> "We run into the risk of applying double standards, with one partner being more likely to talk about an orthodox attitude to life and another about a radicalising attitude towards life."[34]

The absence of a detailed and concrete policy design in the Flemish action plan also created barriers to its efficient implementation. The policy design does not highlight what role each actor should play in the roll-out of the action plan. This may have exacerbated existing scepticism among some youth welfare organisations regarding their role in the prevention of violent radicalisation as well as wariness concerning the potential securiti-

sation of their work in the fight against terrorism. Moreover, a clear budgetary framework would have been useful to measure inputs against expected outputs and identify potential funding gaps. Many actions were to be implemented without additional resources, which generated an additional workload for some of the engaged sectors. Finally, the action plan does not clearly outline objectives for specific measures and actions. This has complicated efforts to evaluate the outcomes of the measures and the action plan more generally. These last two issues will be discussed in more depth in the following sections.

The previous paragraphs have pointed out that, according to research, a conceptual framework and overarching vision are crucial elements in a P/CVE action plan. We have also seen how the absence of these elements may in practice decrease the likelihood of a plan being implemented efficiently. Theory and practice, however, can be quite distant from one another: policy-makers may encounter challenges when trying to apply the theoretical guidelines on a conceptual framework and vision in practice. First, elaborating a conceptual framework on P/CVE policies can be challenging given that there are many uncertainties about the problem to prevent and how to achieve this. How can policy-makers adopt a clear conceptual framework in their action plan in the absence of a general consensus on what radicalisation is, what its drivers are and how the radicalisation process works?[35] There is also little scientific evidence indicating that one or another preventive measure works. This complicates policy-makers' task of indicating how a specific measure is expected to contribute to the intended objective of the action plan.

Second, promoting a shared vision and conceptual framework among the various partners engaged in the implementation of the action plan comes with its own set of challenges. Here too, theory and practice can be quite distant. The strength of a multi-sector approach lies in the fact that part-

ners may look at the problem from different angles. However, this may also create difficulties – for instance, when partners do not judge "radical" thoughts or behaviours in the same way, or when they adopt different thresholds for what constitutes problematic radicalism.[36] How can policy-makers focus on streamlining visions among implementing partners yet leave open the door for different perspectives? How can they outline a clear conceptual framework when (local) practitioners may want to judge cases of radicalisation within their specific context and based on their professional experience?[a]

Third, policy-makers may face constraints due to the security urgency that often drives the development of a P/CVE action plan. How can policy-makers elaborate a well-thought-out conceptual framework and policy design in their action plan – ideally based on recent scientific insights – while meeting public demands for an urgent response to a security threat?

The evaluation of the Flemish action plan may provide some inspiration. The analysis highlights that, if elaborating a detailed conceptualisation of (the prevention of) radicalisation may be unrealistic, a *basic conceptualisation* could be a good starting point. Policy-makers may not be able to fall back on a widespread definition of radicalisation or a consensus on its influencing factors. Nevertheless, they will be able to refer to some key concepts on which experts and researchers do agree. For instance, there is a general consensus on the complexity and the process-based nature of radicalisation, as well as on the idea that this process is non-linear.[37] It is also agreed that radicalisation may be influenced by various driving factors and that the (combination of) influencing factors can vary from one situation to another. Researchers generally also agree that the driving factors of radicalisation are present at the micro, meso and macro levels.[38] The limited scientific evidence on what works in the prevention of radi-

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a For instance, (local) practitioners may want to keep space for their own professional judgement in analysing and intervening in a radicalisation case, providing tailor-made guidance and relying on ad hoc case analysis. See, e.g., Eijkman, Q. & Roodnat, J. (2017), Beware of branding someone a terrorist: local professionals on person-specific interventions to counter extremism, *Journal for Deradicalization*, 10, p. 196.

calisation should not hold policy-makers back from clarifying what a specific action aims to achieve and why the underlying mechanism of their approach is expected to work. Such a basic conceptualisation of (the prevention of) radicalisation may still leave abundant space for local practice, professional judgement and experimentation.

In the framework of the Flemish action plan, a *multi-agency platform* at policy level played an important role in developing and promoting a shared vision among practitioners in the various policy domains. The Flemish Radicalisation Platform brings together contact persons from the different administrations engaged in the implementation of the action plan. Respondents were highly positive about the platform: the discussions made it possible to address radicalisation from different perspectives and take up various approaches and methodologies for the prevention of radicalisation. At the same time, members of the platform paid attention to vision development and the elaboration of an overarching policy – for example, through discussions with and feedback from experts. Respondents in the Flemish case study highlighted that the government too could play a role in promoting a shared vision and conceptual framework among the various sectors and actors. The government could, for example, endorse efforts by local authorities and practitioners to work towards a shared vision or at least *facilitate their dialogue* about it. However, it is important for semantic discussions not to paralyse local practice:

"A uniform local and supra-local framework is desirable if this can also make a positive contribution to the current practice … Semantic discussions are important but should facilitate the practical operation."[39]

For the development of the new 2021 action plan, the Flemish government paid more attention to developing a policy design than in the previous action plans. For example, the government developed – months prior to adopting the measures and actions within the action plan - a *framework with objectives* underlying the development and implementation of the action plan.

The evaluation of the Flemish action plan highlights how it may be worthwhile to *involve those actors that will implement the action plan in its development process*. A co-designing effort can increase the sense of a shared vision among the various actors engaged in the implementation. It also creates a sense of ownership if, for instance, the conceptual framework underlying the actions and measures in the plan reflects the meaningful contribution of each sector. In particular, socio-preventive sectors may feel reluctant to participate in a security-focused endeavour if they feel their intrinsic role is ignored or instrumentalised for security purposes.[40] The Flemish case study presents an inspiring practice in this regard. Within the education sector, the vision of the place of education in P/CVE gradually shifted throughout the implementation of the action plan: the initial security- and problem-oriented focus altered towards a more meaningful role of education.[a] The traditionally solid interaction between the education providers and the education administration (involved in the design of the action plan) made it possible for the education sector to introduce this vision of the role of education in P/CVE into the action plan. The strong organisational structure of the education sector also made it possible to convey that vision to education practitioners at a local level.[b]

Finally, during the implementation of the action plan, the Flemish government maintained a continual *stream of dialogue with experts*. Feedback opportunities were foreseen in the form of round-

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a Initially, education practitioners adopted a rather security-focused approach aimed at the detection of potentially radicalising pupils. Gradually, however, the mindset shifted towards fundamental and well-being-oriented prevention – for example, through promoting an open, safe and warm school climate. Additionally, the problem-oriented focus on radicalisation as a specific issue shifted towards the broad pedagogical value of education: in the event of radicalisation, practitioners should fall back on the regular approach to pedagogical problems concerning pupils.

b For a detailed study of the engagement of the education sector within the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation, see Goris, K. & Van Alstein, M. (2021), *"Cobbler, stick to your last": the role of education in the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalization and polarization*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.

table discussions, intersectoral network days and various meetings in the Flemish Parliament. Intermediate and *ex post* consultation opportunities can be useful practices to introduce scientific insights into an action plan when urgency to act prevents a pre-emptive scientific assessment of the conceptual framework and concrete measures.

Key points

➜ A conceptual framework, overarching vision and concrete policy design form a necessary basis for a P/CVE action plan. They outline to the different actors the problem the plan seeks to prevent and how it wants to achieve this. An unclear conceptual framework and vision can create confusion among the various actors involved in the implementation of the plan and can hinder cooperation between them.

➜ Policy-makers may encounter practical issues when setting out these crucial elements in their action plan. Developing a well-thought-out conceptual framework is challenging given that there are many uncertainties about radicalisation and how to prevent it; when the security context requires urgent action, this can pose additional difficulties.

➜ A useful step can be to develop a vision and conceptualisation of basic elements of (the prevention of) radicalisation on which a consensus does exist. Additionally, insights from the Flemish action plan show that a steady stream of dialogue with the various sectors engaged in the implementation of the plan stimulates the development of a conceptual basis that respects the meaningful contributions of each sector.

Who to engage in a whole-of-society approach and how to support them adequately

A P/CVE action plan forms an important basis for efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. Still, "the process and partners matter as much as the plan itself".[41] Which partners should policy-makers engage to implement their action plan? And how should they support these partners so that they can adequately implement the action plan? The literature on P/CVE gives us some answers to these questions.

The whole-of-society approach to preventing and countering violent extremism consists of two dimensions: a multidisciplinary and a multilevel dimension. Multidisciplinarity is needed to respond to the complexity of the radicalisation process and the multitude of influencing factors. The involvement of various policy areas is thus needed to prevent and intervene in this process.[42] These areas may include, among others, law enforcement, social service providers, education professionals, youth workers and religious leaders. The need for a multilevel response stems from the idea that radicalisation is locally anchored. Despite radicalisation being an internationally branched phenomenon, it often takes place in a local breeding ground. Therefore, locally rooted actors (such as local policy-makers, practitioners and grassroots organisations) are best placed to detect signals of radicalisation, gain access to relevant communities and intervene in the radicalisation process.[43]

The P/CVE literature also tells us how best to engage partners in order to increase the likelihood of a plan being implemented successfully. A P/CVE action plan benefits if it is set up through a *consultation process* with the various engaged actors. This ensures that their needs and priorities are reflected in the plan, enables consideration of a broad range of opinions and interests, and increases the chance of widespread ownership. Having *sufficient resources* is crucial for a plan's successful implementation. An action plan consists of many actions and measures, so the implementing partners need adequate funding and personnel for the roll-out. Finally, a coordination mechanism is key to oversee the drafting, development and implementation of the plan.[44] Such a mechanism, for instance in the form of a lead government agency, "ensures the necessary inter-agency coordination to allow for a 'whole of government' and ultimately 'whole of society' approach".[45]

Multidisciplinarity has a crucial place in the Flemish action plan. It comes as no surprise, thus, that many of the actions and measures in the plan focus on enhancing multi-agency and multilevel cooperation and coordination. A collaborative and multi-sector approach has been pursued through the establishment of various consultation platforms – for example, the aforementioned Flemish Radicalisation Platform, which brings together representatives of the various engaged policy administrations. The multidisciplinary discussion tables at a municipal level (or Local Integrated Security Cells) are examples of how multidisciplinary cooperation was enhanced at the local and practitioner levels. Moreover, the Flemish action plan enabled the creation of several intra-sectoral consultation structures.

The limited consultation of the youth welfare sector in the policy design of the action plan meant that existing concerns within the sector, in particular about the risk of securitisation, continued to persist.

Despite these efforts, the process of engaging the various actors went more smoothly in some sectors than in others. This can partly be explained by the impromptu and unscripted nature of the consultation process that informed the development of the action plan. In a previous section it was mentioned how the education sector was consulted from the outset of the policy design process. For this reason, the priorities and needs of this sector are (in part) reflected in the action plan. In contrast, the youth welfare sector – a less centralised sector consisting predominantly of civil society organisations – was only approached during the implementation phase of the action plan. This seems to reflect a more general trend, with limited civil society consultation in the development of other national P/CVE action plans.[46] In the Flemish case, the limited consideration in the action plan of the priorities and concerns of the youth welfare sector translated into difficulties in gaining support from some organisations. The limited consultation of the youth welfare sector in the policy design of the action plan meant that existing concerns within the sector, in particular about the risk of securitisation, continued to persist.

To follow up on and coordinate the implementation of the action plan, the Flemish government appointed the Agency for Home Affairs as the coordinating agency. This agency played a predominantly facilitating role in coordination. For instance, it facilitated supra-local coordination between local authorities through financial support to the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG). Respondents expressed that the mere facilitating role of the Flemish government was insufficient and felt that the coordinating role of the government itself was somewhat unclear. On several occasions, respondents stated that they had experienced the need for greater guidance and coordination from the government. For instance, more supra-local steering would be welcome to oversee the quality of available expertise, facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and identify where gaps in knowl-

edge lie. The abundance of knowledge and expertise on radicalisation can make it difficult for local practitioners to see the wood for the trees. At the same time, they experience gaps in expertise with regard to new phenomena, such as online radicalisation or right-wing extremism.

Stronger supra-local guidance could also have been beneficial to increase the sustainability of locally embedded projects that were funded through the action plan. Local authorities and project implementers were granted significant autonomy in the implementation of their actions. The Flemish government also entrusted local actors with the responsibility of ensuring long-term anchoring of their subsidised efforts. However, some local authorities and civil society organisations did not have the necessary resources and staff to fully embed acquired knowledge and results in a structural and systematic manner. Several respondents raised concerns about projects, expertise and partnerships being lost once project financing came to an end:

"If resources are limited in time, this often means that a built-up operation must be wholly or partially phased out. This can happen, for example, if additionally recruited staff or valuable partnerships with external partners cannot be retained, which also translates into a loss of expertise."[47]

An action plan requires sufficient resources to enable partners to implement the various actions and measures. It may be difficult to estimate how many resources are "sufficient", in particular when much of the financial and personnel support is provided through regular means. The Flemish government did allocate substantial additional resources for the implementation of the measures and actions in the action plan: €23 million and in total nine full-time employees (to support the implementation of the plan) for the period 2015–2020. A first important caveat is that the vast majority of those financial resources were not specifically targeted at the prevention of radicalisation but at broader actions that could contribute

to the prevention of the problem.[a] A second caveat is that many of the measures had to be implemented using regular resources. Respondents expressed their concerns about how this made existing gaps in resources and staff shortages even more visible for some overstretched sectors. The focus on the prevention of violent radicalisation meant a net increase of duties and tasks for youth care and pupil guidance centres. These were already facing a number of structural needs, limited resources, staff shortages and long waiting lists. It may be problematic when

"basic areas of work, for example in youth work, are asked to deliver all kinds of extras in the context of radicalisation policies, when the foundation is not right".[48]

The evaluation of the Flemish action plan also pointed out that the additional resources provided for the roll-out of the measures and actions were in some cases unequally divided between the engaged sectors. This contributed to how the different sectors judged and evaluated their own role in the implementation of the action plan. For example, much of the additional resources and personnel were directed towards the education sector, whereas only a small amount of funding and none of the nine FTE's were made available to the youth welfare sector.[b] This was despite the fact that the government considered both sectors to be crucial partners. The lack of sufficient financial and personnel support not only increased scepticism among youth-focused civil society organisations about engaging in the implementation of the action plan but also created a fair amount of stress. One respondent saw this issue as part of a broader trend of decreasing structural financing for the sector, which

"in recent years has systematically lost its basic operating resources, and now has to find funding for its work through project funding".[49]

In the previous paragraphs we saw that the process and partners matter a great deal in successfully implementing a whole-of-society action plan. However, engaging a multitude of partners may sound easier than it is. Making sure that the needs and priorities of all actors feed the development process of the action plan is more straightforward for some sectors than others. Many civil society organisations, in particular grassroots organisations, do not have a "direct line" to (national) policy-makers. For policy-makers it can be a challenge to identify representatives within specific sectors of civil society that can act as speaking partners. This is particularly true if the sectors are less structured or centrally organised.

Another potential challenge stems from the key role that local actors play in a national P/CVE action plan. National policy-makers and authorities are accountable for the implementation of the action plan, while local actors are the ones needing to deliver on the ground.[50] This requires a careful balance between national and local leadership in the implementation of the action plan. The evaluation of the Flemish action plan pointed out obstacles stemming from too much local autonomy. In contrast, national authorities in some other countries are somewhat reluctant to cede power to local or regional actors.[51] Both cases can hinder the efficient implementation of a plan.

Policy-makers may also struggle to adopt an adequate funding method for the implementation of the measures and actions in their plan. Should they rely on regular services or allocate project funding to support the actors responsible for the implementation? Both types of financial support have advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, supporting regular services and structures makes it possible to rely on existing expertise and networks. It also facilitates anchoring acquired knowledge. Project financing, on the other hand, can be a suitable way to respond quickly and flex-

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a For instance, from the overall budget, €13 million was aimed at supporting municipalities in the outskirts of Brussels with various challenges specific to urban areas.

b The action plan allocated almost €2 million and nine full-time employees to the education sector. The youth welfare sector received only €300,000 and no additional personnel support for the implementation of the measures and actions in the plan.

ibly to problems about which the government itself does not yet have much expertise. It also allows experimentation before interventions are implemented more broadly. This too may raise some questions. For example, how can policy-makers make sure they support an appropriate variety of experimental projects in unexplored areas of P/CVE without "letting a thousand flowers bloom"?[a]

Some insights from the Flemish case study can suggest ways of dealing with these challenges. Despite the rather unscripted consultation process leading up to the development of the Flemish action plan, some elements of the plan did make informal consultation possible (albeit in the implementation rather than development phase). One of them related to the contact persons who were appointed to the various administrative departments. These contact persons – all participants in the Flemish Radicalisation Platform - played an important role in exchanging issues, concerns and needs in both top-down and bottom-up ways. The intra-sectoral consultation structures, set up to strengthen cooperation and coordination within the various sectors, also played an important role in this regard. Overall, the respondents were positive about these structures: they facilitated not only the consultation process but also the flow of information. The intra-sectoral structures also formed an excellent learning network in which expertise and experiences could be built up and shared, and themes could be approached from various angles.

The analysis of the Flemish action plan also revealed that existing coordination mechanisms can play a useful role in coordinating the implementation of an action plan. In this case study, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) played a key role in the supra-local coordination and flow of information between local authorities engaged in the implementation of the action plan. For instance, the VVSG built a bridge between municipalities that had expertise in dealing with radicalisation and those that did not. The VVSG also played a crucial role in guiding local authorities on how to create and organise their multi-agency discussion tables. Part of the credit for this success goes to the Flemish government, which allocated financial support to the VVSG with a view to supporting its coordinating role.

Finally, the analysis highlighted that a proper follow-up on whether demanded output is sufficiently met with allocated resources is a necessary first step to ensure that the engaged actors are adequately supported in their efforts to implement an action plan. The absence in the Flemish action plan of a clear mechanism able to measure input against output formed an obstacle to determining exactly how much budget had been or should have been provided for the implementation of the actions and measures. For instance, tracking inputs and outputs may help policy-makers to estimate whether deployment via regular means requires additional personnel and financial support. Information from the tracking can also serve as a rationale for reallocating support if this is deemed necessary.

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a The "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach creates a patchwork quilt of underfunded preventive measures. This pitfall means that the funding is spread over several projects, so that each project gets a (too) small piece of the cake.

Key points

➜ A whole-of-society approach to P/CVE emphasises multidisciplinary and multilevel participation in the implementation of an action plan. Policy-makers can increase the likelihood of a successful implementation of the actions and measures in a plan by supporting the engaged actors with sufficient resources and making sure the plan reflects those actors' needs and priorities. Adequate supra-local coordination and steering may also be needed to guide local actors in exchanging knowledge and expertise and anchoring acquired knowledge in a structural and systematic manner.

➜ National policy-makers and authorities are accountable for the implementation of an action plan, while local actors are the ones needing to deliver it on the ground. Too much autonomy and too little guidance for local actors can each hinder the efficient implementation of the measures and actions in a plan. Insights from the Flemish case study show how a network of contact persons, intra-sectoral consultation structures and existing coordination mechanisms may increase coordination and cooperation and benefit the exchange of issues and concerns in both top-down and bottom-up ways.

➜ Adequate funding is crucial for the successful implementation of a P/CVE action plan. This can be achieved by relying on regular services or working through project funding, as both have advantages and disadvantages. Either way – as attested by the analysis of the Flemish action plan – a proper follow-up on whether demanded output is sufficiently met with allocated resources is a first step to determining whether increases in personnel and financial support are needed.

P/CVE action plans: living and flexible documents

The contexts of phenomena such as (violent) radicalisation and extremism can evolve rapidly. An area that urgently asked for policy answers some years ago may be less acute a few years later. Meanwhile, new challenges and needs may have come to the forefront. If policy-makers want to pursue an adequate policy, they must gear it as closely as possible to current challenges and needs. For this reason, P/CVE action plans should be "living documents that are adjusted over time to take into account the evolving local threat and push and pull factors".[52] Regular follow-ups on where needs and requirements lie – for instance,

through situational analyses – form a necessary basis for potential updates to the plan.[53] An evolving security context or policy situation may require policy-makers to review the conceptual framework and vision underlying the P/CVE policy design, for instance, so that they reflect new scientific insights on radicalisation or violent extremism. Updates may also require adjustments to existing interventions or the addition of new measures and actions.

An action plan that is not sufficiently flexible or inadequately aligned with the evolving security context risks focusing on the wrong priorities or, worse, missing crucial areas of attention. Part of the evaluation of the Flemish action plan focused on the question of whether the action plan – some years after its adoption – is adequate to deal with

the current situation of violent radicalisation in Belgium. Several updating mechanisms and opportunities were outlined in the action plan. For example, regular consultations take place with experts, who also provide feedback, enabling policy-makers to obtain new insights into radicalisation. The Flemish Radicalisation Platform was also tasked with continuously monitoring and adjusting the action plan if needed. The action plan, it was stated, should "be able to respond quickly and flexibly to new developments and new challenges."[54] This has led to some amendments over the years in line with the evolving security and policy context. In 2017, for instance, the scope of the action plan was broadened (as part of the update in that year) to include a focus on polarisation, perceived to be a growing issue in Flemish society.

Nevertheless, a greater level of flexibility and versatility of the Flemish action plan is needed to tackle the various forms of violent radicalisation and polarisation. The original trigger for the P/CVE policy – the departure of young people to Syria and Iraq to join extremist groups and the terrorist attacks by jihadist actors – has left its mark on the Flemish action plan. Despite the broad vision on radicalisation underlying the plan, several measures focus strongly on jihadist forms of violent radicalisation and on related themes, such as integration and cooperation with religious organisations. The context has now evolved. For instance, the pressing need to prevent the departure of FTFs has shifted to an urgency to handle their return or rehabilitation after release from prison. Violent radicalisation in Belgium has also become more diffuse than it was some years ago. In addition to jihadist extremism, other types of violent extremism have become more present – for instance, right-wing extremism and radicalisation related to single issues, such as 5G transmission masts or the COVID-19 pandemic. Some respondents highlighted the pressing need to focus on these topics:

"In recent years, enormous investments have been made at local and supra-local level to counter "Islamic-inspired radicalisation" – for instance, working with mosques, the Muslim community, non-profit organisations and workshops on identity development among Muslim youth. However, there is far too little support for raising awareness of right-wing radicalisation, even though it is certainly present."[55]

How should policy-makers approach the process of updating their action plan? This question may reflect a more general tension underlying the development of an action plan. On the one hand, policy-makers may be confronted with a sense of urgency of the kind that is often engrained in the security context of radicalisation and violent extremism. A security-driven sense of urgency may generate political and public pressure, translate into an impulse to act and lead to the development (or updating) of an action plan. Moving forward out of a sense of urgency is not necessarily a bad thing, as it may help to push through ideas and planned practices that have been in the pipeline for some time. It also generates political commitment, which is crucial for the successful implementation of an action plan and needed to mobilise the necessary resources.[56] On the other hand, the purpose of a broadly based P/CVE action plan is to provide long-term preventive solutions to radicalisation and violent extremism. This is best done through a well-thought-out and carefully designed strategy that is guided by evidence-based knowledge. The nuance, caution and time that this may require are not always available to national policy-makers.

In this regard, the sense of urgency of a security context is a double-edged sword. It may translate into an impulse to act and make things happen. But it can also diminish thoughtfulness as a result of the speed with which actions must be taken. In prevention, there are two particular pitfalls that may arise. First, urgency may lead to a rapid and reactive response to a problem that today is perceived as serious but tomorrow may be forgotten. Responding in this way deprives policy-makers of the opportunity to draw up a well-

thought-out action plan. Second, urgency may create an emphasis on action rather than consequences: a popular misconception is that "doing something is always better than doing nothing". Both pitfalls may translate into measures that are not based on empirical knowledge, that can have unintended consequences and that focus more on the symptoms than on (structural) causes.[57]

The Flemish case study highlights how, in practice, two types of updating process – each reflecting one side of the abovementioned tension – may be needed to make sure an action plan responds adequately to the evolving context. First, an action plan may require updates concerning which policy-makers can rely on existing knowledge and expertise. For instance, when the Flemish government updated its action plan in the light of the emerging polarisation of society, polarisation was not a new phenomenon. The government could thus refer to existing expertise present among practitioners as well as evidence-based knowledge on polarisation. Similarly, developments in the future may increasingly need to reach out to adults susceptible to violent radicalisation. This reflects the greater diversity in age of those involved in both left- and right-wing extremism, as opposed to the predominantly young age of jihadist actors and foreign terrorist fighters. In this area, the government can rely on existing good practices from various policy domains that have information on how best to reach out to adult target groups.

Second, some new developments that need to be reflected in policy measures in an action plan must be built upon little or no scientific insight. A good example is the current need to focus on online interventions to prevent and counter radicalisation. The digital dimension plays an increasingly important role in the radicalisation process. However, online radicalisation is a relatively new phenomenon and not many evidence-based interventions in the digital sphere exist so far. There is also a pressing need to focus on reintegrating radicalised ex-detainees as many will be released in the upcoming months and years. Here, too, relatively little evidence exists on what does and does not work. This may legitimise the need to "try something"[58] and set up experimental interventions. Policy-makers can do so by launching a project call, which is an interesting way to respond (quickly) to a phenomenon about which there is little knowledge. Project grants can often be provided in the short term and within budgetary constraints, and they are a good way to test methodologies before implementing them more widely.[59] One respondent pointed to the advantages of working through project funding in this regard:

> "You temporarily let someone work on a project and you see whether it is successful, and that way it gets political support for including it in regular policy".[60]

The sense of urgency of a security context is a double-edged sword. It may translate into an impulse to act and make things happen. But it can also diminish thoughtfulness as a result of the speed with which actions must be taken.

Key points

➜ An action plan to prevent and counter violent extremism is a living document that is adjusted over time to adequately respond to an evolving security context, an emerging policy situation or new scientific insights. An action plan that is not sufficiently flexible or adequately aligned with the evolving security context risks focusing on the wrong priorities or, worse, missing crucial areas of attention.

➜ A well-thought-out and evidence-based action plan is best updated based on a situational analysis and recent scientific insights. This can be done by setting up regular consultations with experts on radicalisation and violent extremism.

➜ In the case of a security-related sense of urgency or when there are few or no scientific insights on new developments that need to be reflected in the action plan, policy-makers may feel the need to "try something". Experimental interventions – for instance, through project funding – can be an interesting method of responding (quickly) to a phenomenon about which there is little knowledge.

How to embed a structural evaluation reflex in a P/CVE action plan

Evaluating the impact of a preventive policy may be a difficult task, let alone evaluating a comprehensive set of preventive policies such as a P/CVE action plan. The objectives of P/CVE action plans are often very broad and diverse. They may, for instance, include interventions targeting the general population as well as specific groups,[61] and they may aim at preventing a terrorist attack or the violent radicalisation of (segments of) the population. In addition, it can be difficult to "measure the negative" – for instance, whether an attack did not take place or whether a population did not radicalise. It is even more difficult to attribute the non-occurrence of such an event to a certain policy, given that numerous factors may each play a role.[62] Despite these challenges, embedding a structural evaluation reflex in an action plan influences the likelihood of its successful implementation. Evaluative practices make it possible to find out what the policy is doing right, where there is room for adjustment and improvement, and how possible negative consequences of the policy can be detected and mitigated.[63]

The literature presents several guidelines that can help policy-makers to embed evaluation in a comprehensive P/CVE action plan. First of all, objectives form a crucial basis of any evaluation practice. An action plan should ideally contain a series of objectives that describe short- and

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Evaluative practices make it possible to find out what the policy is doing right, where there is room for adjustment and improvement, and how possible negative consequences of the policy can be detected and mitigated.

medium-term outcomes that it is expected to achieve. These objectives should be present not only in the overall action plan but also in its policy lines and concrete actions.[64] Evaluation also benefits from realistic, measurable and clearly defined objectives. Broadly defined objectives (such as preventing terrorist attacks) will make it difficult to determine the exact impact of an intervention. In contrast, the effects of interventions with clearly defined objectives (such as increasing the resilience of specific groups) can be mapped out. A second guideline to facilitate the evaluation of an action plan is to include a framework with evaluation criteria and standards of performance. Such a framework identifies indicators for measuring the success of specific actions and measures. This helps to support the various engaged actors in tracking the progress of their interventions towards the overall vision and goals of the plan.[65] Finally, policy-makers should ideally maintain a focus on evaluation throughout the various phases of the action plan. These include its development and implementation. For instance, impact evaluations gain strength when an ex ante evaluation or baseline measurement precedes the implementation of a measure or action.[66]

The Flemish action plan foresaw the need for an overall evaluation of the plan. This evaluation, conducted by the Flemish Peace Institute, focused on both the conceptual framework underlying the plan and the implementation of its measures.[67] Some of the recommendations from this evaluation exercise have been incorporated in the 2021 renewed action plan. Ideally, however, this evaluation reflex would have been extended even more structurally throughout the Flemish action plan. Additionally, some of the abovementioned evaluation pitfalls were present in the action plan, making it impossible to optimally assess (or adjust and improve, for that matter) its efficiency or determine which interventions worked and which did not. For instance, the plan's objectives are not clearly defined and measurable. The two-fold overarching objective of the plan - to prevent individuals from radicalising and to detect signals

of violent radicalisation as early as possible - is very broad and general. The concrete measures and actions are also not accompanied by objectives that can be assessed to verify whether they have been successful.

The action plan also does not have an evaluation framework, which would serve to guide evaluation practices by (project) implementers. This may have contributed to the very diverse approaches adopted on the ground. While some projects financed through the action plan have built systematic evaluation into their development and implementation phases, other projects have paid much less or no attention to it. This complicates the Flemish government's task of deciding which projects should be extended, terminated or adjusted. It also makes it difficult to hold stakeholders accountable for their commitments under the plan. Ultimately, due to the lack of a structural evaluation reflex in the action plan, the Flemish government cannot assess what its policy efforts have really delivered. Has the action plan contributed to reducing or preventing processes of violent radicalisation and polarisation? The fact that it is impossible to determine this could eventually complicate the process of justifying the personnel and finances that have been allocated to the achievement of the plan's overall goal since 2015.

The previous paragraphs have highlighted some basic elements that can guide policy-makers in promoting the embedding of an evaluation reflex in their P/CVE action plan. A set of clearly defined and measurable objectives and an evaluation framework are necessary starting points. But, even then, evaluating a comprehensive action plan – with all of its various actions and measures – may seem like a far-fetched ideal for some. Distinguishing between an evaluation of the overall programme and impact studies of concrete actions and measures can make this process more manageable. In this second type of assessment – the evaluation of specific interventions and measures - local project implementers play an important

Conducting impact research is truly specialist work: it is necessary to provide specific resources and to involve experts or scientists to conduct adequate impact assessments of P/CVE interventions.

role. It is important for policy-makers to guide them sufficiently in their assessment of their projects.

This can be done, for instance, by drafting an adequate framework with evaluation criteria and standards that can guide local project implementers in their evaluation practices. But what makes such a framework adequate? Policy-makers may struggle to find the right balance between developing and applying a monitoring and evaluation framework consisting of high standards of performance and making sure valuable grassroots organisations can play a role in the implementation of an action plan. Small – but essential - civil society organisations, for instance, may have limited technical capabilities and resources and so may struggle to meet strict evaluation requirements.[68] Too strict evaluation criteria may disqualify them from applying for project funding within the framework of the action plan or make them unable to conduct an adequate evaluation of their work.

Another pitfall to avoid is making evaluation criteria too distant from local practice. Quantitative evaluation criteria may seem appealing to governments as a way of measuring the impact of projects funded through an action plan. However, implementing partners may judge these criteria unrealistic or inadequate as ways to evaluate preventive work. This may lead to frustrations and create a gap between the government and implementing partners. Insights from the Flemish case study highlight how it can be helpful to actively involve local implementers in the development of a feasible and relevant evaluation framework. This may be a first step to streamline the evaluation requirements of policy-makers to ensure that they

meet the needs of local (grassroots) organisations that implement interventions.

It may also be useful to keep in mind that conducting impact research is truly specialist work: it is necessary to provide specific resources and to involve experts or scientists to conduct adequate impact assessments of P/CVE interventions. An inspirational practice in this regard comes from one of the projects funded within the framework of the Flemish action plan. Throughout the project, the team maintained a structural collaboration with researchers who specialised in monitoring and evaluation. One of the project's components was also specifically set up to measure the impact of the other components (i.e. those focused on content). Policy-makers could play a role here by facilitating this type of cooperation between project implementers and academic institutions – for instance, by encouraging combined project proposals or facilitating networking opportunities between the two types of actor.

Key points

➜ Evaluating the impact of a comprehensive set of preventive policies, such as a P/CVE action plan, may be a complicated task. Nevertheless, embedding a structural evaluation reflex in an action plan influences the likelihood of its successful implementation. Evaluative practices make it possible to find out what the policy is doing right and where there is room for adjustment and improvement. It may also help to detect and mitigate possible negative consequences of the policy. Ultimately, it helps to justify the personnel and finances provided within the framework of the plan.

➜ A set of clearly defined and measurable objectives and an evaluation framework are necessary starting points. Policy-makers may also find it helpful to distinguish between an evaluation of the overall programme and impact studies of concrete actions and measures. For the latter, it is important for policy-makers to guide local project implementers sufficiently in their assessment of their project. Insights from the Flemish case study highlight how it can be helpful to actively involve local implementers in the development of a feasible and relevant evaluation framework.

➜ Policy-makers may also want to reach out to experts or scientists to conduct adequate impact assessments of P/CVE interventions, as monitoring and evaluation is truly specialist work.

Conclusions

Adopting a whole-of-society approach to preventing and countering violent extremism is not an easy task for policy-makers. This is, in the first place, because this approach compels governments to navigate their way across various fields of tension. The tension between – or rather combination of – prevention and repression lies at the core of P/CVE. Preventive P/CVE policies and objectives need to be embedded in and coherent with a government's counterterrorism architecture, which will be more oriented towards security-related and suppressive measures.[69] The field of tension between prevention and repression is also evident within P/CVE policies themselves as they range from general preventive to problem-oriented interventions and bring together security and socio-preventive actors.

Developing a whole-of-society approach may also create confusion among national policy-makers regarding their own role in it. National governments generally have primacy on security – as this is a service that governments are obliged to provide to their citizens – but P/CVE is all about "mobilising society, from the bottom to the top, in a shared endeavour".[70] Civil society organisations, local authorities, communities and other actors have primacy in P/CVE.[71] Moving from a national-level approach to a local-level and community-centric approach[72] leaves open many questions about what exactly the role of the government should be in a P/CVE action plan. Should it be a mere initiative-taker, take up a leading role or act as a coordinator? Such a move also raises questions about how much autonomy the government should give to the various players and how much steering is needed.

Ultimately, the development of P/CVE policies may demand a certain level of introspection from national authorities. This will require introspection regarding their policy process, taking account of the broader aims of "strengthening the relationship between the state and its citizens and building trust between all levels of government and local communities", which "lies at the heart of the P/CVE agenda".[73] This may push governments to reflect upon the extent of societal engagement and consultation in their policy-making, as well as the fluidity of cross-sectoral cooperation between government agencies. It may also compel governments to recognise that how they treat their citizens really matters when it comes to P/CVE, and moreover force them to mitigate potential failures that may have fuelled radicalisation, such as marginalisation and alienation, poor governance, and other societal grievances.[74]

There is much literature on radicalisation and how to prevent or counter it yet, in practice, attempts to set up a whole-of-society approach may be quite distant from that theory. This analysis has tried to build a bridge between theory and practice by looking at insights from the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation. It has focused on four crucial components in the development and implementation of a P/CVE action plan: the conceptual framework and vision underlying the action plan, multi-stakeholder engagement, the flexibility of the plan and its ability to adapt to an evolving context of radicalisation and violent extremism, and the evaluation of specific measures and actions as well as of the overall action plan.

From the analysis, two main guiding principles emerge. First, policy-makers need to find a careful balance between putting local actors in the driving seat and maintaining a visible and guiding supra-local presence. Both too much and too little local autonomy may hinder the successful implementation of an action plan. Steady streams of top-down and bottom-up communication and engagement with local actors are needed during all phases of the action plan. For instance, the conceptual framework and vision of the action plan should reflect the expertise, concerns and priorities of local actors. Yet, at the same time, top-down

vision creation and streamlining of that vision are important. During evaluation, too, continued communication with local practitioners is needed to develop a feasible and relevant evaluation framework (for example) but also to make sure that they feel adequately supported in their evaluation practices and anchoring efforts. Policy-makers should not be alone in facilitating this stream of communication and engagement. Insights from the Flemish action plan show how a network of contact persons in the various engaged sectors as well as inter- and intra-sectoral consultation platforms may benefit the exchange of issues and concerns in top-down and bottom-up ways.

Second, policy-makers need to strike a balance between responding to a security-driven and urgency-based context and developing long-term preventive solutions to radicalisation and violent extremism, ideally in the form of a well-thought-out and evidence-based strategy. On the one hand, policy-makers may want to rely on regular funding streams and existing networks so that P/CVE can be embedded in structural prevention services. They may also feel the need to regularly consult with experts in order to gather scientific insights that can feed the action plan. At the same time, an urgent need to respond to a security threat may demand a quicker and more flexible approach. Finally, a lack of knowledge of what works to deal with new challenges may call for a pioneering spirit and experimental interventions.

The road to a high-impact national action plan for P/CVE is paved with multiple obstacles. Not only is P/CVE a new field but it also "works in the most sensitive and politicised territory imaginable".[75] It is hoped that this empirical study, based on insights from more than 60 respondents engaged in the development and implementation of the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation, may help to alleviate some of these concerns and add to the evidence base on P/CVE.

This analysis is based on the book "Violent radicalisation & polarisation. Policy & prevention in Flanders. Evaluation and challenges". Contributing authors of the edited volume and the the Dutch version of the volume can be found on our website: www.vlaams-vredesinstituut.eu (Publicaties>Radicalisering).

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