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## Factors Facilitating the Successful Implementation of a Prevention of Violent Radicalization Intervention as Identified by Front-Line Practitioners<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Empirical research, already quite infrequent in fundamental research on radicalization, is even more limited when it comes to intervention. In addition, a modest amount of attention has been paid to the experience and everyday practice of practitioners involved in prevention of radicalization interventions in the literature. To fill this gap, the International Center for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC) conducted an international study of front-line practitioners in the prevention of radicalization to pay particular attention to their practical experience and identify key issues they faced. This information was obtained from interviews with 90 experts and front-line practitioners from 27 countries in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. This article will present some of the key findings from this study, namely the factors identified by first-line practitioners as facilitating the successful implementation of prevention of violent radicalization interventions.

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### Introduction

Several organizations have devoted some effort to pooling and standardizing prevention of radicalization interventions around the world, and there are now several practice databases that exemplify this work. The most paradigmatic case is that of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), a network of professionals whose work focuses on radicalization leading to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a larger international research study: ICPC (2017) *The Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence: An International Study of Front-Line Workers and Intervention Issues*. Montreal, Canada: International Centre for the Prevention of Crime.

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violence. It is funded by the European Commission and its purpose is to encourage people to share knowledge and practices in this field. Every year, RAN publishes a report detailing counter-radicalization initiatives that have been undertaken (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016). A bird's-eye view of the work being done to counter and prevent radicalization leading to violence around the world can be derived from a number of sources: experiences like those of RAN, researchers' observations, and systematic reviews. Notwithstanding these efforts, the field of study concerned with interventions to prevent radicalization remains vastly underexplored. Much of the literature concerns the factors that explain why individuals become radicalized or that speed the radicalization process. Research on intervention and prevention, on the other hand, has historically occupied considerably less space than fundamental research on this subject (ICPC, 2015).

Three aspects in particular have received little attention in the literature: evidence-based studies, project evaluations, and the experiences of front-line practitioners (sometimes referred to simply as "practitioners" for the purposes of this article). In 2015, ICPC conducted a systematic review on the prevention of radicalization, reviewing and analyzing scientific and grey literatures, national and international norms and legislations, and promising programs and practices on the topic on a global scale. Of all the scientific documents identified in this review in which intervention was discussed, only 16% used primary empirical data, and of this number almost half were evaluations. Practitioners' experiences were the least-studied aspect. A high percentage of the publications stated an objective of educating policymakers and front-line practitioners, yet only thirteen studies took practitioners' opinions into consideration, while only two directly addressed them, although not exclusively (ICPC, 2015). These observations, limited as they are, underscore how little we know about the prevention of radicalization, and even less about how this prevention unfolds in practice. While the lack of empirical data in fundamental research on the topic of radicalization remains an important challenge, it is even more urgent to acquire empirical knowledge on intervention and prevention if we want to ensure the development of effective prevention of radicalization measures.

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To date, we have only superficial answers to the question: “How does the prevention of radicalization take place in actual practice?” We know a good deal about the existence and use of certain practices, but very little about how the process actually unfolds on the ground. For this reason, the ICPC undertook to investigate this issue by conducting an international study of prevention practices of radicalization. Given the deficient state of empirical knowledge of front-line practitioners in both Western and non-Western countries, and the lack of studies focusing on them, we decided that this study should be exploratory in nature. The objective was to learn about the challenges, issues, and needs faced by front-line practitioners, as well as their recommendations for the development and implementation of prevention and intervention measures, as seen through the prism of field work.

The approach adopted in this study was to concentrate on local- and urban-level interventions carried out in the context of primary and secondary prevention programs. Primary prevention of radicalization targets the population as a whole and consists of, as specified by the European Forum for Urban Security, “creating resilience to the appeal of extremist messages, providing spaces where individuals can express their grievances and develop their personal skills and self-confidence” (2016, p. 22). It is concerned with limiting the risk factors that may be at the root of radicalization processes. Secondary prevention, on the other hand, targets individuals who are at risk of radicalization, providing them with help and seeking to reduce their vulnerabilities (European Forum for Urban Security, 2016). Deradicalization and disengagement programs taking place in prison settings were not directly addressed<sup>3</sup>. We chose the urban setting as our focus because the majority of attacks around the world have taken place in cities, on the one hand, and the community aspect has received less attention in the literature, on the other (ICPC, 2015, 2016). In fact, most of the attention has been focused on global and national approaches. The value of our strategy was confirmed by the experts interviewed in the first phase of the study. They concurred that most of the

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<sup>3</sup> A few front-line practitioners interviewed did speak about their experiences in prison settings, but we did not solicit this information as part of this study.

factors explaining radicalization are rooted in local conditions, and that cities and communities are consequently in the best position to provide solutions adapted to local needs.

Radicalization leading to violence is a multiform phenomenon that can be identified under a great variety of expressions. However, for the sake of this research, our team chose to focus on two specific forms of radicalization leading to violence, Islamic extremism and far-right extremism. Regardless of the type of extremism in question, the same operative definition of radicalization leading to violence was adopted:

“[T]he process by which an individual or a group adopts a violent form of action that is directly associated with an extremist ideology of political, religious, or social content which contests the established political, social or cultural order.” (Khosrokhavar, 2014, pp. 8–9)

The term “front-line practitioner” is defined for our purposes as any practitioner having direct, in-person contact with the participants in an intervention.

For the purposes of this article, we will be focusing on the factors identified by practitioners as contributing to the successful implementation of a prevention of radicalization intervention. Given the current lack of evaluated practices and the little empirical knowledge we have concerning the field of radicalization prevention, we believe this initial exploration of what practitioners deem successful in their practice can highlight ways forward in terms of intervention development. The information provided by the practitioners is not, of course, an objective assessment of the efficacy of an intervention to prevent radicalization. Our goal was to give a voice to practitioners and gain their impressions in relation to what had helped them engage with participants and carry out their intervention. While the objective assessment of an intervention’s efficacy or successful implementation cannot be solely based on practitioners’ perspective, the latter can provide important insights for the development of interventions. Presenting the perspective of those responsible for prevention at the local level can highlight both the correlations and the discrepancies between CVE policies and the work being done to carry out these policies.

It is worth highlighting at this point that a simplified version of grounded theory was used in the context of this study. Grounded theory is a process for the development of theories based on empirical data (Charmaz, 2014). Our work does not, however, follow the classical approach of grounded theory, requiring researchers to enter the field devoid of any engagement with the existing literature in order to avoid being influenced by theoretical ideas and assumptions (Dunne, 2011). In fact, this study was carried out in light of observations derived from the literature. As Dunne explains,

“it is commonly argued that grounded theory is an effective research strategy for topics which have been subject to relatively little research and about which there is a paucity of knowledge [...]. However, this leads to a practical conundrum articulated by McGhee at al. (2007, pp. 339-340), who ask, ‘but how can this paucity of knowledge be ascertained unless an initial review of literature is undertaken?’ (2011, p. 116).

Indeed, we were able to ascertain that there was little knowledge that had been produced on the practical experience of practitioners in the field of radicalization prevention following the systematic review ICPC conducted in 2015. This observation led us to conduct the research upon which this article is based, with the goal of exploring the experiences of practitioners in radicalization prevention and, ultimately, deriving models of intervention from the collected empirical data.

As such, this study was initiated following a prior engagement with the literature and identification of gaps within it. This is why for the purposes of this article, we deem more fitting to first present the literature that provided us with some initial guidance into the field. Our research process nonetheless followed grounded theory analysis’ non-linear format, with data collection and analysis occurring concurrently. This process will be detailed in the methodology section of this article.

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## Literature Review

Few studies consider the point of view of front-line practitioners; moreover, when these practitioners are interviewed on the topic of radicalization, the researchers often hear yet another expression of someone's views as to the processes and factors that explain radicalization leading to violence<sup>4</sup>. The majority of studies or scientific documents mention the importance of front-line practitioners in the implementation of effective interventions, but few examine intervention practices. A few studies published in the Journal for Deradicalization have used interviews with practitioners to explore issues such as their level of preparedness to deal with radicalization (Dryden, 2017; Mitchell, 2016), their approaches to CVE and the extent to which national stakeholders collaborate to prevent violent extremism (Sumpter, 2017), their perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of the program they implement (Lewis, 2018) and potential solutions to youth radicalization (Ahmad, 2017). In this section we discuss some issues and challenges faced by front-line practitioners in regards to intervention practices in the field of counter-radicalization.

A first great challenge facing front-line practitioners is that of **building ties with other actors** on the ground and with the community. Romaniuk (2015), for example, argues that the biggest challenge to first-wave CVE approaches had to do with *community relations*. He identifies two waves of measures that followed the lead of the UK's Prevent strategy<sup>5</sup> — probably because most of the available unclassified data was produced by this national strategy (Beider & Briggs, 2010; Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011; Hirschfield et al., 2012; Kundnani, 2009; Lakhani, 2012). The Prevent strategy was modified twice (Fitzgerald, 2016). Romaniuk contends that the first modification of the strategy, in 2011, was the starting point for the second wave of counter-radicalization measures. Despite sharp criticism, this strategy

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Beski-Chafiq, Birmant, Benmerzoug, Taibi, & Goignard, 2010; Githens-Mazer, Lambert, Baker, Cohen-Baker, & Pieri, 2010; Ponsaers et al., 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Prevent* is one of the four main pillars of the counter-terrorism strategy applied in the United Kingdom, known as CONTEST (*CouNter-TErrorism STrategy*), which was developed in 2003 (Rogers, 2008) and has been updated many times since then, particularly due to the frequent controversy it has caused (Barclay, 2011).

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strongly inflected the development of other national strategies. As it happens, the major criticism of the program's initial version had to do with its impact on community relations. Several researchers concur that Prevent lead to the stigmatization of the Muslim community as a "suspect community" (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011; Kundnani, 2009; Thomas, 2010). Githens-Mazer et al. emphasize that the majority of individuals interviewed for their study believed that "these policies were having a negative effect on community relations, with many responses specifically mentioning that these policies were either 'racist,' alienating, or victimising of British Muslims" (2010, pp. 41–2). Hirschfield et al. (2012) state that at least two communities refused to work with Prevent because they considered it discriminatory. While this type of criticism was leveled at all front-line practitioners, the police bore the brunt of it. Choudhury & Fenwick (2011) found that the police were inexperienced in this area and that their actions could compromise relations with the community. Stigmatization is also an issue in other Western nations. Lindekilde notes that "a number of studies have pointed out how much official counter-radicalization discourse in northwestern Europe has been centered on Muslim communities..." (2012b, p. 339). Nevertheless, there is a clear consensus in Western countries as to the community's importance in preventing and countering violent radicalization. Hirschfield et al. (2012) recommend engaging the community, for this gives the intervention substantial credibility; taking the community's needs into consideration, and enlisting local associations to help with implementation.

**Coordination** is also mentioned as an important point to consider (ICPC, 2015, 2016). According to Bjørgo (2002), at the local level, coordinated measures achieve greater success than isolated measures working at cross-purposes. In acknowledgment of this, a number of multi-stakeholder bodies have begun to emerge for the purposes of facilitating coordination and sharing information, including RAN (mentioned in the introduction) and the municipal-level Strong Cities Network. At the national level, various countries have established coordinating bodies. In Belgium, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles created the *Réseau Anti-Radicalisme* (RAR), which encompasses the range of services offered by the relevant

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government departments and is responsible for coordinating and ensuring the coherence of interministerial action (2015). Another example is France's *Comité interministériel pour la Prévention de la Délinquance et de la Radicalisation*, which coordinates various efforts nationally (ICPC, 2016). In Birmingham, England, officials from a number of ministries are collaborating to identify emerging issues and solutions in this field based on local intelligence reports known as "counter-terrorism local profiles" or CTLP (Police and Crime Committee, 2015). As in the case of community relations, local partnerships are important. Along these lines, the Audit Commission<sup>6</sup> recommended that Prevent emphasize existing local partnerships to improve the coordination process (Audit Commission, 2008). In Belgium, front-line practitioners mentioned that networking among local actors is necessary in order to adapt the intervention to local circumstances (Ponsaers et al., 2015).

**Information-sharing**, particularly with police and intelligence services, is also highlighted as an issue of concern. This concern is shared by front-line practitioners from quite a wide range of backgrounds. Kundnani, again referring to the United Kingdom, asserts that counter-terrorism police working within the "Channel" program<sup>7</sup> infiltrated local communities to gather information (2009). He also notes that front-line practitioners were concerned about increasing expectations that they will share information to which they are privy: "The imposition of information sharing requirements on teachers and youth, community and cultural workers undercuts professional norms of confidentiality" (Kundnani, 2009, p. 6). Other front-line practitioners did not share this view, even though they felt that the police-driven conceptualization of community relations as local intelligence-gathering does nothing to change this perception (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011). The role of the police on the intervention front remains problematic. It is a paradox that information-sharing

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<sup>6</sup> The Audit Commission is an independent body in the United Kingdom "responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public" (Audit Commission, 2008, p. 2). It undertook an assessment in 2008 of the first year of Prevent, visiting 15 sites in which councils and police partners were tasked with the development of programs of activity to deliver Prevent.

<sup>7</sup> *Channel* is the mentorship program developed under Prevent (Ragazzi, 2014).

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requirements — as critical as they are to counter-terrorism efforts — can hinder counter-radicalization efforts. At issue are matters of *confidentiality*, *trust* on the part of program users, and *front-line practitioner credibility*. The practitioners know that relationships of trust and credibility are crucial to the success of any type of intervention (Fitzgerald, 2016), and this was also noted in our systematic review. Still, the concept of “credibility” remains broad: front-line practitioners considered credible are generally local community and faith leaders (Audit Commission, 2008), or persons such as reformed extremists with life experiences similar to those of the intervention participants. Indeed, it is common to employ ex-members of extremist groups in the context of these programs, the best known being “Exit,” in which they are integral to the disengagement process (Bjørge, 2002). Montreal’s Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) also works with former far-right extremists. London’s STREET program is another interesting case in point. The program was started in 2006 by members of a South London Salafist community (Barclay, 2011). The credibility of the initiative and the level of trust it garnered were greatly enhanced by the fact that it came from the community itself; moreover, the practitioners have “street experience” and knowledge of Islam’s teachings (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010). But because of its ties to Salafism, STREET was not funded through the Prevent strategy (Garbaye & Latour, 2016). The most pragmatic voices hold that it is essential to work with anyone whose involvement can be of use in an intervention (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011).

Another group of issues concerns the **lack of a clear definition of the field**. Indeed, a number of researchers concur that counter-radicalization remains a conceptually nebulous field (Harris-Hogan & Barrelle, 2016; Heydemann, 2014; Holmer, 2013; Romaniuk, 2015). One contributing factor to this phenomenon is the fact that there is no consensus on a clear definition of the concept of radicalization leading to violence itself (Kundnani, 2012; Schmid, 2013). According to Romaniuk (2015), “violent extremism” is broader than “terrorism,” while radicalization is the process whereby an individual becomes an extremist. If terrorism refers to the violent act itself, violent extremism implies “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or

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otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence” (USAID, 2011, in Romaniuk, 2015, p. 7). In other words, violent extremism denotes anything that provides support for a violent act, while not necessarily culminating in this objective; put another way, it denotes everything relating to an individual’s trajectory through the radicalization process. It remains a broad and imprecise concept. Other researchers stress that “the concept ‘violent extremism’ is often interchanged with terrorism, political violence and extreme violence. The literature covering ‘violent extremism’ employs the concept in a way that suggests it is self-evident and self-explanatory” (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, & Caluya, 2011, p. 9). The problem lies in the link between this process and the violent act. It is presumed that the radicalization of a person’s ideas can lead to a violent act, but there is no proof. The space between intellectual radicalization and actual violence has been theorized but remains a grey area. The problems plaguing the definition of key concepts such as “radicalization” and “extremism” translate into problems defining the scope of intervention. The majority of practitioners in the programs evaluated by Hirschfield et al. in England (2012), which were programs that had received funding under the Prevent strategy, felt they had a poor understanding of the prevention of violent extremism.

Confronted with these issues, front-line practitioners must draw on **their own experiences in other fields** and on successful outcomes achieved elsewhere. They often make use of criminological models designed to prevent recidivism, as well as models of social cohesion derived from community work. For instance, again in the case of the United Kingdom:

“Faced with a paucity of evidence about risk factors for radicalisation and PVE-specific policy interventions, projects have tended to stick to what they are most comfortable and familiar with in meeting the challenges of the Prevent Strategy.” (Hirschfield et al., 2012, p. 74)

The net result of all these entangled issues is that it has been **difficult to broach the subject of radicalization** with communities. This has proven to be a sizeable problem for front-line practitioners all over the world. Some practitioners are uncomfortable with the concept and

refrain from using it in their work with communities (Hirschfield et al., 2012). A further observation is that intervention with respect to radicalization is still an **experimental field** for governments and practitioners alike (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011; Romaniuk, 2015). This experimentation is still below the radar, since interventions are based on an unstable and rapidly evolving framework, and governments demand very short-term implementation time frames: “Some cited pressures in the initial pathfinder phase to have projects that delivered in a short period of time, without time for a clear consideration of the aims and objectives” (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011, p. 51). Evaluations, as we stated earlier, are another important issue, since local projects have difficulty establishing evaluation criteria (Hirschfield et al., 2012). But practitioners also **have doubts about the possibility of assessing changes in extremist attitudes**, since such change involves a cognitive process and the results will only be visible in the very long term (Hirschfield et al., 2012).

These challenges provide a glimpse of the context first-line practitioners have to navigate when implementing interventions to prevent radicalization. In light of these, we decided to present in this article the findings from our study that relate to the factors that practitioners, in their practice, have identified as conducive to the successful implementation of their interventions. By doing so, we hope to highlight what practitioners consider helpful ways to navigate such a challenging context.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A total of 90 participants from 64 organizations based in 27 countries were interviewed for this study: 27 experts and academics from 24 organizations based in 14 countries — Canada, Denmark, France, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Senegal, Singapore, Syria, the United Kingdom, and the United States — and 63 front-line practitioners from 43 organizations based in 23 countries — Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Morocco,

the Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Pakistan, Singapore, Somalia, Switzerland, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The front-line practitioners in our study had various professional profiles and backgrounds: psychologists, social workers, youth workers, police officers, teachers, and former extremists. They were recruited for the study using a snowball sampling strategy (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Our goal with this study was not to draw comparisons between geographical, political, or cultural contexts. As such, we did not seek to achieve a representative sample on such terms. Given the exploratory nature of our study, we sought to derive general observations and tendencies between Western and non-Western contexts when possible, while remaining conscious of the highly context specific nature of CVE.

The following tables present the breakdown of the respondents of the study:

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Experts</i>	<i>Practitioners</i>
Men	14	41
Women	13	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>63</b>

*Number of respondents by gender*

<i>Region</i>	<i>Experts</i>	<i>Practitioners</i>
Sub-Saharan Africa and Sahel	2	8
North America	6	10
Asia	4	6
Europe	10	31
Middle East and North Africa	5	6
Oceania	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>63</b>

*Number of respondents by region*

<i>Type of organization</i>	<i>Experts</i>	<i>Practitioners</i>
Non-profit organization	13	27
Research institute	8	1
Educational institution	2	3
Government organization	1	11
Other	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>43</b>

*Number of organizations by type*

<i>Type of radicalization targeted</i>	<i>Experts</i>	<i>Practitioners</i>
Islamist radicalization	4	11
Far-right	1	1
All forms of radicalization leading to violence	17	26
Unknown	2	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>43</b>

*Number of organizations by type of radicalization targeted*

#### *Data collection*

Our data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews designed to elicit discussion of the personal experiences of front-line practitioners involved in the prevention of radicalization. Due to the geographical locations of the respondents, most of the interviews were conducted over Skype. As a prior step, a conceptual framework comprising the study dimensions and variables was developed. The variables were operationalized as questions for inclusion in the interview guide.

Given the international scope of the study and the fact the majority of interviews were conducted over Skype rather than in person, we opted to ask for participants' oral consent rather than asking them to sign a consent form they would then have to email back to us.

Participants were asked, at the beginning of the interview, whether they agreed to have the interview recorded for the purposes of our research. They were then informed that the

information collected through interviews would be analysed for the purposes of our report and that anonymity would be provided to all respondents in the report. Prior to its publication, the report was emailed to every respondent in order to get their feedback and also ensure that there was not any information in the report that could reveal their identity, even though anonymity was provided.

### *Analysis*

Given our time constraints, it was not possible to produce verbatim (word-for-word) transcripts of all the interviews. Instead, we made use of an interview grid reiterating the conceptual framework developed in advance for the purpose of drafting the interview questions. As such, we opted for a combined deductive/inductive approach for the development of codes. Most of the codes were developed on the basis of the conceptual framework produced during the initial phases of the study, which constituted a deductive approach. But our use of grounded theory also demanded that allowance be made for the interview data to suggest emergent codes; otherwise, certain unique issues raised by the respondents that were not anticipated during development of the conceptual framework could potentially be ignored and lost.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this article, data collection and analysis was not a linear but rather a circular process; that is to say, the analysis work began while the data collection was still underway. This approach, one of the underlying principles of grounded theory (Hennink et al., 2011), served to enrich the data collection because our codes enabled us to identify missing subjects or themes that had perhaps only been touched on during the initial interviews. During the follow-up interviews, the researchers were aware of the themes for which more information was needed and could phrase their questions so as to elicit the missing information.

### *Procedure*

The interviews were carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of interviewing experts and academics in the field of radicalization and its prevention to guide us towards countries, cities, and organizations pursuing interesting and/or promising lines of work in this field, as well as referring us to potential participants for the second phase of the study. We understood experts as individuals whose work and specialization revolved around the topics of radicalization, extremism and terrorism, but who did not carry out interventions with participants. The effort to recruit these experts involved e-mailing or phoning over 160 specialists, researchers, organizations, research centres, and centres of expertise on radicalization and terrorism in about 40 countries to invite them to take part in an interview. Following this exploratory phase, we were able to contact front-line practitioners that were recommended to us by the experts and interview them.

### **Results**

As noted in the introduction to this article, interventions aiming to prevent radicalization and violent extremism are still too infrequently evaluated. This means that practitioners lack the necessary means to objectively assess whether their intervention has been successful in preventing radicalization leading to violence. However, in the context of this study, they were able to draw on their own experiences to offer some suggestions in regards to the factors they believe can contribute to the successful implementation of their intervention. Again, these factors do not correspond to objective measures, but rather subjective assessments that can provide insight into ways of carrying out prevention of radicalization interventions that align with what practitioners deem effective and feasible in their work. These factors fall within the following categories: (a) approaches adopted during an intervention that foster its successful implementation, (b) factors that relate to the practitioner, (c) factors that relate to the organization carrying out the intervention, (d) factors that relate to the community context, and (e) factors that relate to the sociopolitical context.

a) Approaches adopted during an intervention

Over the course of the interviews, respondents were questioned in relation to the content that they address in their interventions; for instance, do they discuss ideology with their participants? Religion? Violence? Politics? The purpose of analyzing this dimension was to understand which themes practitioners considered relevant to the prevention of radicalization, how these themes were addressed and, above all, why practitioners considered them important. Practitioners did not necessarily agree on which aspects of radicalization are most problematic, and as such must be addressed. For some, “radical” ideas are not a problem in and of itself: it is the resort to violence that causes the problem. For others, it cannot be denied that a person’s ideas constitute a risk that must be taken into consideration. While responses varied considerably in terms of what type of content was or should be addressed in interventions, a considerable number of practitioners agreed on how this content should be addressed and the approaches to adopt over the course of an intervention in order to ensure a successful implementation.

One such approach is an **experiential and interactive approach**. A European respondent gave the example of conducting some exercises with a group of young participants and then having a group feedback session on the activity, giving everyone a chance to derive the lessons from it. Our systematic review (ICPC, 2015) likewise recommended the experiential approach as a useful option for interventions.

Another recommendation by a European respondent is to adopt a **positive approach**: instead of focusing on participants’ negative behaviours or weaknesses, address their strengths, positive qualities, projects, and ambitions.

An **empathic, understanding, and open-minded approach** also greatly lends itself to the success of an intervention’s implementation. Several front-line practitioners from different continents stated that the key to their success is to listen carefully to their participants and try to understand their point of view, even if they hold different opinions or ideas. Interventions frequently aim to develop the participants’ open-mindedness, and it is

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therefore crucial for the front-line practitioners to be equally open-minded, rather than merely intent on defending their own positions at all costs. Such an approach facilitates the establishment of a trusting relationship between the participants and the practitioner, which was repeatedly mentioned as a crucial success factor.

In fact, a remark heard more than once during interviews is that the important thing over the course of an intervention is not to address any particular topic, but to **create an atmosphere of trust** in which participants (in many cases youth) feel comfortable discussing issues and topics of concern to them, without judgment and with respect for one another. One North American respondent recommended that open debate be encouraged, even if limits must be imposed from time to time. According to practitioners, individuals who feel that society ignores their opinions, who feel isolated and reduced to silence, are more likely to contemplate avenues of expression unsuited to a democratic society. Encouraging participants to express themselves, to share their ideas even if controversial or seemingly antithetical to the view of the majority, would appear to be a higher priority for the respondents than discussing specific themes.

These various approaches reflect findings from the literature, in terms for instance of providing validation to participants' meaning-making frameworks (Williams, 2017).

#### b) Practitioner-related success factors

Certain success factors related to the practitioners were also identified. Some European respondents stressed that a **multidisciplinary team** is a success factor in their interventions. One respondent explained that having facilitators, educators specializing in prevention, and mediators on his team enables them to respond simultaneously to a number of issues affecting the youths they work with. Having an interdisciplinary case management team has indeed been identified as an important structural quality criteria in international best practice, given the highly complex nature of counter-extremism (Koehler, 2017).

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A second success factor identified is the **practitioners' experience and working in an area familiar to them**. For example, if the practitioners use tools they are already familiar with, they may feel more comfortable carrying out the intervention. A respondent who works for a law enforcement organization stressed that the tool used by his organization for the prevention of radicalization was developed in response to different crime-related issues, such as drug use. He explained that radicalization is not a phenomenon that police officers frequently encounter, but that they nonetheless have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the use of the tool during other types of interventions. This makes them more comfortable working on the issue of radicalization, even if it is less familiar to them, because they already know and feel confident in their ability to use the tool. Respondents have in fact drawn on and adapted measures that have proven effective in violence prevention, public health, or suicide prevention.

The **practitioners' personality and the relational aspect** of the work can also play a role in the continued existence and success of a project. A police officer in North America stated that, having herself played a part in developing the intervention project being implemented by her department, she feels particularly attached to the project and devotes a good deal of her time to it. She fears that whoever takes over the file when she leaves may not have the same commitment to it and will assign it a lower priority, which could have an impact on its continued existence and its successful implementation. Much of the relational work she does on a daily basis with community groups served by her department is volunteer work, over and above her regular workload, and her successors may not be willing to make the same investment. Choudhury and Fenwick, too, emphasize the influence of personality as a success factor, particularly as regards the bond of trust built up between communities and the police. They derive the following observation from their focus groups with residents of four regions of England and their interviews with local and national front-line practitioners:

“Across all the case study areas a consistent theme was the extent to which relationships of trust between the police and communities are often critically dependent on relationships with particular individuals, and are shaped by the

personality and commitment of individual officers.” (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011, p. 16)

Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) also highlights the importance of affinity between the agent and the target of intervention, which can foster liking and thereby enhance the ability of the agent of intervention to reduce resistance from the target and get through to them

c) Organization-related success factors

Other success factors identified are more a function of the organization carrying out the intervention. One European respondent stated his view that it is important for an organization to **know its limits** and the limits of its mandate, so as not to overstep them in an attempt to “save everybody.” He said:

“One big, big, how I can say this, mistake that many people or organizations we have seen make is to believe they can fix everything with everyone, which is never the case. We try to be as focused as possible, we have this population right now, we can do this and that, this we can’t do so let’s not go there, maybe some people are better at that than we are.”

According to him, it is useful to be conscious of his limits, the things his organization should not try to do because of the small likelihood of success. The idea is to **favour a multisectoral approach**, so that problems are handled by the organizations best equipped to address them. Radicalization and violent extremism cannot be prevented by a single organization acting alone; to maximize the success rate of interventions, it is crucial to involve a suite of local actors and to coordinate their activities (ICPC, 2015). In fact, many respondents expressed a strong desire to collaborate with different actors, such as the government, the media, religious actors, and the private sector.

A second organizational success factor raised by a European respondent is **remaining flexible and ready to adapt oneself** so as to best meet the participants’ needs. One of her organization’s greatest strengths, she says, is its capacity to react and adapt when the time comes to hold a meeting with an at-risk youth who is participating in an intervention. The

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youth is given a large margin of freedom to choose the meeting place, in his preferred neighbourhood, so that the meeting can happen without delay.

A third factor identified is the importance of **creativity and willingness to take risks** in order to steer a CVE program to a successful outcome. As stated in the introduction of this report, radicalization remains a poorly understood phenomenon with its share of uncertainties. A trial-and-error process may be necessary if one is to develop a truly effective prevention approach. One European respondent said that she benefited from such a process when developing her program and that her interventions were greatly improved as a result. A respondent in North America went further, declaring that an entrepreneurial mindset and a willingness to take calculated risks are beneficial and even desirable when developing CVE interventions. Innovation, he believes, is a key factor in this field; the people responsible for developing prevention programs have to be creative and willing to get off the beaten path.

Finally, a European respondent stressed the importance for an organization to **continually take stock**, to reflect on whether the approach being used is the right one and what can be done to improve its programs and interventions. As Koehler (2017) suggests, this can be achieved through regular external evaluations of different areas of the program by independent third parties.

#### d) Community-related success factors

Respondents indicated that a range of community-based approaches can be used to favour the success of an intervention's implementation. Several of them emphasized the importance of adopting an **integrated approach**: working not only with young people but also with their parents and teachers, so that the intervention does not take place in isolation. This makes it possible to marshal the collective efforts of all concerned with a view to achieving success. The involvement of the affective environment, such as friends and family, has indeed been advised in the literature (Koehler, 2017).

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Other respondents raised a point previously identified in our systematic review (ICPC, 2015), which is to promote a **local approach**. In other words, programs aimed at preventing radicalization and violent extremism are more likely to be successfully implemented if they are adapted to local realities and issues. Adopting a local approach can mean, as an example, having local, community-recognized organizations take charge of interventions. In the case of former extremists, Koehler (2017) also emphasizes the importance of considering the perspective of the towns, cities and districts into which they will be reintegrated. In order to develop such local approaches, respondents stressed the importance of having a national strategy that is flexible enough to accommodate local realities. Interestingly, most of the respondents believe the factors explaining radicalization at the local level to be not much different from those explaining other social problems, an observation previously emphasized in our systematic review (ICPC, 2015).

Several respondents in non-Western countries stated that a **community participation approach** has greatly contributed to the success of their interventions' implementation. One African respondent even stated that involving the communities in the development and implementation of prevention programs is the most important recommendation he can make:

“Too many practitioners think they know everything and want to immediately go to communities and tell them what to do. From my experience, what they know “up here” is absolutely different from what communities feel and experience on a daily basis. Go to the communities, talk to them, understand them, and only then develop interventions based on that.”

A respondent in Asia noted that 95 percent of her organization's programming is determined by the community — a guarantee that it will feel a sense of ownership over the projects and a commitment to their success. A second respondent in Asia stated that the most important factor in the success of his interventions is that youth participants can take ownership over the whole program. They are offered the resources necessary to conduct the program as they see fit and using their own vocabulary. They feel acknowledged and listened to, something the respondent believes to be crucial when working with youth.

e) Success factors relating to the sociopolitical context

Certain respondents identified elements of the sociopolitical context that have contributed to the successful implementation of their intervention. An African respondent stated that **current preoccupations around the issue of radicalization** are conducive to her intervention. Radicalization being a national concern, a range of actors (the government and the communities) have shown a willingness to support her organization and encourage its work. This public priority placed on the issue of radicalization has also led to new funding for their activities; it has given them the financial resources needed to experiment.

Some European respondents stated that what has greatly favoured the success of their intervention is the fact that it fills a cruelly neglected need: namely, it provides a **space for dialogue in society**, a place where participants feel free to express themselves and interact with one another in an atmosphere of respect and empathy.

## Discussion

The findings from this study highlight two main observations: that establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with participants and communities is a key success factor for practitioners, and that they have adapted to an ill-defined field and issue by both drawing on their own experiences and profession and by encouraging innovation and creativity.

### *Trust as an essential success factor*

A main observation we can derive from the factors identified by the practitioners as facilitating the success of an intervention's implementation is the **essential need for a trusting relationship**. Ensuring they have established a relationship based on trust both with the participants of an intervention and the community in which the intervention takes place appears to be a core consideration for practitioners. This is why front-line practitioners stress

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the importance of factors that can improve this relationship: providing opportunities for free expression, taking a non-judgmental approach, being flexible and open to the needs and realities of individuals and communities, etc. Such factors resemble what are called in psychotherapy “nonspecific” or “common” factors (Huibers & Cuijpers, 2015). Despite the diversity of approaches used to address psychotherapeutic change, many approaches ultimately arrive at similar positive results. Researchers deduced that there must be a common factor, a factor unconnected with the specific content of the intervention: namely, a strong, positive psychotherapeutic alliance (Huibers & Cuijpers, 2015). Frank (1993) posited four key factors conducive to change: a functional patient-therapist relationship based on the patient’s confidence in the therapist’s work; a context conducive to healing; a rationale that justifies and legitimizes the psychotherapist’s methods, and a number of procedures that structure the psychotherapy. The content of the intervention itself appears to be of lesser importance. As we have seen, this is also the case for practitioners in the prevention of radicalization; no specific theme or content has been identified as more likely to facilitate the success of an intervention’s implementation. Rather, general approaches over the course of an intervention and the relational aspect of the work are deemed more influential on the outcomes of the intervention, as they have important consequences on the relationship of trust between practitioners, participants, and the community.

As seen in the literature review of this article, practitioners are however confronted with numerous challenges that can impede on the development and maintenance of a trusting relationship with participants and communities: concerns over having to share information with the police or intelligence services, the fear of the stigmatizing effect of “prevention of radicalization” initiatives, the difficulty of addressing the topic in itself with communities, and so on. While practitioners are faced with the delicate task of implementing interventions that target a sensitive issue and depend largely on a crucial but fragile relationship of trust, these additional challenges further complicate their work. Partnerships and coordination with other actors at the local level, stressed by many respondents as a factor facilitating a successful implementation, are also contingent on trusting relationships between the various partners.

Indeed, as we had seen, building ties with other actors on the ground and in the community is a challenging aspect for practitioners. Hence, trust appears to be, on several levels, an essential factor for the successful implementation of an intervention.

*Adapting to an ill-defined problem and field through one's experience and innovation*

A second observation we can derive from this study's findings is that first-line practitioners try to adapt to an ill-defined problem and field by both **drawing on their own experience and professional background** – for instance by applying tools derived from other fields and/or that they are more familiar with – and by **encouraging innovation and creativity**. This phenomenon can be explained by several factors.

First, as we have seen in the introduction to this article, radicalization leading to violence is a concept with many interpretations, and there is currently no consensus around a single, concise definition of the phenomenon. This lack of a conceptual clarity as to the phenomenon at stake makes it understandably difficult to do effective prevention work. As such, this study has enabled us to see that the lack of a common understanding of radicalization and counter-radicalization is not exclusive to the academic realm: it is reproduced by front-line practitioners as they struggle to operate within a field whose contours remain to be firmly established. As we have seen, practitioners do not necessarily agree on the problematic aspects of radicalization that need to be targeted in an intervention. These different interpretations of radicalization will obviously have an impact on how prevention is viewed and enacted. In attempting to navigate this conceptual uncertainty, practitioners will tend to draw on the repertoires and tools with which they are familiar. They also stress the importance of taking risks, being flexible, creative and innovative; given how little we know about what effectively works to prevent radicalization, innovation is considered a key factor in the field.

Second, the lack of evaluated practices in the field of radicalization prevention, as mentioned in the introduction, means that practitioners have very few best practices to draw

upon for their own interventions. As such, they both look to other fields or their own experiences for the development of interventions, or encourage innovation.

Finally, practitioners believe that the factors that contribute to radicalization at the local level are similar to those at the root of other social problems, as we had noted in our systematic review (ICPC, 2015). Hence, they draw on tools and practices that have proven effective to address other issues they are more familiar with.

## Conclusion

Effective prevention of radicalization leading to violence obviously depends on a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon, particularly at the local level: not just the factors that drive people to consider committing violent acts, but also the capacity, experience, and effectiveness of front-line practitioners. These individuals are often regarded as invisible cogs in a prevention machine; only rarely are their needs or skills vis-à-vis the phenomenon in question considered, and many practitioners indeed feel ill-equipped to handle this work. Many have stated in this study that they want more support in terms of training and dissemination of practices. All the same, despite the peculiar features of the phenomenon of violent radicalization, an important conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the approaches used by practitioners in this field do not seem to differ much from those used in other types of prevention work.

With this study, we sought to fill two of the most salient gaps in the scientific literature concerning interventions for the prevention of extremism and violent radicalization: evidence-based studies, and the experience of front-line workers in practice. Concerning the first aspect, we have derived a wide-ranging evidentiary panorama of counter-radicalization from our interviews with 90 respondents on five continents.

As to the second aspect, we stated in the introduction that, until now, the experience of front-line practitioners had remained relatively unexplored terrain, if not terra incognita. This study has therefore been exploratory in nature. In fact, it is the first international-scale study

to consider the experiences of these professionals at the level of practice. As a result, it has yielded much positive information as well as bumping up against some obvious limits. As a portrait of lived realities, we hope that this study will serve to inform people about the practice of prevention, but also, to guide further exploration of a much-neglected subject.

There are evidently a number of limits to our approach. Focusing on Islamic and far-right extremisms led to the exclusion of several regions of the world from the scope of this study. Latin America, especially, has known very specific forms of radicalization leading to violence processes, deeply intertwined with its own historic, cultural, social and political dynamics and constructs, thus setting this region aside in terms of our initiative. Our portrait of practitioners' experiences would have been even richer had a comparative approach between all types of extremisms been considered. Furthermore, the findings we have presented relate to the factors identified by practitioners as contributing to the successful *implementation* of an intervention. As such, our study does not shed light on how practitioners can effectively prevent radicalization leading to violence. Yet, a better understanding of the factors they consider key for their interventions can provide some insight on successful approaches to prevention; further research could then focus on assessing whether adopting such approaches for an intervention has, indeed, contributed to preventing radicalization.

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