
“They think of us as part of the problem instead of part of the solution” - Swedish civil society and faith based organizations in resilience building and prevention of radicalization and violent Islamist extremism

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Abstract

Radicalization and violent extremism are pressing issues on the Swedish political agenda. The local level has been identified as pivotal when it comes to preventive work and local public actors are encouraged to cooperate with civil society in efforts to promote local resilience. However, the Swedish debate on the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith based organizations (FBOs) in resilience building and prevention is heated. Based on 14 interviews with representatives for secular, Christian and Muslim CSOs and FBOs, we have explored and analysed how they perceive their role in resilience building and preventive work. We have asked how they interpret local resilience against radicalization and violent extremism and what they think is needed in order to promote it. Findings are mirrored against a recent literature review on local resilience. In the interviews, there is a strong emphasis on work to strengthen social support networks, enhance community resources and build collective identity. In relation to the literature review, there are significant similarities with how resilience is defined and said to be promoted.

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Introduction

Radicalization and violent extremism had been on the political agenda for some time when, in 2014, a national coordinator was appointed in Sweden. The coordinator's job was to help improve cooperation between key actors at national, regional and local levels in their work to

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safeguard democracy. In official Swedish discourse, violent extremism is defined as movements, ideologies or environments that do not accept democracy and promote violence for the purpose of achieving ideological goals (SOU 2017:110: 3). Three environments have been identified: right wing, left wing and Islamist violent extremists. According to the Swedish Security Service (Säpo), the Islamist environment is the most dangerous one (Säpo, 2018: 62) and, provides our focus here.

As in many other countries, the local level has been identified as crucial for detecting and preventing radicalization and violent extremism. In Sweden, the local authorities (in 290 municipalities) have been under pressure to appoint coordinators, develop action plans and increase local resilience – and thereby prevent – radicalization and violent extremism. There has been and still is strong agreement in both policy and research circles that success with regard to prevention hinges upon effective cooperation between public actors on the one hand and between public actors, civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith based organizations (FBOs) on the other (Ju 2014: 18; SOU 2017: 110). However, during the last couple of years, there has been a heated debate in Sweden on the role of CSOs and FBOs in resilience building and preventive work. State funding of these organizations has been critically discussed in public debates and in Official Reports of the Swedish Government (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, SOU). At the core of this debate lies a suspicion that some (mostly Muslim) CSOs and FBOs pay lip service to democracy and human rights in order to qualify for funding (Hedin, 2015; Ismail, 2016; Helmerson, 2018). Simultaneously and paradoxically, CSOs and FBOs are also referred to as resources in preventive work. Compared to public actors, they are often said to enjoy higher levels of trust in local communities and therefore better equipped to approach sensitive issues in constructive ways (SOU 2017: 110).

A growing literature addresses the role of CSOs and FBOs in resilience building and preventive work but often without engaging directly with such organizations for the purpose of mapping and analysing their experiences and perspectives. Our aim is therefore to explore and analyse how Swedish CSOs and FBOs perceive their role in resilience building and

preventive work, especially against the backdrop of the debate on their role. From their perspective, what is local resilience against radicalization and violent extremism and what do they think is needed in order to promote it? We mirror findings against a recently completed and published literature review on what local resilience to radicalization is, and how it can be promoted. Fourteen interviews were carried out with representatives for CSOs and FBOs on the national level and in two local contexts in Sweden. These interviews were conducted within the realms of a research project on radicalization, Islamist violent extremism and local resilience.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we provide a short background to key events and developments in Sweden. This is followed by a section on previous research on the role of CSOs and FBOs in resilience building and preventive work. Third, we present findings from the literature review of local resilience to radicalization. The main results from that review are used as a lens through which the interview material is analysed. In the fourth section, we describe our research design and the interview method. We then turn to the interviews themselves and present findings supported by quotes. Results and conclusions are discussed in the final section.

Background

As noted in the introduction, the national coordinator identified resilience building and preventive work at the local level as pivotal. First, all municipalities were encouraged to appoint local coordinators. This was followed by a recommendation to assess to what extent the three identified extremist environments were active in each local context and on that basis, draw up action plans against violent extremism. Such plans were described as means through which cooperation between relevant actors could be promoted and resilience building and preventive work take concrete form (Ju 2014: 18). However, local work on resilience building and prevention is far from straightforward. Competing explanations as to why people

radicalize (Bjorgo, 2011; Borum, 2012 and PISOIU, 2013), difficulties in understanding exactly what resilience means, as well as tension between social policy and security policy perspectives, make such work demanding for many local actors. It is, in other words, hard for local decision-makers to know what resilience building should look like in practice. Should local work focus on identifying risk factors, individuals and environments or concentrate on general protective factors instead? Unsurprisingly, previous research has shown that local action plans in Sweden display a tension between risk and protection i.e. between security policy and social policy perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism (SKL, 2017). Municipalities struggle to find a balance between on the one hand working with protection on a general level and on the other selecting and targeting certain groups displaying risk factors, no matter how difficult it is to decide what these really are. Related to this, there is a discussion on the role of civil society organizations and faith based organizations. State funding lies at the heart of this debate.

CSOs and FBOs can apply for state funding, for instance at the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil society (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällefrågor, MUCF). FBOs can also apply for funding from the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfundet, SST). Between 2016 and 2018, MUCF supported approximately 50 projects against violent extremism and funds amounted to well over 20 million SEK (MUCF, 2019). The agency has been criticized in the media, but also by other agencies, for not being able to assess and evaluate to what extent actors and projects actually do comply with democratic values and norms (Statskontoret, 2017).

The Swedish Government decides which faith communities are allowed state funding and the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities allocates assigned means to those communities. State funding was introduced in 1971 but does not include the Church of Sweden, which is funded mainly through church tax. State funding aims to “enable congregations to work actively with a long-term focus on worship, education, and spiritual and pastoral care” (The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, 2019). In 2017,

well over 40 communities, six of them Muslim, received support. Critics, among them some politicians, have argued that faith communities should receive no state support whatsoever. According to them, Sweden is a secular country that should not spend tax money on religious communities. Critics have also claimed that some of the Muslim communities are linked with the Muslim Brotherhood and embrace values contrary to democracy and gender equality (Åberg, 2017; Skogkär, 2018). As far as the latter is concerned, a couple of reports on the Muslim Brotherhood in Sweden and on Islamist attempts to influence the Swedish public debate, commissioned by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, have been in the public eye (see Norrell, Carlbom & Durrani, 2016 and Carlbom, 2018). Although one of the reports is careful to stress that only a minority of Swedish Muslims support and are influenced by Muslim Brotherhood ideas, state funding is problematized (Carlbom, 2018). For some critics, Islamist organizations “take the back door” into Swedish society and actively seek to infiltrate both civil society and political parties (Gudmundson, 2018).

The Act on support to religious communities stipulates the criteria FBOs have to meet in order to be funded. Partly because of the debate on state funding, it has recently been reviewed by an inquiry (SOU 2018:18). Among other things, the inquiry concluded that it was unclear how the democracy criterion in the act should be interpreted. It therefore suggested a new one “worded in such a way as to exclude religious communities that act in contravention of fundamental values in Swedish society” (SOU 2018: 18: 47).

Previous research on the role of CSOs and FBOs in resilience building and preventive work

Research on the role of civil society in resilience building and preventive work is growing. The consequences of the war on terror for civil society, especially in the global South have been mapped, described and analysed in numerous case studies. In the global North, literature has discussed cooperation between public actors and civil society, highlighted the dangers of

securitization in the wake of preventive programs and addressed the role of civil society. Prevention is also a key issue among policy makers and there is an abundance of workshop, policy paper and handbook materials available. It is our impression that these are sometimes, but not always, interwoven with research. Studies that build on interviews with representatives for CSOs and FBOs in countries like Sweden are relatively few. In this section, we give a brief thematic but by no means exhaustive review of previous research.

When it comes to the consequences of the war on terror for civil society, Cortright and colleagues (2008) conclude that repressive counterterrorism measures have eroded human rights in many countries and that:

“Overly restrictive security policies have contributed to a climate of suspicion towards nongovernmental groups, particularly those who challenge social exclusion and unequal power relations. Many of the organizations that work against extremism by promoting human rights and development are themselves being labelled extremist and are facing constraints on their ability to operate.”
(Cortright, Lopez, Millar & Gerber-Stellingwerf, 2008, v).

Views about how civil society can contribute to preventive work are thus linked to ideas about what it is that causes radicalization in the first place. Although there is agreement that processes are unique, that factors vary and can include a mix of personal character traits and societal, religious, political, economic and cultural aspects, many policy makers and researchers seem to agree that it is important to address structural conditions. Conditions believed to give rise to violent extremism in the global South are armed conflict, oppression, poverty and human rights abuses (Cortright et al, 2008: 1). Civil society is often said to play an “indispensable role” in addressing these root causes as CSOs give voice to grievances, promote political accountability, produce trust, support the rights of citizens and facilitate dialogue between public actors and citizens (van Ginkel, 2012: 7; Cortright et al, 2008: 2). In

other words, they do important work but not necessarily within programs explicitly designed to address violent extremism.

In a study of CSOs in Indonesia, Sumpter (2017) shows that these often step in where the government fails to do so and draw on local contacts, knowledge and a greater level of trust among community members in their work to prevent violent extremism. CSOs work in schools and universities, they engage with youth in activities and discussions to promote tolerance and pluralism and they work in prisons. Interviews show that CSO representatives often think that the very label CVE (countering violent extremism) is unhelpful and part of securitization.

Cooperation and securitization, two recurrent themes in research on the role of CSOs and FBOs in Western countries, are often discussed in relation to preventive programs that have been launched in for instance the UK, Australia and the US. Effective interventions designed for specific local circumstances in tandem with cooperation between local communities, local police, policy makers and public actors such as teachers and social workers have been seen as key to success (Skiple, 2018; Thompson & Bucarius, 2017; Hertz, 2016, see also Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2019). Skiple analyses local implementation of an educational program in Sweden, the Tolerance Project. She shows both that front-line professionals problematize racism and intolerance in different ways and that they do not make a clear distinction between preventing radicalization and fostering democratic citizens.

Many community-based preventive programs have been criticized, however. Several studies from the UK show how Muslim communities have felt stigmatized by preventive strategies, projects and programs (Institute of Race Relations, 2010; Stevens, 2011; O'Toole, Nilsson DeHanas & Modood, 2012; Thomas, 2016). Community-based approaches and cooperation with CSOs and FBOs may thus be complicated and difficult. However, research from the UK also shows that there is an "appetite for engagement" among young people in Muslim communities (Pilkington, 2018). Commenting on policy shifts in the country and stressing the need for a social approach to radicalization, Pilkington writes that:

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“emphasis towards community engagement in counter-terrorism policy offer an opportunity – for communities to stand up to stigmatisation, engage in dialogue and to show their strength and resilience not only in picking up the pieces after terrorist attacks but in safe-guarding each other in a way that makes their occurrence less likely.” (Pilkington, 2018).

In other research, calls are made for combining security-focused approaches and social approaches to radicalization by employing hard, soft and smart power policies. While hard power policy instruments are available only to the police and security agencies, soft power instruments – often described as addressing root causes of radicalization, supporting dialogue and building trust – can be employed also by “NGOs, corporations, institutions and transnational networks” (Aly, Balbi & Jacques, 2015: 5). Smart power is achieved through an “integrated strategy” and draws on a combination of hard and soft instruments but rests upon a legitimacy derived from activities in civil society. According to Aly and colleagues, violent extremism is a “social issue with security implications” rather than the other way around (Aly et al, 2015: 9).

According to Mandaville and Nozell (2017), interest in and space for the inclusion of religious actors in work to prevent violent extremism has grown over the past couple of years (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017: 1). The role of religion in relation to violent extremism is debated but scholars often agree that establishing causal links is difficult. All religions are interpreted in different ways; where some find inspiration and support for violence, others find solace and tolerance. Some scholars also suggest that being firmly anchored in religious beliefs can reduce the likelihood of accepting and adopting extremist rhetoric and worldviews (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017: 1-3).

In policy terms, there has been a lot of discussion on how to engage religious actors and institutions in preventive work. In terms of what religious organisations, actors and communities can do, structural conditions are again brought to the fore (Mandaville & Nozell,

2017: 11). As shown earlier, however, engaging with religious communities remains controversial in some circles and questions that concern credibility, funding and ideology are often raised (RAN LOCAL, 2016; Said & Fouad, 2018: 8). In the EU, the US and in Sweden there is a number of policy papers, reports on best practices and guidebooks available on how to build trust, initiate dialogue and find ways to establish partnerships with various communities (see for instance OSCE, 2018; MUCF, 2017 and the Change Institute, 2008). In one report, it is said that:

“Establishing a relationship with communities who feel targeted by authorities is difficult and time-consuming; nonetheless, this constitutes a first step in advancing community engagement, resilience and the willingness to deal with issues such as polarisation and radicalisation.” (RAN LOCAL and YF&C, 2018: 5).

Some of these reports, papers and guidebooks seem to be outcomes of workshops involving for instance local coordinators against radicalization and violent extremism. The extent to which recommendations are based on empirical studies is difficult to say, but the number of references to such studies is small (see also Aly et al, 2015: 7).

It seems clear that CSOs and FBOs are considered important in relation to radicalization and violent extremism, but for different reasons. To some states and governments, their work for human rights and democracy becomes suspicious and the label “extremist” ascribed to anyone or anything that might appear critical to government policy. In other contexts, CSOs and FBOs are perceived as resources and valued for their abilities to build trust. The quote above highlights the issue of resilience; we address research on local resilience in the next section as we outline our analytical framework and ask how Swedish CSOs and FBOs think about their role in resilience building and preventive work.

What is local resilience and how can it be promoted?

In our previous review on local resilience to radicalization (Wimelius, Eriksson, Kinsman, Strandh & Ghazinour, 2018) we synthesized findings from literatures within the fields of public health, social work, crisis management and community policing to identify factors there argued as promoting local resilience. In this study, we use those previous findings as a lens through which we analyse experiences and perceptions among representatives for CBOs and FBOs.

Within the field of *public health*, resilience is broadly understood as the capacity of a community to bounce back from a disaster or trauma (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche & Pfefferbaum, 2008), or to withstand or recover from adversity (Plough, Fielding, Chandra, Williams, Eisenman, Wells, Law, Fogleman & Magaña, 2013). Further, the public health literature on resilience emphasizes the need to assess community strengths based on existing capacities in the community, rather than simply focusing on vulnerabilities (Plough et al, 2013). In line with this, the public health literature emphasizes the need for building community partnerships, engaging with community organisations, and coordinating training to promote community resilience (Centres for disease control and prevention, 2011).

Within the *social work* literature, the concept of resilience is mainly used as a theoretical tool for guiding strength-based approaches in interventions at both individual and community levels (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). As such, resilience in social work implies trying to mobilize protective factors and promoting local capacity by focusing on community strengths rather than focusing on risks (Broadsky & Bennett Cattaneo, 2013; Kulkami, Kennedy & Lewis, 2010). Promoting community resources such as a collective identity, sense of hope, agency, altruism, trust and security, are ways of promoting community resilience according to the social work literature; these resources must be integrated within existing community networks, however (Sousa, Haj-Yahia, Feldman & Lee, 2013).

Within *crisis management*, resilience is broadly understood as a dynamic process rather than an outcome, not least in relation to natural disasters. This dynamic process is described as containing an ability to withstand stress without losing function (robustness); an ability to retain functional requirements during disruption (redundancy); an ability to supply resources to maintain priorities (resourcefulness); and an ability to avoiding further disruption and losses (rapidity) (Bruneau & Reinhorn, 2007). In order to promote these abilities, the literature emphasizes the need for building trust in public institutions, endorsing a sense of belonging as well as relying on and making use of existing social networks (Cutter, Ash & Emrich, 2016). Finally, the literature within *community policing* uses resilience as a concept describing the ability of a community to stick together and help itself, why communication, cohesion and cooperation are key (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2014). In order to promote resilience, the literature emphasizes the need for strengthening community safety, which in turn requires close communication with community members.

As illustrated above, and concluded in our review (Wimelius et al, 2018) there is clear agreement between literatures on the definition of local resilience and how it can be promoted. In summary, local resilience is seen as: *a dynamic process* (rather than a fixed state) with a clear focus on strengths rather than problems and risks; *a capacity* in a local community in which *cooperation, social networks and community resources* are key; a *normative concept*, something to strive for, and; a *framework for guiding interventions*. In addition, there is agreement between literatures that local resilience can be promoted by:

- Strengthening social support networks;
- Collaborating with community organizations;
- Enhancing community resources;
- Increasing community safety;
- Building collective identity based on hope, agency, altruism, cohesion and trust
- Training and education

Analytically, we raise the question whether these identified ways of promoting local resilience, and indeed understanding it, are acknowledged as relevant and if so, enacted, within the work and activities of CSOs FBOs in the Swedish setting? Below we present the results of our interview study, after first accounting for the methods used.

Method

Overall study design and sampling

Our empirical data is based on 14 interviews, with 17 respondents (in two interviews we met with more than one representative) representing CSOs and FBOs on the national level and in two local contexts in Sweden. Eight of the respondents were men and nine were women. They either held important positions within their organizations or were project leaders. The two national Muslim FBOs are umbrella organizations that include about 25 000 and 50 000 members respectively and between 30 and 50 congregations each (nationwide). Both receive funding from the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities.

In order to get a broad overview of our topic of interest, we chose to interview representatives for CSOs and FBOs working at both national and local levels. Our two local contexts were chosen to represent different contexts in the Swedish setting: one big city in the south of Sweden and one medium sized city in the north. Previous research has tended to focus exclusively on larger urban areas in the south of Sweden and we wanted to broaden that focus to identify a wider range of perceptions. Our sampling of participants (and thus organizations) was purposive and characterised by the snowballing technique. We used interviews with national and local public actors, starting with government agencies and local coordinators against violent extremism, as our point of departure. Such interviews are part of our larger project but not discussed and analysed in this paper. We asked representatives for government agencies to suggest relevant CSOs and FBOs and local coordinators to tell us about CSOs and FBOs that were part of local cooperation networks. We then contacted and

interviewed representatives and asked them to help us identify other relevant organizations, representatives and projects (Dahlgren, Emmelin & Winkvist, 2004). It turned out that the Church of Sweden and other Christian churches were often involved in such networks; Muslim FBOs and CSOs were not present to the same extent and were initially hard to reach. We relied on helpful individuals, some of whom were gatekeepers (we also ended up interviewing one of them) whose trust we had earned, and others who worked at government agencies trusted by the communities, to reach potential interviewees. Therefore, our empirical material should not be viewed as neither exhaustive nor representative for CSOs and FBOs in Sweden. Rather, our interviews should be seen as an “empirical mirroring”, of our literature review. Below is a summary and brief description of the type of organisation our interviewees represented:

Type of CSO and FBO represented by our interviewees N=14	
National level	Local level
Christian FBOs (N=2)	Youth/cultural CSO (N=2)
Muslim FBOs (N=2)	Cultural CSO (N=1)
Aid CSO (1)	Gatekeeper with extensive experiences from various civil society organisations (N=1)
Civil defence CSO (N=1)	Christian FBOs (N=2)
	Ethnic/Muslim CSOs (N=2)

Data collection and analysis

Our interviews were carried out in a flexible and pragmatic way, in order to adjust to the availability, wishes and needs of our interviewees. This implies that some interviews were carried out face to face while others were conducted by phone. Those carried out face to face were conducted at the place of preference of the interviewee, in their office, a conference

room at the university or at a public café. The interviews varied in length, from 30 minutes up to almost two hours. We used a semi structured interview guide, containing questions and topics to be covered during the interviews. These were; Questions about their organization, its aim and work; overall views and experiences of radicalization and violent extremism; perceptions about their organization's role in preventing radicalization and violent extremism; views on local resilience, and experiences and perceptions about collaboration with other communities and actors. Some interviews were recorded while others were documented by extensive note taking. In addition, the responsible researcher wrote extensive memos after each interview. Recorded interviews were transcribed word by word, and interview notes were further developed and revised after each session. All available documentation from each interview was then combined and summarized. These documents were read and re-read several times to get a comprehensive picture of the material. In the next step of the analysis, we used the results from our previous literature review to summarize our findings. Thus, all interviews were summarized under the following pre-determined themes:

- Views on their organisation's role in preventing violent extremism
- Ways of working/activities carried out within their organisation to;
 - strengthening social support networks;
 - collaborating with community organizations;
 - enhancing community resources;
 - increasing community safety;
 - building collective identity based on hope, agency, altruism, cohesion, trust and security;
 - training and education

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the regional ethics committee in Umeå (Dnr 2017/258-31). All respondents received oral and written information about the project. They were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage. We also provided information about how data would be treated and used and how confidentiality would be ensured. For some respondents, not least representatives for Muslim CSOs and FBOs, it was clear that the topic was sensitive. Several interviewees described how they, as individuals as well as members of their organisations, constantly felt stigmatised and regarded as suspect by the surrounding society as soon as radicalization and violent extremism were discussed. Thus, it was extremely important to clarify the purpose of our study and to try to build trust in the interview situation. Being flexible about how, when and where to carry out the interview was therefore also important.

Perceptions of resilience building and prevention

In this section, we present results and show that clear patterns emerge from the interviews: representatives for CSOs and FBOs generally define resilience in terms of social inclusion, participation, interpersonal and institutional trust and think that they contribute to resilience building in projects that aim to achieve all or some of that. They also think that much of the work they do and have done is preventive although not framed in that way. We show that there is considerable overlap in relation to how resilience is defined and said to be promoted in the reviewed literature; in the interviews, there is a strong emphasis on work to strengthen social support networks, enhance community resources and build collective identity.

What is local resilience against radicalization and violent extremism?

To begin with, local CSOs and FBOs did not unanimously agree that radicalization and violent extremism were problems (Muslim CSO 2; Christian FBO 6; Ethnic/Muslim CSO

3). They blamed the media for “using such words” and for stereotypical portraits of Muslims as radicalized and potential terrorists (Ethnic/Muslim CSO 3). One interviewee, who worked at a hospital, described how she was confronted by patients and asked to explain “what IS wants and why” (Ethnic/Muslim CSO 2). As a Muslim, she was expected not only to know all the intricacies and complexities of war and but violent conflict in the Middle East, but also expected to explain why her religion – so those who asked assumed – gave rise to ideas and behaviour of such a violent kind. National Muslim FBOs expressed in similar terms how they were fed up of being “researched, mapped, analysed, scrutinized and explained” by what they saw as an increasingly hostile community of Swedish researchers (Muslim FBO 4). “They think of us as part of the problem instead of part of the solution”, as one representative put it (Muslim FBO 4).

However, it is also clear that experiences and observations of radicalization in local contexts vary. Where some saw no signs of radicalization and violent extremism, other interviewees described neighborhoods in which women and girls – due to the presence of a self-proclaimed morality police – were increasingly invisible in public spaces, and in which Islamist extremist ideas were propagated: “these are signs of radicalization to me” (Gatekeeper with extensive experience from various CSOs).

Whether they observed signs of radicalization or not, local and national CSOs and FBOs generally thought of resilience and the role of their organizations and communities in similar terms. Resilience was about making people feel at home, about reaching out, about social inclusion and trust (Youth/cultural CSO 1; Youth/cultural CSO 4; Aid CSO 5; Cultural CSO 7; Christian FBO 1; Muslim FBO 3 and Muslim FBO 4). Resilience, as one representative said: “is about building a society where people not only feel accepted but feel at home” (Christian FBO 5). The overarching idea seemed to be that when people feel that they belong, are accepted for who they are and know that they can rely on community resources to help them navigate adversities, there is local resilience to radicalization and violent extremism. We expand on this in the next section but note that within these

perceptions of resilience, there is also a clear idea about why people are radicalized and drawn to violent extremist Islamism; it is because they lack a sense of context, meaning and belonging.

What do CSOs and FBOs think is needed in order to promote local resilience?

The importance of trust, networks and bridge building

Some of the interviewed national and local CSOs did not think that violent extremism was really on their agenda but argued that the work they did to promote social inclusion in socioeconomically marginalized communities was linked to preventing radicalization (Youth/cultural CSO 1; Youth/cultural CSO 4; Aid CSO 5). It was striking that so many of the interviewed representatives stressed the ability of civil society to help increase interpersonal trust, which, so they argued, was linked to an increased trust in institutions: “our work is about increasing trust in institutions and authorities” (Youth/cultural CSO 1). A representative for a local project based in an area characterized by low socioeconomic status and inhabited mainly by a mix of immigrants and students argued: “Our ability to build trust is unique because we are already here, we know the languages people speak and are familiar with different cultural and religious practices” (Cultural CSO 7). The representative believed that such knowledge was key to being perceived as credible and genuine in efforts to “strengthen this entire community’s identity” (Cultural CSO 7). Strengthening identity meant creating places for people to meet, identifying common interests and doing meaningful things together. The latter included dance workshops, watching and discussing theatre and film, establishing a local café, organizing flea markets and making a web site on which people in the neighborhood could share ideas and initiatives. It also meant providing free activities – from sports to skate board building, pokébiking and trips – for children when schools were out for summer, Christmas or Easter. The whole point, the representative explained, was for people to get to know each other and build social and cultural networks (Cultural CSO 7). The

entire project was also described as aiming for democracy-promotion, which was strongly believed to help prevent radicalization and violent extremism. The representative referred to the neighborhood as displaying “a strong religiosity without radicalism”, thought of religion as promoting social cohesion and providing people with places to meet (Cultural CSO 7).

Another representative described how his organization often met with people who did not trust social workers or police officers: “some parents think that social workers are out to take their children away from them...the young think the police is racist” (Ethnic/Muslim CSO 3). These attitudes often led to a lack of interest in and will to cooperate with the social services and the police. This representative described it as a “huge task” to change such attitudes and perceptions, some of which stemmed from experiences of corrupt and dishonest state officials in other countries (Ethnic/Muslim CSO 3).

A focus on resources and assets

Christian FBOs described their work to build bridges, establish language cafés and reach out to people in immigrant communities, as ways to counter feelings of exclusion and alienation. The fact that FBOs are used to providing social, emotional and spiritual support to individuals and families in crisis was emphasized as an important resource (Christian FBO 5). One representative described how her organization had assisted people after the terrorist attack in Stockholm, “we were there offering social support, blankets and mobile chargers” (Christian FBO 1).

Religion as such was also referred to as a resource and an asset in resilience building. Muslim FBOs described Islam as “containing boundaries and arguments that keep violent extremism at bay” (Muslim FBO 3). They also said that individuals who had joined IS or who had turned on their societies in hostile or violent ways had “lost Islam” (Muslim FBO 3; Muslim FBO 4). Imams and congregations were depicted as vital in their care and support for members and families but as one interviewee expressed it: “everything we do prevents extremism” (Muslim FBO 4). Democracy-promotion, social activities, football practice,

assisting with homework, parents walking the streets at night to keep them safe and the basic religious messages delivered during Friday prayer were all considered important and resilience building albeit not framed in that way. This interviewee wished that such activities would be acknowledged and understood in preventive terms and that society at large would realize that just because they were not labelled preventive, did not mean that Muslim FBOs did nothing. What was done on a daily basis should be regarded as part of a solution rather than part of a problem, the representative argued (Muslim FBO 4).

The challenge of collaboration

National and local CSOs and FBOs generally agreed that collaboration with public actors was essential but their experiences from collaboration varied. Christian and Muslim FBOs stressed that knowledge of religion among public actors, politicians and the public was poor: “society lacks words and concepts for understanding what religious faith is” (Christian FBO 1) one representative said; “most people do not know the difference between Sunni and Shi’a Islam”, another complained (Muslim FBO 3). This representative went on to argue that some government agencies seemed to be in the business of “scaring people all the time” by inventing images of Swedish society as under siege and constant threat from Islamist violent extremists (Muslim FBO 3). The representative called for “a logic and rational” take on current events (Muslim FBO 3).

When asked about collaboration with public actors, one Muslim FBO representative plainly stated, “the congregations in my organization would tell you that they collaborate with Säpo [The Swedish Security Service] and that that is pretty much it” (Muslim FBO 4). This representative emphasized that many communities had called for local cooperation for a long time but were rarely invited to dialogue if they did not also bring a representative from the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities: “There is low trust in us” (Muslim FBO 4). Just being able to organize an event in a conference hall owned by a municipality had become increasingly difficult since local authorities were “afraid to let the wrong

communities in” (Muslim FBO 4). Frustration showed as this representative continued to describe what was experienced as a state of ongoing and relentless public, political and media led audit of Muslim CSOs and FBOs that received state funding. “We comply with all the rules, what else, or what more do we need to do in order to pass inspection?” (Muslim FBO 4). Adding to that, another difficulty pertaining to work done by CSOs and FBOs was said to be that a lot was expected from short-term project-based work. One interviewee simply stated that time (often only about a year) was too short for projects to be able to deliver results that were “long-term”, which was asked for by funders (Cultural CSO 7).

Others worried that state funding would end altogether and drastically undercut the ability of Muslim CSOs and FBOs to do resilience building and preventive work. The state should not, so a Muslim CSO representative argued, back down from demanding explicit compliance with democratic norms, but also invest more in cooperation with Muslim CSOs and FBOs in order not to “lose an entire group” (Ethnic/Muslim CSO 3). Yet others, notably well-established Swedish CSOs and Christian FBOs, had good experiences of collaboration and cooperation. They were invited to and took part in formal cooperation networks centered on issues that also touched upon radicalization and violent extremism. They were quite used to being consulted and appreciated for what they did. What was described in interviews were meetings with – among others – local police, social services, schools, businesses, and property owners (Cultural CSO 7). A local representative for the Church of Sweden described that he had been invited – to represent *all* faith based organizations – to sit on a regional committee on crisis preparedness issues. The committee is led by the County Administration Board and includes the rescue services, the coast guard, the police and the regional branch of the Security Service. Radicalization and violent extremism were agreed to be “among the most important” of issues but the representative found the committee was not able to “do something concretely” but assumed that the Security Service did keep an eye on things but could not share this with the rest of the committee (Christian FBO 6). However, resilience and prevention, so this representative thought, went beyond security related work. Again, bridge

building, inclusion and participation were articulated as pivotal. Interestingly, this representative argued that Christian FBOs could help local authorities approach local Muslim FBOs. Contacts needed to be “less dramatic” and the church could very well help to “break the ice” and find ways in which cooperation could be initiated by assuming a facilitator-like role (Christian FBO 6). An arena on which Christian FBOs (in this local context) could strive to accomplish this was an interreligious council, initiated by the local government a couple of years ago. The council meets four times a year and includes representatives for religious minorities in Sweden. Its purpose is to increase mutual understanding, promote interreligious cooperation, dialogue and communication. According to the representative, meetings were good venues for getting to know each other and build trust between communities on the one hand and communities and the local government on the other (Christian FBO 6).

To sum up, not only do CSOs and FBOs – national and local, Christian, Muslim and secular – think of resilience in similar terms. Those interviewed here seemed to agree that one of the major (and perhaps unique) strengths of civil society is the ability to build and foster trust between communities and individuals and trust in institutions. It is telling that so many of them describe activities in terms of building bridges and increasing mutual acceptance. What also stands out is the view that resilience to radicalization and violent extremism might be better built by civil society actors if they are allowed to continue doing what they always have done, rather than by designing specific projects aimed at preventing radicalization and violent extremism. It is also clear that many of the factors identified in the literature review of resilience feature in the interviews. Strengthening social support networks and enhancing community resources are perhaps the two most obvious ones, but building collective identity is also prominent. Training and education did not feature to the same extent. Collaboration was seen as vital but also as imbued with difficulties, especially for Muslim CSOs and FBOs who experienced that there was “low trust” in them among other actors.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have explored and analysed how purposely selected representatives for Swedish CSOs and FBOs perceive their role in resilience building and preventive work. We have asked what they think local resilience against radicalization and violent extremism is, and what they think must be done in order to promote it. Our interviews show that CSOs and FBOs think that they build resilience and help prevent radicalization and violent extremism when they do what their organizations are geared up to do – reach out to people, promote participation in social life, engage people in each other and in the future of their neighborhoods and build trust. We interpret their understanding of local resilience as that of a safety net, a web of relationships that catch you if you fall, help you get a foothold in a new society and gives you a sense of belonging. Across geographical space and irrespective of the basis for their activities (aid, religion, culture or civil defence), the interviewed representatives shared this understanding of what local resilience is but tended to emphasize different resources in resilience building. For Christian and Muslim FBOs for instance, religion was a resource; churches and mosques allow people to meet and connect and religious communities contribute to social cohesion.

This study was based on a relatively small number of interviews. Even if the purpose here was not representative sampling, there is a clear need for future research to expand the horizon. As described earlier, CSOs, FBOs and local authorities nationwide are engaged in projects, programs and initiatives that address and prevent violent extremism; these are well worth studying. Local cooperation networks, involving both public actors and representatives for CSOs and FBOs, also merit more attention. In this paper, we have been able to describe (some) CSO and FBO experiences of collaboration, but what do public actors think, what are their experiences? We also want to stress that the two national Muslim FBOs included in this paper are umbrella organizations. They have thousands of members and include between 30 and 50 congregations; more interviews are called for and our results must be interpreted with

that in mind. Nonetheless, we argue that what emerges from our interviews not only matches up with results from other studies, but also displays strong similarities with findings from the literature review.

First, it is striking how similar experiences of Swedish CSOs and FBOs are to those of counterparts in other countries (see Cortright et al, 2008; Sumpter, 2017; Said & Fouad, 2018). Contexts differ but the opinion and experience that some of the best resilience building work is done within the realms of regular and ordinary activities rather than ones especially and explicitly designed to prevent violent extremism, is something they have in common. Swedish Muslim FBOs also experienced some of the same difficulties related to collaboration with public actors that Muslim FBOs elsewhere do. They were not necessarily invited to dialogue or local networks and thought this was so because there was an underlying suspicion that they were hiding, hostile and undemocratic agendas (see Said & Fouad, 2018). In this perspective, it is quite revealing how one representative stated that most congregations would name the Security Service, if asked with whom they usually collaborated. The representatives interviewed in this study felt they were under constant scrutiny and audit and that no matter what they did, they never really passed the test. In their view, the resources they possess and provide remain to a considerable extent untapped by society. It is telling that Christian FBOs also observed this and thought of themselves as potential liaisons between Muslim FBOs on the one hand and local government officials on the other. This scrutiny is probably linked to the exposure of a network of Salafi imams who seem to be in the business of preaching not only isolation from Swedish society, but have praised IS and championed ideas that are clearly detrimental to gender equality and are anti-democratic, homophobic and anti-Semitic (Ranstorp, Ahlin, Hyllengren & Normark, 2018). Some of the people associated with these imams have made names for themselves as youth leaders and helped initiate and establish for instance sports clubs (Ranstorp et al 2018, 113 ff; 143 ff, 165 ff). For critics, it is *their* activities that define what Muslim CSOs and FBOs do; distinctions between this network and its associates and other organizations are hard to make in a debate that allows for few

nuances. For Muslim CSOs and FBOs who do not endorse or sympathize with this Salafi network, it is consequently an uphill battle. The debate on state funding and the role of CSOs and FBOs in preventive work is a necessary one but the risk is that it ends up constraining and undercutting the work of organizations and communities that do not wish to partake in strategies of isolation or subscribe to illiberal and deeply anti-democratic ideas.

Second, when mirrored against our literature review on what local resilience to radicalisation is and how it can be promoted, findings show that recurrent themes in the literature review also emerge in the interviews. In both, the underlying assumption is that CSOs and FBOs can offer individuals who risk being drawn to extremist groups a much needed and positive alternative. This assumption is in turn based on the premise that it is lack of social context, meaning and community that together with a wide range of other individual or societal triggers explain radicalization. In the interviews, the emphasis on social networks, community resources, and collective identity stand out. Representatives for CSOs and FBOs kept stressing the importance of belonging and the importance of building bridges between individuals, communities and the surrounding society to avoid social exclusion and segregation. In their view, a basic component of local resilience seemed to be *bridging social capital*, that is building networks between diverse people and promoting understanding and cooperation between people with different social and ethnic backgrounds. This is also described as a key resource in literature and research on local resilience. Some definitions of the latter even include the former meaning that local or community resilience is "social capital, physical infrastructure, and culturally embedded patterns of interdependence" (Ungar, 2011: 1742, cf. Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack 2016 and Weine, 2012).

Finally, our findings should be discussed also from a broader perspective and one that reflects the most recent developments in Sweden. Efforts to fight radicalization in terms of *counter terrorism* and *countering violent extremism* strategies have increasingly been, if not replaced, than at least complemented by an emphasis put on resilience and prevention in many countries (Aly et al, 2015), Sweden included. Not only has it become important to distinguish

(analytically as well as in policy terms) between radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism; there is growing consensus that explanations to why people radicalize are complex – there are no handy, catch all generalizations or quick fixes waiting to be made and implemented. However, local actors are still expected to *do* something, to be prepared, to help promote local resilience and prevent radicalization and violent extremism. In terms of *doing something*, protection, seen from a social policy perspective, has traditionally been strong in Sweden. However, and as observed in previous research, there is tension between such an approach and a security oriented one in Swedish local action plans against radicalization and violent extremism. This tension is also present on the national level and the political debate has been moving back and forth between these two perspectives over the last couple of years. It was therefore interesting that the national coordinator against violent extremism was replaced by the Center for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE) on January 1, 2018. The CVE, which operates under the auspices of the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, Brå), shall “based primarily on crime policy grounds, strengthen and develop preventive work against violent extremism. The primary aim of the center is to prevent ideologically motivated criminality and terrorism in Sweden.” (CVE, 2018).

On the one hand, the establishment of the CVE could be interpreted as a return to counter terrorism strategies, implying a less significant emphasis on the role of civil society in preventive work. On the other, local prevention and resilience are still explicit priorities in Sweden and cooperation is continually emphasized as critically important for effective and successful prevention. In a report from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, SKL), it says that: “Municipalities should lead local preventive work and cooperate with schools, police and social services, faith based communities and civil society within the framework of existing collaborative structures” (SKL, 2019: 6). The report goes on to stress that young peoples’ resilience to extremist ideas and messages must be strengthened through supportive work done in schools and by the

social services in cooperation with a wide range of other actors, including CSOs and FBOs (SKL, 2019: 7). Taken together, these developments could be interpreted as attempts to strike a better balance between social and security policy in Sweden. Since explanations to radicalization and violent extremism are complex, identifying and promoting general protective factors – and inviting CSOs and FBOs to participate in those efforts – is a good option on the local level. However, it is also an option that does not preclude the Security Services and the Police from narrowing in on crime and terrorism. When actors are allowed to do what they do best, the number of resources and strengths brought to cooperation and collaboration networks are likely to increase and can be synthesized in constructive and “smart” (see Aly et al, 2015) ways. For that to happen though, CSOs and FBOs that adhere to democratic norms must be perceived as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

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