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„Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism“

Input as Discussant in the Session „The Role of Youth in Preventing and Countering VERLT, with a Special Focus on the Return of Suspected Foreign Terrorist Fighters“

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Outlines

Thanks, colleagues, for three stimulating inputs. Since we are working with young people all the time, let me try to add to this.

As Naima Müller pointed out “involving youth in local governance and politics” is important. Yes, the United Nation Security Council rightly urged us: “to increase representation of youth in decision-making at all levels”. The OSCE as well has been lobbying this issue, especially across gender lines. At Cultures Interactive we were happy to contribute early on.

But: Let me add more critically: We don’t just need young people for the sake of having some youth at our tables. Most of all we need to link up to those who we call “hard to reach young people”. You can’t just bring them here, because they don’t mix well – at least not with us. They don’t even want to come. But these are the ones we need most.

Maybe the Security Council should have said: We need to hear our angry young voices, troubled youth, who are on their way to Syria or Ukraine, because they can’t stand us any longer.

However, in order to get to these young people, we need to change our language, our habits, our way to operate. We also need to become less self-righteous – less full of ourselves and our democracy; and yet also be clear about respect and human rights.

So, let’s not just go for show case young people.

But: We also need to avoid the opposite mistake: Let’s stop running around looking for the would-be-terrorists among our young people. We need to take care of all of them – and all those in particular, who give any reason of concern, whatever concern that might be.

Because, if we don’t do this, it will very soon be large parts of our youth, who will be hard to reach – and angry.

How can we win back our young people?

There are many ways to do this: At Cultures we work with a Fair Skills approach. We don’t talk much about democracy, or ideologies or religion! We do youth-cultural workshops, in a peer teaching method, then we do some anti-bias and emotional skills training, and finally some psycho-dynamic group work. So one element is creativity, another is human rights, and the third is talking - just talking, without any agenda.

I agree with Naima: We would be astonished when seeing what young people can achieve if they get a chance.

There are many places in which you can do this: youth centers, schools, communities, as my colleague Zubeda Limbada pointed out. Or juvenile prisons as Naima has said, where standards of human rights and child protection are badly needed. Therefore we appreciate the „Neuchâtel Memorandum“, which shall be adopted at the GCTF Ministerial Meeting in September 2016 in New York.

However, we don't just have to take care of young people. We often work in Eastern Germany and in Eastern Europe. This is especially tricky, since even large parts of the adult population don't believe in human rights, democracy and the public authorities any more.

How can we build bridges into these communities?

Well, you start with young people, then with teachers and youth workers, then the families – and you talk to local authorities! Is this much work? Yes. Can we do it? Yes we can – and we can't do without.

Youth workers and teachers are most important in this, because they have access to the young people at-risk – and to the hot spots. But they often don't know what to do. So we need to provide methods and techniques - for communication and trust building.

And we need to build a pedagogic mindset – a preventive personality, so to speak. This requires training, time and funds.

Plus, we don't just need some democratic attitude. We need to train a quite sophisticated habit, which combines respect, support – but also: confrontation. It's "critical supportiveness". Because with young neo-Nazis or Jihadists militants, we don't only want to be able to respect them as persons – we also need to effectively confront their stance and behavior.

One part of this is to know the key difference between an argument on the one hand and narrative on the other. Debating and discussing is one thing, sharing personal experiences is another thing – we need more of the latter. Because you never out-argue an extremist, but you can try to talk to the person in the extremist.

Moreover, let's not talk so much about religion or ideology. Talk about personal issues, about identity, most important perhaps gender identity – what it means for the young people to be a man or be a women. And let's have in mind that all kinds of extremists have in common that they are both sexist and homophobic.

This brings us back to the local communities:

We can't do without community. It takes a village to raise youngsters. Cultures is currently working in HU, CZ and SL. We call it Local Derad training. It is vocational training for social workers and youth cultural actors – and we add roundtables for local stakeholders to it. Plus, the Radicalisation Awareness Network, which we work with closely, has a new working group on Local Authorities – and one on Youth, Family and Community. The Erasmus+ project

'Community Counteracting Radicalisation' assists us in building a prevent program bottom-up from the community – and not top down from the counter terrorism adviser.

The demand for Local Derad is tremendous. Because there is so much tension and group hatred around. We are asked for these trainings every other week. But we are just a project. What is really needed is infrastructure – or regular structures, as we call it in German.

Regular structures means, for instance, that every school and youth institution has the means and staff to makes respect, inclusion and human rights their first priority. Here, the German federal program "Live Democracy!" is a tremendous progress. I say this as an NGO, who not easily says nice things about government.

Here I partially disagree with Resul Sahinol. Of course, you can never prevent everything in life. But we can do much better – and be more serious about it, and more sophisticated.

In closing: The OSCE-Regional Roundtable for North African Youth and CVE has put it quite simple: „There is no trust between youth and authorities from the bottom to the top.“

This is true also for many European regions.

So we need to talk. Talk with all young people. We need to listen to angry voices, odd cases ... and engage with any trouble they have. We don't ask whether they might become terrorists. We don't do risk assessments. We do needs and resource assessment. And we don't leave anybody out. We definitely stop saying: I don't care whether you waste your life, as long as I don't have to see you and your ghettos.

But we also say: We require personal effort, respect and human rights. Here, refugees are very helpful. In case you have refugees in the country, bring them into every youth setting – and provide the means to facilitate. This makes for respect and tolerance and mutual learning.

If you don't have refugees, then our standard recommendation is: Get refugees! Bring them into the country and if it was only for the egotistical reason to allow our young people to have some real-life intercultural experience. Take in refugees, and build a program of building resilient communities with them and around them.

To this effect, Cultures has started a pilot project called Mix-Factor working with refugee and local young people.

My last point is for policy makers: Listen, policy makers, your fist line youth workers are most important. Do liaise as directly with them as possible. Academic institutes, foundations and Think tanks can play an important role. But CVE has become an industry now. There is much money around. So, don't alienate your first-line youth workers – rather liaise directly with them. And build a whole landscape of NGOs and youth workers.