

#telladifferentstory



Preventing Violent Extremism: Leaders Telling a Different Story

Kick-off Meeting Report

Brussels, 28 September 2016

In an attempt to bridge the gap between civil society and governments in understanding how to best prevent violent extremism (PVE), enhance citizens' voices and foster government's accountability, Club de Madrid (CdM), with the support of the Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), organized a one-day roundtable on 28 September 2016 to launch their new joint initiative, **"Preventing Violent Extremism: Leaders Telling a Different Story"**.

The discussion was led by CdM Members former Prime Minister **Mehdi Jomaa** (Tunisia, 2014-2015), former Prime Minister **Zlatko Lagumdžija** (Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2001-2002), and EU representatives **Gilles de Kerchove**, Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, **Adriaan Van der Meer**, Head of Unit Stability, Security Development and Nuclear Safety, DG DEVCO and **Jean-Louis Ville**, Acting Director, Directorate General for Human Development and Migration, **European Commission**.

The meeting brought together leading experts in the field of P/CVE and counter narratives, EU representatives, government officials, youth and women's groups representatives and media practitioners among others.

Introduction

Despite considerable efforts, the volume of hateful, radicalizing messages by extremist organizations is considerably higher and continues being more attractive than counter-messages. Governments cannot respond to this phenomenon alone. Communities are the best allies in preventing people from being radicalised into violent extremism. Effectively empowering women and youth, advancing Shared Societies, local and human interest messages, and using the right messengers were found to be key elements for a new turn on preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts.

Discussions during the project's kick-off meeting in Brussels built on the Club de Madrid's **Global Consensus on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism** and recommendations formulated during the **Madrid+10 Initiative**. They underlined the need to promote a new, alternative approach focused on democracy, human rights, and rule of law when preventing violent extremism.

Following the success of this exercise, the **Club de Madrid** decided to sustain its efforts on P/CVE and developed the present initiative **"Preventing Violent Extremism: Leaders Telling a Different Story"**. This project aims to build bridges between government and civil society, using qualitative research and evidence-based proposals in an effort to develop effective, alternative narratives and positive messaging to tackle the challenges of radicalization and violent extremism. This report highlights the essence of discussions during the kick-off event.

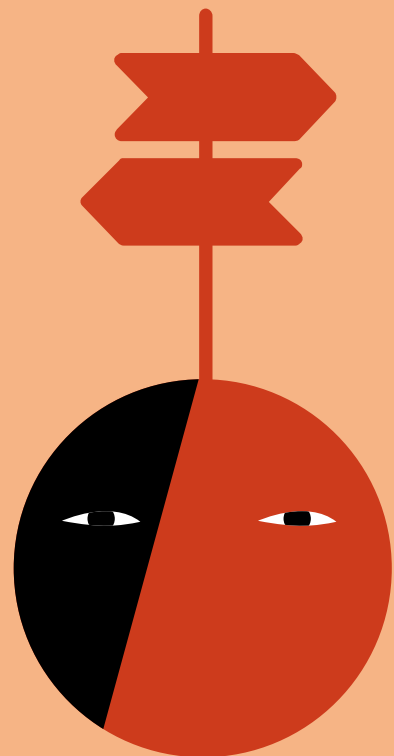
WHAT WORKS?

A comprehensive approach to PVE

Divisions, exclusion, inequality and discrimination are recurrent drivers of violent extremism. Participants in the first session of the kick-off event analyzed different approaches to delivering alternative narratives against violent extremism, focusing on inclusiveness and **Shared Societies**, community resilience as well as the need for youth and women's empowerment.

What we call CVE?

The expression "Countering Violent Extremism"¹ refers to efforts focused on preventing all forms of ideologically based extremist violence, including radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups. It is distinct from disruptive actions, which focus on stopping acts of terrorism by those who have already subscribed to violence.



¹. Factsheet: A Comprehensive U.S. Government Approach to Countering Violent Extremism, available at: <http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/US%20Government%20Approach%20to%20CVE- Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

Exchanges pointed to several key areas to be included in a comprehensive P/CVE framework, amongst them:

➤➤➤ **Inclusive and Shared Societies.** Socio economic and political conditions leading to marginalization, economic deprivation, lack of access to education and knowledge ultimately resulting in exclusion and frustration must be addressed. All communities must be involved as equal partners in the implementation of inclusive development policies that guarantee political participation, respect for diversity and equal opportunity and respect for *all*.

➤➤➤ **Legitimacy and good governance.** Violent extremism can thrive where there is poor or weak governance, or where the government is seen as illegitimate. Where these conditions persist, grievances are often left unaddressed, and extremist groups present themselves as an alternative to chaos, instability and corruption.

➤➤➤ **Long-term prevention.** Approaches or policies that are short-term, repressive, and ignore the complex root causes of violent extremism are counterproductive. It is crucial to improve the effectiveness of preventive responses and to introduce innovative practices that can be sustained over the long-term.

The Importance of an Evidence-Based Approach

The Global Terrorism Index has identified two factors that are closely associated with terrorist activity: political violence committed by the state and the existence of a broader armed conflict.

➤ **92%** of terrorist attacks over the past 25 years occurred in countries where state sponsored political violence was widespread.

➤ **88%** occurred in countries involved in violent conflicts.

"Believe me, it is much more fun to be united in diversity than confronted in diversities"

*(Zlatko Lagumdžija,
PM of Bosnia & Herzegovina (2001-2002)
CdM Member)*

Engaging with and empowering young people.

Youth must be provided with the capacity, the set of skills and the values to allow them to make informed decisions. Developing critical thinking is vital but it must be combined with genuine dialogue. Youth participation in PVE activities and in decision-making processes must be enhanced at different levels.

Technology. Recent technological developments especially the internet and social media – have improved the lives of billions of people, but it has also given violent extremists opportunities to disseminate their ideology, and to mobilize supporters and resources. Governments, civil society and private corporations must find frameworks of collaboration to prevent the use of these tools to further violent extremism.

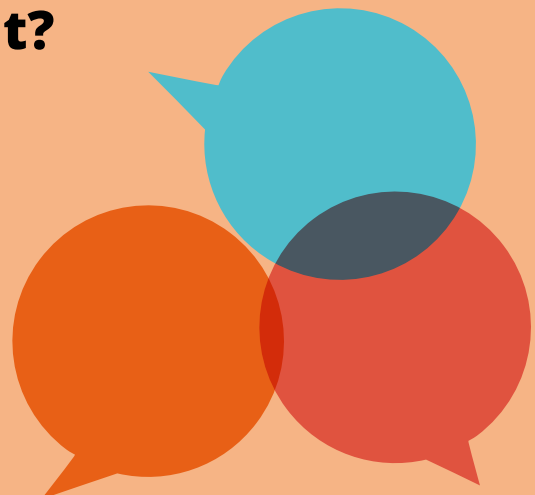
Education and skill development. Reviewing education and employment policies is crucial in the fight against violent extremism. The integration of education for life (values) and education for living (skills and tools) and a values-based curriculum that includes respect for diversity and tolerance is essential.

“We cannot change people if we don’t understand the people. We have to understand the nature of “the beast”

(Hanif Qadir, CEO of Active Change Foundation & former Islamism extremist)

What CVE is about?

CVE efforts must include the creation of positive alternative narratives and messaging through online and offline communication activities, which directly or indirectly challenge extremist propaganda in different types of fora.



THE MESSAGE: Developing an Alternative Narrative

Why is it so difficult to deliver an effective alternative narrative that speaks in a more constructive way?

Despite the growing interest in developing effective counter narrative strategies, most of the programmes implemented lack an analytical evidence-based framework. An effective approach must bring together the various positive narrative efforts as well as provide an understanding of the dynamics of how an individual receives and perceives the messages.

"Simply put all counter messages that we have shown them, mainly from major initiatives, were considered boring"

(Ayman Mhanna, Executive Director of the Global Forum for Media Development, Executive Director of the Samir Kassir Foundation)

"We need to find the way to touch the people, the communities. We have to avoid the messages we are used to because they don't understand them"

(Mehdi Jomaa, Prime Minister of Tunisia (2014-2015), Club de Madrid Member)

THREE-STEP STRUCTURE OF IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

1

Definition of the problem:

a broad catalogue of grievances which resonates with a large spectrum of people who recognize their own plight and can identify with the message.

2

The solution: portrayed out on the horizon in the form of the ideal society where the grievances have been overcome.

3

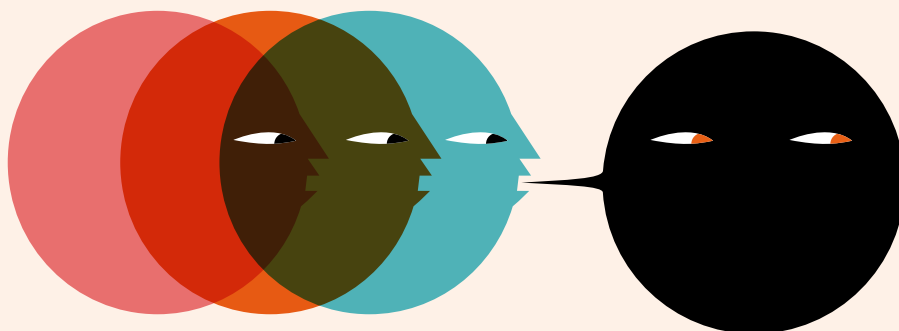
The path and vision:

the ideologue's narrative outlines a path to the realisation of the vision sketching who is to be held responsible for the grievances – the scapegoat – and how to overcome the obstacle in order to reach the perfect solution.

Dr. Alex P. Schmid, Research Fellow, ICCT, Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative

It is crucial to understand the ideological **construction of the narratives of violent extremists** in order to develop a more effective counter and alternative discourse to challenge these messages. Here are some ideas discussed regarding a different and positive story:

- People are driven by a message that is linked to local and personal concerns. Participants encouraged counter-narrative designers to adopt a **human interest approach**, focusing on community grievances and developing narratives with powerful **emotional contents** (emotional communication).
- Messages that compose narratives should be **culturally relevant and identity-based**. A platform (linked to their own culture) will allow these communities to adopt, own and complement a particular response.
- Narratives should aim to strengthen the **respect and protection of civil rights**.
- The need to offer non-violent, **inspiring** alternative messages to those who may be persuaded to support or join violent extremist groups; messages of unity in place of division, love in place of hatred, and defiance in place of fear.
- Narratives should highlight everyone's humanity, **diversity, and inclusion** especially that of historically marginalized groups.
- The **ownership and acceptance** of the narratives on the ground must be ensured. It is crucial to go to their spaces and speak their language, deliver targeted but simple words. As important as the content, are the style, melody and tone of the narratives.
- In many cases developing the messages is not the determinant factor, but the way the messages are presented.
- **Explicit links between religious faith and violent extremism** must be avoided. This type of counter-messaging may deepen feelings of islamophobia, and islamophobia feeds radicalization.
- Exclusionary and discriminatory speeches from policy makers trigger hate speech, intolerance and violent extremism.
- An effective alternative narrative has **to be local** (soft local approach). Youth, community leaders, local Imams, and trusted media are the best options to deliver them.



Main challenges

- ▶▶▶ DAESH and other groups target their messages to specific audiences. Counter-narratives, however, have not been able to reach their own target audiences as effectively.
- ▶▶▶ The emergence of successful extremism messaging strategies, specifically in the context of new modus operandi such as **swarm² dynamics**, has given rise to extensive debates on quantity versus quality in counter-narratives strategies. The volume and quality of alternative/counter-narrative efforts remains considerably higher than the violent extremist propaganda.
- ▶▶▶ Lack of government, civil society and private sector enduring partnerships to deliver more effective and targeted counter-narrative



“A narrative is much more than a series of messages: a narrative is a series of stories that come from the hearts and goes to the hearts. Stories with a soul”

(Dr. Alex P. Schmid, Research Fellow at the ICCT, and Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative)

². “Swarm dynamics reflect the new characteristics and nature of some jihadist groups: “it is a strong decentralized network, moving fast and being very flexible” (‘The Transformation Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength’, AIVD, October 2014.)

THE MESSENGER AND THE MEDIA: Giving Voice to the Voiceless



State and non-state actors need to develop targeted PVE frameworks with alternative-counter narratives that challenge those associated with violent extremism. The rise and complexity of media channels and the transformation of media and communication technologies have created growing platforms and networks for public debate. Simultaneously, these have also provided extremist groups with a dynamic and active space allowing them to gain greater influence and reach a broader audience.

In addition to the message, targeted communication strategies should take into account a series of elements: the messenger, the recipient, and the methods of communication.

The Messenger

Civil society is uniquely placed to bridge gaps between local realities and global policies, including efforts to prevent violent extremism.

Youth, women, and religious leaders, can play a significant role in delivering alternative narratives against violent extremism.

Trust, credibility, legitimacy, ownership, and a sense of belonging are crucial to the success of these dialogues.

Local messengers (families, communities and institutions) possess a unique knowledge, and understanding of the root causes of extremism. They also enjoy the trust of local actors. Greater efforts are required to amplify these voices that resonate with the local community and/or target audience.

Youth is best positioned to deliver positive messages contesting extremist views. Additional efforts to empower youth through leadership, critical thinking skills, and education for values, are greatly needed.

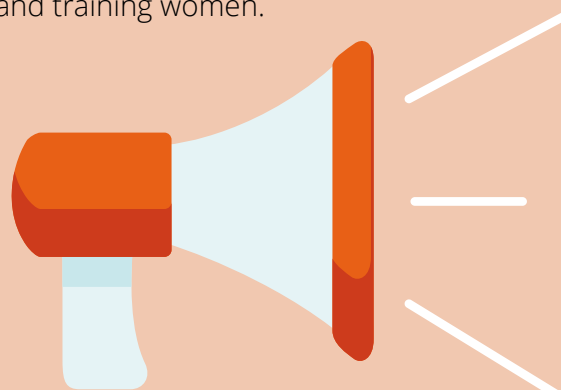
The respect of elders, however, cannot be undermined as in various communities this legitimizes the message and the messenger.

At the social and family level, the role of **women and girls** in delivering messages is significant. It is most important to involve women in the development of alternative narratives, as well as in the process of creating a positive change.

Women, particularly **mothers**, enjoy a level of authority in the family and in communities that can be effectively used to transmit positive messages and foster alternative role models to challenge the violent extremists' narrative.

Religious communities and faith-based engagement can be turned into an effective, strategic tool to counter radicalization and violent extremism by changing the narrative and promoting pluralism, diversity, inclusion, respect, and a shared society.

Call to action: set up an "European Woman Policy Forum" to bring together female scholars, expert practitioners and politicians, among others, with the objective of developing an action plan to empowering and training women.



Victims of extremist groups as well as **former violent extremists** demand more platforms and spaces to tell their stories and personal experiences. These voices are in a particularly sensitive situation and may require appropriate counselling and governmental support.

Main challenges

- In spite of improvements, there is still a clear lack of diversity in the voices that challenge extremism. The CVE community and governments have partially failed in engaging **local and cultural interlocutors**.
- Credible messengers often face a **severe lack of funding**, skills and capacity to effectively deliver their positive messaging.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots practitioners need to find a way of working in collaboration with governments while preserving the trust of their communities. Due to financial constraints CSOs can be inclined to adapt to governmental methods and language, echoing their narratives, and thus often damaging their credibility.
- Say-do gap: Saying one thing and doing another - or even the contrary - simply reinforces the extremists' messages. The alternative: **"All leaders to act with courage and credibility, and practise what they preach."** (Club de Madrid Global Consensus, 2015)

"In some communities, there is nothing for the youth, but really nothing to do, no sport, no library, no cinema... Nothing but the mosque"

(Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter- Terrorism Coordinator)

A PILOT STUDY IN LEBANON: RECEPTION AND PERCEPTION OF RADICAL MESSAGES (JUNE, 2016)

Hyper-local factors

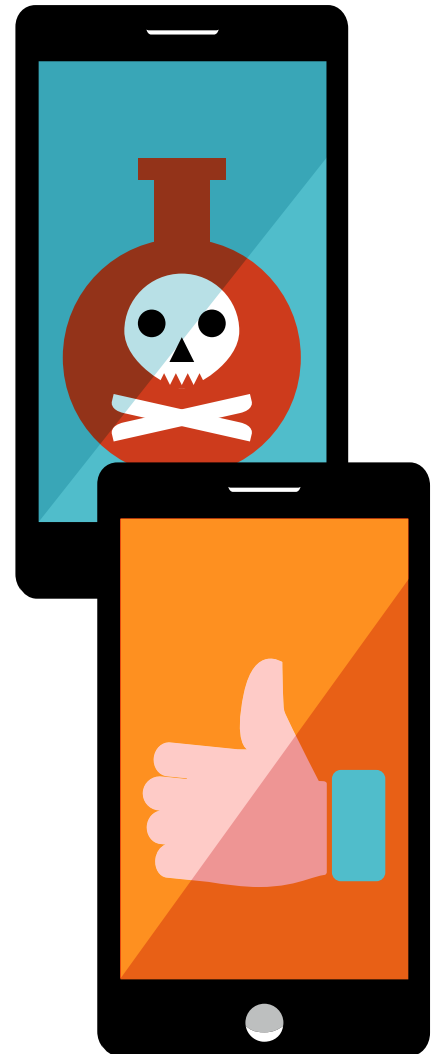
were the most important components in both radicalization and counter-radicalization. Participants placed significant emphasis on the **role of neighborhood 'heads'** who are the "only ones able to warn and convince young people against wrongdoing." Heads of neighborhood have personal qualities that generate trust within communities and make them effective first responders.

These qualities can be summarized as follows:

- A credible, non-corrupt person who does not use his position to 'swindle' or make a profit;
- A person who promotes moderate stances and uses moderate speech;
- Local to the area, not just the region or the city, and speaking common people's language;
- Not politically aligned or promoting a partisan agenda.

The role of the media

- Media and communication strategies need to be a priority in promoting and disseminating positive voices and alternative narratives.
- Practitioners suggested that media and social media have never been the main channels for radicalization. This process mostly **happens offline**: face-to-face, day-to-day, one-to-one. Nevertheless, media is important as a validating factor especially among youth groups.
- An important finding is that people can be radicalized online through **personalized targeted communication and personal messages**. The success of extremist groups however, does not lie on the dissemination of these online messages but on direct interaction and local and sub-local channels.
- The potential of media lies on its capacity to identify grievances as well as local personal feelings of injustice and frame them as a global struggle, an ideology, or a narrative.
- **Independent media** has a prominent role to play in opening free spaces for dialogue, thus minimizing the likelihood of turning these debates into darker spaces.
- **Debates** on the role of media are often **shaped on the basis of assumptions rather than evidence** leading to useless if not harmful actions. This stresses the need to build a stronger evidence-based strategy to improve media strategies and inform decision-making.
- In this sense, the media can help improve **accountability, transparency and dialogue**. The media can serve as a platform for advancing a wide range of governance and social inclusion issues, which are profoundly linked to the root causes of radicalization and violent extremism.
- Social networks are the vehicles of choice in spreading extremist propaganda. Further discussion is needed on the role of tech and media companies in addressing these threats and the type of public-private partnerships that need to be strengthened in order to combat the former.



Challenges

- ▶ There is still very limited analysis on the role of **local citizen-journalism and local media** outlets and their credibility in building an alternative narrative. This explains the need for supporting spaces and platforms where media practitioners can contribute to the debates.
- ▶ **Protection and safety** of journalists and media practitioners has increasingly become a matter of concern in the international community, and among governments, NGOs, and media actors.

“If the message is too professional, it creates suspicion, who is funding it? It is discredited on the premise that is government money. We must find ways to retain authenticity, legitimacy and competition”

(Ebrahim Rasool, Founder of the World For All Foundation)



THE AUDIENCE: Building from Scientific Evidence

- Identifying the **target audience** is crucial to the debate on message, messenger, messaging and media.
- **Audience research** must precede segmentation. Effective communication requires identifying the audience before segmenting it, as well as designing the message according to this target audience.
- The most powerful violent extremism messaging is **carefully segmented by regions, languages, and themes**. Extremist groups make targeted products for segmented audiences. This novel evidence strengthens the capacity of governments and civil society to fine-tune the existing policy approaches.
- **Quality research before, during and after** the development of counter-narratives is essential to measure the effectiveness and impact of such narratives.
- Practitioners have to assess their values, belief systems, capacities and environment in the same way extremist recruiters do, in order to understand how violent extremist groups communicate. With this information, experts can develop narratives and build bridges that foster trust.
- **Data collection and analysis** help practitioners understand the root causes and drivers of radicalization and violent extremism. Moreover, it also explains why societies become more resilient to certain messages and which elements make them more resilient. This is extremely relevant for P/CVE policy design and impact measurement.

“Why not highlight all these success stories that came out of Molenbeek? There must be tens of thousands in the last 20 years. Alternative narrative here should also mean highlighting these success stories”

(Alex Ritzmann, Senior Advisor, European Foundation for Democracy)

Main Challenges

- ▶ Researchers and practitioners have to deal with the **difficulties of accessing information** and data. Additional spaces for knowledge sharing between security actors and research have to be established.
- ▶ Researching violent extremism can be **dangerous work**. Many countries facing violent extremism suffer from severe research-capacity deficits, security challenges, and barriers to access to data.

What is ISIS saying?

The first element of analysis to understand the political and social strategy of ISIS is getting to know what topics the terrorists are using to seduce their audiences. The analysis of 1,308 videos shows that the group always refers to four main themes:

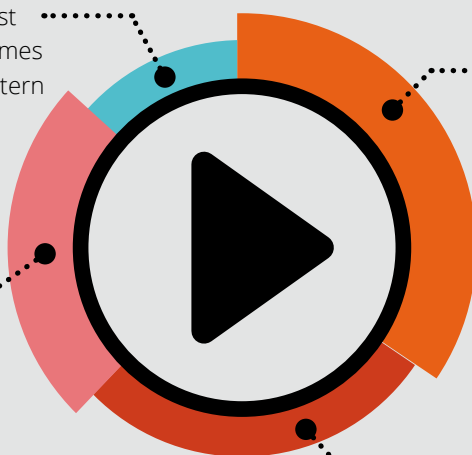
The projection of **explicit violence**.

At least 50% of executions are inspired by scenes of the most popular action movies/video games among young audiences in Western countries. (15%)

The group exercising government actions, **solving local public problems**. ISIS building a social contract (24%)

The perception of being a spontaneous and **grass-roots movement** (33% of the videos)

The perception that ISIS is a powerful and **victorious army** (27%)



This type of scientific-based analysis of ISIS communication strategy is very useful to develop effective alternative narratives and more informed policy actions.

** Source: Javier Lesaca, researcher at George Washington University.*



BRIDGING THE GAP: LEADERS telling a different story

It is widely acknowledged that violent extremist groups develop through processes of engagement, communication and conversation. Thus, the relevance of bringing together all relevant stakeholders, without which change and real impact will never be achieved.

Participants highlighted the important role of political leaders - such as **Club de Madrid Members, all democratic former Presidents and Prime Ministers** - in addressing this gap by using their gravitas, convening power and capacity to act as a bridge between practitioners, civil society, and current political leaders.

The goal is to establish and promote frameworks for collaboration and multi-stakeholder dialogue through which both policy makers and the civil society can be more effective in telling and promoting a different story.

Participants identified the following challenges and opportunities:

- Bridging the gap between national policies and local realities entails **trust-building** efforts, including sharing of information, keeping commitments and regular dialogues.
- Research suggests a number of identifiable sets of socio-political factors that foster violent extremism. It is essential to **start building from evidence** and design policies aimed at addressing these identified root causes.

- Governments can set policies and develop mechanisms but it is **civil society as a whole** that should be there to move it forward. Government authorities should start moving beyond ambiguous and vague approaches to tackle the problem and increasingly engage civil society actors and communities in policy design and implementation through innovative and attractive strategies.
- Governments have repeatedly failed to deliver basic services to their populations, leaving a vacuum where extremism then grows. Again, **good governance** - principles and values – is the only path for addressing deep grievances and providing room for change.
- It is a global phenomenon that requires a **global and multi-faceted response**. Stronger international cooperation is needed in order for local and regional responses to be effective. Global leaders, including Club de Madrid Members, are best placed to tackle the issue at this level.

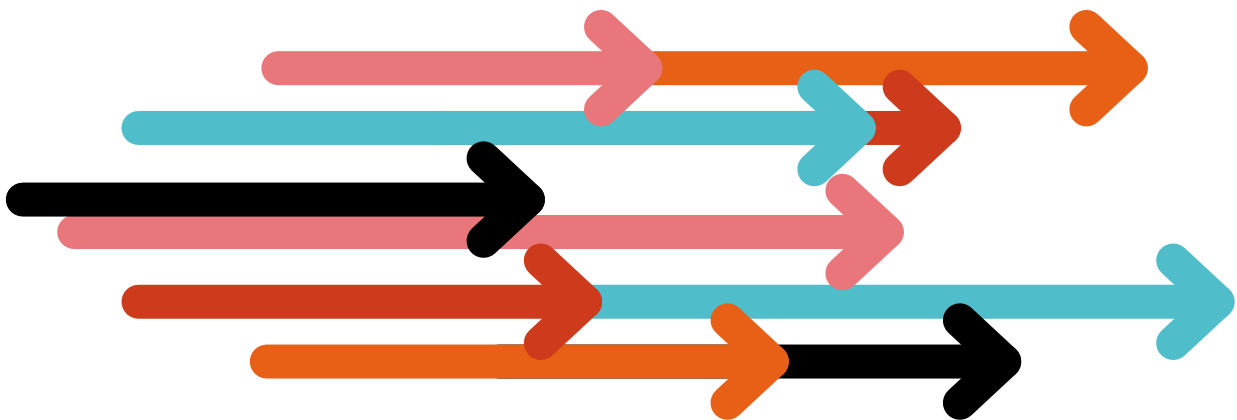
To summarize, the **gap** goes beyond simply engaging the communities to how these communities should be engaged. Current efforts are insufficient. Civil society and grassroots organizations lack the capacity and resources to do it by themselves. Governments, on the contrary, have the potential but often lack the commitment and impetus to put the appropriate mechanisms in place for civil society engagement and participation.

MOVING FORWARD

The kick-off meeting highlighted the importance of embracing a new evidence-based approach to better prevent and counter violent extremism. Countering extremist narratives must take into account a set of elements including **prevention, respect, inclusion, diversity, and respect for human rights**. Policies and programs, however, can only be designed and implemented if they are informed by strong scientific evidence, tailored for the context-specific situation and if they bring relevant stakeholders on board.

The idea is having trusted and credible voices deliver alternative messages to diverse audiences. This is widely recognized in current policy analysis yet **scarcely practiced**. Several alternative counter-narrative efforts are being implemented on an ad hoc basis, with neither a well defined narrative, nor a clear target audience, nor a common set of values and principles to promote.

Discussions served as the starting point to the implementation of the Club de Madrid's '**PVE: Leaders Telling A Different Story**' project and highlighted the main challenges within existing governmental and non-governmental counter-narrative frameworks against the violent extremist narrative.



Debates also identified key stakeholders and proposed specific elements and areas of future research and policy improvement.

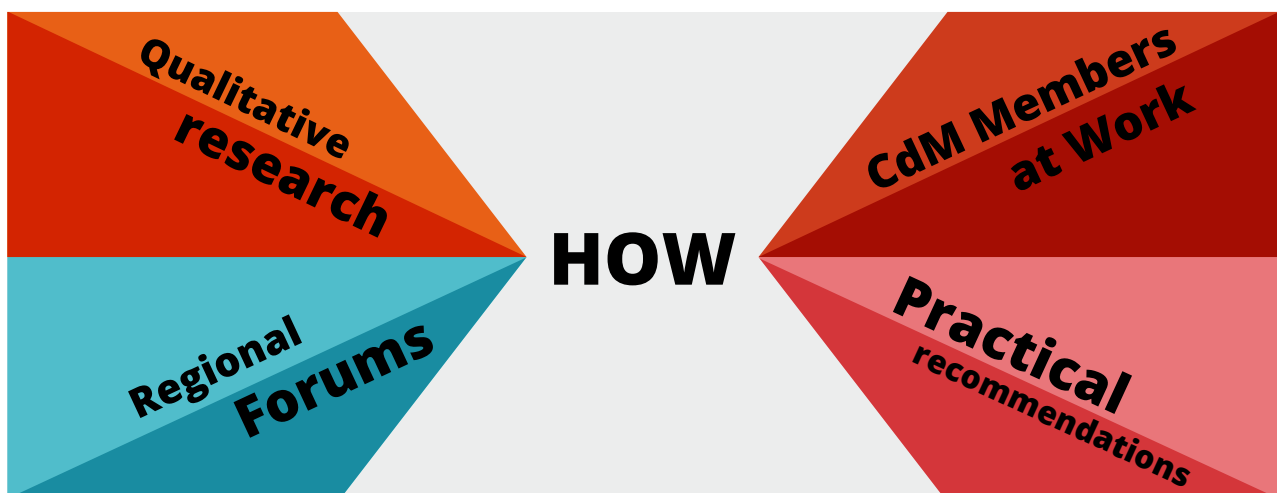
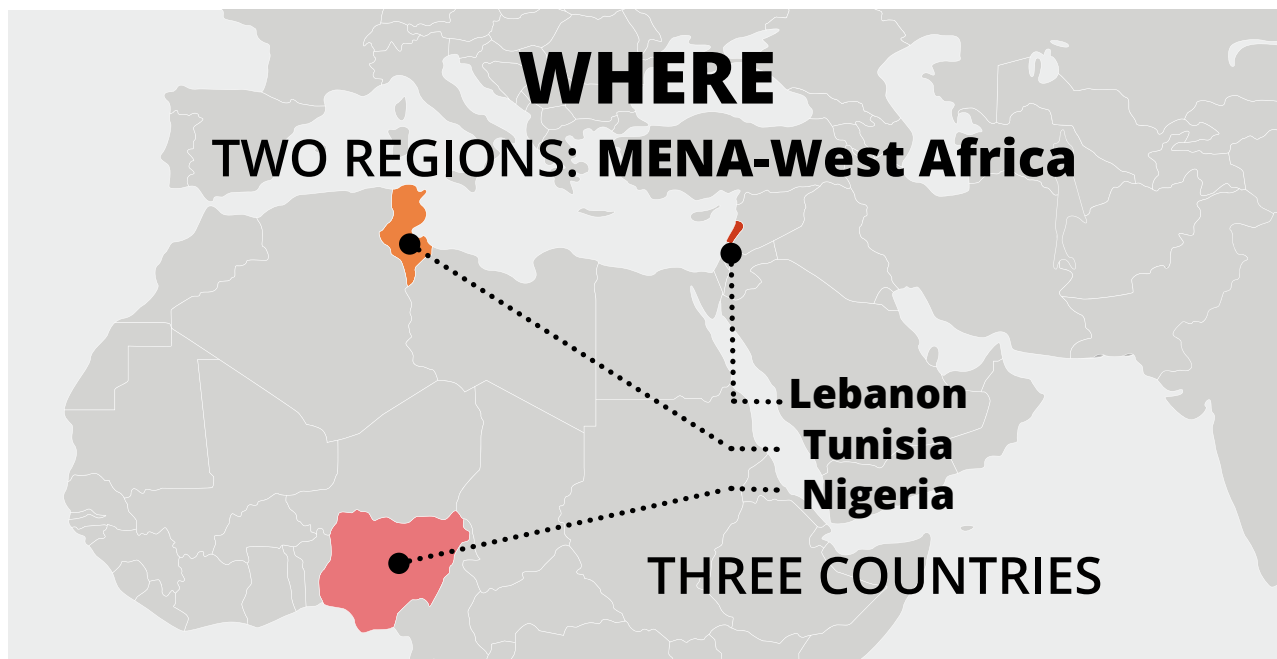
The following recommendations will feed future debates and upcoming project activities:

-  Enhanced **collaboration between government and researchers** will require **platforms and spaces for dialogue and knowledge exchange** thorough which researchers and CSOs engaged on alternative/counter-narratives can effectively share and communicate their findings to the national, regional and international actors, including practitioners and policy makers.
-  The **role of the political leaders** in opening doors **and bridging the gap** between civil society and policy makers needs to be mainstreamed.
-  The CVE **community's communication strategy** must be better coordinated as must the type of messaging international development actors, governments, media actors and tech companies are delivering.
-  Government and international actors should increase their **support to local community actors** (front liners), including youth and women, for capacity building - technology, production, communications, and campaigning – to detect early sings of radicalization and violent extremism.
-  **Evidence building**, monitoring and networks needed to develop **better-informed and evidence-based policy decisions** on effective narratives must be broadly supported.

NEXT STEPS

The approaches, challenges and recommendations discussed in this meeting will be incorporated in the in-country and regional implementation of this project. The latter will be focused on two regions – Middle East and North Africa and West Africa – and three countries, Tunisia, Lebanon and Nigeria.

The project methodology will include qualitative research and analysis; regional and national consultations; CdM Member led in-country missions and bilateral meetings; and an on-line campaign and strategy recommendations.



STOP
VIOLENT
EXTREMISM

www.stoppingviolentextremism.org



/ClubMadrid



@CLUBdeMADRID

www.clubmadrid.org