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# Sustainable P/CVE approaches: The importance of continuation and formalisation for multi-agency-networks

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## I.  Central insights: The importance of continuity and formalisation for MAW structures

Radicalisation and violent extremism remain highly complex challenges in the EU, requiring comprehensive strategies and multi-faceted approaches. Many initiatives in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), therefore pursue concepts of Multi-Agency-Working (MAW) in which actors from diverse contexts and with specific expertise cooperate with the common goal of addressing radicalisation and violent extremism. While the work on complex cases and local trends in the field of P/CVE requires stakeholders to work together in strong and trusting networks, they often find themselves confronted with a lack of financial and human resources. In order to support, mentor and evaluate (often newly established) regional structures, the consortium project EMMA was formed. After two years of working closely together with networks in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, EMMA found that formalisation processes (including documentation, clear distribution of roles and reporting) can be a highly significant element in supporting the continuation and stabilisation of MAW at an early stage. Formalising approaches helps to build trust between stakeholders, makes processes and responsibilities more transparent and clear, and facilitates cooperation through a common frame of reference. Furthermore, this can prevent tasks from being distributed disproportionately, allow new team members to integrate quickly, build trust across agencies and be a first step towards anchoring MAW in organisations rather than individuals. This paper discusses the potentials and possible pitfalls for formalisation approaches in multi-stakeholder work. It is aimed specifically at networks that still find themselves in the formation phase, but also at those that have already been working together for several years but seek to continue working on their stabilisation strategies and formalisation approaches.

From our work with local authorities in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, this paper identifies five key challenges with regard to formalisation processes. It summarises good practices the project has identified, based on national and international meetings, peer-to-peer exchanges and surveys amongst participating cities.

## II.  Reality Check: Challenges in establishing continuity and formalisation

### Challenge 1: Varying mandate strength

The organisation of MAW structures depends on local circumstances and legal frameworks. As the mentoring process in the EMMA project has been targeting local networks in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, it has shown that varying degrees of institutionalisation and mandate lead to different framework conditions for cooperation. Compared to the Netherlands and Belgium, structures in Germany are far less centralised. Hence, the set-up of local networks varies between regions and from city to city. When it comes to joint case assessment, regulations for information-sharing between civil society actors and security authorities vary in German federal states (Bundesländer).[1] In some German federal states, police have a specific "point of contact" for civil society agencies. These officers or organisational units serve as contact points for questions related to cases relevant for prevention and disengagement work. In some municipalities in Belgium, MAW is geographically organised at police zone level, which provides a clear framework for stakeholders' responsibilities.

### Challenge 2: Skills transfer and ensuring a stable network

Within Germany, local networks in the field of P/CVE are often established at the initiative of civil society organisations or municipalities. As MAW structures are not always firmly institutionalised, many of the actors involved participate in MAW meetings outside of their regular working hours, generating additional burdens on key stakeholders. As a result, the success and duration of cooperation is highly dependent on the motivation and capacities of the individuals involved.

For MAW in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, continuity and formalisation processes need to be adjustable depending on the regional context. The main challenge is to create a network of experience and expertise that functions as the foundation for best practices in ensuring the continuity of each MAW. Local multi-agency structures within cities are often confronted with cases and trends in local extremist scenes that require long-term, sometimes years of continuous work and individual follow-up. In face of these challenges, continuity within case work, as well as organised skills transfer and communication across the institutions involved becomes a key asset in responding to local challenges violent extremism.

### Challenge 3: Acquiring resources

As mentioned above, especially German local multi-agency work often relies on stakeholders who take part in network meetings on top of the day-to-day obligations of their regular work. Many lack financial and human resources to do so, resulting in a need to keep the workload of local multi-agency structures as low as possible while also ensuring the necessary continuity and professionalisation.

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[1] Further information can be found here: El Difraoui et al., Deradikalisierungs- und Distanzierungsarbeit.

Furthermore, many of the civil society organisations involved and needed in such networks rely on short-term project funding, exacerbating the challenge of maintaining key staff and ensuring long-term of case work. For stakeholders the question therefore arises: How much formalisation do we need to work together efficiently while at the same time not limiting ourselves in our necessary flexibility to respond to newly emerging challenges? As continuity and formalisation processes are often time consuming, involved actors often have no time to deal with detailed minutes, target agreements and similar documents. However, it is especially because of their challenging position and fluctuating staff that a certain level of formalisation is essential to ensure the continuity of MAW.

### Challenge 4: Missing support structure

Especially in Germany, newly founded MAW networks lack support structures that can enable formalisation. Based on the research interviews we conducted as part of the project as well as the participatory observations that took place in the different cities, it became apparent that there is a lack of tools, materials and support that might guide formalisation processes in multi-stakeholder teams.

To date, no comprehensive international networks exist to provide hands-on support, exchange and/or mentoring for local multi-agency structures. Despite the differences in structures in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, we found a high level of interest among practitioners to exchange lessons learned and expertise among peers – both nationally and internationally.[2] In particular, participating cities highlighted their interest of exchanging on current and emerging trends and the development of responses to counter them, but also exchange on the structural and institutional challenges faced by multi-agency structures.

One example of a  common challenge faced by all participating cities, albeit to varying degrees, is the establishment of a procedure of information sharing across the different institutions and stakeholders involved in multi-agency work. There was a recurring theme of reluctance of sharing information across different institutions, and a need to bridge the respective obligations and institutional cultures. This is particularly challenging when guidelines on formalisation of these processes are missing and legal frameworks are unclear or difficult to understand.

For instance, within the federal structure of Germany, different national and state-specific regulations apply, outlining differential limitations to the sharing of case-specific data for different stakeholders. In the absence of a specific national regulation or mandate for multi-agency work, stakeholders need to interpret existing regulations as they apply to P/CVE work.  In Belgium, there is a law and a regional

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[2] This is in line with previous peer-to-peer exchange projects done at Violence Prevention Network, which strongly underlined the transformative potential of topical long-term peer-to-peer practitioner exchange.RecoRa & VPN (2019): The Art of Seeing Promise over Risk. Available online: https://violence-prevention-network.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Art-of-Seeing-Promise-over-Risk_EPEX_2019_final-web.pdf

Flemish decree that set out the guidelines for information sharing. However, it should be noted that it is still difficult to convince social actors to participate in a MAW consultation process. Legislative backing is one aspect, but multi-disciplinary cooperation also requires a change in the mentality of the actors to break through (administrative) barriers and traditions of working independently. A central component to this work is a high level of trust among actors, which is often fostered by positive experiences and collaboration, allowing social actors to work at eye level with other entities.

Based on the EMMA experience, one national and one international follow-up project emerged to continue the support work of local multi-agency actors. the VVSG in Flanders will continue to focus on guidance and coaching of MAW actors in order to provide them with customised support for the start-up and development of their cooperation. VPN coordinates the new EU-funded project icommit[3], which develops hands-on training and support for city-level multi-agency teams across the EU. The project seeks to improve inter-institutional communication and strengthen social and civil society stakeholders by developing a toolkit to monitor, assess and communicate case progress.

### Challenge 5: Diverging interests

When stakeholders from different organisations and institutions with different professional backgrounds come together, it can be difficult to align their interests and goals. Especially in case conferences, where different institutions discuss and individual case or client and decide upon next steps, a coordinated and coherent approach is important. Civil society organisations, specifically those working in secondary and tertiary prevention (as is common in the German context), mainly target individual causes of extremist attitudes and the personal convictions of their clients. While the work of security authorities is structured by the primary goal of guaranteeing public safety and the principles of confidentiality, for practitioner-oriented approaches the highest standards for the protection of trust must apply. This balancing act, between the need for cooperation and exchange on the one hand and finding common ground based on sometimes very different interests and approaches between the groups of actors on the other, continues to be one of the decisive challenges in this field of work.

## III.    Good practice in formalisation and continuity

On the basis of peer-to-peer meetings, informal exchange and semi-structured interviews with MAW stakeholders and a workshop with key actors involved in MAW, we were able to identify good practices and lessons learned from their vast experience and expertise in the field:

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[3] Find more information here: www.multiagencycooperation.eu

**1. Before getting started: Decide on a common goal and shared set of values**

The concept of MAW is defined by a diversity of actors with different perspectives and backgrounds working together in order to address the complex challenges of P/CVE work. Although MAW participants do not always have to agree, it is helpful to discuss and decide on a shared set of values that help reach the joint objectives.

    a. <u>Agree on the basics</u>: To discuss and document joint objectives as well as basic agreements and work processes helps achieve goals. Especially for newly founded MAW groups, it can be helpful to discuss overarching goals at the beginning (for instance: Which cases is the MAW dealing with? How do different stakeholders define extremism?). As mentioned above, for most actors in MAW teams, consultations and team meetings with other members happen alongside or in addition to many other professional tasks. Some stakeholders may even participate in the joint meetings on a voluntary basis without remuneration for their efforts (community members etc.). It can be helpful to refer to the target agreements regularly and check whether the work is still proceeding towards them.

    b. <u>Getting to know each other:</u> Especially for heterogeneous groups, this can be challenging and takes time. However, this is an essential process of building trust. A first basis here can be the consensus that a variety of actors need to be involved and engaged in order to deal with the problem.

    c. <u>Separation of strategic and operational levels</u>: Separating the two levels can ensure that MAW structures are continuously developed and that individual MAW members remain capable of acting. This is also crucial to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are at the table when discussing specific topics, but at the same time to ensure that the capacities of actors who do not need to be involved in certain arrangements are not unnecessarily stretched. Separating different challenges in this way can also help in addressing them: Are the political needs and hurdles of the MAW known? Who are possible contact persons? Which institutions and MAW groups may have already solved similar problems?

    **Example**: One of the best-known international MAW approaches is the Aarhus model. The conditions for success were a strong mandate from the beginning and various opportunities to exchange information. These conditions are rare – and hence the model was not transferred to other cities in Denmark. However, there are inspiring examples of cooperation based on much weaker mandates in other cities.

    d. <u>Seeking support</u>: The multi-faceted (and ever-changing) challenges to local MAW groups also require additional support structures. Under the

EMMA project, we set an emphasis on communicating the needs and hurdles of MAW, also to policy makers. Local and national networks for MAW stakeholders may exist, such as VVSG's network of Flemish Cities. On an international level, the newly started EU Project *icommit* aims to improve stakeholders' responses and risk mitigation for disengagement and reintegration (D&R) efforts and offers phase-specific support for multi-stakeholder teams working together on a city level. In addition, *icommit* provides multi-agency support with specialised experts to advise them on their local challenges.

## 2. Getting started: clarify legal questions / mandate

After setting out joint objectives, these should be checked against external frameworks such as legal contexts, political mandates and resolutions.

e. Review the framework conditions in your country / federal state and check whether there are possible resolutions that can be referred to. This information can also serve as a basis for external communication strategies and the acquisition of funding for your MAW.

f. Especially for planning MAW case conferences, familiarity with the relevant data protection regulations is essential. Anonymised case discussions can also violate the legal basis if, despite anonymisation, conclusions can be drawn about an individual. The framework conditions on the prohibition and obligation to disclose can differ depending on the situation and the country.

## 3. Once started: Prioritisation of which shared documents are actually needed

Having set a shared agenda internally and externally, the next important step is to put the results of this process on paper. This is not only helpful for possible new members of the MAW and internal processes, but also for public communication and positioning in a wider field with a range of actors.

g. Decide on which documents are needed and avoid over-formalisation. Once the first steps have been taken and MAW has been established, consideration can be given to the creation of documents. However, too many documents can lead to an overly bureaucratic procedure and reduce intrinsic motivation.

h. Create engagement instead of deterrence: In many cases, MAW must respond to evolving and not always predictable situations. Formalisation is therefore helpful in order to ensure liability, but it should not interfere with the flexibility of approaches.

i. Take your time: Formalise and produce documents in small steps. Not all documents have to be in place at the beginning. It is much more about developing continuously, remaining flexible, being able to react

to new developments and involving all actors. A needs assessment can be a good way of involving MAW stakeholders.

### 4. Written formalisation: Rules of procedure / guidelines

Drafting guidelines for working together is fundamental for successful cooperation in a multi-stakeholder team. Essential points that should be addressed are:

a. Definition of concepts and terms: When many stakeholders from different professional areas work together, it is important to find a common language. Security-oriented terminologies from law enforcement and security agencies are foreign to civil society organisations and vice versa. Especially for finding a common definition of terms, it is advisable to agree on an already existing definition and to adapt or expand it if necessary.

b. Rules of procedure: Referring to the mandate and mission in the rules of procedure / guidelines can help to create commitment.

c. Composition of teams: It is crucial to ensure role clarity for all stakeholders. Questions of who leads meetings and the role(s) and responsibilities of individuals should be answered. Creating overview charts on individual roles and responsibilities can also help with external communication and expectation management and makes it clear what the MAW can achieve.

d. Establish a procedural decision-making process: As a rule, there should be clarity over which body makes the final decision in certain cases. For cases in which this is not clear and there is disagreement among MAW participants on how to proceed, a voting process may be useful. These processes and the decision-making should be transparent for all involved.

e. Establish rules concerning minutes and participant lists, and decide how to deal with call logs. Especially with documents such as minutes, a common decision should be made on what information should be documented and shared and what information should only remain among the present stakeholders.

f. Involve external actors according to a "level system": If clear guidelines are in place, it is easier to save resources and only invite relevant (external) policy makers, researchers, practitioners etc. depending on thematic questions or on the severity of the case.

## IV.  Conclusion

This paper has discussed what formalisation procedures can help to achieve continuous improvement and development of MAW structures. Documenting common goals as well as rules of procedures and working processes can help to keep track of the initial goal in the long run. In everyday work, it can be helpful to refer to the goal agreements regularly, and check whether the approach is still being directed towards them. Formalising MAW networks can help to lower dependency on individual actors and support the integration of new members. In other words, it can be a first step towards anchoring the MAW in organisations rather than individuals.

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