



**R2COM**

Radicalisation and Violent Extremism  
Prevention in the Community

# State of play: NGOs and CSOs' role in P/CVE within the criminal justice system

## Literature review

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Date: 19/09/2022

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



TRANSFORM





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## List of acronyms

- CSO** – Civil Society Organisation
- ENoD** – European Network of Radicalisation
- EU** – European Union
- FTF** – Foreign Terrorist Fighter
- NGO** – Non-Governmental Organisation
- OSCE** - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- P/CVE** – Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
- RAN** – Radicalization Awareness Network
- VETO** – Violent Extremist Terrorist Offender





## Executive summary

In the aftermath of 9/11, academic literature and grey literature focused on P/CVE have quickly multiplied over time, also offering a broad narrative about the different practices that take place in most countries of the world.

In this plethora of available documents, it is possible to identify a specific line of study that concerns the role of NGOs and CSOs in the P/CVE field.

Durkheim defined society as an organism in which each component plays a necessary part, but none can function alone (Little, 2012), for this reason, the role of CSOs in the fight of terrorism around the world has been considered of great help (Grossman, 2018). In fact, CSOs are part of the society, playing necessary roles to solve its problems and concerns.

In the modern era, civil society takes a giant step towards eradicating the contemporary problems around the globe, functioning to alleviate poverty, eradicate corruption and prevent terrorism (Subedi & Jenkins, 2016).

The scope of this literature review is to analyse the role played by NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE strategies by answering five specific questions coming from an in-depth analysis of selected documents, to highlight possible gaps in the existing literature, as well as identify pressing needs that require innovative solutions.





# Introduction

Before proceeding with the discussion around the role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE, it is worth to offer a definition of the term CSO itself. Following the United Nations understanding, CSOs - civil society organisations- and NGOs-non-governmental organisations - can be defined as any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which can be organised on a local, national or international level. (United Nations, n.d.).

Moreover, according to the Institute for the Strategic Dialogue (2010), CSOs identify a system of voluntary civic and social organisations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the structures of the State or of the private and economic sector. As described, CSOs embrace many civil actors that seek to protect shared values and targets; among them, it is possible to mention communities and any other form of formal or informal association involved in the public life (OSCE, 2018).

Prevention and counter violent extremism has become one of the principal tasks of the international agenda, requiring new and more efficient approaches that involve a large number of professionals. In this framework, the role of NGOs and CSOs is almost universally recognised as pivotal, as Prislán and colleagues (2018) considered that efficient prevention strategies should start from the consideration of the social and cultural characteristics of the involved society, thus requiring the involvement of various practitioners, namely from the local setting and civil society. Nevertheless, there is no uniformity in the way in which this part of society should be involved in P/CVE.

The need for a “whole of society” commitment towards the individuation of early signs of radicalisation, alongside the “whole of the government” efforts in the same direction are internationally considered necessary for the implementation of efficient P/CVE strategies (Grossman, 2018, p. 155).

Considering that radicalisation to violence takes primarily place at the local level, it is evident that initiatives developed locally are pivotal for the achievement of the desired outcomes.

Therefore, community engagement and community-oriented policing are two relevant approaches to P/CVE but can be effective only if the communities are aware of the potential threats posed by terrorism and radicalisation. This awareness asks for a community's empowerment based on trust, collaborations and the development of community-based solutions to emerging local issues (Global Counter Terrorism Forum, 2013).

Dinham and Lowndes (2008) claim that each P/CVE strategy needs to involve three different sectors: 1) public sector (such as local councils, police, social care agencies, health agencies); 2) business sector (such as local companies, private providers of urban services);





3) community sector (such as non-profit organizations that provide services and citizens groups). This last one plays a significant role in preventing social polarisation and violence, as well as in the detection of potentially violent/dangerous behaviours (ENoD, 2014). In fact, the community sector can offer tailor-made approaches, not only to countering violent extremism but also in prevention and de-radicalization strategies, as these are notoriously based on dialogues between extremists and practitioners, possible only if rooted in a trustful relationship. The strong contact with the local environment that normally characterises NGOs and CSOs makes them best suited for developing such a positive work environment. Moreover, NGOs and CSOs are mainly engaged in the protection of human rights (in general or with regard to specific vulnerable groups), thus being considered fundamental factors when dealing with P/CVE strategies, which increases their level of trust and credibility.





# Methodology

The analysis of documents useful to define the role of NGOs and CSOs (in P/CVE started with an online research conducted through keywords (in English) on different research engines (general and academic) and related to the period of 2000-2021.

The total number of considered documents was 274, however only 168 were considered to be pertinent. The analysis of the selected papers considers three variables:

- 1) The type of publication (e.g., academic, informative, theoretical, empirical);
- 2) The different approaches in discussing the role of NGOs and CSOs (e.g., analytical, supportive, critical);
- 3) The existence of strategies for the monitoring of the proposed outcomes in terms of resocialisation and reintegration of former radicalised individuals (e.g., presence of follow-up protocols, peer-to-peer evaluations, verification of the obtained outcomes in the long period).

35 papers have been analysed in-depth in order to define the state of the art with regard to the role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE. The first part of the in-depth analysis explains which types of documents have been considered and offers a proposal of quadripartition based on the content. Additionally, the second part, which is divided into five fundamental questions, aims at facilitating the definition of strategic elements connected to the role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE.





# What do we know about the NGOs and CSOs role in P/CVE and exit strategies?

Relevant documents can be organised into four different groups:

- 1) **Academic documents** (articles published on thematic journals, books or other academia documents);
- 2) **Reports of National and International Organisations** (reports or any other document that contains the official position of the organisation itself, suggested guidelines and key recommendations);
- 3) **Documents written by NGOs/CSOs** (documents written for internal/external use, final or mid-term reports linked to specific P/CVE projects, suggested guidelines and key recommendations);
- 4) **Other type of available grey literature and media** (e.g., journalistic insights, specialised press).

According to the contents of the mentioned documents, it is possible to outline four different approaches that clearly describe the role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE and exit works from different perspectives.

- a) **NGOs and CSOs Complementary role in P/CVE-** The 2006 United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the UN Security Council Resolution 2014/2178<sup>1</sup>, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals, encourage a multi-stakeholder collaboration at different levels, between State and non-State actors, to achieve peace, security and development.

Regardless, the formal recognition of the role of NGOs and CSOs passes through the realisation of a State plan that integrates their activities: without a formal consideration of those organisations, there is the risk that they can't be recognised as relevant actors in P/CVE strategies. Without the necessary legitimacy, NGOs and CSOs can find themselves working in a 'risky' situation, or working in isolation from the mainstream P/CVE discourse, resulting in the reduced effectiveness of their

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<sup>1</sup> This resolution urges to empower different members of civil society in P/CVE work.





approaches. Moreover, they often have to deal with financial problems deriving from difficulties in finding the necessary funds.

- b) Guidelines-** This type of document is meant to offer support to NGOs and CSOs to start their work (or already working) in P/CVE (OSCE, 2020). These are normally organised in general topics that can be relevant for a large number of different approaches, being supported by existing practices, which can be based on the collaboration with State actors, thus asking for the engagement in a genuine partnership with civil society, drawing on expertise available within it (OSCE, 2007).
- c) Collection of practices-** This kind of approach is quite common, as the RAN collection of inspiring practices shows (RAN, 2019). The implemented projects can develop mixed strategies, involving also the above-mentioned approaches.
- d) Consideration of the importance of NGOs and CSOs in the development of theoretical knowledge and empirical data-** This kind of approach entails the theorisation of the role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE, which is further supported by current central empirical approaches (Aslam, 2020; Wara 2020).





# The 5 Fundamental questions that help outlining the state of the art of the NGOs and CSOs role in P/CVE and exit strategies

## 1) What is the role of NGOs and CSO in P/CVE?

When thinking about P/CVE strategies and the role that NGOs can play in these, it is worth mentioning two opposite positions: the first one based on the so-called **'hard security approach'** (based on surveillance, policing and the implementation of *ad hoc* anti-terror law, (Spalek and Imtoul, 2007) and the **'soft security approach'** that is based on understanding social, cultural and political drivers of violence, including the contexts and dynamics that enable extremist ideas to emerge, grow and sustain (Stern, 2009).

The 'hard security approach' tends to exclude the intervention of NGOs and CSOs because the principal focus is the monitoring and repression of possible risk situations for radicalisation or violent extremism. This approach is traditionally based on repressive measures, exclusively implemented by security agencies, (Pickering, McCulloch, & WrightNeville, 2008; Prislán, Černigoj, & Lobnikar, 2018) without any space left for CSOs and NGOs intervention.

This kind of approach has shown to be non-effective and, sometimes, even counterproductive. For this reason, the attention of authorities and professionals shifted towards approaches based on less aggressive and more prevention-oriented strategies (De Goede & Simon, 2013).

In this sense, the 'soft security approach' is based on a different perspective, placing inclusion, social integration and social cohesion (Hadji & Hassan, 2014) as the expected outcomes for which NGOs and CSOs work next to institutional actors, or in an independent way, thus providing an interesting alternative (Halafoff, Lam & Bouma, 2019).

Nye (2008) explains that rooting P/CVE strategies on soft power means to achieve the desired outcomes through mechanisms that do not involve coercion, but rather, attraction and persuasion based on shared culture, values, and policies. Examples of soft power measures implemented in P/CVE include awareness campaigns on violent radicalisation and recruitment, use of counter/alternative narratives by civil society to deal with extremist





propaganda and support to the involved local community to interrupt the radicalisation path before the use of violence (Berardinelli & Guglielminetti, 2018).

The “soft security approach” seems to be the most applied, since state actors normally involve NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE strategies, recognising the usefulness of their participation. Moreover, the involvement of schools, families and youth, for instance, in the prevention of radicalisation, is promoted by these organisations, filling the gap left by State actors.

This kind of collaboration can be implemented with different strategies, namely the bottom-up approach by establishing that the recognition and management of specific challenges, locally emerged, represents a possibility for earlier prevention and intervention with extremist offenders, allowing NGOs and CSOs a wider scope to work. The top-down approach is the direct consequence of increased governmental awareness on the importance of the work done by NGOs and CSOs. According to this approach, these organisations can be involved in specific tasks related to exit programs, normally in relation to the prison and probation environment. The top-down approach can be applied also for the implementation of services that don't belong to the criminal justice system, especially in favour of radicalised individuals and family members. In this regards CSOs' services are complementary to those offered by state agencies in tertiary radicalisation<sup>2</sup>prevention ( Papp et al., 2022).

In the majority of the consulted documents, NGOs and CSOs are not completely autonomous, as they participate in projects developed by state actors or are asked to offer specific activities (through the involvement of their available skills) that are not institutionally covered. Thus, no P/CVE strategies carried out by NGOs and CSOs were found to be completely independent and detached from some level of State agreement and approval. Only in the case of tertiary radicalisation prevention approaches, NGOs and CSOs show greater autonomy.

As underlined by Holmer (2013), a multi-agency approach (that involves NGOs and CSOs) (RAN, 2016; Molemkamp, 2018) seems not to be applied consistently by some countries (e.g. US, UK, France, Australia).

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<sup>2</sup> Tertiary prevention focuses on people already involved in a radicalised environment- or specific categories of people such as their family members or professionals seeking advice –with the aim to motivate them towards a different path through disengagement, deradicalisation, rehabilitation, reintegration, or a combination of these (Papp et al., 2022);





According to Aly, Balbi and Jaques (2015, p.10) “the challenges to develop a smart CVE approach that effectively combines soft and hard power elements are located both within the traditional structural separation between hard and soft power and within the contemporary context in which CVE has evolved from a hard Counterterrorism focus”.

In addition, a recent and analytical RAN document on the role of CSOs in exit work (Papp et al., 2022) underlines the wide variety of methods and approaches followed by CSOs when collaborating with state agencies in the EU landscape, confirming its added value to better tackle the diverse set of needs and difficulties posed by exit work (RAN, 2022). Different possibilities of collaboration are highlighted, namely:

- a) **Policy formulation:** NGOs and CSOs are relevant partners as these can suggest strategic and legislative approaches based on direct observation of the emerging communitarian needs.
- b) **Stable long-term funding:** despite not always available, it is one of the most important elements of collaboration, as it can grant long-lasting cooperation in exit strategies. Nevertheless, a financial connection with state agencies also has negative consequences, since it reduces NGOs and CSOs’ independence, decreasing their flexibility in the application of the selected strategies. Moreover, a sense of distrust can be fomented from the side of communitarian stakeholders that don’t like to be associated with state agencies or governments.
- c) **Capacity building and knowledge exchange:** above all, in the field of tertiary prevention, NGOs and CSOs can fill in the gap of specific skills and links with the community that state agencies can face. Moreover, due to the permanent efforts that some NGOs and CSOs put into their P/CVE work, they can become highly specialised, meaning that they can share their knowledge with state agencies. In addition, the direct contact with individuals who support extremist ideologies and people at risk makes them the most suitable actors for the early detection of emerging radicalisation trends and trajectories.
- d) **Case Referral:** this activity can be implemented from a mutual perspective since the referral of cases can be done by state agencies to NGOs and CSOs (when specific skills that are not available at a central level can be offered by NGOs and CSOs), but also by NGOs and CSOs towards State agencies (if specific needs, for instance related to housing, are beyond NGOs and CSOs’ competencies).
- e) **Case Management:** NGOs and CSOs working in the field of criminal justice system and, particularly, in the prison and probation settings, are often a pivotal pillar for the





exchange of information and implementation of exit strategies for state agencies. The relationship between NGOs and CSOs and state agencies is usually based on formal and consolidated instruments such as standard procedures and protocols.

NGOs and CSOs' practitioners are also involved in the multi-agency work at the same level as other partners. In this case, the participation of NGOs and CSOs tends to mitigate the security approach often applied in the prison and probation settings.

- f) Post-release reintegration:** when dealing with the delicate phase of post-release, the contribution of NGOs and CSOs appears to be decisive, as the extreme flexibility that normally characterises the interventions of NGOs and CSOs (e.g., possibility to answer to specific needs during the weekend and post-office hours, possibility to offer continuity of approaches from prison to probation and in the exit phase, possibility to be informally reached by former prisoners or probationers that don't want to be in touch with state agencies after the end of their sentence). In addition, NGOs and CSOs can maintain contacts with the communities in which the formers are supposed to be reintegrated, even for a long time, facilitating in this way, support aimed at promoting inclusion and monitoring the implemented measures.
- g) Cooperation in security-relevant cases:** this is a sensitive field of collaboration, as NGOs and CSOs are normally not sufficiently trained or skilled to work on such cases. For this reason, the relationship between NGOs and CSOs and State agencies is shaped by the request for help from the NGOs and CSOs' side, whenever practitioners feel that a security issue is at stake. Regardless, both NGOs and CSOs and state agencies use risk assessment procedures, even if following different protocols or implementing different tools. However, the non-homogeneity of the applied methods can create difficulties in the way the information is exchanged, as well as in the evaluation of possible threats and risks. Nevertheless, it represents, an enlarged possibility of monitoring specific environments and settings.

## 2) Why involve NGOs and CSOs? Pros and Cons

Despite all the analysed documents looking at NGOs and CSOs as essential partners, differences in the type of suggested involvement are evident.

Concerning the reasons that support the idea of NGOs and CSOs as salient actors in P/CVE strategies, the most accredited ones are based on the consciousness that these organisations:

- Facilitate social inclusion and integration of marginalised individuals into society (Choudhury, 2017; De Goede & Simon, 2013). Social exclusion, in fact, is a push





factor for radicalisation, and has a mutually reinforcing link with inequality based on different elements, each requiring adequate attention (i.e., religion, gender, race, poverty) (Lister, 2000; Sajoo, 2016).

- Are in direct and permanent contact with the society they work with. They find it easier to penetrate the culture and language and to build a trustful relationship (ENoD, 2014).
- Are usually credible and experienced to work with specific groups to help detect and address their specific grievances, which often make individuals more vulnerable to radicalisation (OSCE, 2018).
- Exercise an important role of guiding public opinion on fundamental issues.
- For their informal, branched, and permanent presence on the territory, are in a better position to prevent polarisation and violence, offering a prompt intervention for emerging conflicts. They can also detect, at early stages, possible elements of radicalisation among the community, thus preventing its successive steps (ENoD, 2014).
- They have direct contact with local and residents, thus easily collecting relevant information and offering narratives for radicalised individuals (or those at risk of radicalisation) that are not comfortable collaborating with State actors.

On the other hand, the most shared issues of concern are:

- The possibility that NGOs and CSOs work too autonomously, without connecting themselves to the institutional activities of P/CVE already implemented (reducing or even nullifying the possible positive outcomes).
- The possibility that they can be politicised and, for this reason, not independent.
- The possibility they lack information about the general situation of terrorism in the State in which they operate.
- The possibility of their approach being contrary, or not in line, with state agencies strategies.
- The possibility that they are not willing to collaborate with state agencies and government and to exchange useful information.
- The possibility that they do not have the necessary skills to approach and implement exit strategies.
- The impossibility for them to achieve their full potential in P/CVE due to inadequate regulations and coordination, absence of government support and distrust between stakeholders and communities (Gervasoni, 2017).





### 3) Who are NGOs and CSOs' principal actors?

According to the Institute for the Strategic Dialogue (2010) there are three specific sectors of Civil Society primarily involved in P/CVE:

- **Community groups and non-governmental organisations:** they include, for instance, community representatives, spiritual assistants, religious communities, faith groups, women's associations, youth's associations, adult organisations, culture and sport organisations, organisations working in prisons;
- **Frontline workers within state and non-state services:** they include, for instance, educational representatives, researchers and academics, mediators, local government representatives, representatives of healthcare and social services, psychologists;
- **General public:** it includes volunteers, families, peer groups, media and reporters, information, technology, and social media sectors and former extremists (Amath, 2015; Botha, 2014; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2010; Kozmelj, 2018; OSCE, 2018).

Practitioners and professionals that work in high-risk environments, such as prisons, places of religious training, education, families, and the internet are especially important (Vermeulen & Bovenkerk, 2012).

### 4) Which are the main activities performed by CSO and NGOs?

The activities and programs carried out by CSOs and NGOs in the field of P/CVE and exit work can be divided according to the:

- **Type of the action:** e.g., training, strategic communications, awareness building.
- **Function of the action:** Prevention, Intervention, Rehabilitation. Preventive action can encompass secondary and tertiary prevention. These preventive scopes target those living in a vulnerable or already radicalised context, or those who are in contact with extremist individuals and FTFs. Thus, by reinforcing the skills of families, education professionals, community members and front-line practitioners they can be active partners to P/CVE strategies.
- **Type of involvement of individuals in the proposed actions:** The participation in P/CVE projects and exit programs can be voluntary or involuntary, as it can be





imposed by specific requirements of the competent authorities, or it can be a personal choice of the involved person. This distinction can be relevant in regard to the kind of adhesion to the proposed activities, as it makes a difference in terms of willingness to adhere to a long-lasting change. It must be noted that this categorisation is not absolute, since some activities can fall under more than one of the mentioned sections (OSCE, 2018).

Another way to consider the type of activities implemented by NGOs relates to whether it is implemented following an individual or collective approach. Regarding individual approaches, these are normally based on a multi-disciplinary intervention, taking in consideration the specific needs of the participants (the most common practices are: counselling, mentoring, also involving former extremist individuals as mentors) (Christensen, 2015). Collective or group interventions are based on the implementation of specific training in a group setting.

According to the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (2010), most CSOs are involved in the following practical activities:

- citizenship teaching and empowerment, language tuitions, promotion of leadership among young people, democratic platforms, campaigns on voting;
- facilitation of religious and political education, inter-faith dialogues, religious leaders' training;
- anti-discrimination, anti-violence, intergenerational, myth-busting discussions and forums;
- development of vocational skills and communication competencies, improvements in school curricula;
- cohesion activities, community mapping, housing and integration policies, training, and employment projects;
- diversionary activities for young people (e.g., sports, arts.), targeted after-school clubs, mentoring and role models, apprenticeships, training on the use of social media platforms;
- Strengthening relations between institutions (the police, community and social services, local officials), institutional capacity building, development of information sharing protocols, training for frontline workers and training on spotting vulnerable individuals.





- Using restorative justice programs as part of the proposed exit strategy, although applied by some organisations, is still underestimated when dealing with the exit phase.

## 5) Which are the existing gaps and challenges?

According to the literature, the gaps and challenges can be summarised as follows:

- **Discontinuity of the implemented actions:** often due to the lack of financial resources and/or the absence of a stable connection with state agencies.
- **Scarcity of follow-up protocols:** documents that present specific approaches of NGOs and CSOs implemented in the deradicalisation field, often do not mention any follow-up protocols for the monitoring of the reached outcomes. Therefore, evaluating the efficacy of the proposed strategy and the possibility of maintaining them in the long period is difficult.
- **Lack of empirical data of the obtained outcome:** documents that refer specific P/CVE approaches implemented by NGOs and CSOs rarely offer empirical data or detailed analysis of the reached outcomes. The possibility to consult such data would be useful for a better understanding of the efficacy of the proposed approaches.
- **Lack of shared professional standards:** the variety of approaches and methods implemented in P/CVE and the strict connection with the specific local configuration of the problem, makes the work of the involved practitioners highly dependent from the available resources, often preventing the replicability in different contexts.
- **Rare or non-sufficient references to the training of professionals:** documents that refer to specific approaches of P/CVE implemented by NGOs and CSO rarely give information about the (specific) training followed by their practitioners. Knowing more about this aspect would be pivotal for the evaluation of possible transferability of the presented practice.
- **Implementation of different risk assessment tools if compared with state agencies:** the fact that the different CSOs work in a different way and with different professional standards implies the use of different risk assessment tools. Even if the assessment phase is pivotal when working in the P/CVE field, as the implementation of (different) assessment tools represent a positive change in the way in which CSOs work, it can create an obstacle when dealing with different evaluation and outcomes.
- **Difficulties in identifying and sharing information:** (lack of common standard procedures and clear protocols for the exchange of information). This phase is of course one of the most delicate of the whole exit work implemented by CSOs.





CSOs are normally not prepared to deal with information that poses an issue of public security, however they are used to work with sensitive information. Finding a way to decide which information can/must be shared with intelligence agencies and other competent state agencies working with VETOs and at-risk individuals – in a multi-agency approach perspective – isn't a easy task. The lack of clear and shared guidelines/protocols does not facilitate this exchange.





## Conclusion

The role of NGOs and CSOs in P/CVE and exit strategies has undoubtedly become more consistent and visible in the last years, confirming the pivotal importance of a multi-agency approach, at least when dealing with VETOs, radicalised individuals, or those vulnerable to radicalisation. Nevertheless, there are still many gaps to be filled for the consolidation and replication of the existing good practices.

First of all, the lack of standards of collaboration among NGOs and CSOs and State agencies makes it difficult to imagine a continuum of the proposed approaches (for example, among the prison and the probation experience,) above all when no clear and stable funding systems are granted to NGOs and CSOs.

Moreover, the discussion about the training of practitioners working for NGOs and CSOs still needs to be analysed and more in-depth studied to find common agreement, at least about the training contents and its periodicity. Hence, the establishment of largely shared guidelines in this regard could be of great help in facilitating the collaboration among NGOs, CSOs and State agencies, thus reinforcing mutual trust.

Lastly, another necessary step concerns the implementation of follow-up procedures, based on the application – as much as possible – of the same evaluation tools, to facilitate the understanding of the outcomes. This shared approach could also positively affect the identification of what really works in the field of P/CVE and exit strategies, and facilitate its re-adaptation to similar contexts.





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**R2COM**  
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Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



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