

# Report

---

## Excursion to Washington D.C. & Minneapolis / Saint Paul 13.4.-21.4.2015

Delegation's report



MINISTRY  
OF THE INTERIOR

The Network for  
Religious and  
Traditional  
Peacemakers



In April, 13.4-21.4., Finn Church Aid (FCA) organised an excursion for a Finnish delegation to USA, Washington D.C. and Minneapolis / Saint Paul as part of cooperation initiative with the Ministry of Interior. Cooperation aims to strengthen trust, collaboration and dialogue between different parties engaged in prevention of violent radicalization and extremism, and the root causes behind this phenomenon. Delegation of 19 people included; representatives of various faith traditions, civil servants and law enforcement as well as civil society representatives, who are working to support young people. This present report is a summary of findings of the excursion; lessons learned from the American experience, and recommendations for ways forward in Finland.

## Outline of the Report

In April 2015 a delegation of faith leaders, officials and civil society representatives made an excursion to United States of America; Washington D.C. and the Twin cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. This excursion was part of a cooperation initiative undertaken by Finn Church Aid, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, and the Ministry of the Interior of Finland for finding ways to engage, build trust and support different stakeholders' work and mutual cooperation in preventing violent extremism.

Excursion to United States was a fact finding mission, and participants had a chance to visit various state officials, local authorities and communities, and religious institutions engaged in preventing violent extremism. Many of the organization visited were working together for preserving social cohesion and empowering communities. In the end of this report there is an *Annex 2*. which lists all the organisations, officials and communities our delegation was invited to visit and discuss with. This report is co-written by the members of this delegation, it and it starts with a background (Chapter 1) that describes the mutual concern that brought the delegation together, and the rationale and goals of the cooperation initiative more in depth.

The second chapter, *Lessons learned and Takeaway's from the American experience* collects together delegations experiences and reflections from the excursion.

In Washington D.C. we visited various state officials who are engaged in national policy planning, and promoting ways for community engagement in PVE both in local and national level. Furthermore, delegation visited various faith communities, and local authorities and communities working together in order to find how these programmes were implemented. During the days of traveling delegation reflected on how we could best work together in Finland, and what are the ways forward. What are needs and challenges that need to be addressed?

The third chapter describes the process which translated the experiences and reflections of the delegation into recommendations for action and next steps in Finland. FCA facilitated workshops for delegation in order to map out the existing good practices, challenges and recommendation in Finnish context.

Chapter four concludes this report. This chapter explores the themes which arose from the these conversations during the excursion in depth, and gives recommendations for guidelines and next steps for developing in which all parties can engage cooperation for preventing violent extremism, and enhancing trust between all parties.

## Contents

Outline of the Report.....	1
1. Background.....	3
1.1.1. Rationale for cooperation initiative Finn Church Aid and Ministry of the Interior .....	3
2. Lessons learned and Takeaway's from the American experience.....	5
2.1.1. Advocating participation and civil rights/CAIR .....	6
2.1.2. Foreign policy .....	7
2.1.3. Inter-faith relations – for peace and unity .....	7
2.2.1. Role of communities in national and local level policy planning - building strong partnerships....	8
2.2.2. Law enforcement Law enforcement and community partnerships - Trust-building and transparency.....	8
2.2.3. Community engagement and partnerships as resources for better integration .....	9
2.2.4. Dialogue and good communications as good practices for preventing violent extremism .....	10
3. The Workshops - Mapping best practices and developing guidelines for developing cooperation in Finland .....	11
3.1.1. Findings of the workshops.....	11
4. Conclusions - Themes of discussion – Ways forward .....	13
4.1.1.. Role of religious education .....	13
4.1.2. Addressing alienation and marginalization .....	14
4.1.3. Role of language and terminology.....	15
4.2. Building a community based approach in Prevention of violent radicalization and extremism.....	15
4.2.1. Inclusive cooperation and trust – deepening cooperation among different actors .....	15
4.2.2. Strategic communications, and building counter-narratives .....	16
4.2.3. Next steps of action .....	17

Annex 1. Members of the delegation

Annex 2. Outline of the Programme of the excursion

Annex 3. Summary of the excursion, presented by Hunderra Assefa, Spokesperson for Young Muslims in the seminar on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, in Kanava ry's premises.

## 1. Background

The issues of violent radicalization, extremist movements using religious narratives, and violent extremism have been a major concern of the international community for decades. There are many ongoing national, transnational and international efforts to address and study these issues and find practical solutions to them that are accepted by the majority of stakeholders in each context.

However, the issues of violent radicalization and violent extremism have only very recently come to play a significant role in the Finnish national context. In the light of recent developments - an increasing number of foreign fighters leaving Finland to participate in an ongoing conflict in Syria as an example - it has been noted that there is an acute need for finding suitable working methods and practical solutions to enhance cooperation between multiple stakeholders, especially between religious communities and officials in tackling this phenomenon, and issues related to it.

Before engaging in any kind of CVE work, it is imperative to keep in mind that there are in existence a vast range of violent extremist movements, all driven by their own ideological, political or social agendas. Similarly, people who join such movements may or may not always be motivated by those same factors. People may join because of qualms with governmental policy or perceived injustices, a feeling of not belonging in society and exclusion, lack of financial success or social mobility, racial hatred and xenophobia, or religious considerations. Thus any preventative response to these movements needs to operate on a similarly broad spectrum.

To this end the Finnish authorities have for some time fielded a preventative policing unit, comprising of a host of experts from various fields. However, since violent extremism amongst Muslim minorities is a relatively new phenomenon in the Finnish context, there has been a justified deliberation regarding whether or not the needed expertise can be found within the existing actors amongst the authorities to properly and holistically tackle the issue. Keeping in mind that many violent extremist movements operating within Muslim majority countries do so under a self-proclaimed banner of religious authority, and attract many followers based on this religiously flavored discourse; as such, there is a need to also engage and involve religious communities in countering these narratives.

Local religious communities are not only the first point of contact for many individuals considering joining violent extremist movements, but also far better suited than the authorities when it comes to providing an effective counter-narrative to religiously motivated violent extremism. They are also the ones who are often the most acutely aware of the challenges facing the individuals within their communities. Given this, religious counselling and the involvement of religious communities in CVE work is not only advisable, but in fact essential to any truly multilateral and broad-spectrum approach to CVE.

### 1.1.1. Rationale for cooperation initiative Finn Church Aid and Ministry of the Interior

It has been recognized that there is a need to create a framework and network for cooperation between civil society and officials, in order to address root causes of this phenomenon in Finnish national context, and create sustainable inclusive working methods for coordinating the efforts and information sharing between religious communities and officials and other key stakeholders. Since the framework for tackling violent extremism in Finland is at its early stage, and working methods are being formulated, this offers Finland an opportunity to learn and gain insights of the work done elsewhere, and adapt ideas and best practices from long-running projects and cooperation efforts to our work in Finland.

Finn Church Aid has, due to its role as the interim secretariat of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, relevant experience in bringing together multiple stakeholders, facilitating contacts, and coordinating efforts for the prevention of violent radicalization abroad and nowadays in Finland. Network Secretariat also employs Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi, who has previously worked deeply in the issue while he was employed by Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Dr. Elsanousi gave several presentations about his experiences to Finnish religious communities and officials and the idea of an excursion to US was born in these consultations.<sup>1</sup> Network also believes that community's responses are most effective in preventing violent extremism (PVE) and therefore community peer-learning platforms provide often best basis for addressing good practices and advancing both law enforcements and communities understanding on the necessity of cooperation.

Ministry of Interior (MOI) requested FCA and the Network to assist in ensuring proper dialogue and cooperation between religious communities, the ministry and law enforcement in Finland. FCA suggested that an excursion would be made in the early phases of renewed cooperation to provide reference points and ideas for further deliberations and promised to cover cost of the excursion<sup>2</sup>.

In USA a plethora of cooperation initiatives both of civil society and government officials have been launched in order to counter the challenges of violent radicalization and extremism. In light of statistics, it has been estimated that the number of foreign fighters joining the conflict originating from US has been over 150 individuals<sup>3</sup>, whereas in Finland the number has estimated to be over 60 individuals.<sup>4</sup> In comparison and taking into account the size of the population, the number in Finland is relatively high, indicating a worrisome trend. In USA inter-faith cooperation and religious leaders working together with officials have proven to be an effective recipe in prevention of violent radicalization and extremism, and tackling other issues relating to these phenomena: integration, intolerance, lack of participation, and counter measures against recruitment into groups that promote violence, to name a few. For the purpose of building capacity of both civil society and officials to better respond to challenges posed by violent extremism in Finland, it was suggested that an excursion should be made for learning from the ongoing projects and successful working methods in practice, in Washington D.C. and Minnesota.

It was also acknowledged that many view USA foreign policy as counterproductive and hindering global efforts in preventing extremism. Therefore dialogue on foreign policy has to be strengthened.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Elsanousi's interview on YLE, 20.3.2015; <http://goo.gl/bY4UcA>

<sup>2</sup> Church Foreign relations Council provided 35,000 E grant.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas J. Rasmussen Director National Counterterrorism Center, Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence "Current Terrorist Threat to the United States", 12.2.2015,; <http://goo.gl/86Xnhk>

<sup>4</sup> Suojelupoliisin terrorismiin erikoistunut tutkija Pekka Hiltunen Ylen Ykkösaamussa., 25.2.2015.

## **1.2. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EXCURSION**

- To obtain information and gain insights on lessons learned and working methods from different actors engaged in work preventing radicalization, and building good relations and trust between different religious communities and officials; grass-root cooperation and religious communities, inter-faith dialogue and cooperation initiatives, cooperation between various officials and communities.
- Networking; creating international contacts between Finnish and American community representatives and officials for further sharing and even possible cooperation in prevention of violent extremism.
- Offer a possibility for Finnish actors to draw lessons from the work of their American counterparts in order to contribute in developing Finnish model and their own responses to violent extremism.
- Draw lessons from the integration of the American Somali population, and gain insights on how to strengthen the resilience of the Finnish Somali community, and support the integration of Somali youth in Finland.
- Draw lessons from how to actively engage religious authorities into the work being carried out against online radicalization; to capitalize on their leadership and incorporate it into a communications strategy when creating a comprehensive counter-narrative to violent extremism.
- Draw lessons from how to develop and promote domestic community-level programs, engage local communities in development of these programmes, and map best practical solutions to do this.
- The excursion also offered an opportunity to learn from measures and policies against violent extremism that have proven counter-productive in US's context, and how to avoid any such pitfalls in the Finnish context.

## **2. Lessons learned and Takeaway's from the American experience**

### 2.1.1. Advocating participation and civil rights/CAIR

The Council on American-Islamic Relations<sup>5</sup> (CAIR,) is a civil liberties advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

During the excursion, the Finnish delegation had the opportunity to visit CAIR's headquarters near Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. Among the staff that the delegation met were Executive Director and Founder Mr. Nihad Awad as well as National Communications Director and spokesperson Mr. Ibrahim Hooper. The delegation had a chance to sit with Mr. Awad and discuss with him various issues related to violent extremism and countering the narrative put forth by organizations that engage in violent extremism. During the conversation, the following points were made:

- ISIS should not be referred to as Islamic or given any Islamic reference, as this will only legitimize the actions of the group. Also terms such as 'Jihad' should be used in their correct context, so as to not blur their proper Islamic definitions.
- The sense of alienation is not the sole cause for joining violent extremist organizations. People who join such organizations always site foreign policy issues and the will to fight oppression as reasons to join. If governmental actors shy away from discussing about foreign policy issues, the problem of violent extremism cannot be solved and the CVE (countering violent extremism) program will not succeed.
- In addition to manipulating Islamic terminologies and concepts, ISIS uses local circumstances and issues of foreign policy, such as occupation and repression, as ways to recruit young Muslims.
- Involving other communities (both religious and secular) in issues related to Muslims' civil liberties is an effective way of making one's voice heard
- In USA, there have been cases of agent provocateurs infiltrating mosques and trying to purposefully get vulnerable Muslims incriminated<sup>6</sup>. This decreases the level of trust between the community and authorities, and it's not productive in any manner.
- It is important to create powerful communication channels within the community, and to provide relevant trainings (related to for example civil rights and liberties) to members of the community.
- There are double standards in place in the coverage of crimes perpetrated by organizations that use the Christian tradition to justify their acts versus organizations that use the Islamic tradition for similar reasons. For example, when abortion clinic attacks are covered, reference is made and emphasis is given to the crime itself and not to the religious affiliation of the perpetrators, even if they use religious terminology to justify the act. The same should be done when covering acts perpetrated by groups such as ISIS. This requires for there to be sensitivity training offered by the Muslim community to for example representatives of media houses.

The meeting at CAIR was not only informative, but it also offered a very critical, deep, and insightful glance at the various dynamics related to violent extremism. CAIR's professionalism and experience in public relations, civil liberties advocacy, and dialogue makes it an excellent organization to learn from.

---

<sup>5</sup> Web site; CAIR 2012, <http://goo.gl/sPEILg>.

<sup>6</sup> CAIR 2012, CAIR 2012, Mosque Infiltration Feeds Muslims' Distrust of FBI. Available: <http://goo.gl/sPEILg>.

### 2.1.2. Foreign policy

As mentioned, foreign policy is one of the main factors that are consistently cited by those who carry out terror attacks as a prime motivational cause. Any realistic effort at CVE needs to consider questions of foreign policy. Unfortunately the officials met on the trip to the USA refused to admit that foreign policy needed to be reviewed as part of their CVE activities.

The consensus amongst the delegates participating in the trip was that terrorism and violent extremism cannot be cured by a “war on terror” and further violence. Bombs and military action are often only tools for creating more terrorists. Furthermore, refugee camps created by violent conflicts are prime targets and fertile ground for terrorist recruiters.<sup>7</sup>

Naturally Finland cannot hope to change the foreign policy of major actors in any major way, although it often does exert more influence on a diplomatic level than its small size would suggest. However, a simple natural first step is to review its own foreign policy in light of internal security considerations. By making small, yet meaningful adjustments to some of its own foreign policies, it can help create trust with communities residing both within and without its borders and minimize its own risk at being targeted in terror attacks. It is also important to communicate foreign policy issues including the promotion of human and civil rights.

### 2.1.3. Inter-faith relations – for peace and unity

An important part of creating a safe and secure society is the active progression of social cohesion. Inclusivity and cooperation are an ideal counter-weight to the exclusivist and destructive discourse of violent extremist movements. When local communities come together to work around positive issues and agendas that unite them, or to respond to negative events in a unified and meaningful manner, they can have deep and lasting impacts on relations between different groups of society.

Two excellent inter-faith initiatives were witnessed. Firstly, the Shoulder2Shoulder network that brought communities of different faiths together to confront extremism and present a unified front against racism, bigotry, and xenophobia. If any single community was being mistreated in any such manner the network brought together all these actors to intervene in the said situation in an appropriate and thought-out manner. The concept of utilizing crises and confronting them with a positive message has proven very effective at turning negative experience that may otherwise have driven a wedge between communities and created mistrust, to having the opposite effect of increasing mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. Secondly, an intra-faith initiative set up by the Islamic Society of North America was the so-called “Pledge of Honor”, by which various Muslim communities promised to respect one another and refrain from needless polemical, offensive, and excommunicative rhetoric. Such a measure can potentially have great effects at a time when sectarian violence runs rampant in the Middle-East.

*“The Shoulder to Shoulder was inspiring. It was great to see members of different faiths come together and towards a common goal of peace and harmony. I believe this type of interfaith dialogue and team work would be very productive in Finland.” – Habiba Ali, Kehitäs & Arvostus ry*

---

<sup>7</sup> Botha & Abdile (2014), Radicalization and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia Available: <http://goo.gl/bbVlJ2>

### 2.2.1. Role of communities in national and local level policy planning - building strong partnerships

*“If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.”*

It is also important for the authorities to note and value the communities, and build partnerships with them. All along the study visit program, both authorities and communities stressed the importance of building partnerships and involving communities. The authorities should start with drafting partnership strategies. But, meeting with communities in the grass root as much as possible strengthens the sense of belonging, increases the trust and the sense of being heard in the dialogue process. It is also important that community representatives have easy access to authorities on local, state and on federal/national level. Also the community representatives should be encouraged to create direct connections with politicians.

There were also in general many good practices how neighborhoods, religious communities or NGOs take responsibilities and active roles in organising integration related activities, like language training, orientation to civil rights and in general the society, bring mainstream activities in the community premises etc.

The interaction between ministries, local level authorities and NGO's is important both in terms of participation and effectiveness. The ministries should strengthen the voices of communities in planning and preparation of national level policies. It helps officials to get new and innovative ideas to implement to the policy papers. On the other hand it binds the communities to the enforcement of actions when they can influence to measures. The challenge for the civil servants is to find right individuals from the communities with whom you should work. The authorities have to take into accounts all groups e.g. youth, religious leaders, families, women etc. Law enforcement and local community based cooperation and trust building.

### 2.2.2. Law enforcement Law enforcement and community partnerships - Trust-building and transparency

The co-operation and dialogue between law enforcement and local communities is based on the mutual trust. Previously the communities were treated as targets for the actions of authorities. Law enforcement focused strongly on the intelligence gathering from the society. This created mistrust and suspicious in the communities. Therefore officials changed their approach to community based model. The communities were treated as partners and they were more involved in activities on local level. (Jari: A key measure to achieve the best result is to build trust between the police and the NGO's, as well as the communities and together try to solve possible security challenges).

Trust building is long lasting work and law enforcement staff, from deputy to police chief, was participating different activities on local level. That is only way for law enforcement get to know their communities and people they are cooperating. All the actions law enforcement do and facilitate on local level is to create safety in communities. They serve and protect all the groups equally.

The personnel of law enforcement should represent equally the different ethnic groups of the community it is serving. Law enforcement has to recruit and hire people with various language and cultural backgrounds. Police officers who know and understand different minorities and cultural issues are able to communicate with them correctly.

The communication between law enforcement and local community is key element. In everyday life there are always lot of rumors and messages going around. In some cases the facts are limited and in worst case scenario might start bad consequences. Law enforcement has to put efforts to correct these wrong messages and misunderstandings. That is why it is vital to invest in communication in advance.

Finnish police could find ways to create posts of community liaison officers to work in local police. They could assist patrol officers in non-enforcement activities, relate to and work effectively with people from diverse, cultural, economic and ethnic backgrounds etc. It is also important to lower the threshold of the members of different ethnic group to join the law enforcement. This could be done by spreading information of the profession of the police to the minority groups.

*“One of the best observations I made during the trip was seeing how engaged different authorities were to their communities. This type of activity is needed in Finland. In order for our youth to be more trusting and open a helping hand is needed from example the police force. - In Minneapolis police officers volunteered to hold a youth workshop. This offered young people excellent after school activities such as discussion groups and sports. I strongly believe that young people want to be trusted and respected, once they feel like they belong somewhere it is very hard for them to radicalize or, become involved in criminal activity.”*

– Habiba Ali, Kehittämisryhmä

### **2.2.3. Community engagement and partnerships as resources for better integration**

*“Home is not where you were born, but where your grandchildren are raised”.*

*“If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.”*

It is also important for the authorities to note and value the communities, and build partnerships with them. All along the study visit program, both authorities and communities stressed the importance of building partnerships and involving communities. The authorities should start with drafting partnership strategies. But, meeting with communities in the grass root as much as possible strengthens the sense of belonging, increases the trust and the sense of being heard in the dialogue process. It is also important that community representatives have easy access to authorities on local, state and on federal/national level. Also the community representatives should be encouraged to create direct connections with politicians.

There were also in general many good practices how neighborhoods, religious communities or NGOs take responsibilities and active roles in organising integration related activities, like language training, orientation to civil rights and in general the society, bring mainstream activities in the community premises etc.

Employment is naturally the main tool for integration, also for the whole family. When assessing the lessons learned in relation with employment, it is important to look at differences between the US and Finnish labor market structures and legislation.

It was positive to note that the path to employment is short and communities often take an active role in promoting employment, organizing language courses and other integration relative activities. This is also

easier, when communities are large, but also necessary as public programs are not that comprehensive and local authorities have smaller role. In the US sponsorship programs finding a job (e.g. for a refugee or a family member) may also be an obligation for the community and a precondition for a residence permit. In the Finnish system, community commitment cannot rule out those authority obligations or individual rights (unemployment fees, social income support, health services etc.), which are regulated in the national legislation.

All in all, it seems to be easier in the US to find the way to employment or entrepreneurship than in Finland. At the same time it has to be noted, that labor market conditions are not regulated as strictly in the US as they are in Finland, and the first stage jobs may be low paid and part- time.

*“If we leave hate language behind, what is the worst what can happen? We get a better world”*

The impact of respectful language was also stressed by many of the speakers during the visits. The message for respectful language should be given at the highest political level, and followed by politicians, authorities, media and other opinion makers on all levels. It might also be useful to draft a vocabulary in relation to immigration, integration and minority issues.

But, if something goes wrong: *“Never let a good crisis to get wasted”*.

#### **2.2.4. Dialogue and good communications as good practices for preventing violent extremism**

During the excursion the delegation had the opportunity to meet with several different government officials and authorities. Concerns towards government (and local) officials’ practices and policies were discussed openly and critically, exchanging ideas and views on harmful vs. best practices. A key message from these meetings, which we could all agree on, was the importance of seeing the community as equal partners and that also in a time of crisis, it is important for government leaders to publicly show support for the community (e.g. public statements and speeches).

Furthermore, officials need to ask the communities what they think drive radicalization and find the solutions to effective prevention through cooperation. In CVE work officials need to step back from acting as experts and instead empower community members to take the lead in doing the prevention work, i.e. communities need to own the problem and the solutions.

Other key points to keep in mind is that when officials engage in dialogue with the community, the communication needs to be transparent and the officials need to stay engaged and follow-up on the issues and concerns raised by community members. Recruiters to violent extremist movements will utilize any grievances that for example youth may have and fuel their anger and resentment. As such, it is important to address those grievances head on; minimizing any breeding ground there might be for the recruiters’ messages. A continuous dialogue between youth, community leaders and local officials, which includes regular follow-ups, is thus required. Furthermore, officials need to be mindful of the terminology they use. Officials need to avoid talking about religion or religiously inspired violence but instead speak of ideologically inspired violence. Thus, when speaking of violent extremism it is equally important to speak of it within a wider framework, than just being a case of radicalization of Muslim youth. Officials have the responsibility to adapt this mindfulness of the terminology when making statements about violent extremism. However, it also needs to be recognized that we still have a long way to go in educating officials on different levels about the right use of terminology.

---

### 3. The Workshops - Mapping best practices and developing guidelines for developing cooperation in Finland

Violent radicalization and extremism are complex phenomenon as are the root causes leading to these. During excursion the participants shared their views on how they saw the phenomenon, root causes leading to it, and best ways to cooperate for addressing this common concern.

Participants were encouraged to contribute mapping the problematique surrounding this issue; what are the root causes? What should be done in order to prevent violent radicalization and extremism? What good practices we already have in Finland, and what new actions need to be taken?

In order to do this, FCA organized two rounds of workshops for the participants. This session started with a reflection and mixed small group discussion, where groups gathered lessons learned from different meetings and discussions during the excursion, and reflected them as the basis for discussion on how to build better practices and cooperation in Finland.

Participants also discussed how they saw their role, and the role of others in preventive work, and measures they would like take to further develop preventive work. In these discussions participants were asked to outline possible challenges related to their role or work, and present suggestions how others could support them in their respective roles and work.

#### *Workshop*

In the preliminary workshop participants were divided into 3 groups; religious leaders, officials, and youth NGO representatives. Each group discussed among themselves;

- a) What are the good practices and frameworks in place in Finland, b) what are needs for development and recommendable new actions c) what are the challenges, d) what support or resources are needed?**

#### *Workshop*

In the second workshop participants were able to review to ideas and insights that were collected during the first workshop, and discuss how they could support each other's role, and contribute to finding best practices to overcome the challenges.

Workshops were followed by a reflection discussion during which the participants reflected the central themes, and listed next steps of action for developing more inclusive framework of cooperation.

#### 3.1.1. Findings of the workshops

##### *Existing good working models and cooperation frameworks*

- Anchor model (Local police, preventive unit). At the moment in 4 police district out of 11.
- Local cooperation network of different officials (City of Helsinki); develops local response and builds capacity of different authorities and first liners
- Community Liaison officer for Mosques ( City of Helsinki)

- Youth organizations working to address the root causes of violent radicalization; offering young people meaningful activities
- Interfaith forums; USKOT -foorumi, inter-faith dialogue groups and grass-roots initiatives
- Religious communities are engaging countering propaganda of violent extremism
- National level cooperation network for Countering violent radicalization and extremism (Ministry of the Interior)
- SINE (Islamic Council of Finland); advocates for Muslim affairs in Finland
- Religious education at comprehensive and secondary schools ensures that students have a right to study their own denomination.

### *Challenges*

- Lack of trust and information sharing between different actors
- Lack of interaction and understanding between different stakeholders and actors
- Lack of coordination of efforts
- Need to engage local communities to develop inclusive working methods
- Lack of resources; NGO's, religious communities, families etc.
- Lack of continuous positive interaction and cooperation based on communities' various needs; agenda needs to be set by the communities, this far interaction has been sporadic in nature and reflected more the agenda of the officials than communities
- Minorities in Finland are under-represented in the public sector; law enforcement, Government officials etc.
- Lack of information about violent radicalization as phenomenon, and services and resources available to families, individuals and communities.
- Lack of religious education at the vocational education. This might lead to a situation where students don't have the same access to knowledge than those who enter secondary schools.
- Current public discussion of religious education doesn't include minority perspective. This is reflected when some schools want to put all the students into same study groups. This can lead to situation that the teacher responsible for education does have qualifications to teach denominations and ethics from the minority perspective. If a student becomes an expert of the subject in the education situation, it violates the rights of the student to study own denomination. That is part UN Convention on the Rights of the Child called as Children's Rights to the Sacred.

### *Recommendations*

- Trust building and transparent practices -> Positive cooperation models which support community engagement 1) ensuring communities access and engagement to existing cooperation networks, 2) bringing together different stakeholders -> organizing round table discussions on the topics that are priorities to communities, and ensuring follow up actions to these discussions locally.
- Targeted events and information for young people about the employment opportunities in the public sector: civil service, law enforcement etc.

- Shoulder-to-Shoulder -model like inter-faith cooperation and communication model for building a positive pro-active message of peace, solidarity, and unity to counter negative communications on religious minorities, and to end the anti-Muslim /and anti-Semitic sentiment.
- Internet safety trainings for parents and teachers.
- To develop curriculums at the secondary schools and at vocational education on democratic citizenship and human rights.
- To develop national curriculum in religious education in different nominations as a tool for enhancing understanding of different traditions and preventing radicalization.

## 4. Conclusions - Themes of discussion – Ways forward

### 4.1.1.. Role of religious education

Extremist movements like ISIL or al-Shabaab utilize religious discourse, and concepts in their propaganda. They use Islam's sacred texts out of their context, and interpret religion in a way that justifies their actions. Reports show that many of those individuals who have left to join these movements from Europe have had very little or no previous religious education. Role of religious education is crucial for providing young people better understanding of religion, and build up resilience against the violent message of the extremist.

- There is a lack of resources in religious education, which needs to be addressed. Muslim communities in Finland do not have similar resource base such as for example the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Finland does for providing basic services, and religious education to their members; confirmation camps etc.
- Religious communities do not have the resources to organize activities directed to young people and keep engaging them in the community.
- Also, there is a need to create a university-level study programme for those who wish to study and receive academic qualifications for Islamic studies, and serve their communities as imams in Finland beside the current subject teacher programme in Islam. This would ensure that there would be possibility for Muslim tradition to develop in Finnish context.
- One factor that the imams brought in to discussion is the need to ensure that there is an opportunity for young people to receive religious higher education that is developed in interaction with Finnish society. Since, imams have a great responsibility to advise their community members on daily life issues, it's important that education provides both in depth knowledge of Islam and Finnish society.
- Lack of knowledge of Islam is contributing to islamophobia and attitudes of intolerance more generally in our society. Basic education should provide basic information on all religions as a part of curricula of basic education, which should promote multicultural values and encourage students to dialogue.

- In schools children's multiple identities and back grounds should be taken in to account in such a manner that allows them equally develop positive identity as part of this society. For example, prayer times are an essential part of tradition and practice of Islam.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ➔ **Resources for religious education should be allocated also to the minorities.**
- ➔ **Cooperation and dialogues between schools and parents should be encouraged to find practical solutions, which would allow all students to practice their religion.**
- ➔ **Training for teachers on multicultural/ religious topics should be made available.**
- ➔ **To maintain current for religious education model as it takes account the religious minorities: 1) It gives official status to religious minorities at the school system 2) It keeps discussion going with authorities and religious minorities about the needs of religious minorities in Finland.**

#### **4.1.2. Addressing alienation and marginalization**

There is no one profile for those foreign fighters leaving to conflict zones in order to join violent extremist groups nor there is a standard process identified leading to individual's violent radicalization. Nevertheless, common nominators have been found in the cases of individuals who have left to join extremist movements or shown to have radicalized into acceptance of violence to promote their ideology or belief system. In most of the known cases there are commonalities; marginalization, experiences of injustice, lack of sense of belonging or meaning, mental health problems, lack of opportunities; unemployment etc.

These factors mentioned above are general challenges that face young people in our society today. It is important to note that none of the above factors makes anyone prone to violent radicalization as such, but all of these factors weaken individual's resilience and makes them more vulnerable to recruitment propaganda that promises them sense of purpose, belonging, livelihood and possibility to take direct action for the black-and-white ideology providing simple solutions in this complex world.

From what we know of these individuals is that a process leading to violent radicalization is rarely linear, and varies from case to case. Experiences of rejection or alienation followed by experience of injustice, is seen often to have been the triggering factor. This also indicates that in the process leading to individual's violent radicalization there are several entry points where youth's needs could be addressed with preventive measures. The question remains, however, how do we find the individuals at risk, in the right time?

Also, one factor that contributes to the sense of alienation among young people with minority back grounds is the lack of positive role models in public space; ethnic and religious minorities are under-represented in public discourse, and in all sectors of public life.

- ➔ **When planning PVC-work (Preventing violent extremism) communities know best the local context; what works and what not.**
- ➔ **Resolving local grievances as part of building community resilience.**

- ➔ Reducing young people's marginalization and alienation needs to be addressed in a comprehensive policy planning framework; integration, employment, affirmative actions are necessary for ensuring equal access to public offices.

#### **4.1.3. Role of language and terminology**

It was strongly emphasized that while a common understanding prevails on the fact that there is clear distinction between religion and violent extremism, which misuses religion - this needs to be communicated clearly at all occasions by all the parties. There exists a public discourse reflected in the media that links violent extremism and Islam together. This imposes negative narrative and a stigma on the Muslim community, which further contributes to islamophobia, racism, and marginalization. Furthermore, extremist movements utilize religious narratives to justify their actions of violence in their propaganda aimed for recruiting young people. Therefore, it is important that all those seeking prevent violent radicalization and violent extremism do not utilize language and concepts such as "Jihadist", "Radical/extreme Islamists", "Islamic State" while referring to criminal activity or terrorism. These concepts familiar to us from media headlines do have significance in the tradition of Islam, but are used in a way that reinforces the misguided interpretation familiar from extremist movements. And most importantly, reinforcing this discourse undermines the efforts of those communicating counter-narratives for the propaganda of hate and violence. These narratives countering ISIS's or Al-Shabaab's messages should be given voices in the public discourse and media.

- ➔ Religious leaders are the key figures, and best able to reconstruct the linking of teachings of Islam from violence promoted by extremist groups
- ➔ Voices from Muslim community needs to be enforced and their work against extremists supported with resources
- ➔ PVE-work is sensitive in nature due the stigmatizing discourse that links Islam and terrorism together, local religious communities need to be supported and their integrity respected in planning of this work
- ➔ Youth organizations and religious leaders should work together delivering the counter message
- ➔ Trainings for media on terminology
- ➔ Shoulder-to-shoulder communication model to support message of peace and unity

## **4.2. Building a community based approach in Prevention of violent radicalization and extremism**

### **4.2.1. Inclusive cooperation and trust – deepening cooperation among different actors**

It was noted during discussions that in Finland policy-planning and action-plan developing and implementation are traditionally led by officials. Nevertheless, most of preventive action plans are locally implemented and each locality has their own context. Therefore, local communities need to be actively engaged in the planning and developing action models, and communities need to have ownership in implementing these action plans in collaboration with the officials.

Violent radicalization and extremism are sensitive issues in the Muslim community since the public discourse in the media blurs the distinction between Islam as a religion, and terrorism as action, which utilizes different ideological elements - also those of religion and Islam, as a narrative of justification. This has led to an experience among Muslim communities that they are perceived by the general public as a security threat. This experience of alienation has been reinforced by public demands for Muslims to resign and denounce terrorism, just because they are Muslims. At the same time a counter-narrative of Islam is vital for countering the extremist propaganda. These same dynamics are fueling xenophobia and islamophobia. As a societal development this can lead to further polarization and weakening of good relations among population groups.

The dynamics described above affect the level of trust that Muslim communities have towards officials, law enforcement and society. Lack of trust makes cooperation towards addressing this common concern; shared by both communities and officials, for those young people vulnerable for recruitment and propaganda of extremist movements more difficult.

However, during excursion the positive role that communities can undertake in preventive work was underlined by all parties. It was also acknowledged that communities need support from the society in this work, and there is a vital need for building strong partnerships based on trust, respect and cooperation.

The officials presented that they need communities to engage in planning and developing cooperation models in order to better address the needs of the communities, and support building their capacity according to their expressed needs.

#### **4.2.2. Strategic communications, and building counter-narratives**

One factor which extremist movements utilize in their recruitment is the feelings of alienation among young people. In Europe, especially young people with first or second generation immigrant backgrounds have identified being in higher risk for targeted recruitment by extremist movements for foreign fighters.

Many times young people with visibly different ethnic or religious background from those represented by the general majority face more challenges when forming a positive and inclusive identity in interplay with the surrounding society. This is due the fact that many are living in what we call “between two cultures”, when their parents culture of origin and culture of the society they live in might cast contradictory expectations for them. In this cross pressure of expectations any additional challenges, such as experiences of racism, unemployment or lack of participation can lead them to feeling out of place.

- ➔ Organizations working with young people can support young people to develop positive and inclusive identities as part of their communities.  
These organizations play a key role for reaching out to these individuals in their respective communities via their networks they have access, and they are credible actors enjoying the trust of young people and their families.
- ➔ Resources need to be directed to local communities and youth work. Building capacity of these actors, which provided free time activities, mentoring programmes and counseling.
- ➔ Resources needed are; capacity-building -> training the youth workers in the communities, facilities and resources.

- ➔ In USA the imams have played a key role addressing the religious narrative of extremist movements, similar activities could be designed in Finland. However, this requires coordinated efforts between the youth organizations, which have access to young people and are able to identify individuals who show signs of radicalization, and religious leaders who have the capacity to deconstruct harmful religious narratives.
- ➔ In order to be effective, counter –narratives need to be delivered locally by credible actors, who enjoy trust of the communities. These individuals need to be identified within communities, and they need to be given resources to organize.

Cooperation between community based actors and officials; while strongly acknowledged that the community based approach is most effective, a strong partnership with local officials, schools, and local law enforcement is essential. Access to relevant social and health services at a right time is crucial part of intervention.

#### 4.2.3. Next steps of action

Altogether, during excursion a common ground to build upon was reached for basis of future cooperation. This common ground is to be built on an understanding that violent radicalization and extremism as a complex phenomenon needs to be addressed in a vast cooperation, which brings together the insights and situated knowledge that each; officials, religious leaders, and NGO's have. This cooperation can only be built if there is trust between the parties, and this trust can be generated with transparent practices and willingness to develop these practices together as equal partners.

**It was also noted, that measures and collective efforts needs to be taken in order to ensure that all participants communicate findings of this excursion to their peer and context groups.**

This report is followed by next steps for action. There are many stakeholders who share this common concern, and the will to contribute to this cooperation, which aims to build better cooperation models, and strong partnerships fitting into Finnish context. All these parties are warmly welcomed to bring their insights and contribution to develop best practices in Finnish context.

- Mapping need of communities and issues that need to addressed (religious leaders and youth organizations)
- Round table discussions organised by officials on various themes for communities in order to build a circle of positive interaction (Officials)
- Strong support from the leadership for developing of partnerships between Officials, NGO's and communities
- Meetings and events in order to community engagement into policy planning and implementation; developing best practices (Officials)
- Seminar for communities; presenting findings of this report, and engaging them in developing next steps of action (FCA organizes) 17.6.
- Seminar for policy makers and politicians (Ministry of the Interior organizes)