

Overview compilation document from interviews and questionnaires conducted for the development of IC Sweden

This document contains summaries of the content emerging from the different groups and individuals participating in this effort through different data-gathering formats.

Overall summary of interviews with religious leaders, youth leaders at Fryshuset, and local government employees:

Image of the society - society is described as increasingly polarized, segregated, and divided in which there are fewer natural meeting spaces.

Worrying trends/frustration - growing racism, extremism, fanaticism, alienation. Young people feel excluded. Breakdown of family systems and social networks.

Extremism – during the interviews the participants mentioned mainly white supremacist extremism. The situation surrounding the newly arrived refugees and the political climate is sometimes described as an underlying factor to why the society is pulling toward a right-wing direction.

Key factors behind extremism - the most common factors/causes mentioned were: the lack of role models, search for a group identity, affiliation/belonging, meaning/direction (have something to fight for), context, alienation, social/cultural/economic poverty, and racism/prejudice.

The same initial psychosocial and socio-cultural factors were considered as common to the various forms of extremism involving violent actions included in the Swedish national plan document: religious extremism, right-wing extremism, and left-wing extremism. However, different factors may enter or exit the process the closer the individual moves toward specific forms of extremism. Some participants described it as a matter of degree, where early interventions in each of the extremism forms can make use of similar types of methods. The more the individual becomes involved in one of the different extreme groups, the greater the need for specification in applying the methods.

Religion is rarely described as a factor, but when it was mentioned it was related to misconceptions about sacred texts, the lack of knowledge regarding the nature and function of one's own religion and others, the absence of a critical approach, and an inflexible and intolerant thinking pattern.

The importance of values/ideology - values/ideology are rarely considered to be a driving force in themselves. Rather, these are considered as a second-step factor, coming after underlying and often unconscious push-and-pull factors have been at play. In the few cases where values/ideology were mentioned they were related to misinterpretation or a misunderstanding of religion, e.g., sects with a limited, narrow and restrictive interpretation.

Important venues - the school is frequently described as a key arena for reaching young people, and as a natural place to counter extremism as well as promote resilience. Other venues mentioned are youth clubs and different kinds of associations. Also, there is a need to help families work together, and provide support for parents.

Hot topics - the participants had difficulty in pinpointing specific topics. What came up was the Israel/Palestine issue, jihad, the willingness to engage in the society (whether one can be both religious and politically active), sex/love/relationships, integration issues, the question of 'who' is Swedish.

What is unique with the Swedish context - this was unfortunately not always addressed in the interviews. The only interview that really has addressed the issue is the interview with the youth leaders at Fryshuset. The text below is from that interview:

The participants do not mention individual events, but rather point to a general change from a welfare state that includes all- to a welfare state that includes only some. Global events are also mentioned as important since they have an impact on the Swedish context, such as 9/11.

Events such as Yasri Khan (the handshake controversy) and Omar Mustafa and their role for young believers' views on political engagement and participation (the inability to combine religion and politics in Sweden) is described as a symbol of the more underlying factors/processes in the society. Religion in the public discourse is something new in Sweden, and the attention and awareness of religion that occurs in public discourse and media are considered to be stigmatizing, or creating a locked attention/isolated focus that is not always positive. The locked attention/isolated focus creates a potential area of conflict by constantly bringing up religion, both in positive and negative examples.

The refugee situation (Autumn 2015) is also seen as a concrete event, which according to the participants will involve a "before" and "after" framework due to its major impact. The participants note that it has affected the Swedish self-image and the image of Swedish generosity. It has also created a reduced confidence in the local governments' (the Swedish

society/system) capacity since they failed to respond to the situation. It is also viewed as having created an uncertainty regarding 'who' determines and sets the agenda, since the state/system is no longer able to live up to public expectations and trust.

Overall summary of the survey distributed to teachers and local government employees:

Perceived anxiety/frustration/warning signs in the Swedish society – insecurity, segregation, xenophobia, exclusion, grouping, increased polarization, "us and them"-thinking, racism, populism, "alternative" truths, the lack of source criticism, increased distrust, lack of respect for fellow human beings.

Challenges to reduce/prevent violent extremism – lack of meetings/venues, lack of opportunities, lack of knowledge/understanding about culture/religion, prejudice, dividing boundaries between democratic rights/freedoms, lack of long-term projects that are properly evaluated, inability to move from words to concrete action, the lack of challenging but compassionate dialogue/conversation, lack of knowledge about prevention, little focus on building relationships, low self-esteem of students, lack of cooperation with religious communities, lack of courage to engage in debates, stigmatizing vulnerable groups, lack of listening to young peoples' own experiences, lack of well-functioning families.

The role of values/ideology – some believe they have a huge, decisive, and/or underestimated role, while others point out that they play a minor role or that it has subordinate explanatory power.

Factors that contribute to a vulnerability – "black and white"-thinking, ignorance that creates fear, alienation, strong group identity, prejudice, lack of status, lack of meaning, perceived injustice/frustration, lack of role models, community/belonging, hopelessness, desire for adventure, conflicting identities, unclear or conflicting gender roles.

Young people are being exploited differently depending on the form of extremism – some say that there is a difference (without specifying what) but most emphasizes that the different forms have the same type of underlying mechanisms.

Unique experiences among young people being exploited – many find it difficult to answer the question, others note that there are no unique experience. Some mention racism while others mention the influence of friends, and the experience of loved ones being subjected to violence/death.

Hot topics – freedom of religion, the Israel/Palestine issue, LGBT issues, xenophobia/racism, feminism/gender issues, integration/migration (bad/big costs), abortion, the Muslim veil, religion and conflict (religion in general), death penalty, whether to help terrorist fighters

returning from Syria, cultural differences, Swedishness (who is Swedish/identification), sex/love, sexual consent, faith vs science/knowing, injustice (what is justice?), importance sports/football as building group spirit and providing sanctioned outlet.

Successful approaches to reduce/prevent extremism – education/knowledge, frequent intercultural meetings with mutual respect, new perspectives, self-reflection, sincere/genuine and straight forward conversations/dialogue in safe spaces (where people are able/dare to ask questions), long-term approach, talk to young people about extremism and its processes, create meaningful relationships, increased understanding of one's own feelings/thoughts/human tendencies, opportunities to examine/question one's own values, provide positive role models.

What has not been working – many find it difficult to name a concrete example of what has not worked. Some mention the lack of commitment from schools, challenges of moving from words to action, avoidance of difficult questions, the police, quick solutions, trying to argue against individuals with strong convictions, a confrontational approach, avoidance of discussions with young people, not problematizing/highlighting current events, moral preaching.

What information is missing/needed to work proactively – understand the world that certain people live in, specific knowledge to be able to respond to questions/view on facts, understanding of/knowledge of why people behave/think/feel as they do, understanding of how actors in society influence one another, knowledge about religion, inside perspective from people who have left violent extremism, knowledge of group processes, warning signs, understanding motivations, knowledge of the various violent environments, more people trained in the subject, how to avoid stigma, understanding of others in terms of differences/similarities, dialogue between groups.

How to ensure that the relevant people receive the right knowledge/skills - venues, gathered material, research review, public lectures, training, public education, more educators. Professionals who encounter young people (e.g. teachers) are often mentioned as a group that would need more training/knowledge.

The relationship between practical work, decision-making and research – many note that it is essential to have close interaction and cooperation between the three functions, and that they need to inform one another and work well together. Many note that there is a gap among these functions and are asking for research that actually can be put into practice.

Which alliances and partnerships are necessary – the police, social services, first-line practitioners, schools, psychiatry, religious actors, youth clubs/recreation centers, voluntary organizations, universities/colleges.

Balance between reporting/monitoring and building trust/initiate conversations - many feel that the question is difficult or not related/relevant to their particular task. The

respondents emphasize that building trust must come first.

What is needed to bridge the tension/polarization – meetings places, open conversation, understanding, knowledge, integration. Several feel that the question has already been answered in previous sections.

How to create safe meeting places – start small using existing/natural meeting places, through hobbies/sports, leisure centers, neutral sites, access to adults, adjust as needed.

What is important to reduce/prevent extremism – intervention through making time for open discussion, preventive work, role models, include people, education, not to build a competitive/conflict situation by setting one group against another, good contact with adults, mutual respect, source criticism.

Overall summary of Future Search:

The Future Search conference consisted of about 40 young people (17-29 years) with different religious and cultural backgrounds. The conference was based on UN Resolution 2250, which states that young people must be involved in preventing and resolving conflicts. During the conference six areas were discussed:

RELIGION

The participants are searching for intercultural/interfaith venues and for positive role models. They believe that there is a lack of knowledge about religion, which can lead to misunderstandings, simplifications and extreme interpretations. Media is perceived as having a major role in the one-sided portrayal of religious individuals, e.g., as being mad, brainwashed or dangerous. The lack of knowledge concerning religion is also related to destructive interpretations, coercion, oppression, honour violence, separatism, and religions being hijacked by individuals who use it for evil purposes. They also believe that priests and imams sometimes do not understand the Swedish society/context, and hence do not communicate properly thereafter. Furthermore, the participants feel that the everyday practice of religion often becomes invisible. Thus, religion often becomes associated with something radical or extreme in the society, which in turn leads to religious phobia. Participants also feel that there is a lack of knowledge in society regarding what extremism is. They argue that the authorities are afraid to offend anybody when religion is discussed, resulting in that nobody goes to the bottom with real issues around extremism or underlying causes. Finally, they feel that conflicts can easily be perceived as a religious conflict as soon as religion (in any way) is included in the discussion. Participants also describe how the polarization between different groups is growing, and where the "good" is related to one's own group and the "evil" to the out-group. Segregation is considered a possible cause, making it more difficult for different groups to have positive intergroup contact or even meet.

EDUCATION

The participants assert that Swedish school children don't have knowledge about history. They argue that the school, in turn, focuses on the wrong kind of knowledge, using old methods, poor source criticism and lack of intersectional analysis. There's only one way of thinking that is presented, and knowledge relevant to real life does not reach the students. The participants ask for classes about ethics and morality, responsibilities and obligations, not just focus on rights and freedoms, as well as questioning of values and discussions of the consequences of 'secularism'. The participants also express that the politicians seem to lack initiative and that there is a perception that the school is not a priority area. Furthermore, they stress that there is a lack of knowledge about racism among teachers and that the Swedish school possesses a hidden ethnocentrism that transmits a perspective of Western norms. The school system lacks self-criticism, and lacks knowledge of other cultures and examples of how religion is lived by ordinary people and can in fact often be a life resource.

CULTURE

Culture includes both traditional (but not static) ways of life and its expressions. Participants felt that culture and entertainment are often confused, and are presented as the same thing. Swedish cultural activities are often ethnocentric and lack diversity, representation and role models of minorities, which means that many do not recognize themselves in the culture that is presented in public. Participants feel that there is a bias in the definition of culture and that new definitions should be created. Participants also feel that cultures do not always develop or can become stagnant with respect to the modern society. The culture can perpetuate forced roles, honour culture and patriarchal structures. It can also be exclusive, increase an "us and them" attitude or cause confusion. The participants seek a global "we" based on common experience and more world culture. They also highlight how cultural clashes often are referred to as negative, but they can also be positive when something new emerges from the encounter.

MEDIA

The participants stress that the media logic is based on fear of the unknown and that journalists distort reality since they lack knowledge of other cultures and religions. Therefore, the media presents one-sided bias with a colonial mindset. The news reports are also changing focus quickly since they are driven by profit motives. People on social media gather information in bubbles that confirm their worldview. These often have no source criticism and are governed more by emotion than by facts, are active through anonymous accounts and create conspiracy theories as well as spread rumours rapidly. According to the participants there are lots of negative voices online, but few positive, and that they lack knowledge about how one responds to hate messages. They ask for collective responsibility rather than the responsibility of only one actor, and a more solution-focused image of the world as a whole.

ACTIVISM

Participants feel that many associate activism with radicalism or idealism coupled with a political agenda. Furthermore, riots, vandalism and social disobedience have made activism appear exclusive, hateful and violent. Meanwhile, some of the participants experience a powerlessness and a lack of both concrete actions and results. They highlight the lack of commitment, mainly from white men, who are blind to their own privileges. At the same time, they perceive a lack of women and diversity in leadership positions. Participants also seek clearer goals, passion and role models. Participants point out that activism is considered positive in society as long as it fits the ideas of the Western world. For example, that white feminists dominate over all other feminist forces when their efforts are not perceived as relevant. Activism also has a tendency to focus on specific areas while overlooking other areas of need.

WORLD

The participants perceive much hatred, darkness and war in the world. Some cultures and religions are portrayed as a threat that must be kept away while extremist groups are starting to collaborate in different countries. The participants also see the abuse of power and imperialism built on white supremacy, i.e., that short-term economic interests control the market and issues related to the West are given priority. This, along with a perceived lack of collaboration and spirituality, make some of the participants experience hopelessness. They are asking for thorough analyses, awareness, positive leadership and new economic models that can rebalance the inequitable distribution of resources

Overall summary Camp Connect:

Camp Connect is one of Sweden's largest camps for youth organizations. The camp gathers participants from across the whole country to take part in various activities, seminars and lectures during four days, with a focus on youth volunteer work and entrepreneurship (see <http://fryshusandan.fryshuset.se/lager-event/>). The purpose of the interviews is to hear the voices of young people regarding their perception of society and different challenges, resources, as well as their view on volunteer activities/commitments and how they understand religion and different worldviews.

A total of 14 people were interviewed (3 group interviews and 6 individual). The age ranged between 16 and 29 years (8 women aged 16-19 and six men aged between 16-29 years). The average age was 18 years (16 years for women and 21 for men). The interviews comprise about 153 minutes in total (with an average interview time of 17 minutes).

Among the participants 4 identified themselves as Muslims, 4 as Christians, 4 as secular / non-religious, 1 as Mandaean and 1 as Buddhist.

Themes:

A theme that emerges in the interviews is an inability to formulate what their faith or worldview means, and how it is relevant in the society. Overall the participants do not consider their faith to be important or central in their lives. However, they do perceive their faith as being a part of their own identity, and most of the participants view their religious identity as linked to their cultural background. Moreover, the participants have difficulties expressing what their worldview means to them, or distinguishing between a religious- and a secular worldview. Furthermore, this is evident mainly among those without a religious background and/or faith. They also have great difficulty in expressing what role or resource that their worldview has for society at large. Instead the participants often refer to an individual meaning, for example, that it can give hope, meaning and moral guidance.

Another major theme is the view of the society. The participants often describe the society as biased, polarized and fragmented. Overall the participants also assert that there exists a lack of intergroup contact and dialogue between different groups. For example, one respondent states the following:

I would describe the society as very divided and very confused. There are many prejudices ... and people do not have information about other people and religions. And that means, I feel, that we are being segregated. We're not talking with each other and we do not treat each other as we should (Respondent 5).

Another participant made a similar remark:

Well today, if I think of myself, it's hard to be a proud Muslim. Because there are so many now that say that Muslims are terrorists. It has become a stamp. And it is not true at all! Islam is about peace and love to other people, both to Muslims and non-Muslims (Respondent 6).

Furthermore, they mention extremism as a growing problem that contributes to conflicts by people advocating absolute truth claims or narrow worldviews. One participant describes it in the following way:

There are many who do not seem to respect what others think, they try to force or persuade others to agree with their own opinion. So, it seems to be really important for some to convince others that they are absolutely right [...] and people also get violent about it (Respondent 8).

However, several participants emphasize that neither religions- nor different worldviews are the root of the problem. Furthermore, prejudices and polarized conditions are often described as a source of frustration in the society. Many of the participants also indicate that they wish that more people would take the time to learn more about religions and cultures instead of judging others and spreading prejudice/ignorance:

I think it is tedious that people do not take the time to learn but go around and judge others or have prejudices. I think it's really tough. [...] that they do not learn about Muslims, for example. It is a big issue now. So, I feel that people should talk or ask instead of pointing to people and judging, or attacking and stuff (Respondent 1).

The frustration is mainly related to Islamophobia and ignorance about Islam. This frustration is not, however, limited to people who identify themselves as Muslims but it is also stressed by several interview participants who belongs to other religions or worldviews. Several also pointed out that there is a lack of respect, of dialogue and of understanding in society, which are seen as contributing factors to an increased division and polarization. For example, when I ask one of the participants on how one could address these issues she replies that:

One way is to give people information. I think that's the one thing that can remove all the prejudices, all the things that can create trouble between people. It can help to get information, to get an understanding of each person and their circumstances. If you get that information out into the school, then perhaps it can help the new generation to learn to respect each other. [...] For me, I think that basically it is information or knowledge that is needed. Then with the information one can hopefully get an understanding (Respondent 12)

Furthermore, in the interviews the participants seek forums or meeting places, where one can talk openly about issues and share experiences in 'safe spaces', i.e. a safe environment where people agree on the conditions of the dialogue:

When one discusses with another we can find a solution. So, we balance each other. Like we balance each other, and I respect what you think since you have explained to me how it is, I don't perhaps have to think or believe as you, but I understand how you think and feel. I think it's really important to discuss and address issues. It feels like people are really afraid to address or bring up things, especially about religion and politics. They are terrified. But if we don't talk about it who will then bring it up? (Respondent 2).

Perspective taking and empathy are also highlighted as a key ingredient to combat prejudice and polarization. Several participants also point out the need for better role models and the importance of providing information on religions to counter the ignorance that can give rise to prejudice or hatred. Finally, in the interviews the participants frequently express the need for respect, responsiveness and dialogue between people and groups.

Overall summary of interviews/conversations with clinical professionals who have worked with youth- at risk for violent extremism

Several common themes have emerged:

1. Need for a multi-dimensional model or framework to understand the complexity of factors involved in risk situations, and coordinated efforts needed for addressing these.
2. Difficulties in family communication, breakdown of information sharing and isolation.
3. Problematic 'nature' of Swedish culture in terms of not having open discussions or forums for addressing problematic societal issues of this nature-
4. Psychosocial problems more common than psychiatric diagnoses as causative factors.

5. School as natural forum for addressing this issue, and the need for health promoting strategies and not just waiting for the damage to be done-
6. Important that school-based healthcare system be involved, as that comes under another jurisdiction than both mental health and somatic healthcare systems.
7. Need for more information and training in identifying signs and signals of risk situations.
8. Need for practical/applied/transformational research on identifying protective factors at individual, group and societal levels.
9. Need for better inter-sectorial communication so that the at-risk youth does not 'get lost' between parts of the healthcare system-
10. Very few proactive institutions or organizations that can help youth understand risks, dangers, and that offer alternative activities that help with a sense of belonging.
11. New kinds of challenges coming to mental health contexts, problems with how to make meaning, how to create cohesive and constructive narratives for facing challenges and for positive coping strategies.
12. Need to rethink what 'secular' Sweden is and its consequences for the mental health of both majority and minority populations.

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