How to do a collaborative local initiative, addressing various local NGOs in view of a bottom up prevent project –

Some notes on the CoCoRa final CCP meeting at Cultures Interactive on in May 2016

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Various bilateral meetings between CI and local community organisation representatives lead up to a focus workshop day in view of finalising the collaborate program – and collecting the suitable approaches. The workshop day was conducted at CI on the 27th May 2016. Its main focus was on the needs in the community and on the approaches which have already been built locally, which happened mostly ten to fifteen years ago and in part aside of any coordinated national or state action plan of preventing violent extremism.

It had been evident from the very beginning that Berlin Neukölln as a "community" in a big German city presents certain specificities, challenges and potentials for the CoCoRa bottom-up community-lead approach of building a program of preventing violent extremism. Berlin Neukölln is the location of CI premises – and it is a district which has the highest immigrant population and rates of unemployment.

Firstly, the community as such is quite diverse and heterogeneous (certainly not only Muslim); various migration backgrounds are mixed or coexist in the community – and share risk factors and risk behaviours – some of them Muslim, yet in different traditions and organisational affiliations, the strongest group of which being Turkish background and thus characterized by relatively secular and varied forms of Muslim identity. Most secular among them are the Kurdish background immigrant population and the Alevite population which tend to have a left-wing and trade union political affiliation. Moreover, the (young) Turkish population may also be affiliated with different Muslim organisations which have different political affiliations and financial relations, some of which would certainly be Saudi financed and propagating highly orthodox Wahabi view on Islam. The Christian population may be in varying degrees traditional and orthodox. Few Russian immigrant population may be found as well in Neukölln (while most of those are in different parts of the city, as Marzahn).

Secondly, the risks for young people to get entangled in forms of so-called radicalisation, violent extremism and other anti-social behaviours are numerous and wide-ranging. AQ and ISIS recruiting go for all the groups in different ways and personal approaches. The various Muslim organisations with different political affiliations in some instances imply inherent risks of (pre-)radicalisation (e.g. Mili Görus, Gülen/ clandestine organisation). The Turkish right-wing extremists, Grey Wolves, are particularly pertinent. The geopolitical impact of the Erdogan regime in Turkey plays a large role (also because, Turks in Berlin can vote in Turkish national elections and campaigning takes place).

The Russian immigrant population in the recent past has had some risk of being recruited to Ukraine as foreign fighters; yet, they predominantly live in other districts of town and only some live in Neukölln.

Aside of violent extremist recruitment in the ordinary sense – and sometimes overlapping – are

recruiting activities by local gangs, mafias, and family clans which pertain to different national home countries or to key families in the City. Yet beyond these social context risks it has appeared ever more clearly in the community that one key risk factor is that substantial sections of it are entrenched in archaic patriarchal social systems. These may or may not result in domestic violence and subjugation as well as in so-called honour crimes which generally have an either sexist or homophobic thrust – but in any event the existence of these patriarchal social systems coincide with and cross-escalate dynamics of violent extremism and domestic violence. Yet, this social risk factor of patriarchal mind set and behaviour – domestic violence, honour crimes, sexist or homophobic acts – seems rather independent of religious denomination and degree of religious practice.

Thirdly and most importantly, given the prehistory of various programs of integration and prevention which were launched in Germany on a federal, state and municipal level over the last 20 years roughly, and also given the local initiatives within communities, there already is quite a number of approaches, initiatives and NGOs in place in the community. These already existing approaches, methods, and tools have emerged at the community level over the last 10 to 15 years and had been developed in a bottom-up manner as prevent work which was intuitively conceptualized by community members of different age groups and affiliations. By now they have already developed to quite some level of professionalism – in some instances hitting the threshold of "mainstreaming" and/or even "industrialization" in the sense that some of the approaches seem ready to be rolled out way beyond the community of origin.

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In this situation it was quite interesting – yet expectable – to realize that the challenge of employing the CoCoRa initiative in the "community" Berlin Neukölln was not so much to raise local awareness and facilitate community members and young people, which might have been the case some 20 years ago when there was not yet much awareness about the problem of violent extremism and attached risks and thus also were not very many ideas and pilots about what could be done on the local level in a self-directed manner as a bottom-up response of safeguarding the community from risks of violence and so-called radicalisation. Hence, the challenge today, in Berlin Neukölln, is not to activate and facilitate the community process – or at least not in the first instance.

Rather the primary challenge today appears to be to inaugurate and facilitate a process of exchange and cooperation among the community activities which are already in place – and between the client groups which they cater to. This is an unusual and, as it were, postmodern challenge of community interaction in that it forces us to look at the existing landscape of initiatives and approaches before looking and talking with the client groups in the community.

But it seemed recommended and in the end inevitable to assume this postmodern perspective on "community" since, in places like Berlin Neukölln in the year 2016, it would have been highly artificial to just pick one of these approaches/ organizations/ subsector communities and single it out as the "community".

Following this path lead us to some further challenges: To put it briefly, trying to not only exchange and cooperate with the local approaches individually but also motivate them to get together, spend some time and enter into a common discourse, meant trying to make move some very busy, over-worked, in part underfunded colleagues to come together, who are very often asked to convene and conference anyway, who are not sure which alliances to build and often feel in competition,

sometimes even distrustful with each other and/or have concrete histories of conflict with regard to methodological, political, or ethical issues which put them into the defensive.

A similar issue is the lack of trust and cooperation between all the projects on the one side and the regular state structures of local youth and community welfare/ social work which receive regular funding which often is way too low given the load of problems to tackle. The statutory actors often have the feeling that these EU and other projects just come in the way and create trouble without helping much.

In the end CI managed to get a fair number and heterogeneous group of them together. This, however, was achieved largely through extrinsic/ incentivized motivation – for instance, the prospect of a government representative attending, CI as a long time RAN member and as liaison organisation for the governmental prevent program since 2015, the prospect of getting more acquainted with EU projects, the relatively good reputation of CI as colleague in the region.

Hence, foreseeably, at the meeting, the painful question of "why are we spending time here while we have so endlessly much to do and are totally underfunded anyway", was raised powerfully by the organisation which is indeed the least funded and the most precariously placed in the institutional sphere. There, the general feeling was that everybody wants to talk to us and do projects with us, but nobody wants to regularly fund our base prevent work in the community; and implicitly: people are generating money and political capital on our backs.

(This was also the moment where CI decided to not ask for making any pictures at the event. Because due to the mix of people it was just not the kind of crowd in which all people would be carried by the consciousness of "We do an EU project together and everybody gets their share, and we are all fine with this". The group was too heterogeneous for that – and quite a few might have felt exploited for one reason or another.)

Then, however, to the surprise of many it increasingly became evident that what was an ambivalent issue for all participants (don't know who to trust, who is paying my time, who is robbing off my ideas etc.) also responded to a deeply felt need and a structural lacuna in the landscape of local approaches: This unfilled need regarded the absence of possibilities – and safe spaces – to engage in an in-depth practice exchange among colleague of first-line work fields and cross organisational boundaries. Intense curiosity and openness for the other colleagues' approaches and experiences, challenges and attempted solutions, case management exchange, and methodological discussion emerged – and with that a large degree of openness about one's own work.

Particularly noteworthy was, that in view of the community it was found to be a need and option to align these different approaches and organisation in the sense that they try to find synergies and complementarities – so that one organisation could focus on one part of community work and liaise with the others who pick up on other aspects of these. For instance, it was found that three organisations (Dialog macht Schule, Heroes, Ufuq) in methodologically different ways have their main focus on schools and working with classes, and two of them have discovered the need and begun experimenting with working with teachers and with parents; yet Aufbruch Neukölln had engaged in parents work for more than a decade and is very experienced in doing so and Annedore SPI has some focus on working with teachers and multipliers. This begged the questions whether one could not try to cooperate in more systematic ways and use existing synergies between these approaches and organisations.

Albeit there was no follow-up meeting planned originally, the groups strongly voiced the desire to

come together again on a more systematic basis and further intensify the exchange and explore avenues of cross-organisational cooperation in the community.