

NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND IN THE FIGHT OF THE EU AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM



31st January 2019, at the European Parliament in Brussels, several officials, experts, researchers and journalists concerned with finding solutions to the rise of violent extremism in the Maghreb and Sahel region gathered to share insights on a 5 million euros European Union (EU) funded programme implemented by UNICRI.



UNICRI, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, has created a huge and ambitious four-year pilot programme (2015-2019) on countering radicalisation and violent extremism in the regions of Maghreb and Sahel. The

programme, being a success, has been extended to June 2020.

With the support of the European Commission (EC) and DG NEAR, forty-eight small grants were carried out within the framework of the Pilot Project in the Maghreb region.

Preventing and countering violent extremism

As we all know, violent extremism is on the rise since the Syria war and Daesh's propaganda. It is generally referred to as accepting the use of violence in line with an ideological commitment to achieve political, religious or social goals. It is not just about embracing the ideology but also acting upon it.

The UNICRI programme on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) understood the complexity of the subject. With funds from the EU, the answer to tackle the problem has been a wide variety of on-the-ground projects in carefully elected vulnerable parts of a selection of countries, in both the Maghreb and Sahel regions. In the Maghreb region, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya were the centre of attention. The P/CVE programme tailored itself to cultural contexts, with focused local interventions and a long-term involvement with trusted community actors.

The complete structure of the project goes from studying the actual context of each community, to piloting grass-root initiatives and then monitoring their impact. The main objective is to understand mechanisms enhancing community resilience towards radical and violent extremist tendencies.

No one is left behind

In order to touch every vulnerable individual, diverse topics have been developed into real actions: from environment, art and cultural activities, religious tolerance, women's rights, debate skills and critical thinking, to sports, media and radio, advocacy and leadership.

No one was left behind. The audience targeted was broad: 27% youth, 13% civil society

activists, 11% women, 11% journalists, 11% imams and religious leaders, 8% of teachers in koranic and state schools, 6% local administration, 5% minority groups, 3% tribal leaders, 3% refugees and returnees and 3% former slaves.

Even

though the EU-funded pilot programme has been extended to 2020, the first phase of the qualitative evaluation has been completed and a report on preliminary findings has been issued. While the evaluation is still preliminary, it is vital and is already helping UNICRI to identify good practices and formulate early conclusions on what works and what does not in making the communities more resilient to radicalisation and violent extremism. Outcomes will then be used to make future actions even more impactful and effective.

Meanwhile, monthly newsletters reviewing key information and offering latest updates with concrete examples of the activities implemented on the ground are being disseminated.

Far-reaching array of projects

Prolific initiatives

by local organisations were supported by UNICRI. The youth being the largest majority of the population in the Maghreb region, most of the actions were devoted to them specially considering the challenges they face. Unemployment, lack of public services, access to health care, distrust towards the political establishment and corruption are just a few of the problems being faced by them.

Among the successful

initiatives let's cite one in Morocco: the "Jeunes unis contre le radicalisme" implemented by the «Comité Européen pour la Formation et l'Agriculture» (CEFA); one in Tunisia: "Hope: Support for democratic citizenship through artistic innovation" by Fanny Raghman Anni (FRA) one in Libya: "Active Citizen" by H2O Association for supporting democratic transition and youth engagement; and one regional one: "Media for Democracy in North Africa" by International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

Mazen Smeti

"With our art, we were able to decorate institutes, rural schools and streets"

Twenty-one-year-old Mazen Smeti, a Tunisian passionate dancer participated in one of the biggest projects implemented by the COOPERA organisation "Jovenes para la cooperacion internacional al Desarrollo". It was an Interdisciplinary Mobile Cultural Activity (IMCA) for youth vulnerable to socioeconomic exclusion and violent extremism, radicalization and terrorist recruitment. The activities took place in the Tunisian mountains near the Algerian border, an area sadly considered as a smuggler and terrorists' hotspot, a kind of jihadist groups' "informal headquarters."

Mazen discloses that he was engaged in two different "cultural caravans" organised by the project. "I was already practicing dancing before the caravan and when I participated in the event, I was able to develop my talent and technique in dance. At the end, we were able to present a nice show."

Mazen did not just dance, he also embraced a new form of expression. "Besides, I learned something new and it is graffiti. I liked it to the point that when the cultural caravan was over, with a group of friends, we created "The Junks." The latter is a small group engaged in painting spaces in the cities to give them a different image and a new look to encourage opening youth perspectives. Mazen adds that thanks to the caravan he made new friends and that: "With our art, we were able to decorate institutes, rural schools and streets." With this initiative, the walls became bearers of the young generation's voices. COOPERA encouraged them by purchasing diverse painting materials.

The project's activities were diverse. With the cooperation of local leaders and village chiefs, the caravan travelled to Kasserine, Sousse, Tunis, Le Kef, Sbeitla, Thala and Karouan, accompanied by music performances and conducting various workshops.

The workshops were held in seven locations over thirty-six days and on eleven training topics. From break-dance to mural painting, photography, hairdressing, henna tattoo, rosemary oil distilling and diverse handicrafts, there was an interest for everyone. Not less than 608 youths, girls and boys participated in the workshops.

Omayma Derwichi
A charismatic twenty-two-year-old lady with a fashion designer background, shared joyfully her experience with us. She took part in one of the cultural caravans implemented by the COOPERA organisation and she says it was a beautiful experience, she enjoyed it a lot and learned new things especially in the field of dance and theatre.

Omayma experienced coaching in physical expression, an approach to movement for dancers and actors. The technique maximises body capacities for enhanced and more sophisticated performances. Exercising within a group has encouraged her to surpass herself even though she is a medal winner. Actually, Omayma has won first place in basketball, football and gymnastics. Nonetheless, this experience boosted her self-esteem and encouraged her to stay in contact with the new friends she made and maybe, who knows, build new projects for the future.

Talking about improving self-esteem and giving tools, hope and a purpose in life, isn't that the best way to fight extremism and violence?

All and all, these EU-funded activities offered a listening ear, gave a push to participants to challenge themselves to be creative and produce something while being backed up by a group of trustworthy people and being congratulated for the accomplished work. Having the opportunity to be listened to, share personal experiences with others, and learn about someone else's life challenges helps somehow find more internal peace and harmony.

The best is yet to come

Experts say that disinformation, the desire for meaning and order, and the need for change are the main reasons for religious extremism. Nonetheless, lack of culture, education and social inclusion are as well fundamental motives. Over 80 civil society organisations in the Sahel and Maghreb regions worked with community groups on these aspects, trying to erase the sense of victimhood and pushing for critical thinking, human rights, gender equality and artistic creation.

This EU-funded regional programme is doing a lot of good to the communities. Amazingly diverse and well thought it educates a careful selection of youth that will, in a domino effect, instruct others and so on. By respecting the history, cultural and religious traditions, the local initiatives have boosted social cohesion and inclusion, making the communities more resilient to the spread of violent extremist ideologies. The best is yet to come: the approach to the implementation of those small-scale interventions is ultimately applicable to other regions that are affected by similar phenomena.

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