

Learning to Live Together:

The role of education in preventing violent extremism

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

26 SEPTEMBER 2016 - GENEVA

“We need to find a glue that keeps us together, so that we are not only like vessels maybe passing each other in the night but otherwise living in parallel worlds.”

Keynote Address, Rev. Dr Hans Ucko

REPORT

The Roundtable Discussion on “Learning to Live Together: the Role of Education in Preventing Violent Extremism”, convened by Arigatou International Geneva brought together over 20 participants, including scholars, practitioners from civil society organizations, religious leaders and technical experts from UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF.

The roundtable aimed at:

- Discussing major challenges that civil society organizations, religious communities, academia, international organizations face in seeking to prevent violent extremism through education
- Identifying synergies and spaces for cooperation and joint action in seeking to prevent violent extremism through education

Arigatou International opened the discussion explaining the rationale for convening the roundtable at this critical time. Ms Maria Lucia Uribe, Director of the Arigatou International Geneva Office, introduced Arigatou International and gave a brief introduction of the topic highlighting the challenges that today’s pluralistic and diverse societies are facing in terms of negative stereotypes, fear of the other, religious fundamentalism and extremism, violence and distrust. She stressed how education becomes ever more essential to nurturing understanding of different cultures, values and faiths and the key to respond and prevent radicalization,

extremism and violence in young people and children.

A round of introduction of the participants followed. The full list of participants and their bios appear as [annex](#) to this report.

The discussion continued with the [keynote presentation](#) of Rev. Dr Hans Ucko, co-chair of the Prayer and Action Initiative of Arigatou International and member of the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children. In his intervention, Dr Ucko reflected on the feelings that violent extremism provokes in our societies: on one hand we feel sorry for the victims, while on the other hand we feel fear for our selves. However, seldom we ask what are the reasons that turned our children and our youth into becoming extremists. What makes them feel excluded from society and turns them into terrorists?

Dr Hans opening highlighted the need to make young people feel that they can contribute to our society, that their voices and concerns will be heard, that their needs and aspirations will be fulfilled. We need to counter the conditions that make children and young people humiliated and alienated by their communities and the society they live in.

We need a new vision for the society: a society for cohesion that we all have to contribute to build. Religious leaders and religious communities need to change their narrative of exclusivity to embrace a revisited narrative that includes the others. In a society of cohesion, there is a feeling of belonging together, “a glue” that keeps us together, so that we are not only like vessels maybe passing each other in the night but otherwise living in parallel worlds, unrelated to each other or when meeting, then only as victim and victimizer. And in a quest for a new vision of society, there will and need be diversity and plurality, not as a concession but as an a priori. The recognition that there is a need for a rethinking on how to shape society to genuinely reckon with plurality as a given reality should prompt the many stakeholders to consider that that which we can do together, we should not do separately.

Rev. Dr Hans Ucko’s remarks fostered a dynamic discussion on the topic among the participants.





Mr Karim Mahmoud-Vintam from the popular education movement [Cités d'Or](#) reported on what he experiences in his work in terms of the dynamics and the conditions that drive young people to join extremist groups and often to practice violence. He explained how extremist groups offer an alternative meaning of life and an immediate sense of belonging for young people that feel disconnected. The "recruiters" of the extremist groups, point at the inconsistencies of our societies and way of living that while promoting equality and inclusion, practices inequality, exclusion and marginalization of those "who do not fit in". These "recruiters" instead offer a place in a different kind of society with the promise to each individual to change the world and contribute to the creation of a better system. He continued arguing how out of the 600 young people identified in France to be at risk of falling into extremism, there are not commonalities. Religion is not a common factor, many of this young people come from secular backgrounds, some are Muslims, and some are Christians. He stressed how we need to articulate a new narrative a counter voice that gives a sense of belonging and how we need to be more consistent, give opportunities for growth, learning, work for young people to be active members of society.

Mr Clive Lawton, Chief Executive of the [Commonwealth Jewish Council](#), highlighted the importance of finding a counter voice to the extremist narrative. A counter voice that is able to generate passion and to channel the dreams and hopes of the youth. A counter voice that shows concrete possibilities to contribute to society. A counter voice that presents positive images of change, rather than focus on the negative images of marginalization and distrust. He continued adding that the phenomenon of violence is not new, but what we see today is a form of radicalization and extremist that exclude any possibility of living together in peaceful ways, respecting each other.

The youngest participant of the group, Ms Faten Madhi Al-Hussaini, 21 years old, from Norway, took the floor and opened her remarks by mentioning some of the concrete initiatives that her organization [JustUnity](#) carries out in Norway to support different sectors of the society in their work to prevent radicalization. She mentioned how often they support teachers in talking about extremism in their classroom as well as in detecting the signals that could drive young people to join extremist groups. She cited their work with over 70 young people in Norway that

intended to join the ISIS group in Syria. The JustUnity team met with them trying to understand the reasons why they wanted to turn to violence and extremism.

Ms Al-Hussaini highlighted how often young boys and girls are driven to join ISIS groups in Syria because they are feeling alienated already in their homes. They do not feel supported by their families. This often happens in families that are for examples experiencing issues of poverty, domestic violence or addiction. However, this also happens within the so-called "normal" families, simply because children and parents have difficulties understanding each other. She also remarked how these vulnerable young people feel totally isolated by the society they live in, without safe spaces to express themselves and their discomfort, their fears and anxiety of not belonging. What JustUnity provided to them is a safe place for discussion among friends that care and try to understand each other. In particular, she highlighted that often in Norway what drives youth to radical and extremist groups is that fact that these young people are marginalized and rejected by their religious communities as well as their families that perceive them as "too modern" and reject their way of being. This is when these young people turn to "recruiters" in extremist groups that welcome them, that do not judge them for their past but take them in, making them feeling accepted. In this sense, she remarked how important it is for young people to have a "second chance" to feel that if they fail in something or make a mistake, they will still have the opportunity to try again, the space to think and grow. The opportunity to still feel loved and accepted by their families and their communities.

Ms Al-Hussaini concluded her remarks by highlighting the importance of including the families, the parents in the programmes that we design to counter the emergence of extremism and radicalization. This will help bridging the intergenerational gaps and support parents in understanding their children more, including detecting signs of radicalization. But she also continued by stressing how important it is to involve religious leaders and to transform their narrative, allowing spaces for critical thinking and discussions within the religious communities and for safe spaces where young people can be them selves without fearing to be abandoned or isolated by their community. She closed her intervention by highlighting the importance of teacher training as one of the fundamentals to reach out to children and youth and counter their isolation.

Mr Hafid Ouardiri continued the discussion highlighting the importance of involving families as well as religious communities, including creating spaces and platforms for joint reflection on these themes. He cited on his work as Director of the [Inter-Connaissance Foundation](#) especially in terms of intercultural mediation and individualized coaching dialogue activities with young people. He stressed how the Foundation's goal is to promote understanding and build relationships between the Islamic culture and other cultures and people, highlighting the importance they give in their initiatives to working with families, schools and religious leaders.



The representative from UNESCO, Mr David Fernandez Puyana, continued the conversation presenting the current efforts of the UN system to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. He cited the UN SG Plan of Action, as a framework for action that allows states as well as civil society, the UN and religious leaders to work together in innovative and effective ways to prevent violent extremism. He continued mentioning the need to tackle the conditions conducting to violent extremism.

Mrs Selina Ullah, President of the [Intercultural Communication and Leadership School](#), continued the discussion presenting several of the initiatives that her organization carries out to support young people; making them empowered and connecting them. Building around them a circle of friendship and trust that supports them in their growth and in their future personal and professional development.

Ms Heidi Peugeot, representing UNICEF, took the floor to insist on the importance of the socio-economic dimensions of peace building by focusing on the equitable delivery and access to essential services to all children and youth as a key underlying factor for peace. She also stressed the importance of supporting better education outcomes to address underlying causes of conflict and promote social cohesion as part of the education curricula.

Ms. Agathe Hamel from [Coexister Foundation](#), shared about the work they do with young people in France and the importance of promoting common values that can foster coexistence and understanding of each other. She explained how Coexister works on the premises that France is a country with different levels of pluralism: cultural, linguistic, generational and religious and that this pluralism, too often been seen as a hurdle, is the central feature and strength of the French national unity. She reflected on the meaning and implications of "Active Coexistence" , openness to others and respect. She also highlighted the importance of creating safe spaces for young people to learn and share their experiences, citing for example on the Interfaith Tour initiative of Coexister.

Ms Laura Livia Kropiunnig from [Women without Border](#) stressed the importance of the family as role models to foster values and critical thinking. Taking several examples of her work with

mothers she shared how fundamental it is to include mothers in the design of any initiative so that they can learn to speak with their children and can understand the early signs of exclusion and lack of belonging that could be conducive to radicalization. Humanity starts with the family.

Mrs Frederique Seidel from the [World Council of Churches](#) insisted on the importance of linking religious education with formal education and to include in the teaching value-based approaches to learn to live together. She also highlighted the importance of developing socio-emotional skills in children.

Mrs Anh Tho Andres-Kammler, from [Globethics](#), shared about her experiences in Asia and particularly coming from a Buddhist background. She emphasized on the role of families fostering inclusive values in children from early childhood and promoting respect for diversity.

Adding to Mrs Anh Tho Andres-Kammler 's reflections, Mrs Agneta Ucko, the Vice Chair of the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children of Arigatou International, continued highlighting the paramount importance of nurturing ethical values and spirituality in children and young people and how this will help them strengthen their identity and critical thinking, as well as their ability to make well grounded decisions, including respecting and working with people of other cultures and religions. She stressed the importance of fostering children and young people individual and collective responsibilities in a global community thus making them take an active part into building their future.

The discussion also highlighted how the initiatives in this field have to be designed for all and not exclusively for the risk groups. We need to find ways to channel the positive energies. We also need policies that allow for individualized approaches, as there is no linear pathway to extremism.

Mrs Elena Gaia from [Word Vision International](#) highlighted the links between the economic crises and the diminished resources for targeted programs with the aim to support children and young people to feel included and to help them being part of the society. She also reflected on the fact that governments need to take responsibility and scale up the efforts of civil society





organizations, for example by mainstreaming some of the project work at the national level.

Ms Laura Davison from the [Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies](#) shared the work that the Education Policy Working Group is doing, particularly in the development of a Catalogue of Resources on Education and Preventing Violent Extremism. This database contains over one hundred resources (articles, studies, research reports, books) on education and violent extremism. The aim of this catalogue is to make resources on PVE and education readily available to practitioners, academics, and all those working in the field of education in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.

Mr Alistair Davison, Program Manager at the [Cordoba Foundation of Geneva](#), explained the ongoing programmes of the Cordoba Foundation in North Africa, the Middle East and the Sahel regions where the Cordoba Foundation works with influential religious scholars to promote a discourse of peace across these regions targeting youth groups that might be at risk of joining armed extremist groups.

The Foundation works both in non-formal education settings as well as formal state-supported education establishments, in order to ensure a broader and more comprehensive curriculum, and better prepare students for gainful work after their graduation. At the moment, the Cordoba Foundation is also exploring the possibility of establishing a program in Europe to promote the peaceful interaction of Muslims and non-Muslims focusing on education and working with teachers and schools in France, Belgium and Switzerland to promote a better understanding of Islam and reduce tensions over the place of Islam in European society.

The second part of the roundtable looked at synergies and partnership opportunities.

Mrs Agneta Ucko, co-chair of the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children of Arigatou International, provided a rationale about the work on ethics education and how the Learning to Live Together Programme was developed. She emphasized on the intercultural and interreligious work that was done to develop the programme to be flexibly enough to be used in different types of settings.

Ms Uribe opened the second half of the roundtable with a presentation of the [“Learning to Live Together – An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education”](#) LTLT. Arigatou International developed the LTLT program and approach in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF. The LTLT is now a program implemented in more than 30 countries around the world with the goal for educators (teachers, youth leaders, social workers) to nurture ethical values and spirituality in children and youth that will help them strengthen their identity and critical thinking, ability to make well grounded decisions, respect and work with people of other cultures and religions, and foster their individual and collective responsibilities in a global community.

Mr Clive Lawton, cited on his work about ethical issues in six religious traditions as a tool that could be useful to understand the moral imperatives of each religious tradition while at the same time also finding common values. This work explores in parallel the ethical foundations for Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths and can be a useful guide for the design of interfaith programs.

The discussion continued around the issue of how to understand and react to the sense of disappointment and frustration that young people often voice, as they are unhappy with the “system” and with the current values and roles that they are suppose to abide in today’s society. The discussion looked at concrete ways to channel negative frustrations and behaves into positive and transformative action by providing opportunities, platforms and incentives for young people to “change” the negative aspects of our society together, rather than finding scope in violence and radicalization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants identified a list of general recommendations that could guide their future partnership and joint efforts:

- Continue to build awareness and consensus around the mainstreaming of ethical values, spirituality and critical thinking in the school curricula
- Continue to work with families, supporting parents to understand and communicate with their children
- Continue to share knowledge and exchange technical materials for program development, including by publicizing knowledge products (for example highlighting them in newsletters and knowledge platforms), as well as looking into the possibility to develop knowledge resource, trainings and workshop together
- Continue the advocacy work on this topic in particular sponsoring initiatives to convey key messages to government representatives in order to keep government accountable to their commitments and in particular to UN Secretary-General Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and Agenda 2030.



- Continue to work together to design and create spaces for working with religious leaders and religious communities including sharing

WAY FORWARD

The round table discussion highlighted a strong commitment from the participants to join forces and work together on this topic, including with young people, parents/caregivers and teachers.

Several concrete recommendations were put forward to guide the future work of this group. Arigatou International is fully committed to continue to work on this topic, exploring further concrete ways for partnerships and actions, including developing a platform to exchange ideas, resources, projects, and learn from one another.

Arigatou International Geneva also proposed to continue looking for concrete opportunities for awareness raising among different constituencies, support building political will, accelerate action and strengthen partnerships to prevent radicalization and violent extremism

The recognition that there is a need for a rethinking how to shape society to genuinely reckon with plurality as a given reality should prompt us and many other stakeholders to consider that that which we can do together, we should not do separately. Arigatou International Geneva stands by these words and looks forward to hearing from the participants on possible ways to collaborate bilaterally or initiate joint work with several organizations in Europe.