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Towards an evidence-based approach to tackling radicalisation and extremism

A first evaluation of municipal Reinforcement Funds (Versterkingsgelden) 2020-2021

Executive summary

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Executive summary

Every year, the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (*Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid*, NCTV) of the Netherlands allocates so-called 'Reinforcement Funds' (*Versterkingsgelden*) to selected Dutch municipalities in support of their activities aimed at combating and weakening extremist movements, preventing new recruitment into such movements, and countering radicalisation. By intensifying preventive measures in combating radicalisation, (violent) extremism and terrorism in those municipalities where these issues are most prevalent, the government aims to strengthen local efforts in a targeted way and where it is most needed.

Municipalities can apply for Reinforcement Funds within several clusters of activities:

Cluster A: Analysis of local issues related to radicalisation or (violent) extremism

This cluster includes research and analysis activities of issues related to radicalisation or (violent) extremism in a municipality or region. These analyses have been used for various purposes, for instance to generate new insights or to deepen existing knowledge. Some of these activities carry on for extended periods of time and build on efforts from previous years, while others are new and designed to address certain knowledge gaps. Activities in this cluster are expected to inform activities in other clusters that aim to counter radicalisation or address local issues related to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

Cluster B: Person-specific approach (*PGA*) towards radicalised individuals

There is no universal driver of radicalisation; at an individual level, a range of – often interacting – factors may play a role. This is why the decision to intervene and the selection of the type of intervention usually needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. The person-specific approach (in Dutch: *PGA*) provides opportunities to do so. Its application often takes multiple years. Applications for funding within this cluster are often related to hiring specific expertise, support for case management in the Community Safety Partnership (*Zorg- en Veiligheidshuis*), setting up a structure for signalling individuals at risk of radicalisation, monitoring cases and interventions tailored to individuals.

Cluster C: Building, maintaining and facilitating a network of key figures involved in detecting possible radicalisation

This cluster revolves around activities of building, maintaining and strengthening a local network of key figures (*sleutelfiguren*). This network consists of individuals who are closely linked to both formal and informal networks in their community. These key figures are expected to be able to connect to various

groups in a municipality, neighbourhood or district. Their embeddedness in the community should also allow them to approach target groups that may sometimes be difficult to reach for municipalities and partner organisations. Building and maintaining these networks typically take several years. Reinforcement Funds are used to support activities such as project management, regular catch-ups, training for key figures and other activities with members of the network.

👓 Cluster D: Strengthening expertise and education

Activities in this cluster are aimed at the promotion of expertise and education of those individuals and/or organisations involved in the prevention of radicalisation. In 2020 and 2021, funding for training has been used for sessions organised by the national training institute for countering radicalisation (*Rijksopleidingsinstituut tegengaan Radicalisering*, ROR) and external providers, as well as for sessions organised by municipalities for professionals. Typically, advanced courses are offered to professionals who previously completed basic training to expand on the knowledge they acquired in previous years.

✋ Cluster E (in 2020) and clusters E and F (in 2021): Prevention activities aimed at certain vulnerable target groups

Prevention activities are aimed at increasing the resilience of vulnerable target groups or their social environment, as well as the prevention or early detection of signs of radicalisation. In 2020, municipalities could apply for Reinforcement Funds in one cluster dedicated to prevention activities. In 2021, however, this cluster was split into two separate ones. The first cluster focused on prevention activities for radicalised persons and their social environment, such as providing counselling towards an (alternative) social network, prospects for the future, and family support. The second cluster concerned prevention activities aimed at strengthening the resilience of specific groups and individuals who may be susceptible to radicalisation, such as youth work, deployment of social neighbourhood teams, resilience training for susceptible young people, parenting support and information sessions for parents.

📋 Cluster F (in 2020) and G (in 2021): Evaluation of activities carried out to counter radicalisation, extremism and terrorism

Municipalities may also request a contribution from Reinforcement Funds to carry out an evaluation. An independent impact evaluation is mandatory for activities that are awarded a sum equalling €100,000 or higher.

In 2020 and 2021, a total of €7.3 million and €6.6 million was disbursed to 18 and 19 municipalities, respectively. For the majority of cases, these municipalities applied for funding on behalf of a larger group of municipalities in the region. Table S-1 shows the allocation of Reinforcement Funds and the corresponding number of activities per cluster in the years 2020 and 2021.

Table S-1. Total amounts granted by cluster

Cluster	Number of Activities 2020	Total by cluster 2020	Number of activities 2021	Total by cluster 2021
A) Analysis	20	€ 670,969	23	€ 977,896
B) Person-specific approach	50	€ 2.212,366	41	€ 1,919,989
C) Local network of key figures	32	€ 859,166	34	€ 1,021,924
D) Strengthening expertise and education	25	€ 1,198,708	59	€ 1,093,070
E) Prevention	45	€ 1,763,369	8	€ 266,424
F) Prevention	-	-	26	€ 1,107,189
F&G) Evaluation	15	€ 558,806	11	€ 237,245
Total	**187**	**€ 7,263,385**	**202**	**€ 6,623,737**

This study was requested by the Netherlands House of Representatives and stemmed from the government's ambition to gain better insight into the effectiveness of the Reinforcement Funds as well as the aspiration to move towards a more evidence-based integrated local approach to countering radicalisation, (violent) extremism and terrorism. The main research questions of this study are:

> *What were the expected impacts of activities funded through the Reinforcement Funds in 2020-2021? And how were these activities implemented and what outputs and outcomes can be identified?*

These main questions are divided into a series of sub-questions that can be characterised by elements of: a plan evaluation (what is the coherence and logic of the activities on paper?); a process evaluation (to what extent have the activities actually been carried out and how?); and a first impetus for an impact evaluation (what can be said about the *outputs and outcomes* of the activities?).

We applied several methodologies in this study to answer the main research questions and sub-questions, including a desk-based analysis of the applications and grant letters of the Reinforcement Funds, an analysis of evaluations of municipal activities that have already been carried out, and a set of semi-structured (group) interviews. Due to the sheer number of individual activities funded by the Reinforcement Funds in 2020 and 2021 (nearly 400), a selection of 137 activities was identified and analysed as part of a number of case studies per cluster. Chapter 2 contains a detailed explanation of the methodological approach.

This report takes a first step towards evaluating the effectiveness of the activities funded by the Reinforcement Funds. However, considering the data, resources, and methods available for this study, it is impossible to establish causality between the activities and their potential effects. Therefore, we refrain from using the labels 'impact evaluation' or assessment of 'effectiveness'. Where possible, information about outputs (quantitative and measurable summaries of the intervention) and outcomes (qualitative changes taking place because of the intervention) are collected: what were the results of the activities? The findings and conclusions of our analysis are aggregated at the cluster level to allow us to draw general lessons about municipal approaches to countering radicalisation. In addition to providing a first impetus towards

evaluating the effectiveness of the activities funded with the Reinforcement Funds, this report also calls for and provides directions for more systematic impact research in this area in the future.

The anticipated outputs and outcomes of the activities funded by the Reinforcement Funds

Many activities are aimed at improving knowledge
Many municipalities emphasise knowledge improvement in their applications for Reinforcement Funds. Through an improved understanding of the issues surrounding specific target groups and their motivations, municipalities hope to better tailor their approach to these groups (especially in the case of analytical activities [cluster A] and strengthening expertise [cluster D]). These insights are also used to support activities in other clusters, such as the PGA (cluster B). In the long term, insights are expected to strengthen and improve early detection of signs of radicalisation and extremism, which would enable professionals to act more quickly and targeted. Some municipalities also use analyses to instil a sense of urgency among partner organisations. The improvement of knowledge is also partly the intended outcome of using key figures (cluster C) and a PGA (cluster B). Ideally, improved knowledge among key figures leads to earlier detection of signals of potentially vulnerable or radicalising individuals. By using the local networks of key figures and through mutual exchange of knowledge and experiences, it is assumed that the expertise and quality of information among local officials, administrators, and key figures would be enhanced. Moreover, this would create more effective communication between municipalities, key figures and target groups.

Other activities are mostly aimed at strengthening resilience among vulnerable groups
A second common objective of activities funded with the Reinforcement Funds is strengthening the resilience of vulnerable groups and their environment. This is central to both the *PGA* (cluster B) and prevention activities (cluster E and F). Activities related to the *PGA*, key figure networks and prevention, make use of expertise to create and then maintain a trusting relationship with individuals, vulnerable groups or communities. Expected outcomes and objectives in this context are often very broadly formulated. Moreover, applications often focused on increasing resilience at an individual and family level, removing a breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism, social support, and social activities that facilitate individuals' return to society. In 2020 and 2021, these interventions particularly targeted young people and migrants. The funded activities still seemed to be largely focused on religious radicalisation and jihadism in particular. Other forms of extremism, such as right- or left-wing extremism and radicalisation associated with conspiracy theories, still seemed underrepresented. Having said this, we observed a gradual shift of attention towards other forms of extremism. Finally, funds have also been granted to activities aimed at countering polarisation or strengthening inclusion, identity, and connection.

Objectives are predominantly short-term
In the applications for Reinforcement Funds, objectives for the activities were generally formulated for a relatively short term, emphasising the directly intended products of the activities. Longer-term objectives are oftentimes absent. For instance, the objectives of the analyses in cluster A are often described as: 'improving the knowledge position of the municipality', or 'gaining insight into a certain target group or problem'. However, what is subsequently done with that knowledge or insight is often omitted.

The mechanisms by which the anticipated outputs and outcomes should be realised

The applications for analyses and activities aimed at promoting expertise usually do not contain an explicit description of the mechanisms by which the intended outputs and outcomes would materialise

In preparing the applications for Reinforcement Funds and preparing for the activities, municipalities appear to rely mainly on their own practical experience. For instance, applications for analyses (cluster A) are often based on (i) an inventory of needs within the organisation, (ii) signals from the municipalities in the region, police, NCTV, or (iii), in one case, a quick scan or a bi-annual information report. It also appears that analyses sometimes result from political pressure rather than from locally developed long-term visions. Activities to promote expertise (cluster D), such as courses for municipal officials, also often result from an internal inventory of needs among potential target groups. However, it is usually not explicitly stated how an improvement of knowledge or expertise can best be achieved and/or what type of activities are most effective in this respect. Analyses of the case studies show that municipalities sometimes use certain methods, such as trainings from private partners, for which little empirical evidence for effectiveness seems to be available.

In other clusters more attention appears to be paid to the mechanisms by which the intended outputs and outcomes would be realised

Municipalities tend to give comparatively more thorough consideration to how anticipated outputs and outcomes should be realised when it comes to activities involving interventions aimed at specific target groups, such as the *PGA* (cluster B), key figures networks (cluster C) or prevention (clusters E and F). Nevertheless, they rarely include an explicit overview of the intervention logic and assumptions underpinning the intervention in applications. In some cases, however, they did formulate clear objectives and drew up a plan of action, from which the intervention logic can be reconstructed. Municipalities often base their planned activities on (i) knowledge exchanges with stakeholders, (ii) experience with pilot projects and learning-by-doing, and (iii) lessons from old cases. Some municipalities use scientific literature and experiences from abroad to prepare for *PGA*-related activities (cluster B) and preventive interventions (clusters E and F). It is nonetheless rare for them, as many civil servants acknowledge, to use 'theories of change' or empirical evidence on how interventions to tackle radicalisation or extremism should work. This is somewhat understandable as the availability of relevant impact evaluations in this area is limited both domestically and abroad. However, a more systematic use of independent evaluations would provide an improved basis for an evidence-based intervention logic and policy theory.

Performance indicators are rarely used

When spending public funds, it is important to outline criteria for success in order to check whether activities are in fact implemented, whether the activities work as expected, and whether the anticipated outputs and outcomes are achieved. Success is usually measured by means of a set of performance indicators. In practice, however, such indicators are hardly ever used in the preparation, planning and implementation of activities funded by the Reinforcement Funds. Most notably, officials from municipalities can often outline the objectives of the activities, but they are generally unable to explain how to measure whether these objectives are met. A partial explanation for this may be that any tangible effects of these interventions remain largely unclear. Moreover, the outputs and outcomes of some activities, such as training courses or exploratory analyses, are generally difficult to measure.

The implementation of activities

The implementation of activities was delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic
The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 had a major impact on the implementation of activities funded by the Reinforcement Funds. Many activities involving in-person contact were postponed. This was particularly true for many of the interventions dealing with vulnerable groups, but also for a number of courses and meetings with municipal officials and partner organisations. While it took a relatively long time in some case studies to adapt planned interventions to a virtual environment (especially for training courses), many of the activities were continued online. In some cases, it proved difficult to organise activities in a virtual environment. Problems occurred, for instance, because of technical issues, because the target group had no or limited access to the internet, because it was considered necessary to establish a level of trust between participants of activities that would be difficult to achieve online, or because an online environment was considered "less safe". Consequently, many activities for key figures were also smaller in scale than expected, making participants feel less involved in the network. As the NCTV allowed municipalities to transfer Reinforcement Funds for 2020 to 2021 in light of the pandemic, it can generally be stated that the activities were all carried out – at least where possible. In fact, it appeared that the activities related to the promotion of expertise and education (cluster D) had a much wider reach because of the pandemic. Since the initial limitations of physical space did no longer play a role in online meetings, more professionals were able to participate in these activities.

The success of activities depended mainly on individual professionals and cooperation
The extent to which the activities funded by Reinforcement Funds meet their intended results seems to be largely dependent on the professionals involved. For instance, for both the *PGA* (cluster B) and prevention activities (clusters E and F), the professionals' and experts' level of commitment was considered a factor of success. They were praised for their subject-matter knowledge, their understanding of the local context, their language skills, their eye for culturally sensitive aspects and their enthusiasm. At the same time, such dependence on professionals also poses a risk for the sustainability of the interventions, when they are no longer available. In many of the municipalities involved, a very small group of civil servants is responsible for a broad set of security topics, in which radicalisation is only one of many policy areas. The capacity for setting up complex interventions, implementing and ultimately monitoring and evaluating them is very limited. Finally, the relatively high staff turnover in these departments complicates the continuity of these programmes and inhibits the accumulation and safeguarding of knowledge within the organisation.

Nonetheless, cooperation between local government officials and with other stakeholders in those two clusters, *PGA* and prevention, is often perceived as successful. The lines of communication with suppliers and other partner organisations are efficient and partners are able to find their way to the municipality, which benefits the mutual exchange of information. Continuously investing in the network of municipalities, youth workers, trainers, welfare organisations, education and security partners is therefore considered important.

Municipalities are capable of offering tailor-made interventions, partly due to the experience, expertise and cooperation of the professionals involved. In order to overcome mistrust and to align the interventions with the target group's own perceptions, it is considered important for professionals to connect with the target group during the implementation. Similarly, some of the case studies related to prevention activities

suggested there is a need for flexibility when implementing activities. The Reinforcement Funds leave room for the local approach to countering radicalisation and allow municipalities to continuously adapt programmes to their needs.

There are efforts to expand target groups of interventions to include other forms of extremism, but this also requires a recalibration of the available instruments
Several local government representatives expressed a desire to further expand the focus from jihadist extremism towards other forms of extremism. Although this broadening of target groups is already underway, interventions such as the *PGA* are still mostly geared towards jihadist extremism. The tools and documentation for this intervention are not yet sufficiently tailored to other forms of extremism. The same applies to the knowledge and networks among representatives of the municipalities and partner organisations, as well as the involved experts. Most networks with vulnerable target groups, which are considered crucial for the success of activities, still strongly rely on contacts with mosques, (pre-) secondary schools with a high proportion of students with a migrant background, and in neighbourhoods with an overrepresentation of Muslims or people with a migrant background. Contacts and networks with groups vulnerable to other forms of radicalisation, such as right-wing extremism or followers of conspiracy theories, are very limited. At the same time, finding an entry point and building trusting relationships with communities or organisations where these vulnerable groups are located does not happen overnight. It requires years of investment. There is currently no early warning system for these emerging issues. For several interventions in the prevention cluster targeting these new groups, organisers appeared to struggle reaching the targeted number of participants. In addition, it could take some time to tailor an intervention to a new target group, particularly if scientific evidence is scarce. Finally, several case studies revealed that a disproportionate focus on Islam led to frustration among the target group in some instances. By focusing activities on polarisation, but also inclusion, identity and connection, interventions may be more accessible and perceived as less stigmatising than when the term 'radicalisation' is used.

Pooling the training offer leads to economies of scale, but leaves little room for customisation
The NCTV currently encourages municipalities to engage with training courses given by the ROR. This seems logical in view of both economies of scale as well as avoiding a proliferation of external training providers for municipalities. Moreover, municipalities seemed to be enthusiastic about the range and quality of the training courses offered for key figures (cluster C), amongst others, especially when training courses involve concrete case studies. The same applied to training sessions held for the purpose of improving the expertise amongst local government representatives and their partners involved in the prevention of radicalisation in cluster D. At the same time, municipalities noted that ROR struggles to tailor the training offer to the local context. Most notably, they feel that the approach of the ROR does not always suit the target group or the level of knowledge amongst participants. Municipalities would therefore like to have the opportunity to organise training sessions in cooperation with other providers as well.

The outputs and outcomes of the activities

Progress as well as the outputs and outcomes of activities are rarely tracked in a systematic way
The objectives for spending Reinforcement Funds are generally broadly formulated, and they usually lack performance indicators to track progress towards intended outputs and outcomes. Consequently, most

municipalities do not have a systematic overview of progress and results of the activities in 2020 and 2021. Moreover, information tends to be scattered across different stakeholders. Nevertheless, based on the case studies we can provide an indication of the outputs and outcomes, of the extent to which the objectives were achieved and of any unintended or unexpected outcomes.

Results: The Covid-19 pandemic has led to delays, but not necessarily to cancellations
Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many activities were delayed. In some cases, these delays meant that the intended outputs and outcomes (to the best of our knowledge) could not be achieved. A reduction of the number of in-person contact moments would be an example of the impact of the pandemic. However, the pandemic was not the only reason for delays in 2020 and 2021. The time taken to create more public support for tackling radicalisation, and the workload of officials involved were also cited as reasons for delays and not reaching anticipated results. Yet, most of the planned activities were eventually implemented. While it is true that in some cases the originally stated objectives were not achieved, those closely involved in the implementation of the activities are generally convinced of their usefulness. They argue that participants of activities generally leave the sessions feeling empowered. In addition, the activities seem to draw more attention to the issue of radicalisation, and an increasing number of civil servants involved in focusing on security policy and their partners organisations are gaining awareness of the activities on offer. Regarding outputs, local government representatives often focus on completing the planned activity itself, citing concrete figures related to, for instance, the implementation of a certain number of sessions, reaching the intended target groups, closing case files or the number of recommendations delivered by an analyst.

Outcomes: Interventions provide an important foundation, but long-term effects are difficult or impossible to observe
As for the outcomes of the activities, positive anecdotal evidence is regularly found in both interviews and evaluations. For example, municipal representatives claim that preventive interventions (clusters E and F and, to some extent, cluster B) have led to more visibility and control of the situation, and that vulnerable target groups and partners now know where to report a problem if it arises. In addition, they believe that analysis activities (cluster A) generally provide municipal officials with more concrete tools and frameworks for future actions, and that participants of activities aimed at enhancing expertise (cluster D and, to some extent, cluster C) often feel better equipped to deal with signs of radicalisation. In some cases, societal changes can be observed and behavioural changes among target groups encouraged. Even though it is difficult to establish causality, officials even report positive effects in terms of preventing (further) radicalisation among individuals.

The experiences of those involved in the implementation of interventions are generally positive. Nevertheless, evidence for impact is limited. For example, interventions aimed at the improvement of knowledge and expertise (clusters A, C, D and, to some extent, also the evaluation cluster F and G) are seen as effective by those involved. In practice however, it remains difficult to assess whether these activities have indeed resulted in an improvement of knowledge. It also remains difficult to say whether these have led to desired outcomes, such as an improvement in the ability to detect early signs of radicalisation. This is due to the generally limited (or absent) formulation of objectives, lack of performance indicators, inadequate evaluation efforts and the limited evidence base of available evaluations. Furthermore, it appears that perceptions of success still tend to differ among respondents. When these experiences vary widely, and no

concrete objectives and performance indicators are formulated, determining impact proves difficult here as well. Municipal officials express that they want enhanced insights into impact. Most notably, they would like to know whether the work they do has an effect, and whether their efforts benefit the process.

On top of these challenges, the timeframe of this evaluation is too short to observe long-term outcomes. It is difficult to prove whether interventions aimed at prevention and resilience (such as the *PGA* [cluster B] and prevention activities [clusters E and F]), as well as analyses (cluster A) and activities aimed at expertise promotion (cluster D) implemented in 2020 and 2021, have the desired impact. However, this does not necessarily imply that there is no impact at all. Rather, the impact cannot be demonstrated based on the current evaluation efforts.

Recommendations

Evaluation practices in relation to addressing radicalisation and extremism are still in their infancy. Several evaluations have been carried out, some of which already provide an initial impetus for the analysis of effectiveness. However, they do not yet allow for making reliable statements about the causality of interventions and their outputs and outcomes. The complexity of the issues and interventions, the sensitivity of the subject and the confidentiality of information are among the reasons why evaluations are complicated and time-consuming. For these reasons, robust impact evaluations in the field of radicalisation and violent extremism are scarce both in the Netherlands and abroad. This does not mean that thorough evaluation of these activities is impossible. There are increasing initiatives to develop thorough evaluation approaches, as well as accessible guidelines for practitioners. Our main recommendations therefore focus on improving evaluation practices in relation to the expenditure of Reinforcement Funds.

Achieving a more evidence-based local approach to radicalisation in the Netherlands requires objectives and intended impacts to be better formulated. There is also a need to better explain how objectives and impacts can be achieved through the deployment of activities, for example by using an intervention logic. Preferably, this should include a clear (evidence-based) policy theory and reference to proven effective interventions in the Netherlands or abroad. Based on this intervention logic, performance indicators can then be identified to help monitor the progress and the results of the activities. For a comprehensive overview of the outputs and outcomes of the activities funded with the Reinforcement Funds, it is necessary for this information to be collected systematically. In the annexes to this report, we have drawn up a concrete guide for evaluating impact in this context. The guide can be used by municipalities when conducting or commissioning an impact evaluation of their interventions. By carefully following the action plan and making the steps to be taken explicit, a better understanding of the various outputs and outcomes of the intervention can be achieved.