

# Designing Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for Violent Extremist Offenders: A Realist Approach

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## Abstract

In this Research Paper, ICCT – The Hague Research Fellow Tinka Veldhuis makes an argument for a Realist approach to rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for inmates with a terrorist or extremist background. Accordingly, within the Realist framework, it is stressed that the outcomes of rehabilitation programmes should be understood as a product of the policy mechanisms and the context in which they are implemented. To maximise the likelihood of success it is important to make explicit the underlying assumptions about how the intervention should, given the unique context, contribute to achieving its objectives. This paper endeavours to highlight some of the key questions that need to be answered before and during the implementation of rehabilitation policies.

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## Introduction

In 2010, the Director of National Intelligence assessed that an approximate 20% of former Guantanamo Bay detainees were suspected of reengaging in terrorist or insurgent activities<sup>1</sup>, a figure confirmed by the Obama administration<sup>2</sup>. Elsewhere, similar concerns have been raised over recidivism rates among inmates with a terrorist or extremist background.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, prisons are often seen as places where radical ideologies fester and where terrorist movements seek to recruit new members into their ranks. Although accurate figures on prison radicalisation and recidivism-rates among violent extremist offenders are often lacking,<sup>4</sup> preventing post-release radicalisation and terrorism is of central concern to governments and authorities around the world.

As a result, several de-radicalisation and rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists have emerged across the globe in the last few years. For example, extensive programmes have been established in Saudi-Arabia, Indonesia, Singapore, Colombia, and the United Kingdom (UK), to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Each of these countries has developed its own approach to promote desistance of some form of political violence. When analysing and comparing these programmes, one runs into the problem that although the programmes generally seem to include similar interventions (e.g. education and vocational training, psychological and religious counselling), they actually pursue a broad range of objectives. Or, as Horgan puts it: “At present, there is a flurry of activity worldwide aimed at what on the surface appears to be a pursuit of similar objective, but upon closer inspection reveal such diverse conceptual underpinnings that they can only realistically be unified in terms of promoting some kind of move away from terrorism.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in most cases the underlying rationale and details of the intervention – the ‘programme theory’ – has never been explicitly formulated or translated into tangible blueprints. More often than not, the programmes seem to be developed on the basis of intuition and implicit assumptions about how certain interventions can achieve specific desired outcomes – *a priori* explications of the ideas behind these programmes are rare. Hence, it often remains unclear what objectives such policies exactly aim to achieve and how the instruments are supposed to contribute to achieving these objectives, let alone how the success of these policies can be evaluated. For example, do these initiatives aspire to transform the participants to pacifist citizens by targeting the ideology which legitimised violence in the first place (‘de-radicalisation’), or do they ‘merely’ seek to provide participants with a package of tools that is believed to curtail violent behaviour? How do these measures tap into existing knowledge about the causes of violent radicalisation and terrorist behaviour? And above all, how should we assess their impact and effectiveness?

Indeed, attempts to measure the effect of these programmes are confronted by substantial barriers and to date few if any rehabilitation initiatives have been subjected to in-depth evaluation<sup>7</sup>. However, for governments and prison authorities to know whether and how investing in the rehabilitation of violent extremists is worthwhile or a waste of resources requires a clear understanding of what these policies aim to achieve and how, and whether they succeed in doing so or not.

<sup>1</sup> Director of National Intelligence (2010). Summary of the Reengagement of Detainees formerly held at Guantanamo Bay. Retrieved from [http://www.dni.gov/electronic\\_reading\\_room/120710\\_Summary\\_of\\_the\\_Reengagement\\_of\\_Detainees\\_Formerly\\_Held\\_at\\_Guantanamo\\_Bay\\_Cuba.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/electronic_reading_room/120710_Summary_of_the_Reengagement_of_Detainees_Formerly_Held_at_Guantanamo_Bay_Cuba.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Joscelyn, T. (2010). Gitmo Recidivism Rate Soars. *The Weekly Standard*, December 7. Retrieved from [https://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/gitmo-recidivism-rate-soars\\_521965.html](https://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/gitmo-recidivism-rate-soars_521965.html)

<sup>3</sup> Pluchinsky, D.A. (2008). Global Jihadist recidivism: A red flag. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31, 3: 181-200; Arianti, V. (2011). Jihadi recidivism: The case of Indonesia. *Eurasiareview*, February 17. Retrieved from <http://www.eurasiareview.com/17022011-jihadi-recidivism-the-case-of-indonesia/>

<sup>4</sup> Rappaport, A., Veldhuis, T.M., Guiora, A.N. Homeland Security and the Inmate Population: The Risk and Reality of Islamic Radicalization in Prison. In L. Gideon (Ed.) *Special Needs of Offenders in Correctional Institutions*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publishing (in press).

<sup>5</sup> Neumann, P. (2010). *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*. London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.

<sup>6</sup> Horgan, J. (2008). Deradicalization or disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2, 4.

<sup>7</sup> One of the first efforts to assess the impact of de-radicalisation efforts is currently made by Prof. Arie Kruglanski and colleagues. See for example Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., & Gunaratna (in press). Aspects of deradicalization. In L. Rubin, R. Gunaratna, & J. A. Gerard (Eds.), *Terrorist Rehabilitation and counter-radicalization*. London: Routledge.

It is in this context that this ICCT Research Paper emphasises that rehabilitation programmes for offenders with a terrorist or extremist background should be rooted in explicit, unambiguously formulated programme theories that should include detailed descriptions of the different components of the intervention and explicate how they relate to each other. Above all, these theories need to describe the primary and secondary objectives, the policy implementation instruments, and the ideas about expected causal relationships and impacts.

Specifically, the policy brief makes an argument for a *Realist* approach as developed by Pawson and Tilley<sup>8</sup>, which is concerned with the identification of policies' underlying causal mechanisms and the way in which they function across contexts. In other words, a Realist approach aims to move beyond assessing 'whether the programme works' to 'why the programme (sometimes) works' and 'why it works differently in different environments', in order to identify what can be done to maximise the chances of success.

The objectives of the paper are two-fold. Firstly, it emphasises the added value of a Realist framework in our thinking about rehabilitation efforts, and highlights some of the key questions that policy officials (and hence programme theories) need to answer, both at the onset of the programme and as it develops and evolves over time. Secondly, in doing so, the paper aims to illustrate that programme theories should be forward looking and sensitive to indirect or invisible mechanisms, which might potentially undermine the programme's effectiveness if not dealt with appropriately. Specifically, the paper shows that in the rehabilitation of violent extremists, identifying and pursuing the primary objectives (e.g. reducing recidivism) is not enough, as there are several factors (e.g., stigmatisation and criminogenic environments) that can seriously undermine the intervention's impact. Explicitly integrating the targeting of such distorting factors as secondary objectives into the programme theory can substantially improve the effectiveness of the overall programme.

A few terms are relevant for the discussion. Here, *rehabilitation* is seen as a purposeful, planned intervention, which aims to change characteristics of the offender (attitudes, cognitive skills and processes, personality or mental health, and social, educational or vocational skills) that are believed to be the cause of the individual's criminal behaviour, with the intention to reduce the chance that the individual will re-offend.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, *reintegration* is understood as a safe transition to the community, by which the individual proceeds to live a law-abiding life following his or her release and acquires attitudes and behaviours that generally lead to productive functioning in society.

Further, a clear distinction must be made between *disengagement* and *de-radicalisation*, processes that can manifest themselves at both the individual and collective level.<sup>10</sup> Disengagement denotes a behavioural change by which individuals or movements reduce or stop using violent methods. Disengagement can be partial and does not necessarily imply a complete move away from violence.<sup>11</sup> Movements could decide to slightly alter their tactics and individuals can change their role in the movement to a more peripheral position, without denouncing violence completely or leaving the movement entirely. Disengagement may or may not involve de-radicalisation, which requires not only a change in behaviour but also a change in belief. De-radicalisation, in turn, is fundamentally a psychological and cognitive process by which the individual experiences a fundamental change in understanding and belief. However, de-radicalisation does not necessarily go hand in hand with disengagement.<sup>12</sup> Individuals can go through a psychological process of renouncing violence whilst, for a number of reasons, remaining active in the violent movement. For example, social pressure, fear of revenge or prosecution and lack of alternatives can inhibit the individual from moving away from violence, even if he or she

<sup>8</sup> Pawson, R. & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. London: SAGE Publications; Pawson, R. (2006). *Evidence-based policy: A realist perspective*. London: SAGE Publications.

<sup>9</sup> See Cullen, F. T., & Gendreau, P. (2000). Assessing correctional rehabilitation: Policy, practice, and prospects (pp. 109-175). In J. Horney (Ed.). *National Institute of Justice criminal justice 2000: Changes in decision making and discretion in the criminal justice system*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, p.114.

<sup>10</sup> Bjørge, T. and Horgan, J. (Eds.) (2009). *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*. London: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Bjørge & Horgan (2009); Chowdhury Fink, N. & Hearne, E.B. (2008). *Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and disengagement from violent extremism*. International Peace Institute.

<sup>12</sup> Bjørge & Horgan (2009).

mentally disputes the movement's violent strategies.<sup>13</sup> When dealing with inmates who have an extremist background, rehabilitation programmes can include efforts geared towards both de-radicalisation and disengagement, but in general pursue broader ambitions to prepare and assist individuals in returning peacefully to society after imprisonment.

In this paper, the focus of analysis is narrowed down in several ways. To begin with, although the issues under discussion are relevant for various categories, including 'regular' inmates, the present discussion focuses specifically on two types of inmates: 1) offenders with a terrorist background, i.e. those who have been suspected or convicted of a terrorism-related offense, and 2) inmates who have been radicalised during imprisonment and who have, as a consequence of that, been recognised by the authorities as a potential security concern. In particular, this latter category and the issue of prison radicalisation bring with it a unique set of problems and challenges for policy officials, including concerns about preventing the spread of violent extremist ideologies among the inmate population. However, here the emphasis is on the measures that need to be taken to tackle relevant security issues that arise when extremist inmates are being released.

Also, the focus is not on the question whether and why special rehabilitation efforts are required for violent extremist offenders. Valid and legitimate questions can be asked concerning the extent to which existing criminal justice systems and rehabilitation programmes are – or are not – sufficiently equipped to deal with this category of inmates. Yet, here the question is not whether we require 'new' programmes for violent extremists or how these should differ from 'regular' programmes. Rather we take a step back and highlight a few dilemmas and concerns that policy officials need to address before any programme commences, irrespective of whether they are confronted with general offenders or with violent extremists. The implication is that this paper will draw extensively on available knowledge obtained from 'general' rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for prison inmates. Those policy makers responsible for designing a rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists should decide whether and to what extent these insights are applicable to their specific and unique situation.

Neither will this paper deal specifically with the variety of different ideological backgrounds, like extremist right-wing, left-wing, religious or nationalist offenders. Central to the Realist approach is the notion that policies and programmes are most likely to succeed if the objectives are tailored to the specific contexts and needs of the individuals or groups involved.<sup>14</sup> This paper does not aim to disentangle the different layers of these contexts and analyse their impacts, but it aims to raise questions that might help to match the correct instrument with the accurate context and objectives.

Lastly it is important to emphasise the ethical sensitivity of the matter at hand. Concepts like rehabilitation, violent extremism, de-radicalisation and re-integration also have a political and normative connotation. Rehabilitation aims to persuade individuals to make the 'right' choices and refrain from 'wrong' behaviour. However, what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' depends on ones' societal and political position and is usually not unequivocally embraced. After all, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, and who is perceived as an extremist by some – usually government – may be seen as a credible interlocutor by others. This notion has a few important implications.

Firstly, in crafting their response to violent extremism, governments and authorities need ask not only whether an objective or solution is practical, it is equally important to ask whether it is in compliance with international legal standards and ethical in terms of human rights. One of the core values of the democratic state is that the government does not aim to manipulate the individual's mindset and that individual freedom of thought, speech and religion are respected. In the discussion about de-radicalisation, this means that a delicate balance has to be found between attempting to change the cognitions and attitudes that pushed the individual down the path of violence, whilst guaranteeing core individual freedoms. Ultimately, this could even mean that

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; Chowdhury Fink & Hearne (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997).

authorities might be forced to opt for a second best solution (e.g. no complete de-radicalisation) in order to respect basic human rights.

Secondly, governments are at all times challenged to critically examine the underlying causes and motivations that gave rise to violent extremist individuals or movements. Extremist movements do not operate in a vacuum, and sometimes they convey political messages that are carried and supported by wider audiences beyond the movement. Although violence is never a justified means to an end, looking beyond the mere acts and examining the underlying causes and motivations might be an additional step to finding a sustainable solution to the problem. Sometimes, if the extremist discourse reflects sentiments and grievances that are more broadly shared within society, this might mean that adjustments at the societal and political level are required to deal appropriately and effectively with the underlying issues. In this sense a form of collective disengagement might be attained by reducing the underlying grievances and the public support base for (violent) political activism. Cases in the past have shown that political inclusion of actors into the discourse can serve as a driver for collective disengagement.

That being said, once people have been incarcerated for a long time, irrespective of the precise dimensions of the underlying conflict, a social reality emerges that can produce very real consequences. The fact remains that people who have, for whatever reason, spent a substantial part of their life in confinement need to be adequately prepared for their transition into society and need to be equipped with the appropriate skills that are necessary to live a productive life in society. The present paper explicitly starts from the premise that there is an apparent need experienced by actors in the field to consider providing rehabilitation services to inmates with an extremist inmate. From that starting point, the next questions are how these services should be designed and what they should consist of?

## A Realist Approach to Designing Rehabilitation Programmes

### Outcomes, Mechanisms and Context

The Realist framework is drawn from the work by Pawson and Tilley and is rooted in the appreciation that in policy, one size does not fit all and that similar policies can produce very different outcomes when implemented in different settings.<sup>15</sup> To explain *why* policies work or fail in a particular context, the Realist approach examines the underlying mechanisms through which policy instruments generate certain outcomes under certain conditions. From a Realist perspective, the question is not 'what works', but 'what works for whom in what circumstances'.<sup>16</sup> The Realist approach as such seeks to unpack the complexity of social programmes by examining the conditions under which certain policies are more or less likely to work. The framework coalesces around three key concepts: Outcomes (O), Mechanisms, (M), and Context (C).<sup>17</sup>

Firstly, the *outcomes* are the impact that a policy has on a target population. Policy outcomes are social changes that are caused by the implementation of (one or more) elements of the intervention. Outcomes can be expected or unexpected, desired or undesired, and can be different across contexts and target populations (e.g. the same policy can produce different outcomes for men and women). For instance, enhancing security measures at airports might reduce the risk of terrorist attacks, but can simultaneously and adversely increase levels of fear among the public. Secondly, the policy *mechanisms* are the engine behind the programme. Mechanisms explain what it is about the intervention that causes change, and how specific instruments contribute to achieving the desired outcome.<sup>18</sup> Following the previous example, increased airport security might reduce terrorist threats through several mechanisms, like detecting explosives or otherwise dangerous devices and discouraging terrorist

<sup>15</sup> Pawson, R. & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. London: SAGE Publications; Sanderson, I. (2002). Evaluation, policy learning and evidence-based policy making. *Public Administration*, 80, 1: 1-22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P.25.

<sup>17</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997).

<sup>18</sup> Pawson (2006): P.23-24.

organisations to attempt attacks. Thirdly, *contextual conditions* influence if and how a policy instrument makes an impact.<sup>19</sup> For example, whether elevated military visibility at airports induces fear among travellers might be culture-specific and dependent on familiarity with and attitudes towards military intervention in regular civil life.

The notion that interventions are dynamic systems, which depend on the context in which they are implemented and evolve over time as the context and stakeholder reasoning changes, is fundamental to the Realist approach.<sup>20</sup> It follows that although programmes cannot be replicated one-on-one across contexts, general understandings of what works for whom, when, and why are transferrable. This makes the Realist approach particularly valuable for such complex interventions as rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists, which are made up of several interrelated components (e.g. training programmes, economic support, after-care) and implemented in a broad range of contexts (e.g. different countries, with different criminal justice systems and prison settings) and for different types of extremist offenders (e.g. Islamists, nationalists, guerrillas, right wing extremists).

### Evidence-based Programme Theories

According to a Realist view, interventions are always rooted in some kind of theory that describes how the particular implementation of a programme will bring about a certain desired outcome.<sup>21</sup> Such theories are based on a series of “if.... then” premises held by policy architects or academics, practitioners and other relevant stakeholders. In the most ideal case, an explicit programme theory is available in which the policy makers have described in advance how the policy instrument is going to work and what impact it is expected to have.

However, in most cases, the underlying theory is not explicated in a formalised policy design but exists only in the minds of the different actors involved, who might in fact all have very different theories about the intervention. For example, Horgan points out that various de-radicalisation programmes that have emerged in different parts of the world often fail to address the question whether these programmes actually work, and how?<sup>22</sup> Of course, one appealing explanation for this lack of evidence is that any attempt to evaluate complex interventions like inmate reform programmes (in as far as any attempt has been made at all) runs into profound methodological difficulties. The lack of a control condition – i.e. a situation in which the particular intervention was not in place or an alternative programme was conducted – hinders any unbiased causal inference about the programme’s impact. Consequently, it is at the same time equally impossible to claim that these de-radicalisation programmes *do not* work.

However, a more fundamental problem is that de-radicalisation or reform programmes for violent extremists often lack an accurate description of the intervention, such as an explicit articulation of its objectives and underlying logic or theory. For example, the indicators for success or failure are rarely explicitly formulated; if they are, they are often too vaguely defined to be translated into measurable criteria. When the central beliefs about how a programme is expected to work remain implicit, the risk is that policy makers and practitioners work from very different conceptions about what the programme aims to achieve and how it should be implemented. Also, it is possible that those who designed or initially implemented the programme move on to other positions over time and are replaced by new managers or practitioners, who might deviate from the original plan if they are not properly briefed on the purposes and procedures of the programme. Under such conditions, accurate assessments of whether an intervention has been successful or not, let alone *how* it operates, is practically impossible.

Hence, programme theories are important facilitators of comprehensive and coherent policy strategies. They compel policy officials to consider thoroughly what and how their innovation aims to achieve. The process of

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P.24.

<sup>20</sup> Sridharan, A. \_ Nakaima, A. (2010). Ten steps to making evaluations matter. *Evaluation and Programming*,

<sup>21</sup> Pawson (2006): P.26; Pawson R, Greenhalgh T, Harvey G, Walshe K. (2005). Realist review: a new method of systematic review designed for complex policy interventions. *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy* 10, 1:21-34.

<sup>22</sup> Horgan (2008).



formalising the programme theory does not only force some level of consensus on the exact dimensions of the intervention, it also ensures that all the actors are working from the same premises and have the same concepts and objectives in mind.

The Realist framework recommends a theory-driven and evidence-based approach for identifying and designing the programmes that are capable of achieving the desired end-states.<sup>23</sup> Evidence-based policies are defined as policies that can be justified in terms of the best available evidence about the interventions and their likely effects.<sup>24</sup> They are rooted in a strong, evidence-based theory about how and why the programme is expected to produce specific outcomes. Indeed, it has been shown by research that rehabilitative efforts are well served by a sound conceptual model which describes the underlying assumptions about elements in the programme. Meta-evaluation analyses by Antonowicz and Ross revealed that rehabilitation programmes which are based on a coherent theoretical conceptualisation of cognitive-behavioural models of criminal behaviour were more likely to be effective in reducing recidivism.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the chances of success increase considerably if the intervention is based on an explicated idea, substantiated by previous experience and empirical knowledge, about which measures are most suitable to achieve the set goals. Such underlying theoretical models do not only convey the fundamental principles of the intervention, but also determine which measures are deemed appropriate, and why.

There are different types of evidence that can be used to substantiate policy designs.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of existing evaluations are the most desirable types of evidence. Such reviews identify all relevant published and unpublished evidence, assess the quality of each study to expose flaws, and summarise the findings in a balanced and impartial manner. As such, they combine the results of a series of studies in order to generalise the outcomes for a population of reviews.

Secondly, single studies (e.g. a review of one specific programme) can be used as evidence, but only if they are undertaken by the highest possible standards. Single studies are always conducted in a very specific context in which the programme is introduced, which can produce unbalanced and unrepresentative conclusions that are not fit generalisations. Systematic reviews can overcome such biases by exposing sets of studies to critical appraisal and rigorous analyses.<sup>27</sup> Hence, single studies can provide valuable evidence for very specific programmes in very specific contexts, but are less informative about the general conditions and populations under which programmes are more - or less - likely to work.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, expert opinion can be an appreciated source of information for policy design. Expert meetings and advisory groups can gather the experience, expertise and judgement of top-level specialists and practitioners to inform decision makers about the costs and benefits of available policy alternatives. However, expert opinion is often based on selective cases, contexts or studies and cannot be assumed to be all-inclusive or grounded in substantial research evidence. As such, it is not advisable to rely solely on experts whilst designing or implementing new policies. Expert judgment is particularly valuable when existing evidence is lacking or imperfect, but should always be *integrated* with the best available evidence from systematic research.<sup>29</sup>

Naturally, policies are informed and influenced by a range of other sources, like political and cultural values, available resources, existing legal and bureaucratic frameworks, personalities and tradition.<sup>30</sup> The purpose here is not to argue that policy cannot proceed without being rooted in the latest research evidence. Often,

<sup>23</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997) ; Pawson, R. (2006). Evidence-based policy: A realist perspective. London: SAGE Publications.

<sup>24</sup> Davies (1999).

<sup>25</sup> Antonowicz, D. H. & Ross, R.R. (1994). Essential components of successful rehabilitation programs for offenders. *International Journal of Offender and Comparative Criminology* 38 (2): 97–104.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, P.T. (2004) Is Evidence-Based Government Possible? Conference Paper for the Campbell Collaboration Colloquium, Washington Feb 2004. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policyhub/downloads/JerryLeeLecture1202041.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Davies, P.T (2003). Systematic reviews: How are they different from what we already do? In Anderson, L. & Bennet, N. (eds.), *Developing educational leadership for policy and practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

<sup>28</sup> Davies (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Banks, G. (2009). Evidence-based policy-making: what is it? How do we get it? ANU Public Lecture Series, presented by ANZSOG, 4 February, Productivity Commission, Canberra Australia. Retrieved from: [http://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/85836/20090204-evidence-based-policy.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/85836/20090204-evidence-based-policy.pdf)



sound evidence might not be available or applicable to the present circumstances, and policy decisions often need be made within a limited timeframe. In most cases, there is simply no time to wait for rigorous systematic reviews.

However, policies should always be rooted in proper and explicit reasoning and theory. Especially in areas like terrorist detention and extremist reform, where policies touch upon individual rights by restricting people's freedoms or even attempting to change the individual's mindset, there is too much at stake to accept that such programmes are designed on a trial and error basis without underpinning logic. Rehabilitation programmes should be based on fundamental theories and need to be rigorously monitored and evaluated to inform correction or, if necessary, termination of the programme.

In developing violent extremist rehabilitation programmes, research evidence on the conditions under which specific interventions work or fail is still lagging behind. Concerns about terrorist recidivism and post-release radicalisation surfaced on the international political agenda relatively recently and only in the last few years have rehabilitation efforts for this specific category of offenders started to proliferate. Yet we must be aware of an "evaluation gap" between the potential of what can be learned from existing evidence and what *is* actually learned. Over the course of decades, a substantial amount of relevant evidence has been gathered by systematic reviews and meta-analyses on 'general' rehabilitation programmes, as well as on relevant areas like disarmament and demobilisation of violent political movements, violent (prison) gangs, guerrillas and other violent organisations. Although not exactly replicable, insights about these interventions should be used to inform the thinking process about rehabilitation of violent extremist offenders. In doing so the challenge is to identify good practices and general principles relating to what works for whom under what circumstances, in order to explore whether and how these principles are transferrable to different contexts. Crucially, using this knowledge requires a clear and sound conceptualisation of what is meant by key terms like 'rehabilitation', 'disengagement', 'de-radicalisation' and 'demobilisation', to ensure that findings are legitimately generalised and applied.

## Theory Behind Rehabilitation Programmes

The design of rehabilitation programmes should be informed by available evidence, drawn from strong theories and existing evaluations of relevant interventions. The purpose of this paper is not to develop a programme theory for an extremist rehabilitation programme, but to argue clearly that policy makers *do* have the responsibility to take up this task and explicitly work out the details of the intervention before it is introduced. This section aims to assist them by highlighting some of the most important questions that provide the building blocks for transparent and goal-driven interventions.

It is important to note that these questions *always* have to be answered and that they have not emerged from a specific scenario or case-study. Irrespective of whether the rehabilitation initiative targets extreme right offenders, Islamists, violent prison gangs or drug cartels, and regardless of whether the focus is on individual or collective treatment, on prison-based or community-based programmes, the policy description should always be able to answer a series of general questions that revolve around the interplay between outcomes, mechanisms, and context of the intervention.

## Outcomes

Firstly, the programme theory should provide a description of what kind of social change the programme aspires to bring about. What is the purpose of the intervention? The ambitions of rehabilitation programmes can be modelled in a hierarchical structure of goals, objectives (criteria), and sub-objectives. Whereas *goals* are formulated in general terms and identify broad, more abstract desired end-states, *objectives* and *sub-objectives*

are narrowly defined and are specific descriptions of the achievements required to produce the desired outcomes.

In general terms, the goals of detention and rehabilitation policies are to pursue protection of society by preventing crime and reforming criminals.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to offenders with a terrorist or violent extremist background, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts fit within a broader counter-terrorism framework. Ultimately, their goal is to prevent and counter violent radicalisation and acts terrorism and the individuals and movements involved.

Programme goals translate into more specific objectives, which are criteria to judge whether the intervention has achieved the desired outcomes. Informed by 'regular' offender treatments, one of the most prominent objectives of rehabilitating and reintegration programmes for violent extremists is to prepare inmates for their transition back into mainstream society in a way that minimises the chance that they will re-offend after being released from prison.<sup>32</sup>

In turn, these objectives are achieved through sub-objectives, which are arrived at through a number of additional questions. Firstly, should rehabilitation efforts aim for *de-radicalisation* or *disengagement*? Among (counter-)terrorism experts, an animated debate is on-going on the reasons and motivations for people to move from involvement in violence to non-violent activities.<sup>33</sup> The pathways to leaving violent extremism behind may not be the same for everyone, and a shift away from violent behaviour does not necessarily go hand in hand with a shift away from ideological support. That is, inmates might be persuaded to reconsider the use of violence, but that does not automatically imply that they are no longer committed to the political cause they pursued. The question is whether and why that would be problematic.

From a criminal justice perspective, one could argue that renouncing violent behaviour (i.e. disengagement) may suffice, as long as the individual indeed refrains from committing any further terrorist offenses after being released from prison. After all, adhering to radical views is not against the law *per se*, only when extremist belief systems give rise to illegal activities do they become relevant in criminal justice terms. In fact, Horgan<sup>34</sup> argues that although most programmes describe themselves as 'de-radicalisation programmes', on closer scrutiny they actually appear to be more about attempts to promote disengagement and desistance from terrorism than about denouncing violent extremist ideologies.

The challenge, however, is to arrive at a state where desistance from terrorist violence is *permanent*, and where individuals stay away from violence indefinitely. But how can that be achieved? The underlying question is a fundamental one: what comes first, (violent extremist) attitudes or (violent extremist) behaviour? Insights from psychology point out that the relationship between how people feel or think and what they actually do is utterly complex, and that a change in attitudes does not necessarily reflect a change in behaviour, or *vice versa*.<sup>35</sup> With regard to dealing with ideologically radicalised offenders, this relationship is complicated even further by the notion that extremist behaviour, if not driven, is at least legitimised by a fundamentalist belief system. With acknowledgement of the complex link between extremist attitudes and actions, a general consensus appears to exist among terrorism experts that rehabilitation efforts require a balanced approach which targets both attitudes and behaviour and is geared to disengagement whilst promoting de-radicalisation.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cullen & Gendreau (2000); Cullen, F. T., & Applegate, B. K. (1997). *Offender rehabilitation: Effective correctional intervention*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, Dartmouth.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bjørge, T. and Horgan, J. (Eds.) (2009). *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*. London: Routledge; Horgan, J. (2009). *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*. London and New York: Routledge; Horgan, J. and Braddock, K. (2010). 'Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs.' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (1), 1-25;

<sup>34</sup> Horgan, J. (2008). Deradicalization or disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179-211; Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (2010). *Predicting and changing behavior: The reasoned action approach*. New York: Psychology Press (Taylor & Francis).

<sup>36</sup> ICCT-The Hague (2012). Executive Summary of the Conference on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders: Good Practices & Lessons Learned, held 6-9 December 2011, The Hague, The Netherlands. Retrieved from: <http://www.icct.nl/userfiles/file/Executive%20Summary%20The%20Hague%20Rehab%20Conference%20December%202011.pdf>

Second, should rehabilitation initiatives be implemented at the individual or the collective level? The answer to this question depends on how the target population is defined and in particular on a) the structure of the extremist movement at which the intervention is aimed, and b) at the position of respective individuals within the movement.<sup>37</sup> Arguably, collective treatments are only likely to work if the participants in the programme belong to a coherent movement that is more or less hierarchically structured.<sup>38</sup> In movements that lean heavily on leadership, the top segments can impose a change in direction and promote a sense of shared reality among its members. The success relies to a large extent on the degree to which the leaders can be persuaded to participate and commence a collective move away from violence. In the case of de-centralised movements where core leadership is less important, collective efforts might be less productive.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the intervention should be tailored to the social position of individual participants in the broader network. Individuals who reside at the periphery of a violent movement have different needs than those who belong to the core. For example, individuals who take up a facilitative function but are otherwise marginally embedded and hardly acquainted with the core violent extremists, might be poorly served by collective treatments which confront them with their fellow group members. For such participants, an individualised approach might be more beneficial.

Thirdly, what are short term versus mid- and long term objectives of rehabilitation efforts? In the short term, the central objective is to prepare inmates for their transition back into mainstream society and assist them in becoming law-abiding citizens. Programmes seek to prevent the individual from running straight back into the arms of groups or individuals who pushed the individual towards extremism and terrorist activities in the first place. In the long run, rehabilitation programmes should contribute to shaping an environment in which the ex-inmate can nest and live a sustainable, law-abiding life. Hence, recidivism should be prevented not only in the short and middle term, but also in the longer term.

## Mechanisms

After the objectives have been established, the question arises what mechanisms are required and what instruments need to be implemented to achieve the desired outcomes. The programme theory describes the policy instruments and, importantly, how the instruments are believed to contribute to achieving the objectives. Broadly speaking, rehabilitation initiatives – for violent extremists as well as for other categories of offenders – rest on the assumption that changes can be made to the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the inmate, in such a way that the chance of recidivism can be reduced.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the key challenge is to identify and implement the interventions that can induce such changes. In line with a Realist approach, the different programme components should be evidence-based and rooted in existing knowledge, derived from research and experience, about the factors that are predictive of recidivism and how they can be addressed. Driven by insights from ‘general’ inmate reform, a programme theory for extremist rehabilitation could include, among others, the following mechanisms.

Firstly, one of the core elements of many rehabilitation programmes is education. A variety of programmes are offered to inmates including literacy and language courses, basic maths, history and civics. Depending on the inmate’s educational record, college- or university level programmes may be offered. Education is believed to ignite a range of social changes. Not only does it improve the inmate’s educational capabilities and chances of employment, it is also believed to contribute to broaden their intellectual horizon, increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and to promote the individual’s resilience to violent extremist messages and dominant fellow inmates.

<sup>37</sup>See for an elaboration Rabasa, A., Pettyjohn, S.L., Ghez, J.J. & Boucek, C. (2010). Deradicalizing Islamist Extremist. RAND Cooperation. Retrieved from: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA534160>

<sup>38</sup> Neumann (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Neumann (2010).

<sup>40</sup> Cullen & Gendreau (2000).

Secondly, rehabilitation efforts generally emphasise vocational training. Indeed, lack of employment and employment skills is believed to be closely related to criminal conduct and re-offending.<sup>41</sup> Vocational training is often customised to a specific career or trade and focuses on practical applications of skills learned, with little emphasis on theory or analytical proficiency. The presumed mechanism behind vocational training can be that it improves employment skills and prepares the inmate to take a skilled job upon release from prison. Certificates could be awarded to prove to potential employers that the ex-convict has the necessary skills to perform a specific, skilled occupation.

Thirdly, a crucial component of rehabilitation programmes is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Research shows that CBT generally has significant effects on reducing recidivism among 'general' (not extremist) offenders.<sup>42</sup> CBT rests on the premise that the cognitive, attitudinal and motivational dispositions of offenders – the thoughts, feelings and beliefs that pushed them towards deviancy in the first place – are learned rather than innate.<sup>43</sup> CBT focuses on understanding and changing these cognitive processes in a way that reduces criminal tendencies (e.g. improving abstract thinking, critical reasoning, goal setting, perspective taking),<sup>44</sup> and can be particularly valuable to pursue reform of violent extremist offenders.

Fourthly, religious counselling is increasingly recognised as an instrument for offender reform.<sup>45</sup> Religion has always played an important role in the prison context,<sup>46</sup> and studies have shown that religious counselling can exert positive effects on inmate adjustment and re-offending.<sup>47</sup> The underlying mechanism behind religious counselling could for example be that religious counselling can induce positive attitudinal and motivational change, or that – in the case of religious extremism – religious counselling can encourage inmates to adhere to a more moderate, peaceful religious interpretation that does not legitimise terrorist activities.

Prison rehabilitation programmes for extremist offenders can include several other components, including individual classification and needs assessments, group discussions, on the job training, parole and probation, social and recreational activities, testing and evaluation, and (financial) aftercare.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of whether the underlying theories about the impact of treatment programmes on reduced recidivism are correct or fundamentally flawed, their actual impact depends on the setting in which they are implemented.

## Context

One of the strongest qualities of the Realist approach is its clear acknowledgement of the fact that programmes are dynamic enterprises which are embedded in complex social systems that strongly influence policy mechanisms and outcomes. Extremist rehabilitation programmes that are seemingly effective in country A might produce completely different, even counter-productive results in country B when not tailored to the specific environment. Disentangling the different layers of the policy context, and understanding how they affect the

<sup>41</sup> Hagan, J. (1993). The Social Embeddedness of Crime and Unemployment. *Criminology*, 31, 4: 465–91; Western, B. (2002). The Impact of Incarceration on Wage Mobility and Inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 67, 4: 526–46.

<sup>42</sup> Andrews, D. A., Zinger, I., Hoge, R. D., Bonta, J., Gendreau, P., & Cullen, F. T. (1990). Does correctional treatment work? A clinically-relevant and psychologically informed meta-analysis. *Criminology*, 28, 369–404; Antonowicz & Ross (1994); Lipsey, M.W., Landenberger, N.A. & Wilson, S.J. (2007). Effects of cognitive-behavioral programs for criminal offenders. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 6: 1–30

<sup>43</sup> Lipsey et al (2007): 4

<sup>44</sup> See Lipsey et al (2007) for an overview of representative CBT programmes for offenders.

<sup>45</sup> Sundt, J.L., Dammer, H.R. & Cullen, F.T. (2002): The Role of the Prison Chaplain in Rehabilitation, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 35: 3–4, 59–86; Worthington, E., Kuru, T., McCullough, M., & Sandage, S. (1996). Empirical research on religion and psychotherapeutic processes and outcomes: A 10-year review and research prospectus. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 448–487.

<sup>46</sup> Beckford, J., Joly, D. & Khosrokhavar, F. (2005). *Muslims in Prison: Challenge and Change in Britain and France*. Hampshire: Palgrave; Clear, T.R. & Sumter, M.T. (2002). Prisoners, Prison, and Religion. Religion and Adjustment to Prison. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 35 (3/4).

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, B. R. (1987). Religiosity and institutional deviance: The impact of religious variables upon inmate adjustment. *Criminal Justice Review*, 12, 21–30; Johnson, B. R., Larson, D. B., & Pitts, T. C. (1997). Religious programming, institutional adjustment, and recidivism among former inmates in prison fellowship programs: A research note. *Justice Quarterly*, 14, 1.

<sup>48</sup> See for an overview of 22 interventions: Robertson, Von H. (1968). *A Descriptive Analysis of Vocational Rehabilitation and Training Programs and Techniques at the Utah State Prison*. Salt Lake City: Utah State Board of Education.

intervention, is therefore a critical element in the Realist approach. Pawson and Tilley acknowledge at least four layers of contextual factors<sup>49</sup>:

Firstly, the workings of rehabilitation programmes are heavily affected by the *individuals* involved. On the one hand, the inmates should be sufficiently motivated to participate in the programme and reflect critically on their own attitudes and behaviour. The same programme might work differently with, for instance, convicted versus suspected offenders, long-term versus short-term inmates, leaders versus followers, and high-risk versus low-risk offenders. It might even be the case that some of the most committed extremists, often called ‘irreconcilables’, are not susceptible to reform at all.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, rehabilitation programmes should be tailored to the specific needs of individuals with consideration of their political motivation or ideological background as well as the structure of the movement (e.g. centralised or decentralised). What works for Islamists in Saudi Arabia might not work for Islamists in the UK, let alone for loyalists in Northern Ireland or right-wing extremists in Scandinavia. On the other hand, the staff, including prison personnel, probation officers and social workers, should understand the conceptual framework and the objectives of the programme, and have the appropriate training, social skills and credibility to make the intervention a success.

Secondly, the *interpersonal relationships* between the stakeholders and actors involved should be supportive of the programme. The development and implementation of rehabilitation programmes requires a joint effort by a wide range of actors, who each contribute unique expertise and skills at different phases and stages of the process. For such a complex enterprise to be successful, a shared sense of ownership and constructive communication lines between individuals involved are necessary preconditions.<sup>51</sup>

Thirdly, the *institutional setting* is important: who should be responsible for the development and implementation of the rehabilitation programme? For example, a question that needs to be answered is whether participants in extremist rehabilitation programmes should be housed in separate facilities where they can be segregated from other categories of inmates. If so, should central authority be placed with the prison service, probation service, or are rehabilitation programmes well serviced by privatisation? Either way, the culture, ethos, management structure and available resources of the respective institution needs to be facilitative of rehabilitation efforts. Management levels and practitioners should all be on the same page concerning the procedures and rules to be followed.

Lastly, Pawson and Tilley identify the wider *infrastructural* system as an important contextual influence on how programmes work.<sup>52</sup> Rehabilitative interventions are embedded in complex legal and bureaucratic frameworks and are subjected by infrastructural constraints. The exact dimensions of the criminal justice system and the prison system in a particular country shape how the programme works and what outcomes it produces. As such, rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists are subject to layer upon layer of contextual factors, which can impose severe constraints on the workings and outcomes of the intervention. To ensure that rehabilitation efforts have a chance to succeed in reforming violent extremists and reducing recidivism, it is critical that programmes are tailored to the specific characteristics of the environment in which they are implemented. Essentially, this means that potential contextual constraints, i.e. factors that could confound the required mechanisms and undermine the effectiveness of the intervention, should be dealt with appropriately and *a priori*. Informed by a Realist framework, this means that actively eliminating or at least minimising the negative impact of distorting environmental factors should be explicitly integrated as objectives into the programme theory. This implies that a ‘secondary programme theory’, which describes the instruments and

<sup>49</sup> Pawson (2006): P.31 provides a valuable example of a prisoner education programme; See also Pawson et al (2005): P23 for an example on school-based sex education for teenagers.

<sup>50</sup> Rabasa, A., Pettyjohn, S.L., Ghez, J.J. & Boucek, C. (2010). *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, P. xx; Bernard et al. (2010). *The battle behind the wire: U.S. prisoner and detainee operations from World War II to Iraq*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation; P.70.

<sup>51</sup> ICCT (2011). *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders: Core Principles and Good Practices*. Unpublished background paper for roundtable expert meeting and conference, 6-9 Dec 2011, The Hague, The Netherlands.

<sup>52</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997); Pawson et al (2005); Pawson (2006).

mechanisms through which these derivative objectives are to be achieved, should be integrated into the overarching theory behind the intervention.

Hence, the general policy plan now consists of two interrelated parts: a primary programme theory which describes the mechanisms through which the inmate is being prepared for the transition to society, and a secondary programme theory which describes the mechanisms through which the negative impact of potentially confounding external factors is limited. In the following section, an example will be used to elaborate this line of reasoning.

## Secondary Programme Theory

In developing rehabilitation initiatives, programme architects have to be sensitive to external influences that might conflict with their ambitions. Of course, the number of potentially disturbing contextual factors is abundant and not all of them can reasonably be manipulated within the policy framework. For instance, to a large degree the implementation of extremist rehabilitation is dependent on public and political support for inmate reform *vis-à-vis* punishment and retaliation, as well as on general attitudes towards inmates with an extremist or terrorist background and, crucially, on the availability of resources. Reasonably, some of these influences are intangible or too abstract to be targeted within the limits of the rehabilitation initiative. The programme architects are challenged to identify in advance the most disturbing contextual influences and, within the legal, bureaucratic and socio-economic space available to them, and should subsequently try to absorb these influences into the policy programme.

For instance, rehabilitation programmes often seem to rest on the assumption that changing relevant characteristics of the *inmate* is sufficient to facilitate re-socialisation and the re-entry processes. However, it is not. Rehabilitation is not a unilateral process. Preparing the individual for his return into mainstream society is only one side of the equation. It is equally important to prepare the receiving community for the inmate's return. At least two examples are relevant here to support this argument.

Firstly, the environment to which the inmate returns might be characterised by risk factors that are known to be conducive to radicalisation or extremist behaviour. After all, there were reasons present that caused the individual to deviate and be incarcerated in the first place. Criminological literature has identified a range of risk factors that are associated with criminal conduct and re-offending<sup>53</sup>. Some of these factors, like criminal record and family criminality, are static and cannot be changed.<sup>54</sup> Others, like anti-social attitudes and values, poor self-control, poor problem-solving skills, and lack of employment skills, are dynamic (often called *criminogenic needs*) and can be targeted in prison-based programmes.<sup>55</sup> Other relevant factors, which are not carried within the individual but are nested within the context, might be more difficult to change and require additional measures. For example, it has been shown that anti-social associates, family dysfunction, and lack of employment are correlated with reoffending.<sup>56</sup>

In addition, extremism literature identifies a series of factors that are believed to be conducive to violent radicalisation and terrorist behaviour.<sup>57</sup> Experiences of (collective) humiliation, social rejection and relative deprivation can contribute to post-release radicalisation and push ex-inmates back towards violent extremist movements. Individuals who, upon release, have no protective social environment to return to, run the risk of being pulled straight back into the extremist environment they came from.

<sup>53</sup> Andrews, D., Zinger, I., Hoge, R., Bonta, J., Gendreau, P., Cullen, F. (1990). Does Correctional Treatment Work? A Clinically Relevant and Psychologically Informed Meta-Analysis." *Criminology*, 28(3):369-404.; Gendreau, P., Little, T., Goggin, C. (1996). A Meta-Analysis of the Predictors of Adult Offender Recidivism: What Works!. *Criminology*, 34:575-607.

<sup>54</sup> Andrews & Bonta (1994),

<sup>55</sup> Andrews et al. (1990); Gendreau et al. (1996)

<sup>56</sup> See for example Berg, M. & Huebner, B.M. (2011). Reentry and the Ties that Bind: An Examination of Social Ties, Employment, and Recidivism". *Justice Quarterly*, 28(1), 382 – 410.

<sup>57</sup> See for an overview Veldhuis, T.M. & Staun, J. (2009). *Islamist radicalization: A root cause model* (Clingendael Security Paper no. 12). The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.



Secondly, whether rehabilitation and reintegration will be successful depends critically on the willingness of the host community to adopt the ex-offender and accept him as a full member again. Ex-inmates and probation officers are greatly concerned with negative stereotypes that exist among the public about ex-inmates and -criminals. Research consistently reveals that inmates are confronted with negative stigmas,<sup>58</sup> which hinder the reintegration process<sup>59</sup> and cause difficulties in finding housing<sup>60</sup> or employment<sup>61</sup>. Arguably, such stigmatisation effects are at least as strong, if not stronger, for ex-inmates who have a violent extremist background.

In sum, the road from imprisonment to a 'normal' life outside prison cannot be expected to be a smooth one. Ex-inmates are confronted with several issues that can severely obstruct the re-entry process and increase the likelihood of recidivism. Transforming extremist offenders into peaceful, law-abiding citizens is one thing, but to keep them away from violence in the extended future is another. To maximise the chances of success, additional measures must be taken to address criminogenic needs in the offenders' immediate environment, and to establish a safe and trusting social network to return to. It is of profound importance to actively engender the receiving environment as a protective factor against recidivism and to encourage the community to support the re-entry and reintegration process.

It follows that an explicit plan must be derived to deal with confounding factors (or, to phrase it differently, to ensure that necessary preconditions are met), which should be integrated into the overarching rehabilitation policy. Similar to the general framework, the secondary programme theory describes the intended outcomes of the intervention and the instruments and mechanisms with which these outcomes are to be achieved. To give an example of what such a programme theory could look like:

*Outcomes:* The objective of the secondary programme is in line with the general programme theory: to prevent post-release radicalisation and recidivism. This translates into the sub-objectives to 1) prepare the receiving environment for the inmate's return to society, by reducing 1a) criminogenic factors and 1b) stigmatisation of violent extremist offenders.

*Mechanisms:* to achieve the objectives, the cognitive, behavioural, attitudinal and other relevant socio-economic characteristics of the host society should be altered in a positive way. Instruments should focus on community engagement and involve the offender's family members, employment organisations and social service agencies in the community. The community (e.g. families, neighbourhoods, religious and cultural institutions and, if applicable, victims) should be explicitly empowered to reduce the risk of post-release radicalisation and extremism. Prevailing negative perceptions in the community about ex-inmates in general and violent extremist offenders in particular should be deliberately targeted to enhance trust and a positive attitude towards the ex-inmate.

Figure 1 illustrates how the formulation of a programme theory for rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists could be graphically presented. It is important to note that this figure is merely an example of one of many possible programme theories. It is beyond the scope of the present study to identify all the details of such a programme. Above all, each intervention should be tailored to the specific needs of the individual and community involved; a context which is lacking in the present discussion. Surely, there are other objectives, mechanisms and instruments thinkable that should be accounted for in order to tailor the intervention to its precise context. The

<sup>58</sup> Hirschfield, P.J. & Piquero, A.R. (2010). Normalization and Legitimation: Modelling Stigmatizing Attitudes Toward Ex-Offenders. *Criminology*, 48. 27-55.

<sup>59</sup> Visher, C., La Vigne, N. & Travis, J. (2004). *Returning home: Understanding the challenges of prisoner reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute; Kuppens, J., & Ferwerda, H. (2008). *Van binnen naar buiten: Een behoefteonderzoek naar de aard en omvang van nazorg voor gedetineerden*. Arnhem: Advies en Onderzoeksgroep Beke.

<sup>60</sup> Clear, T.R., Rose, D.R. & Ryder, J.A. (2001). Incarceration and Community: The Problem of Removing and Returning Offenders. *Crime and Delinquency*, 47. 335-351.

<sup>61</sup> Solomon, A., Johnson, K., Travis, J. & McBride, E. (2004). *From Prison to Work: The employment dimensions of prisoner reentry: A report of the reentry roundtable*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

figure below provides a basic overview of some of the most important elements that should be included in any programme theory, and as such might be valuable as a framework for the development of future programmes.

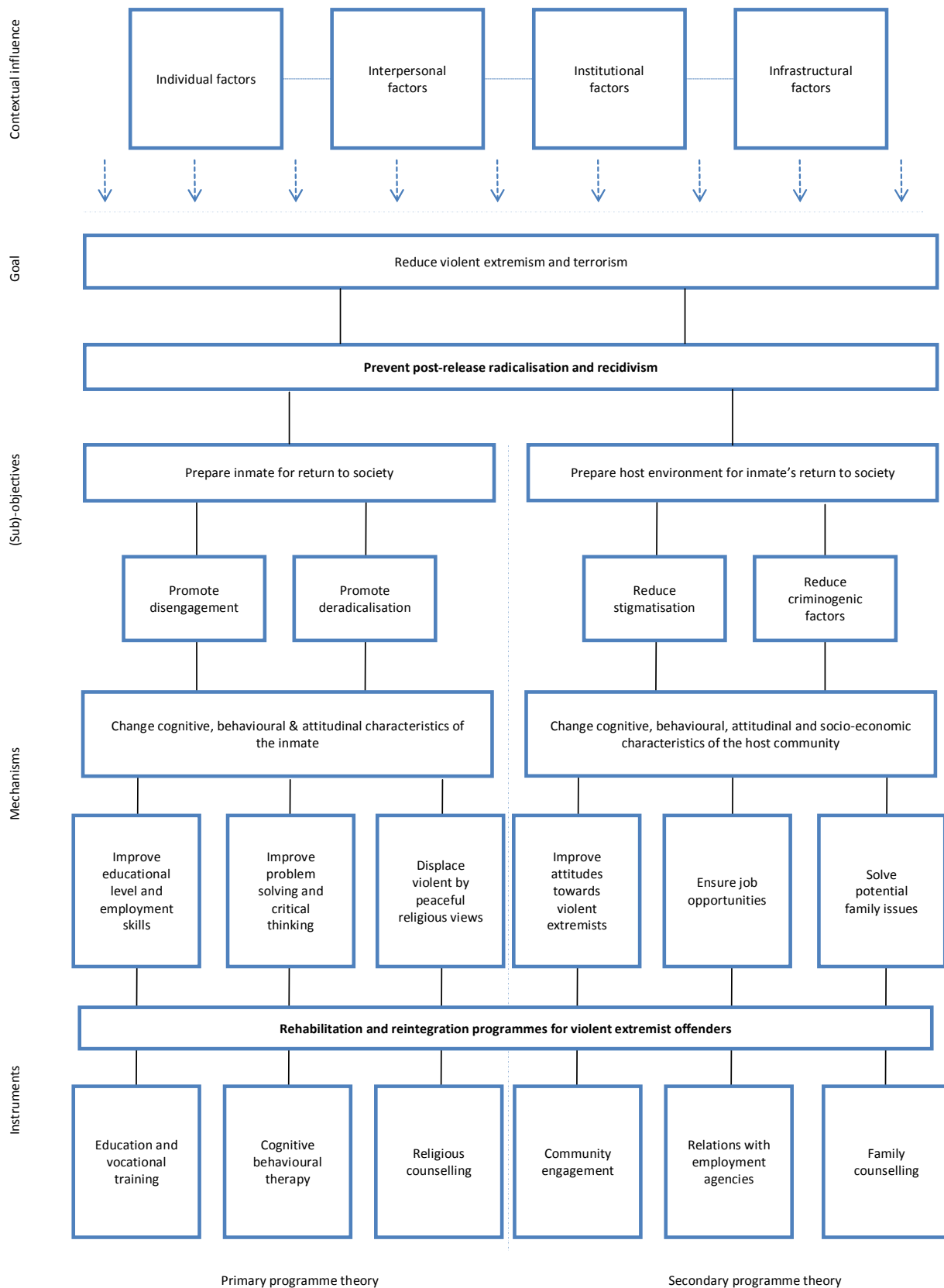


Figure 1. Example of a programme theory to rehabilitate and reintegrate violent extremist offenders

## Evidence-based Policy Evaluation

A coherent programme theory does not only outline how the programme should work; it is also a necessary precondition in any attempt to assess whether and why the programme did or did not work. Rigorous policy evaluation is an essential element of the Realist approach.<sup>62</sup> Programmes need to be evaluated as thoroughly as possible, especially when, as is the case with rehabilitation programmes for violent extremist offenders, existing evidence is scarce and programmes are implemented on a trial basis. To begin with, rigorous evaluations analyse and promote accountability and legitimacy, and prove that policies are working effectively (and thus that money is well spent). Also, they contribute to the accumulation of knowledge. Evaluations serve to advise policy makers on outcomes, effects, and cost-benefit analyses, and on lessons on ‘good practices’. As such, evaluations promote improvement of policies through increased understanding of how they function under different circumstances.

Policy evaluations revolve around two key questions: does the current policy work and how can we make it work (better)?<sup>63</sup> To answer these questions, comprehensive policy reviews consist of at least three components. Firstly, they involve a plan-evaluation, which examines whether the programme is, in theory, suitable to produce its intended results. This first part of the evaluation focuses on the credibility and accurateness of the programme theory. When the programme theory is implicit, as is often the case, evaluators need to start by reconstructing the programme theory and explicating the underlying assumptions about how and for whom the programme might work. Again, the need for prospective development of an explicit programme theory is evident: it ensures that the one and only correct theory on which the intervention rests is being reviewed, and prevents stakeholders from operating on the basis of different interpretations of the programme theory.

Secondly, policy reviews include a process-evaluation, which analyses the implementation process and researches whether the programme activities are occurring as expected. For example, an evaluator could ask whether the target audience was reached (did all violent extremist inmates who were eligible for the rehabilitation intervention participate in the programme?), whether the different components of the programme were accomplished (did the participants in the programme indeed receive the different treatments, e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, education, etc.?), and how external factors influenced programme *delivery* – not outcomes – (how did established security measures affect rehabilitative efforts?).

Thirdly, the review involves an impact-evaluation, which assesses whether the programme did indeed produce the desired outcomes. By examining the configuration between contexts, outcomes and mechanisms, Realist evaluations do not only answer the question whether the intervention worked, but also reveal *how* the programme worked, which problems were met during the implementation and how they were dealt with.<sup>64</sup> For example, to evaluate whether rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists reduce recidivism, a Realist would examine its underlying mechanisms (e.g. have skills, motivation and attitudes changed?) and the context in which they work (e.g. does the ‘host community’ support the re-entry process, are there job opportunities for the ex-inmate, are there criminogenic factors present which can push the individual back to violent extremism?).<sup>65</sup>

There is a range of practical problems that could arise and hinder the evaluation process, of which a few typical ones will be described below.<sup>66</sup> Firstly and most prominently, evaluators often run into methodological issues. Above all, a frequently encountered problem is that the programme theory is unclear. Often, the programme theory has not been written down and evaluators struggle to correctly reconstruct and interpret the

<sup>62</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997); Pawson (2006)

<sup>63</sup> Sanderson (2002): 10.

<sup>64</sup> Pawson & Tilley (1997); Pawson (2006)

<sup>65</sup> This example is adapted from an example by Pawson R, Greenhalgh T, Harvey G, Walshe K. (2005). Realist review - a new method of systematic review designed for complex policy interventions. *Journal of Health Services Research Policy*, 10, 21-34.

<sup>66</sup> See for example Knaap, L.M. van der, Leeuw, F. L., Bogaerts, S., & Nijssen, L.T.J. (2008). Combining Campbell standards and the Realist Evaluation Approach: The best of two worlds? *American Journal of Evaluation*, 29(1), 48-57; Khan, J. Harmelink, M., Harmsen R., Irrek, W. & Labanca, N. (2007). From Theory Based Policy Evaluation to SMART Policy Design. Summary report of the AID-EE project. Utrecht: ECOFYS Netherlands.

theory. Policy makers may only have a vague idea of how the policy instrument is supposed to function, or adhere to different theories.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, lack of data is a common problem. In most cases, evaluation mechanisms are not integrated into the programme theory, as a result of which crucial monitoring data are not collected. If one for example wishes to examine whether cognitive and attitudinal characteristics of inmates change over time, these characteristics need to be assessed at different moments, most prominently at the onset of the programme. In the absence of null-measurements or, alternatively, (quasi-)experimental setups in which the intervention can be compared with a counterfactual, assessing policy outcomes is extremely difficult. Lastly, an important methodological concern is the difficulty to isolate programme impacts from exogenous factors and to measure them with reasonable accuracy. Especially with complex interventions like rehabilitation programmes, which are designed to pursue multiple objectives at once, it is difficult to achieve unambiguous causal attribution about which (part of the) intervention caused what effect and how. Strong theories about counterfactual reasoning are essential to overcome this issue.

Secondly, policy outcomes might not always be (immediately) visible. In some cases, it takes a long time for results to manifest themselves. For example, rehabilitation programmes are geared towards achieving sustainable absence from criminal activity after imprisonment, but inmates might fall back to violent extremism long after they have been released (or after the policy evaluation has been conducted). Violent radicalisation is a gradual, incremental process which cannot be undone overnight. Whether rehabilitative efforts were indeed successful in refraining the individual from violence may only become clear after an extended period of time.

Thirdly, complex policies like rehabilitation programmes require tailored and customised approaches which are adjusted to the specific context and individuals involved, making it almost impossible to identify standard interventions that can be systematically assessed under varying circumstances. Here, the challenge is to identify general principles about how mechanisms function under specific conditions, and examine how they can be applied to different programmes in different environments.

To some extent, these concerns can be accounted for by explicitly formulating narrowly defined criteria in the programme theory, including indicators of success and failure, reasons for failure and preconditions for success.

### Indicators of Success and Failure

Firstly, in order to measure the impact of the intervention, the policy theory has to be translated into concrete indicators for success and failure. A clear conceptualisation of the relevant terms and objectives is absolutely crucial in this respect. Ambiguity about what it exactly is that the programme aims to achieve will hamper attempts to evaluate its success. How can we assess whether a rehabilitation programme has achieved its outcomes, if it is unclear what is meant by 'rehabilitation' (i.e. disengagement or de-radicalisation)? When is a person 'sufficiently' rehabilitated? Does 'proper' de-radicalisation require the inmate to explicitly and publicly renounce violent extremism, or would the judgment of staff members suffice? Rehabilitation, disengagement and de-radicalisation are intangible ideas, without concrete definitions. As a result they may be understood or interpreted differently by different people. To measure the programme's impact, such terms need to be defined in more concrete, measurable indicators.

Ultimately, the central objective of rehabilitation programmes is to reduce recidivism (see Figure 1 for a flow-chart). The concept of recidivism can be translated into several standardised follow-up measures like re-arrest, reconviction, and re-incarceration.<sup>68</sup> However, these criteria have limitations and they raise important questions which are particularly relevant in dealing with violent extremist offenders, and which have to be answered in advance.

<sup>67</sup> Khan et al. (2007).

<sup>68</sup> Antonowicz & Ross (1994).

For example, with what percentage (e.g. ten, twenty, hundred?) should recidivism be reduced in order for the rehabilitation programme to be deemed a success? This is especially relevant given the fact that not all re-offenders will be caught or prosecuted, and some individuals might travel abroad and be caught for terrorist activities there, without being included in the recidivism statistics in the country of rehabilitation. Moreover, it is possible that ex-inmates reoffend upon release by committing a crime unrelated to terrorism, such as violent assault or robbery. They might have disengaged from violent extremism, but not from ‘regular’ crimes. It should be explicated before the programme commences whether and why these or similar cases are considered a success or not.

An important feature of rehabilitation efforts is that they are multi-faceted and are designed to induce improvement on several outcome variables other than recidivism, including institutional adjustment (fewer disciplinary problems), improved vocational skills, educational achievement, personality and attitude change, and community adjustment. There are different ways to view such changes. On the one hand, these results can be seen as necessary sub-objectives to achieve reductions in recidivism. On the other hand, they can also be seen as extra beneficial effects beyond a decline in recidivism. They may be of secondary importance but must nevertheless not be overlooked when assessing the impact of rehabilitation interventions. Either way, such secondary outcomes (improved skills, motivation and attitudes) reflect the workings of the policy mechanisms; measuring them with accuracy is an important step in identifying *why* the programme was or was not successful. These examples illustrate that it is crucial to develop unambiguous and quantifiable indicators of the programme’s goals, objectives and sub-objectives, in order to test the underlying mechanisms of the programme. These criteria are crucial in isolating programme effects from exogenous effects and can help reveal whether any changes that occurred are attributable to the implementation of the instrument (i.e. that the change was *caused* by the intervention instead of by an unrelated factor).

## Reasons for Failure

The programme theory should also include a rationale about the conditions that might lead rehabilitation programmes to fail. Broadly speaking, the reasons for failure fall into two categories. Firstly, rehabilitation programmes may fail when the underlying policy is ill-conceived. Programmes that are poorly thought through, do not account for confounding contextual factors, are poorly planned and not based on existing experience or criminological theory are likely to fail or, even worse, do more harm than good. The policy instruments need to be accurately and logically aligned with the programme’s objectives.

To give an example, policy makers might feel that in a given context it is appropriate to segregate some offenders from other categories of inmates. When this is the case, it is critical that the segregation criteria (i.e. the policy instrument) are formulated in accordance with the stated policy objective. When the key objective of segregation is explicitly defined as to curb recruitment efforts by violent extremist inmates, the selection criteria should be formulated so that they identify those inmates – and only those – who, on the basis of individual assessments, have indeed been classified a potential risk of recruiting other prisoners. The selection criteria should not be too broadly defined. Selecting ‘terrorist offenders’ for segregation might run the risk of a) failing to identify non-terrorist offenders who have radicalised in prison and might be inspired to undertake recruitment efforts, and b) wrongly segregating offenders who have indeed been related to a terrorist offence, but who might not be ideologically radicalised, let alone motivated to recruit fellow inmates. Think for example about offenders who have been forced against their will to commit terrorist acts or who have been involved in secondary or peripheral activities for monetary rather than political gain. Segregating these inmates in special terrorist facilities does not contribute to countering violent extremist recruitment but rather exposes them to radical influences from their radicalised fellow inmates.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> See for an extended version of this elaboration Veldhuis, T.M., Gordijn, E.H., Lindenberg, S. & Veenstra, R. (2011). *Terroristen in Detentie. Evaluatie van de Terroristenafdeling*. [Terrorists in Detention: Review of the Terrorism Wing]. The Hague: WODC/Ministry of Security and Justice.

In other words, the formulation of the selection criteria (and other instruments, for that matter) has to be individualised rather than standardised and should be unequivocally aligned with the semantics applied in the formulation of the corresponding objectives. In this example, the selection criteria should segregate (only) those inmates who have, before or during detention, undertaken incitement or recruitment efforts and can legitimately be identified as a potential recruitment concern.

Secondly, programmes fail when they lack therapeutic integrity, i.e. when they are not implemented as designed. Therapeutic integrity of a programme can be corrupted by several factors, including incompetent or inadequately trained staff, lack of resources to implement the programme, disturbances in the institutional or correctional context, or when personnel interpret the programme theory in a wrong way or fail to adhere to the procedures and principles that are required to change the inmate's attitudes and behaviours. To prevent such failures, the programme theory of rehabilitation programmes should be realistic and tailored to the specific contextual constraints (e.g. available resources, institutional and legal boundaries). Also, the details of the programme need to be communicated explicitly to the practitioners and other relevant actors to ensure that the central premises are unequivocally adopted and followed. Moreover, programme theories should include a comprehensive, forward looking analysis of potential reasons for failure that may occur in the short term as well as in the middle or longer term. Such analyses should be geared to identify as many potential confounding factors as possible across different contextual layers, including infrastructural (e.g. a lack of community support and a lack of resources), institutional (e.g. lack of supportive culture and a poor balance between security measures (e.g. intelligence gathering) and rehabilitative efforts), interpersonal (e.g. staff who lack credibility), and individual (e.g. irreconcilables) layers.<sup>70</sup>

To give a notable example, policy makers have to be aware that the socio-political infrastructure under which they design detention and rehabilitation policies can exert profound influence on the decision-making process and, in turn, the policy outcomes.<sup>71</sup> Often, counter-terrorism policies, like other security related measures, are designed under substantial social, political and time pressure. They are generally produced in the face of an acute threat, with policy makers being confronted with high political and public expectations that can result in a public outcry to pursue a particular course of action – irrespective of whether such actions actually contribute to countering the threat.<sup>72</sup> Also, existing procedures and policies might be deemed unsuitable to deal with the situation, so that novel policies need to be developed and implemented on short notice. A (real or perceived) threat, like violent radicalisation among the prison population, might ultimately influence the decision making process in a way that leads to suboptimal policy decisions.<sup>73</sup> Research shows that high pressure often can induce a paralysing group think among decision makers and might push them towards an unbalanced focus on short term goals whilst disregarding longer term objectives ('first things first'), and to misinterpreting or neglecting of undesired influences or outcomes.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, policy makers need to be skilled to recognise and acknowledge external pressures on the policy context and integrate additional measures into the programme theory that aim to curb undesired outcomes (i.e. by means of secondary programme theories).

## Necessary Preconditions for Success

In addition to reasons for failure, programme theories need to incorporate necessary preconditions for success, which again have to be identified across different contextual layers and translated accordingly into (sub-)

<sup>70</sup> Here, the conceptualisation of layers is drawn from Pawson and Tilley's work (See also footnote 45). Importantly, this classification serves only as an example and policy makers can opt for a different conceptualisation, as long as it covers as many potential confounding factors as possible.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Janis, I. L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Boin, A. & 't Hart, P. (2000). Institutional Crises and Reforms in Policy Sectors. In *Government Institutions: Effects, Changes and Normative Foundations*, edited by H. Wagenaar, (9–32). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Downes-Le Guin, T. & Hoffman, B. (1993). *The Impact of Terrorism on Public Opinion - 1988 to 1989*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR225](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR225). Also available in print form.

<sup>73</sup> See for an example of the impact of socio-political pressure on policy making in the realm of terrorist detention and rehabilitation: Veldhuis et al. (2011).

<sup>74</sup> See for example Gray, J. R. (1999). A bias toward short-term thinking in threat-related negative emotional states. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 65 – 75.



objectives and corresponding instruments. At the infrastructural level, these may include a clear identification of the target population (who is eligible and who's not?), a coherent approach among different actors and stakeholders, a supportive political and cultural environment, and sufficient available legal and bureaucratic manoeuvre space. At the institutional level, preconditions may comprise on-going individual risk and needs assessments, a safe prison environment, sufficient resources and the adequate training of staff. Sound communication between different actors involved and an across-the-board adherence to the same programme theory are factors included at the interpersonal level. At the individual level, necessary preconditions for success such as sufficient motivation and essential skills of the actors involved should be recognised and dealt with appropriately before the programme commences.

## Concluding Remarks

This ICCT Research Paper stressed the importance of a Realist approach to designing rehabilitation programmes for violent extremist offenders. Accordingly, it is argued that rehabilitation programmes need to be rooted in substantial evidence about the causes of violent extremism and about good practices in 'general' inmate rehabilitation as well as related areas like de-radicalisation, disengagement and demobilisation of violent movements.

Even more so, this paper argues that policy makers are tasked with the responsibility to explicate and write down the underlying programme theory (preferably including graphical charts) before the intervention is implemented. Such documents should include a sound conceptual model which unambiguously defines the key concepts involved (i.e. de-radicalisation, disengagement, recidivism, reintegration, rehabilitation, etc.) and how they relate to each other. The programme theory should also prominently describe in detail what the intervention aims to achieve, how the different policy instruments are aligned with the programme's objectives, what social mechanisms the intervention aims to bring in motion and how the programme may be influenced by the context in which it is introduced. Moreover, the programme theory translates the objectives into measurable indicators for success and failure and identifies the necessary preconditions for success. Importantly, such explicitly formulated programme theories promote legitimacy and accountability of the intervention, whilst ensuring uniform interpretations among management and practitioners as well as continuity of the programme when generations of stakeholders and staff come and go.

Accordingly, a few important lessons can be learned. Firstly, it is important to recognise that the Realist approach and its corresponding recommendations concerning the development, implementation and evaluation of policies are applicable to an abundance of situations and policy demands. The described line of argumentation is not only relevant in the realm of terrorist detention and rehabilitation. It is equally important and applicable in wider policy domains in counter-terrorism, the security sector, economics, education and every other social policy domain.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, in terms of violent extremist rehabilitation, the notions described above are relevant across multiple settings. Irrespective of whether policy makers are confronted with individual or with movements, with politically motivated inmates, prison gangs or sex offenders, the basic questions outlined above need to be answered prospectively regardless of the contextual details. Rather than developing a standardised rehabilitation programme, this paper aimed to highlight a few basic principles and translate them into guidelines that can assist policy makers in designing and developing a variety of policies, not only in the violent extremist rehabilitation area.

Secondly, in creating the most solid theoretical and evidence-based foundation, the challenge is to recognise and learn from relevant expertise and insights from related areas. All the relevant knowledge and experience available to us should be reviewed in the most efficient way to inform our thinking about

<sup>75</sup> See Pawson & Tilley (1997) and Pawson (2006) for broad and comprehensive applications of the Realist approach.

rehabilitation efforts. It is necessary to identify all the different contexts and settings that might be relevant for the development of future programmes. We have to look at different countries, at efforts with different movements in different cultural and socio-economic contexts and with different ideological backgrounds. Isolating the general principles about what works in terms of the underlying policy mechanisms and their conjunction with the specific external contexts in which they are implemented, can help us identify good practices and lessons which are transferrable across contexts.

Especially with 'new' policy domains, such as rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders, it is often difficult to fill in all the relevant details of the programme before the intervention commences. Often, practices and procedures are fine-tuned and optimised as the staff learns from unexpected difficulties or opportunities. Over time, the programme is adjusted to the specific context. The Realist approach emphasises that programmes 'incarnate' over time.<sup>76</sup> When a programme is implemented, it essentially 'tests' whether the underlying theory is correct or not in and of itself. The programme evaluation reveals whether these assumptions were flawed or not, on the basis of which the programme theory can be modified and improved.

Thirdly, hence a programme evaluation is a critical step in the policy chain. Evaluations inform us whether the programme works and, even more importantly, why it works and how it can be improved. Evaluation mechanisms have to be planned jointly with the policy formulation and have to be integrated into the programme to make longitudinal evaluation research designs possible. Specifically, the variables on which change is expected to occur (e.g. skills, attitudes, motivation) should be measured before, during and after the programme is in operation. These measures should be tested not only among the participants in the programme, but also among inmates who do *not* participate. This will allow researchers to examine the characteristics of the participants in comparison with the control group and those who refused or were denied access to the programme.

Such a research design would also allow for comparison between different groups of participants on the basis of their outset characteristics. For example, differences may occur between a highly motivated group, a moderately motivated group and an unmotivated group, or between individuals who publicly renounce violent extremist ideologies and acts and those who do not. If recidivism reduces among participants who have decided to renounce their violent extremist past in public but not among those who do not, and motivation was controlled for in the analysis, this is a strong indicator that public renouncement might contribute to the success of the programme.

Lastly, it is important to note that the implementation and outcomes of programmes can be substantially influenced by the way they are presented and framed. The way that managers, practitioners, target populations and the public think about (and talk about) the policy shapes the dynamics between the outcomes, mechanisms and context of the intervention. In general, rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists are embedded and presented within a counter-terrorism or counter violent extremism framework, which is accompanied by specific semantics and jargon. Often, we talk about 'terrorist rehabilitation', 'de-radicalisation', 'terrorist detention', 'demobilisation' or 'disarmament'. The discourse is driven by normative and politically loaded concepts. Although this is understandable, an explicit linkage between policy responses and acts of terrorism or violent extremism does have implications for the way these policies are framed and viewed. Most prominently, it draws the attention of the inmates and directly involved staff, as well as of government officials, media, policy makers and the public to that 'terrorist' or 'extremist' label. Not only do such labels induce stigmatisation of the offenders (and hence impair their re-entry process), they also run the risk of unintentionally legitimising further extremism and violence by acknowledging explicitly the political – or at least unique – nature of the offenders involved. Presenting and discussing rehabilitation policies, at least semantically, in a 'regular' criminal justice framework might help in countering such negative impacts. Framing policies in a neutral, objective way that emphasises the violent, illegal component of the criminal act rather than explicitly relating the individual to violent extremism, might be an important step in de-legitimising ideologies that support violence.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

To conclude, rehabilitation efforts for violent extremist offenders are surrounded by complexity. They involve intangible concepts, are implemented across a broad range of settings and applied by a wide variety of staff to an even wider audience of individuals and movements. This paper endeavoured to unpack these complexities by isolating the key policy elements and discussing them within the well-established Realist framework of policy making. The issues facing us today concerning extremist reform are not new. Rather, we are challenged to assemble the incredible amount of relevant evidence that has been gathered over the course of decades and translate pieces of information to contemporary scenarios. In doing so, acknowledging that every programme revolves around the interplay between outcomes, mechanisms and context is an important step for disentangling the complexity and, even more importantly, ensuring that future rehabilitation programmes are legitimate, purposeful, and increasingly likely to achieve their objectives.