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# **Civil Society's Approach to Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Western Balkans**

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## Global Action Platform



Gender Alliance for Development Center  
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With funding support from the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund

## ACRONYMS

<b>CBT</b>	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
<b>GCERF</b>	Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>P/CVE</b>	Preventing and countering violent extremism
<b>PVE</b>	Preventing violent extremism
<b>PTSD</b>	Post-traumatic stress disorder
<b>RFTFs</b>	Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters
<b>R&amp;R</b>	Rehabilitation and Reintegration

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Namely, we express special gratitude to Ejnxh Pepa, from the Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG), Chiara Dedeken from the Advocacy Training & Resource Center (ATRC), Alma Paspali from the National Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism Albania, Kevin Osborne, Vese Kelmendi and Cholpon Kainazarova from the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), Enkeleda Sako and Mehmet Durishti from Terre des hommes Albania (TdH), Florent Bajrami from Initiative for European Perspective (IEP), Goran Stamoski and Gonce Jakovleska from Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC), Nderim Nagauci from the Center for Common Ground, Meral Musli Tajroska and Drenusha Marku from the Pleiades Organization, Lumjana Cenaj from the Woman Center for Development and Cultural Albania (WCDCA), Rebeka Qena from the Community Development Fund (CDF), Mirela Arqimandriti from Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC), and Nejra Veljan and Ermin Sarajlija from Atlantic Initiative (AI) for contributing their invaluable inputs to this manual.

Cover Image: freepik.com

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GCERF and its partners in the Western Balkans have been implementing a whole-of-society approach to Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) of returnees from Northeast Syria (NES) since 2019. Our experience illustrates that working with returnees is a complex task and requires a case management-based approach tailored to the context in which the individual is returning. Recognising the complexity of the task and the need for experience sharing, GCERF's grantees established an R&R working group in 2021 with the overall objective of ensuring successful R&R.

Two years after its creation, and five years since the inception of R&R programming in the Western Balkans, GCERF's partners have facilitated the R&R of more than 350 returnees and 1,000 family members. GCERF has supported the training of 132 frontline workers in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The result of this work is a wealth of experience, lessons learned, and good practices. Having read documents published by the GCTF and other partners involved in R&R, the working group agreed to prepare a comprehensive manual for governments and frontline workers. This manual is meant to provide a holistic overview of the case management-based approach. In addition to this guide, the working group has developed a suite of training modules covering each of the main sections, including individual assessments, trauma violence-informed care, art therapy, religious counselling, working with families, working with teachers and schools, and vocational training and education programmes for adults.

The working group has already supported experiential visits to share the main lessons, good practices, and tools outlined in the manual. Over the next two years, the working group will organise additional experiential visits and will work to translate the documents herein into the languages used by GCERF's partner countries.

The main goal of the working group is to provide practitioners the tools and confidence to repatriate, rehabilitate, and reintegrate their nationals. It is evident that a whole-of-society approach to R&R is the key for sustainable success.

**Mr. Kevin Osborne**

*Focal point for returnees from Northeast Syria and Iraq*  
Global Community Engagement Resilience Fund

# INTRODUCTION TO THIS PRACTITIONER'S MANUAL

In 2021, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), launched its Global Action Platform (GAP) initiative. This network comprises over 300 GCERF partners across twenty-two\* countries. The core objective of this network is to systematically enhance the capacity of its partners, promote peer-to-peer learning, facilitate the exchange of valuable lessons learned and good practices, and advocate for the prevention of violent extremism.

In the Western Balkans, GCERF has been organising country-level and regional communities of practice to connect GCERF partners and facilitate sharing of lessons learned in areas of PVE and rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of the returnees from the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq and their family members to their local communities. A thematic Working Group on R&R was set up to assess the progress made in the region, identify successful approaches, and consolidate good practices. One of the key outputs of the working group was the development of this practitioner's manual.

Each chapter introduces a practice used by one of the working group members and includes a detailed description, the reasons why this practice is important, key challenges, recommendations as well as an example of how organisations have successfully used this practice.


Chapter one discusses the needs assessment of local capacities on PVE and R&R with an example from Bosnia and Herzegovina where the Atlantic Initiative (AI) performed mapping and needs assessment of local centres for social work and mental health as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to foster the local multi-stakeholder approach to R&R. The Advocacy Training and Resource Center (ATRC) also shares their good practices in the assessment and subsequent support to NGOs.

Chapter two covers trauma-informed care and cognitive behavioural therapy for returnees and their families. After outlining key principles, Terre des Hommes Albania and Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG) share their good practices on using this approach with returnees from Syria and Iraq and their families to support their rehabilitation and reintegration in Albania.

Chapter three discusses different art therapy initiatives and ideas which were used in Albania by Terre des Hommes Albania, in Kosovo by Integra, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Atlantic Initiative. Various art forms have been utilised both in the rehabilitation of returnees and their families to foster reintegration and reducing the stigma of returnees in their communities.

Chapter four tackles the role of religious counselling in the R&R of returnees from conflict zones. CLWG in Albania provides insights into its experience, illustrating





how its activities contributed to the rehabilitation and reintegration process and its effectiveness in reducing recidivism.

Chapter five covers aspects of the role of family and parents in PVE and R&R. In North Macedonia, Pleiades has been implementing Mother Schools, a program model developed by Women without Borders (WwB). Pleiades shares good practices from this family-centered prevention program.

Chapter six discusses the role of teachers and school psychologists in PVE and R&R. CLWG shares its collaboration, training and support to teachers and psychologists in Albania.

Chapter seven covers vocational and educational training and support for returnees. Educational programs aim to address the common challenge of unemployment and financial instability faced by returnees and their families and to mitigate reengagement with violent extremist groups. The Women's Center for Development and Culture (WCDCA) and Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC) in Albania provide insights into its educational programs with returnee women and children.

## PRACTITIONER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

To gain an understanding of the local capacities through needs assessment, to implement Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) and Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) programming and services, practitioners recommend the programme managers to:

- 1.** Conduct **targeted needs assessments** of local practitioners and key stakeholders to help understand their capacity to provide R&R services and/or implement PVE initiatives:
  - a)** Semi-structured interviews are an effective way to conduct these assessments.
  - b)** Self-assessments can also be a useful (complementary) tool, to assess the capacities of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs).

To subsequently improve the capacities of practitioners and stakeholders, programme implementers are recommended to:

- 2.** Provide **tailored training** for practitioners and stakeholders based on the assessment. Key goals and indicators of knowledge, skill or structural requirements should be in place to track their progress.
- 3.** **Complement training with on-the-job support and/or mentoring** to ensure implementation of the knowledge and skills acquired in the training and to effectively follow up on any practical questions or challenges.

To facilitate this key foundation of programming, practitioners recommend that donors and governmental institutions:

- 4.** **Fund and/or support capacity building initiatives** in R&R and PVE programming that encompass both state and non-state actors.
- 5.** **Require capacity building components** in any R&R programme to strengthen the sustainability of programmes beyond the funding cycles.

An Integrative approach, including trauma-informed care and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), is essential to the R&R process to build trust, emphasise patient empowerment, and foster resilience over time.

*For program directors and policymakers, it is recommended to:*

- 1.** Provide training to mental health professionals and stakeholders of psycho-social care (including social workers, child protection structures, education, and

employment specialists, etc.) to ensure the delivery of appropriate and informed services.

**2.** Emphasise staff care and self-care, such as providing supervision for counsellors/psychologists and organising activities that prevent burnout.

**3.** Inform psychologists about the latest practices in trauma-informed care to enhance their skills and enable them to work effectively with the returnees.

*For psychologists and other front liners, it is recommended to:*

**4.** Employ a holistic trauma-informed care approach in the therapeutic process with returnees to address their emotional, physical, and health needs.

**5.** Collaborate with other actors, including police officers, teachers, and social workers, to provide comprehensive services for the returnees. This can be achieved through periodic multi-sectorial meetings or by strengthening existing referral and case management systems.

**6.** Acquire knowledge about the cultural backgrounds, ways of living, and experiences of returnees to incorporate this understanding into therapy approaches for building trustworthy relationships.

**7.** Include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in the R&R process for all returnees who have irrational thoughts or showcase maladaptive behaviour.

- a) Adapt CBT to meet the individual needs of returnees, conducting therapy sessions in their native language and incorporating cultural considerations and values.
- b) Use CBT to develop coping skills to manage symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, such as relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and problem-solving skills.
- c) Apply CBT to treat symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks, nightmares, and feelings of anxiety or depression, by assisting returnees in processing and coping with their traumatic experiences.
- d) Utilising this therapy approach can be particularly beneficial for individuals struggling to adjust to life after experiencing trauma, helping them challenge negative thought processes and managing their emotional responses.

## Art therapy

*For program directors and policymakers, it is recommended to:*

- 1.** Address the resistance of returnees to engage in art therapy by providing specialised support and guidance. Consider incorporating art therapy into rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees who have experienced complex trauma.
- 2.** Acknowledge that art therapists often work with individuals who have experienced trauma and emotional challenges. Encourage therapists to prioritise self-care and seek support to prevent burnout.
- 3.** Advocate for dedicated and well-equipped premises and material resources for art therapy professionals. Ensure access to trainings on using Art Therapy Methods and access to appropriate facilities to conduct art therapy sessions effectively, whether in clinical settings or within schools, to make these sessions more accessible.

*For psychologists and other front liners, it is recommended to:*

- 1.** Emphasise the importance of positive interactions with therapists in the healing process. Encourage ongoing communication and support between therapists and participants.
- 2.** Promote visual communication as a vital component of art therapy sessions. Encourage participants to express themselves creatively and freely in a safe, relaxed environment, possibly even incorporating art therapy into school settings. Recognise that communication, especially verbal, can be triggering for individuals with mental disorders or trauma.
- 3.** Advocate and promote the widespread adoption of the Forum Theatre<sup>1</sup> format, which leads to support from local and central authorities. Stress the importance of expanding its accessibility and benefits, particularly within educational settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Forum theatre, [Involve](https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/forum-theatre), accessed May 13, 2024, <https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/forum-theatre>

## Religious counselling

*For program designers, implementors and government actors:*

1. Include peer support religious counselling to provide an opportunity for returnees to connect with others who have gone through similar experiences. Peer support groups can be a valuable addition to religious counselling, providing a safe and supportive space for individuals to share their experiences and learn from each other.
2. Consider gender and background when selecting counsellors. Due to deeply rooted beliefs of returnees about religion and traditions, it is often the case that at first counselling can only be provided by professionals of the same gender as the returnees.
3. Cooperate with religious organisations or entities when selecting religious counsellors to ensure the integrity of professionals.
4. Complement religious counselling with trauma-informed care and psychosocial counselling.

*For religious counsellors:*

4. Combine counselling sessions at home and externally. While religious counselling often happens within the returnees' homes or parental coaching rooms, its scope extends beyond religious matters to encompass community engagement, gender, education, employment, tolerance and more. Certain counselling sessions could be beneficial if conducted in external sessions. This approach fosters interaction between returnees and community members, helping them to step out of their comfort zones and actively engage in the counselling sessions.
5. Employ a trauma-informed approach to religious counselling, which involves understanding the impact of trauma on the individual and adapting counselling techniques accordingly. This may include creating a safe and calm environment, applying mindfulness techniques, and focusing on building resilience and coping skills.
6. Encourage returnees to engage their children and other family members in counselling sessions, offering support and guidance to help them understand and actively participate in the process. Counselling can be more effective when family members are involved in the process.

## Role of parents and family members

*For program directors and policymakers, it is recommended to:*

- 1.** Recognise the role of parents, families and other caregivers in P/CVE and R&R.
- 2.** Avoid placing the burden solely on mothers and women, but also recognise the role of fathers and other male caregivers in P/CVE and R&R and empower them in this role.

*For donors and governments:*

- 3.** Invest in early childhood development, including in the context of P/CVE and R&R, both through direct support to children and through support to parents, families, and other caregivers to strengthen their role in the personal and social development of their children.

*For program designers, implementors and government actors:*

- 4.** Provide tools and support to parents, families, and caregivers to empower them in their role of supporting children and youth in P/CVE and R&R.
- 5.** Assess and mitigate the potential risks posed to parents, families, and caregivers to safeguard their physical and mental well-being.

## Working with Teachers & School Psychologist: Psycho-Social Support

*For program designers, implementors and government actors:*

- 1.** Establish partnerships with schools and community organisations to provide comprehensive support to returnee women and children. Collaborating with school administrators, teachers, and counsellors can help identify the needs of returnee children and offer them with the necessary support.
- 2.** Organise cultural sensitivity training for teachers, school psychologists, and other service providers to better understand the needs and challenges faced by returnee women and children from conflict areas such as Syria. This can help ensure that the services provided are appropriate and sensitive to their cultural backgrounds.
- 3.** Social support services to organise activities and events that promote social integration and cultural exchange. These initiatives can help returned women and children connect with their peers and build a sense of belonging within their communities.

Overall, working with teachers/school psychologists and social support services can establish a comprehensive approach to supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children returnees from conflict areas. By collaborating with schools and community organisations, providing mental health and social support, and fostering social and economic integration, we can assist these individuals in rebuilding their lives and reintegrating into their communities.

*For psychologists and other front liners, it is recommended to:*

4. School psychologists and other mental health professionals should be available to provide returned children with the necessary support to address any mental health issues that may arise due to the trauma they have experienced. This support can encompass individual and group therapy, as well as referrals to other mental health professionals when necessary.

### Vocational and Educational Training for returnees

*For policymakers, it is recommended to:*

1. Develop policies that support the economic empowerment of women in vulnerable situations, including returned women, such as access to microfinance and markets.

*For program directors, it is recommended to:*

2. Ensure that women's rights are protected and that, in addition to employment, they have access to legal and social services.
3. Implement programs that focus on vocational training in artisanal skills, alongside with psychological support and community integration activities.
4. Collaborate with local artisans and cultural institutions to preserve traditional crafts and promote cultural heritage.
5. Provide mentorship and networking opportunities to connect women with potential buyers and markets.

*For international organizations and donors, it is recommended to:*

6. Provide financial and technical support for initiatives that focus on returned women's empowerment through artisanal skills training.

Advocate for the inclusion of a gender sensitive approach to R&R

# REINTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

## INFOGRAPHIC

### ● Preparation

Preparation prior to the arrival of returnees includes:

- Establishing judicial and legal procedures
- Adopting national R&R, CT, or P/CVE strategies and action plans
- Locating nationals in the camps
- Negotiating the return with camp authorities
- Establishing focal R&R coordination point
- Creation of Standard Operating Procedures

### ● Logistics

Logistics of repatriation included:

- Moving of returnees from the Al Hol camp to Al Roj
- Informing returnees of the repatriation process
- Repatriation to home country

### ● Initial Rehabilitation

Support to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and families in emergency reception centres and prisons included:

- Medical and psycho-social examinations
- Identifying needs and initiation of case management
- Judicial proceedings
- Initial medical and psycho-social support in emergency reception centres and prisons

### ● Rehabilitation, Reintegration & Resocialisation

Support in the community to RFTFs, their families, and receiving communities includes:

- Direct support to returnees in their home communities
- Support to host communities



# INTRODUCTION TO THE WESTERN BALKANS CONTEXT ON P/CVE AND R&R

## GCERF programs in the Western Balkans

GCERF continues to support partners in building the capacity of governmental and non-governmental actors in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) and rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R). In Western Balkans, we are focusing on providing direct assistance to returnees from conflict zones covering medical, psycho-social, educational, administrative, legal, and livelihood support, which contributes to reducing the stigmatisation of returnees and promoting interreligious and ethnic tolerance and social cohesion.

GCERF investment is based on collaboration and coordination with the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism in Albania; the Ministry of Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Prevention and Reintegration Division in Kosovo; the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism in North Macedonia.

*Current Programming is focused on four pillars:*

- 1. National:** Capacity building of central-level government R&R and PVE institutions and actors through technical support and training. Facilitation of coordination.
- 2. Municipality:** Capacity building of local-level government R&R and PVE actors through the development of guidelines, provision of training, and facilitating coordination.
- 3. Community:** Reducing the stigmatisation towards returnees; increasing inter-religious and inter-ethnic tolerance; building capacities of communities on PVE and early identification.
- 4. Individual:** Providing direct support to returnees and vulnerable people including medical, psycho-social, educational, administrative and livelihood support.

In recent years, attention in the realm of P/CVE activities in the Western Balkans focused almost exclusively on Islamist Extremism. The challenge persists with the significant number of citizens from the region traveling to Syria and Iraq and the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), either alone or with their families. However, like in the rest of Europe, other forms of extremism are emerging as pressing concerns in the region, particularly the (Violent) Right Wing Extremism (VRWE). Linked to a long history of violence rooted in ethno-nationalist conflicts, RWE manifests in various ways, including polarisation and hate crimes. Ethno-nationalism as well as discrimination, including segregation in social and educational

settings, contribute to social exclusion and radicalisation patterns in the region. Moreover, ongoing societal debates related to migration have impacted the broader region. Additionally, the number of WB citizens, in particular from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia and Montenegro, who travelled to Ukraine in 2014 has also risen and represent a growing concern. <sup>2</sup>

## Country-specific updates within the context of PVE and R&R<sup>3</sup>

### *Albania*

The number of Albanians who joined the Syrian conflict during 2012 to 2015 as part of different terrorist groups, including ISIS reached 144. Of these, 38 were children and 27 women. According to official information, up to 2022 around 30 individuals have returned from conflict zones.<sup>4</sup> Albania's National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism makes specific reference to rural areas where most RFTFs are located, thereby providing the legal and policy framework for interventions in socio-economic reintegration of returning FTFs and their families. The CVE Center has adopted a comprehensive approach, collaborating with diverse civil society organisations, to address the country's needs concerning FTF returnees and their families.

In September 2023, the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SPAK) sent 23 individuals, including nine women, to trial for their alleged involvement in a terrorist organisation after returning from Syria. The prosecutor's decision caused tension among the accused women, impacting their psychological well-being and that of their children. Frontline professionals, particularly psychologists and service providers, were called upon to address the concerns. Additionally, regional security concerns arose as Serbian paramilitaries ambushed a police patrol in northern Kosovo on September 24, 2023, resulting in one police officer's death and a subsequent firefight near the Kosovo-Serbia border, marking a significant escalation of violence since the end of the Kosovo war in 1999.

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<sup>2</sup> Conclusion Paper RAN in the Western Balkans – Cross-cutting Event on Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE) 28–29 June 2022, Skopje, North Macedonia ([https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/ran\\_wb\\_vrwe\\_skopje\\_28-29062022\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/ran_wb_vrwe_skopje_28-29062022_en.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> GCERF Western Balkans Consolidated Reports, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran\\_wb\\_ad-hoc\\_dealing\\_with\\_returned\\_women\\_in\\_wb\\_082022\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_wb_ad-hoc_dealing_with_returned_women_in_wb_082022_en.pdf)

## *Bosnia and Herzegovina*


In BiH, the context of violent extremism is intricately linked to the nation's complex socio-political landscape, marked by its recent history of conflict, ongoing ethnic divisions, and socio-economic challenges. These factors, combined with the phenomenon of foreign fighters joining conflicts in Syria and Iraq, have highlighted the urgent need for effective strategies to prevent violent extremism. BiH's complex social fabric, characterised by ethnic divisions and the legacy of war, presents unique challenges for returnees, who may face stigmatisation and isolation. The establishment of a coordination team, consisting of 26 institutions, resulted in a comprehensive Plan for Repatriation and a Program of Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Resocialisation. The Council of Ministers' adoption of the R&R plan in August 2022 marked a significant step, and the subsequent implementation of a Communication Strategy has enhanced both internal and external communication within the R&R process. Despite facing challenges related to tensions at the Iranian Dissidents Camp in Albania, BiH has demonstrated commitment to comprehensive rehabilitation efforts.

## *Kosovo*

Kosovo, a secular state with a population of around 1.8 million, is one of Europe's youngest demographics, with over half of its population under the age of 25. Islam is the predominant religion, with approximately 95.6% of the population identifying as Muslims. Ethnically, the country is primarily composed of 90% ethnic Albanians, with over 5% ethnic Serbs, and minority communities including Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Turkish, Bosniaks, and Gorani. Kosovo's proactive approach involves the approval of a new Strategy for the Prevention and Combat of Terrorism, valid until 2028. The strategy encompasses four key objectives: prevention, protection, prosecution, and response. Notably, Kosovo faces diverse terrorist threats, including those driven by religious, political, and nationalist motives. The introduction of a Referral Mechanism at the local level aims to prevent radicalisation, with plans for expansion to multiple municipalities by 2028.

## *North Macedonia*

North Macedonia confronts economic challenges impacting citizens' daily lives, especially vulnerable groups. The government's endorsement of new Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) and Counter Terrorism (CT) Strategies highlights a proactive stance. An estimated 156 individuals from North Macedonia are considered as RFTFs, with more than 100 individuals having already returned. A significant number of



these individuals have faced trials and received prison sentences, with some still incarcerated while others have been released. Facilitating their reintegration is imperative not only for their smooth transition but also for preventing the recurrence of extremism within their communities. Establishing a supportive environment within these communities is crucial, and civil society organisations are instrumental in this regard.

# 1. NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL CAPACITIES ON P/CVE AND R&R

## 1.1. What are needs assessments on local capacities?

A needs assessment is a strategic approach to identifying the discrepancies between the current state of affairs and desired outcomes, particularly within organisational performance or community needs contexts. This meticulous process is crucial in P/CVE and R&R programming when preparing for trainings, providing on-the-job support, or offering mentoring to ensure that the support is not generic but rather precisely tailored to address specific deficiencies.

In the specialised areas of P/CVE and R&R, conducting a mapping and needs assessment of actors is a critical step. This process entails a detailed examination of the capabilities of various stakeholders in implementing initiatives or providing services in these domains. A thorough assessment encompasses multiple dimensions of capacity, from technical proficiency to operational effectiveness to in-depth knowledge about P/CVE and R&R topics.

The initial phase of a needs assessment involves mapping out all the pertinent local actors. This includes a range of state actors, such as centres for social work, mental health services, and other government entities, as well as non-state entities, including non-governmental organisations, community groups, youth organisations, and other mechanisms involved in the social fabric of the area.

After identifying the relevant actors, the assessment progresses through structured interviews, often complemented by surveys and self-evaluation tools. These methods are designed to compile comprehensive data on the actors' current operational status, their understanding of P/CVE and R&R, and their ability to respond effectively to the challenges posed by these issues.

Through this data collection and subsequent analysis, the assessment identifies gaps in skills, knowledge, resources, and other areas that hinder the actors' ability to perform optimally. The final goal of this process is to design and implement support systems that are not only responsive to the identified needs but also contribute to the development of robust strategies for preventing violent extremism and aiding in the recovery and social reintegration of affected individuals.

By continuously monitoring the effectiveness of these tailored support measures and gathering feedback for ongoing improvement, needs assessments play an essential role in enhancing the preparedness and resilience of communities against the challenges of P/CVE and R&R.

## 1.2. Why do we need to assess local capacities on P/CVE and R&R?

Conducting a needs assessment of local capacities on P/CVE and R&R is essential for the following reasons:

- Understanding the community's past experiences, which helps in gaining a nuanced understanding of the community's context and determining the types of services and capacities required.
- Evaluating the existing capacities of relevant actors and highlighting potential needs that must be addressed for the effective provision of P/CVE and R&R services and initiatives.
- Providing tailored workshops and on-the-job support based on the identified needs.
- Gathering good practices and commonly shared pitfalls and challenges.
- Promoting a multi-stakeholder approach to P/CVE and R&R by mapping current efforts, as well as identifying how NGOs and other state actors can support the work of local institutions.

### In practice

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Atlantic Initiative (AI) conducted a mapping and needs assessment of P/CVE and R&R actors with a specific focus on the local communities/municipalities of return for foreign terrorist fighters and their family members. Three local researchers were engaged and conducted 26 interviews: 13 with social workers and 13 with psychologists of local centres for social work and mental health in 13 communities. Additionally, they conducted 30 interviews with NGOs, which were selected based on their relevance to the field. These NGOs support women, children, mental health, activism, youth, and socially vulnerable categories. Mapping the NGOs and assessing their current capacities enabled AI to identify relevant NGOs capable of supporting local institutions in P/CVE and R&R. This effort also provided a baseline on which AI developed training programs for the NGOs to enhance their capacity to support local initiatives for returnees and other vulnerable groups.

The selected NGOs became aware that their core activities, usually conducted in their local environments, with prior assistance from AI, contribute to the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism, as well as to the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and their families in local communities. They now view themselves as a group of professionals which can strengthen resilience of local communities to these phenomena and actively assist in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Also, they are now prepared to cooperate with local authorities represented in local multidisciplinary teams and contribute to the successful outcome of rehabilitation and reintegration processes, particularly in areas where local institutions lack resources and/or expertise.

## In Practice

In Kosovo, the Advocacy Training and Resource Center (ATRC) conducted a mapping exercise identifying over 30 NGOs with the potential to contribute to P/CVE in Kosovo. Subsequently, ATRC has piloted its capacity building initiative with five NGOs in key geographic areas. This initiative started with an in-depth assessment consisting of 1) A self-assessment questionnaire for the NGOs to assess their operational capacity and needs, 2) An analysis of their key documents and policies in place, as well as previous program documents, 3) Individual interviews and consultation sessions to discuss the above. All this information was consolidated in an assessment matrix covering the NGOs' capacities on 1) governance & human resources, 2) project cycle management, 3) resource mobilisation & sustainability, 4) external relations and outreach, 5) administration and procurement, and 6) financial management. This matrix quantified the assessment of its current capacities, which are then re-assessed at the end of the initiative. The initiative spans over 6 months of group workshops and individual sessions, and an additional 3 months of on-the-job support and small grants to implement PVE initiatives. The needs assessment proved to be a crucial first step in sustainably building the capacities of the NGOs.

### 1.3 Challenges & Mitigation measures

- When mapping relevant NGOs, it can be challenging to identify active or non-active organisations. Authorities of local administrations and services for social activities (city, municipal and cantonal) maintain records of registered NGOs but lack information on their activity status. To address this issue, researchers utilised the “snowballing method”, a research technique which enables researchers to conduct studies based on findings. It is used in situations where potential subjects are hard to locate. This method helps to identify active NGOs by leveraging the networks within the NGO community.
- In the theory of research methodology, this method is explained as a “non-probability sampling method where new units are recruited by other units to form a sample”<sup>5</sup>. It is recognised that “snowball sampling can be a useful technique to conduct research about people with specific traits who might otherwise be difficult to identify” (e.g., people with a rare disease)<sup>6</sup>. Also referred to as chain sampling or network sampling, snowball sampling begins with one or more study participants and then continues based on referrals from the participants<sup>7</sup>. This process continues until the desired sample, or a saturation point are reached<sup>8</sup>. In this case, researchers interview NGOs, querying them about other NGOs that satisfied relevant research criteria to interview these identified organisations. This process was repeated until the targeted number of NGOs was reached. By using snowball sampling,

<sup>5</sup> Nikolopoulou, Kassiani. "What Is Snowball Sampling? | Definition & Examples." Published on August 17, 2022. Revised on June 22, 2023. Accessed November 13, 2023. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/snowball-sampling/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

researchers can circumvent the limitations of official records, which may not accurately reflect the current activity levels of NGOs. The method establishes a chain of referrals that can provide a wealth of information on active organisations within a particular field or community. This method is advantageous not only for mapping NGOs but also for understanding the network and dynamics within the NGO community.

- In cases where communities identified as needing P/CVE or R&R support and lacking active or relevant NGOs, organisations from wider municipalities or areas are selected to extend support beyond their own community.
- R&R has long been considered a securitised issue. Not all government institutions are open to accepting support from NGOs or other non-state actors. To build a sustainable multi-stakeholder approach, it is important to prioritise transparency and patience in building trust among state and non-state actors.
- An abundance of trainings on R&R, P/CVE and other topics are offered, often to the same target group. While the needs addressed in the training may be important, attendance can be merely performative. To minimise this challenge, tailoring the trainings as much as possible, as well as following up with on-the-job support and mentoring can increase meaningful engagement.
- Despite their importance, capacity building activities are not prioritised by most donors and supporters. Activities with final beneficiaries are more requested in calls for proposals.

#### 1.4 Recommendations

To gain an understanding of the local capacities to implement PVE and R&R programming and services, practitioners recommend including the following in the project design:

1. A targeted needs assessments of local practitioners and key stakeholders to help understand their capacity to provide R&R services and/or implement PVE initiatives.
  - a) Semi-structured interviews are an effective way to conduct these assessments.
  - b) Self-assessments can also be a useful and complementary tool to assess the capacities of NGOs.



To subsequently improve the capacities of the above practitioners and stakeholders, program implementers are recommended to:

- 2.** Provide tailored training for practitioners and stakeholders based on the assessment. Key goals and indicators of knowledge, skill or structural requirements should be in place to track their progress.
- 3.** Complement training with on-the-job support and/or mentoring to ensure the implementation of the knowledge and skills acquired in the training and to effectively address any practical questions or challenges.

To facilitate this key foundation of programming, practitioners recommend donors and governmental institutions to:

- 4.** Fund and/or support capacity building initiatives in R&R and PVE programming that cover both state and non-state actors.
- 5.** Require capacity building components in any R&R program to strengthen the sustainability of programmes.



Atlantic Initiative  
organised a workshops for journalists



Atlantic Initiative in Bosnia and Herze-  
govina organised a mobile team meeting  
with members of local multidisciplinary  
team for CVE and R&R

## 2. INTEGRATIVE APPROACH ON R&R: TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE & CBT

### 2.1 Trauma Informed Care

#### 2.1.1. What is Trauma informed care?

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) recognises the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life, including service staff. Trauma-Informed Care considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatise individuals. Trauma-informed services prioritise the do no harm approach i.e. they do not re-traumatise or blame victims for their efforts to manage their traumatic reactions. Instead, these services embrace a message of hope and optimism that recovery is possible.

Trauma-informed care is based on the understanding that:

- A significant number of people living with mental health conditions have experienced trauma in their lives.
- Trauma may be a factor for people experiencing distress.
- The impact of trauma may be lifelong.
- Trauma can impact the person, their emotions, and relationships with others.

TIC is a strengths-based approach that is responsive to the impact of trauma. It emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both survivors of trauma and service providers. TIC creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. It is grounded in an understanding of the neurological, biological, psychological, and social effects of trauma, and recognises the high prevalence of these experiences for people who access mental health services<sup>9</sup>.

Trauma informed approaches to care shift the focus from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" by:

- Realising the widespread impact of trauma and understanding potential paths for recovery.
- Recognising the signs and symptoms of trauma in individual clients, families, and staff.
- Integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

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<sup>9</sup> Trauma-Informed Care. Center for Health Care Strategies. Accessed January 15, 2024.  
<https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>.

- Seeking to actively resist re-traumatisation (i.e., avoid creating an environment that inadvertently reminds patients of their traumatic experiences and causes them to experience emotional and biological stress).

### Six key principles of a trauma-informed approach<sup>10</sup>

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

#### 2.1.2 The importance of using Trauma Informed Care

Integrating trauma-informed care approaches into the rehabilitation and reintegration of all returnees is essential. It fosters trust, prioritises patient empowerment, and enables individuals to become resilient and gain a sense of control over their well-being.

#### 2.1.3. Challenges

- Beneficiaries may have a lack of basic security and show a lack of confidence, which makes the application of TIC more difficult.
- Beneficiaries may show the inability to cope with stress and lack critical thinking.
- Beneficiaries may not grasp the significance of the therapeutic process as they do not perceive it as a primary and essential aspect of their daily lives.

These challenges can be mitigated through continuous capacity-building trainings and supervision and support for frontliners which enable them to manage the counselling process and respond to beneficiaries' needs.

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<sup>10</sup> "What Are the 6 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care?" Duquesne University School of Nursing. Accessed January 15, 2024. <https://onlinenursing.duq.edu/blog/what-are-the-6-principles-of-trauma-informed-care/#:~:text=Healthcare%20organizations%2C%20nurses%20and%20other,and%20choice%3B%20and%20cultural%20issues>

# Trauma Informed Care in Practice

A training on trauma interventions was organised according to the guidance by international experts. The training took place in Tirana from 18-22 of April 2022. In total, 18 psychologists from different regions in Albania were trained on trauma interventions. The objectives of the training were:

- a) Understanding traumatic events and their potential impact on individuals' well-being.
- b) Introduction to assessment processes and tools for trauma related psychological symptoms.
- c) Introduction to integrated treatment models for trauma with a special focus on returnees from conflict zones.

The training received accreditation by the Order of Psychologists in Albania.  
(Terres des Hommes, Albania)

## 2.2. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

### 2.2.1 What is CBT?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a form of talk therapy focused on identifying and changing negative thought patterns and behaviours, aiming to improve overall mental health and well-being. Returnees from Syria may have endured traumatic events, including exposure to violence or the loss of loved ones, leading to various psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and difficulty adjusting to life after their challenging experiences.

Psychologists have applied CBT to improve returnees' emotional states and behaviours, reduce anxiety levels by examining confused or distorted thinking patterns. Through CBT, therapists have educated returnees on how thoughts may influence emotions and behaviours, empowering them to identify and manage negative thoughts or aggressive behaviours through coping skills and strategies. This approach has been reported to enhance cognition and behaviour among returnees, effectively addressing psychological distress and trauma from their experiences in conflict zones. During CBT sessions, returnees collaborate with their therapists to set and accomplish small goals, fostering confidence and self-efficacy in the process.

### 2.2.2. Why do we need CBT?

Psychiatrists and psychologists conducting assessments on RFTF adults, and their children have identified prevalent issues of PTSD, trauma, and psychological distress stemming from their experiences in conflict zones, including the loss of loved ones and exposure to violence. During the individual sessions with the returnees, psychologists observed the presence of irrational negative thoughts, which

underscored the importance of addressing cognitive distortions. CBT should be included in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of all returnees who have irrational thoughts or manifest maladaptive behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

These continuous CBT therapy sessions are an important aspect of the work with returnees in implementing the R&R plan, helping returned women and children to overcome trauma, and equipping them with emotional self-regulation tools to integrate into society. Therapy sessions conducted in the returnee's native language have facilitated a smoother therapeutic process and direct intervention for therapists. Consequently, RFTFs have exhibited substantial emotional and psychosocial improvements following the implementation of CBT.<sup>12</sup>

## Success story

With CBT, the returnees have transformed negative thought patterns, and gained heightened awareness of their behaviors. Two male child returnees, aged 9 and 15 at the outset of therapy, showed behaviors such as avoiding eye contact and struggling to articulate. However, once a therapeutic relationship was established, their resistance diminished. During the sessions, both children demonstrated attachment to the therapist and conveyed positive sentiments about the therapeutic journey. Positive improvements in their emotional state were noticed during these sessions. Psychologists also observed an overall improvement in their behavior and communication with teachers and family members. The children expressed that therapy helped them to elaborate and express their emotions.

Delivering CBT to returnees from conflict zones:

1. (L) A 50-year-old woman underwent her initial psychological assessment with the CLWG counsellors. L.K. had experienced significant trauma during the conflict. She recounted traumatic and unexpected events, such as frequent bombings occurring every 3-4 hours, which her entire family experienced. Furthermore, one of her sons was left paralyzed, experiencing hemiparesis. During the assessment of trauma exposure, L.K. shared that she was present during these events and learned about the news about her son from other family members.

During the initial sessions with the psychologist, it became evident that they did not see any value in participating in the therapeutic process. Moreover, she expressed skepticism about the significance of therapy and doubted its benefits. However, the psychologist explained the importance, purpose, and procedural aspects of therapy.

As such, the psychologist emphasized the importance of identifying triggers and that any information shared during the sessions would remain confidential. Following these explanations from the therapist, she became more willing to participate in the counseling sessions and subsequent sessions were more cooperative.

<sup>11</sup> I.Marsden S., & Lewis, J., (2021). Trauma, adversity, and violent extremism. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/trauma-adversity-and-violentextremism/>

<sup>12</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). Rehabilitation and reintegration of extremist offenders from a mental health perspective. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran\\_mh\\_rehabilitation\\_reintegration\\_of\\_extremist\\_offenders\\_10-11\\_032021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_mh_rehabilitation_reintegration_of_extremist_offenders_10-11_032021_en.pdf)

*Feedback from the women path towards R&R, through CBT:*

Despite facing various challenges and a general disbelief, the woman has made significant efforts in improving her psychological well-being. The psychologist closely observed her thoughts and emotional reactions, often revealing concerns linked to her circumstances. Through counselling, social barriers hindering the returnee's ability to navigate social interactions were identified. Cognitive restructuring techniques were utilized to identify and challenge negative thought patterns. Over the course of the CBT sessions, the women demonstrated gradual improvement in her perception and managing social interactions.

*PTSD Evaluation reflecting the positive outcomes resulting from the CBT therapy:*

Following a second psychological assessment session with (L), notable improvements were observed in her communication and behavior. She demonstrated sustained eye contact, coherence in her responses, and exhibited normal verbal and non-verbal communication. There were no signs of resistance, and she actively engaged in the assessment, providing responses to all questions. Upon analysing the responses and calculating the assessment questionnaire, a total of 20 points was obtained. This score falls below the clinical attention threshold for PTSD (which is typically in the range of 31-33 points). Consequently, it was determined that L.K. does not currently meet the diagnostic criteria for a post-traumatic stress disorder. Although some psychiatric symptoms were present, the case did not meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis according to the PCL-5. These findings suggest positive progress and indicate the effectiveness of intervention strategies implemented thus far.

Throughout this period, the CLWG counsellor observed positive developments in her ability to cope with nervousness and fear during social interactions, though further progress is needed in this regard. Positive reinforcement and encouragement were utilized to bolster desired social behaviours. In her reintegration journey, emphasis was placed on addressing immediate needs, establishing consistent routines, seeking potential employment avenues, and attending to emotional well-being. It is crucial to sustain the provision of requisite support and resources to aid her in navigating this transition and striving towards a hopeful future.

(Counseling Line for Women and Girls, Albania)

### 2.2.3. Recommendations

An Integrative approach incorporating trauma-informed care and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is crucial in the R&R process to foster trust, promote patient empowerment and build resilience over time.

*For program directors and policy-makers, it is recommended to:*


1. Provide training not only to mental health professionals, but also to other stakeholders in psycho-social care, such as Social Workers, Community and Youth Workers, Psychologists to ensure appropriate and informed services, etc.

2. Emphasise staff care and self-care practices, recognising the demanding nature of working with traumatised individuals. It is essential that all professionals involved in the P/CVE cases receive regular supervision and mentoring from their employers or third parties.
3. Inform psychologists about the latest practices in trauma-informed care to enhance their skills and enable effective practice with returnees.

For psychologists and other frontliners, it is recommended to:

4. Take a holistic trauma-informed care approach within the therapeutic process with returnees to address their emotional, physical, and health needs.
5. Collaborate with other actors, including police officers, teachers, and social workers to provide comprehensive services for the returnees.
  - Psychiatrists, therapists, and social workers should work together to offer comprehensive mental health support for individuals. This collaboration can involve designing a transition plan encompassing outpatient therapy, treatment management, and community-based support services.
  - Teachers, school counsellors, and community organisations should work together to support at-risk youth returning to school following periods of absence. They can develop individualised education plans, providing tutoring or mentoring, and engage parents and school staff in the reintegration process.
6. Learn about the cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, and experiences of returnees to apply this knowledge in their therapy approach. This knowledge can facilitate the establishment of trusting relationships with returnees.
7. Include CBT in the R&R process of all returnees who have irrational thoughts or manifest maladaptive behaviour.
  - a) CBT should be adapted to meet the individual needs of returnees. Therapy sessions can be conducted in individuals' native language and can incorporate cultural considerations and values.
  - b) CBT should be used to develop coping skills to manage symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, such as relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and problem-solving skills.
  - c) CBT can be useful to treat symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as flashbacks, nightmares, and feelings of anxiety or depression of returnees, helping individuals to process and cope with their traumatic experiences.



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- d) The therapy approach can be particularly helpful for individuals who may be struggling with adjusting to life after experiencing trauma. It facilitates the reintegration process by challenging negative thought processes and teaching beneficiaries to manage their emotional responses.
- CBT helps trauma survivors challenge and reframe negative beliefs. Therapists work with beneficiaries to explore the evidence supporting these beliefs and help them develop more balanced and realistic perspectives. For example, someone who survived a traumatic event may believe they are entirely to blame; CBT can help them see the situation from a more balanced perspective.
  - In cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), CBT often includes exposure therapy. This approach gradually exposes individuals to traumatic memories in a safe and controlled manner, helping them confront and process their trauma. Over time, this can reduce the emotional charge associated with the traumatic event.
  - CBT encourages individuals to be more self-compassionate and less self-critical. Trauma survivors often blame themselves or feel shame, which can impede the reintegration process. CBT can help individuals develop a more compassionate and forgiving self-perspective.



Training organised by CLWG for frontliners and psychologists in Albania



Group meeting organised with women in Albania by CLWG

## 3. ART THERAPY

### 3.1.1. What is art therapy?

Art therapy is a therapeutic approach that blends elements of art and psychology to improve emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. It uses various art forms, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, and collage, as tools for self-expression and exploration. Led by trained art therapists with expertise in both art and psychology, art therapy aims to highlight the creative process involved in art making to enable individuals to communicate, resolve psychological conflicts, alleviate stress, improve self-esteem, and gain insight into their emotions and behaviours. The artwork created during art therapy sessions serves as a visual and tangible representation of the individual's inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences, providing further exploration and reflection.<sup>13</sup>

Art therapy is a tool, which therapists apply to help patients to interpret, express, and address their emotions and thoughts. Patients work with an art therapist to delve into their emotions, identify underlying conflicts or distressing events, and utilize art as a medium for finding resolutions. Certain forms of art, such as poetry, may reflect their suffering and explore themes related to family and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, art therapy serves broader therapeutic purposes such as improving cognitive and sensorimotor functions, nurturing self-esteem, and self-awareness. It plays a pivotal role in fostering emotional resilience and deeper insight, and it enhances social skills. Lastly, it serves as a valuable tool in mitigating and resolving conflicts and distress, contributing to broader societal and ecological changes.

Drawing from a range of psychological orientations, such as psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive-behavioural, and developmental theories, art therapy integrates elements of these approaches to address diverse therapeutic goals and meet the unique needs of each beneficiary. In psychodynamic art therapy, the focus often revolves around exploring the unconscious mind through the creation of symbolic imagery and metaphorical representations in art. Humanistic art therapy emphasises self-exploration, personal growth, and the development of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Cognitive-behavioural art therapy may involve using art as a tool to challenge negative thoughts and beliefs and develop more adaptive cognitive patterns.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> American Art Therapy Association. (2020). What is Art Therapy? Retrieved from <https://arttherapy.org/what-is-art-therapy/>

<sup>14</sup> Malchiodi, C. A. (Ed.). (2012). Handbook of art therapy (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

### 3.1.2. Why do we need art therapy and healing?

Studies have shown that art therapy is a very effective tool to improve children's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Art therapy can help address many conditions and experiences, including:

- Emotion exploration
- Self-esteem problems
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Trauma
- Grief
- Personality disorders

Individuals who have experienced trauma lose the ability to verbalise their experiences because of the intense emotions associated with the memories and a sense of emotional detachment from them. Art expression has emerged as a highly effective means of helping individuals by facilitating communication and providing a voice to their painful and traumatic experiences.

Trauma represents a strong experience that remains unprocessed in both the mind and body. Through art therapy, it is possible to reprocess this raw information, which is often recorded in the form of images, bodily sensations, and strong emotions. For children, art therapy exercises provide a constructive avenue to express strong emotions, allowing them to channel these sentiments safely, both for themselves and in their interactions with others. This practice helps mitigate feelings of judgment, shame, or guilt regarding their emotional experiences.<sup>15</sup>

Art therapy calms the nervous system and serves as an effective treatment for individuals experiencing developmental, medical, educational, social, or psychological challenges. A key objective of art therapy is to improve or restore a sense of personal well-being. Art therapy proves particularly beneficial in situations involving crisis, transitions, trauma, and grief. During these challenging times, engaging in art therapy can provide individuals with a supportive outlet for expressing and processing their emotions. By utilizing artistic forms of expression, such as drawing, painting, or sculpting, individuals can explore their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in a non-verbal and creative manner.<sup>16</sup> Research has

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<sup>15</sup> Bosgraaf L, Spreen M, Pattiselanno K, van Hooren S. Art Therapy for Psychosocial Problems in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Narrative Review on Art Therapeutic Means and Forms of Expression, Therapist Behavior, and Supposed Mechanisms of Change. *Front Psychol.* 2020 Oct 8;11:584685. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584685. PMID: 33132993; PMCID: PMC7578380.

<sup>16</sup> Malka, M. (2019). Art as a Facilitator of Communication on Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence: A Retrospective Examination of a 10-Year-Old Girl's Therapy. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(2), 185–197

suggested that incorporating art therapy in the treatment of individuals who have experienced trauma can reduce the severity of anxiety symptoms and enhance their overall self-perception.<sup>17</sup>

While art therapy can be helpful for a wide range of individuals, it is especially recognised for its potential to assist individuals in coping with crises, significant life changes, traumatic events, and grief. The creative process involved in art therapy allows individuals to communicate and process complex emotions that may be difficult to express verbally, or to manage anger, and to develop their identity outside of victimisation. It can provide a safe space for self-reflection, self-discovery, and emotional healing.<sup>18</sup>

Art therapists create a safe and supportive environment where clients can freely express themselves through art. They encourage clients to explore different methodologies, techniques, and themes, allowing for personal expression without judgment. The art therapist may engage in dialogue with the client, helping them interpret and understand the meaning behind their artwork and the emotions it elicits.

Art therapy has the potential to enhance the emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical well-being of individuals. In line with R&R, it is used as a tool to alleviate the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma thereby enhancing the capacity to cope with pain and other distressing symptoms. Moreover, it has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety in children with asthma and stimulate mental function in older adults with dementia.

Psychologists have observed the potential of this form of therapy in stabilising affect, behaviour, and cognition among returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. The therapy focuses on enabling the connection with one's emotions and managing emotional responses to traumatic events. It has been noted that therapy aids returnees in elevating their self-esteem. Through the mediums of poetry and drawings, individuals can assess their emotional states and thoughts<sup>19</sup>.

Therapists utilise drawings as a means of communication not only with adults but also with children. Therapist drawings broaden the individuals' range of expressive experience by providing a secure platform for conveying feelings and attitudes that may be challenging.<sup>20</sup> A white sheet of paper becomes a "safe place" for children to express themselves in a non-threatening manner.<sup>21</sup> Drawing can "create internal

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<sup>18</sup> Malka, M. (2019). Art as a Facilitator of Communication on Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence: A Retrospective Examination of a 10-Year-Old Girl's Therapy. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(2), 185–197

<sup>18</sup> Malka, M. (2019). Art as a Facilitator of Communication on Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence: A Retrospective Examination of a 10-Year-Old Girl's Therapy. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(2), 185–197

<sup>19</sup> Shukla A, Choudhari SG, Gaidhane AM, Quazi Syed Z. Role of Art Therapy in the Promotion of Mental Health: A Critical Review. *Cureus*. 2022 Aug 15;14(8):e28026. doi: 10.7759/cureus.28026. PMID: 36134083; PMCID: PMC9472646.

<sup>20</sup> Birch, Jennifer, M.A., and Karla D. Carmichael, Ph.D. "Using Drawings in Play Therapy: A Jungian Approach." *The University of Alabama, The Alabama Counseling Association Journal*, Volume 34, Number 2, Spring 2009

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

perceptions about self and the world”<sup>22</sup>. These graphic representations “bring issues to the surface, thus accelerating the helping professional’s ability to intervene and assist troubled children”<sup>23</sup>.

Growing up in conditions of armed conflict, terrorism and war has been associated with a variety of negative psychological consequences, particularly post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms and a spectrum of overt and covert symptoms and disorders.<sup>24</sup> Short and long-term effects have been found, including short term effects such as distress, shock, fear, anger, and aggressive behaviour.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, this method is highly effective for children to release emotional and psychological burdens resulting from their trauma:

- Children cannot always express their concerns.
- Sometimes they lack verbal skills to describe feelings or do not know exactly how they feel.
- Sometimes children feel unsafe to speak.

As a result, art therapy can address these difficulties in the therapeutic approaches with children. Additionally, other benefits of art therapy for children have been observed:

- Art therapy enhances body (eye, hand, and ear coordination).
- It develops sequencing skills, encouraging children to create art in a step-by-step manner. This process strengthens their sense of arranging/organising events, items, or ideas, helping them recognise patterns that make their world more understandable and predictable.
- Art therapy aids in making children more resilient to traumatic events by enabling them to reframe the traumatic events through their imagination. It can challenge their perceptual abilities, hone motor skills, and observations, boost self - esteem and instil a sense of capability when faced with various challenges.
- Children become more engaged and have increased mental concentration.
- Art therapy and healing enable the children to gain a sense of belonging and boost their confidence.
- Art therapy helps to alleviate anxiety and depression.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Slone, Michelle, and Anat Shoshani. "Children Affected by War and Armed Conflict: Parental Protective Factors and Resistance to Mental Health Symptoms." School of Psychological Sciences, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

<sup>25</sup> Slone, M., & Shoshani, A. (2017). Children affected by war and armed conflict: Parental protective factors and resistance to mental health symptoms. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 257227.

Art therapy can play a crucial role in peacebuilding efforts, as demonstrated by Zelizer grounded theory/case study exploring the arts's significance during and after the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Through extensive research conducted over fourteen months in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the study revealed the presence of community arts-based peacebuilding efforts during the war and in the post-conflict phase. The study highlighted the existence of theatre, film, and music concerts even amidst the siege, shedding light on the resilience of artistic processes and their contribution to peace-building efforts in BiH. Community arts-based processes have become increasingly vital in peacebuilding initiatives worldwide and in societies facing intense conflicts. Such processes serve as powerful tools to unite identity groups, foster cultural exchange, raise awareness about past suffering, and engage communities in creative endeavours, both during and after a conflict. Lessons learned from art therapy used in peacebuilding can be applied in work with returnees from foreign conflict zones, offering valuable insights for healing, reconciliation, and community engagement.

### 3.2 Different forms of Art Therapy in practice

Terre des hommes, Albania, Integra from Kosovo and Atlantic Initiative from Bosnia and Herzegovina, are NGOs actively involved in the GCERF Global Action Platform/Aftercare Subgroup. They utilise various forms of art to support adult and child returnees from foreign conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

#### 3.2.1 Art Therapy training by Terre des Hommes Albania

During 2022, a total of 23 professionals (22 female and 1 male), including psychologists and social workers working in nine regions in Albania were trained in "Art therapy techniques and practices".

The objectives of the training were: a) Introduction of art therapy as a therapeutic method in working with children and adults; b) Strengthening the professional skills of each participant through theoretical knowledge and personal experience; c) Understanding and applying the art therapy principles conducive to personal growth and self-care.

As a result of the training, the participants gained an understanding of art therapy as a therapeutic method and acquired experience in facilitating different techniques. The positive atmosphere fostered by the trainer, often initiated through enjoyable ice-breaker games, led to increased openness, confidence, and solidarity within the group.

During the learning process, all participants demonstrated great interest and completed all the tasks with remarkable enthusiasm. They provided unanimously positive feedback on the training, noting its effectiveness in expanding their knowledge of art therapy techniques and its application in working with children and

teens. The psychologists left the training with significant enthusiasm to engage with the children in their practice.

### 3.2.2 Forum Theater Play

#### What is Forum Theatre?

Forum Theatre, also known as Boal's Theatre, 'Theatre of the Oppressed' or 'Theatre for Development', is an interactive theatrical form invented in the early 1970s by Augusto Boal.<sup>26</sup> Boal's aim was to help audience members identify their "internal oppressions" to begin to overcome them<sup>27</sup>. Forum Theatre serves as a participatory drama technique aimed at facilitating community dialogue on social issues by engaging the audience in the search for transformative actions.<sup>28</sup> This art form and theatrical approach serve as tools for individual and community empowerment. They provide a space for individuals impacted by unjust power structures within and beyond their communities<sup>29</sup>.

Forum Theatre includes various elements, such as actors interacting with and engaging others to encourage the free flow of imagination. The concept of oppressed theatre, as conveyed through forum theatre, revolves around individuals facing oppression and the denial of their rights. During a forum theatre performance, the audience witnesses a brief play in which a central character (protagonist) confronts a form of oppression or obstacle which s/he is unable to overcome. The subject-matter of the play often resonates with the audience, drawing from shared life experiences.

Following the performance, members of the audience can step onto the stage and suggest alternative courses of action for the protagonist. This interactive component transforms the event into a rehearsal for imminent situations, enabling the analysis of alternative possibilities in any context - whether past, present, or future. The actors then delve into the results of these choices with the audience, creating a form of theatrical debate. Through this process, experiences and ideas are rehearsed and shared, fostering both solidarity and a sense of empowerment among participants<sup>30</sup>.

Integra produced the forum theatre play "The box of empathy", with four main roles and actors. One forum theatre involved four young artists, and 15 shows were organised for 40 returned children and 450 children who were not returnees from conflict zones. This theatre play had 15 reruns and the planned number of

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<sup>26</sup> Forum theatre, *Involve*, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/forum-theatre>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Miramonti A, *How to Use Forum Theatre for Community Dialogue - A Facilitator's Handbook*, 2017

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Forum theatre, *Involve*, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/forum-theatre>



participants was reached. The dynamic nature of the play, coupled with its theme, and the impactful acting of the actors captivated the audience. The presentation of the theme, prepared with care and precision, evoked both laughter and a profound understanding of the message.

### Why do we need Forum Theatre?

By Forum Theatre, we intend to empower people (children) to overcome inequalities and prejudices within communities, by giving a platform for oppressed communities to voice their concerns and collaboratively seek solutions. Moreover, we strive to foster an understanding among the audience, particularly children, regarding different cultures and perspectives. By creating an intercultural environment, Forum Theatre offers children the opportunity to gain awareness of various issues.

### 3.2.3 Occupation Therapy Through Writing Poetry

As part of the psychotherapy group support for female returnees from the Syrian battlefield, with a focus on addressing their traumatic experiences, two leading psychologists decided to apply occupational-work therapy techniques, such as writing poetry, drawing, and keeping a diary, which are tailored to personal talents and preferences of each participant. The idea of writing poetry emerged when one of the returnees mentioned receiving an international prize for poetry during high school. The group, comprising six women between the ages of 25 and 60, participated in these therapeutic activities. Due to the pandemic, the sessions on artistic were held through a Viber platform. The poetry created by the participants reflected their suffering and explored themes of family and partner relationships. The poems were included in the 2022 book entitled "Eternal Dreamers" published by the Atlantic Initiative.

## Success story

Through engaging in artistic work, the returnees creatively and meaningfully utilised their spare time, as they were unemployed at the time. As a result, one of the returnees published a joint book of poetry and continued to write poetry, which she now shares on social networks. Participating in this therapeutic activity, and particularly reading their poetry while holding a printed edition in front of an applauding audience, contributed to the resocialisation and de-stigmatisation of the returnees. The entire process not only allowed them to reclaim their social roles but also provided beneficial therapeutic effects, aiding them in navigating their emotions.

### 3.3 Challenges and Recommendations with a Focus on the Need for Continuous Art

**Challenge 1:** Healing requires more than the creative process alone

**Recommendation:** Emphasise the importance of positive interactions between therapists and participants in the healing process. Encourage ongoing communication and support between therapists and participants.

**Challenge 2:** Emotional investment and burnout

**Recommendation:** Acknowledge that art therapists often work with individuals who have experienced trauma and emotional challenges. Encourage therapists to prioritise self-care and seek support to prevent burnout.

**Challenge 3:** Communication in the presence of trauma

**Recommendation:** Recognise that communication, particularly verbal, can be triggering for individuals with mental disorders or trauma. Promote visual communication as a vital component of art therapy sessions. Encourage participants to express themselves creatively in a safe, relaxed environment, potentially incorporating art therapy into school settings.

**Challenge 4:** Resistance due to complex trauma

**Recommendation:** Address the resistance of returnees to engage in art therapy by providing specialised support and guidance. Consider integrating art therapy into rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees who have experienced complex trauma.

**Challenge 5:** Lack of suitable facilities, training on Art Therapy methods and securing long-term sessions

**Recommendation:** Advocate for dedicated and well-equipped premises and material resources for art therapy professionals. Ensure access to trainings on using the Art Therapy Methods and access to appropriate facilities to conduct art therapy sessions effectively, whether in clinical settings or schools.

Challenges and Recommendations for Promoting Forum Theatre in School Settings:

**Challenge 1:** Promoting Forum Theatre and increasing the understanding of the form

**Recommendation:** Promote the Forum Theatre format to gain recognition and support from local and central authorities. Stress the importance of expanding its accessibility and benefits, particularly within educational settings.

**Challenge 2:** Fostering awareness among school staff

**Recommendation a:** Recognise the unique format of the Forum Theatre as a valuable educational tool. Prioritise introducing and nurturing an understanding of Forum Theatre within the school staff. Encourage teachers to actively engage in discussions related to the themes explored in the Forum Theatre. Provide them with tools to enhance their creativity, such as examples from conversations, films, songs, personal storytelling, and other creative resources to facilitate this learning process.

**Recommendation b:** Exercise caution in script development for Forum Theatre sessions. Ensure that topics are chosen and written thoughtfully, avoiding direct references to returned children to prevent any unintended negative effects. Additionally, consider the age of the children while writing scripts to make them more relevant and age-appropriate.

### 3.5 Further reading

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/art-therapy>;
- Child Art Therapy, Judith Aron Rubin-2005
- Forum theatre, <https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/forum-theatre>
- Miramonti A, How to Use Forum Theatre for Community Dialogue - A Facilitator's Handbook, 2017
- Tudorache A.L, Methods for Social Change Image and Forum Theatre, 2013
- Forum Theatre: A Tool for Social Change Using theatre to reveal the relationship between oppressors and the oppressed in society, <https://actbuildchange.com/blog/forum-theatre-a-tool-for-social-change/>
- Book of poetry “Vječiti sanjari”, publisher Atlantska inicijativa, 2022

## 4. RELIGIOUS COUNSELLING

### 4.1. What is Religious Counselling?

Religious counselling plays a vital role in the rehabilitation process for women returnees and their children. The goal of religious counselling is to help the returnees develop a more moderate and tolerant perspective on religion, one that rejects violent extremism and embraces peaceful coexistence within the community. Religious counselling can be offered to both returned adults and children by expert theologians through group or one-on-one sessions, and focuses on providing religious information, as well as interpretation of holy books in a manner that provides an alternative to extremist and radical narratives.

### 4.2. How religious counselling helps the R&R process

Religious or ideological counselling and education are crucial aspects in facilitating the de-radicalisation process of returnees and fostering new perspectives on practicing religion. Participants in the religious counselling sessions include female and male returnees, their children, as well as other family members. These sessions can be conducted individually or in small groups, often including members of the family. The individual sessions offer ideological and theological support to both returnees and their family members, aiming to assess the level of ideological commitment, which is crucial for the reintegration process. The sessions are carried out by well-educated, progressive religious experts who are vetted by the relevant governmental structures. The duration of the sessions is around 60 minutes. There is no fixed number of sessions required for each returnee, as this varies on a case-by-case basis. However, experts suggest that disengagement and reintegration are a lengthy process, and interventions require at least 3+ years to have a long-lasting impact on the lives of returnees.

During the sessions, the theological experts employ descriptive and argumentative approaches and engage in direct communication with both adults and children. The religious counselling sessions should focus on:

- Providing a safe space for individuals to explore their beliefs and values.
- Assisting individuals in disengagement and promoting non-violent interpretations of religious texts.
- Understanding religious practices and the Holy books correctly.
- Maintaining a healthy state and practicing self-care.
- Promoting resilience and personal growth through religious practices and traditions.

- Overall, religious counselling can be an important tool in helping returnees navigate the challenges of returning to their communities after experiencing conflict or trauma.

### 4.3. The importance of religious counselling

- Religious counselling can provide a safe and non-judgmental space for returnees to explore their beliefs and values without fear of persecution or discrimination. This can facilitate self-awareness and foster personal growth.
- Religious counselling encourages critical thinking and questioning: Returnees may have been conditioned to accept extremist interpretations of religious texts uncritically. Counsellors encourage critical thinking and questioning and help returnees develop their own understanding of their faith.
- Religious counselling establishes a safe and non-judgmental environment: Returnees may feel anxious or defensive when discussing their religious beliefs, particularly if they have been radicalised in the past. Counsellors create a safe and non-judgmental environment where returnees can freely express their thoughts and feelings without fear of reprisal.
- Religious counselling emphasises the peaceful and tolerant aspects of religion: Religious counselling sessions help returnees understand that all religions promote peace and tolerance, and that these values take precedence over extremist interpretations. Counsellors utilize religious texts, teachings, and traditions to demonstrate how faith supports peace, compassion, and cooperation.
- By promoting non-violent interpretations of religious texts and fostering critical thinking, religious counselling aids individuals in reintegrating into their communities and fostering peaceful coexistence.
- Religious counselling forms one component of a larger R&R process which includes education, vocational training, and other support services. By addressing the religious and spiritual needs of returnees, religious counselling can contribute to a holistic approach to rehabilitation and reintegration.
- It may also serve as a preventive measure against recidivism and re-radicalisation among returned adults and children.

## Success story

Religious counselling sessions with (R), a young boy of 14 who returned from a conflict zone. Struggling to reintegrate into society due to his extremist beliefs and the trauma he had experienced, he initially resisted attending public school and engaging in social activities. The mixed gender classes and modern culture of Tirana were unsettling to him.

As part of his rehabilitation program, he participated in religious counselling sessions with a male counsellor. Together, they explored ways to moderate extremist ideologies.

The counsellor guided him to understand that violent extremism did not align his true religious principles. He worked to re-educate and reshape his beliefs towards a more peaceful and tolerant interpretation of his faith. The counsellor also helped the boy to address his trauma and provided a safe and supportive environment for him to talk about his experiences.

Over time, the boy's beliefs shifted towards a more moderate and tolerant understanding of his religion. He began rejecting extremist interpretations of religious texts and focusing on the peaceful and compassionate aspects of his faith. He also started participating in community and school activities, building positive relationships with others, and integrating into society. Today, he stands as a success story of disengagement and reintegration.

His journey highlights the importance of religious counselling sessions in disengaging and reintegrating young boy returnees. By facilitating discussions on re-educating and reshaping beliefs and values towards peace and tolerance, and introducing trauma-informed counselling techniques, we can effectively reduce the levels of extremist ideology and promote a positive reintegration into society.

### 4.4.Challenges

- Disengagement and the process of shifting a returnee's perception of religion are a long journey, as deeply ingrained ideological sentiments are challenging to eradicate. Achieving complete certainty regarding an individual's deradicalisation is difficult; instead, their continued disengagement is the desired outcome.
- Returnees and their children may be hesitant about trusting counsellors or organisations due to their past experiences. Establishing trust may require time as well as counsellors to build relationships with other community or family members of the returnees. The religious counsellors can facilitate this process through individual meetings with family members and group sessions with families of returnees.
- Given their very rigid beliefs about religion, adult returnees are very distrustful of religious counsellors at first. Some of them even express doubts about whether the counsellors are truly Muslim or just posing as such. Trust is built through persistence and patience.

- Due to the returnees' deeply rooted beliefs about religion and traditions, counselling can only be provided by professionals of the same gender as the returnees. This may sometimes be an issue when there is a shortage of religious experts who can be engaged in the process.
- Engaging local religious and community leaders to provide religious counselling and support is important for the returnees, as they may be more readily accepted by returnees and can offer valuable insights into the religious and traditional aspects of the counselling process.
- Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Fostering collaboration between professionals from different disciplines, such as mental health experts, religious leaders, and other professionals can facilitate comprehensive knowledge. They can work together to provide holistic support, addressing both psychological and cultural needs.


#### 4.5.Recommendations

For program designers, implementors and government actors:

1. Include peer support and religious counselling to provide an opportunity to connect with others who have gone through similar experiences. Peer support groups can be a valuable addition to religious counselling, which can provide a safe and supportive space for individuals to share their experiences and learn from each other.
2. Consider gender and background when selecting counsellors. Due to the returnees' deeply rooted beliefs about religion and traditions, it is often the case that at first counselling should be provided by professionals of the same gender as the returnees.
3. Cooperate with religious organisations or entities when selecting religious counsellors, to ensure the integrity of professionals.
4. Complement religious counselling with trauma-informed care and psychosocial counselling.

For religious counsellors:

1. Combine counselling sessions at home and externally. While religious counselling often happens in the returnees' homes or parental coaching rooms, its scope extends beyond religious matters to encompass community engagement, gender, education, employment, tolerance and more. Certain counselling sessions could be beneficial if conducted in external sessions. This encourages the returnee to interact with other community members and step out of their comfort zone. For example, some religious counselling sessions with minors have been conducted in the form of a picnic or lunch date.

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2. Use a trauma-informed approach to religious counselling, which means being aware of the impact of trauma on the individuals and adapting counselling techniques accordingly. This may include creating a safe and calm environment, using mindfulness techniques, and focusing on building resilience and coping skills.
  3. Encourage returnees to involve their children and other family members in counselling sessions and provide support and guidance to help them understand and participate in the process. Counselling can be more effective when family members are involved in the process.



## 5.ROLE OF FAMILY AND PARENTS: MOTHER SCHOOLS MODEL

### 5.1.What is Mother Schools Model?

The Mother Schools model is a pioneering, family-centred prevention program developed by the Women without Borders (WwB) to address the rising threat of extremism among vulnerable youth.

The Mother Schools model enhances existing social services as a community-based intervention strategy by providing local stakeholders with the essential structures, tools, and skills to address and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies. The program unites mothers to advance their individual capacity, capabilities, and emotional literacy, while raising their awareness of radical influences. This strategy empowers women and harnesses their potential to confront the threat of radicalisation in at-risk communities.

The program is implemented in three phases over the course of 12 months. Each session consists of 10 workshops, with three Mother Schools Groups operating at the same time. The Project Set-up and Train the Teacher Workshops are focused on establishing the project and identifying all involved parties, including teachers, note takers, and participants. The program consists of the following steps:

- Women without Borders team train the teachers and notetakers.
- Mother Schools Roll-out, and
- Graduation Ceremony to honor the mothers' commitment and dedication to their children and communities.

Mother Schools are implemented through "Local Implementing Partners".

### 5.2 The importance of Mother Schools Model?

Mothers are not only the first teachers in their children's lives but are increasingly being recognised for their unique potential as the first line of defence and critical starting point in the global fight against terrorism. They witness every stage: they represent the missing link in preventing extremism. A mother's unparalleled physical and emotional proximity allows her to intervene in her children's lives. However, mothers often lack the awareness, knowledge, and self-confidence to recognise the early signs of radicalisation. Particularly in affected communities, where the taboo topic of radicalisation and resulting stigmas tend to further isolate them—the potential of mothers as change makers can be neglected. At this critical moment, when extremism continuously is taking root in communities, we cannot afford to lose or overlook mothers as security allies.

Women without Borders (WwB) was the first to recognise and capitalise on the preventative potential of mothers. Through its pioneering 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model, they empowered these natural change-makers in their families, neighbourhoods, and communities to confront and counteract terrorism strategically.

Common strategies like counter-narrative approaches disseminated over the internet repeatedly have failed to keep pace with recruitment tactics. WwB's globally recognised approach has emerged as best practice, reshaping prevention policies worldwide. By going beyond merely reclaiming the tools used by recruiters, Mother Schools have been strengthening the resilience of at-risk communities at the grassroots level.

One of the evident indicators of increased self-confidence arguably lies in the readiness of mothers and their early successes in asserting themselves among family members. This marks an important step towards fortifying authority and respect, as well as claiming their rights.

## 5.2. The importance of Mother Schools Model?

Mothers are not only the first educators in their children's lives, but are increasingly being recognized for their unique potential as the first line of defence and critical starting point in the global fight against terrorism. While local law enforcement plays a crucial role, violent extremism, as an expression of emotional deficits, inherently surpasses its scope. Mothers, on the other hand, witness every stage: they represent the missing link in preventing extremism. A mother's unparalleled physical and emotional proximity allows her to intervene in her children's lives. However, mothers often lack the awareness, knowledge, and self-confidence to recognize the early signs of radicalization. Particularly in affected communities, where the taboo topic of radicalization and resulting stigmas tend to further isolate them—the potential of mothers as change makers can be neglected. At this critical moment, when extremism continuously is taking root in communities, we cannot afford to lose or overlook mothers as security allies.

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## In Practice

Thanks to the Pleiades in North Macedonia, 60 women from Chair and Butel, located in the city of Skopje, were empowered through the Mother Schools prevention program. They acquired knowledge and skills to protect their children from extremism within their communities. The “Mother Schools” program in North Macedonia was implemented through the “Parenting for Peace” model in two municipalities. The initiative aimed to equip mothers with the competence and confidence to effectively apply their unique potential, ensuring the safety of their children from extremism in their communities.

## 5.4. Success story

The founder and executive director of the Pleiades organisation introduced the first Parenting for Peace program Motherschool in Skopje, North Macedonia in 2016. Meral Musli Tajroska’s professional journey began the same year when she joined Women without Borders as a teacher. Her responsibility was to empower women to take an active role in protecting their families from the threat of violent extremism. Through workshops, she provided concerned mothers with training in communication and parenting skills, enabling them to identify and respond to early signs of potential radicalisation in their children. Her dedication led to her appointment as the Spokeswoman and Ambassador of the international non-profit organisation Women without Borders.

Similarly, Drenusha Marku, the executive director of the Pleiades organization, joined the first Parenting for Peace program Motherschool in Skopje, North Macedonia, as a concerned mother. She was seen by her peers as an inspiring leader. In 2017, Drenusha Marku actively engaged as a “buddy” in the first Mother Circles community movement in North Macedonia. Harnessing the emerging talents within the community, she became a Mother Schools teacher, guiding many mothers through the concepts of Mother Schools.

In 2019, Meral Musli Tajroska and Drenusha Marku joined forces to continue fostering women’s leadership by establishing the Pleiades organization. As a result of their involvement in the first Parenting for Peace programme Mother School in Skopje, both Meral Musli Tajroska and Drenusha Marku are recognised as promoters of alternative diplomacy and dialogue and advocates for a future without fear or violence. Their greatest accomplishment was the Pleiades organisation took on the role of the local implementing partner of Mother Schools in North Macedonia for the years 2022 and 2023.

### 5.3.Challenges/pitfalls

The emergence of COVID-19 posed a significant external challenge, resulting in the temporary suspension of all Mother Schools programming, including the second round of implementation in North Macedonia. While the pandemic hindered consistent attendance and limited the reach to the highest possible number of mothers, efforts were made to support mothers in becoming familiar with online platforms. Additionally, they were encouraged to attend the final graduation ceremonies, which was held virtually.

Within the framework of the program, there is a phenomenon known as 'Hello-Goodbye-Effect', where mothers experience high enthusiasm upon graduating from the program. This education programme can lead to exaggerated expectations regarding personal, familial, and community changes. To ensure that perceived improvements are accurately assessed and to comprehend the longer-term impact, the return to the communities of implementation for targeted follow-up interviews with program beneficiaries would be necessary after one or more years. However, conducting such interviews would be beyond the scope of this project.

### 5.4.Recommendations

For program directors and policymakers, it is recommended to:

1. Recognise the significant role of parents, families and other caregivers in P/CVE and R&R.
2. Avoid placing the burden solely on mothers and women; acknowledge the vital role of fathers and other male caregivers in PCVE and R&R and empower them accordingly.

For donors and governments:

3. Invest in early childhood development, including within the context of P/CVE and R&R, by providing direct support to children and assisting parents, families, and other caregivers to strengthen their involvement in the personal and social development of their children.

For program designers, implementors and government actors:

4. Offer tools and support to parents, families, and caregivers to empower them in their capacity to support children and young people in PCVE and R&R efforts.

5. Assess and mitigate the risks associated with empowering parents, families, and caregivers to ensure their safety, both physically and mentally, is safeguarded.

### 5.5 Further reading

<https://wwb.org/activity/motherschools-north-macedonia-impact-report/>



Activity organised by Pleiades in North Macedonia



Community Event organised in Kosovo by ATRC

# MotherSchools Graduation Ceremony

*Parenting for Peace in North Macedonia*



Activity organised  
by Pleiades in North Macedonia



Activity organised  
by Pleiades in North Macedonia

## 6. WORKING WITH TEACHERS & SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST: PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT

### 6.1. Psychosocial and Educational Support in Schools: CLWG Approach

War conditions and ongoing conflicts have a significant adverse impact on the lives of children and youth, often resulting in mental health consequences<sup>31</sup>. It is well-documented that youth living in conflict-affected areas, referred to as conflict-affected youth, experience multiple and ongoing psychological traumas, and stressful situations<sup>32</sup>. Given the high prevalence of stress-related and PTSD symptoms among conflict-affected youths, there is an urgent need to implement scalable mental health interventions to address this burden (Charlson et al., 2019)<sup>33</sup>. Understanding the nuanced perspectives of children, parents, and teachers is paramount in developing interventions that genuinely address the psychosocial impacts of trauma and challenging living conditions. Each stakeholder brings a unique lens to their experiences, influencing their perception of support, resilience, and coping mechanisms. By actively seeking and integrating these perspectives into intervention design, initiatives become more responsive to the specific needs of the community, fostering trust and cultural sensitivity. This approach not only allows for tailored support to individual circumstances but also ensures that the interventions resonate with the diverse ways in which different stakeholders interpret and navigate their complex realities.

The importance of Psychosocial and Educational support. (First-hand observance and experience from NGOs working with returnees)

Psychosocial and educational support in schools play a crucial role in the overall development and well-being of students, particularly those who have experienced trauma or disruptions in their lives. Here are general reasons why psychosocial and educational support is important in schools:

**Emotional Well-being:** Psychosocial support helps students build emotional resilience and cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma. It provides a safe environment for them to express their emotions and learn effective coping mechanisms.

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<sup>31</sup> Charlson, Fiona, Mark van Ommeren, Abraham Flaxman, Joseph Cornett, Harvey Whiteford, and Shekhar Saxena. "New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *The Lancet*, Vol 394, July 20, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Dimitry, L. A. (2011). Systematic review on the mental health of children and adolescents in areas of armed conflict in the Middle East. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 38(2), 153–161. PMID: 21615769. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j1365-2214.2011.01246.x>

<sup>33</sup> Charlson, F., van Ommeren, M., Flaxman, A., Cornett, J., Whiteford, H., & Saxena, S. (2019). New WHO prevalence estimates of mental health disorders in conflict settings: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet*, 394 (10194), 240–248. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)30934-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30934-1)



**Academic Success:** Psychosocial and educational support ensures that students receive personalised assistance to address academic challenges. This can include tailored learning plans, additional tutoring, and access to resources to help them catch up and excel in their studies.

**Social Integration:** Psychosocial support fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness among students. It encourages positive social interactions, teamwork, and communication skills, contributing to a supportive school community.

**Behavioural Development:** Educational and psychosocial support assist in addressing behavioural issues by identifying underlying causes and implementing suitable interventions. This contributes to the creation of a positive and conducive learning environment.

**Prevention of Dropout:** Students facing difficulties, whether emotional or academic, are at a higher risk of dropping out of school. Providing support helps identify potential dropouts early and implement strategies to keep them engaged and motivated to continue their education.

**Holistic Development:** Integrating psychosocial and educational support ensures a comprehensive approach to a child's development. It addresses not only academic needs but also emotional, social, and psychological aspects, fostering well-rounded individuals.

**Long-term Positive Outcomes:** Investing in psychosocial and educational support leads to long-term positive outcomes for the returnees. It not only helps them overcome immediate challenges but also equips them with skills and resources for future success in education and life.

In summary, psychosocial, and educational support in schools are essential for creating a nurturing and conducive learning environment, contributing to the overall well-being and success of the returned children.

## 6.2. Why do we need to engage with teachers and school psychologists?

1. There is a crucial need for specialised training and guidance for teachers, school psychologists, and social support workers to effectively address the unique needs of returnees.
2. CLWG in collaboration with the school staff, psychologist, social workers, and local institutions can help coordinate efforts between various stakeholders, including schools, government agencies, and non-profit organisations, to ensure that returnees receive comprehensive support services. This helps in ensuring that resources are used effectively.

3. By providing training and resources, they can help ensure the continuity of support services even after their direct involvement has ended.
4. CLWG's holistic approach to rehabilitation and reintegration encompasses addressing the physical, emotional, and social needs of returnees. By collaborating with teachers, school psychologists, and social support workers, they can help ensure that these needs are addressed in an integrated and coordinated manner.
5. Teachers need a better understanding of the needs and challenges faced by children at risk of radicalisation and children returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.
6. Building resilience and coping skills in children susceptible to radicalisation and children returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq by equipping them with problem-solving skills and conflict resolution techniques.
7. Identifying and addressing signs of radicalisation in children involves vigilance towards changes in behaviour, attitudes, and language.
8. Developing appropriate interventions to the specific needs of children at risk of radicalisation to violent extremism and children returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. The interventions encompass a spectrum of approaches including individual and group counselling, family therapy, and community-based initiatives.
9. Supporting the reintegration of children returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq requires addressing educational and vocational needs, social integration, and community engagement.
10. Promoting tolerance and inclusion within educational institutions and communities, and creating safe spaces for dialogue, to foster intercultural exchange and positive relationships between different groups.
11. Ensuring child protection and safeguarding through identifying and reporting child protection concerns, providing support for child victims of abuse or neglect, and ensuring comprehensive training of all personnel in child protection policies and procedures.
12. Active engagement of families and communities is integral to the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Building partnerships with parents, engaging community leaders, and promoting community-based solutions to addressing radicalisation and violence should be prioritised.

## 6.3. Success story

F.M., a young student, faced significant challenges, particularly in Albanian language proficiency, reading and writing skills, and understanding of natural sciences. These difficulties stemmed from receiving only Arabic lessons in the camp.

Despite these hurdles, his journey took a positive turn through dedicated private learning lessons provided by CLWG. F.M. has demonstrated remarkable engagement and dedication. As a result of his consistent attendance and hard work, F.M. has made notable progress in reading and writing in Albanian. Additionally, he has developed a stronger grasp of new concepts in various subjects and has developed critical thinking skills. He has also shown a genuine interest in further expanding his knowledge, as evidenced by his frequent questioning and curiosity in understanding the reasons and logic behind topics discussed in the lessons.

Despite both him and his mother lacking motivation, influenced by religious indoctrination and the experiences outside of Albania, F.M.'s has shown a strong commitment during the private learning sessions to improve his skills and knowledge. The private tutoring sessions provided by CLWG have played a significant role in his academic development, with F.M.'s progress serving as evidence of the effectiveness of personalised learning experiences.

## 6.4. Challenges

- Limited resources: The school system and social support services in Albania have limited resources, which can pose challenges in providing continuous support to returnees, particularly if there is a high demand for services. The limited resources and capacity may lead to a shortage of services.
- Many of the children returnees have experienced traumatic events during the conflict, which can affect their mental health and ability to learn. Teachers and psychologists in schools may need further specialized training to support these students.
- Cultural barriers can pose challenges for teachers, school psychologists, and social support services when working with returnees from conflict areas.
- Returnees often come from diverse cultural backgrounds with unique customs, traditions, languages, and value systems. Teachers and support services may lack familiarity with their diverse backgrounds, making it difficult to understand and accommodate the cultural needs of the students.
- Returnees may experience stigmatisation or discrimination within the school environment due to their cultural backgrounds or past experiences. Such a hostile or unwelcoming atmosphere can hinder their adaptation success.
- Returnee students often struggle with issues related to cultural identity and belonging. Caught between their cultural heritage and the host country's culture, they may experience disorientation and identity crisis.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive intervention supported by parental coaching and psychosocial counselling for both parents and children.

Parents play a vital role in their children's educational journey. They can provide emotional support, encouragement, and a nurturing environment that promotes learning. By combining parental coaching with psychosocial counselling for both parents and children, a holistic support system is created that addresses not only educational but also emotional and psychological needs. This approach enhances the chances of successful reintegration and academic achievement for returnee children.

## 6.5. Recommendations

- Collaboration with schools and community organisations is crucial for providing comprehensive support to returnee women and children. By partnering with school administrators, teachers, and counsellors, we can help identify the needs of returnee children and offer them the necessary assistance.
- To ensure effective support, it is essential to provide trainings on cultural sensitivity for teachers, school psychologists, and other service providers to better identify the needs and challenges faced by returnee women and children from conflict areas in Syria, as well as to ensure that the services provided are appropriate and sensitive.
- School psychologists and other mental health professionals should be available to provide returnee children with the necessary support to address any mental health issues that may arise due to the trauma they have experienced. This can include individual and group therapy, and referrals to other mental health professionals when necessary.
- Social support services should offer activities and events that promote social integration and cultural exchange. Such initiatives can help returnee women and children connect with their peers and build a sense of belonging within their communities.
- Overall, working with teachers, school psychologists, and social support services can provide a comprehensive approach to supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children returnees from conflict areas in Syria. By collaborating with schools and community organizations, offering mental health and social support, as well as facilitating social and economic integration, we can assist the returnees in rebuilding their lives and reintegrating into their communities.

## 7. VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR RETURNED WOMEN

### 7.1. What is Crafting the Future?

The Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC) identified the therapeutic and empowering benefits of traditional crafts for women and extended an opportunity for them to acquire artisanal skills. Returned women embraced this opportunity and participated in the "Crafting the Future" training program, centered on embroidery, soap making, and carpet weaving. These crafts, deeply entrenched in Albania's cultural heritage, not only offered a source of income but also fostered a sense of identity and community among the women.

**Embroidery:** Each stitch became a symbol of resilience. As they learned to create intricate designs, the women found solace in the rhythmic motion of needle and thread. Their embroidery told stories of hope, weaving together the past and the future.

**Soap Making:** The alchemy of soap making brought a sense of renewal. Mixing natural ingredients, the women crafted soaps infused with traditional herbs and scents. This process became a metaphor for their own transformation, turning raw materials into something beautiful and nurturing.

**Carpet Weaving:** The loom became a canvas for their aspirations. Weaving carpets, they intertwined threads of different colours and textures, creating patterns that reflected their journey from conflict to peace. Each carpet was a testament to their perseverance and artistic expression.

The GADC training not only equipped the women with practical and valuable skills but also boosted their confidence. At the end of the training sessions, they will begin producing the soaps in the comfort of their own homes using the provided equipment. The goal is for the women to sell their handmade products locally and online. The income generated from their crafts will foster financial independence and instil a profound sense of purpose.

The success of these women will serve as an inspiration to others within their community of returnees. As they sat together, weaving, embroidering, and crafting soaps, the women reflected on their journey. They had transformed from former fighters to artisans, from individuals marked by conflict to creators of beauty. Their crafts transcended mere products; they were symbols of their resilience, hope, and the enduring power of the human spirit.

The program "Crafting the future", led by the GADC is poised to expand its impact, reaching out to other communities susceptible to radicalisation. This expansion is

driven by a profound commitment to empowering women who find themselves at risk, providing them with a platform to acquire valuable artisanal skills. The aim of the initiative is to not only nurture their individual talents but also to cultivate a sense of agency and self-worth. By equipping these women with the tools to shape their futures, the program seeks to create a ripple effect, inspiring others in similar circumstances to embrace their potential and contribute positively to their communities.

## 7.2. Why do we need “Crafting the Future” for women returnees?

Educating returnees in artisanal skills plays a vital role in the broader efforts for rehabilitation and reintegration for several key reasons:

- **Restoring Dignity:** Women returning from conflict areas of Syria and Iraq have endured trauma, loss, and displacement. Learning a craft can help restore their dignity and self-worth by offering them a purpose and a means to express their identity.
- **Economic Independence:** Women returnees may face economic challenges and limited job opportunities. Acquiring artisanal skills enables them to produce sellable goods, providing a source of income to support themselves and their families.
- **Healing and Therapy.** Engaging in artistic work can serve as therapy, aiding women in coping with the psychological impacts of their past experiences. It gives them feelings of serenity, focus, and accomplishment.
- **Social Reintegration.** Participating in craftsmanship programs facilitates the reintegration of returned women into society by fostering connections with others, establishing support networks, and reducing social isolation.

Teaching craftsmanship to women who have returned from conflict areas is a powerful tool for rehabilitation and reintegration, enabling them to heal, rebuild their lives and integrate into the community.

## 7.3. Success story

After years of residing in the Al-Hol camp following the conflict, three women returnees in Albania found themselves at a crossroads, seeking a new beginning after leaving their past lives behind. To address the multifaceted challenges these women faced, particularly in reintegrating into the workforce, a comprehensive methodology was developed by GADC. The program began with a thorough evaluation of their current skills and the opportunities these skills provided. The next step involved boosting their skills to match current job market demands, focusing on enhancing their knowledge in artisanal skills, updating their resumes, and providing mentorship programs with social mentors to guide them through their re-entry.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise the importance of flexible work arrangements to accommodate the unique circumstances of these women. Networking events were facilitated to help rebuild professional connections, and a feedback mechanism was established to continuously assess and adjust the support programs. This holistic approach facilitated a smoother transition for these women back into the workforce and has also transformed their lives and impacted positively their communities. Through this comprehensive strategy, the program empowers women to rebuild their lives with dignity and confidence as they smoothly transition back into the workforce.

#### 7.4. Challenges

The "Crafting the Future" program, designed to empower individuals through craftsmanship, encounters several challenges which require attention and strategic solutions:

- **Funding and Resources:** A persistent challenge lies in securing adequate funding and resources for materials, training, and facilities. This can impede the program's effectiveness, particularly in communities at risk of radicalisation, where resources may be scarce.
- **Market Access:** Establishing sustainable market access for the crafted products is paramount. Without such access, artisans may struggle to sell their products, which can affect their motivation and financial stability.
- **Skill Development:** Ensuring consistent, high-quality training can pose difficulties, particularly in remote areas, where skilled trainers may be scarce, and maintaining standards across different locations remains difficult.
- **Gender Dynamics:** In certain communities, resistance to the economic empowerment of returned women or their participation in certain crafts. Addressing these gender dynamics and fostering inclusivity are critical for the program's success and impact.
- **Scalability:** Expanding the program to reach more beneficiaries while maintaining its quality and personal touch can be challenging.
- **Stigmatization:** Returned women may face stigmatisation in the employment market due to their background. In Albania, for example, some returned women are facing prosecution and their names have been made public by the media. This might diminish their chances of finding employment in the future.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative approach, involving stakeholders from the community, government, and private sector, as well as ongoing evaluation and adaptation of programs.

#### 7.5. Recommendations

To effectively support women's rehabilitation and reintegration through vocational training, various actors can play a crucial role:

*For policy-makers, it is recommended to:*

- Develop policies that support the economic empowerment of women in vulnerable situations, including returned women, such as access to microfinance and markets.

*For program directors, it is recommended to:*

- Ensure that women's rights are protected and that, besides employment, they have access to legal and social services.
- Implement programs that offer vocational training in artisanal skills, along with psychological support and community integration activities.
- Collaborate with local artisans and cultural institutions to preserve traditional crafts and promote cultural heritage.
- Provide mentorship and networking opportunities to connect women with potential buyers and markets.

*International organisations and donors are recommended to:*

- Provide financial and technical support for initiatives that focus on returned women's empowerment through artisanal skills training.
- Advocate for the inclusion of a gender sensitive approach to R&R.

By working collaboratively, these actors can create an enabling environment for returned women to thrive as artisans, contributing to their personal development, economic independence, and the overall well-being of their communities.





Returned women in the workshop making soap to sell in the market - Income generating activity by GADC in Albania



Income generating activity - embroidery made by RFTF women in Albania, facilitated by Gender Alliance for Development Center

