Applying a Social Lab Methodology for Adaptation of a Network in Preventing Radicalisation and Polarisation, the Delft Case Study[*]

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Abstract

This paper presents the relevance of applying a Social Lab Methodology in Adaptation of a Network in Preventing Radicalisation and Polarisation. The research was conducted by Human Security Collective (HSC) as part of the Horizon 2020 Participation project, together with the Strategic Network on Radicalisation and Polarisation (SNRP) in Delft, the Netherlands. Aimed at addressing evolving challenges in radicalisation and polarisation, the research employed a Social Lab methodology because it offers a way to address complex social challenges through involving a diversity of stakeholders (Hassan, 2014). Within the framework of the Delft approach on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), the SNRP, formed in 2016 during a national focus on Jihadism, sought to strengthen resilience. Recognising the emerging need to adapt to changing dynamics and shift the focus from crisis response to prevention, the research aimed to answer the question: "What is needed to adapt the SNRP network towards changing times?" To answer this, municipality professionals, religious leaders, civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, and youths participated in the Social Lab during workshops, interviews and discussions. The paper discusses the outcomes from the sessions and presents action points together with concrete recommendations for the Municipality of Delft and the SNRP. Emphasising the importance of adaptable strategies in preventing polarisation and radicalisation, the findings offer insights for policymakers, practitioners and communities navigating dynamic

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socio-political contexts. Moreover, the paper outlines the Social Lab cycle, the added value of the process, as well as some critical notes on the Social Lab methodology.

Keywords: Social Lab, municipality, polarisation, radicalisation, P/CVE, youths.

1. Introduction

"We have scientific and technical labs for solving our most difficult scientific and technical challenges. We need Social Labs to solve our most pressing social challenges" (Hassan, 2014, p.16).

As part of the Horizon 2020 Participation[1] project, Human Security Collective (HSC)[2] carried out a Social Lab cycle with the Strategic Network on radicalisation and polarisation (SNRP) in the Municipality of Delft, the Netherlands. The SNRP was established in the aftermath of the 2013 foreign fighters' crisis, during which Delft saw a relatively high number of people (20) leaving the Netherlands for the Islamic State (IS)-controlled regions at that time (Neve et al., 2019). The current composition of the SNRP reflects the pressing concerns during its establishment, yet, the most recent report by the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) recommends increased attention to accelerationism[3] and the threat arising from this strand of right-wing extremism, especially among young people (NCTV, 2022).

In a context where structural factors, such as socioeconomic inequalities and discrimination, create fertile ground for radicalisation (Borum, 2011), the critical literature emphasises the limitations of security-focused strategies for prevention. Such strategies, predominantly centred on repression and surveillance, risk stigmatising entire communities and fostering distrust towards

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[1] Participation is a consortium that aims to analyse contemporary forms and experiences of extremism and radicalisation and to propose concrete actions, policies, and tools that will empower policy actors and practitioners to respond to a changing reality. Visit their website for more information: https://participation-in.eu/.

[2] Human Security Collective (HSC) is a foundation based in The Hague working on issues of development, security and the involvement of citizens in their communities and societies. Visit their website for more information: https://www.hscollective.org/.

[3] Accelerationism in this paper refers to the extreme right ideology that aims to create or enlarge chaos to accelerate the start of a race war and the replacement of democracy with a white ethnostate (NCTV, 2021).

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institutions (Neumann, 2013). Additionally, the development of information bubbles in digital ecosystems consolidates extremist narratives, eroding critical thinking (Bakshy et al., 2015). These dynamics themselves act as structural factors, shaping the formation of political identities and ideologies (Ebner, 2021). Instead, participatory models, which aim to overcome the traditional state–citizen dichotomy, assign a strategic role to social involvement in the definition of problems and strategies. By understanding security as the collective construction of social well-being and shared responsibility, the Social Lab becomes a central device for promoting inclusive urban governance, capable of strengthening trust and social capital (Coaffee, 2013).

First introduced by Zaid Hassan (2014), the term "Social Lab" refers to a methodology designed to address complex social issues through an action-oriented approach grounded in stakeholder ownership and participation. It promotes collective learning and knowledge co-production by bringing together diverse actors in protected spaces (Marschalek et al., 2022) and by adopting both bottom-up and top-down approaches within participatory and collaborative governance frameworks (Cornwall, 2008).

Governmental approaches to addressing radicalisation and polarisation often lack a methodology based on a root cause, which is crucial for prevention objectives. Therefore, a socio-structural approach is needed to address the root causes of radicalisation, highlighting the importance of community-based interventions that promote urban resilience, social cohesion, and civic participation (Gielen, 2019). It is precisely within this context that Social Labs emerge as catalysts for social innovation, contributing to the development of trust and institutional legitimacy (Hassan, 2014).

A Social Lab aims to understand and address issues which lie at the root of polarisation and radicalisation, by including diverse perspectives and prioritising lived experiences, as opposed to traditional understandings of expertise (Hassan, 2014). As issues surrounding polarisation and radicalisation are inherently social and grounded in societal challenges, and addressing them requires engaging diverse stakeholders, this research adopts the Social Lab methodology as a tool to conduct Participatory Research.

This paper first outlines the context of the SNRP, followed by a description of the methodology and the phases of the Social Lab cycle, discussing what emerged from these sessions. The paper presents a set of concrete recommendations for the Municipality of Delft and the SNRP on how to continue the process of adapting the network towards changing times. Lastly, the paper reflects on the added value, as well as some critical notes on the Social Lab methodology.

1.1. The strategic network on radicalisation and polarisation in Delft

Before delving deeper into the Social Lab cycle and the outcomes, it is important for the reader to better understand the background of the SNRP and the context in Delft.

Following the departure of about twenty young people to Syria in 2013, the Municipality of Delft was prompted to develop a local approach on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE). From 2015–2019, this policy was known as "*Implementation Programme on Violent Jihadism*", reflecting the priority of that period (Neve et al., 2019). The SNRP was established in 2016 as part of this approach.

The following four pillars make up the P/CVE policy: diminishing social tensions and polarisation; strengthening resilience; building, training and maintaining networks; and the individual approach [Persoons Gebonden Aanpak (PGA)]. The SNRP operates within the second pillar 'Strengthening Resilience' by establishing a network of key players to address polarisation and radicalisation. It aligns with the broader concept of "urban resilience", understood as the capacity of cities to reorganise in the face of social and political disruptions by transforming vulnerabilities into opportunities for social change and reinforcing internal cohesion (Coaffee & Lee, 2016), and highlights the importance of policies aimed at consolidating social capital to reduce marginalisation and support radicalisation prevention (Marsden, 2016).

The members of the SNRP include municipality professionals in the social, security and youth domains, civil society representatives, social entrepreneurs and community and religious leaders from various backgrounds. These include both volunteers and professionals, such as municipal employees and youth workers. Most of the members who participate as volunteers run their own social initiatives in Delft, often supported by the Municipality. Members are generally tied to informal organisations often connected to the Muslim community, reflecting the SNRP's original focus.

The network meets approximately four times a year. During such meetings, members share their experience with recent trends in polarisation and radicalisation. Along with information sharing on local developments, potential collective initiatives are discussed.

With the immediate crisis behind them, SNRP members recognised the need to reassess the network's role in addressing current trends in polarisation and radicalisation. This reassessment marked the overcoming of an emergency logic and the transition towards a proactive and territorially rooted approach.

The Delft case illustrates how a crisis-driven local network may evolve into a platform for systemic prevention and participatory governance. However, empirical research on such adaptive processes, especially in response to

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emerging forms of extremism, remain limited, underscoring the need for further study (Marschalek et al., 2022).

2. Methodology

The research process employed is grounded in the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that integrates action and reflection by involving communities directly affected by social issues as co-researchers (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). This approach aims to ensure that research responds to community needs and contributes to meaningful societal change (Marschalek et al., 2022).

By bridging theory and practice with a focus on real-world application, the study adopted the Social Lab methodology, which aligns with PAR principles (Timmermans et al., 2020). It enables researchers to examine societal issues in collaboration with experts and stakeholders, moving beyond expert-driven approaches through the development of potential solutions (Hassan, 2014). At the same time, this methodology introduces key innovations compared to traditional participatory methods. Unlike one-off participatory sessions, (1) Social Labs are designed as iterative processes where actions are tested, evaluated, and refined in real-world settings, (2) they are systemic because they aim to holistically address the root causes of societal challenges, treating them as interconnected (Hassan, 2014), and (3) they involve participants as co-creators, with ownership of both problem definition and solution design (Decataldo & Russo, 2022). Additionally, while traditional participatory techniques often rely on predefined deliverable formats, Social Labs operate as open containers for co-creation, combining experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and pragmatist epistemology (Dewey, 1986) to continuously adapt strategies as new insights emerge (Decataldo & Russo, 2022). Social Labs are innovative precisely because they enable learning from failure and generate context-specific knowledge necessary to promote grounded recommendations that integrate community voices.

The Social Lab conducted with the SNRP members consisted of three interdependent iterative phases. The first phase included desk research, introduction of the Social Lab, and analysis of the key question the members of SNRP wanted to address in order to define a clear research question. The second phase included analysing radicalisation and polarisation trends in Delft and designing pilot actions to address them. This phase included a diverse set of stakeholders from Delft and was about answering the question: *"what do we need to do, make, or create in order to solve the challenge?"* The third phase was focused on providing recommendations, draft action points to follow up, and to reflect

on the Social Lab, contributing to its wider implementation by practitioners and policymakers.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the Social Lab cycle and the actions per phase that were carried out by different actors.

Table 1. Description of the Social Lab cycle

Social Lab cycle Actors involved	First phase diagnosing the key research question	Second phase designing pilot actions	Third phase reflection and feedback phase with recommendations for follow up
Research team	Desk research		Recommendations for the Municipality of Delft and the SNRP.
Members of SNRP together with the research team	Defining research question with members of SNRP, introduction of Participation Social Lab (1).	Mind Map to brainstorm trends on safety in one's neighbourhood (2). Workshop development of initiatives (3) Workshop identifying key players missing in the SNRP (3). Workshop defining new mission and vision of the SNRP (4).	Evaluation of Social Lab methodology (5) Action points to follow up (5).
Interviewees		Discussing outcomes with regard to development of initiatives, identifying key players missing in SNRP.	
Focus group youths		Mind Map to brainstorm trends on safety in one's neighbourhood. Workshop development of initiatives	
Professionals at the Municipality of Delft		Discussing trend analysis made by the SNRP, collecting ideas about improving collaboration between SNRP and professionals at the Municipality	

All in all, the research team organised five sessions with members of the SNRP (10), two focus group discussions with youths (22), one session with professionals (9) from the Municipality of Delft, and five in-depth interviews

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with key stakeholders of civil society in Delft. Three of these interviewees were also members of the SNRP network. While they could not participate in all the SNRP Social Lab meetings, their perspectives were deemed crucial in the analysis of all phases of the Social Lab. The Social Lab was facilitated by a team from Human Security Collective (HSC)[4].

3. The Social Lab Cycle and Results

3.1. Phase 1: diagnosis

During the first phase of the Social Lab, the research team organised the first session with the SNRP to introduce the process that the members were entering and framed it as part of Horizon 2020 Participation. Furthermore, the methodology of a Social Lab cycle was shared with the participants, and the main question to explore throughout the Social Lab cycle was concretised: What is needed to adapt the SNRP network towards changing times?

3.2. Phase 2: innovation

The second phase of the Social Lab covered three sessions with the SNRP, two sessions with youths, one session with professionals at the Municipality of Delft, and five interviews with key stakeholders in Delft's civil society.

3.2.1 Session 2 SNRP: brainstorming

In the first session, the SNRP members conducted a collective brainstorm around perceptions on safety in Delft with support of the HSC facilitators and researchers. The tool used was the Mind Map methodology which allowed for the identification and connection of trends and sub-trends, and enabled participants to share their experiences and knowledge. They also indicated

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[4] The HSC research team consists of two senior staff members (task manager and lead facilitator) and two junior researchers who contributed to the design and implementation of the Social Lab meetings. One staff member, also a citizen of Delft, was already active in the SNRP, which facilitated access and alignment with the network's goals. HSC has extensive experience in participatory facilitation, particularly with youths, and applies an approach similar to Social Labs, focusing on lived experiences and safe spaces for open dialogue.

whether trends were increasing or decreasing, and prioritised the most pressing ones using a sticker-based voting system.

In addition to the first session with the SNRP, individual interviews were held with key stakeholders in Delft. These stakeholders were included because of their significant knowledge and expertise on working in communities or as part of civil society. The findings on trends in Delft stemming from the SNRP-session were presented and interviewees were asked to comment and add their evaluations of the overview. Based on these inputs, the HSC research team was able to identify four main themes: 1) Bubble forming/Us-them thinking; 2) Inequity; 3) Norm disappearance/(Negative) Role models; and 4) Declining trust in government.

Bubble forming in this context refers to the development observed by participants that groups in society have become more separated from one another and grow more radical in their ideas to the point that dialogue is limited and us/them thinking is reinforced (Brandsma, 2016; NCTV, 2021). However, one interviewee provided a different perspective, suggesting that social bubbles are a normal and not inherently negative phenomenon. Norm disappearance, according to the participants, relates to the growing absence of social control in their neighbourhoods. This results in a hesitance to directly address situations that are concerning, such as littering or young people creating a disturbance. The phenomenon of drill rap was mentioned in relation to this, as young people are exposed to negative role models more frequently through the drill rap scene which has supposedly led to an increase in the willingness to use violence and carry weapons (Caramanica, 2022). Lastly, participants noticed a decline in trust in the government and increased inequity in Delft, as well as on a national level.

As Cornwall (2008) argues, participation becomes meaningful only when marginalised voices are heard and allowed to shape agendas. This was reflected in what emerged through the Mind Map: not only a list of expected social tensions but also divergent interpretations of the same trend, as seen in the example of social bubbles. This highlighted the need for greater nuance in addressing social fragmentation, a topic often flattened in policy discourse. The participatory setting enabled stakeholders to visualise overlaps and gaps in perceived priorities, insights often overlooked in conventional needs assessments.

3.2.2 Session Young People: Brainstorming

The SNRP consists of members over the age of 35, indicating a lack of youth representation. Yet, young people's perspectives on polarisation and radicalisation are crucial considering that youths are generally more vulnerable

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to such processes and that including all voices in society is a key-component of PAR and Social Labs. To address this gap, the research team engaged students from a vocational institute in Delft. HSC's existing relationship with the institute facilitated this engagement.

Two focus group sessions were held during school hours, replicating the SNRP's brainstorming process. Results from the Mind Map on community safety revealed several overlapping concerns with the SNRP, such as discrimination, sexual harassment/transgressive behaviour, housing market crisis, distrust towards the government, and domestic violence. However, the themes prioritised by the young people were different from those underlined by the SNRP: 1) Discrimination; 2) Mild legal punishments; 3) Debts, and 4) Sexual harassment. This discrepancy reinforces the need to incorporate youths in future SNRP trend analyses in order to provide a holistic picture and to more effectively address issues in Delft. Notably, the perception of lenient punishments emerged as a unique theme among youths, which was often overlooked in other studies. The sessions also exposed the civic exclusion of vocational students, revealing social marginalisation and a lack of participatory pathways. This moment of reflection can spark shifts in perception and self-understanding, resonating with Mezirow's (2000) concept of "transformative learning", a process initiated by disorienting experiences that challenge internalised assumptions.

3.2.3 Link to polarisation and radicalisation

It is important to understand how the themes that emerge from the brainstorm sessions are related to polarisation and radicalisation. Central to this connection is the role of perceived injustice (van den Bos, 2020). In Delft specifically, research has shown that vulnerable youths have fewer opportunities than their peers and are conscious of this, an awareness that potentially contributes to their susceptibility to radical narratives (Neve et al., 2019).

All the themes prioritised in the collective brainstorm sessions on safety indicate some level of perceived injustice, such as the housing crisis, which highlights inequality between homeowners and those without financial means. The young participants chose mild legal punishments as a major theme, reflecting their dissatisfaction with the Dutch legal system. Discrimination of minority groups in Dutch society was also a main challenge according to the participants from all sessions. Lastly, distrust towards the government, emphasised by the SNRP, also illustrates the importance of vertical polarisation, where tensions between government and citizens create space for radical groups to gain traction (Neumann, 2013), as seen during the COVID-19 protests.

Overall, these themes play into grievances that exist within society. According to a large body of research, grievances are among the major components in radicalisation and polarisation processes (Borum, 2003; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Moghaddam, 2005; Sageman, 2008). However, the participatory approach did not only confirm existing theories, but also deepened the understanding of how young people interpret these dynamics.

3.2.4 Session 3 SNRP: envisioning

Building on the trend analysis, the second session with the SNRP focused on providing initial solutions to issues identified, using the World Café methodology (Participatiekompas, 2022). This methodology allowed participants to rotate between two thematic discussion spaces, to ensure the inclusion of insights from all participants. From the four prioritised themes that emerged during the trend analysis, the SNRP members voted to address bubble-forming/us-vs-them thinking. Thus, one space was dedicated to this, while the other space engaged with the issue of diversifying and broadening the SNRP.

The results emphasised the need to create connections between people, but also between existing initiatives: *"The connection [...] has to come together and not sequester."* There was consensus about the importance of reaching out to people that are hard to reach and are losing faith in society, but who do not (yet) hold polarised positions. This insight draws from a masterclass, provided by the philosopher Bart Brandsma (2016) on the importance of investing in those resisting polarisation yet vulnerable to its pressures, which many SNRP members attended.

During the brainstorming on how to counter bubble forming, two main concepts were developed to encapsulate *"activities from which the Delftenaar [a person living in Delft] regains pride in living in Delft."* The first was storytelling, the sharing of experiences to create connections between people from different social bubbles and to decrease the "us vs them" thinking. In this proposed project, individuals would enter neighbourhoods and hold conversations with citizens. Examples provided of potential guiding questions are: Where are you from? How long have you been living in this neighbourhood? What do you like about this neighbourhood? What difficulties do you experience in this neighbourhood?

The second idea was to address the phenomenon by organising "*local community celebrations*" three times a year. The gatherings would take place around celebratory moments, such as Christmas or Ramadan, connecting different worlds. Concretely, these events would include the sharing of meals and rotating seats to foster diverse interactions. "*You facilitate a meal so people enter*

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conversations with each other, including another round of conversation in which people move seats." The SNRP will be directing the organisation, while at the same time including a broad range of stakeholders in the organisation and ownership of the community celebrations.

Additionally, existing social initiatives within Delft would provide a platform to increase awareness of the presence of the network and the activities provided. This secondary objective addresses an observation that emerged from previous steps in this Social Lab. Most participants agreed that a plethora of social initiatives exists; however, there is a lack of connection and coordination among them. This finding was corroborated in individual interviews. One professional from the Municipality said: *"This was also mentioned in the SNRP. You can see a multitude of initiatives, there is an issue, a new solution is proposed, then a next gap emerges, an exception, for which a new solution is drafted."* There appears to be an absence of structural solutions in favour of an excess of smaller solutions to individual problems. One interviewee outside the SNRP, who is extensively involved in Delft's civil society, emphasised that it is imperative to start from the needs of citizens before envisioning new initiatives. Although the SNRP consists of citizens, there is a lack of representation of Delft's citizens, thus a more thorough needs assessment should be carried out prior to developing initial ideas into concrete initiatives.

The overrepresentation of certain social groups, or bubbles, within the network, is not negative per se; however, it becomes problematic when they do not interact with others. This increases polarisation and inhibits common understanding, especially considering the large differences between neighbourhoods in terms of socio-economic factors, sense of belonging and feelings of safety. Furthermore, social cohesion, both within and between neighbourhoods, has declined due to social housing policy and lack of investments (Neve et al., 2019).

While the network was established in 2016 to address concern surrounding jihadism and foreign fighters, right-wing extremism has become a larger issue which requires more attention from national security services, as emerged during the start of the Social Lab. Yet, participants did not reach a consensus on whether this development could be observed in Delft. While one member proposed that it would be likely that the city will face a rise of right-wing extremism, some other members did not share this observation. Additionally, the Mind Map creation in the first session, together with individual interviews held, did not produce many insights on this particular issue. It seems that there is an information gap in the SNRP that inhibits a full picture of these concerns and, consequently, the trend analyses conducted by core SNRP members alone do not produce a holistic picture of societal developments. Adapting to the new context would require new voices to be included to represent the social bubbles

that are not involved yet. The need to increase diversity was also reflected in the focus group with professionals of the Municipality, with one participant saying: *"The SNRP should also be more diverse, this might make it more attractive for other parties. I attended one session, before I knew what it [SNRP] was. I thought it was culturally bound."*

In light of this, the SNRP indicated that it was important to reconsider how inclusive the network is. The group brainstormed potential actors to fill existing gaps. The main groups analysed that were under-represented or not represented at all: youths/students, sports associations, entrepreneurs, and apolitical people with low trust in politicians. Some expressed hesitation about formal expansion, suggesting instead the examination of alternative models of inclusion to engage underrepresented perspectives.

In the next step, SNRP members were asked to concretely note down names of people, groups and organisations that could possibly fill the information gap. This resulted in a large list of actors, but also increasing doubt towards adding new members to the network. During a follow-up session, some members of the network arrived at the conclusion that it was too soon to think in terms of involving new stakeholders, as they realised that there was a need to first work on a new vision and mission with the existing members.

Proposals to informally engage people from other social bubbles included the organisation of thematic meetings, providing internships and promoting focus group sessions on trend analyses. While these propositions are valuable to learn what may attract people to gatherings, one lateral thinker suggested that it is important to think critically about *"how can you encourage people to leave their bubble?"*

There is a broad consensus amongst the participants in all sessions that it is especially hard to reach those who are generally not interested in participating, yet they could be the most important to reach because of the knowledge gap. Including a broader range of stakeholders within the network would enrich insights of trend analyses and further increase the success of proposed solutions to engage citizens who normally live under the radar. Perhaps the most notable outcome of this session was the SNRP's collective self-awareness. Instead of focusing on quick fixes, members recognised the need to re-anchor their identity and purpose. This reflexive turn exemplifies the potential of the Social Lab approach, where assumptions are questioned and new directions emerge from within.

3.2.5 Young people's session: envisioning

In addition to the SNRP members, students also engaged in a brainstorm about initiatives to address the themes they prioritised in the Mind Map on local

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security concerns. The students were divided into groups to fit their main interest in the themes that had emerged and were stimulated to imagine what type of initiatives in their neighbourhood could address the issue. One of the central topics was discrimination. They strongly emphasised the importance of connection when addressing discrimination and, for instance, students suggested a shared meal, or a neighbourhood celebration would be effective in this regard. This initiative is closely related to what the SNRP brought forward. One notable observation was that a number of students working on this initiative had ample experience of discrimination. In relation to this, they affirmed that they felt the responsibility of countering stereotypes and reaching out to people from other social bubbles. The convergence between student and SNRP proposals illustrates how shared goals can emerge across disconnected groups when meaningful participatory spaces are created (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). However, it revealed both a risk (placing the burden of change on those affected) and a transformative potential (as youth-led initiatives can become powerful vehicles for social cohesion).

3.2.6 Session of the professionals of the municipality of Delft: consulting

During the second phase of the Social Lab cycle, the research team organised a session with the professionals of the municipality of Delft to discuss the Mind Map outcomes developed by the SNRP, as well as to consult them on what was needed to make the network more responsive to changing times. A key finding was the presence of a perceived gap between policy makers and citizens: *"I don't think the same language is spoken [as citizens] and speaking does not occur at the same locations. We have city conversations on how the government can grow closer to citizens, but you always meet the same people."* This gap was also reported by another professional who expressed critical notes on an existing advisory council of Delft: *"The advisory council in the social domain is a club of people who are actually far removed from society, this is my personal interpretation. They should actually be a mirror of society. At this moment it is just a group of highly educated people who play local council and come from neighbourhoods in which issues do not exist. I don't mean this in a bad way."* These reflections underscore a lack of representativeness in institutional participatory spaces. As the SNRP consists of engaged citizens, the role that the network could play in addressing this gap was discussed and the majority of participants in the session were positive towards it. Another key finding with regard to the SNRP's strategic role was that not many professionals of the municipality were aware of its existence. Therefore, the suggestion was made to work on a communication strategy that facilitates reaching out to the SNRP from the municipality's side and subsequently improve collaboration. This may

enhance the network position as trust-builders within fragmented urban settings.

While the correlation between declining trust in institutions and weakening social capital and civic disengagement is widely known in the literature (Borum, 2003; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Putnam, 2000) these findings support a situated articulation of the issues across different social positions, highlighting how grievances are internalised and expressed differently by professionals and young people.

3.2.7 Session 4 SNRP: mission & vision

The fourth session of the SNRP within the Social Lab cycle was planned to address two main recommendations: 1) Create a communications strategy for SNRP; 2) Diversify SNRP. These topics emerged from all previously held sessions, the focus groups with youths and professionals, and the individual interviews. Young participants, in particular, noted that they were unaware of the network's existence or role. The tools discussed included social media, multilingual messaging, and collaborations with schools, youth centres and mosques. The focus was not only on "informing", but also on building trust and enabling access to the network. Regarding the diversification of SNRP, they highlighted the importance of broadening the profile of participating members, as well as extending the thematic scope of the network beyond jihadist radicalisation, to include far-right extremism, online polarisation related to ethnicity and gender identity.

However, during the session, the members of the SNRP were hesitant to address these two recommendations as they realised that the establishment of a vision and mission was preliminary to inviting new members, or to creating a communication strategy. It was therefore decided to work on redefining the mission and vision of the SNRP network, keeping in mind that the urgency of the foreign fighter crisis had diminished, and that the network was entering a new phase. This shift in focus reflected the evolving concerns discussed in previous sessions.

It should be noted that the youth focus group was more focused on raising problems, highlighting distrust towards institutions and the lack of spaces for dialogue. Instead, professionals from the Municipality were more proactive and focused on suggesting concrete solutions. Thus, these insights not only informed the decision to revisit the network's identity, but also underscored the relevance of Social Labs in surfacing tensions and enabling a collective reframing of priorities.

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The results from this session are the creation of a new vision and mission as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. New Mission, Vision and Goals SNRP.
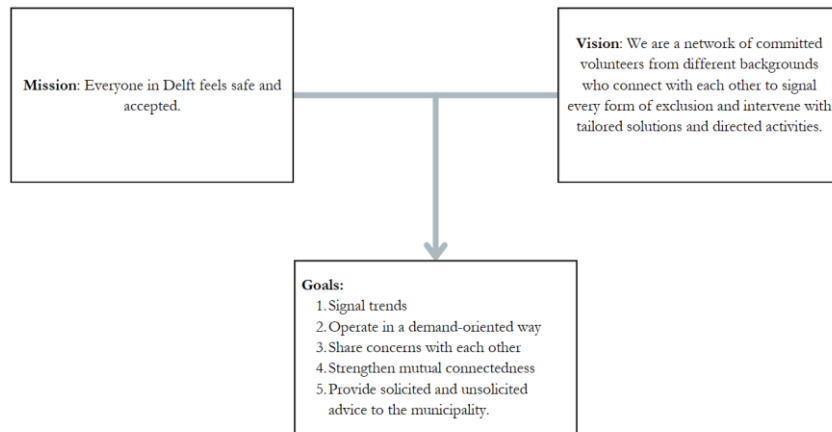
3.3. Third phase: recommending and reflecting

The third and final stage of the Social Lab cycle was the process of reflecting and providing feedback on the ideas initiated during the design and implementation phase. Social Labs are seen as ongoing processes that should not end as this research is finalised; therefore, the SNRP network committed to continuing with the process and the following action points were agreed on: 1) continue developing a new strategy and measures, including frequent evaluations and inclusion of citizens; 2) provide advice to the college of the Municipality of Delft[5] and civil servants; and 3) install a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to monitor progress.

3.3.1 Recommendations

Lastly, the research team made the following recommendations for the SNRP and the Municipality of Delft, based on insights from the Social Lab cycle, key stakeholder interviews, and sessions with young people and municipality professionals:

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[5] The college of the Municipality of Delft consists of the mayor and aldermen.

1. increase the diversity of perspectives represented in the SNRP by including a broader range of actors from various social bubbles;
2. link and learn from initiatives and networks in other municipalities in the Netherlands (and across Europe) to exchange ideas on finding ways to relate to new forms of radicalisation and polarisation;
3. ensure key players in Delft who are not members of the SNRP are invited to thematic meetings or consulted on specific topics;
4. develop a common understanding between the SNRP and the municipality on the roles and responsibilities of the SNRP during a follow-up meeting by both SNRP members and representatives of the municipality;
5. adopt a systematic approach to analysing trends on polarisation and radicalisation;
6. ensure inclusion of youths in the analysis and in the implementation phases;
7. continue applying methodologies to co-create new ideas and to adjust to new realities. This can be done through requesting members of the SNRP to facilitate meetings; utilising their skills and methodologies to advance the SNRP network.

Alongside these recommendations, the Social Lab cycle also brought to light several bureaucratic challenges that affected the evolution and quality of the participatory processes within the SNRP network. Institutional constraints, municipal approval procedures, and legal restrictions on the handling of citizens' data often slowed down the network's ability to respond promptly to emerging dynamics.

These barriers reflect a structural tension, inherent in collaborative governance, between efficiency and transparent accountability (Ansell & Torfing, 2022). At the same time, however, such constraints triggered a parallel process of organisational resilience, based on continuous negotiation and incremental adaptation, to transform institutional limitations into opportunities to redefine roles and operational strategies (Chandler & Coaffee, 2016).

In addition to these direct outcomes, reflections on the methodology of the Social Lab were also conducted. Facilitators and participants were encouraged to share insights on what they had learned from applying this methodology. These takeaways have practical implications for professionals working on complex societal issues, highlighting benefits and challenges of using Social Labs.

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3.3.2 Reflections on the Social Lab methodology

The Social Lab methodology proved particularly valuable in adapting the SNRP network to evolving challenges related to radicalisation and polarisation.

First, the incorporation of multiple voices that is inherent to a Social Lab cycle is imperative when considering phenomena such as polarisation and radicalisation. During an interview with a Delft key player and civil society expert unaffiliated with SNRP, the initiatives were considered promising, but doubts were raised as to whether community needs had been properly assessed. He said: "*Start with a need and work towards a solution, always keep in mind how to encourage the members of the community to join an initiative.*" The first part of this recommendation, to start from a need, was an important perspective that had been somewhat overlooked. This insight, which was shared with the SNRP members, was decisive in changing the focus towards redefining the mission and vision of the network.

The importance of a diversity of perspectives became clear during the focus group with young people, most of whom were enrolled in vocational training programmes and had limited prior opportunities for civic engagement. They expressed surprise at being heard and valued as sources of knowledge, as it was not usual for them to be consulted. The research team also recognised that this group was less accustomed to discussing current trends in society and was therefore more apprehensive in being asked about their opinions. A Social Lab methodology, being flexible to participants' needs, made it possible to accommodate their lower attention span and allowed for more discussions at the same time. Most importantly, the findings from the trend analyses conducted with the young people differed significantly from those conducted with the SNRP. After both sessions, most of these participants thanked the research team for having given them the opportunity to voice their opinion, something they rarely experience.

Secondly, the importance of the adaptability associated with Social Labs was apparent during the fourth session with the SNRP. In this meeting, the initial plan was to build on recommendations derived from all the sessions. The research team extracted two main recommendations: 1) Create a communications strategy for SNRP; 2) Diversify SNRP. However, while the session demonstrated the suitability of the Social Lab methodology, the members felt that an intermediate step was missing. They felt it was crucial to first and foremost re-evaluate the vision, mission, and goals of the SNRP, originally focused on late-stage jihadist radicalisation. Contemporarily, the focus has shifted to early prevention efforts and the topic of polarisation moved to the forefront. The new core question that SNRP aims to address is: How can further polarisation of society be prevented to also inhibit new forms of

radicalisation processes? In the light of this new development, the research team redirected its efforts to support the redefinition of the SNRP's mission and vision, recognising the need to address fundamental questions before expanding the network or developing a communication strategy. Some members of the SNRP came up with their own brainstorming methodology, generating a sense of collective ownership over the process and the result. The added value of Social Labs was also evident in how diverse perspectives, particularly from individual interviews, reshaped priorities, shifting the focus towards understanding citizens' needs and strategically broadening the SNRP network.

Moreover, the Social Lab enabled the network to engage in inward reflections, fostering a deeper understanding of its purpose. This is important, as polarisation and radicalisation are everchanging and unpredictable phenomena. In order to remain relevant, the network should adopt this kind of inward reflection as standard practice and the Social Lab methodology is well suited for that. The Social Lab methodology was appreciated by participants and became a foundation for continued strategic reflection within the SNRP.

Although overall the Social Lab methodology showed strong potential for addressing polarisation and radicalisation while engaging diverse actors, several challenges also emerged.

Among its *strengths*, it enabled inclusive participation, especially of underrepresented youths, and demonstrated flexibility by allowing participants to redirect the process when necessary. The co-creation of vision and mission, for instance, fostered collective ownership. However, some *weaknesses* became apparent. The process was time- and resource-intensive, creating disparities between paid professionals and volunteers. This revealed a limitation in the original design of the Social Lab cycle, which underestimated the time and availability constraints of volunteers. Furthermore, power imbalances persisted, as municipal staff retained decision-making influence, occasionally undermining equal ownership. These issues echo wider criticism in the literature that view Social Labs as potentially 'elitist' processes, since they tend to favour those with institutional support or high intrinsic motivation (Marschalek et al., 2022).

In this context, Social Labs exemplify the inherent tensions of "co-production" practices, where decision-making power is often unevenly distributed between institutional and community actors. In Delft, there was a risk that the engagement of volunteers and young people would remain merely consultative rather than being genuinely transformative, thereby constraining the process's innovative potential and rendering it susceptible to absorption within conventional institutional governance logics.

Despite these limitations, the methodology opened *opportunities* for strategic repositioning of the network, empowering voices of youths and facilitating cross-sector collaboration. All participants remained involved throughout the

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process, suggesting a strong sense of commitment and ownership. Yet, there are *threats* to long-term sustainability, including participant fatigue, potential exclusion due to time constraints, and unclear governance if power dynamics are not addressed early on.

One final recommendation is to strengthen the preparatory phase through individual meetings with volunteers to clarify expectations and ensure long-term commitment.

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