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# Implementing Social Labs in Addressing Radicalisation and Promoting Inter-Religious Dialogue*

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**Abstract**

Over recent decades, the European community has grappled with diverse forms of extremism and terrorism, exacerbated by economic crises, social divisions and the globalised nature of extremism. While most Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policies have targeted Islamic radicalisation, the approach has not fully addressed the nuances of different forms of extremism, including far-right ideologies. This paper argues for the inclusion of Social Labs as an innovative methodological approach from a sociological standpoint. The Social Lab methodology option, grounded in participatory action-research, places the community – here we refer to religious communities, religious leaders and inter-religious networks – as an integral part of the research and solution-creation process. Drawing on empirical research across Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, this work combines qualitative tools like narrative interviews, focus groups, and working groups with inter-religious dialogue networks, aiming to foster localised, community-based solutions. The paper critically evaluates the analytical path of Social Labs in capturing the nuanced socio-economic and religious drivers of radicalisation and polarisation and explores its potential for preventing religious radicalisation at the grassroots level.

The paper adds a critical layer by emphasising the need for methodological innovation in the form of Social Labs. It argues that Social Labs facilitate a more participative dynamics that can help in contextualising and ultimately countering extremism in its various forms. The paper concludes by presenting guidelines developed through Social Labs, aimed at fostering resilient communities and informing future policy and interventions.

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## 1. Social labs as a tool to prevent forms of violent extremism

In the academic discourse on preventing violent extremism, the use of Social Labs emerges as a crucial tool both for examining the foundations of radicalisation and for devising a broad range of preventive measures against different manifestations of violent extremism. By extending the understanding of Social Labs as a methodological tool within participatory action research, it becomes imperative to delve into the intrinsic aspects that make Social Labs a unique and powerful approach for addressing the complex challenges of extremism and radicalisation. The PARTICIPATION project, funded by Horizon 2020, represents a pioneering initiative that integrates the Social Labs methodology within the broader context of social research and policy-making aimed at mitigating radicalisation and its social consequences. This article reports some methodological considerations regarding the effectiveness of action-research pathways that apply Social Labs techniques, their proximity and affinity with the Grounded Theory approach, and the ethical implications of researcher and participant engagement. In particular, this section presents a summary of the Social Labs tool compared to the Grounded Theory approach (1967). Derived from Task 3.5 of the PARTICIPATION project, funded by Horizon 2020, the Social Lab methodology is rooted in participatory action research. Specifically, the technical choice of Social Labs as both a participatory tool and a research instrument constitutes a unique methodological approach offering specific descriptive and cognitive insights into the dynamics of violent radicalisation. Due to its participatory and creative nature, Social Labs promotes the development of solutions for addressing gaps in European and national institutional responses to religious extremism by engaging collaboratively with various social groups and communities, including religious leaders, community representatives and interfaith networks.

The research conducted using the empirical application of Social Labs places communities, particularly religious entities and networks, at the core of both investigative and solution-generation phases, thereby embodying a pragmatic experiential learning framework as proposed by Kolb (1984). This approach views learning as a dynamic and iterative process of transforming experience into knowledge, thanks to the appropriate facilitation by the researcher who collects and organises experiential information produced within the labs, contributing to raising questions and identifying responses through enhanced social and educational initiatives (Timmermans et al., 2020).

# Implementing Social Labs in Addressing Radicalisation and Promoting Inter-Religious Dialogue

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The data analysis comes from Task 3.5 of PARTICIPATION (Participatory Approach to Analysing and Preventing Radicalisation), funded by Horizon 2020, and aims to prevent extremism, radicalisation and polarisation – that can lead to violence – through more effective social and educational policies. The methodological choice of Social Labs, rooted in participatory action research, positions the community – in this case, religious communities, religious leaders and interfaith networks – as an integral part of the research and solution-creation process.

The current trend of polarisation and radicalisation due to the return of populist movements and nationalistic clashes challenges the adequacy of traditional theoretical frameworks. New interpretive tools capable of capturing the hybridity and ideological nature of emerging extremisms have become necessary. For example, as Antonelli and Marinone (2020) demonstrate in their comparative desk research, the current far-right landscape is deeply hybridised, combining populist rhetoric, pseudo-intellectual discourses and apocalyptic mythologies. These movements often articulate themselves as defenders of "Western civilisation" against perceived threats such as immigration, Islam, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (Leidig, 2023). Yet, despite the multiplicity of extremisms, far-right extremism demands particular scholarly and political attention due to its growing institutional normalisation, electoral success, and resonance with segments of the general population. In contrast to the marginal status of most violent Islamist or far-left movements, far-right actors increasingly enjoy political legitimacy, media visibility, and digital reach. As the PARTICIPATION project recommends, a multidimensional and participatory approach is required while remaining critically attuned to the evolving semantics, aesthetics and affective dimensions of extremism. According to this frame, the rediscovery of religious values and the promotion of interfaith dialogue offer a crucial sociocultural strategy to counter both far-right and Islamist forms of violent extremism. As highlighted by Daher et al. (2021), radicalisation is not merely an ideological deviation but a socially embedded process nurtured by exclusion, identity crises, and ignorance of the Other (Daher et al., 2021, p. 4-5).

The primary objective of Task 3.5 of PARTICIPATION (Participatory Approach to Analysing and Preventing Radicalisation) was to design Social Labs using a participatory approach to develop a series of recommendations to support individuals at risk of radicalisation and violent extremism, involving religious leaders and representatives from Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands. This particular research experience provides a good vantage point for understanding not only a social dynamic (the radicalisation process) but also the methodological potential of Social Labs. The origin of Social Labs, introduced by Zaid Hassan in 2014, intersects with action research and problem-based

learning, drawing from pragmatic philosophy to tackle complex social challenges through systemic, experimental and community-centred methodologies. These labs operate as local catalysts, enhancing the effectiveness of social research and innovation by facilitating experiential learning, thus becoming increasingly instrumental in policy updating and design. From a methodological perspective, Social Labs emerge as a communicative and relational interface between the local community and the scientific community, strengthening the impact of research and innovation efforts by stimulating localised experiential learning processes dedicated to social intervention. The methodological perspective of Social Labs presented in these terms aligns closely with the Grounded Theory research approach. In this case, Grounded Theory represents a systematic approach to qualitative research, distinguished by its ability to generate theories through data analysis. This method was originally developed by sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967) to generate theoretical formulations concerning social phenomena directly from the data. Some common principles highlight the proximity of the two perspectives. Both rely on a bottom-up approach through data observation. The research process approaches data openly and without bias, fostering the discovery of new patterns and relationships. Specifically, they respond to Herbert Blumer's (1969) call to study social action in natural contexts (Glaser, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Glaser's approach presumes a knowable world awaiting discovery, impartial observers uninfluenced by pre-conceived logical-deductive theories or previous research on the topic, and a view of Grounded Theory categories emerging from the data. The concept of Social Labs (Hassan, 2014) merges action research tools and the problem-based learning approach linked to the pragmatist philosophical tradition. In this perspective, the theoretical background of Social Labs is enriched by its alignment with Kolb's experiential learning theory, where the emphasis on learning through a cyclical process of doing, reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting fosters a deep understanding and resolution of social complexities. Unlike other participatory methodologies, such as focus groups and stakeholder workshops, Social Labs emphasise action-oriented cooperative engagement that requires no prior expertise, fostering shared experiences and a collective desire to bring about change. As shown in the literature (Kieboom et al., 2015), Social Labs transcend short-term commitments, instead serving as incubators for social experimentation. Such openness to the data and the interpretive results for the emergence of theoretical knowledge in both perspectives ensures that each research phase involves constant comparison, where each piece of data is continuously compared with other data to identify and develop conceptual categories. This iterative comparison process allows the researcher to refine and

adjust categories until clear and defined models and relational dynamics emerge to explain the social phenomena investigated.

Data interpretation and coding is structured in phases, which, albeit different in the two approaches, reveal a common abductive root that leads to results never intended for their own sake but always destined for a return of scientific knowledge to the relational community that generated it through phenomenological observation.

In summary, the central phases of Grounded Theory research applied to data interpretation and coding consist of three main stages: a) Open Coding – identifying and naming concepts appearing in the data; b) Axial Coding – linking concepts into broader categories and relationships among them; and c) Selective Coding – identifying the central concept around which the theory is constructed. The final result of Grounded Theory is the development of a theory deeply rooted in empirical data. This theory is not merely a collection of categories but a well-structured theory providing a comprehensive explanation of the observed phenomena. Theories can be substantial, limited to a particular field of investigation, or formal, applicable to a wide range of contexts. In the case of action research conducted with Social Labs, the comparative dimension adopted within the project seeks to amplify learning across various thematic, regional and even national contexts, further enriching the discourse on preventing radicalisation. Essentially, Social Labs, as explored in this context, represent a paradigm shift towards a more inclusive and participatory approach to understanding and mitigating the forces of radicalisation and violent extremism. Through the lens of the PARTICIPATION project, the application of Social Labs underscores the integral role of community engagement and experiential learning in creating innovative and effective strategies to counter the multifaceted challenge of radicalisation (Hassan, 2014; Kieboom et al., 2015; Timmermans et al., 2020).

The operational framework of Social Labs within the PARTICIPATION project adheres to a tripartite structure: initial discussion and diagnosis of existing practices, design and implementation of pilot actions, followed by reflective feedback on these interventions. This inherently participatory and iterative process transcends the conventional expert-oriented approach, fostering a cooperative, action-focused environment conducive to social experimentation and learning.

Although the applications and implications of Grounded Theory and Social Lab research are particularly suited for underdeveloped research fields or those concerning phenomena with ethical issues and elusive social units, they present challenges. In both cases, these research approaches can be subjectively influenced by the researcher's perceptions, particularly in data selection and interpretation. Additionally, the intensive nature of its coding, and the analysis

process require a significant investment of time and resources. Given this proximity of perspectives, the operational setup and concrete preparation of Social Labs can rely on the data-based research modus operandi. According to Glaser (2001; 1978), Grounded Theory is based on discovered data, avoids pre-conceived interpretations through existing theories or categories, relies on comparative methods, and aims for theoretical development. Thus, the Grounded Theory researcher compares data with data, data with concepts, concepts with concepts, and theoretical categories with theoretical categories. For example, a Grounded Theory researcher compares an interview excerpt with another one, an interview excerpt with a concept that might explain it, a concept with another concept, and so forth. Moreover, along with his co-author Juliet Corbin (1998), Strauss took Grounded Theory in directions that were slightly different from the initial formulations. They introduced several new techniques, emphasised description, and included verification as part of Grounded Theory. They emphasised adherence to technical procedures that Glaser sees as constraining data into pre-conceived categories rather than allowing categories to emerge by comparing data with data. The approaches of both Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Glaser (2001; 1978) remain objectivist because both assume the reality of an external world, the discovery of data within that world, a neutral observer of it, conceptual categories emerging from the data, and the representation of data and subjects as non-problematic (Cipriani, 2007).

## 2. Religious engagement and social labs against radicalisation: interfaith strategies in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands

Within Task 3.5, Social Labs are extremely useful because they allow us to develop a series of recommendations aimed at supporting subjects who are at risk of radicalisation, involving religious leaders and representatives of European religious communities in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands.

Since the 1980s, Belgium has been a hub for groups connected to the Algerian and Moroccan conflicts, with a turning point marked by the 1981 synagogue attack in Antwerp. While jihadist radicalisation gained prominence after the September 11 attacks – particularly with the emergence of Sharia4Belgium and the recruitment of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq – right-wing extremism has also seen a steady rise, fuelled by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments, especially in urban and politically polarised areas.

While Italy has been marginally affected by terrorist attacks compared to other EU countries, it remains a strategic transit point for radical networks. The country faces ongoing threats from three forms of extremism: left-wing, right-

wing, and religious. Right-wing extremism has seen a resurgence, especially since 2018, with a rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attacks. This trend reflects growing societal polarisation and exploitation of nationalist and identity-based fears.

As in the Italian case, radicalisation in the Netherlands is closely linked to processes of polarisation. However, in the Dutch context, this polarisation is tied not only to issues of identity, but also more specifically to religion and trust in institutions[1].

Across all three countries, right-wing extremism is no longer a fringe phenomenon but an expanding threat that intersects with broader societal fractures, calling for integrated, cross-sector responses to prevent further polarisation and violence.

In light of the common challenges faced by Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, the cooperative engagement of political leaders and religious communities stands out as a vital response. The central research question, therefore, focusses on how to implement innovative tools that can facilitate meaningful dialogue between local communities and religious stakeholders. By promoting inclusive spaces for conversation and the exchange of diverse viewpoints, these collaborative initiatives seek to counteract polarisation and radicalisation, ultimately fostering stronger social cohesion and generating concrete improvements in the fabric of society.

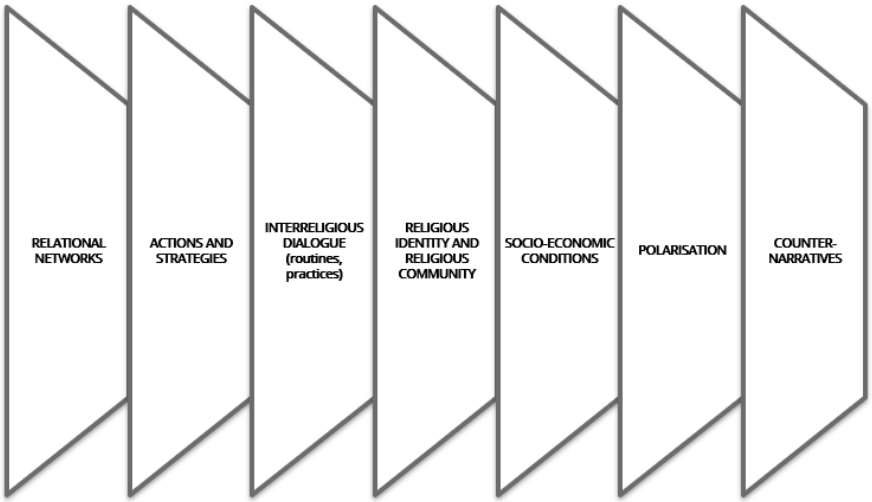
Therefore, the research is aimed at analysing data relating to: (1) the narrative interviews and focus groups conducted with religious leaders and representatives of religious communities in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands; (2) the three workshops held with interreligious dialogue networks in the three countries under consideration. In Social Labs, there is a constant process of comparing data in order to identify and develop specific conceptual categories: within Task 3.5, the data from interviews and focus groups with religious leaders allow the first version of the recommendations to be drawn up; this version will be critically discussed in three workshops held with the interreligious dialogue networks in the three countries to define the final recommendations.

The data collected during the two research steps described above will be categorised into the following seven thematic areas: 1) relational networks; 2) actions and strategies: 3) interreligious dialogue; 4) religious identity and religious community; 5) socio-economic conditions; 6) polarisation; and 7). counter-narratives. Areas 1, 2 and 3 regard positive experiences on dialogue and collaboration between different religious communities and between these

[1] The information concerning the three contexts can be found in the report *Religious Communities: Analyzing and Discussing Religious Polarization and Extremism* (D3.5): https://participation-in.eu/media/Religious-communities-d3.5.pdf

religious communities and local authorities; areas 4, 5 and 6 concern the causes that contribute to polarisation and radicalisation processes; and area 7, the counter-narratives, proposes some recommendations to prevent forms of violent extremism. (Fig. 1).

*Figure 1. The seven thematic areas.*




### *2.1 Narrative interviews with local religious leaders*

The narrative interviews were conducted in Belgium with a Catholic priest, an imam and a rabbi; in Italy with an imam, an Orthodox priest and a member of the Catholic Christian community; while in the Netherlands, the research team interviewed two Protestant pastors and an Orthodox rabbi: all the religious leaders dealt with issues related to countering forms of violent extremism, polarisation and social discrimination (Table 1).

In Belgium, all the religious leaders interviewed expressed their willingness to discuss and interact with other religions: "we collaborate with many churches and associations that deal with different humanitarian activities and very often we carry out actions together to help others" (Rabbi, Jewish leader, M, middle-aged adult, Belgium). In particular, in Italy there is the *Coordinamento delle religioni in dialogo* (Coordination of Religions in Dialogue) which values the importance of interreligious dialogue in order to prevent forms of hatred towards those with different cultures and religions: the *Coordinamento delle religioni in dialogo* "allows members of different religions to emphasise the importance of dialogue

and communication; in the *Coordinamento delle religioni in dialogo*, we get along well with other religions and have made many initiatives, aimed at society, including visits to schools, highlighting the importance of dialogue" (Imam, M, senior citizen). In the Netherlands, one of the religious leaders highlights the importance of improving collaboration with municipalities and political authorities in order to stem the loss of religious values: "for me, it is important to safeguard religious interests and values within a society that is becoming increasingly secular" (Orthodox Rabbi, M, senior citizen).

*Table 1. Sample of Interviewees – Religious leaders.*

| Country | Interviewee N. | Sex | Age Group | Religious affiliation | Education | Research step Involvement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **B** | 1 | M | Senior adult | Catholic | Master's Degree | Religious Leader |
| **B** | 2 | M | Senior adult | Muslim | Master's Degree | Religious leader |
| **B** | 3 | M | Middle-aged adult | Jewish | MBA | Religious Leader |
| **IT** | 1 | M | Middle-aged adult | Christian Orthodox | Degree | Religious Leader |
| **IT** | 2 | M | Middle-aged adult | Muslim | Degree | Religious Leader |
| **IT** | 3 | M | Adult | Catholic | Degree | Religious Leader |
| **NL** | 1 | M | Adult | Pastor | Degree | Religious Leader |
| **NL** | 2 | M | Middle-aged adult | Pastor | Master's Degree | Religious Leader |
| **NL** | 3 | M | Senior adult | Orthodox Rabbi | Master's Degree | Religious Leader |

Regarding the actions and strategies implemented by religious communities, in Italy, an Orthodox priest noted the usefulness of the annual meetings held by the Catholic Episcopate, within which "leaders of different religious communities meet to discuss socially relevant contemporary issues" (Orthodox Christian priest, M, middle-aged adult). In this regard, in Belgium and the Netherlands, religious leaders talk about the importance of such types of meetings, "to be open to discussion, dialogue, and to invite people without asking them 'who you are', 'where you come from' and 'what you believe'" (Catholic Christian priest, M, senior citizen, Belgium). Another religious leader states: "our goal is to become the church that people can trust, by attempting to understand their requirements" (Pastor #1, M, adult, Netherlands).

Interviewees from three European countries emphasise the ways in which interreligious dialogue should be structured: "the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim communities aspire to an interreligious dialogue that is structured around common themes; Christians and Muslims are working together in the *Ensemble avec Marie* movement to advance peace and a more inclusive society, where the diversity of cultures and religions is respected, with a concern for freedom of worship and the right to diversity" (Imam, M, senior citizen, Belgium); "it is important to have interreligious dialogue with members who show their desire to build society together" (Catholic missionary, M, Adult, Italy); "joint action is crucial to address any social crises" (Pastor #2, M, middle-aged adult, Netherlands).

Through interreligious dialogue, people of different beliefs can communicate and acquire new religious values at the same time. The presence or absence of these values can lead to either feelings of closure and distrust toward others, or to a disorienting state where the subject is attracted to groups with polarising attitudes.

The mindset of an individual or group of individuals is "generally shaped by religious values, especially if one grows up in a religious community" (Pastor #1, M, adult, Netherlands). In the Dutch context, one of the pastors interviewed acknowledges the difficulties of participating in debates with other religious leaders at times, given that some of them have a conservative religious orientation: "the issue of racism cannot be discussed in public debates because the way some people discuss other cultures scares you!" (Pastor #1, M, adult). The evolution of society and the advancement of technology have resulted in a weakening of religious values: "just look at the churches and mosques; the places of worship are empty!" (Imam, M, Middle-aged adult, Italy); "many individuals, particularly young people, would be more inclined to share radical opinions with individuals they know on YouTube or Instagram because they lack reliable references" (Imam, M, senior citizen, Belgium).

The development of violent extremism is not solely caused by the presence of conservative religious groups and the weakening of religious values. The analysis above has shown that socio-economic conditions and the development of polarisation processes have a dual value: (1) the socio-economic problems that Europe suffers could lead to the continent not welcoming a considerable number of migrants; "it becomes increasingly difficult for Europe to accept new migrants due to serious socio-economic problems" (Imam, M, senior citizen, Belgium). Furthermore, the difficulties in accepting new migrants are exacerbated by the presence of right-wing extremist groups, which have developed not only Islamophobic sentiments, but also racist and xenophobic sentiments, fuelled by increasingly polarising political discourse: "anti-immigration rhetoric can be used as a reason to encourage violence. If people

claim that foreigners are taking jobs from you and have more rights than you, people may start to believe it and may act violently towards migrants" (Catholic Christian priest, M, senior citizen, Belgium). Extremist groups exploit the vulnerable status of migrants to generate intense negative emotions, such as anger, resentment, and sometimes even hatred, towards those who are perceived as outsiders to their group; (2) In fact, according to the religious leaders interviewed, this situation creates "disconnection and tensions between native citizens and migrants, who perceive that they are not well accepted within the host society, and, for this reason, religious institutions feel obliged to intervene in order to resolve these conflicts." (Rabbi, Jew leader, M, middle-aged adult, Belgium).

In this regard, the interviewees have drawn several counter-narratives useful for preventing the proliferation of forms of extremism, especially those of the right, which recall, in part, what was said earlier about interreligious dialogue: (1) "it's crucial to prevent radicalisation by not being radical in our own ways and imposing our ideas on others" (Catholic Christian priest, M, senior citizen, Belgium); (2) "it's important to emphasise the significance of dialogue, listening, measuring oneself with others, and respecting others" (Imam, M, senior citizen, Italy); (3) "understanding the motives behind your actions, particularly beating someone who is different from you, is crucial" (Pastor #2, M, middle-aged adult, Netherlands).

The main objective of this preliminary phase of research is to identify relevant concepts and issues through the analysis of interviews, namely: the significance of religious communities in preventing the processes of polarisation and radicalisation, and the importance of their coordinated involvement in these issues. This initial relevance will be supplemented by focus group data with religious communities, which, compared to narrative interviews, will allow us to derive information, that is not always evident through the dynamics of social interaction. By comparing the results from both interviews and focus groups, we can further expand the issues related to preventing radicalisation.

### *2.2 Focus Group with representatives of religious communities*

The analysis of the focus groups carried out with the religious communities is primarily aimed at further exploring the issues that emerged from the interviews. To support the conclusions of the previous section, the importance of religious communities in the process of prevention of polarisation and radicalisation is crucial; this can also be seen in the sample of respondents that was involved in the focus group.

In Belgium, the respondents comprised five representatives, two from the Muslim Community and three from the Catholic Community. In Italy, there were three representatives of the Catholic community from Rome, three from the Muslim community from Catania and one from the Orthodox community of Palermo. In the Netherlands, there were six representatives: two from Islam, three from Christianity, and one from Judaism (Table 2).

*Table 2. Sample of Interviewees – Religious communities.*

| Country | Interviewee N. | Sex | Age Group | Religious affiliation | Education | Research step Involvement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **B** | 1 | M | Middle-aged adult | Muslim | Associate Degree | Religious community representative |
| **B** | 2 | M | Middle-aged adult | Muslim | Associate Degree | Religious community representative |
| **B** | 3 | F | Adult | Catholic | Master's Degree | Religious community representative |
| **B** | 4 | M | Adult | Catholic | PhD | Religious community representative |
| **B** | 5 | F | Adult | Catholic | Master's Degree | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 1 | M | Adult | Christian Orthodox | Highschool Diploma | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 2 | M | Senior adult | Catholic | Degree | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 3 | M | Middle-aged adult | Catholic | Degree | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 4 | M | Adult | Catholic | Vocational school | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 5 | M | Adult | Muslim | Vocational school | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 6 | M | Adult | Muslim | Vocational school | Religious community representative |
| **IT** | 7 | M | Young adult | Muslim | Vocational school | Religious community representative |
| **NL** | 1 | F | Middle-aged adult | Jewish | / | Religious community member |
| **NL** | 2 | F | Adult | Muslim | Master's Degree | Religious community member |
| **NL** | 3 | M | Middle-aged adult | Muslim | Master's Degree | Religious community member |
| **NL** | 4 | F | Middle-aged adult | Christian | Master's Degree | Religious community member |
| **NL** | 5 | M | Middle-aged adult | Christian | Master's Degree | Religious community member |
| **NL** | 6 | M | Adult | Christian | Master's Degree | Religious community member |

Three main issues emerged during the focus groups: 1) polarisation; 2) trouble caused by anti-immigration rhetoric; and 3) the counter narrative. For example, regarding Belgium, an interesting point that emerges is that while in

the interviews, polarisation is seen to be not only of a religious nature, in the focus group the discussion between leaders shows that religious polarisation is actually the most dangerous for them. Building a historical reconstruction of polarisation, one of the participants referred to the exploitation of religious identities, used as a motivating tool to declare war against the other religions: "There were the wars against the Muslim world at the time of the crusades. And all that was also something that, in my opinion, harmed the image of the religion, because there should have been a way to agree on holy places that we have more or less in common, where there is a common base. We must agree all together that everyone should be able to come to the holy city rather than fight each other. However, the problem of human beings of faith, is not the lack of a desire to compromise, but rather what is called power relations. If the problem of polarisation is based on religion, it is not acceptable" (A.M., Belgium, Algerian origin, 60+). In Italy, regarding polarisation, what emerged clearly during the focus group, from several religious leaders – both Muslims and Jews – which then also echoes what emerged from the interviews, is that there is a lack of willingness to listen to those who are different from us because there is a mental closure. Finally, the effect of this is precisely to encourage hate towards the other and therefore polarisation. Another important aspect is the role of education for the youth; one of the participants described extremism as "a son of a manipulation, wanted by a few, to subdue many" (M.F., Italy, male). He stated that extremism is the result of great ignorance and manipulation, as information – especially on sensitive topics– is very easy to manipulate. He says: "your ignorance is my strength" (M.F., Italy, male). In his opinion, young people are vulnerable to extreme ideas also because they are fascinated by strong ideas. Moreover, we can confirm that, with the methodologies of the Social Lab, our participants felt that they were more understood. We should also mention the insights that emerged on the critical role played by key institutions, such as the school and the family, as sources of strength and care. In the Netherlands, for example, closed-mindedness emerges not only from the religious communities, but in particular from political institutions that very often express polarising attitudes. Moreover, this closure – also from above – towards young people who are no longer able to acquire values very often leads them to approach forms of right-wing extremism: "That is the tension that my peers and I are dealing with. You really want to structurally, institutionally, positively and constructively change certain things you know how to, and you have the character to do so. However, it simply is an invisible fight. [...] Even in places that pretend to be open to criticism, they push you aside relentlessly when you open your mouth. That is really an issue that we face" (H. S. Netherlands, male.)

A second important point regards the trouble caused by anti-immigration rhetoric in Belgium; in this case, what emerged from the focus groups is that it

increased during the pandemic period: "We can see the feeling of injustice on the issue concerning the vaccine. I think about young people, second, third, and fourth generation immigrants. Because of the higher isolation, they feel that [they] are not accepted in this society. An experience or a situation like that is frustrating. The young person will grow up with a feeling of hatred towards the other, whoever they are, if they do not recognise him or her [as a member of the same community], and that is a dangerous situation" *(*M.M., Belgium, 45-59). In Italy, it is evident that sometimes the anti-migratory rhetoric in young people may be a cultural legacy of the family in which they grew up: "One of the phrases that is sometimes used to make children stop crying is: *Be quiet, otherwise the black man will come!* It is vital that families teach their children not to hate the other and to love them as they are, whether they are black, Muslim, Chinese, white European, a person with a disability etc." (M.L. Italy, Male).

In the Netherlands, participants claimed that one of the discriminatory effects of anti-immigration rhetoric is the fact that some landlords decided to raise rents so that migrants had to leave their homes. However, they also stated that some migrants become radicalised as they fail to integrate socially within the host country: "We need a migration museum. They [people with a migration background] are now being told that they are not indigenous Dutch people. [...] At that time [when the first migrant workers came to the Netherlands], Turks and Moroccans were systematically placed in separate neighbourhoods from white people, and now they have to leave because the rents have increased, and people want to make tons of money from houses. I call it what it is, blatant racism, and that is not allowed in the Netherlands" (P.F., Netherlands).

A third point regarding the counter narrative, in Belgium, is also mentioned in the interviews: the importance of values, not only religious values but those that are about helping each other: "some years ago, a charity began to raise funds and resources for a shelter for homeless people and migrants. So, in doing this, people get together, and they don't discuss the name of God […] So, Saturday, Sunday, or Friday they just do it and they find that the values are there, being there for the other, being tolerant. And I think, here at least you find a very good chance to be ecumenical and to be open to other people with other backgrounds, religious backgrounds and understanding" (J.M., Belgium, Colombian origin, 60+). In Italy, the participants emphasised the importance of common spaces and dialogue with other communities, including atheist ones. Many of the participants stressed that they would continue to be active in the social and the political life of the host country. With these activities, the representatives of each community should consider expressing themselves better – both in terms of levels of language proficiency (in the words of one of the participants) and in terms of offering and learning good practices, and working more on the possibilities of a dialogue and social, institutional and

political representation. An interesting common point in all three countries is that, according to the participants, the only way for the communities to be able to facilitate change on political and institutional levels is to continue to be present. Particular attention was paid to the interconnection between social and socio-economic factors and the dynamics of polarisation and extremism of a religious matrix, thinking that this possible link can also provide information on the social composition of groups at risk in the different territories and all over Europe in general. The valorisation of the different points of view expressed during the sessions is aimed at developing tools for navigating complexity regarding both positive and critical thoughts. Exploring potential polarisation and radicalisation through dialogue within religious communities is the first prevention tool because it enables groups to communicate with each other and build communities of thought and action that are resilient to extremism and narratives of hatred and violence.

Seven thematic areas were identified in the three countries investigated, drawing from the content analysis categories and areas of discussion explored during the previous research phases. This helps to outline the *recommendatory guidelines* as they were submitted to the interreligious dialogue networks to be further elaborated and critically discussed in three workshops (in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands): (1) the need for a network approach for the religious stakeholders in order to create a bridge with (and within) the community of reference and the social environment they are in; (2) the relevance (through institutionalisation) of a structured presence in the urban space for different religious stakeholders; (3) the creation of an interreligious dialogue that allows a dialogue on diversity to be established; (4) the need to prevent the risk that youth can encounter radicalisation and extremist speeches and polarising rhetoric online; (5) religious communities must propose themselves as significant actors in the integration process of vulnerable populations and separate this from the migration issue; (6) the need to combat stereotypes (and the media mechanisms that support them) and automatic associations between extreme ideologies and precise religious affiliations; (7) the need for an environment in which individuality is expressed through collective actions: this collective dimension must be based on certain milestones such as education, civic engagement and voluntary activities. Furthermore, the strategic role of families is indispensable for dialogue to be based on the mutual respect of 'authentic' religious values.

### *2.3* **Working *group with inter-religious dialogue networks and final recommendations***

Based on the narrative interviews with local religious leaders and focus group sessions with representatives of religious communities, a first set of recommendations was drafted by the research teams from Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands. Although the recommendations were derived from local contexts, the findings were generalised to ensure applicability in all three countries, as well as being useful guidelines for a broader audience. The next step in the Social Lab with religious communities focused on validating, refining and supplementing the first draft of recommendations. To this end, the research team in the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium involved a new set of stakeholders: members of interreligious dialogue networks. In all countries, working group sessions with interreligious dialogue networks were held that served as a feedback-gathering opportunity on the initial draft of recommendations.

*Table 3. Sample of Interviewees – Interreligious network members.*

| Country | Interviewee N. | Sex | Age Group | Religious affiliation | Education | Research step Involvement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IT | 1 | M | Senior adult | Catholic | Degree | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 2 | F | Senior adult | Baha'i | Degree | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 3 | F | Senior adult | Buddhist | High School Diploma | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 4 | F | Senior adult | Catholic | Degree | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 5 | M | Senior adult | Catholic | High School Diploma | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 6 | M | Middle-aged adult | Muslim | Degree | Interreligious network member |
| IT | 7 | M | Middle-aged adult | Hindu | Degree | Interreligious network member |
| B | 1 | F | Adult | Catholic | PhD | Interreligious network member |
| B | 2 | M | Middle-aged adult | Humanist | Master's Degree | Interreligious network member |
| B | 3 | M | Senior adult | Christian | PhD | Interreligious network member |
| NL | 1 | F | Middle-aged adult | Christian | Master's Degree | Interreligious network member |
| NL | 2 | F | Adult | Muslim | Master's Degree | Interreligious network member |
| NL | 3 | F | Adult | Muslim | PhD candidate | Interreligious network member |
| NL | 4 | M | Senior adult | Jewish | Master's Degree | Interreligious network member |

The final objective was to develop a set of guidelines on how to prevent (religious) polarisation and radicalisation and to promote (interreligious) dialogue at the local and national level. Information on the participants of the working group with interreligious dialogue members can be found in Table 3.

The recommendations cover the following seven thematic areas, derived from the analysis of the interviews with religious leaders as well as the focus group discussions with representatives of religious communities, as described in the previous section: Relational Networks, Actions and Strategies, Interreligious Dialogue, Religious Identity and Religious Community, Socio-Economic Conditions, Polarisation, and Counter-Narratives. It is beyond the scope of this paper to report on all the findings from this research step, but the key feedback points received will be highlighted.

i. The need to engage with the unusual suspect. People who do not automatically participate in interreligious dialogue sessions or events are possibly the most important to engage with, since they generally hold more conservative views and are less open-minded; therefore, it is crucial to engage these people in the organisation of common interfaith events. "You should avoid talking only to people who already want to talk to others. Connecting with people who do not want to commit to the dialogue is important. Invest in face-to-face meetings"– (Christian, NL). To engage individuals typically absent from interreligious dialogue – often those holding more closed or radical views – it is essential to actively identify and involve them in the co-organisation of events focussed on shared concerns (e.g., youth, education, inclusion). This requires trusted intermediaries from within the communities to build initial trust and facilitate contact. Meetings should be in-person, informal, and oriented toward building relationships rather than ideological debate.
ii. Interreligious dialogues should not solely be about religion but should relate to wider societal issues. "You may ask yourself: is interreligious dialogue an end in itself, or is it important because current social questions are important? As far as I'm concerned, the second is important: as people from different backgrounds, we are all part of society. It's about building a humane society" (Christian, Netherlands). Interreligious dialogue should be reframed as a tool for addressing urgent social issues, not as an isolated practice focussed solely on theology or identity. To be effective, it must connect with real-life challenges – such as social exclusion, discrimination, or youth marginalisation – by creating spaces where religious communities work together on shared civic problems. This approach enhances the social relevance of dialogue, shifts its purpose from symbolic coexistence to practical cooperation, and

fosters trust among groups through concrete collaboration in the public sphere.

iii. Frameworks should ensure long-term institutional support for interreligious dialogue by recognising these networks as formal actors in local governance, while also remaining flexible enough to support bottom-up initiatives. Stability must be combined with openness to informal participation, enabling local communities to shape content and priorities without depending solely on top-down agendas.

iv. Education must be embedded in long-term prevention strategies by integrating interreligious literacy and critical thinking into formal and informal learning spaces, especially those targeting youth. This requires not only accurate content on diverse faiths but also pedagogical approaches that encourage empathy and dismantle binary worldviews. As noted by a Hindu leader in Italy, "through dialogue you are able to touch the heart of the other person who has a wrong belief and does not respect the views of others," while a Muslim participant in the Netherlands stressed that "education can play a strong de-polarising role, if the right information is provided."

v. To make interreligious dialogue effective, it is essential to first support open discussion within each religious community. This means involving different internal voices – especially those who may feel excluded or disagree with official positions – so that disagreements are addressed internally rather than becoming obstacles to dialogue with others. As one Belgian participant observed, "many internal differences and sensitive matters arise when the communities are opening up to inter-faith dialogue. It is very important to ensure good and respectful dialogue within the same organisation."

vi. It is crucial to engage young people and really listen to them, even if they are highly critical. Engaging young people requires creating spaces where they feel genuinely heard, even when their views are critical or uncomfortable, while also involving their families to address early signs of polarisation that often emerge at home. Participation must be understood as a gradual process that includes trust-building with both youths and parents. As noted in Italy, "participation is not a simple thing [...] it is a process that is built," and Belgian participants stressed that "sometimes the first step towards radicalisation happens at home, with the family."

vii. To counter stereotyping and foster inclusion, shared values among religious communities must be made visible through structured, recurring practices embedded in local policies and education. This involves supporting interfaith collaborations that generate public

narratives of coexistence through concrete actions such as joint cultural events, dialogue in schools, and community-led media content. As one interviewee recommended, it is essential to "create and/or bring forward positive narratives (i.e. best practices of fruitful coexistence of faith communities etc.) to avoid negative image-making and stereotyping" (Belgium). This approach ensures that interreligious dialogue moves beyond symbolic gestures and becomes a stable tool of social cohesion.

viii. To avoid the unintended polarising effects of policies, especially those touching on identity and belief, it is essential to institutionalise participatory mechanisms that ensure the presence of diverse intra- and inter-religious voices throughout the policymaking process. The Dutch case demonstrates that excluding religious actors, particularly in contexts marked by distrust toward institutions, reinforces an "us-vs-them" dynamic and delegitimises state action. Inclusion must not be reduced to symbolic consultation but become a structural requirement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies affecting faith communities. As one Christian interviewee stated, "If you make a policy about people, you have to involve them" – this principle must guide a shift from top-down governance to co-designed, context-aware interventions.

The local teams in Italy and especially the Netherlands emphasised the need to understand radicalisation and polarisation not only among religious communities, but in a broader societal sense where the focus is not solely on religiously motivated polarisation and radicalisation. The feedback from those participating in the Social Lab was that polarisation and radicalisation in this research should be considered to be a multifaceted and broader phenomenon not only limited to specific religious groups. This key perspective guided the research team in their approach and required adaptation of research questions and subsequently that of the recommendations. The ability to do so is a key advantage of Social Labs, where all stakeholders involved, not only the traditional researchers, have a say in the design, outcomes and applicability of the research. This emphasises the added value and strength of conducting Social Labs on complex societal issues.

As radicalisation and polarisation processes are socially constructed and part of a complex system of daily-life interactions and social relationships (McDonald, 2018), approaches on how to deal with these processes should arise from the diverse perspectives of social actors and should be adaptable to ever-changing societal dynamics. Social Labs offer an effective approach to respond to the inclusion of diverse stakeholders as well as to the need for exploration and reiteration. Reiteration and feedback loops are an essential part of conducting Social Labs. Another key element is incorporating the voices of a broad and diverse set of stakeholders. Within this research with religious

communities in the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium, religious leaders and representatives of religious communities were engaged in the first phase of the research through interviews and focus groups. This first phase culminated in the drafting of a preliminary set of recommendations. The second phase of the research, as highlighted in this section, entailed the validation and refinement of these recommendations. To this end, interreligious dialogue networks in the three respective countries aimed to provide a new perspective, bringing a great deal of expertise on external communication with them. The purpose of this step was to identify appropriate strategies to prevent extremism, radicalisation and polarisation through involving social actors, in this case interreligious dialogue networks. The final phase of the research aimed to develop a set of guidelines on how to prevent (religious) polarisation and radicalisation and to promote (interreligious) dialogue at the local and national level[2].

The study has offered meaningful insights into how religious communities perceive and respond to radicalisation. It highlighted their potential role as actors of dialogue and social resilience, while fostering trust and participation through a bottom-up, qualitative approach. Nevertheless, while rich in depth, this research is limited by the specific sociocultural contexts examined. Future investigations would benefit from involving religious and belief systems that are less represented – such as secular worldviews or new spiritual movements – as well as expanding the geographic coverage to include regions of Europe that are currently underexplored, particularly in the East and North. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how radicalisation processes are embedded in diverse territorial and cultural configurations.

## 3. Concluding Reflections on the Synergistic Collaboration between Grounded Theory and Social Labs

A preliminary theoretical (infra-1) and empirical (infra-2) consideration concerning the sensitive nature and observational challenges of violent religious radicalisation led to the adoption of a distinctly qualitative method for this research. This involved the implementation of Social Labs aimed at suggesting innovative strategies to address social problems and the disruptive dynamics affecting the social fabric. Certainly, theoretical considerations alone would not have sufficed to legitimise the integrated use of various research modes. Still, a methodological reflection on the research process reveals foundational

[2] This final set of recommendations can be found in the report *Religious Communities: Analyzing and Discussing Religious Polarization and Extremism* (D3.5): https://participation-in.eu/media/Religious-communities-d3.5.pdf

similarities between the Grounded Theory approach and the action research conducted for Task T3.5, particularly in the investigative approach and subsequent theoretical development. These foundational similarities can be identified in the following features: a) the inquiry aimed to generate theoretical insights from the data; b) the research design is abductive in nature (Glaser, 1978; Reichertz, 2010); and c) the development of recommendations, following initial empirical research and the Social Lab implementation, allows for further fields and research questions to be explored regarding violent religious radicalisation dynamics. During the field investigation and inquiry phases, sensitising concepts were preferred, remaining open to unpredictability and adaptable throughout the research.

However, given the sensitivity and prevalence of the topic across different geographic contexts, the initial data interpretation relied on analytical frameworks shared in literature and aligned with the unique characteristics of individual cases. In conducting Social Labs across three partner countries, data saturation principles ensured that the reference sample encompassed all relevant subjects with specific traits useful for research purposes. Additionally, sociological knowledge of the investigated phenomenon is understood both in Social Labs and through the Grounded Theory perspective as knowledge of *knowledge,* (Cipolla, 1991), referring to forms of knowledge – technical and practical as well as intellectual – that are manifested in daily life and social relationships. The lived experiences shared by social actors become a crucial vehicle for shedding light on the social dynamics of violent radicalisation prevention, thus serving as generalisations of specific configurations of social relations that define the logic of action and change.

The research conducted as part of the PARTICIPATION project, which involved religious communities from three partner countries, situates this reflection within the academic dialogue on the epistemological and ethical implications of Grounded Theory. Regarding Grounded Theory and Participatory Methodologies, such as Social Labs, the literature emphasises (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007) the importance of a flexible, responsive approach dynamically adapting to collected data while focusing on pragmatic social innovation goals, as illustrated in studies employing participatory Social Labs techniques (Kieboom et al., 2015). This approach requires clear awareness of the type of phenomenological knowledge accessible to the researcher and how it was enabled through the interaction between the researcher and the social units involved in Social Labs. In this sense, delving into the iterative Grounded Theory approach is beneficial for refining the definition of Social Labs as a form of participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Both approaches aim to transform social reality based on insights into everyday practices

achieved through participatory research, which is co-produced between social units and researchers.

While Timmermans et al. (2020) used Social Labs to address complex social issues such as radicalisation and extremism, highlighting how Social Labs facilitate collective learning processes and grassroots solutions, Tina Cook (2012) discusses challenges encountered in conducting two participatory studies. These focused not only on the participation of specific social units but also on joint reflection and developing a shared understanding of participants' unique life situations and contexts (Campelli, 1999).

Some studies (Timmermans et al., 2020) indicate that, in addition to the mere participation of co-researchers in the inquiry, participatory research entails a joint knowledge production process that generates new insights for scientists and practitioners. From an action research perspective, the collective reflection influences people's daily practices and the ethical aspects of research itself. Thus, this Social Lab research experience and its recommendations invite the scientific community and qualitative research advocates to ask more questions about participatory research, especially regarding knowledge objectives and social change direction.

Despite the extensive literature on Social Labs and participatory research, there remains a lack of studies directly linking Social Labs to specific theoretical models for analysing large-scale social change. Furthermore, research ethics here too should adhere to the principles of being Findable, Accessible, Inter-operable, and Re-usable (Deliverable D3.2) to ensure the highest standards of integrity outlined in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity to protect also participant confidentiality when addressing sensitive topics.

Social Labs inherently involve managing emotions, values, and conflicts, potentially leading to ethical dilemmas, particularly when addressing sensitive issues like radicalisation. Thus, ethics should be consistently discussed to create a safe environment for open sharing. Early discussions should include group goals, member roles, communication strategies, and freedom of expression, considering the varying sensitivities of the involved subjects. This is achievable if researchers (who lead and manage the Social Lab) prioritise participant interests, demonstrate commitment to the community, support action linked to the research findings, and ensure sustainability while emphasising the temporary nature of the Labs.

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