

Executive summary

Powerful learning networks: Collaborative learning in interorganizational crimefighting and counterterrorism networks

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Introduction

Given the current national threat level 'three', the Dutch authorities estimate the possibility of a terror attack in the Netherlands to be significant. Terrorism is a layered, complex, changing, and elusive phenomenon. It is a so-called 'wicked problem' for which no easy, one-size-fits-all solution exists. As a result, there is an on-going search in counterterrorism to find the best explanations, visions, and approaches. The same goes for crimefighting: easy, one-size-fits-all solutions for occurring problems do not always exist.

We do know, however, that both counterterrorism and crimefighting require effective collaboration between actors in the sectors of security, health care, education, and social services. These actors need to establish and discover on an ongoing basis which interventions improve their approaches to crimefighting and/or counterterrorism. While such a search will never lead to an ultimate and encompassing solution, it can lead to useful and practical perspectives that enable powerful intervention capacity. If powerful intervention capacity exists, the organizations involved will be able to operate effectively under complex, changing circumstances. With the recognition, nevertheless, that not all criminality or terrorist attacks can be prevented. Powerful intervention capacity requires:

- (i) *Goal-orientedness*: achieving shared objectives
- (ii) *Legitimacy*: securing support for the collaboration from all necessary and relevant partners and stakeholders; and
- (iii) *Robustness*: the availability and readiness of the required knowledge, connections, capacities, and human resources to intervene, also during dynamic circumstances of changes in threats.

The ability to intervene effectively depends on collaboration that crosses organizational demarcations. The success of an integrated approach as we know it in crimefighting and counterterrorism is not self-evident. It requires cooperative and learning capacities in these networks and an on-going dedication of the organizations involved.

In this study we analyzed to what extent and in which ways interorganizational collaboration and learning can be improved in crimefighting and counterterrorism in the Netherlands. We explored if opportunities exist to more closely relate the approaches of crimefighting and counterterrorism. We analyzed the way in which the Dutch counterterrorism approach is designed in terms of its governance, and if it can be strengthened further by learning from the experiences gained in crimefighting. This study is centered around the following main research question:

In which ways and under which conditions can the Dutch administrative, organizational and professional approach to counterterrorism, which is characterized by (network) collaboration, be strengthened so that it overcomes interorganizational differences between regimes, (substantive) perspectives and ways of working? What can we learn in that respect from the approach of other wicked problems, especially from crimefighting, in which intervention capacity is/has been demonstrated?

The research employed a multidisciplinary, multi-method approach. Extensive literature study and in-depth interviews with professionals and experts constitute the foundation of the information and data collection. In total, we interviewed 47 respondents: 41 of them were involved in crimefighting and counterterrorism in the Netherlands, and 6 of them were national and international experts in the field of (youth) crime, radicalization, and terrorism.¹ To further validate the findings and to stimulate learning for and from the study, the researchers also discussed the research findings with a panel of 13 professionals – all of whom are involved in a national counterterrorism knowledge network – in the final phase of this project.

Findings

Crime and terrorism: an ambiguous 'crime-terror nexus'

From both the literature and the expert interviews, it is evident that a crime-terror nexus – the interwovenness of criminality and terrorism – exists to some degree. Some overlap exists between individuals involved in criminality and those who engage in acts of terrorism. For example, in preparatory actions: terrorists trying to obtain weapons through connections in organized crime. Or, some individuals currently involved in terrorism developed useful skills during a previous life in 'regular' criminality. In some instances, terrorism suspects were already known to the authorities, for example as a suspect of other crimes.

Looking at the mechanisms and factors that play a role in criminality and terrorism more generally, we identified commonalities and differences on three levels: (i) the individual; (ii) the organization/network; (iii) the act itself. Based on this extensive literature research, the nexus remains ambiguous. About serious crime for instance, it can be said that criminal organizations and terrorist networks are similar in terms of group feeling and structure, but important differences exist too, for example regarding goals, belief systems, and time horizons.

If we turn our attention to similarities and differences between *counterterrorism* and *crimefighting*, we see that in *counterterrorism* the focus is primarily on the detection and timely disturbance of drastic processes that take place over time, and on preparatory acts that are usually ideologically driven. In contrast, already committed deeds and repression take center stage in *crimefighting*. This is an important difference with consequences for the required knowledge, expertise, and capacity. In the collaboration within and between counterterrorism and crimefighting networks, sensitivity to both the similarities and the differences is thus key.

Collaboration and learning in counterterrorism and crimefighting networks

Both the existing academic literature and the practice of crimefighting and counterterrorism in the Netherlands show that many forms of cooperation exist in these approaches. Partnerships differ among each other in their duration, composition, orientation, management, and operation. None of these organizational forms is necessarily superior, though: it is first and foremost a question of whether the chosen organizational form fits the intended goals of the cooperation.

Within the chosen form of cooperation, it is then crucial that partners can bring together and overcome their differences. Organizations have different objectives and tasks, diverging regimes, contrasting or conflicting ideologies and perspectives on the problem at hand, different

¹ Four of these interviews were conducted with 2-4 respondents, all other interviews were conducted with individual respondents. Hence, 47 respondents were interviewed in 41 interviews.

professional ways of working, and diverse interests and power positions. To establish successful network collaboration specific conditions must be met and appropriate incentives must be in place. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the interactive, communicative and reflexive mechanisms that take place in the collaboration.

Regarding core conditions and incentives, effective network collaboration requires a *specific type of professional* that is able to think reflexively and conceptually and has the capacity to understand and empathize with the perspectives, interests, and positions of others. Professionals who have had prior experience in the various organizations involved, may be able to operate as effective 'change agents' in this regard. However, the right *institutional conditions* and *incentives* are also crucial for successful (network) collaboration. These especially concern: a fitting organizational design; leadership; administrative attention, urgency, and priority; enough resources; clarity on rules and roles; and appropriate (financial) incentives in the parent organizations to work together with others beyond the boundaries of one's own organization.

These and other core conditions and objectives for collaboration influence the intervention capacity in counterterrorism and crimefighting approaches. Social interaction and communication between network partners, and reflection upon the processes of collaboration are important to build and maintain effective collaboration. Both the existing literature and our empirical research point to the importance of sufficient *manpower* and *time* to build trust relationships. High levels of turnover of the professionals involved, and too little time to create a shared starting position, can have negative consequences for the success of a partnership in the long term. For the motivation of the professionals, a *shared perspective* on the problem and the approach to tackle it, as well as sufficient *identification* by all the partners with that perspective, have proven important. More than anything, this requires enough continuity in the specific individuals who participate in these networks and acquire shared experiences.

In the communication between the network partners and its representatives, inclusive language also plays a role: words like 'perpetrators' and 'offenses' are not the best to secure the firm involvement of the educational sector, for example. This can hinder the involvement of certain partners in the 'integrative approach' to counterterrorism and crimefighting. Information sharing in partnerships remains a crucial point of attention as well. Dutch counterterrorism networks have had a relative advantage compared to crimefighting networks when it comes to information sharing (except for specific forms of crime that are high on the political agenda, such as subversive crime). First because the experienced urgency associated with terrorism sometimes makes sharing information easier, and second, because the collaboration in counterterrorism rests on a stronger and more sharply defined narrative. The experienced sense of urgency strengthens the legitimacy and therefore the intervention capacity of counterterrorism networks. This also relates to the (financial) resources available to counterterrorism.

Cooperating organizations have the potential to become *powerful learning networks*. However, similar to collaboration, learning is not self-evident and requires the aforementioned interactive and communicative mechanisms to operate well. Moreover, the partners should undertake focused, mutual, and recurring activities during which the professionals involved reflect upon their problems, approaches, frameworks, and the collaboration itself. Especially for learning in crimefighting and counterterrorism networks, the political climate, media, and accountability

pressures, and the instrumentalization of knowledge are important, because these can hinder learning in practice.

We see that organizational learning in crimefighting and counterterrorism occurs in and across partnerships, but it is a challenging matter. Counterterrorism and crimefighting are complex issues and require specialist effort, action, and reflection. Moreover, learning often occurs on an informal, indirect, and practical basis, and is more often a side effect than a main yield. This can be explained by the way in which involved organizations and professionals work, and the scarcity of time and capacity. The police, but also health care and education organizations are known for high work pressure, limited capacity, and a focus on daily practices. This partly explains why first order learning is more common than forms of second, third, or fourth order learning. In other words, learning primarily happens in the operational collaboration with partners, and mainly with regard to the problems and the effects of interventions and approaches.

Second order learning in the parent organization as a consequence of, or in response to, collaboration with partners and third order learning – learning to work together and learning about collaboration with partners – happen less frequently and are seldom institutionally embedded. Relatively little fourth order learning takes place, i.e. learning between networks about collaboration that crosses organizational boundaries. Securing learning results (on all levels) remains challenging, because this requires not only time and capacity, but also permanent ‘backbones’, evaluations and new policies. Taken together, this requires more ‘targeted learning’. Contrary to our expectations, there are more national structures and resources that facilitate learning in counterterrorism than in crimefighting.

The governance and organizational design of counterterrorism and crimefighting

Finally, we draw attention to the possibilities for a closer relation between crimefighting and counterterrorism. Especially when object populations overlap and where a person-oriented approach for both fields is suitable, a more combined approach is conceivable. At the same time there are considerable barriers. As mentioned before, the ‘crime-terror nexus’ is ambiguous at best. Particularly, the political-ideological aspect of terrorism differs from criminality. In some respects, this creates barriers for a further integration of both approaches. Moreover, the contexts in which the approaches are shaped, including the political and societal contexts, differ considerably. A further institutional integration of the two does not enhance intervention capacity and could even diminish it. Should a decision nevertheless be made to integrate both fields more, strong guarantees would need to be put in place. Especially guarantees about securing enough political urgency and administrative attention for terrorism, the preservation of expertise and knowledge, transparency of funding (allocation of funds), accountability, and attention to the dedication and motivation of professionals in the organizations concerned.

Despite limits on the possibilities for further administrative integration of Dutch counterterrorism and crimefighting systems, there is ample room for counterterrorism and crimefighting to learn from each other more and more frequently. This can be on a general level, by learning from each other about certain interventions and strategies, or how organizations work together with other organizations in general. When it concerns concrete cases, it can also be useful to employ either terrorism or crime expertise during the early stages of an investigation, for instance in the development of a person-oriented approach.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall conclusions

Crimefighting and counterterrorism approaches require powerful learning networks of national policy makers, local executors, and science. The intervention capacity, network collaboration and learning are interconnected processes, as portrayed in Figure 1. That process, however, does not automatically work as a 'well-oiled machine'. On the contrary – learning in collaboration is neither self-evident, nor easy to accomplish. In practice, it rarely happens on a systematic basis. Due to ambiguity, a lack of goal-orientation, shifting priorities, differences in ways of working and professional cultures, declining attention, and limited time and capacity, smooth collaboration and learning are not 'normal'. Moreover, interorganizational collaboration is not unlimited: legal goals, tasks, responsibilities, and authorizations limit the concentration of power and information, also for the sake of legitimacy and to protect citizens.



Figure 1: Network collaboration, learning and intervention capacity

Even though it is both challenging and limited, collaboration on specific aspects can be of prime importance, and does indeed occur, both in counterterrorism as well as in crimefighting. Enlightening examples in the Netherlands are, amongst others the '*Veiligheidshuizen*' ('Safety

houses'), *Top-600*, and '*RIEC's*' ('Regional Information and Expertise Centers'). These ways of collaboration require significant capacity and effort of those involved. Words like 'integrated collaboration' or 'chain collaboration' can mask the complexity of starting and upholding solid network collaboration, and the inherent tensions those types of interorganizational collaboration bring. Diverse crucial conditions, incentives, and interactive and communicative mechanisms ensure the cooperation of different organizations and professionals. When it comes to core conditions and incentives, professionals in counterterrorism and crimefighting value the following factors in particular: administrative urgency, priority, and attention; enough resources; clarity of rules and roles; suitable incentives – especially in parent organizations; and leadership with clear direction. Within the collaboration itself mutual trust, inclusive language, keeping each other informed and sharing information, and reciprocity are of crucial importance, as well as a strong and well-defined narrative or 'story' about the problems faced.

In part due to political attention and a strong and well-defined narrative, collaboration in Dutch counterterrorism succeeds more easily than in crimefighting. However, both in counterterrorism and in crimefighting the narratives can be further improved, especially when it comes to the use of language. The way in which problems are discussed should appeal to the goals and perspectives of all the partners involved – not just the security partners. Partners in health care, wellbeing and education do not always see themselves as partners in crimefighting and counterterrorism – in spite of their actual involvement with concrete cases and the role they are assigned in national policy. Although more research is needed, there are indications that this is related to the dominance of 'security thinking' in both the narrative as well as the language commonly used in (policy) reports and consultations. Excessive use of words such as 'perpetrators', 'extremists' and 'radicalization' makes identification with the (approach of an) issue less accessible and obvious for partners who think and work in terms of 'worrying behavior' or 'protection'. The strong focus on security terminology is explainable but undermines the 'integrated' basis of the intended collaboration. More *inclusive language*, that better fits what the (intended) partners are facing, is necessary to keep all parties on board.

Learning in and from interorganizational collaboration also occurs. Based on our empirical exploration we can tentatively conclude that a learning curve developed over the past years, especially in counterterrorism, and when it concerns first order learning: learning in collaboration with partners about problems and impacts of interventions and approaches. Learning however often remains limited to learning in and from operational collaboration (first order). When learning does go further, there is often a form of 'targeted learning'. For such targeted learning it is important that (i) the social interaction and communication between parties receives explicit attention, and (ii) that focused and shared activities take place that enable and invite reflection. Time and opportunity should be created to learn from each other's ideas, images, value perspectives and assumptions, but also to discuss tensions and ambiguity in the collaboration itself, to critically examine, and potentially even 'unlearn', the frameworks, systems and value perspectives underlying the network. An important future concern emerging from this study is how knowledge that has been acquired in past years can be secured once the urgency for a certain topic diminishes.

Partly thanks to their differences, on both a substantive and institutional level, crimefighting and counterterrorism cannot easily be integrated, and this should thus be done with great care. Specific sub domains show (limited) potential for the combining of approaches (such as a person-oriented approach, and then primarily in the preventive approach); besides that, strengthening is mainly possible by learning more from each other in an organized manner.

Lessons for the reinforcement of collaboration and learning in networks

Based on the findings in this report, and the conclusions as described above, we come to the following recommendations to strengthen cooperative learning.

1. Be careful with an unrealistic emphasis on an 'integrated approach' or 'chains'. The practices of counterterrorism and crimefighting are too diverse, ambiguous, and unruly to enable harmonious collaboration and direct learning. Recognize and acknowledge the inherent tensions of interorganizational cooperation and explicitly give them a place in the cooperation by discussing them together. This also goes for the limits of cooperation. As soon as cooperation puts too much stress on the boundaries of the division of power and legal authorizations, there is a risk for loss of legitimacy in the society at large, something that should also not be neglected. In policy development regarding 'integrated' approaches inherent tensions and boundaries should also receive sufficient attention.
2. Take restrictions and barriers as a starting point when strengthening learning collaboration, and invest in mechanisms and incentives (such as time, stability in personnel, administrative-political attention, interactions, leadership, et cetera) to realize powerful interventions together. Realize that even goal-orientedness, legitimacy and robustness will create tensions, and that choices need to be made.
3. Further develop and refine the narrative concerning counterterrorism, with specific attention to inclusivity (or the integrated character) in the use of language and terminology in (policy) reports and consultations. To keep non-security partners sufficiently involved, it is important that their perspectives, goals, and tasks in the narrative are spoken to - in language that is fitting and accessible to them.
4. Create sufficient time for the counterterrorism approach to learn from established practices in crimefighting, but also keep an eye out for political and administrative attention. That requires both (financial) resources and suitable incentives that stimulate thinking across organizational boundaries, such as goal-oriented financing.
5. Keep an eye on individuals with risks of radicalization and terrorism during crimefighting, in terms of detection, with prosecution and probation. Use within the crimefighting network a radicalization perspective to look at (youth) crime to enable more preventive action, especially with case consultations. Involve expertise from counterterrorism whilst doing this.
6. In relation to aspects of the crime-terror nexus, learning from each other is possible, both for counterterrorism and for crimefighting. For major counterterrorism investigations detectives with a broad experience in the field of organized crime can be involved, as co-reader or counter-thinker. Vice versa: for investigations into organized crime it can be useful to involve counterterrorism expertise to learn about the newest technologies and strategies from that perspective.

7. Create spaces where groups from counterterrorism and crimefighting can interact, connect, and build networks, especially when learning is still too dependent upon specific persons in networks, and has an 'ad hoc' or 'accidental' character. Give attention to *proactive* learning; with regard to the collaboration and the frameworks within which the partners work, but also with regard to the issues themselves (such as new risk groups or strategies).
8. Create space in each partner organization for so-called 'connectors' for whom the network collaboration is not just part of the job, but also part of the professional identity. Integrate the counterterrorism and crimefighting approaches using these 'change agents', but keep an eye out for differences.
9. Ensure a learning 'profile' and learning competences of professionals. Facilitate those professionals who can identify with other partners, who can think both operationally and conceptually, and can observe the problems in 'the bigger picture'. Invest in and present the opportunity for professional development with regard to learning and collaboration, on different levels. This does not only require resources, but also enough time for professionals to build skills and relationships.
10. Conduct further research into which forms of cooperation are effective in different phases of the approach, and which forms of cooperation are effective in different phases of the cooperation. Although structural, organized collaboration was central to this study, this will not always be necessary. Try to gain insight into when 'loose', more informal, and/or smaller forms of collaboration suffice or are even more effective.