Cutting through complexity

Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)

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Publication date
2020

Document Version
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6 Evidence-based Informed Policy Design for Support Groups for Families of Foreign Fighters: Ex Ante Application of Realistic Evaluation and Review[16]

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6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters illustrated that realist review and realistic evaluation are suitable methods to deal with the complexity of evaluating countering violent extremism. Those chapters focused on applying realistic evaluation in an ex post situation. In chapter 2, realist review, through which existing evaluation studies are synthesized, was used to develop a conceptual model for CVE. Chapters 4 and 5 illustrated the conduct of realistic evaluation for existing CVE programmes, such as family support and exit programmes.

The introduction to this thesis characterized violent extremism as a complex and intractable policy issue on which different actors hold different views and propose different solutions based on their diverse belief systems. Combined with the very scant evidence base available in the CVE field, this poses challenges not only for policy evaluation but also for policy design. After all, the different actors hold different views on the relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcome measures. As illustrated by the examples from France and the Netherlands in the introduction, actors tend to select those elements of the problem that are best aligned with their own personal, political and socio-cultural belief systems. Often, this results in oversimplification of the problem and thus also of the solution. This poses challenges not only in an ex post situation, where CVE policy has already been implemented and requires evaluation, but also in the first

16 This is a slightly edited version of a previous published article: Gielen, Amy-Jane and Annebregt Dijkman (2019), "Evidence Based Informed Policy Design for Support Froups for Families of Foreign Fighters: Ex Ante Application of Realistic Review and Realist Evaluation," *Journal for Deradicalization*, Vol. 20, pp. 232 – 271.

stage of the policy cycle, that is, the policy design phase. Ultimately the goal of both realist review and realistic evaluation is to inform policymakers of what works, for whom, in what context, how and why, in order to improve programmes and interventions. This raises the question of whether and how the methods of realist review and realistic evaluation can be applied ex ante, to develop more evidence-based and informed CVE policy theory and design.

This question became relevant when the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs sought to set up a support group programme for families of foreign fighters. In the preceding years, various forms of family support had been established in the Netherlands. For example, volunteers provided individual support to families through a civil society organization for Dutch people of Moroccan descent, called SMN (Samenwerkingsverband Marokkaanse Nederlanders). Long-term individual family support was also being provided by a family support contact point (Familiesteunpunt), now called LSE. This is a more professional organization subsidized by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Security. Both organizations soon realized that parents of foreign fighters would benefit not only from individual family support, but also support in groups, so that they could interact with others whose children had travelled to join ISIS. SMN sought to meet that need by establishing a platform for those left behind (Platform Achterblijvers). The platform organized monthly meetings at which parents could exchange experiences with each other. While this initiative clearly met a need for certain parents, concerns were raised about possible negative side effects, particularly the social, emotional and physical safety of the families involved. For example, situations arose in which parents accused others of recruiting their children. Moreover, the group meetings brought family members face to face with the pain, grief and trauma of other families, and wrong advice was sometimes shared. This did not help to increase participants' resilience and coping skills, and concerns were raised that it might make them more susceptible grooming by violent extremist networks (RAN, 2013; Gielen, 2014). Therefore, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned research into the question of whether parents of foreign fighters wanted a support group and if so, what kinds of group support were preferred in terms of modalities, host organization, ground rules and necessary pre-conditions.

In several European countries such programmes had already been set up, though without an evidence base. Rather, these initiatives were typically

organized bottom-up by parents and civil society organizations. As the situation in the Netherlands was similar, policymakers faced the question of whether they should integrate these support group programmes into their CVE efforts. What could a support group for families of foreign fighters contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism? If policymakers did choose to set up such a programme, how should it be done in terms of content, organization and process?

This chapter examines these questions, illustrating how realist review and realistic evaluation were applied to produce a more evidence-based policy theory on support groups for families of foreign fighters. The chapter expands on previous chapters in that it not only develops an evidence-based policy theory, but it actually tests that theory through interviews and focus groups involving families of foreign fighters, professional and community organizations, and municipal policymakers. The chapter demonstrates that such an ex ante approach can contribute to the legitimacy, feasibility and effectiveness of CVE policy and prepare the ground for more thorough evaluation research.

6.2 Realist review to develop a theoretical model

6.2.1 Step 1: Scope of the review

The first step in the ex ante evaluation was to develop a theoretical model of how group-based support for families of foreign fighters might work, in what contexts, for whom and how. Chapters 2 and 3 illustrated the application of realist review to gain insight into the relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. Chapter 3 extensively discussed the particular suitability of realistic evaluation methods for complex programmes. Realist review synthesizes existing evaluation studies, and realistic evaluation assesses a particular programme or intervention. The first step of realist review is providing an argument as to why such a programme should be considered complex, based on the seven features of complexity (Pawson, 2005). Such an argumentation is presented below.

Group-based family support programmes for families of foreign fighters are complex for several reasons. First, at the time of this research (2016), there was no evidence base to support the effectiveness of group-based support for families of foreign fighters. This is because these programmes have

been developed only recently and tried in just a few countries. Moreover, those that do exist have not yet been evaluated. However, the literature on support groups provides a strong evidence base for group support in general (Chien *et al.*, 2004; 2009, Citron *et al.*, 1999 and Distelbrink *et al.*, 2008). The theory behind these programmes is basically that support from fellow sufferers contributes to emotional resilience, social resilience, increased knowledge and a strengthening of the social network (*ibid.*).Transferring this evidence-based theory of change to CVE, family support groups as part of CVE can be thought to be effective because they provide families with a stronger social network, which makes them more emotionally and socially resilient and equips them with better coping mechanisms against violent extremism. Yet, though a support group programme for families of foreign fighters could potentially contribute to CVE, this is still a theory that requires further testing.

A second feature of complex social programmes is that their effectiveness requires the active input of stakeholders and the target group (Pawson, 2005). This feature also seems to apply to CVE. For example, setting up support groups for families requires input from the families, civil society organizations, professional organizations, municipalities and ministries.

The third characteristic of complexity is a long policy chain (*ibid.*). Regarding CVE, this is aptly illustrated by the long route that the issue of support groups for families took before it was put on the policy agenda. Group-based family support was not initially part of the Dutch CVE programme. However, for more than two years, families expressed the need for group-based family support. Because the government, at that time, was not meeting this need, the previously mentioned community-based family support group was set up, that is, Platform Achterblijvers. It wasn't until a year later that the ministries commissioned the research to investigate the possibilities of including group-based family support within the government's CVE programmes. This illustrates the long policy chain from policy idea to policy design. The previous point strongly corresponds with the fourth characteristic of complexity, that is, all the different actors influence and affect implementation. As such, the existing community-based family support group became an important factor to consider in setting up any new form of family support. Also, many organizations expressed an interest in family support. A family support group is highly context-dependent, which is the fifth feature of complexity. Indeed, chapter 4 (Gielen, 2015a) already illustrated that support groups might work better in some communities

than in others. Sixth, the idea of family support groups very much stems from an exchange of ideas. Family support groups had previously been set up in cities like Vilvoorde (Belgium) and Aarhus (Denmark). These inspired the initial idea for the Dutch family support groups. Finally, complexity entails that the conditions and mechanisms that make a group-based family support programme effective can change over time, in both intended and unintended ways. For example, the development of the conflict in Syria and Iraq has affected the needs of the parents in support groups. While most parents initially signed up to share experiences related to a child travelling to join ISIS, other parents wanted to discuss a returned child, a detained child or the birth of grandchildren. This had consequences for the group dynamic, as different types of parents, but also different family members (sisters, grandparents) came to the meetings, bringing different contexts and ideas about what they wanted to exchange.

Therefore, support programmes for families of foreign fighters meet the criteria of complexity, and require a review method that can deal with this complexity: realist review. The next step of the review was to clarify its objective and focus. Normally in cases where ample literature is available, the objective of a review is to test underlying theories. However, in our case no evaluations of group-based family support programmes for foreign fighters were available as yet. This is completely understandable, as family support is a relatively new approach in CVE programmes (Gielen, 2015a; Maher & Neumann, 2016). This meant that we had to branch out to other bodies of literature. In line with the heuristic guidelines for realist review, developed in chapter 3, the aim of our realist review was to develop a theoretical model of group-based family support programmes for foreign fighters that provides insight into the mechanisms and contextual conditions underlying support groups' effectiveness. In other words, the review focused on better understanding what works, for whom, why and how in group-based family support for foreign fighters. But the theoretical model is an end result of the review, not its starting point.

We scoped the literature using the University of Amsterdam's Catalogue-Plus database, which includes all the main databases such as Academic Search Primer, Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, the Social Sciences Index and SAGE Journals. Initially only the Dutch search word for contact with fellow sufferers ('lotgenotencontact') was used, in combination with the search words 'evaluation' and 'effectiveness'. This yielded very few citations (11) and even fewer relevant full texts (2). Those articles,

however, revealed a large body of English literature on fellow patient contact, support groups, family support groups, grief counselling (family) support groups, support groups for bereaved families and mutual help groups. This was helpful in the second step of realist review: searching for primary studies.

6.2.2 Steps 2 and 3: Searching for primary CVE studies and quality appraisal

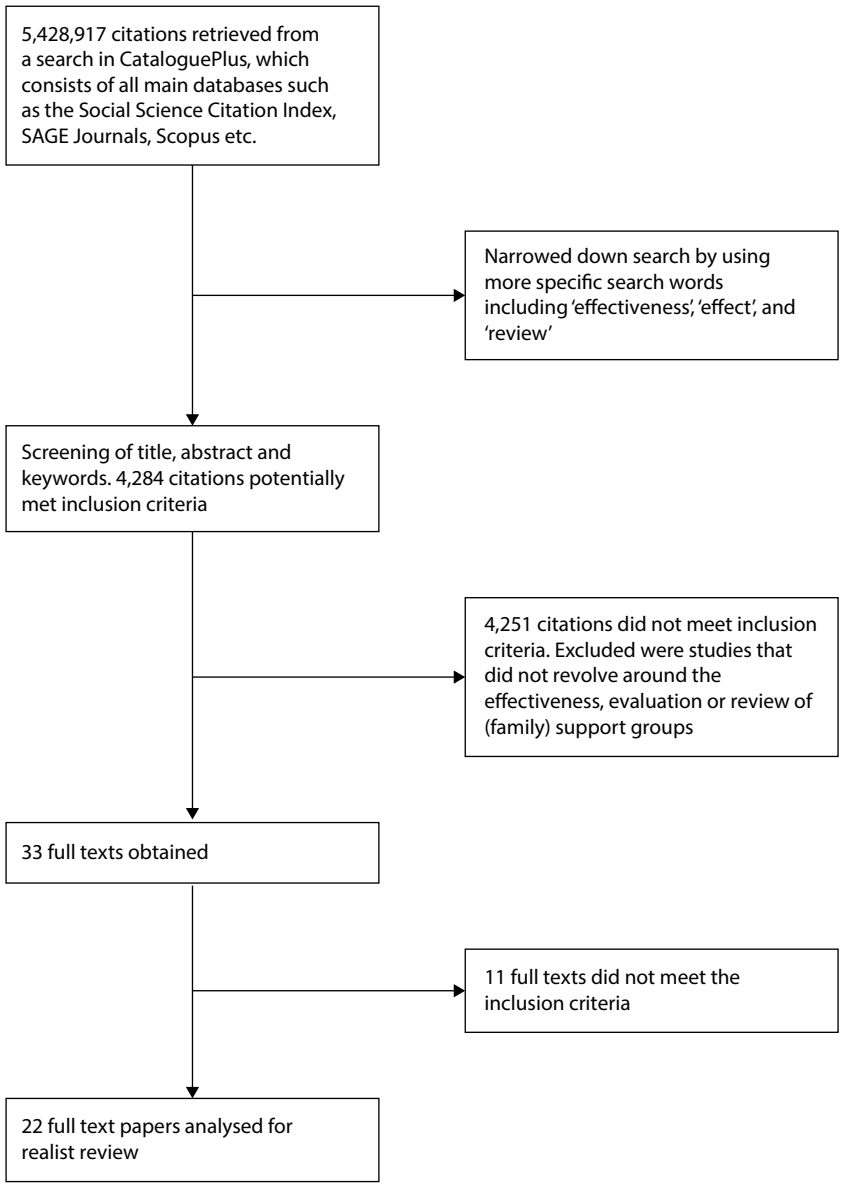
Based on the insights gained in the scoping phase, the above-mentioned search words were used. That search produced 5,428,917 citations. This large volume required us to narrow our search. Thus, the above-mentioned search words were still used, but now in combination with additional search words, such as 'evaluation', 'review' and 'effectiveness'. This reduced the citations to 4,284 studies, before quality appraisal (step 3 of the realist review).

In accordance with the realist review principles, the citations were assessed for relevance and rigour. A number of inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated. Relevant studies were initially taken as those providing effect evaluations or reviews of group-based self-help, mutual help, family and grief counselling and similar. With respect to the assessment of rigour, the studies were not judged on how much they contributed to a specific explanatory challenge, but rather whether they provided insight into what support groups entail; specifically, what contexts, mechanisms and outcomes are relevant. This produced 33 relevant full texts, which were completely read and analysed. Eleven texts turned out to be less relevant than anticipated, in that they did not provide valuable information on relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of support programmes. Figure 6.1 outlines the search and appraisal process in a flow chart.

6.2.3 Step 4: Extracting the data

The realist review yielded 22 relevant studies addressing a wide range of group-based support programmes. These were, for instance, for people with a chronic illness, the bereaved, the addicted or the terminally ill, both the individuals concerned and their family members. This corroborates the findings from the scoping phase in step 1. The aim and focus of the review, in combination with the diversity of programmes and interventions addressed in the 22 studies, imposed the need for a more systematic approach for extracting the data than the interpretive and non-replicable trail advised

Figure 6.1: Flow chart of screening process for primary studies as part of the realist review



by Pawson (2006). This corresponds with the conclusion of chapter 3 and the revised heuristic guidelines presented in table 3.3.

The following categories were selected for data extraction:
- type of support group;
- aim of the programme or intervention;
- description of the programme or intervention (e.g., target group and theory of change);
- relevant contextual conditions;
- outcome (positive and negative effects, side effects); and
- lessons learnt (by research participants and researchers).

6.2.4 Steps 5 and 6: Synthesizing the support group literature and dissemination

The fifth step of the review is to refine the programme theory that was developed in the first phase: determining what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances (Pawson, 2006). However, as no evaluations of group-based family support programmes for foreign fighters were available, the goal of our review was different. Our review aimed to develop an evidence-based conceptual model of group-based support that might be applicable to the foreign fighter phenomenon. The result was an unconfigured C-M-O model, presented in table 6.2, describing different contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of support groups.

In terms of dissemination, the unconfigured C-M-O model was used as an input for a realistic ex ante evaluation, which is further discussed in section 6.3.

While the mechanisms and outcomes in table 6.2 very much speak for themselves, some contextual conditions require clarification. It is crucial that an appropriate facilitator (C1) be involved in a support group. This should preferably be someone who is experienced in guiding group processes and also has knowledge and expertise on the subject. The organizational context (C2) of support groups is also important. Specifically, a neutral host organization contributes to the effectiveness of the support programme. This is preferably not a mental health organization, but it should be an organization able to provide individual care and support, as well as professional and practical guidance to the group (e.g., a space to meet). From the realist review we also take away that grouping and creating an optimal

Table 6.2: Contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of support groups unconfigured. Derived by authors from the 22 studies which were part of the realist review of support groups

	Contexts of support groups
C1	Compostion of the group
C2	Group size
C3	Setting & duration & frequency
C4	Ground rules
C5	Professional guidance
C6	Organizational design

	Mechanisms of support groups
M1	Positive social interaction with people with similar experiences and in similar situations can increase feelings of recognition, expand the social network and reduce social isolation
M2	According to stress and coping theory, positive social interaction with people with similar experiences can increase coping skills and emotional well-being
M3	Optimal matching theory states that similarities and shared needs between people with similar experiences increase coping mechanisms
M4	Therapeutic help theory suggests that equality and reciprocity in providing help to people with similar experiences increases self-respect and self-esteem (benefits all)

	Outcomes of support groups
O1	Increased social support
O2	Decreased emotional stress and burden
O3	Increased coping skills
O4	Increased knowledge

match (C_3) with the target audience is important. Also, support groups (C_4) should have a closed character, meaning that the group should start and end with a fixed membership and no new people be added in-between.

The duration and frequency of support programmes (C_5) can vary from eight weeks to two years. The review revealed a duration of 38 weeks and 316 hours as most effective. In terms of set-up (C6), small support groups seem to be more effective than larger ones, with the ideal group size being 6–10 people. Finally, the realist review highlighted the importance of formulating ground rules (C_7) that participants and facilitators must abide by.

6.3 Ex ante realistic evaluation: Methodology

We were approached by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Security in 2016 to investigate the potential of family support groups. They approached us as independent researchers, knowing of our prior experience providing individual support to families of foreign fighters. We were knowledgeable about these families' situations, had access to them and could easily gain access to relevant others. The ministries wanted to know if the families were interested in participating in a group-based support programme and if so, how such a programme should be formed. Based on our practitioner experience, we could have easily provided the ministries with some ready answers. However, we opted for a thorough scientific investigation, using realist review on general group support programmes for theory development and a realist ex ante evaluation to test the theory.

We advised the ministry to consider not only the family members as stakeholders in the research, but to also include the broader spectrum of actors involved in support programmes, including civil society organizations, experts and policymakers. We further advised the ministries that the research should zoom in on specific contextual and organizational conditions that might be relevant to group support programmes for families of foreign fighters. We had complete autonomy in formulating the research questions and research methodology and in selecting research participants. Furthermore, our role was confined to the research; we would have no part in the execution of any support programme eventually developed.

The realist review of group-based support programmes provided us with a conceptual model of potentially relevant contexts, mechanisms and

outcomes for family support groups. We were then able to test the extent to which these were applicable to families of foreign fighters. To do this we applied realistic evaluation. As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, realistic evaluation is used to evaluate a specific complex intervention. However, we applied realistic evaluation ex ante, since in our case family support groups had not yet been designed. Applying realist review ex ante is unprecedented, so there were no heuristic guidelines or detailed steps to follow. We proceeded by taking the four steps of realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) as our starting point: (1) developing a theoretical model depicting what might work, for whom, how and in what circumstances; (2) multi-method data collection; (3) data extraction; and (4) development of a refined programme theory.

A realistic evaluation always addresses the explorative realist research question of what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances. However, as we are not evaluating an intervention, but rather, applying realistic evaluation ex ante, our research question asked what a group-based support programme *might* do, for whom, how and in what circumstances for families of foreign fighters. Specifically, we zoomed in on what might be the relevant mechanisms and contextual conditions in terms of the process, content and organization of a group-based support programme.

The first step of the realistic evaluation was developing a theoretical model. As very little literature was available on families of foreign fighters (Maher & Neumann, 2016; Gielen, 2015a), let alone on group support for families of foreign fighters, the starting point for our theoretical model was the unconfigured C-M-Os derived from the realist review of group support programmes in general, presented in table 6.2. Taken together, those C-M-Os served as a canvas that we could develop further, based on questions we asked our respondents. We asked them, for instance, about their experiences with support groups for families of foreign fighters and also what organizational design, group composition, ground rules and professional guidance they felt were needed, as well as their thoughts on the setting, duration and frequency of support group meetings.

We drew on multi-method data collection to test the applicability of group-based support for families of foreign fighters. The following forms of data-collection were used:

– Document analysis of the limited research reports available on families of foreign fighters. These provided us a better understanding of the specifics of this target audience.

- Interviews with parents and family members of jihadist/foreign fighters (*N*=9). These parents and family members were selected following individual family support that we had provided them earlier. They received our support on a voluntary basis under the auspices of the municipality they inhabited. The family support was provided from the winter of 2014 to the autumn of 2016. We approached families in different situations and with different characteristics:
  - family of an adult male foreign fighter who had been detained or stopped (1x);
  - family of a minor female foreign fighter who had been stopped (3x, including a foster family);
  - family of an adult male foreign fighter (1x);
  - family of an adult female foreign fighter (1x);
  - family of a deceased minor foreign fighter (1x);
  - family of a deceased adult foreign fighter (1x); and
  - family of a deceased adult foreign fighter who had travelled with wife and children (1x).
- Interviews with experts (*N*=5). These experts were selected because they worked in the few organizations in the Netherlands specialized in group-based support and/or families of foreign fighters. They spoke with us about their experiences and lessons learnt from support programmes for foreign fighters. The organizations they represented were the following:
  - *Stichting Sabr*. This is a grassroots civil society organization in the municipality of The Hague, offering contact with families of radicalized individuals/foreign fighters/violent extremist detainees and preventive radicalization training for mothers (Oumnia Works). This was the first organization in the Netherlands to offer family support in relation to radicalization.
  - *Samenwerkingsverband Marokkaanse Nederlanders* (*SMN*). This organization initiated a telephone hotline on radicalization (Hulplijn Radicalisering) and is host to the Platform Achterblijvers, the previously mentioned support group for families of foreign fighters.
  - *LSE/Familiesteunpunt*. LSE is a national family support organization offering individual support to families with children who have radicalized. They also provide voluntary exit programmes for violent extremists. The organization is subsidized by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Security.
  - *Slachtofferhulp Nederland* (*SHN*). SHN offers support groups for relatives of traffic accident and sexual abuse victims.

  - *Institute for Psychotrauma* (*IVP*). As part of the umbrella organization Arq, IVP organized a support group for relatives of victims of the MH-17 and Hercules airplane crashes. It also hosts Centrum '45, which provides individual psychological support for returned foreign fighters and group trauma therapy for people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (e.g., army veterans).
- A focus group with families of foreign fighters. We asked the representative of Platform Achterblijvers to approach parents who would be willing to participate in our focus group. We then selected participants who were not already among the respondents interviewed and who represented the diversity of situations of families of foreign fighters. It ultimately included a parent whose daughter had converted and travelled to Syria; a women whose (minor) sister had travelled to Syria; a father whose children had travelled and whose son was killed; and a woman whose husband had travelled without her and also was killed. The parents could provide us their first-hand experiences with the support group for families of foreign fighters (Platform Achterblijvers), and talk about their needs and desires in relation to support group programmes (*N*=4).[17]
- A focus group with policymakers responsible for CVE in so-called 'priority municipalities' (*N*=6). Most of these policymakers had direct contact with families of foreign fighters.[18] Priority municipalities are designated as such by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism because they are viewed as most affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon. In the focus group we asked participants to reflect on outcomes based on the data collected in steps 1 to 4.

The third step of realistic evaluation is data analysis. In this case, we drew out all the potentially relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of group-based support for families of foreign fighters. Section 6.4 presents the data analysis. Following the first three steps of realistic evaluation brought us to a programme theory on how support programmes might work, among whom and in what circumstances for families of foreign fighters. Section 6.5 discusses this programme theory, including scenarios for implementation.

17 Together with N=9 (individual family support cases) it brings us to a total N=13 on practice based insights of families dealing with foreign fighters

18 Prioritized municipalities are municipalities that have been selected by the Ministry of Justice and Security because they are most affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon. At the time we conducted the research (2016), there were 10 prioritized municipalities.

6.4 Ex-ante realistic evaluation: Relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes for support groups for families of foreign fighters

This section presents our analysis based on the multi-method data collection described above. Our analysis of the data entailed drawing out more specific information on relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes for group-based support for families of foreign fighters. We sought to further specify the conceptual model presented for support groups in general, using results from the data collection and analysis. The aim was to draw up a conceptual C-M-O model for support programmes tailored to families of foreign fighters.

6.4.1 Contexts (C) of group-based support for families of foreign fighters

Based on the realist review of general support programmes, we knew that the conditions of group-based support are very important for their effectiveness. From the realist review, we knew that it is important to think about specific contextual conditions for such programmes: group composition, group size, setting, duration and frequency, ground rules and professional guidance. These contextual conditions are discussed below, tailored to the specific characteristics of families of foreign fighters.

Characteristics of the target audience

As mentioned earlier, there was little research on families of foreign fighters and their needs (Gielen, 2015; Weenink, 2015; Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015; Maher & Neumann, 2016). Maher and Neumann (2016) analysed public documents on 46 families of foreign fighters in 17 countries. They found grief, confusion, fear and shame to be the most important impacts on families. In our interviews and focus group with families of foreign fighters, we found that nearly all these families had particular personal and socio-psychological problems, similar to people who participate in 'regular' support groups. However, additionally we found that families of foreign fighters dealt with very specific problems not mentioned in the general literature on support groups. For instance, all were confronted with consequences of the extremist behaviour of their child/family member, in the form of sometimes severe legal repercussions, administrative measures and public exposure. Table 6.3 provides an overview of problems faced by families of foreign fighters.

Table 6.3: Personal, social and psychological problems and criminal and administrative consequences experienced by families in which a member exhibits extremist behaviour, based on interviews by the authors and the literature on families of foreign fighters.

Personal problems	Social psychological problems	Criminal and administrative consequences	Consequences of extremist behaviour on personal and social level
Addiction (drugs, alcohol)	Debts	Arrest of family member	Mourning and trauma
(Previous) trauma	Domestic violence	Taps from police and intelligence	Disrupted family relationships
Serious illness (e.g. cancer)	Divorce	House raids	Fixation on extremist/deceased family member instead of daily life
Anxiety and panic disorders	School drop-out	Police interrogation	Loss of social network due to stigma
Depression	Disturbed family relationships	Detention of family member in terrorist wing	Harassment at school, in the neighbourhood
Agression regulation problems	Physically and/or emotionally unavailable parents	Contact with (community) police, (foreign) security services	New family members (grandchildren, sons and daughters in law)
Disturbed identity development	Engagement in prostitution or groomers	Contact with the Public Prosecutor's Office and probation services	Disappointment and distrust towards government
Low IQ/intellectually disabled	(Multiple) negative experiences with seeking professional help	Involvement of youth care organisations	Tense policial discourse on extremism (e.g.hurtful statements by politicians, general public opinion)
		Deregistration in municipal registration system (GBA)	Intrusive national and sometimes international press coverage, including incorrect reporting (e.g. alleged deaths)
		Passport measure	Unethical approach by researchers (e.g., setting up a Facebook 'support group' that is actually meant for research and not to provide support to parents)
		(Threat of) other children being put into fostercare	Intrusive approach by other families and community organisations
			Loss of feelings of privacy and autonomy
			Feelings of stigmatization in the community and in society
			Contact with relatives in conflict areas and thereby being exposed to jihadist propaganda, emirs, extremists/jihadists

Table 6.3 and information on the consequences of public exposure illustrate the huge impact the foreign fighter phenomenon has on the affected families. It impacts them on a personal level, resulting in mental health issues and grief. It impacts them on a social level, as they may be treated like they have an infectious radicalization disease. Friends, family members and even whole communities may not want to have anything to do with them anymore, causing social isolation. They may also be the subject of negative political discourse and face legal and administrative repercussions. In most families, this comes on top of an existing history of psychological and social problems and negative experiences in receiving professional help. In sum, these families' risk of experiencing all kinds of problems is probably higher than for families who, for example, 'only' lose a child in a car accident. Those families don't experience the same stigma as families of foreign fighters, and they aren't confronted with the consequences of their child's extremist behaviour, such as administrative measures (revoking citizenship), media exposure and police investigation (e.g., house raids). The foreign fighter phenomenon thus brings additional layers of complexity to often already vulnerable families. It also puts siblings and other family members more at risk for different types of problems, including being groomed by an extremist network themselves. These additional layers of complexity have to be taken into account as an important contextual condition when designing group-based support for this target audience.

Content of group-based support

Group-based support for families can only be effective if the specific needs of the families are addressed. It must therefore be tailored to this specific target audience. Based on our many forms of data collection, we were able to derive the specific needs and wishes of families of foreign fighters in terms of topics they wanted to see addressed in a support group:

- violent extremism causes, signals, the foreign fighter phenomenon, the modus operandi of violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, recruitment mechanisms, propaganda, roles and functions of extremist networks;
- administrative and legal repercussions such as revoking citizenship, placement on a terrorism watch list and prosecution;
- contact with family members (do's and don'ts);
- talking about the issue within school, family, work and community networks;
- different forms of professional support and grief counselling and trauma therapy;
- contact with the police and government officials; and
- dealing with the media and outside world.

During our focus groups with the families and the municipalities and our interviews with the NGO experts, we asked if the above topics would address the needs, to which they agreed.

Composition of the group

From the realist review we know that the composition of the group is important, as optimal matches need to be created within the target audience. Based on the types of families we interviewed and the focus group participants, we knew that families had different experiences. So, how should different families be matched became an important question. Some experts believed that individual tailoring was needed for every form of contact between fellow participants. Parents from the focus group were more flexible in how they preferred to be matched. For them, having a family member who had travelled to Syria or Iraq was the basic criterion for contact with fellow sufferers. They argued that they shared a similar experience. Whether the family member was alive, had died or returned made little difference in their opinion, because the emotion was the same. One of the participants in the focus group expressed this as follows:

> *The core of our stories is the same. It does not matter if our children are still in Syria or died there. The emotions and the story are the same. The turning point is the travel to Syria. We recognize the story of family members of returnees, because the common denominator is the traveling part. The fear of getting a phone call about* [*the*] *death* [*of your child or grandchild*] *applies to everyone.*

They had less affinity with parents whose child had been radicalized in the Netherlands and was in detention here or was stopped at the border. Parents in the focus groups argued that there should be separate group for them. This argument was further supported by the policymakers in our municipal focus group. Taking all perspectives into account, we therefore advised that three different groups be created that family members can take part in:

- My relative has travelled (and died).[19]
- My family member is radicalized but not detained.
- My family member is being prosecuted for terrorist activities (and detained).

19 The question is whether – in accordance with the wish of the focus group – family members of returnees must and can be placed in such a group. This target group has their family member 'back' and that leads to awkward situations. The standard procedure for returnees is detention and a stay of at least three months and most often a year on a special terrorist ward in prison.

When asked in our interviews and focus groups, families did not feel the need to be matched based on a specific cultural or religious background. The shared experience of the consequences of radicalization (e.g., travel or detention) is what binds family members, not the fact that they are all of Moroccan, Dutch or Somali descent or adhere to a specific religion. Most family members spoke and understood the Dutch language perfectly, including parents who were first-generation immigrants. However, being able to speak and understand the Dutch language is an important concern during the intake process for the support groups. Our research presents two additional factors that should also be taken into account in composing support groups:

– whether family members have a mental disability that could cognitively prevent them from joining in and following the group or modules and
– family members of converts who are less familiar with daily religious and cultural customs in Muslim families and may therefore feel lost.

Experts suggested that these factors should be kept in mind during the intake and supervision of the group. An intake can consist of a personal conversation with one of the supervisors of a group or another professional. In this regard, it does seem to be important to ensure that participants do not have to go through an 'administrative paper mill' first and speak to many different people. These family members are generally already burdened with administrative worries. Alternating contacts at the start increases the chance that crucial information will be lost, compromising group matching and awareness of points of concern in group dynamics.

The literature on families of foreign fighters, our experiences and the interviews with family members and with experts underlined the need to not only think about the affected parents, but also about siblings. Adolescent siblings seem to be particularly affected by the 'trigger event' of radicalization, and thus the travel, death or detention of their brother or sister. They fully understand the situation and see and feel their parents emotions about it. These adolescent family members perceive their entire household focused only on the outgoing/radicalized/detained/killed brother or sister. The literature suggests that this trigger event makes them more susceptible to radicalization. In our experience, we see that siblings want to protect parents and avoid 'burdening' them with their own concerns. This creates emotional isolation, making them particularly vulnerable to grooming by an (older) brother or sister who travelled to a conflict zone. From a CVE

perspective it is thus particularly important to include this group in the policy design of support groups.

Group size

The realist review of general support programmes (table 6.2) indicated that small support groups are more effective than larger ones, the ideal group size being 6–10 people. In addition, the realist review revealed the importance of support groups having a closed character, in the sense that the group should start and end with a fixed membership, with no new people added in-between. In 'regular' support groups, for example, for family members of airplane crash victims, such groups may be relatively easily assembled. After all, there is a large group of relatives who all experienced the same tragedy at the same time. However, the reality of families of foreign fighters is different. The first Dutch foreign fighter in relation to the Syrian conflict dates back to 2012. By the end of 2016, the Netherlands had 270 foreign fighters (NCTV, 2016a). The limited volume, spread out over a period of more than four years and scattered across the country, makes it impossible to continuously set up new groups. Dutch support groups have therefore been organized differently than prescribed by the literature and the interviewed experts. Platform Achterblijvers from SMN had a relatively large and structured central group (meeting every two months), and new people were always welcome. Stichting Sabr opted for a small-scale approach, with individual customization at the local level the guiding principle.

Setting, duration and frequency

From the realist review we learnt that the duration and frequency of support programmes can vary from eight weeks to two years. The review also revealed that a duration of 38 weeks and 316 hours is most effective. Among the current Dutch support groups, we see a difference between professional and voluntary organizations in terms of programme duration and meeting frequency. The professional organizations that provide support groups to other target audiences than families of foreign fighters, determine the duration and frequency in advance. The voluntary organizations already working with families of foreign fighters do not set an end date for family support. They focus on creating a low-threshold welcoming context and continuous tailoring to families' needs.

Based on our interviews and focus groups, such an open-ended approach is not without risk:

- An organization and its volunteers can become overburdened by family members' sometimes overwhelming needs and requests for help.
- Those receiving support can become dependent on volunteers, as they are 'always available', perhaps also creating an (exclusive) group dynamic.
- There is a risk of a family member not being referred to professional help, such as a psychologist, on time.

Ground rules

The realist review highlighted the importance of formulating ground rules that participants and facilitators of support programmes must abide by. We asked the interviewed family members and experts what important ground rules should be. This produced the following rules:

- no press;
- prior agreements about (psychological) safety;
- prior agreements about sharing information about group members by group members or by the organization with third parties;
- prior agreements about who can retrieve what sort of information, such as what is shared in the group, whether it can be requested by lawyers in a criminal case, or if participants can be asked or called as a witness in a criminal case because they have information about a suspect; and
- use of scenarios and incident protocols (e.g., when PTSD is triggered).

Professional guidance

According to the realist review, it is crucial to obtain professional guidance for a support group. Someone who has experience in guiding group processes and knowledge and experience on the subject is most preferred. The parents and experts we spoke to mentioned additional important criteria, which cannot however all be captured in one specific facilitator. Three roles were distinguished as necessary to organize a good group support programme:

- *Process supervisor.* The process supervisor starts and keeps the conversation between family members going, provides a safe setting and ensures a balance in the group, so that everyone gets the chance to tell their story. This person must have knowledge of the foreign fighter phenomenon, be screened, be culturally sensitive and able to work within a charged political-social context. The process supervisor should not be a volunteer, but a professional paid employee. The process supervisor is as neutral as possible and certainly may not work for police or security services.

- *Trauma/grieving counsellor*. This is someone specialized in trauma and grieving, who is therefore able to recognize mental health issues (e.g., trauma) in a group setting and open up the conversation about it. This counsellor has mainly an observer role during the group sessions and a referral function if a possible mental health issue is detected. This person acts to ensure the psychological safety (e.g., prevention of secondary traumatization) of individual participants and the group as a whole and acts as a sounding board and intervision partner of the process supervisor. The counsellor must therefore be specialized in grief and trauma, culturally sensitive, interested in the subject of foreign fighters and be willing to learn more about the subject.
- *External experts and professional care providers*. External experts and care providers are people who can fulfil the psycho-educational goal of contact with fellow sufferers by providing specific modules. This means they have to be very knowledgeable about the module they deliver and have an affinity with the target group. To guarantee confidentiality and safety, it is important to adequately screen external experts and care providers in advance. Because most family members have feelings of distrust toward professionals care providers (often because of negative experiences in the past), it is important that they are professionally empathic. A very business-like and nine-to-five mentality is not effective for this target group.

Organizational design of family support

The realist review teaches that the organizational design of support groups is important to ensure their effectiveness. A neutral host organization is needed. This should preferably not be a mental health organization, but it should be an organization able to provide individual care and support, as well as professional and practical guidance to the support group (e.g., a space to meet).

During our interviews with representatives of expert organizations we asked them to what extent their organization could meet all the above-mentioned relevant contextual conditions. It turned out that no single organization in its current state would be able to deliver on all counts to provide a support group programme for families of foreign fighters. Some organizations only worked locally, and not nationally. Other organizations were specialized on the issue of violent extremism and families of foreign fighters, but did not have the professional infrastructure needed for professional guidance and individual care.

We also asked parents what they preferred in terms of organizational design. They were very adamant that they wanted the government to provide the support programme. This was an interesting and unexpected outcome, as many also harboured anger against the government because they felt the government was at least partially to blame for the travel of their children to Syria. However, they had more confidence in the government's ability to set up a professional support group, compared to a voluntary organization. However, setting up and executing a support programme for families of foreign fighters does not fit within mandate of the Ministry of Justice and Security or the Ministry of Social Affairs. Rather, it would be more logical for the national government to provide the financial means and set quality standards, and for other professional organizations to implement the support programme based on these. As none of the previously mentioned organizations could at present meet the standards set, an option would be for more than one of at least the following partners to enter into a partnership: Arq (IVP), SMN, Stichting Sabr, LSE/Familiesteunpunt and SHN.

In the Netherlands, the municipalities are responsible for local measures against violent extremism. The family members of foreign fighters are their inhabitants and make use of municipal care facilities. In a focus group we therefore asked policymakers from the 'priority municipalities' what they wanted and needed regarding, in particular, the organizational design of support groups. Their responses can be summarized in several categories: 'proximity', that is, support groups needed to be organized close to their inhabitants, and 'connectedness', referring to their desire to connect the support groups to local CVE approaches and provide additional care if necessary. They also wanted to learn from the support groups, so 'knowledge transfer' was another important requirement of municipalities.

Ultimately, it is up to the national ministries to choose a specific organizational design and partner. Based on our findings from the focus groups with both parents and municipal policymakers, interviews with families and experts and input from the realist review, the organization should preferably be designed with the following criteria in mind:

– a government or government-funded organization as opposed to a community or voluntary organization;
– an organization able to operate nationwide, located centrally in the Netherlands, but with the ability to supervise and facilitate small-scale support groups at the local or regional level;

- knowledge and expertise both on support groups in general and on violent extremism and families of foreign fighters specifically;
- have or be able to access practitioners who can fulfil the three required roles in the support groups (process supervisor, trauma counsellor and experts on the specific modules);
- ability to make referrals to other care providers, which requires good embedding in local and wider care networks;
- ability to strike a good balance regarding the following aspects, which are especially important to families of foreign fighters:
  - neutrality vs. advocacy for family members;
  - professionalism vs. low threshold;
  - setting boundaries vs. accessibility; and
  - guidance on content vs. guidance on emotion;
- ability to offer online support options, such as a properly moderated forum, to provide low-threshold guidance and supplement other forms of care;
- ability to synthesize and transfer of knowledge, including development of route maps and factsheets containing correct information and do's and don'ts and sharing lessons learnt with municipalities;
- proactive communication with fellow practitioners, such as from the police, social district team, municipalities, schools and mosques.

6.4.2 Mechanisms (M) of group-based support for families of foreign fighters

Based on the experiences and needs expressed by families of foreign fighters and the inputs of municipalities and professional and community-based experts, we expanded on theories pertaining to group-based support programmes, but this time with specific reference to the foreign fighter phenomenon. The *social support theory* (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Wei *et al.*, 2012) describes an important mechanism of group-based support for families of foreign fighters. Due to radicalization, travel or detention, most families are confronted with social isolation and stigmatization. Being able to share their stories with people in similar circumstances, helps them meet new people and feel less isolated. The mechanism behind the *stress and coping theory* (Wei *et al.*, 2012; Distelbrink *et al.*, 2012) is that group-based family support contributes to better stress and coping for families of foreign fighters. Most families experience some or all of the following mental health issues: trauma, grief, depression, anxiety and shame. In many families this leads to decreased participation in society, to more absence at work and less

emotional availability to other children in the family. The *therapeutic help theory* (Distelbrink *et al.*, 2012) applies to families who feel driven to share their story and are prepared to fulfil a more leading role, to prevent other families and children from making the same 'mistakes'. With this role they feel they can be of use to others, which boosts their self-esteem and social participation. The *optimal matching theory* (Distelbrink *et al.*, 2012) is very relevant to setting up support groups for families of foreign fighters. There are different types of families of foreign fighters with different experiences. Families whose child is deceased have completely different experiences and support needs than families whose child has returned. Based on the available scientific literature on optimal matching, we can state that it is better to match families with similar experiences. A theory not mentioned in the literature on support programmes, but which does seem relevant to families of foreign fighters, is the *psycho-educational theory* (Ivey, 1976). In our interviews and focus group, families expressed an acute need for more knowledge on the foreign fighter phenomenon and to increase their competencies on topics like the modus operandi of extremist organizations, how to deal with violent extremism and its consequences, and different forms of professional support. The mechanism behind psycho-education is that greater knowledge and competencies increases families' resilience. Resilience here refers to feeling more in control of the situation, having a better idea of what to expect (and what not to expect), awareness of the risks in relation to other family members and knowledge of when and where to seek professional support.

6.4.3 Outcomes (O) of group-based support for families of foreign fighters

The mechanisms of group-based support for families of foreign fighters are thus sharing stories and experiences with others who are in the same situation and increased knowledge and coping skills. These can lead to the following outcomes, which can prevent radicalization of other family members:

- improved coping skills, reducing feelings of shame, fear, loneliness and despair;
- stronger family members, who can provide mutual support and advice (use of experiential expertise) to boost self-esteem;
- improved knowledge and skills related to violent extremism, for example, families know better what they can and cannot expect, the risks they need to be aware of (grooming of brothers and sisters) and when and where they can go for professional assistance;

Table 6.4: Contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of support groups tailored families of foreign fighters

Contexts of support programmes		Mechanims of support programmes		Outcomes of support programmes	
C1	Content 1. Violent extremism (e.g., causes, signals, etc.) 2. Administrative and legal issues 3. Contact with family members 4. Addressing the issue within network 5. Professional support 6. Contact with police and government officials 7. Dealing with media and social discourse	M1	Social support theory: Due to radicalization, travel or detention, most families are confronted with social isolation and stigmatization. Being able to share their stories with people in similar circumstances helps them meet new people and feel less isolated	O1	Increased social support
C2	Composition of the group 1. My relative has travelled (and died) 2.My family member has radicalized 3.My family member has been detained for violent extremism	M2	Stress and coping theory: Most families experience some or all of the following mental health issues: trauma, grief, depression, anxiety and/or shame. In many families this leads to decreased social participation, to more absence at work and less emotional availability to other (often upset) children in the family	O2	Improved stress and coping skills
C3	Group size 6-10 people per group	M3	Therapeutic help theory: Applicable to families that are really driven to share their story and prepared to fulfil a more leading role, to prevent other families and children from making the same 'mistakes'. In this role they feel they can be of use to others, which helps increase their self-esteem and social participation	O3	Increased self-esteem
C4	Setting & duration & frequency 1.Monthly meetings 2.Clear start and finish date 3.Aprrox. 8 sessions related to content (C1)	M4	Optimal matching theory: There are many different types of families of foreign fighters with different experiences. Families whose child is deceased have completely different experiences and support needs than families whose child has returned. Based on the available scientific literature on optimal matching, we can thus presume that it is better to match families with similar experiences	O4	Increased feelings of acknowledgement
C5	Rules 1.No press/media presence 2.Agreements about (psychological) safety 3.Privacy and information sharing agreements 4.Use of scenarios and incident protocols	M5	Psycho-educational theory: Knowledge on the foreign fighter phenomenon and increased (parenting) competencies on topics such as the modus operandi of extremist organizations, dealing with violent extremism and its consequences, and different forms of professional support increases families' resilience in the sense that they feel more in control of the situation, have a better idea of what (not) to expect, are aware of risks to other family members and know when and where to seek professional support	O5	1. Increased knowledge about violent extremism (causes, signals) 2. Increased competencies in dealing with a radicalized family members 3. Awareness of risks (grooming, trigger events) of radicalization of other family members
C6	Professional guidance Deployment of experts and facilitators: a. Process supervisor b. Trauma counsellor c. (Content) experts and care providers				
C7	Organizational design 1. Professional organization with (government funded) financial means 2. Ability to operate nationally, regional and locally 3. Knowledge and expertise on radicalization 4. (Have access to) practitioners who can fulfil necessary roles 5. Possibilities for referral 6. Balancing between: a. Neutrality vs. advocacy for family members b. Professionalism vs. low threshold c. Limitation vs. accessibility d. Guidance on content vs. guidance on emotion 7. Offer online (forum) possibilities 8. Knowledge transfer: route maps/factsheets and sharing lessons learned with municipalities 9. Proactive communication to relevant partners				

– increased understanding, for example, of any breeding grounds for radicalization within their own family system, so that possible recruitment/radicalization of brothers and sisters can be limited; and
– greater social support, increasing the general well-being of the family and also reducing the breeding grounds for further or new radicalization within the family.

6.5 A realistic ex-ante evaluation method and heuristic guidelines

This ex ante evaluation of support programmes for families of foreign fighters started with a realist review, based on the heuristic guidelines set out in chapter 3. As there was virtually no literature available on families of foreign fighters, let alone on support groups for these families, the realist review drew on studies on group support in general, to draw out potentially relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. This resulted in an unconfigured C-M-O model, providing us a canvas of evidence-based guidelines and theories for support groups from other fields. These were then further developed in line with the specific needs of families of foreign fighters. To test the applicability of these evidence-based guidelines and theories to the situation of families of foreign fighters, additional evaluation and research methods were necessary. Realistic evaluation was therefore applied ex ante. We tested and further developed our canvas for group support programmes through interviews and focus groups with families of foreign fighters, professional and community organizations and municipal policymakers. This exercise yielded an unconfigured C-M-O model for group-based support for families of foreign fighters (table 6.4).

Ex ante evaluation has not yet been applied to CVE interventions and programmes – much less ex ante realist review and realistic evaluation. The above sections illustrated step by step how this could be done. This resulted in a method and heuristic guidelines relevant not only to group support for families of foreign fighters, but also other CVE interventions that need to be designed and for which an evidence base is lacking. Designing CVE interventions by drawing on realist ex ante evaluation should consist of the following steps:

1) Conduct a realist review of a similar intervention applied in one or more different fields using the heuristic guidelines developed in chapter 3. The end result is an unconfigured C-M-O model of an intervention or programme in a different context.

2) Use the outcome of the realist review as an evidence-based theoretical model to test the applicability of the C-M-O model for a CVE context and the target audience of the CVE intervention.
3) Make a stakeholder analysis. Which people and organizations would be involved in or affected by the CVE intervention? Who is the target group of the intervention (families of foreign fighters), in which municipalities and communities, and which expert organizations will be involved?
4) Use the stakeholder analysis as an input for multi-method data collection to test and further enhance and specify the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes developed in step 1, for example, by conducting interviews and focus groups with relevant stakeholders.
5) Analyse the data in terms of relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. Does the data warrant further specification of or additions to the model developed in step 1?
6) Develop a specified C-M-O model related to the CVE intervention and target audience that provides answers to questions such as the following:
   – If such an intervention were implemented, what contextual conditions need to be met?
   – What mechanisms underlie the specific intervention?
   – What are the potential outcomes of the intervention?

6.6 Conclusion and reflection

This chapter started by asking if and how realist review and realistic evaluation could be applied ex ante, in order to develop a more evidence-based and informed CVE policy theory and design. It then zoomed in on a specific case study: setting up support groups for families of foreign fighters. This led not only to the development of an evidence-based policy theory for group-based support programmes for families of foreign fighters, it also produced a method and heuristic guidelines for CVE policy design.

So we now know *how* to conduct an ex ante realistic evaluation, but *why* is such an approach important? In terrorism studies, CVE has been criticised as lacking an evidence base and having counter-productive effects on the target audience of CVE programmes, such as religious and ethnic communities (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018; Van San, 2018). An ex ante realistic evaluation seeks to overcome these issues. Realist review contributes to the development of an evidence-based policy theory. The realistic evaluation tests the applicability of the intervention in the context of CVE and its

target audiences. It provides communities, families and/or individuals an opportunity to voice their opinions and express their wishes regarding CVE. It also includes the main stakeholders influenced or affected by the CVE intervention or programme. Finally, it shines light on the experience-based knowledge of experts regarding what can be done and might work – and how. A realistic ex ante evaluation undertaken in this way contributes to the legitimacy, feasibility and effectiveness of CVE policy. The legitimacy is further enhanced by taking not only different stakeholders into account, but also the different perspectives these stakeholders might have. It addresses not only the father whose son travelled to Syria, but also the family member whose minor sister travelled to the conflict zone. Moreover, its focus is not limited to the big cities of the Netherlands, but also includes the smaller municipalities that are affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon. Finally, it lays the groundwork for more thorough evaluation research, contributing in turn to a more evidence-based CVE.

In the case of establishing a Dutch support group programme for families of foreign fighters, our ex ante realistic evaluation yielded insights that were not anticipated beforehand. Dutch families of foreign fighters harboured much resentment against the government. So it might have been logical to have a volunteer or community organization set up the support group programme. However, families were adamant that a professional organization should set up the support groups. In their opinion, the government was the only one who could deliver the required professionality. This was a surprising outcome of the realistic ex ante evaluation. Families' input also provided valuable information about the content of the group sessions.

Some scholars might argue that the value of such an ex ante realistic evaluation is limited to this one CVE case and to the Dutch context, and a specific timeframe (before the defeat of the caliphate), and that it cannot be similarly applied to other geographical contexts and situations. Indeed, the C-M-O model developed cannot be applied one-to-one in Denmark or France, for example. However, the C-M-O model in table 6.4 does provide a canvas that those countries could develop further to understand the contextual requirements, the underlying mechanisms and the potential outcomes of such group support programmes in their situation. The evidence-based policy theory developed here provides a starting point for tailoring support programmes to the specific needs of the families and the infrastructure of the country. It will still be important to conduct interviews and focus groups with stakeholders to test the model's applicability to other contexts and

target audiences. One obvious question is whether the defeat of the caliphate has consequences for the content and set-up of support programmes, as we now know from the *optimal matching theory* that families want to be matched to other families with similar experiences. Once most foreign fighters have surrendered and been imprisoned – in jails or in refugee camps – it seems logical that a separate group would be established for their families.

In sum, ex-ante realistic evaluation provides the tools to help design more legitimate, feasible and effective CVE interventions and programmes.