

A framework for mapping, building, and evaluating collective capabilities for:

# Resisting far-right extremism online and in real world communities

Prepared for Uplift and the Far-Right Observatory by Cian O'Donovan, June 2021

## Summary

Far-right extremists harm individuals and communities in Ireland and elsewhere, on the ground as well as online. Extremism also harms our wellbeing and broader civil society.

**This framework is designed to guide and evaluate strategic action by civil society and digital advocacy organisations that will resist and counter these threats.**

At the core of the framework is set of skills, practices, and methods for working together. What we call **collective capabilities**. These are the capabilities required to work with individuals, groups and with allied organisations and communities to identify and counter far-right threats.

The framework recognises extremism suggests particular things to different people and the understandings of harms must i) be tied into specific local and national contexts, ii) acknowledge the dynamics of extremist activity in the world, ii) evolve with circumstances, for instance covid-19.

## A framework for building capabilities to resist far-right extremism

Improvements in the welfare of individuals and communities will not happen through government action alone. It requires collective action. In Ireland, groups like the Irish Council of Civil Liberties, the Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland, Uplift and others, have come together to create the Far-Right Observatory.

To best work together, it is important to know what capabilities already exist and are available across founding partner organisations, what capabilities are emerging within the FRO itself and what capabilities are under-developed or absent. This three-stage framework is designed to identify, map, and cultivate such collective capabilities.

- **Stage 1:** across a range of scales: identify far-right activities and opportunities for strategic action.
- **Stage 2:** map capabilities that already exist within allied organisations and that are emergent in the FRO. Identify capabilities desired by FRO staff and experts but so far under-developed or absent.
- **Stage 3:** boost or build the absent capabilities identified in Stage 2 by gaining resources, knowledge, and technology.

## Stage 1. Identifying harms of far-right extremism and strategic actions to resist

Far-right extremist activity threatens and harms individuals and communities across a range of scales.

In order to guide strategic action, the framework uses four scales illustrated in Table 1:

1. **Real-world harms** carried out by far-right activists. Examples include street protests and violent attacks on individuals and groups and threats of harm to communities.
2. Harm is done through **online content and communities** and the **content platforms** that host them.
3. Media and technology **firms, markets and infrastructures** play a critical role in: hosting, and enabling content and in enforcing rules and regulations where they exist.
4. These activities take place within **broader society**. Our collective values shape rules and regulation which are made accountable through democratic activities such as collective action.

<b>Table 1: Harms of far-right extremism and opportunities for collective civil society action</b>		
<b>Scale of strategic action</b>	<b>Harms of far-right extremism</b>	<b>Strategic actions: how digital advocacy organisations can counter extremism</b>
Real world locations	Individual harms such as violence, threats, and intimidation carried-out by individual or organised far-right extremists.	Work with existing community organisations to strengthen resilience to extremist harms and recruitment. <b>Observing far-right activity on the ground, create collective knowledge that is meaningful and useful in community contexts</b> Build internal practices, processes and systems to manage knowledge within the FRO
Online content and activity on digital platforms	Threats and hate speech targeted at individuals and communities <b>Online media used for recruitment by far-right groups</b> Networks and media used in planning and coordination <b>Dissemination of hate content within and between countries</b>	Observing online far-right activity by independent civil society organisations. Share knowledge and practice with allied organisations locally and globally <b>Articulate from civil society point of view perspectives on how far-right content should be regulated by firms and regulators</b> Collective action and resourcing to advocate for justice for victims of far-right extremism
Technology firms, markets and digital infrastructures	Harms made worse by difficulty in holding private firms to account. <b>Small number of powerful firms have effective control over online infrastructure and have significant influence in policy decisions.</b>	Focus on establishing and maintaining governance and accountability structures between firms and civil society at local levels in specific jurisdictions. <b>Pursue justice and redress at the level of firms and markets, such as class actions.</b> From civil society position, advocate for transnational legal agreements on data and rights such as European directives via international coalition building
Wider society, the public sphere and democratic institutions	Shrinking of the space for democratic discourse. <b>Nature of public debate is polarised. For instance: “with us or against us” framings used during Covid-19 lockdown debates</b>	Foster public conversations and discussion on themes and intersections of three preceding strategic areas to increase public understanding and participation. Build accountability structures from civil society that can hold elected decision makers, and regulators to account. <b>Building and participating in meaningful accountability structures across ICT platforms and media.</b> Increasing participation in governance processes such as consultations about how platforms should be governed.

## Stage 2. Mapping collective capabilities

Working together to achieve the kind of strategic actions laid out in Table 1 requires certain collective capabilities. For instance, capabilities to collaborate with others, to coordinate action, to lobby governments and firms.

Collective capabilities are critical to all organisations: many people working together to achieve some sort of purposeful goal. Collective capabilities in civil society are especially valuable because they allow individuals to move beyond invited spaces for participation, such as the ballot box, and take more active roles in democratic life. Collective capabilities are strengthened by:

- **People, organisations and allies:** the staff, experts and members of organisations and their underlying training, real-world experience, technical skills, formal education, leadership qualities and local and global networks.
- **Drivers:** resources such as finance, knowledge, technology, and even other capabilities. Drivers include national and European policies, organisational rules and social norms, shared values and expectations. Some of these can be influenced, such as funding or technology provision. Other drivers such as policy will be relatively fixed.

- **Processes:** tactics such as mass participation actions, mass advocacy emails, participatory prioritisation exercises, democratic decision making and collective storytelling about past successes and visions for the future.

Table 2. Provisional list of capabilities, people and organisations, drivers, and processes				
	Capabilities to...	People, organisations, allies	Drivers	Processes
Existing capabilities available through Uplift and allied organisations	... coordinate, collaborate and campaign together <b>...mobilise thousands of members at specific moments on single issues</b> ...build shared identities aligning with common values <b>...hold powerful interests to account</b> ... manage the organisation day-to-day <b>...run member-led campaigns</b>	<b>Staff</b> <b>Members</b> Colleagues at allied organisations at home and abroad <b>Configurations of digital listening and activism technologies</b>	Pool of common resources <b>Technology stacks and development roadmaps</b> A permeable and inclusive networked membership model <b>Policy and legislation on civil society activities (e.g. SIPO)</b> An open, civil society based on values of a just society and liberal democracy	Collective knowledge building of member interests <b>Reflexive storytelling, focussing on previous collective successes</b> Broadening access to previously closed processes of democracy such as government consultations
Available capabilities specific to the FRO	... empower communities most affected by extremism <b>...conduct research and knowledge creation</b> ...campaign for effective legislation from civil society point of view <b>...respond rapidly to far-right mobilisation and events</b> ... interpret data and communicate analysis to inform action that aligns with FRO / Uplift values and visions <b>...communicate to public and national and European legislators</b> ... maintain secure, safe and responsible work environment	<b>Core staff</b> Expert analysts <b>Leadership and training experts</b> Community networks <b>Ally networks for mutual aid and intelligence</b> Allied political operatives <b>Network of funders</b>	Shared understanding of the threat posed by far-right extremism <b>Research, data and collective intelligence on far-right organising</b> Internal organisational practices <b>Legitimacy gained from support of mass membership groups like Uplift</b>	Observation, collective knowledge production and building evidence bases <b>FRO internal workstream prioritisation processes</b> FRO internal management processes <b>FRO-allies communication processes</b> Configuring and maintaining technology stack in secure and safe way that align with shared values
Capabilities that are not reliably available or absent so far	...hold powerful platform firms to account <b>...build and realise alternative visions for how internet platforms and network can be socially useful</b> ... steer research into far-right extremism <b>... contribute to peer-production of internet technologies in the long term</b>	Expanded internal team <b>Expanded network of local communities</b> Extended community of global far-right activists and experts <b>Extended coalition of supporters and funders</b>	Enhanced organisational practices <b>Open commons approach to technology development</b> Increased understanding of shared values of allied organisations, communities and broader public	Collaborative research, design and innovation processes with national and international partners <b>Shaping appropriate accountability processes and structures within platforms and between platforms and civil society</b>

Note: this is a provisional list that needs to be tested in real world situations. Specific capabilities are likely to differ from country to country, as are specific combinations of people, drivers and processes required to build capabilities.

The capabilities needed to achieve specific goals such as the strategies listed in Table 1 need to be mapped from the ground up in the actual existing context in which the FRO operates. That means consulting staff and members of organisations, experts in the field, and previous research.

The first step of a mapping exercise is to work out what capabilities are available already, through Uplift and allied organisations, and then specifically in the FRO. The second task is to identify capabilities that are valued by staff and allies but are underdeveloped or absent. The final piece of work is to consider how to build and strengthen capabilities and what people, drivers and processes are needed. A provisional list of capabilities valued by the FRO is shown in Table 2.

### Stage 3. Organising resources, knowledge, technology.

The third stage involves acquiring the knowledge, resources and technology required to boost or build the capabilities identified as missing in Stage 2. Each capability listed in Table 2 needs specific consideration.

Recommend for special consideration and further work in order to drill down on specific values, technologies and risks at stake:

- **Capabilities to conduct rapid response research and knowledge building**
  - These include the individual skills, network building and building and maintenance of a technology monitoring stack.
  - Specific investigations or instances of events need to be stand-alone and follow evidence-based best practice
  - Inclusion criteria: As well as agreed categories of activities, meaningful bar of inclusion must consider dynamics of extremism and the context of activities.
  - Knowledge building processes and criteria must align with values of FRO staff, members and wider ally group and must include provisions for ensuring accountability for those observed and compliance with regulations.
  - Data must be secure, structured and quality controlled. Processes must be scalable and replicable.
- **Capabilities to maintain secure, safe and responsible work environment.**
  - Audit processes to be established and carried out regularly

#### **About this framework general framework for locally specific capabilities**

The framework is built from existing academic literature, reports, workshops and ongoing discussions with staff. It is important to note that the capabilities listed here are provisional and are likely to differ significantly from country to country, as are specific combinations of people, drivers and processes required to build capabilities. The value of the capabilities approach is in the grounded specificity of the capabilities.

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