

Strong Cities Network

South Asia Regional Practitioners' Workshop

Kolkata, India – 31 January & 1 February 2018

30
DELEGATES

14
CITIES

4
COUNTRIES



ISD held the third Strong Cities Network (SCN) Regional Practitioners' Workshop in South Asia in Kolkata, India on 31 January and 1 February. The event brought together 30 frontline practitioners from **India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives**. Over two days, participants had in-depth discussions and training on a broad spectrum of violent extremism affecting the region, each bringing valuable individual experience and local expertise to the table. Training sessions focused on how cities can improve their planning, taking account of specific local risks and identifying partners to support local projects. The workshop was organised in cooperation with the **U.S. Consulate General Kolkata**, with partners including **Facebook** and the **Commonwealth Secretariat**.

The event was opened by **Craig Hall**, U.S. Consul General in Kolkata, **Nilangshu Bhusan Basu**, Chief Engineer of Kolkata Municipal Corporation, and **Edward Jackson**, Senior Programme Manager at ISD.

"The U.S. and India are strategic partners in the fight against violent extremism in South Asia. The U.S. values India's role in protecting and extending global security and stability and welcomes India's vision to geographically extend its contribution to promoting peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific."

Craig Hall, U.S. Consul General in Kolkata

“In order to curb violent extremism, we have to look to counter terrorist recruitment and radicalisation to violence...with a strong initiative from the political leaders and religious leaders encouraging a tolerant and compassionate culture.”

Nilangshu Bhusan Basu, Chief Engineer, Kolkata Municipal Corporation

By the workshop’s close, **88%** of participants felt that SCN membership was highly valuable to their city, with **92%** recommending that other cities take part in similar workshops and **80%** stating that they felt their own participation would lead to changes and developments in their CVE policy or activities.

In focus: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in South Asia

Discussion was opened by **Mark Albon**, Head of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s CVE Unit, who led a session on framing violent extremism trends and emerging risks across the region, looking at the role of national and international partners, as well as the private sector, in supporting local-level programming. Expert speakers included: **Ambassador Humayun Kabir**, Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United States and currently Vice President of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute; **Mallika Joseph**, Policy Advisor at Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and previously Professor of National Security Studies at the University of Jammu; **Gaurav Bansal**, First Secretary Political from the



U.S. Embassy in New Delhi; and **Kavitha Kunhi Kannan**, Public Policy Manager for India, South Asia & Central Asia at Facebook. Speakers discussed the regional impact of violent extremism in South Asia, all recognising the importance of both protecting and empowering local communities.

A specific region-wide risk raised by participants related to youth unemployment and a growing lack of jobs for university and higher educated young people, whose skills are more often exported to foreign markets than engaged domestically. The point was made that not only is the region not capitalising on a significant and growing pool of home-grown technical expertise and talent, but the feeling of a labour market stacked against the highest achievers and best educated is a growing risk in terms of youth disenfranchisement and lack of opportunity, and is a potential push factor for violence and vulnerability. The centrality of family and kinship networks in the South Asian context was noted and referred back to throughout the rest of the workshop when discussing outreach strategies. In the context of social media and the online domain, speakers noted that it was important for local government and CSOs to be present on social media, not just to share their success stories but as a way of engaging in dialogue with their local communities. Social media can also offer both tech and non-tech solutions, as demonstrated by the hackathons organised by Facebook.

Cities & Civil Society: Engagement & Partnership

This session was chaired by **Rafia Bhulai**, Senior Programs Officer at the Global Center on Cooperative Security, and explored the work that CSOs and NGOs in the region are delivering in prevention, resilience building and reconciliation, as well as how they work more effectively with local government in the process. **Anna Minj**, Director of Community Empowerment, Integrated Development and Gender Justice Diversity Programmes at [BRAC](#), discussed the relationship between violence against women and children and the growth of violent extremism in Bangladesh, noting the importance BRAC programming places on empowering communities, developing participatory prevention mechanisms, strengthening protection, and ensuring survivor support services. **Jehan Perera**, Executive Director of the Sri Lankan [National Peace Council](#), presented peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives, focusing on the inter-religious committees at the district level that bring together religious clergy, government officials, and other community leaders from all ethnicities to engage in joint conflict mitigation activities. **Mazher Hussain** highlighted leading work carried about by the [Confederation of Voluntary Associations \(COVA\)](#) across India, coordinating the community peace and social justice work of more than 700 organisations throughout the country, covering hate speech monitoring, democracy and good governance, and employment and financial inclusion.



Local Action Planning Training

Session 1 – Local Risk Assessment

ISD’s **Daniel Hooton** and **Ruth Boey** opened the SCN Local Action Planning workshop, contextualising local action planning against the broader national and international policy backdrop and outlining the core stages: (1) risk assessment; (2) mitigation and prevention development; and (3) partnership and resourcing, each of which were addressed in detail throughout the workshop. Starting with the risk assessment tier, the SCN team delivered an overview of individual, institutional and ideological risk in a local community, outlining a methodology for categorising local risk, whilst demonstrating the interplay between different types of risk and the influence of other forms of urban risk through a neighbourhood-level hotspot analysis. Real-life case studies on local risk patterns were drawn from across the SCN’s membership. Practitioners then divided into four smaller groups representing different cities and national contexts to discuss how, and to what degree, each type of risk played out their own local contexts.

“Hearing about different stories and some different perceptions and assumptions in this work really changed my mind.”

Survey response

Aimed at enabling local practitioners in CSO or other capacities to work more closely with municipal authorities in identifying risks, this workshop saw practitioners from across South Asia work collaboratively on basic local risk assessments and draw comparisons across diverse contexts on the nature of risk and how it is currently addressed at a community and local governmental level. Risks analysed at local levels included the stoking of ethnic, religious and nationalist tensions, as well as kinship-oriented honour and stigmatisation attitudes at a micro level and the oversight and licencing of local religious and cultural institutions. The community-level impact of conflicts such as Kashmir, as well as more localised examples like that of Manipur in Northeast India and the disproportionately high number of Maldivians who travelled to join Daesh, were discussed with risks identified during this session guiding the subsequent training workshops and serving as the basis for a more developed local action planning framework for cities across the region.



Session 2 – Mitigation and Prevention Approaches

The second tier of the SCN Local Action Planning framework focused on mitigation and prevention approaches. Providing an overview of some of the theory behind prevention strategies, **ISD’s Edward Jackson** highlighted case studies of different prevention approaches in practice across the network, demonstrating how differing risk patterns can necessitate different policy responses shaped to specific local profiles. **Dr Aishath Ali Naaz**, Head Consultant of the Maldives Institute for Psychological Services Training and Research (MIPSTAR), gave an inspiring overview of the work she leads in the Maldives. She analysed the risk profile of the Maldives and highlighted the most important vulnerabilities. More specifically, she talked about her work with gangs and in prisons, and how urban crime and violence shares multiple patterns with violent extremism and should not, in some contexts, be seen as mutually exclusive. Dr Naaz discussed her work with a variety of at-risk individuals, delivering psychological interventions and speaking first hand to the preventive capacity of increased individual mentoring and psychological support services across the region, as well as the need for governments and local leaders to integrate this practice into localised efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism.



With these examples in mind, the participants split into smaller groups to discuss prevention and mitigation strategies in an exercise that sought to outline prevention responses to 4 local risk scenarios. Groups fed back into the broader workshop and practitioners critiqued peers’ responses, referring to their own local circumstances.

Session 3 – Partner and Resource Identification

The final part of the SCN Local Action Planning framework, the identification of partners and resources, was led by **Daniel Hooton**, drawing on recent SCN engagement at the local level in Pakistan as well as the experience of SCN regional practitioner counterparts in West Africa. The introduction demonstrated how strategic partnerships can help leverage the project support, cooperation and expertise needed to develop locally-led prevention in a range of challenging contexts. **Aysha Esakji** then introduced her work in the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, focusing specifically on her work in engaging with madrassas in the borough and how she engages different communities in a sustainable dialogue with each other as well as with local government. **Musammat Badrunnesha**, the founder of the Empowerment and Human Development Society in Bangladesh, also talked about her work with madrassas as an important partner in girls' education, leading on from her work as a Brookings Institution fellow.

In a final practical workshop, participants were asked to link all three tiers of the SCN Local Action Planning framework together and outline the partnerships and prevention approaches that could be taken in response to two specific local risks identified in the first session, as well as potential pitfalls and challenges in implementing their respective action plans across the region.



With all three tiers tied together, practitioners were provided with the basic framework to support the development of local action plans in cities across the region. Local frontline teams had the opportunity to learn directly from regional peers facing similar challenges albeit in different contexts and from the standpoint of different professional training, each taking back to their own community the capacity to develop the basic three-tier structure into a comprehensive action plan in cooperation with local government to drive innovation and impact on P/CVE in South Asia.

Next Steps

With 30 practitioners in 14 different cities engaged across South Asia, this workshop represented for many their first interaction with the SCN. Practitioners noted that at present municipal corporations have relatively little role in security or peacebuilding fields and that national or local government prevention efforts are in their nascent stages. Participation in this workshop above all demonstrates the **wealth of experience, knowledge and capability** in prevention, led largely by civil society organisations active at local levels and engaged as frontline first-responders to multiple social issues, including violence and conflict. Imparting a framework for developing local action plans – for which a comprehensive understanding of risk and the capacity to draw in innovative partnerships to deliver local programming are essential – is designed to prepare these practitioners to engage local government

officials with the SCN and work to develop their cooperation, opening up a role for municipalities in PVE working in partnership with CSOs and other stakeholders.

To this end, all participants have been provided with **access to the SCN Online Hub**, a private login portal for local-level practitioners around the world offering a range of training, research and networking resources. The SCN will seek to **engage municipal leaders** in cities represented in Kolkata with the aim of formalising membership of the network and securing long-term engagement, including participation in ongoing in-country, regional, global and online training and capacity-building. Where appropriate, the SCN will also seek to **engage provincial or state-level officials** and law enforcement leadership, in line with the recommendations of many attendees, to secure practical cooperation and support to develop local prevention capacity across South Asia.

In addition, the SCN is pleased to announce the opening of **two small grant opportunities directed at civil society organisations looking to build partnership with local government** to develop prevention capacities in South Asian cities. Two SCN Local Innovation Grants, each of which have a maximum value of \$12,500, are open to applications. More information, including application guidance and a budget template is available [here](#).

For further information on the Strong Cities Network, including updates on future activities and programming, please visit www.strongcitiesnetwork.org.

Participating Cities & Regions

