STRONG CITIES NETWORK: CELEBRATING 5 YEARS

U.N. General Assembly Virtual Event, 30th September 2020

SUMMARY REPORT

CONTEXT

By 2050, 68 percent of the world's population will live in urban areas. From terrorism and political violence, to increases in hate crimes and disinformation, today's challenges are both global priorities and local realities. While national governments have dominated legal and security agendas, it has never been more important for city leaders and communities to work together to drive their own responses to these urban, social, economic, and technological challenges in order to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and strong.

25 global mayors convened five years ago at the 70th session of the U.N. General Assembly to launch the Strong Cities Network (SCN) and to show that coordinated action at local levels can drive lasting change on a global scale. Over 140 cities from more than 45 countries are now united as part of this network across national and regional divides in the recognition that transnational threats to peace, security and human rights demand local action and global cooperation.

To celebrate our five-year anniversary, we brought together mayors, governments, partner institutions and local practitioners across a global SCN membership to acknowledge key achievements to date and draw attention to the issues our cities face work to tackle hate, polarisation and extremism beyond 2020. The virtual event was held on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly and co-hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, the Kenyan National Counter Terrorism Centre, the Lebanese National PVE Coordination Unit and the U.S. Department of State.
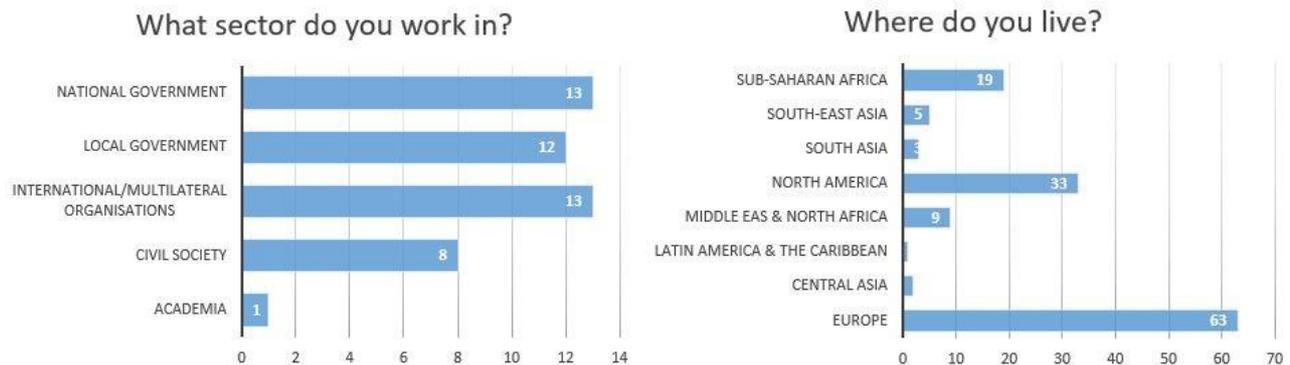
HIGHLIGHTS

- Launch of the **SCN Call for Support** on tackling division and disinformation linked to COVID-19.
- Announcement of an upcoming **SCN Mayoral Forum for Compassionate Leadership with HH the Dalai Lama.**
- **Mayor Andy Berke** (Chattanooga, USA) on how to respond and rebuild in the aftermath of a terror attack.
- **Mayor Maria Isabelle G. Climaco** (Zamboanga, Philippines) on the continued challenges of displaced populations and vulnerable youth groups, seven years after a deadly attack.
- **Mayor Maksim Dimitrievski** (Kumanovo, North Macedonia) on building local multi-stakeholder coordination teams equipped to support rehabilitation and reintegration at the local level.
- **Mayor Mohammad Al-Saudi** (Saida, Lebanon) on local prevention networks and partnerships with Danish and Dutch counterparts throughout economic and governance crises and August's Beirut blast.

A recording of the event is available to watch here. For more information about the Strong Cities Network, please download our new brochure and watch an introductory video here.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Over 120 participants from around the world joined us to mark five years of local leadership against hate, polarisation and extremism representing a diverse array of sectors.

Figs 1a & 1b: Participant poll results illustrating participant countries and sectors.

Sasha Havlicek, Founding CEO of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), which leads the SCN, welcomed participants to the forum and thanked co-host governments for their support and partnership across SCN global programmes. Havlicek acknowledged the unprecedented circumstances of the meeting at a time when city leaders around the world are on the frontline not only of the public health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the extraordinary economic and social fallout that continues to accompany it. Noting that the pandemic has made effective local leadership across cities and urban communities more important than ever before, she formally launched the **SCN Call for Support**, asking governments and the international community to support mayors and equip them to tackle the proliferation of dangerous disinformation and weaponised hate that seeks to undermine cohesion and drive new waves of polarisation and extremism. Calling on governments to commit to systematic efforts to track and analyse disinformation and enfranchise cities and communities to respond at the local level with an evidence base and the practical support to mount a coordinated, global response.

Christopher Harnisch, Deputy Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism at the U.S. State Department, underlined his government's commitment to supporting SCN efforts in critical regions and called on additional governments to support SCN efforts to deepen local impact and broaden its global scale. Harnisch pointed to key successes in forging new bilateral partnerships between cities under the SCN, wi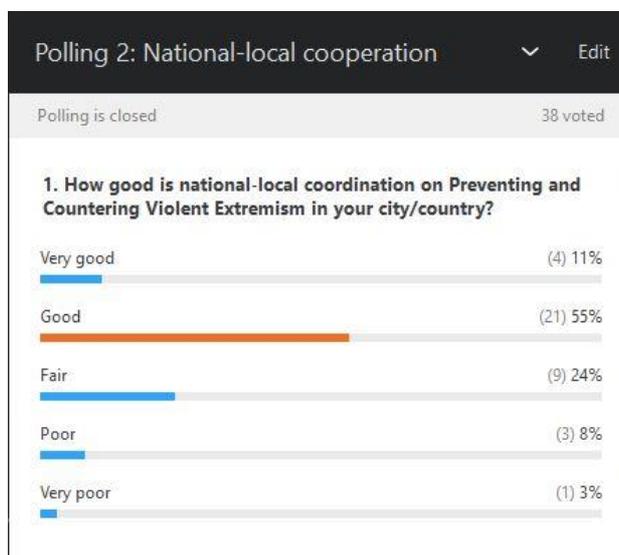th links between cities in Denmark, Lebanon, North Macedonia and the US yielding critical practical outcomes as cities build and refine prevention approaches. Noting how cities that had long been hotspots for radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism had developed into leading global models for localised prevention, he pointed to Čair and Kumanovo (North Macedonia) and Mombasa (Kenya) as inspirational examples. Harnisch called for growing recognition of the cross-ideological challenges cities face, nodding to renewed efforts to tackle racially and ethnically motivated terrorism and white supremacism, and drew attention to U.S. efforts to support repatriation efforts for individuals from Iraq and Syria, noting the critical role for cities in successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

Ambassador Dr Martin Kimani, Director of the National Counter Terrorism Centre & Special Envoy on CVE for Kenya, praised SCN support to six Kenyan counties with concerted efforts to help shape and implement county action plans and noted the leadership of Governor Hassan Ali Joho of Mombasa since the SCN's inception in 2015. Ambassador Kimani discussed the challenges of supporting local government and civil society efforts when active recruitment by groups like al-Shabaab means that there can be a fine

line between societal prevention and security and counterterrorism operations. Ambassador Kimani noted the NCTC's drive to support the county action plan framework and provide the mandate for local communities to engage on prevention. Pointing to some of the key successes in recent years, Ambassador Kimani urged realism about the challenges ahead in Kenya, with COVID-19 bringing a further set of emerging challenges. To tackle them, he argued for a civil society and an SCN leadership that is ideologically adept, mobilising passion and an appreciation of living in multi-party secular democracy, promoting interfaith exchange, religious freedom and respect.

Fig 2: Participant poll results on the quality of National-Local Cooperation.

Fig 3: Participant poll results noting the biggest P/CVE threats in their respective countries.

Ambassador Christina Lassen, Political Director at The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, reflected on Denmark's support to SCN projects in Lebanon and Jordan to establish multi-stakeholder local prevention networks. Ambassador Lassen spoke of the value of peer-to-peer exchanges in yielding real impact and inspirational change, challenging 'one size fits all' approaches which fail to appreciate diverse local contexts. Praising the efforts of SCN member city Saida (Lebanon), she underlined that at a time of multiple crises in security, health and politics, cities and peer to peer networks are more essential and more necessary than ever.

Rubina Abu Zeinab, National Coordinator for Preventing Violent Extremism in Lebanon, provided a final co-host address and a keynote speech thanking the SCN for critical support to municipalities under Danish and Dutch-supported programmes. Zeinab pointed to successes that prevention networks in Tripoli, Saida and Majdal Anjar had achieved amid challenging political and security

environments, noting the role of the national strategy and action plan to provide a growing mandate for cities on prevention and an expansion of training to at least 10 cities by 2023. Acknowledging the extraordinary circumstances which stakeholders had faced over the past year alone in Lebanon, she underlined her support for partnership with the SCN to expand efforts to most if not all governorates with an appreciation that prevention cannot be established sustainably without an effective state-building process.

"Terrorism wants the murder of an American ideal of pluralism and inclusion. Hate can never heal."
Mayor Andy Berke

Delivering a keynote address, **Mayor Andy Berke** (Chattanooga, USA) discussed the terrorist attack that struck his city five years ago, noting that how to move forward in the aftermath is not something you are taught or prepared for as a mayor. Recalling a commitment he made at the time, he said he was determined that nothing about the city's response would exacerbate the problems or serve to further radicalise any more individuals. Mayor Berke said he felt Chattanooga was a better place for its involvement with the SCN and the partnerships he had been able to build with cities around the world through its activities. The launch of the Mayor's Council Against Hate in Chattanooga was based on the learnings he had drawn from the SCN and through exchanges with partner cities, Mayor Berke said, reiterating the determination he had to create and maintain a civic culture which does not allow hate to take hold. Noting that one in five white supremacist incidents in the U.S. had taken place in Tennessee, Mayor Berke reflected on the challenges cities face as they look beyond 2020, with an urgent need to prioritise efforts to protect and promote values of pluralism and inclusion.

Joining a mayoral panel chaired by the Head of the Strong Cities Network, **Rebecca Skellett,** three leading mayors discussed the impact of the SCN in Lebanon, the Philippines and North Macedonia. **Mayor Mohammad Al-Saudi** (Saida, Lebanon), said that when his city joined the SCN, he felt that nowhere else could have been more in need of its support. The city was dealing with humanitarian, refugee and security crises simultaneously, noting that Saida hosts the Ain al-Hilweh camp. Joining the network had brought much-needed support to build and professionalise a trained network of key community stakeholders to support the municipality in developing a prevention strategy and delivering activities across key sectors including with faith leaders.

Mayor Maria Isabelle G. Climaco (Zamboanga, Philippines) presented the stark challenges that she faces with the arrival of COVID-19 on top of peace and security priorities. She noted that as much as seven years after the devastating attack on her city, 788 internally displaced people are still awaiting homes. Mayor Climaco discussed the importance of communications and effective counter narratives, calling for more support from the SCN and partners to support vulnerable youth populations in Zamboanga.

Mayor Maksim Dimitrievski (Kumanovo, North Macedonia) praised his partnership with the SCN to establish a multiagency Community Action Team (CAT) in 2019, supported by national-level efforts since the 2018 adoption of a national strategy and work to develop and implement an action plan. Mayor Dimitrieveski described the successes in developing a local action plan for Kumanovo with the CAT trained to educate and support critical sectors throughout the municipality and engage with schools and young people as well as community stakeholders. SCN programmes were creating new opportunities and producing important, practical results on the ground, he said, pointing to meetings the CAT had convened just a week earlier with support from the SCN to work with the National Coordinator in the wake of the arrest of three returned foreign terrorist fighters charged with preparing terrorist acts. Cities and local communities could play a unique role in efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees, Mayor Dimitrievski said, but it required strong coordination between local and national governments to mobilise effectively at critical moments.

Following a brief panel discussion between mayors, **Ambassador Paul Foley**, Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism at the Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, provided closing remarks in which he reflected on the achievements of the SCN partnership with the Prevention Project and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) on a dedicated National-Local Cooperation initiative. Echoing key points from the panel discussion, Ambassador Foley discussed the importance of strong vertical cooperation on prevention agendas and praised

SCN efforts to convene interior ministries around the world, together with mayoral representatives from their countries. The initiative had resulted in the approval of a set of good practices formally approved by the GCTF coordination committee just days earlier.
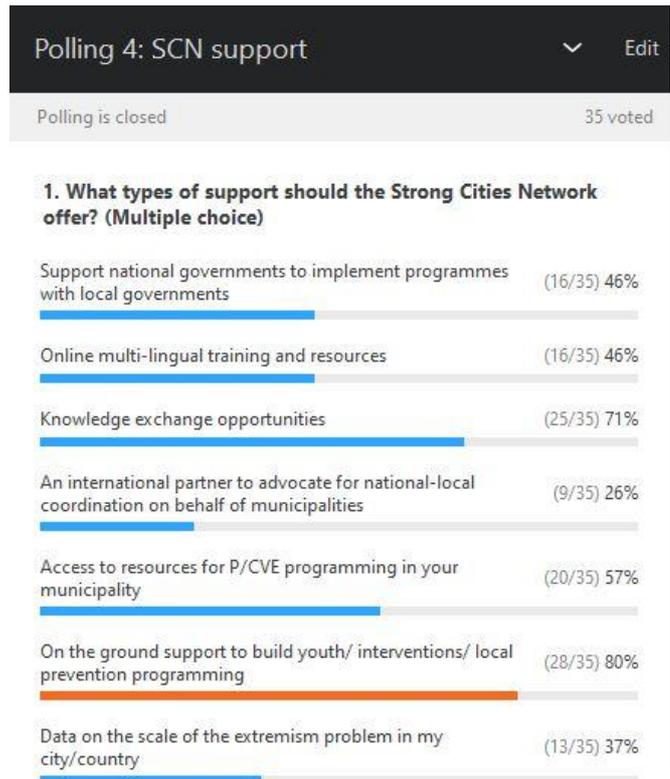
NEXT STEPS

Rebecca Skellett provided some high level announcements on key priorities for the SCN over the coming months and years, firstly noting that while the SCN would continue its existing work, it would also be expanding into new geographies including Central Asia, South East Asia and the United States.

The network will also expand its thematic focus including the launch of new work streams to explore the intersection of COVID-19, disinformation and extremism, post-incident response toolkits helping cities plan for the aftermath of an extremist attack, and lastly, support to cities looking to set up intervention and referral mechanisms. To help ensure connectivity across the network, the team will introduce a new series of webinars, the launch of regional datasets, and a dedicated range of online resources.

Lastly, she announced an upcoming **Strong Cities Network Mayoral Forum for Compassionate Leadership with His Holiness the Dalai Lama,** underscoring the commitment of the network to work with both elected officials and practitioners.

Closing the event, she thanked the long term support from government co-hosts, mayors and all participants who collectively have made the SCN a success.

Fig 4: Participant poll results on the types of support the SCN should offer.