



South Asia Summit: Supporting City-Led Efforts to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism

Over the past four years, the Strong Cities Network (SCN) has worked across the South Asia region to support city-led efforts against violent extremism. This has involved working with cities in the region to gain a better understanding of the violent extremism challenges they are facing, develop and share good practices for locally-led preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts, and ultimately, influence how national, regional, and global actors think about both the threats facing local communities and how to address them most effectively. Building on this work, in December 2021, the network held its inaugural South Asia Summit: Supporting City-Led Efforts to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism.

Over two days, the Summit convened representatives of cities, along with other local actors from Bangladesh, the Maldives, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, as well as from other parts of the world, alongside the UN and other multilateral bodies. Together, they led the conversation on what can be done to catalyse and support city-led P/CVE efforts in the region. The Summit offered participants the opportunity to: share analyses of the current threat landscape; exchange local experiences in and lessons for building a “whole-of-society” approach to P/CVE that includes cities and other sub-national authorities; and explore how to operationalise a tailored, multi-actor, city-led approach to confronting these challenges. Key takeaways included:

1. **Responses to the threats of terrorism and violent extremism in the region are typically highly centralised and securitised.** There is undue attention on addressing the manifestations rather than the drivers of the violence and thus an urgent need to focus more on locally-led prevention efforts.
2. **The spread and threat of online violent extremist content is increasing.** Thus, understanding of both the content of violent extremist activity online and its effects on local communities in the region needs to be increased. Moreover, how prominent events in neighbouring countries, such as the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, influence online extremist communities should be better monitored and understood as part of a wider effort to increase both online and offline community resilience to violent extremism.
3. **Engaging youth is critical to the prevention of violent extremism.** Youth inclusion is fundamental to the sustainability of prevention efforts. This involves, inter alia, ensuring young people are not just the beneficiaries of P/CVE efforts, but are involved in the design and delivery of these locally-led efforts across the region.
4. **Rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of violent extremist offenders and returnees from conflict zones will remain an issue in the coming years.** R&R is a pressing challenge for the Maldives in particular, though the recent advances of the Taliban in Afghanistan and other violent extremist groups means that R&R will likely be a key challenge for cities across the region in the coming years.
5. **Multi-actor coordination is key and cities in the region need the mandate and resources to support and coordinate local actors in a “whole-of-society” approach to prevention.** More should be done to empower and elevate the voices and perspectives of cities and local leaders as central parts of a “whole-of-society” approach to P/CVE across the region.

A region-wide assessment of the threat landscape

The South Asia Summit opened with a region-wide assessment of the violent extremism threat landscape and what more can be done to support cities to address these threats. It was noted how, over the past five years, the threats in the region have become more diverse, multifaceted, and



regional in nature, necessitating renewed understanding of how these issues manifest across national borders, in local communities, and from one local context to another.

Discussions highlighted the enduring influence of ISIS- and Al-Qaeda-inspired violent extremist movements and ideologies and the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These trends heighten regional instability which extremists can exploit and there are indications that individuals from across the region are inspired by these advances to join the ranks of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and ISIS-inspired offshoots. This environment, participants cautioned, could reinforce the justification for more centralised, securitised responses to the violent extremist threat. This also risks undermining the political will for preventative approaches, where cities and other local actors have comparative advantages given their understanding of local communities and contexts.

Speakers also noted how democratic decline and a shrinking civic space has become a trigger point for extremism, hate and polarisation. Throughout the Summit, speakers noted cases where top-down and reactionary policies have exacerbated social divides and undermined efforts to address hate and polarisation at the local level. This has included exploiting ethnic and religious differences for political gain and arresting civil society actors and otherwise preventing them from exercising their freedom of speech. Discussions also highlighted how secular democratic values are also the target of non-state actors who are fuelling intolerance against minorities, the empowerment of women and progressive values.

The online threat

Buttressing the extremist threat in the region is the rapid expansion of online extremist content, particularly against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is not sufficiently monitored or understood. Participants highlighted how social media platforms are being used as vehicles for radicalisation and propaganda, and where sentiment and support for regional extremist trends are playing out in local contexts. Discussions on the online threat emphasised the need to better understand platform migration, interlinking extremist narratives and how hate and extremist speech and content online are being shared with such agility. The role that multilateral organisations engaged in the region can play in helping cities and other local actors understand how events in one part of the region can inspire hateful, divisive and extremist content online in different local contexts, was also highlighted. Critically, it was emphasised that local actors need be supported to bridge their understanding of extremism in their communities with extremist content and trends online and that this is an area in which governments, technology companies and multilateral organisations can support cities and other local actors.

The challenges posed by foreign terrorist fighters, including rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R)

Participants pointed to some of the challenges the Maldivian government faces as it seeks to repatriate its nationals (among the highest per capita of any country) who travelled to fight in Syria and Iraq, including women and children. The large number of returnees has had significant implications for managing the repatriation and R&R process, including the risks of prison radicalisation for those who are successfully prosecuted, as well as how to address the negative perception towards returnees and families as they are received back into local communities. Discussions highlighted the lack of infrastructure for R&R and the dearth of disengagement or de-radicalisation programmes for returnees. It was highlighted how, as in [other regions](#), the burden of rehabilitation and reintegration often falls on cities and local communities in the Maldives. As such, participants noted the need for more support to be given to cities and other local actors so they can develop and implement effective programs in this area. It was also highlighted how the repatriation



and R&R of foreign fighters is an issue that will likely continue to affect the wider region if foreign nationals are inspired to join the Taliban and other extremist groups in Afghanistan.

Including young people in locally-led P/CVE efforts

The Summit underscored the importance of including young people, both as beneficiaries of, and leaders in, locally-led P/CVE efforts. It was noted how young people in the region are often the most vulnerable to the effects of socio-economic marginalisation, social polarisation and violent extremism. Participants also highlighted how extremist organisations are effective at leveraging the vulnerabilities of young people in order to persuade them to join and support their ideologies. Discussions stressed how one of the most important contributors to ensuring a local population is resilient to violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation is the authentic inclusion of young people into decision-making processes at the community level on how to address these issues. Participants underlined how civil society organisations and multilateral bodies such as GCERF have been particularly active in engaging young people in the region on these issues, recognising that their involvement is critical for the sustainability of locally-led P/CVE efforts.

The role of civil society in a whole-of-society approach to P/CVE efforts

Discussions highlighted some of the activities that civil society organisations from across the region are engaged in as part of a “whole-of-society” approach to P/CVE efforts. This includes [SMART](#) in India, which use community-based radios to build social cohesion, empower, connect and increase the resilience of youth, women and other marginalised groups; [DNet](#) in Bangladesh, which works with schools, parents and teachers to enhance digital citizenship, engagement and provide psychosocial support to young people; the [Maldives Institute for Psychological Services, Training & Research \(MIPSTAR\)](#) who work with community leaders, parents, teachers, prisons and other local actors to identify early warning signs of extremism and how to support students where needed, and; the [National Peace Council in Sri Lanka](#) which works to connect inter religious groups with local police and governments to advocate for peace and conflict transformation in Sri Lanka.

Multistakeholder mechanisms for prevention

The International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ) provided an overview of its new training curriculum for [Developing Multi-Actor P/CVE Intervention Programmes](#) which participants emphasised could be used to facilitate the development of tailored, local multistakeholder coordination platforms and programmes for prevention. Speakers shared examples of such initiatives in Kenya and North Macedonia, as well as lessons learned that could be applied to South Asian contexts. They highlighted how these mechanisms are integrated into local and national strategies for countering violent extremism, which is critical to their sustainability, and how they bring together local actors such as civil society, the police, the private sector and religious leaders and connect them with relevant local government bodies who deal with P/CVE issues. Conversations highlighted a number of challenges and good practice, some of which spoke to overcoming trust deficits among local actors, and between local actors and government authorities, through providing a space to coordinate, share and learn from one another. Another common challenge noted related to managing resource shortages at the local level. The Isiolo County government in Kenya, for example, provides office spaces for local action teams and non-governmental organisations to deliver workshops and training, as a way to offset some of the costs associated with local coordination. Also raised was the challenge, and sometimes hesitancy, of integrating P/CVE into the existing work of local actors, due to the stigma that P/CVE may have in local communities, as well as preoccupation with other, more pressing issues. Participants noted that these issues in South Asia include poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, marginalisation, and ethnic and religious divides. Given the more pressing issues and limited resources, as well as the above-mentioned stigma, there is an



opportunity to integrate P/CVE efforts into broader, existing, multi-stakeholder, social programming at the local level.

Looking forward

In line with recommendations that emerged from a meeting with [member cities to revitalise the SCN International Steering Committee](#) held in September 2021, the network is looking to launch regional hubs in key regions where it is active, including South Asia. The regional hubs will drive forward further cooperation, engagement and knowledge transfer among cities in the region, and critically, promote the voices and perspectives of cities and local actors, not only upwards to national governments, but globally as a network.

If you would like to find out more about this, or about the Network in South Asia, you can reach us at info@strongcitiesnetwork.org.

Acknowledgements

The SCN management unit would like to thank all panellists and participants engaged throughout the South Asia Summit. The agenda and full list of panellists for the South Asia Summit can be viewed [here](#).

Resources

[Community Resilience Study: Kumanovo, North Macedonia](#) (2021), *Strong Cities Network*.

[Developing and Implementing Local Action Plans for P/CVE in East Africa: SCN Toolkit with lessons from Kenya](#) (2021), *Strong Cities Network*.

[IJJ Training Curriculum Facilitator's Guide: Developing Multi-Actor P/CVE Intervention Programmes – Implementing a Whole-of-Society, 'Do No Harm' Approach](#) (2021), *International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law*.

[Multi-Agency Models for Preventing Violent Extremism: A Guidebook for Bangladesh](#) (2021), *Strong Cities Network*.

[Online Extremism in Bangladesh: Challenges and Ways Forward](#) (2021), *Strong Cities Network*. The Bengali version can be found [here](#).

[Why Do Cities Matter? 10 Steps That Cities Can Take to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#) (2021), *Strong Cities Network*.