



# Together for Safety

## Online Talks 2022

### Key Findings



# Background

Together for Safety is a series of online talks co-produced by Nordic Safe Cities and the Strong Cities Network. First launched in 2021, Together for Safety aims to inspire national and local leaders, professionals, and youth with new ideas to take action in their communities against pressing safety and security threats, while safeguarding human rights.

At a time when democratic values, pluralism and human rights are under significant pressure, it is most important to share knowledge and experiences across cities to constantly be at the forefront of tackling rising hate, polarisation, and extremism globally.

The 2022 Together for Safety Talks, held in March and April, examined two related issues: Safeguarding Local Democracies, with a focus on protecting cities and communities from harmful online and offline hate-speech and electoral interference; and Safe City Governance and Regional Alliances, with a focus on steps cities can take to promote and strengthen partnerships at the local, national, regional, and global levels.



**Safeguarding Local Democracies: Countering Foreign Interference and Online Misinformation**

17 March 2022



**Safe City Governance: The Role of Networks and Alliances**

7 April 2022

# 9 Key Takeaways from the 2022 Together for Safety Talks

## **1** Mapping of local contexts is critical for effective prevention efforts

Before any work can begin, it is crucial to map the situation on the ground. This includes analysing the local extremism landscape, as well as understanding local prevention-related needs and outlooks by consulting with local stakeholders. Since the most effective prevention approaches are those that respond directly to local needs, subsequent project planning needs to be grounded in this initial diagnosis. Once implementation has begun, it is important that projects are able to adapt to changing circumstances as new information emerges. For the network's internal transparency and cohesion, it is crucial that whenever changes are being made, they are communicated clearly to all members.

## **Cities can counter disinformation campaigns by building trust and resilience among local populations**

**2**

With new tools continually being developed to amplify online messages, disinformation has now become a major tool used by actors across the political spectrum. City-level initiatives have an important role to play in mitigating the impacts of these disinformation campaigns even before they even start. Two ways in which this can be achieved is by building trust as well as resilience within local communities. Trust proves crucial when disinformation campaigns seek to discredit local entities by sowing doubt about their activities. It is therefore imperative that local governments and policymakers nurture that trust by ensuring openness and transparency in all of their activities, as well as by engaging in dialogue with members of civil society and remaining open to criticism. In turn, resilience-building requires teaching critical thinking skills and media literacy to all age ranges, not only youth, which will aid in equipping communities to better recognise and become more resilient to disinformation. It is crucial that those campaigns are tailored to the needs of local contexts, taking into account both levels of media literacy and the main sources of disinformation. Cities can further foster resilience by supporting the work of civil society organisations and independent local media which seek to counter disinformation.

# 3

## **Inclusion is key to strengthening local democracies**

Cities and local authorities are well-positioned to experiment with innovative solutions for encouraging participatory democracy. By including social groups from all strata into discussions, debates and assemblies, cities can create spaces for citizens to obtain reliable information, express their opinions freely, and exchange views on matters related to local governance and beyond. Regardless of form, when designing such initiatives, particular emphasis needs to be given to the inclusion of minority and historically marginalized communities. It is these communities which most often report the lowest levels of trust in authorities and who are among the most prone to the effects of disinformation campaigns. This means that improving representation, designing projects to foster social integration of these communities, and including them in local government decision-making is critical for fostering stable and sustainable local democracies. As suggested during the online Talks, this can take the form of councils or commissions composed of representatives who can advocate on behalf of particular communities.

## **Digital technology can be used by cities and practitioners to strengthen local democracies**

# 4

The exponential speed with which disinformation, hate speech and fake news spreads in the online space makes the internet an inherently challenging space for municipal authorities to navigate and regulate. Yet, local actors can harness these same digital technologies as tools for making their democracies stronger and more resilient. With democratic conversations moving online, interventions that educate residents on how to engage with the digital space can have a significant impact on social cohesion. Local authorities can also harness technologies to engage with citizens directly, identify local needs, priorities and gaps in government activities, and build trusted connections with marginalised communities.

**5**

## **Networks create a unique space to harness expertise from different professional areas in prevention work**

By establishing links between practitioners from various areas of prevention work, networks are uniquely positioned to facilitate the sharing of experience, evidence, good practices and lessons learned within the field. As emphasised during the online Talks, networks can serve as the connective tissue between different layers of society and help build the solid foundations necessary to deliver P/CVE projects effectively. Working together, actors can design and implement projects that may have been beyond the capacity or reach of one acting alone. It allows organisations to collectively build on the strengths of each other's work (e.g., harnessing the community trust enjoyed by religious organisations or the subject-matter expertise of security agencies). Working through networks also has the potential to broaden the geographic reach and sustainability of prevention interventions.

## **Identifying common goals and parameters is critical when collaborating within a network**

**6**

A common challenge for implementing prevention projects through networks is coordinating the various stakeholders involved. The more actors working together, the more difficult it can be to build consensus around priorities, as well as the form and scope of interventions. Disagreements can delay or derail these efforts or else lead to the domination of networks by bigger actors, with smaller organisations feeling excluded from decision-making processes or imposed upon. To alleviate these issues, it is important to develop a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish from the outset a shared vision as well as clearly articulate roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders. When drafting an MoU, members should remain flexible, be willing to adapt to the specificities of the particular network, stay attuned to members' specific areas of concern, and remain open to revising the adopted strategy throughout.

# 7

## **Networks should strive to retain autonomy of mission and vision**

A significant challenge for networks is retaining independence over their projects and the direction of work while being dependent on donor funding. Panellists noted that donors will often have their own expectations regarding the form, direction and delivery of programmes they are funding. At times this may run contrary to the network's vision. Clearly articulating the network's mission and vision to donors at the outset of a grant or project is crucial to ensuring the network can deliver its project in line with what they have communicated to partners and the communities they work with. If not, the network risks losing trust on the ground, which can significantly derail project delivery and sustainability. While challenging, networks should, where possible, work to diversify their sources of funding in order to help retain autonomy.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic presented both new challenges and opportunities**

# 8

During COVID-19, there was an accelerated shift by extremists to a predominantly online approach, increasing their use of forums and social media to spread their message. This necessitated a parallel strategic shift by local prevention actors, finding new ways of working and staying connected, and identifying and developing new digital tools and solutions. The impact of this shift to a more virtual, digital, and connected world is still emerging, and networks and practitioners should remain open to new opportunities.

# 9

## International knowledge-sharing can significantly increase the effectiveness of P/CVE work

With extremist content and activity moving across national borders with more ease than ever before, cities and networks are increasingly facing many of the same challenges, regardless of the geographical context. It is therefore crucial for cities and local actors to be able to exchange experiences, good practices, lessons, and challenges internationally. Whether in the form of webinars, conferences or exchanges, facilitating this sharing can provide crucial expertise and support to local authorities who are new to tackling extremism as well as building common awareness of the extremism landscape globally.

### Further Reading

- [Building Local Alliances in the Nordics: Safer Cities Norway](#) Nordic Safe Cities (2020)
- [Creating Safe Digital Cities – A Nordic Approach](#). Nordic Safe Cities (2022)
- [Promoting Democracy and Security in Africa: Don't Forget Cities](#) Soufan Centre. Daniel Hooton, Eric Rosand (2022)
- [Why Do Cities Matter? 10 Steps That Cities Can Take to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#) Strong Cities Network (2021)
- [Why Local Networks are Key to Preventing Extremism and Hate](#) Strong Cities Network (2022)

# With thanks to

- **Jeppe Albers**, Executive Director, Nordic Safe Cities
- **Laila Bokhari**, Former Deputy Minister with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Secretary to the Prime Minister of Norway
- **Lotte Fast Carlsen**, Deputy Director, Nordic Safe Cities
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- **Andjelija Lucic**, Deputy Executive Director, Forum MNE, Montenegro
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- **Rehema Zaid Obuyi**, Researcher, Integrated Initiatives for Community Empowerment, Kenya
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