



SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL HUB INAUGURAL WORKSHOP

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

31 January – 1 February 2023



Above: Mayors and local government officials from across the region were joined in Dubai by national government and civil society partners to examine the role of local governments in building prevention and resilience approaches and inform the priorities of Strong Cities' newly-launched South Asia Regional Hub.

Overview

On 31 January and 1 February 2023, the Strong Cities Network convened more than 40 mayors, local government officials, national government representatives and civil society partners from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to discuss the role local governments can play in preventing extremism, hate and polarisation. With support from the United States and the European Union, the inaugural workshop of the newly-launched Strong Cities [South Asia Regional Hub](#) helped identify the challenges and opportunities for catalysing more involvement from local governments in addressing threats that have traditionally been seen as falling within the exclusive purview of national governments and security actors in particular. Many South Asian local government leaders shared that this was the first time they had met and discussed these issues with counterparts at either regional or domestic levels.

Participants discussed several key themes that should inform the hub's work going forward. These include: the role of mayors and other local leaders in prevention and response; the need to enhance cooperation between national and local actors; building trust between local government and women, youth and marginalised groups; leveraging existing regional and multilateral prevention efforts to draw more attention to the comparative advantages that cities and other local governments offer in



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this field; and identifying the training, technical support and other capacity-building needs of specific local government stakeholders.

Participants heard from a range of partners across South Asia about some of the successes and good practices for local government-led prevention, as well as the challenges, barriers and learnings that need to be addressed. Discussions informed the strategic priorities and next steps for the South Asia Regional Hub, which is expanding engagement with local governments across the region through its “help desk”, technical support fund and upcoming workshops, dialogues and trainings. Discussions highlighted the need to share promising practices from local governments on these issues and how Strong Cities should not only support further regional learning but also elevate the voice of South Asian cities and local governments at global and multilateral levels.

Key Recommendations

Participants recommended a number of priorities for the Regional Hub to pursue over the coming months, including:

1. Supporting mayors and local leaders to better understand and develop their role in preventing and responding to extremism and hate-motivated violence and rising polarisation through training, dialogues and sharing approaches from elsewhere including on:
 - a. Sensitising cities to the prevention agenda as it applies to extremism, hate and polarisation and how to contribute at local levels through a lens of peacebuilding, community cohesion and resilience given political and security sensitivities;
 - b. Developing local strategic frameworks and action plans that provide a mandate for and elaborate the roles of a local government, how it works with other stakeholders, the challenges it seeks to address and the approaches and activities it can adopt;
 - c. Accessing, understanding and developing local data, including on demographics and ethnic makeup, local grievances and which groups have specific vulnerabilities. This includes but is not limited to improved two-way information sharing with police;
 - d. Engaging with youth, women and marginalised groups in their communities to build trust, reduce religious, ethnic and inter-communal tensions and develop a voice for these groups in shaping local policy. This includes identifying and tackling the multiple barriers to access such as the bureaucratisation of local government systems;
 - e. Identifying and harnessing existing local resources, services and functions which can incorporate/contribute to a prevention role and, whenever possible, advancing efforts to mainstream extremism and hate prevention rather than creating a new standalone (and potentially redundant) mechanism.
2. Strengthening National-Local Cooperation (NLC) by facilitating country-level dialogues between key national government ministries/agencies and city mayors/leaders, as well as civil society. Participants also discussed the need to leverage the mid-tier of government such as provincial or state-level officials, who can serve to bridge the gap between national/federal government and city/district mayors. These stakeholders frequently also have existing responsibility for relevant





policy areas such as education and often hold stronger relationships with police and other security units.

3. Sharing good practices and learnings across the region on local government efforts to engage and empower their young residents, women and marginalised groups so that local policy is developed in a participatory way and the unique roles of some of these stakeholders can be fully realised. Where possible, activities should be regional and advance peer-learning, identifying good practices that can be adopted and tailored to the needs/context of different cities across South Asia.
4. Supporting the development of local government-led multi-actor prevention frameworks and approaches with the aim of operationalising an inter-disciplinary, whole-of-society, approach to prevention that harnesses the skills, roles and engagement of different local services, departments and stakeholders. With little regional precedent for such local mechanisms specific to preventing extremism, hate and polarisation, efforts should be made to identify and implement learnings from related public health or disaster response fields where the operational framework is similarly multi-actor.
5. Developing cooperation with relevant UN agencies, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Commonwealth Secretariat, and other relevant regional and multilateral partners to (a) include cities and local governments in existing frameworks for addressing extremism, hate and polarisation; and (b) facilitate the integration of the hate and extremism prevention agenda into broader resilience, urban development, youth empowerment and good governance efforts.

Opening Session



Daniel Hooton, Strong Cities Director of Global Engagement, outlined the importance of engaging cities and local governments on addressing the challenges of extremism, hate and polarisation. With participants convening just 48 hours after a devastating attack on a mosque in Peshawar (Pakistan), he emphasised that local governments often bear the brunt of extremist violence and related challenges and their role in contributing to prevention and response efforts is typically overlooked. This, despite their comparative advantages, which include proximity to and understanding of local community issues as well as their role in delivering multiple public services and community engagement functions. He shared how traditionally securitised and national government-led approaches are not benefitting from the prevention potential of local governments. He outlined Strong Cities' goal of advancing this agenda at both global and regional levels, including through the recent launch of the Regional Hub in support of cities across South Asia.



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Chelsea Cohen, representing the U.S. Department of State, spoke of the need to advance whole-of-society prevention approaches that involve religious actors, educators, mental health professionals and social workers. She pointed to the evolution of the global threat landscape, highlighting issues like the repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters and their families, as well as the need to address the mainstreaming of disinformation and hate speech, including around issues like migration and government responses to COVID-19. She emphasized how just as cities are hubs of local services, activities and community engagements, so too can they be vital incubators for innovative solutions, with mayors and their communities needing support to fully leverage their prevention role.

Gulmina Bilal Ahmad, Head of the South Asia Regional Hub, welcomed the opportunities brought by the Regional Hub to advance networking and shared learning between cities and local governments on a regional level. She underlined that several participants had never met to discuss local government roles on preventing these challenges at a domestic level, let alone in the spirit of regional cooperation and shared learnings. She addressed the Regional Hub's objective of giving cities and local governments a voice at the decision-making table, allowing them to reach beyond an administrative function and leverage their potential as valuable prevention partners on the policy and programming fronts.

Local Leadership in South Asia

A panel of mayors and local leaders from across the region discussed the needs of and opportunities for involving their cities in prevention, acknowledging the realities of both the threat landscape and the current lack of mandate that most local governments have on these issues.

Himayat Ullah Mayar, the Mayor of Mardan (Pakistan), underlined the expanded functions of local government in Pakistan, but emphasized the need for local mandates for prevention. Despite the lack of explicit mandates, he noted that there are a number of examples where local governments or leaders have contributed to addressing complex crises, which could help inform the development of local prevention mandates. Examples cited include district level "peace committees" and local government contributions to help settle 1.5 million internally displaced people fleeing the border regions suffering an overspill of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Hemanthi Goonasekera, Chief Executive Officer of the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities, shared her organisation's efforts to support local government capacities on a range of issues in Sri Lanka, as well as to provide training directly to newly elected councillors who otherwise have little orientation and support when assuming office. She emphasised the general lack of understanding around community demographics and ethnic composition at municipal and local levels in Sri Lanka. This means elected leaders rarely understand the level of vulnerability or potential escalation of hate and violence their communities face. It is important, she argued, for data to be complemented by a better understanding of how the marginalisation of some groups influenced community vulnerability and could lead to extremism and related challenges. Nonetheless, local governments have a duty for citizen wellbeing, which should frame their potential role in prevention





as they seek to work with partners to build a mandate. There were also good practices at local levels that need to be shared and could be tailored to other cities both domestically and regionally, such as the [USAID-supported Community Response Mechanism for reconciliation activities](#).

Mohammed Zobaier, Mayor of Satkania (Bangladesh) shared that although important improvements have been made since the 2016 Holey Artisan attack in Dhaka, especially those led by the Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU), prevention efforts at local levels were still lacking. In particular, he outlined the need to support women's leadership in local government on these issues, as well as to leverage the existing mandates of regional-level committees such as law and order committees, which bring together police and local government officials as well as other partners.

Ali Nizar, Mayor of Addu City (Maldives), also outlined the need to harness and work with existing infrastructure in the Maldives, such as women's development committees, which comprise 12fo elected female councillors at the city level. He also underlined the appetite for learning lessons from elsewhere across the region given that the local government system in Maldives is comparatively new, with local elections introduced in 2010.

Rajeev Sansanwal, Councillor from New Delhi Municipal Corporation (India) underlined how Delhi was like a microcosm of the country, in which the various national divides, risks and challenges were all felt at the local level. He outlined the two prominent concerns of growing communalism and rising hate speech, emphasising the need for greater support to address inter-communal violence at rallies and riots as well as the need for more educational and awareness-raising initiatives focused on digital literacy in the face of a wave of online disinformation.

Participants highlighted the similarities across the region in terms of local government structures and welcomed the opportunity to learn about key mechanisms and good practices that could be adapted to their own contexts. There was consensus around the need to improve dialogue with national government and police partners and that successful approaches would require local governments to be inclusive and promote the participation of marginalised groups, especially youth and women.



Mapping Local Needs Across South Asia

Dr Anika Ahmed, South Asia Regional Hub Programmes Lead, and Charlotte Moeyens, Strong Cities Senior Manager, then presented the preliminary findings and recommendations of an ongoing local needs' assessment designed to inform the priorities of the Regional Hub. The report's recommendations centred on three priorities:

- **Better Responses: Inclusion, Institutionalisation, Integration**
This recommendation includes the need to harness existing mechanisms relevant to prevention, including those led by civil society organisations (CSOs), develop access to data including through better police-local government dialogue, and develop institutionalised local government efforts that are participatory and informed by good practices from elsewhere.
- **Empowered Cities and Local Governments: Awareness, Capacities, Resources**
This recommendation focuses on the need to support the role of mayors and local leaders, as well as to provide training and technical support top specific groups of local officials while also mapping and harnessing existing local services and resources so that prevention approaches can be incorporated into existing areas of work rather than established as standalone efforts.
- **Stronger Cooperation at All Levels**
This recommendation outlines the need to expand cooperation on three levels: national-local, local-local and multi-stakeholder so that cities are engaging vertically with national counterparts as with their local government peers across the region and will multiple relevant local-level stakeholders.



Ms. Bilal outlined the outreach, help desk, technical support fund and convening functions of the Regional Hub that will be directed at the needs identified by the mapping and the priorities raised through the inaugural workshop. Participants then discussed the five thematic/strategic “pillars” for the Regional Hub: (1) peer learning between cities; (2) capacity-building; (3) national-local, local-local and multi-actor cooperation; (4) elevating local voices; (5) youth-local government engagement.

Pillar 1: Peer Learning

Participants shared how the Regional Hub could expand the learning opportunities for city and local government stakeholders across the region. They agreed that existing fora such as SAARC and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) could be better leveraged for disseminating local lessons on prevention. Discussion focused on the different needs for mayors and local leaders as one stakeholder group and local officials, administrators, departmental leads and other local practitioners

as a second group. Mayoral dialogues, both in-person and online, were encouraged, with a focus on sharing experiences of establishing a mandate and local prevention framework as a first step. Participants also wanted more opportunity to understand how cities elsewhere, including outside of the region, have identified existing resources and capacities relevant to prevention, especially in the context of administrative, service delivery-oriented cities that already face resource challenges. Participants also voiced a need for more sharing and peer learning among local leaders on building participatory approaches and community outreach with marginalised groups. In this regard, there was interest in the learnings from Sri Lanka, in particular the roll-out of “[citizen charters](#)”.



For the practitioner cohort, youth engagement and accessibility to local government systems, including successes from cities that have established effective youth parliaments, was discussed. Participants also agreed on the overall need for local government officials to gain a greater understanding of existing national counterterrorism and P/CVE and other relevant strategies and approaches

as well as how to better engage with police at local levels. They emphasised that it would be helpful to hear from other cities on how they had identified, implemented and coordinated different prevention-related roles and responsibilities across the local government administration.

Pillar 2: Capacity-Building

Discussion focused on identifying which stakeholders the Regional Hub should prioritise for capacity-building support and what form this should take. There was agreement that local-level social workers, women, youth and local private sector stakeholders are critical target groups with which cities and local governments need to develop their cooperation. Examples like capacity-building support for women’s committees in Maldives and female councillors in Bangladesh, youth support workers in Sri Lanka, and business development focal points in local governments in India and Pakistan were all discussed as potential beneficiaries of Regional Hub support.



Youth leaders and activists were discussed as an important target group across the region. In particular, participants voiced the need to improve the digital literacy skills of young people, with potential opportunities for collaborations with local governments designed to raise awareness of disinformation and tackle online hate before it manifests offline in communities. Working with schools, colleges and universities was raised as an important vehicle for scaling training

and curricula, as was coordinating with the relevant provincial, state or other local government to deliver structured training. It was also discussed how training and capacity-building support on all such areas needs to engage directly with administrative leads in local governments to ensure continuity and sustainability when there is a change of local leadership.

Pillar 3: National-Local; Local-Local and Multi-Actor Cooperation



Recognising the limited awareness and understanding local governments have of national strategy and action planning processes across the region in issues related to preventing extremism, hate and polarisation, this session began with presentations on national approaches in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Niaz Ahmed Siddiki discussed how Pakistan’s National Counter Terrorism Authority

(NACTA), which he advises, had developed its approach in response to the evolved threat landscape. Involving local government, he said, had not been at the top of the list when it came to developing immediate security responses to fast-changing threats, but it was increasingly recognised as an important priority for developing a relationship between local communities and counterterrorism agencies. In particular, he pointed to his own experience as former Inspector General of Police in Pakistan to underline the importance of coordination and working-level relationships between local governments and police in order to share understandings of the threat landscapes and local risks. Md. Asaduzzaman, who leads Bangladesh’s CTTCU at Dhaka Metropolitan Police, relayed the importance of regular liaison between district police commanders and local mayors, noting that this had been important to peace and security enjoyed in the years since the Holey Artisan attack. He noted the importance of local government engagement for Strong Cities and other partners in Sylhet, Gazipur, Comilla, Cox’s Bazaar, Chittagong, Narayanganj, Bogra and wider Rajshahi Division in particular. Both speakers highlighted the opportunities to be gained from implementing the [Global Counterterrorism Forum Good Practices for NLC](#) and learning from experiences elsewhere in order to strengthen vertical coordination in South Asian contexts.

Participants noted how improving NLC would be important not just for national strategies to be operationalised locally but for local understandings and practices to inform the approaches that central governments take to these issues. In enhancing horizontal cooperation between different cities, participants discussed how this should be done at both regional and country levels to maximise learnings and share experiences and that multi-stakeholder coordination needed to draw inspiration from other sectors, in particular public health and disaster/emergency responses where there were both successes and failures that could be learnt from. At all levels, participants felt the focus should include trust building, information sharing, transparency and good governance.

Pillar 4: Elevating Local Voices

Participants discussed how the Regional Hub can better elevate local voices and ensure their inclusion in national, regional and multilateral policymaking. Hemanthi Goonasekera, CEO of the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities, emphasised the importance of networks in building the profile of local leaders and gaining them a seat at high-level decision-making tables. She underlined that mayors and local leaders need training to understand how to engage with different international institutions and that while it was important to gain the seat at the table, they needed to do so equipped to accurately and persuasively represent the needs of their communities. Consultation at the community level is therefore essential, she noted, while local political leaders also needed the support of networks and other partners to develop their confidence and capabilities to negotiate effectively and win results. Shafquat Haider of SAARC said it was an important body for uniting the region and noted that it would be important to develop cooperation at the Secretariat level with a view to opening conversations around prevention. Addressing the need to elevate local youth voices,



Ashok Krishnan of India's Blue Ribbon Movement Trust outlined [youth-led efforts that improve accessibility to local government services](#) in Mumbai, in particular through the development of a mobile app with a simple user interface. He reiterated the need to develop learnings and good practices on accessibility as a first step in promoting including youth voices in policymaking at local, national and regional levels.

Pillar V: Youth-Local Government Engagement

Participants underlined that the development of youth-led, shared solutions to extremism and related challenges centred on measures to reduce young people's feelings of detachment from and distrust of local government institutions. With this in mind, discussions focused on identifying the key gaps in building better engagement between local governments and young residents. Participants discussed the potential for setting a quota of youth seats in local councils, in much the same way that this is done for women and minority groups in several countries' local government systems. Discussions also covered the need to develop a greater focus on digital literacy (for all ages) when reviewing or beginning a new prevention strategy, since there was widespread consensus on the particular risks posed to young people by online disinformation and hate content. Participants discussed how it is common for national and local governments to develop strategies for youth that have little or no involvement from or consultation with youth themselves and that this only served to widen the gap and undermine efforts to build trust. Training and other support was needed not only for young people themselves, but also for those within local government responsible for engagement with young people.



Coordination with the Existing Multilateral Prevention Architecture in South Asia

With multiple multilateral actors already engaged on preventing extremism and related challenges across the region, participants emphasised the need to ensure coordination and complementarity between the Hub and these partners to ensure that local government voices are connected to processes already underway at national, regional or civil society levels.

Anna Sherburn, from the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Countering Violent Extremism Unit, discussed Commonwealth engagement in Male and Addu (Maldives), which focused on sports activities to build resilience among young people and explained previous engagement in Bangladesh where the need to support young people in navigating the complexities of identity had been important. She noted that although some countries had developed national action plans, they are in many cases still missing the “action” piece of the puzzle and that city and local government engagement was key to this. There were important differences to acknowledge in the needs of urban centres as opposed to smaller rural areas, she stressed. Participants also emphasised the importance of connecting the dots among different civil society-led prevention efforts and the role that local governments, if properly mandated and resourced, could play in both facilitating and sustaining those connections.

Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss these international efforts and emphasised the need to make sure that UN bodies and wider development partners such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank were also incorporated into the Regional Hub’s approach to partnership-building. Discussion focused on the need to ensure coordination was taking place at both political and practitioner levels and Strong Cities’ partnerships ought to reflect this joint approach.

Building Local Multi-Actor Mechanisms



In the final session before participants moved to wider feedback and next steps, discussions focused on sharing learnings on building and implementing local prevention mechanisms with a whole-of-society approach in mind. Underlining the need to address

sectarian divisions, Zahoor Buledi, a member of the Baluchistan Provisional Assembly in Pakistan, spoke about the consultative role of district Nazims. He noted the need to engage with ethics committees at a provincial level which include chief ministers as well as security personnel. This, he continued, can lead to greater coordination and information sharing between police and local governments, as several participants had called for throughout the workshop. This was a point echoed by Eunus Bhuiyan, an Upazila councillor from Comilla (Bangladesh), who noted the local law enforcement and terrorism committees which include district commissioners and police chiefs. Lubanshi Jain from India’s Aam Aadmi Party, developed this point further, pointing to the specific need



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for such cooperation around rallies and protest which have frequently descended into inter-communal violence. Mazeena Bucher, a councillor from Moratowa (Sri Lanka) shared that the district development council there includes a violence prevention mandate and meets monthly. Among its 48 members are local government officials, community leaders and medical professionals as well as police. Mohammad Saif a councillor in Male (Maldives), shared that an attack targeting the speaker of parliament in May 2021 had awoken many of his colleagues to the threat posed by domestic terrorism and arguably had greater impact in terms of mobilising partners on the prevention agenda than the repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters and their families. He said that there was an important opportunity in the recent granting to local governments responsibilities for mosques and parks. This, he said, opened up a fresh window for community engagement and outreach. Throughout this session, participants noted that a multi-stakeholder and inter-disciplinary approach is essential for effective prevention, particularly given the inter-connected challenges of organised crime, addiction, unemployment and marginalisation.



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