

Event Report

## East and Southern Africa Regional Hub Strategic Engagements in Burundi: Role of Local Governments in Prevention of Extremism, Hate and Polarisation

A Strong Cities Country Engagement  
Bujumbura, Burundi

17-18 April 2023



### Summary

On 17-18 April 2023, as part of its ongoing outreach to local governments and other key stakeholders in East and Southern Africa (ESA), the [Strong Cities](#) ESA Regional Hub, which is hosted by the [East Africa Local Government Association](#) (EALGA), met with representatives from a range of national and local government institutions in Bujumbura, Burundi, and held a roundtable on *The Role of Local Governments in Prevention and Response to Extremism, Hate and Polarisation*. Financed by the European Union (EU) under the auspices of [STRIVE Cities](#), it brought together more than 20 city leaders, including mayors and local administrators, from twelve communes across Burundi, including Bukemba, Gitega, Kayanza, Makamba, Mukaza, Muramya, Muyinga, Ngozi, Nyabihanga, Rumonge, Rutana and Ruyigi. Representatives from the [Burundi Association of Municipalities](#) (ACO Burundi) were also present.

The roundtable was a first-of-its-kind convening of city leaders in Burundi specifically on the topic of the prevention of hate, polarisation and violent extremism. It is one in a series of



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such engagements that the Regional Hub is hosting across ESA to identify city needs and opportunities for collaboration with and between local governments, as part of its mission to enhance city-led prevention and mayoral leadership against hate, polarisation and extremism. It builds on the Regional Hub's [inaugural workshop](#), which was held in Kenya in October 2022 and brought together over 60 representatives from across ESA to introduce the Regional Hub, its mandate and pillars.

Throughout the programme, city leaders acknowledged the importance of placing prevention at the heart of their city's development agenda, particularly in the context of the country's history with inter-ethnic violence. The Chair of ACO Burundi underscored the importance of supporting Burundian cities with tools to do so, identifying Strong Cities as an important platform to give Burundian cities the opportunity "to learn but also to share our experience with other countries from across the region".

The following themes emerged out of the panel discussions and breakout group sessions that took place:

1. **Mayoral Leadership:** Mayors and other city administrators across Burundi are driving policies and programmes that promote inclusivity and recognise the role of local governments in conflict prevention. However, while there is a clear understanding at the local leadership level of the impacts of hate and extremism, particularly in the context of Burundi's history of inter-ethnic violence, there is limited awareness of the concrete role of mayors in preventing and responding to hate- and extremist-motivated violence specifically.
2. **Enhanced City-Led Prevention:** Cities across the country need capacity-building and more regular opportunities for city-city learning to equip them with the confidence and tools to leverage existing and/or develop new local infrastructure, processes and networks to prevent and respond to threats of hate and extremism, as well as learn from other successful initiatives and practices from the country and region more broadly.
3. **National-Local Cooperation (NLC):** Improved and sustained NLC is needed to facilitate information sharing and coordination between local and national governments on issues that have generally been seen as falling within the exclusive purview of the latter, in particular security actors. This underscores the need to bridge the gap between current heavily securitised and centralised approaches to countering violent extremism and hate, and upstream efforts at the local level to prevent these threats from occurring in the first place.

## Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants identified a number of threats and key challenges hindering social cohesion, stability and overall socio-economic development in Burundi, including identity-based politics and historical challenges and sensitivities around inter-ethnic and -communal hate, in particular the challenge of rehabilitating victims of inter-ethnic violence. Discussions further



highlighted how poverty, high levels of unemployment among youth, and an overall lack of economic opportunities provide fertile ground for recruitment by extremist and criminal groups. Participants pointed to the added challenge of rapid urbanisation and poor urban planning, including a lack of integration of urban safety issues with urban design and planning.

“As a country we must confront our past of civil strife and deal with the consequences through reconciliation, reform and reintegration of populations into the fabric of the communes.”

Augustine Minani, Administrator, Rumonge Commune

Participants further agreed that cooperation between local and national government on issues of hate and extremism is limited as a result of a lack of awareness of and appreciation for the role of local governments in addressing threats of violence, hate and extremism. As in most ESA countries, prevention of and response to hate and extremism has predominantly been the mandate of the national government, and its military and other security forces and institutions.

## Key Themes

### 1. Mayoral Leadership:

Mayors and other city administrators across Burundi are driving policies and programmes that promote inclusivity and recognise the role of local governments in conflict prevention. However, while there is a clear understanding at the local leadership level of the impacts of hate and extremism, particularly in the context of Burundi's history of inter-ethnic violence, there is limited awareness of the concrete role of mayors in preventing and responding to hate- and extremist-motivated violence specifically.

Participants agreed that city leaders play an important role in preventing and responding to hate, polarisation and extremism. Recognising that community engagement is core to both developing and implementing effective city-led prevention programmes, participants observed that city leaders play a vital role in creating forums for such engagement and encouraging involvement from local actors. For example, under the leadership of the current Administrator of **Mukaza Commune**, Renovat Sindayihebura, the Commune now has an emergency response plan that stipulates a role for a range of local government and community-based actors in the aftermath of conflict, thus streamlining response efforts and avoiding disjointedness and confusion in a post-conflict environment. The Administrator played a key role in mobilising actors on the ground to help co-develop and raise awareness about this plan.





Community emergency response plans are one of the most important tools a city or community should have in order to effectively respond to threats of crime and violent extremism. **They must however be formulated in a manner that involves all stakeholders, including the community themselves.**

Renovat Sindayihebura, Administrator, Mukaza Commune

Further, the Administrator of **Makamba Commune**, Irakiza Zouena, shared that through engaging local actors, the Commune came to recognise the successes of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that communities have used for generations to solve conflicts and ensure peaceful coexistence. Following this, the Commune has made a concerted effort to collaborate with traditional community mediators to resolve conflict and prevent escalation to violence, including by providing them with training to scale and sustain their mediation efforts.

In addition, under the leadership of Administrator Augustine Minani, **Rumonge Commune** holds annual mediation meetings where residents are invited to raise emerging concerns and identify avenues for mitigating these in collaboration with the local government. The Commune also runs a youth mentorship programme where the administration “holds annual appoints with youth... [where they] are mentored on issues related to community solidarity and social cohesion”.

Finally, participants pointed to the importance of city leaders exemplifying values of tolerance and co-existence through programmes and policies that show an intentionality to ensure the socioeconomic inclusion of all a city’s residents. For example, to address the marginalisation and social exclusion of victims of civil war and certain ethnic groups, the Office of the Administrator of **Kayanza Commune** introduced a programme that specifically supports such groups (for example, the Batwa ethnic group) with obtaining civil status (birth and death registrations, weddings etc). Through providing dedicated resources to supporting underrepresented and marginalised ethnic communities with becoming *Il* in the most practical sense *Il* registered members of society, Administrator Nyanwi Gilbert emphasises his commitment to ensuring the local government he leads serves *all* its residents.

## 2. Enhancing City-Led Prevention

Cities across the country need capacity-building and more regular opportunities for city-city learning to equip them with the confidence and tools to leverage existing and/or develop new local infrastructure, processes and networks to prevent and respond to threats of hate and



extremism, as well as learn from other successful initiatives and practices from the country and region more broadly.

In addition to broad sensitisation to the role of city leaders in preventing hate, polarisation and extremism, participants identified the need for:

- greater access to data to develop city-level understandings of the threat and needs and priorities;
- building local-level prevention capacities so municipalities can adopt more proactive approaches to prevention;
- support community engagement initiatives (in particular among youth) to promote social cohesion; and
- enhance coordination and collaboration among municipalities (city-to-city learning).

In terms of technical capacity building, a key area identified during the workshop is the need for more sharing and learning about how to develop and sustain relationships between local governments and young people, and local governments and other community-based actors, particularly historically underrepresented groups, like women and ethnic minorities.

Participants also highlighted the need for the training specifically on prevention and response to hate and extremism, conflict resolution, and how to build local multi-actor networks to help implement city-led prevention programmes and policies.

For example, while many participants understand that cities face the brunt of hate- and extremist-motivated violence, there was less awareness of the role cities can play to proactively and intentionally mitigate risks of violence in the first place, as well as how to integrate prevention efforts into service delivery and development programmes that cities already deliver. Participants further highlighted the need for mayors and city leaders to understand key drivers of violence and extremism and to have opportunities to learn from other practices for addressing these, including, for example, through promoting sustainable development, youth engagement, gender equality and/or economic growth.

### 3. National-Local Cooperation (NLC)

Improved and sustained NLC is needed to facilitate information sharing and coordination between local and national governments on issues that have generally been seen as falling within the exclusive purview of the latter, in particular security actors. This underscores the need to bridge the gap between current heavily securitised and centralised approaches to countering violent extremism and hate, and upstream efforts at the local level to prevent these threats from occurring in the first place.

Participants discussed Burundi's governance system, noting how, for example, the Mayor of Bujumbura is a direct appointee of the President while other city leaders, such as commune





administrators, are elected but are subject to confirmation by the President, which ultimately creates a situation where there is significant involvement of the national government in municipal matters. Overall, there is little to no devolution of responsibilities to the local level, and the relationship between local governments and the national government is currently very “top-down” in nature, with little opportunities given to local governments to engage the national government on topics of their choosing.

Importantly, participants highlighted the impact of NLC where this has happened. For example, Administrator Irakiza Zouena of **Makamba Commune** shared how her office cooperates with national police to conduct regular community drills that seek to equip the commune’s residents with conflict resolution skills. Further, the above-mentioned civil status programme implemented in **Kayanza Commune** was delivered in partnership with the National Office for Civil Registration, providing another example of the impacts of NLC in addressing the root causes of hate, polarisation and extremism.

Despite this, and the instruments in Burundi that facilitate NLC, when it comes to responding to hate and extremism, **the mandate still largely lies with the national government and its security agencies, with limited if any opportunities for local governments to engage the national government on this topic.**

In this context, participants highlighted ACO Burundi’s critical role in providing a platform for policy discussion and influencing reforms at the national level. Participants pointed to the role Strong Cities can play in supporting ACO Burundi with facilitating strategic discussions with national governments on the importance of looking beyond a traditional security paradigm to address hate and extremist threats. It was recommended that together, ACO Burundi and Strong Cities can raise awareness of the distinct contributions that local governments can make when it comes to the implementation of national hate and extremism prevention frameworks. This support would be informed by and is in line with Strong Cities’ global pillar of work on NLC, where it has facilitated NLC dialogues in contexts ranging from [Uganda](#) to [Indonesia](#). In addition, in September 2023, Strong Cities will launch a guide for the implementation of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum’s (GCTF) [Memorandum on Good Practices for Strengthening NLC for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism](#), which can further inform this effort in Burundi and the broader ESA region.

## Conclusion and Way Forward

Among the agreed next steps for the ESA Regional Hub in Burundi include deepening and expanding engagement with mayors and commune administrators to build their capacities in preventing and responding to extremism, hate and polarisation, as well as working closely with ACO Burundi to facilitate national-local dialogues. The workshop also highlighted the need for city-to-city and inter-regional learning and sharing of practices, which the ESA Regional Hub will facilitate through its upcoming regional and other city-city workshops. Further, city leaders asked for support in developing city prevention plans and community



engagement strategies, which the ESA Regional Hub will provide through deployment of its Technical Support Fund.

Throughout the programme, the Strong Cities team underscored how this was first step in engaging local governments and other key stakeholders in Burundi through the Regional Hub and that the consultations will continue in the coming months to further incorporate Burundi-specific priorities in its work. Ms. Gertrude Rose Gamwera, the Head of the Regional Hub, urged county representatives to take full advantage of the resources, programmes and exchanges the regional Hub will provide and/or facilitate, including through its Technical Support Fund and working groups.

## **Donors & Partners**

This workshop was hosted with generous support from the EU, under the auspices of STRIVE Cities.

## **Contact Us**

For more information about Strong Cities Network and/or its ESA Regional Hub, please contact the Regional Hub at [esaregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:esaregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org).

*The ESA Regional Hub is hosted by the East Africa Local Government Association (EALGA).*

