

## Event Report

# South Asia Regional Hub Mayoral Roundtable on Local Efforts to Build Social Harmony and Cohesion

New Delhi, India  
17 June 2023



## Summary

On 17 June 2023, the Strong Cities Network South Asia Regional Hub, with support from the U.S. Department of State, held a Mayoral Roundtable for cities in India. The event featured 20 municipal corporation mayors and elected councillors from six cities – Chandigarh, Delhi, Mumbai, Patna Raipur and Shimla – to discuss the role of local governments in building and maintaining social harmony, tolerance and inclusion and, more broadly, in preventing hate and extremism. Each participant shared that it was their first ever opportunity for peer-level dialogue between elected representatives from different cities and parties, let alone on a set of challenges often considered a sensitive national security matter beyond the remit of city councils and corporations.

Despite the predominant role that the national government, and in particular security agencies, plays in addressing hate and extremism in India, participants generally agreed that:

- there is a role for cities and other local governments in this domain, including through initiatives led by mayors and city councillors;
- local government mandates should include these issues in addition to traditional public services they are expected to deliver;

- local governments can implement such mandates by leveraging existing local initiatives and structures in line with India's legal framework;
- there are various structures such as peace and *mohalla* committees, social justice commissions and residents' welfare associations (RWAs) which function at different levels of government and are designed to address broader community grievances and that can be also leveraged to address social issues that help fuel radicalisation to violence; and
- cities should (re-)claim competencies that the federal and state government authorities have increasingly taken over.

Additionally, participants explored challenges and showcased good practices in multi-agency cooperation and civil society and community engagement. They remarked that the success of national-local cooperation (NLC) often depends on political alignment among authorities at the local, state and federal level.

## Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants highlighted that mainstreaming of mis-/disinformation and conspiracy narratives, including those aimed at inflaming inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions, is the most significant threat to peace and security in their communities. The discussions revealed a few reasons for the spread of mis-/disinformation, such as the proliferation of mobile technologies, growing internet penetration rates and the lack of critical thinking skills among individuals with low educational attainment. At the same time, the point was made that overpopulation, corruption, poverty and political polarisation overwhelm public services, including education and healthcare, and infrastructure. This presents a cyclical challenge for local authorities as an increasing number of people, who require these services, live in slums with unsanitary conditions with little opportunity to improve their wellbeing. This, combined with biases and hatred between different communities, has the potential to exacerbate existing and generate new tensions and social unrest.

Cities, it was stressed, are on the frontline dealing with the fallout of this social unrest and hate-motivated violence, but are rarely, if ever, included in conversations around the public safety and security of their jurisdictions.

“This is the first time I’ve been invited to a workshop where I’ve been asked what my city needs are to better address challenges to social harmony and peace, as opposed to being told what to do.”

Aijaz Dhebar, Mayor of Raipur



Additionally, a Councillor from the **Municipal Corporation of Delhi** emphasised that “elected officials do not receive support or guidance from relevant authorities to initiate or enhance their prevention initiatives.” The Mayoral Roundtable aimed to help address this gap by providing mayors and other elected officials an opportunity to discuss pertinent issues to building social cohesion and community resilience and voice their city-specific needs to strengthen these efforts.

## Key Themes

### 1. Providing Mayors and Local Governments a Clear Mandate on Prevention

Participants agreed that each city is often left with no choice but to prioritise more traditional local government functions such as sanitation, sewage, waste management, health and education. Addressing threats to peace and social harmony was not mentioned among the key roles for city cooperations because cities in India have no formal public safety role. However, participants pointed out that already existing public services and structures could be leveraged for this purpose. For example, a Councillor from **Patna** pointed out that “even though there are provisions for elected officials and local governments to contribute to prevention, they are not legally binding. This means that councillors can choose to adopt them, but if they do not there are no repercussions.”

A lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities among federal, national, state and local governments often causes overlap, and even at points, creeping of higher tiers of government into the competencies of municipal cooperations and *panchayats* (rural villages). Participants shared that this typically happens when the different tiers of government are ruled by different political parties. In general, the municipal corporation representatives agreed that more powers need to be explicitly and unambiguously devolved to local governments.

“18 subjects need to be transferred to local governments according to the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of India. However, mayors and other elected officials at the local level should not expect that these competencies would be voluntarily returned, but that they need to actively reclaim them. This is particularly important in prioritising its mandate on enhancing social harmony and peace. While it is important to improve basic public services and infrastructure, if cities do not work on addressing challenges to local safety and security then the social fabric will be destroyed and infrastructure will not matter as much.”

Tikender Singh Panwar, Former Deputy Mayor of Shimla



It was highlighted how mayors and councillors need to be the driving force behind cities reclaiming their prevention mandate. They can draw from their authority as elected leaders to draw attention to this issue. According to a Councillor from **Delhi** “they [also] have credibility to call more devolution of prevention responsibilities because they are closer to their citizens and understand their grievances. This contrasts with Members of Parliament, nationally elected officials, who very rarely visit their constituencies.”

### 2. Leveraging Sub-National Government Multi-Agency Prevention Coordination Mandates and Mechanisms

India’s laws and regulations allow state and local governments to develop different multi-agency coordination mechanisms to address threats to social cohesion and community resilience. For instance, at the local government level, cities can establish social justice committees to lead

prevention efforts. The former Deputy Mayor of **Shimla** reported that he chaired his city's social justice commission which regularly convened relevant stakeholders from the city to discuss issues related to peace and security. The group was composed of seconded members of different local government agencies, civil society, community-based organisations and law enforcement, but they were also able to invite, and even summon, additional stakeholders particularly when the topic of discussion was under their purview. During his tenure, the committee was composed of 50% women to ensure gender balance. At the same time the **Municipal Cooperation of Shimla** developed Ward Sabhas, which functioned as committees at the neighbourhood level and met on a bi-annual basis. They created a platform for local government and community representatives to address social issues at the ward level.

The representative from **Mumbai** reported that there are *Mohalla* committees operating at a neighbourhood level in the city. These have been initiated by the Mumbai police in cooperation with the local leaders and communities to maintain peace and harmony. Since local leaders of all religious and ethnic backgrounds are involved, these local bodies, which were established following the communal riots in the city in the early 1990s, have the credibility to resolve local disputes and address threats that can harm the social fabric of Mumbai.

The Councillor from **Chandigarh** shared that similar ward-level bodies called resident welfare associations (RWAs) exist in his city and are designed to resolve social issues at the community level. Over time RWAs have been formed in accordance with the local needs of each neighbourhood. Some of them function more formally, while others are informal and convene on a need-basis. RWAs in Chandigarh, according to the councillor, have been active for years and have been crucial in creating a platform for community dialogue on pressing social issues that could lead to tension between different groups. These bodies are also operating at a neighbourhood level in other parts of the country as well, including Delhi, and are regarded as crucial to managing hyper-local tensions between communities across the city. A Councillor from **Delhi** said that these bodies have proven useful not only to facilitate a dialogue and deescalate inter-religious tensions but also for prevention purposes as they offer platforms for engaging with local leaders to understand their communities' needs *before* a crisis emerges.

At the state level in **Delhi**, the government developed and is operating a peace committee which is composed of practitioners that aim to engage all relevant community stakeholders to design prevention and response initiatives. The peace committee was instrumental in managing Delhi's 2020 riots and its aftermath to ensure similar events do not happen in the future.

## Municipal Corporation of Delhi, India

- **Challenge:** preventing and responding to inter-communal tensions at the ward level
- **Approach:** The Municipal Corporation of Delhi has supported the establishment of Residential Wellness Associations (RWA) at the ward level to enhance social harmony, tolerance and peace. Composed of local leaders from each community, RWA members regularly meet to discuss key social issues and grievances that should be addressed by their local government. Additionally, RWAs also respond to events that have the potential to incite hate and tensions





between communities in their locality. In addition to the members of the RWA, elected councillors and other relevant stakeholders join the group on a need-basis.

- **Impact:** Since their establishment, RWAs have succeeded in establishing credibility among local leaders and the communities they represent. This has enabled them to identify and then help address the needs and concerns of these communities. The RWAs have been able to both de-escalate tensions before they spiral and respond to crisis scenarios that have the potential to result in violence.

[www.mcdonline.nic.in](http://www.mcdonline.nic.in)

## Next Steps

This event is a part of a broader effort by the Strong Cities South Asia Regional Hub to engage sub-national governments on preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation. Findings and recommendations from this event will inform the Regional Hub's workplan for catalysing city-led efforts to address these challenges and, more broadly, strengthen social cohesion and community resilience at the national level in India. They will also help make the Regional Hub's engagement efforts across South Asia more relevant and useful for city stakeholders, including the upcoming second regional workshop which will be held on 2-3 August in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Additionally, participant inputs will also inform two upcoming Strong Cities guides: one for mayors on mayoral leadership in prevention and response, the other for local government practitioners on how to enhance and sustain city-led prevention efforts. Both guides will launch at Strong Cities' fourth Global Summit, which takes place from 19-21 September 2023 on the margins of the opening of 78th UN General Assembly.

## Donors & Partners



## Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities' South Asia Regional Hub, please contact [asia.hub@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:asia.hub@strongcitiesnetwork.org).