

Event Report

Southeast Asia Regional Workshop Strengthening National-Local Cooperation to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism

Manila, Republic of the Philippines
18 – 19 July 2023



Summary

On 18 – 19 July 2023, the Strong Cities Network held its first Southeast Asia regional workshop in Manila, the Philippines, bringing together 20 mayors, governors and national government officials from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to identify opportunities for strengthening national-local cooperation (NLC) related to the prevention of hate, polarisation and violent extremism. With support from the U.S. Department of State and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the workshop convened key city and provincial leaders as well as those charged with developing national strategies related to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). For most city leaders and officials participating, the workshop provided their first briefing on their own country's national approach and the national agencies engaged in delivery, as well as their first dialogue with other cities – either domestically or regionally – to share insights on their own potential role in P/CVE and prevention and resilience efforts more broadly.

Setting out key national efforts, **Indonesian** government officials shared that they are already working in partnership with five provinces and two cities to develop local action plans in line with Indonesia's 2020 – 2024 P/CVE [National Action Plan](#). While local governments clearly have a vital role in informing threat assessments as well as prevention activities, our colleagues from Indonesia noted that mayors and governors needed to be engaged more consistently rather than risk local approaches becoming overly reliant on input from provincial-level security actors. Government officials from **the Philippines** noted that the workshop was well-timed as they are beginning the localisation of their [National Action Plan](#) across 17 regions. They shared with participants a delivery roadmap for the coming years beginning with sensitisation and capacity-building for local governments. **Malaysian** counter-terrorism police outlined some of the opportunities for expanding

the role that mayors and local governments play in prevention efforts, noting the importance of furthering collaboration in the pre-criminal space to identify potential risks and conduct effective community engagement. With a national action plan forthcoming, they identified a need for greater support and capacity-building for mayors to enable them to realise their potential role in prevention and suggested several existing mechanisms and resources at local levels which could potentially be leveraged for prevention and resilience-building.

Mayors and local leaders welcomed the discussion of national approaches. There was widespread agreement that local governments have a key role to play in prevention efforts in each country, as well as in informing national strategy development with their local knowledge and understanding of the issues in their communities. In addition to more awareness and capacity-building efforts for local leaders, mayors urged stakeholders to be realistic about resourcing and sustainability challenges, as well as the need for formalised coordination mechanisms that can facilitate dialogue and information sharing in both directions. In country-focused break-out sessions, participants focused on mapping each of these challenges in more detail and developing an outline for potential areas of collaboration.

Many mayors and local officials initially questioned their relevance to P/CVE issues at the outset of the event. However, by the end, several expressed that they now felt they were central to P/CVE and, more broadly, to prevention efforts. They noted that seeing first-hand the recognition of this capacity from national counterparts was a critical first step. What they had assumed was the exclusive remit of security agencies and not public service-oriented local governments was in fact, they felt, a vital – if yet to be fully realised – strength of city and provincial administrations and their local leaders in each country.

Key Challenges & City Needs

Several participants cited ethnic and religious tensions, the rise in hate speech and disinformation, and the impact of economic inequality and social marginalisation, as key long-term challenges and potential ‘push’ factors for radicalisation to violence. Each city present agreed that these were key risks at the community-level that affected social cohesion and resilience and needed to be addressed as part of the broader environment in which hate, extremist violence and polarisation can take hold. Alongside such environmental factors, the recruitment efforts of regional militant groups with ties to ISIS and other terrorist organisations, as well as the need for rehabilitation and reintegration of those leaving the criminal justice system and for foreign terrorist fighters and their families, were all noted as key challenges.



Cities across all three countries are already engaged in addressing the environmental factors, albeit without drawing a line between these efforts and a P/CVE agenda. Each city outlined examples of community wellbeing activities, interfaith dialogues, youth outreach initiatives and women’s empowerment efforts, many of which are already resourced by local government budgets and delivered in partnership with civil society organisations and community stakeholders. The ‘sharper’ challenges of radicalisation, recruitment to violence and rehabilitation, by contrast, are not areas in which local governments are

routinely engaged. Where such efforts do have a local dimension, it tends to be local police or provincial branches of national security agencies that are involved. Recognising both how existing local efforts to address the environmental challenges can support the implementation of national P/CVE strategies and how cities can develop a role in addressing more explicit extremism-related challenges is contingent on strengthening national-local cooperation. Learn more about the work Strong Cities is leading on NLC [here](#) and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Good Practices on Strengthening NLC IN P/CVE [here](#).

Indonesia

Indonesia's [National Counterterrorism Authority](#) (BNPT) shared that there were 48 ministries and agencies currently involved in the delivery of the National Action Plan and that to support five provinces and two cities in developing local action plans, a dedicated '[Knowledge Hub](#)' (I-KHub) has been launched as a formal informational-sharing mechanism. Additionally, the Social Conflict Management Information System has been launched as a digital reporting mechanism for local governments to flag concerns to national authorities, supported by the Home Ministry. At the local level, the Nations and Political Unity Office leads on the coordination between different actors, with a strong emphasis on civil society involvement and the inclusion of religious groups. An annual national forum is also in place to update key partners and assess progress and challenges.

Despite these efforts, provincial and city mayors from Indonesia shared that there was little existing awareness at their level of P/CVE efforts and that there had been limited engagement with the national action plan to date. Both national and local officials acknowledged that the insights such stakeholders can bring are essential. This includes on ethnic and religious tensions and challenges around free speech and other issues at the community level. In East Java, for example, they are mapping the different ethnic groups across the province and supporting national efforts to develop a religious harmony index. The Vice Governor of East Java noted that provincial leaders are also required by law to tender a five-year economic development plan to national authorities, which incorporates a gender development index, an economic inequality index and other measures that could better inform national government understandings of key threats and challenges. There are also a number of relevant local programmes delivered at the city level targeting social harmony, community cohesion and national identity-building, many of which present opportunities to mainstream aspects of P/CVE without requiring additional resources or creating unsustainable, standalone programming.

"I assumed this session would be heavily focused on security issues and did not expect that it would cover items that are highly relevant to issues concerning jurisdiction of local government. However, I realised by being here how much our current local government role in public services is relevant to prevention efforts. If we do not have abundant resources for P/CVE specific programmes, then we should be looking at how we make changes to existing programmes to make sure they address some P/CVE objectives."

Dr. Emil Dardak, Vice Governor of East Java, Indonesia



Malaysia

With a national action plan in progress, the key agencies at the national government level are the counter-terrorism special branch and social extremism division of the [Royal Malaysia Police](#), as well

as the [Department for National Unity and Integration](#). Both shared that there is a critical need to deepen collaboration with city mayors to better understand emerging risks and trends at the community level, especially since police involvement in the pre-criminal space is limited. With mayors appointed by government commission and often gaining years of experience serving several different cities, there is also significant learning and insight that could be shared.

Participants shared how a formalised coordination mechanism is lacking at present but would enable stronger NLC at all levels and provide city mayors with a recognised mandate to support P/CVE and wider prevention efforts. Such coordination, it was agreed, should be accompanied by a programme of awareness-raising and capacity-building for non-security actors, where understanding of violent extremism and related threats and existing approaches for addressing them is limited. It was noted that units like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' [South East Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism \(SEARCCT\)](#) are well placed to support such efforts and are already delivering training to civil society, youth and non-government partners to boost community-led prevention efforts.

Participants acknowledged that such efforts require sustained political will and resourcing but recognised that there were opportunities for practical coordination on a city-by-city basis, with the Mayors of **Klang** and **Kuching North** both proposing that their cities host initial coordination meetings to convene key partners. Similarly, there are initiatives in both cities that focus on wider community cohesion efforts, which could incorporate P/CVE objectives. The [Kejiranan Mesra](#) “friendly neighbourhood” programme in **Kuching North** was one example. There, community gatherings, sports activities and women’s initiatives bring together people from different parts of the community. Considering the relevance of inter-ethnic issues to wider social cohesion challenges in Malaysia, as well as specific challenges like the high number of Rohingya refugees and unregistered foreign nationals living in Malaysian cities, it was suggested that such initiatives should be considered highly relevant to P/CVE. However, participants noted that care should be taken to ensure that such activities do not become explicitly labelled as P/CVE initiatives and that they retain their existing merits and objectives while incorporating aspects relevant to P/CVE.

Similarly, police school liaison officers and the specialist *Amanita* women’s police units offer opportunities for increasing community engagement, developing trust and serving a wider crime prevention and personal safety function that incorporates aspects of P/CVE. Another key area for collaboration between different national ministries and local governments discussed was the provision of vocational training, especially to those leaving the prison system, where the risks of recidivism and potential vulnerability to radicalisation are high due to a lack of employment opportunities and community stigmatisation.

“As police, we have been working with local councils but only on-demand when we need their help with an investigation. Now I see that we need to be working together proactively on the planning of delivery of prevention – not just waiting until the challenge is urgent.”

DCP Normah Ishak, Principal Assistant Director for Counterterrorism, Royal Malaysia Police

Philippines

Following last year’s elections, the Philippines has updated its National Action Plan through the inclusion of a peace and security chapter in the 2023 – 2028 Philippines Development Plan. Building on the national *Talagha* summit hosted last year, the government’s top priority is the localisation of the national action plan, involving cascading key elements down to local partners.

This process is coordinated by the Department for Interior and Local Government (DILG), representatives of which outlined key actions and objectives to participants including city mayors.

With both the role of cities and the need to engage city leaders and local administrations in P/CVE efforts brought to national attention with the 2017 siege of Marawi, national leaders appreciate the relevance of mayors and cities to prevention efforts. As the Mayor Hanie A. Bud of **Maluso** noted, it is therefore critical that plans to localise the national P/CVE strategy include mayors and local administrations as much as security and civil society partners. The workshop offered an opportunity for central government officials to consult mayors on their localisation roadmap and to ensure that roadmap empowers



mayors and local government to influence and inform national strategy with a two-way dialogue rather than simply a devolving of responsibilities. The representative from DILG shared plans to conduct an interagency workshop with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao's Ministry of Interior and Local Government and disseminate a module on P/CVE localisation to its regional offices, recognising the need for regional offices to engage mayors and local leaders in such efforts.

“To be effective, these strategies must be put into practice in a thorough and coordinated manner, considering the local context and the various players and stakeholders involved.”

Elizabeth Lopez De Leon, Assistant Secretary for Community Participation, Department for Interior and Local Government, Philippines

Next Steps

Each country left the workshop with a specific set of actions for strengthening NLC at home, which were informed by extensive working-level dialogue among national government officials and mayors, governors, and city officials during the event. Whether a commitment from a city to host a coordination meeting or incorporate P/CVE objectives into an existing community programme, or for mayors to be better engaged in existing cooperation mechanisms, such actions speak to the potential for strengthening NLC and improving P/CVE strategy and delivery in Southeast Asia..

Strong Cities will continue to engage cities across all three countries, while simultaneously seeking support from donors and partners to develop and operationalise a regional hub dedicated to engagement across Southeast Asia. Like Strong Cities' hubs in other global regions, this would involve a dedicated regionally-based team tasked with outreach and engagement on a daily basis with mayors, city officials and representatives of key national government agencies, helping build the role and capacity of mayors and cities to contribute to, and help shape, prevention approaches. A regional hub would not only connect cities to their counterparts within the region to share learnings and experiences but would connect them to a global community of good practices and

local-level learnings collected on an international scale and disseminated through the Network to support local impact. A regional hub would also need to continuously map and update needs and gaps that cities across the region are themselves highlighting, not least those related to NLC. A Southeast Asia Regional Hub would also seek to build long-term partnerships across the region both to raise the profile of mayors and elevate their voices on regional and international stages, but also to provide technical support to implement key initiatives, including by leveraging our Expert Pool of local practitioners, mayors and peer support.

In the immediate future, Strong Cities has worked with the Global Counterterrorism Forum's CVE Co-Chairs, Australia and Indonesia, to develop a Toolkit for Implementation of NLC, due to be published in September 2023. The learnings in this Toolkit are intended to support the continued strengthening of NLC around the world, including in Southeast Asia. It is an invaluable resource to support further training and development in this important area.

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Contact Information

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