

Event Report

South Asia Regional Hub Regional Workshop on Inclusive, City-Led Approaches to Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation

Colombo, Sri Lanka
2 – 3 August 2023



Summary

On 2 – 3 August 2023, Strong Cities brought together nearly 40 mayors and other city officials, civil society organisations (CSOs) and national government representatives from Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in Colombo for its South Asia Regional Hub's second regional workshop of 2023. With support from the European Union and the US Department of State, the workshop provided a rare opportunity to unite local governments across the region for working-level discussions to deepen understanding of how cities can play a greater role in addressing hate- and extremism-related challenges that are traditionally considered to be the responsibility of national governments and security agencies. While some participants discussed the progress they had made since February's [inaugural workshop](#), many stakeholders joined this conversation for the first time, with the workshop serving to catalyse the structured sharing of good practices, local experiences and lessons learned on both regional and country levels. Participants emphasised how this dialogue continues to be urgently needed across the region. Few other opportunities exist across South Asia for bringing local governments into conversation on issues of building social cohesion and peace amid sensitive and security-related topics such as hate and extremism.

Following a review of the most prominent challenges to peace and social harmony at local levels across all five countries, the workshop showcased a number of local government-led initiatives to strengthen community resilience. These covered a wide range of efforts, from initiatives to promote inter-cultural dialogue in **Delhi, India** and programmes to support the integration of internally displaced persons from disaster-affected areas in **Mardan, Pakistan** to setting up or playing a role in wider post-conflict reconciliation efforts, like those in **Trincomalee, Sri Lanka**. Throughout each of the practices discussed, participants stressed the importance of strong coordination at multiple

levels. This includes national-local cooperation (NLC) as well as multi-stakeholder coordination at the local level, both among different departments and services of a city, and between cities and community-based organisations and other civil society partners. Discussions around building effective coordination and realising a whole-of-society approach to prevention also encompassed the need for greater inclusion efforts, especially with youth, women, minorities and marginalised groups. Cities highlighted that these efforts need to be long-term and built on trusted partnerships in which such groups are valued as partners in designing effective prevention, outreach and resilience efforts, able to offer unique insight into how local challenges affect communities differently.

With Strong Cities' new guides for mayors and cities being launched in September ([available now via the Resource Hub](#)), participants emphasised the unique and often pivotal role mayors and municipal practitioners play in South Asian contexts in preventing and responding to hate and extremism. Mayors, participants underscored, are in a position to drive positive change within their communities by including grassroots participation in local decision-making, allocating resources, developing local strategies and empowering often-overlooked local stakeholders. However, to be impactful, participants emphasised that it was necessary to transcend political partisanship in favour of community development. Similarly, city officials and local administrations are crucial in fostering dialogue and open communication with community stakeholders and responding to their needs through daily service delivery. Participants shared how by serving successive local political leaders, local administrations can help them to sustain, build and leverage mechanisms, policies and programmes for prevention.

Key takeaways highlighted during the workshop included:

- There are a wide variety of city-led multi-actor prevention mechanisms at the regional and national levels. Their mandates include mapping community needs, leading engagement and dialogue with vulnerable and marginalised groups, developing and deploying cohesion campaigns and even facilitating reconciliation in war-torn societies. Despite their different focus, they are an integral part of local governments' strategies to strengthen social cohesion and building community resilience.
- Each country in South Asia has a different approach to prevention-relevant NLC. However, there is a common growing need to enhance information sharing and coordination between national and local authorities and create mechanisms that are well-suited to prevent in addition to responding to violent incidents.
- Engaging and empowering youth and civil society and community-based organisations is a high priority for mayors and the cities they lead to operationalise a whole-of-society approach to prevention. To strengthen these efforts, cities showcased good practices of including youth to be a part of local decision-making processes, while stressing the need for sustained engagement with grassroots organisations to effectively address community grievances and needs.

Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants agreed that one of the greatest threats to social cohesion across the region is the mainstreaming of hate and extremist narratives by political elites. This includes the prevalence of extreme rhetoric, orchestrated campaigns of targeted harassment against city leaders, and political obstructionism, which collectively grip numerous cities in the region. Additionally, participants highlighted that radicalisation of youth and marginalised communities to violence poses an imminent threat. This issue is compounded by the lack of youth inclusion in decision-making, and limited access to public spaces. More broadly, participants warned that segregation and sectarian tensions, particularly when exacerbated by economic marginalisation, could worsen social divides and hinder inclusive community development if left unaddressed.

Local governments across the region are actively seeking support to chart a course towards more sustainable and effective responses to these pressing challenges. In welcoming the opportunity

provided by the Regional Hub, participants mentioned the need for enhanced regional networking opportunities as well as technical guidance in bolstering public services and prevention programming. For instance, **Tikender Singh Panwar, former Deputy Mayor of Shimla, India**, stressed that his city needs technical and peer support in designing effective youth and women empowerment programmes. Several city representatives also requested the Network's assistance in better understanding risk associated with online mis-/disinformation to their communities as well as understanding good practices from elsewhere on strengthening digital and media literacy skills.

Key Themes

City-led Multi-Stakeholder Coordination Mechanisms

A number of local governments in South Asia have developed, or are in the process of developing, city-led multi-actor prevention mechanisms to strengthen social cohesion and community resilience. City representatives showcased different frameworks which were designed based on their specific cultural and legislative context and local threat environment. They ranged from mechanisms with an explicit role in public security and extremism prevention, such as the **Town-Level Coordination Committee in Tangail, Bangladesh**, to bodies mandated to facilitate community engagement and dialogue. **In Shimla, India**, Ward Sabhas were established in each ward to promote social cohesion and harmony by empowering citizens discuss their community's need and concerns in monthly meetings, fostering inclusivity and women's representation and mapping the city's most pressing issues. **In Mardan, Pakistan**, the city has established multi-disciplinary peace committees that involve youth, religious leaders, councillors and police to lead community cohesion campaigns and initiatives. These committees facilitate coordination and information-sharing between the city and the local police, helping inform local decision-making especially on efforts to promote peace.

Other successful mechanisms include the [atoll councils](#) and the [IBAMA community social groups](#) in the Maldives. Atoll councils are a significant administrative structure at local level that oversee various aspects of local governance, including funding allocation, and act as an intermediary between local and national governments on key issues. **IBAMA** groups offer multi-sectoral community-focused responses based on the needs of vulnerable groups, women and girls, children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Their role is to empower communities and foster safer and more interconnected societies, while at the same time enhancing the responsiveness of institutions, service providers, and organisations to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals and communities across the Maldives.

The example below from Bangladesh provides more local experiences from across the region which cities can benefit from when developing or improving multi-stakeholder coordination at local levels:

City of Tangail, Bangladesh

- **Challenge:** Crime and urban violence.
- **Approach:** The City of Tangail established a [Town Level Coordination Committee \(TLCC\)](#) under the leadership of the Mayor. It convenes various stakeholders including the deputy commissioner, councillors and civil society for grassroots-level coordination on crime prevention. The TLCC meets once a month to evaluate the existing mechanisms and identify and respond to new and persistent challenges to peace and security in the city.
- **Impact:** There is enhanced coordination at the ward level, effectively engaging multiple stakeholders to address prevailing law and order issues and violence in the city.



National-Local Cooperation

Participants stressed the role of NLC in effectively translating national prevention frameworks into localised actions in line with city needs. Each country has approached this differently. In the Maldives, for example, city representatives shared that there is little coordination on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). As an example, the Mayor of **Addu City, Maldives** noted that the national government's security agencies executed an operation in the city without his prior knowledge, arresting 13 individuals suspected to be involved in terrorist activity. At the time of the police operation – and lacking basic knowledge of ongoing security efforts -- the mayor said he was unable to offer safety reassures local communities nor was he able to further prevention efforts. Representatives from other cities in the Maldives pointed to the lack harmonisation of local and national frameworks, as one of the reasons for the limited national-local coordination, and as a result they stressed the need for cities across the country to work together to advocate for more harmonisation and dialogue and coordination directly between local and national government officials.



“There is a national plan but no coordinated mechanism to address hate speech at the local level.”

Jalaj Kumar Chaudhry, Councillor at Municipal Cooperation Delhi, India

Participants from Bangladesh hailed the examples of successful NLC in their country, especially during the response to COVID-19. To maintain such efforts, the national government has established the [National Institute of Local Government](#) to address the capacity gaps at the local level, including by offering training for mayors, city practitioners and civil society representatives. However, participants pointed to NLC gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. One is that

mayors have limited engagement and access to parliament and ministers, with no invitations extended to mayors by the Parliament Standing Committee to join its sessions in the past two decades. As a result, Bangladeshi participants highlighted the need for strengthened direct engagement between nationally and locally elected leaders, such as through the inclusion of mayors in committee meetings and institutionalised cooperation mechanism. This includes standing committees on law and order and those that have a particular relevance to fostering peace and social cohesion. Participants also stressed that the national government should allocate more funding for mayoral-led peace and harmony activities which can be done through establishment of peace and harmony committees in every city. These activities, participants suggested, could be jointly-funded by the national parliament and local governments.

Sri Lankan participants reflected on the steps taken to strengthen NLC in their country, such as the creation of Provincial Councils in 1987 and capacity-building of local governments across the country. Devolution efforts have granted fiscal powers and more authority to local governing bodies, ensuring that decisions that directly impact communities are made at the local level. The establishment of District Coordination Committees, participants shared, fostered collaboration and coordination among local authorities at the provincial level, enabling them to work together more efficiently on local development. To enhance NLC, Sri Lankan authorities supported local government capacity-building, including on coordination with law enforcement. Many felt that further efforts to improve language literacy in Tamil, Sinhalese and English is a crucial step to facilitate effective communication among diverse communities across the country. As local governments await the scheduling of new elections, participants reiterated the importance of open channels of communication and coordination, especially on peace and reconciliation efforts and addressing ethnic and religious tensions.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan

- **Challenge:** Lack of effective vertical coordination and across multiple tiers of government and insufficient community participation in local decision-making.
- **Approach:** The [National Counter Terrorism Authority](#) has been created and chaired by the prime minister, which establishes strategic directions and policies binding for district and local governments. Additionally, a decentralised governance system has been implemented, clearly defining roles and responsibilities for district, city, and village governments, with input from both elected and non-elected members. Village council chairs gather local needs and pass it up to neighbourhood councils and, in turn, the city council. The city council annually plans and allocates budgets for education, health, and urban planning, with provisions for emergencies and unforeseen crises. Separate systems manage criminal and administrative justice matters, streamlining law enforcement, income tax, customs and administration.
- **Impact:** Local communities are more involved in decision-making via elected representatives, who are able to raise grassroots concerns with upper tiers of government in a more structured way. Consequently, funds are reportedly being allocated according to area-specific needs for targeted development. Defined roles and responsibilities at each level have reduced confusion and ultimately improved community perceptions of and access to local government.



Youth Engagement to Build Resilience to Extremism

Participants stressed the importance of engaging young people as part of a whole-of-society approach to building community resilience to hate and extremism. They agreed that local governments can do more to create an enabling environment for building trust and emphasised the need for cities to focus attention on instilling values of civic responsibility among and providing vocational training to young people.

A key issue participants raised was the importance not only of educating youth about local government services but also of better understanding how youth perceive these services. They also considered that, despite potential political interference or misuse, the introduction of youth quotas in different local decision-making bodies has helped to open youth access to such processes overall. Despite often vibrant youth wings of political parties across the region, participants also noted that local efforts to involve youth in community decision-making should focus not only on politics but on the role of art, music and creative sectors in fostering social harmony, for example.

Participants provided various examples of how they try to achieve these objectives. The **former Deputy Mayor of Shimla** stressed that cities in India have been designed to enable physical segregation as opposed to creating public spaces that enhance social inclusivity among youth. The **Mayor of Tangail, Bangladesh** emphasised the importance of intergenerational dialogue and providing youth leadership opportunities at the local government administration for strengthening community resilience. Meanwhile the Secretary of **Trincomalee Town and Gravets Council, Sri Lanka** emphasised the importance of dialogue between multi-ethnic dialogues between youth and local government as well as between youth of different groups, as part of the city's broader community reconciliation efforts, and called for sustained government support for such initiatives.

Cooperation with Civil Society and Community-Based Organisations to Operationalise a Whole-of-Society Approach

Participants pointed to the active involvement of civil society groups across different sectors in South Asia, including advocacy, healthcare, business, education and religious affairs. They stressed how cooperation between local governments and these community-based actors is critical for achieving a comprehensive whole-of-society approach to preventing hate, extremism and polarisation. The **Mayor of Tangail, Bangladesh** shared that his local government developed a TLCC as a key platform for coordinating between local government and grassroots organisations in maintaining law and order, social justice and peace, as well for intensifying engagement between the city and young people.

Participants highlighted the diverse nature of civil society and community-based organisations and the importance of sustaining their initiatives beyond project end dates and after changes in local government leadership, so that learnings and mechanisms could be institutionalised by local government where appropriate. However, they also noted challenges related to the politicisation of the civil society space for party interests and the need for enhanced transparency to ensure accountability for their work and funding.

Participants from across the region agreed that civil society stakeholders are crucial in supporting city-led efforts to prevention through their expertise and resources. In Sri Lanka, for example, CSOs are essential to the reconciliation as well as wider minority and youth engagement efforts, especially at the local level. Participants from Pakistan stressed that civil society and community-based organisations in particular were crucial in the immediate response to COVID-19, supporting local governments in engaging hard to reach communities. They said that learnings from such examples of cooperation need to be sustained and adapted to address hate, extremism and polarisation challenges.

The Colombo workshop also served to generate new initiatives to support local government-CSO collaborations, as well as NLC efforts that give due recognition to the role of cities and city-led partnerships for prevention. For example, a meeting participant who also coordinates the “Mayoral Alliance for Healthy Cities” in Bangladesh plans to organise two meetings for mayors to discuss their role in extremism and hate prevention.

Next Steps

Building on the discussions during the Colombo workshop, the South Asia Regional Hub will focus on strengthening collaborations at the national and regional level to facilitate an effective exchange of good practices and lessons learned on prevention. In the coming months, dedicated support will be made available for mayors and other city officials in the region, informed by the Strong Cities prevention guides which are now available on the [Resource Hub](#). In addition, Narayanganj, Bangladesh and Addu City in the Maldives have agreed to serve on the Network’s International Steering Committee and they will be joined by a number of mayors and city leaders from across the region for the upcoming [Fourth Strong Cities Global Summit](#) taking place in New York City on 19-21 September.

Donors & Partners



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities’ South Asia Regional Hub, please contact saregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org.