

## Event Report

# Strengthening the Role of Cities in Coastal West Africa to Address Hate, Extremism and Polarisation Through Enhanced National-Local Cooperation

Accra, Ghana  
11 October – 12 October 2023



## Summary

On 11 – 12 October 2023, the Strong Cities Network convened more than 40 mayors and other city officials, civil society organisations (CSOs) and national government actors from Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Togo to discuss how city-led efforts to prevent and respond to the increasingly localised threats posed by hate, extremism and polarisation can be advanced through enhanced **national-local cooperation (NLC)** in each country.

Supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the workshop was the second in a series<sup>1</sup> to raise awareness and promote the application of the [NLC Implementation Toolkit](#), which Strong Cities developed on behalf of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to facilitate the localised operationalisation of the GCTF's [13 good practices](#) on strengthening NLC in prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The Toolkit was launched on 19 September 2023 on the margins of the opening of the 78<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly in New York.

In her opening remarks, **Berenice Owen-Jones**, Australian High Commissioner to Ghana, reinforced Australia's commitment to addressing the growing threat of terrorism and extremism in West Africa and emphasised the importance of partnerships and collaboration across all levels in

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<sup>1</sup> The first NLC workshop was held in [Montenegro](#) with local and national actors from around the Western Balkans. The third will be organised in the MENA Region in late 2023 or early 2024.

meeting this threat. Speaking on behalf of the Mayor of Accra, **Douglas N.K. Annoful**, Chief Coordinating Director of Accra's Metropolitan Assembly, shared some of the work his city is doing to work in partnership with different actors across levels and their commitment to pursuing a whole-of-society approach in the city. In his welcome remarks, **Colonel Tim Bataabana**, Director of the Fusion Centre of Ghana's Ministry of National Security, provided an overview of the threat picture facing the region.

Using the NLC Toolkit as the framework, workshop participants identified the gaps and opportunities in the region to promote a whole-of-society approach to preventing hate, extremism and polarisation. The workshop included a series of plenary discussions and small group table-top-exercises to explore each of the Toolkit's six pillars individually and reflect on varied approaches to strengthening NLC to support more effective and sustainable city- and other locally-led prevention efforts. In addition to enriching the discussions, these insights will feed into the regional NLC mapping currently being conducted by Strong Cities' local partner, the West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism (WACCE).

Key findings from the workshop included:

- Despite devolution efforts, centralised security-based approaches to addressing violent extremism and related localised threats remain the norm across the region. The role of local governments in addressing these challenges is limited. This is due to a number of factors, including ones related to their mandate (or lack thereof) and lack of trust from their national counterparts, particularly when the latter is led by a different political party.
- Civil society and local governments have important roles to play in whole-of-society approaches to prevention in the region, which need to be formally incorporated into government strategies.
- Traditional actors and institutions – such as village chiefs, elders and religious and other community leaders – can play a critical role in promoting credibility and sustainability of local and national initiatives to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation. They are crucial for raising public awareness about government-led efforts to address these threats and secure buy-in at the community level.
- Existing local dialogue mechanisms can be utilised to overcome high levels of mistrust and exclusion that hinder NLC efforts among community, local government and national government actors.
- Dedicated funding is needed to support city and other locally-led efforts to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation, including ones that benefit those most susceptible to radicalisation to violence and recruitment to violent groups. This is especially important for rural towns and remote cities that can face more intense resourcing challenges compared to larger urban centres and those directly connected to the capital city and national seats of government.

## Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs



**Colonel Tim Bataabana**, Director of the Fusion Centre of Ghana’s Ministry of National Security underscored that the West African sub-region is an epicentre of violent extremism, despite hosting two-thirds of the world’s peacekeepers. He shared that in the first half of 2023, the region [recorded](#) 1,814 incidents of terrorist attacks, resulting in nearly 4,600 fatalities. This represents a 26% increase in lives lost compared to the same period in 2022. To address this threat, Colonel Bataabana emphasised the importance of prevention and the need for a whole-of-society approach that works at all levels – national, regional, district and hyper local – that includes

local leaders, faith-based organisations and the informal sector. He emphasised that those working at sub-national levels “are more powerful than those of us who find ourselves higher up because they are more in tune with the local security needs. The decisions made there, are the most effective decisions.”

While the threats in coastal West Africa are not as acute as those facing others in the region, participants voiced concern about spill-over from conflicts in the Sahel and the potential for local grievances to fuel recruitment to violent extremism. Several local leaders present, including **Mayor Etornam Flolu** of Ve-Golokwati, Ghana, **Mayor Sulemana Salifu** of Tamale, Ghana, **Deputy Mayor Ahmed Diallo** of Dori, Burkina Faso and **Deputy Mayor Djibril Amadou** of Djougou, Benin offered insights into the threats their cities are facing, many of which were shared across the region. For example, land boundary and ownership issues, chieftaincy disputes, inter-religious tensions, and hostility between farmers and cattle herders have all contributed to violence in the region. Furthermore, the abuse and control of reserve areas, typically home to indigenous populations, and natural resources have also fuelled conflict. These challenges, some which have cross-border implications, have created urgency for local leaders to respond before grievances can be exploited and weaponised by extremist and other violent groups.

While the countries in attendance share many of the same threats, participants discussed how the barriers and opportunities in addressing them vary. Participants discussed the different governance structures across coastal West Africa and the implications for prevention-related NLC. For example, mayors in Ghana are appointed by the national government and thus, according to some participants, wield the “power of central government”, while mayors in the participating Francophone countries are elected and carry “the power of the people”. This difference, participants noted, has implications for NLC, particularly when it comes to security-related issues. Some shared that while it may appear that locally elected officials have legitimacy, influence and goodwill of their citizenry, they often received limited resources and had diminished capacities to deliver for their residents compared to their counterparts in Ghana. This is especially so if they were outside the ruling political party.

These barriers and the political backlash associated with campaigning for office led many participants to share that elections in fact limit efforts to build trusted relationships with city residents, with such relationships being a foundation for meaningful city-led hate and extremism prevention work.

Following an introduction to NLC and the Toolkit and the presentation of the initial findings from WACC’s ongoing research on the state of NLC for addressing extremism in coastal West Africa,

participants exchanged views on the state of NLC in the region as it relates to the prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation. Some of the key barriers identified included:

- The limited involvement of local level actors in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation; this, despite the decentralised governance structures across much of the region and some national-level commitment to involving local governments in the implementation of national security frameworks.
- The politicisation of local-level initiatives, along with corruption and political patronage hinder approaches to NLC in the region. For example, when support and cooperation between central and local authorities is dictated by party affiliation, it can prohibit meaningful cooperation with elected local governments representing opposition parties. This can limit their resourcing, mandate and credibility with local communities, which undermines the ability of local leaders to drive efforts to prevent hate and extremism in their cities.
- Economic crises and competing interests have limited funding and other forms of support for addressing hate and extremism. This is felt most acutely at the local level where limited resources have hampered the capacity of local actors to lead and support prevention, undermining overall sustainability.
- Much of the funding for addressing these challenges at the national and local level comes from international donors, including through initiatives implemented by international organisations, international NGOs or local CSOs. While there are examples of good practice – such as the [World Banks' Social Cohesion project](#) – many of these interventions are detached from local government structures, further weakening the role of local leaders.
- Pertinent information is often withheld from city and other relevant local actors under the guise of national security or is shared only on the basis of personal relationships. More broadly, information sharing and other communication and coordination among actors at different levels and sectors is limited.
- Limited coordination among the growing number of CSOs involved in hate and extremism prevention work in the region has at times led to duplication of efforts, inefficient programming and complicated efforts to strengthen cooperation between national and local actors in this field.
- The lack of trust is significant barrier to NLC. Trust deficits exist, for example, between governments and the communities they are meant to serve, thus limiting the credibility of the former and the latter; national and local governments, thus impacting the extent to which the former will see the latter as relevant to hate and extremism prevention; and police and local communities, thus affecting the willingness of local residents to share information with law enforcement.

Participants recognised the commonality of these findings across the region and highlighted the need to overcome them to allow a whole-of-society approach to prevention to take root. To this end, participants urged Strong Cities to share its research findings and continue to raise awareness around the Toolkit with stakeholders across the region. They also noted the need for additional training and learning opportunities to help local leaders develop collaborative strategies that support NLC and for national governments to recognise the critical role they can play in encouraging and facilitating NLC as part of their prevention efforts.

## Key Themes

### Enhanced Dialogue as a Means to Overcome Mistrust and Exclusion in Cities

Lack of trust and credibility was a central theme throughout the workshop, as it presents a critical barrier to harnessing a whole-of-society approach in addressing hate and extremism. In discussing the challenges related to building trust, including between local governments and communities, participants emphasised that local leaders need to earn the trust of local communities and explored a variety of proactive measures for doing so, including giving residents an opportunity to provide input into local decision-making. To build productive relationships based on trust, it was noted that residents must feel like they can actively contribute to government decision-making, including through formal inclusive processes that produce concrete results.

Participants also discussed ways to promote transparency that can enhance awareness of local government-led efforts to address community challenges and reassure residents that government decisions or appointments are being made in response to their needs and priorities rather than “based on ethnic lines”. Discussions highlighted how when communities feel that ethnicity or political partisanship is driving government decisions, residents are less likely to be willing to share information with local leaders, which could be useful to prevention efforts. In both cases, participants emphasised that trust-building efforts should focus on local institutions, rather than a particular mayor or other specific individuals, as the community’s faith in governance systems should outlast the presence of any one person or administration.

Trust deficits not only affect community-municipality relations, but also cooperation between central and local governments and disrupt inter-communal relationships. Local leaders in attendance suggested that the reluctance among national level actors to empower them in addressing hate and extremism stems in part from a lack of trust in their capabilities. This mistrust is compounded by political differences and the tendency to allow partisan politics to influence the level of support (if any) provided to cities, particularly when it comes to issues that may be perceived to have a national security dimension.

Participants shared that inclusion and two-way communication were key considerations for building and repairing trust and suggested that existing dialogue mechanisms in the region, including ones used to prevent and address resource-driven conflicts, could be leveraged to enhance hate and extremism prevention efforts. For example, **Mayor Sulemana Salifu of Tamale, Ghana** said that his city established a peace council to mediate communal conflicts and promote dialogue between different groups. This body has addressed tensions fuelled by religious differences, tribal and nomadic farmers and cattle herder hostilities, and land disputes. It has also improved the community’s relationship with police and other security forces in Tamale.

Formal dialogue mechanisms provide an opportunity for all residents to have their voices heard, thus fostering a more inclusive approach to local governance and create opportunities for local government to build a rapport with different communities and involve them in resolving their challenges collaboratively. This approach can actively build trust while enabling the local government to leverage productive relationships, which can lead to greater willingness of community members to share information around hate and extremist threats with their local government. With local government better able to gather early warning information from community members, national governments might have more incentives to support their involvement in hate and extremism prevention work, which in turn will lead to enhanced NLC .

## City of Dori, Burkina Faso

**Challenge:** Dori is a culturally diverse city with Fulani, Tuareg and Gomatshé populations that shares borders with Niger and Mali. Deputy Mayor Ahmad Aziz Diallo shared that in the 1990s, the city experienced severe drought that led to conflict between farmers and herders, which was exacerbated by weak governance and lack of public services.



**Approach:** In response, the city established a structure for dialogue and conflict resolution, which has remained instrumental to peacebuilding efforts in the region to this day. This platform includes representatives from all major ethnic and religious groups, as well as CSOs. The representatives meet regularly to discuss issues of concern and develop joint-solutions that account for each group's priorities.

**Impact:** This mechanism has helped ensure fair and equitable water management, a scarce resource that is often a source of conflict between farmers and herders in the city. It has also been useful in developing protocols and mechanisms for peacefully moving livestock, a challenge that impacts relationships with bordering countries.

[www.facebook.com/communedori](https://www.facebook.com/communedori)

## Engaging Traditional Actors, Institutions and Approaches to Promote Credibility and Sustainability

A consistent theme across the workshop discussions was the critical role of indigenous and other traditional leaders in ensuring the success of efforts to address hate and extremism. Within a given community across coastal West Africa, traditional leaders – such as elders or chiefs – and faith and other community leaders, hold considerable influence and can often block local or national interventions that are seen to conflict with traditional community practices. **Mayor Seidou Baboudou of Mango, Togo** emphasised this when he noted, “If this hurdle is experienced, you are already too late [to ensure the success of your initiative]. It means that the right people were not involved in the design process of the project – a crucial stage that is essential for mitigating community resistance.” A CSO leader from Burkina Faso agreed, adding that local and national actors should have a network of religious and traditional influencers in each community and build in time to assess the role that culture and values will play when entering that space. Otherwise, resources can easily be wasted on interventions that are seen as taboo by the target community, even if it would, in theory, benefit from the programme(s).

“On the ground, we have a level of cooperation between central and local governments – but we need to take into account different traditional approaches, leaders and practices that enable us to mitigate issues of stigmatization, community hate and hate speech.”

Regis Batchassi, President, National Youth Council, Togo

Participants shared additional examples where traditional practices can be beneficial in building the credibility and sustainability of prevention initiatives at a local level. For example, **Mayor Etonam Flolu of Ve-Golokwati, Ghana** shared that his engagement with religious leaders has been a key component of his city's strategy to promote dialogue and understanding between different faith groups within the 11 traditional areas of his district. **Deputy Mayor Dijibril Amadou of the Municipality of Djougou, Benin** also underscored that working with religious leaders has helped his government address potential flashpoints caused by land title issues and conflicts between farmers and herders in the city's diverse community.

## Targeted Public Awareness Efforts Needed Through Credible Local Interlocutors and Media Channels

Participants discussed how effective and sustained communication between national and local actors is critical for NLC in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation in the region. In this context, they underscored the need to deepen local understanding in the region about hate and extremist threats and good practices for preventing and responding to them.

Discussions highlighted possible ways to increase awareness in local communities of the diversity of ongoing programmes, including ones with the "P/CVE" label, that can help address hate and extremist threats affecting residents. Some pointed to the benefit of having local "champions" in the community to inform relevant stakeholders about hate and extremism-related initiatives and gain their buy-in at an early stage. They also emphasised the importance of using existing public communication channels (e.g., local radio, media houses) and a mix of digital and traditional communication channels, to raise awareness and share critical information at the community level.

When considering communication mechanisms, participants noted the importance of recognising recipients' needs and preferences to ensure messages reach everyone. For example, **Deputy Mayor Dijibril Amadou from the Municipality of Djougou, Benin** shared that a large portion of his community cannot be reached through written communication, due to low levels of literacy. Instead, the city uses community radio programs, community meetings, town criers and community leaders, as well as video-based social media and WhatsApp campaigns to ensure relevant information reaches as many residents as possible.

While the discussions primarily focused on communication strategies for local government, participants noted that these lessons are applicable to national level actors as well. To this end, some participants suggested the valuable role CSOs can play in disseminating information passed down through local or national actors.

## City of Mango, Togo

- **Challenge:** Seidou Baboudou, Mayor of Mango, Togo recognised the need to ensure there was effective communication and information-sharing at all levels so that local security and development policies and initiatives could be effectively implemented in his municipality, even in harder to reach areas.
- **Approach:** The mayor has worked directly with youth organisations and women to sensitise local populations on important issues and developments. For example, in each local community, a women executive is appointed, and all these executives meet at the village level to share key information emerging from their districts. This supplements existing communication channels, such as the national government's TV broadcasts, the three major radio outlets in Mango and their municipality's work with its local media house and NGOs.
- **Impact:** This approach has allowed for greater awareness among women and youth of hate and extremism-related efforts and enhanced their direct engagement and influence on these processes.



## Inclusive, Multi-Stakeholder Approaches Needed to Enhance NLC

Moving forward, participants made it clear that there needs to be greater emphasis placed on inclusive multi-stakeholder approaches to addressing violent extremism and related threats, underscoring the limits of a security-dominated one. **Souhaibata Barry, Mass Communications Specialist, Association APED**, shared the importance of localised networks and focal points in each community ahead of implementing hate and extremism prevention initiatives to ensure they are culturally sensitive and address local needs. Civil society can help play that critical role. Therefore, a multi-stakeholder approach must include a and clarify the role for these actors. CSOs rarely have a formalised position within government strategies at any level, leaving these organisations to work primarily in silo with international donors whose objectives do not always align with national or local government strategies. This parallel way of working can also lead to redundancies due to poor coordination and foster a sense of competition leading to mistrust and resentment.

Participants shared that CSOs were a critical node for engagement local communities in hate and extremism prevention work. However, there were disagreements voiced, including between CSOs and government officials, as to the appropriate role of CSOs and what capacity-building and other support they need to work effectively. If left unresolved, these could stand in the way of an effective whole-of-society approach. Clarifying and capturing their role in the relevant national framework can reduce tensions between CSOs and government officials and provide the former with clear protocols for supporting government strategies and providing for their beneficiaries.

Participants shared efforts that are being undertaken to ensure better coordination in their municipalities, but more work remains to be done. For example, **Mayor Monoka Lare of the Municipality of Tandjoaré, Togo** spoke to the role the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Preventing and Combating Violent Extremism (CIPLEV) has played in engaging different sectors and stakeholders in initiatives to address hate and extremism. Mayor Lare highlighted his work to shift



away from nationally-driven kinetic approaches to more participatory ones that foster peace. Through mechanisms like CIPLEV, he has been able to engage with different stakeholders and sectors to develop solutions.

## Dedicated Pools of Funding are Required to Strengthen NLC to Address Hate and Extremism

Limited or lack of funding, resourcing and capacity were common and consistent barriers raised throughout the discussions. **Juliet Sale, Regional Director for West Africa, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa**, stressed that “the man with the money and power is sitting somewhere else, that is not the local level.” Participants agreed that dedicated pools of funding are needed to sustain and build political will around local efforts to address hate and extremism and develop empowerment initiatives for groups most susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment of extremist or other violence groups. For example, local authorities generally lack the necessary equipment, expertise and funding to effectively respond to threats and implement sustainable initiatives. Lack of resources also limits their ability to develop and support economic empowerment, cultural and sport programs that are needed to help to steer young people in their cities away from violent and unproductive paths offered by extremist groups and that can lead to violence. **Mayor Flolu, Municipality of Ve-Golokwati, Ghana**, spoke to this point, noting that his city has invested in initiatives that promote job creation and economic empowerment in his community.

Participants also noted the need for training, especially for local officials, to increase their understanding of local threats and good practice in how to address them. They also stressed the need for more support in NLC specifically, including dedicated training on resources such as the NLC Toolkit and tailored support to develop local strategies and initiatives that will support a sustained whole-of-society approach to preventing and responding to hate and extremism. **Douglas Annoful, Chief Coordinating Director of Accra’s Metropolitan Assembly** emphasised this in his opening remarks, noting the need to build the capacity of local leaders to identify and respond to early signs of extremism.

## Next Steps

Strong Cities, in partnership with WACCE, is finalising a comprehensive NLC Mapping Report on coastal West Africa, which will include key findings from this workshop and further research and consultations conducted in the region. Strong Cities will continue to provide support to city officials and practitioners across the region, including through resources such as the [NLC Implementation Toolkit](#) and its guides for [mayors](#) and [city officials](#), all of which are based on input from cities across the world. These resources are now available in Arabic, English and French on Strong Cities’ online [Resource Hub](#).

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