



Strong Cities Network
Fourth Global Summit
19—21 September 2023

Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Mayoral Meeting

New York City, USA
21 September 2023



Summary

On 19 — 21 September 2023, Strong Cities Network held its [Fourth Global Summit](#) in New York City, which brought together over 240 participants, including city leaders and practitioners representing more than 115 cities from 50 countries globally. The Summit featured 11 events and provided city officials from diverse contexts with the opportunity to share and learn from promising practices for city-led prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation. **Read the event report [here](#).**

The programme included a Mayoral Meeting that convened 150+ mayors, governors and other local leaders from across the world. Hosted by New York City Mayor Eric Adams at Gracie Mansion, the meeting spotlighted the role of mayors in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation, and was inspired by both Mayor Adams' commitments to fostering social cohesion in what is one of the biggest and most diverse cities in the world, as well different examples of mayoral leadership in building resilient and inclusive cities from across Strong Cities' global membership and beyond. The

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meeting follows a series of mayoral engagements that Strong Cities organised in the past year in recognition of these inspiring practices and in preparation for the production of [A Guide for Mayors](#), which provides case studies, recommendations and practical guidance to help mayors prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation. The Guide was launched at the Global Summit alongside [A Guide for Cities](#), which provides guidance for local governments on how they can enhance city-led efforts against these threats.

The meeting opened with remarks by **Asmaa Rhlalou, Mayor of Rabat (Morocco)**, who also serves as a co-chair of Strong Cities' revitalised International Steering Committee. Mayor Rhlalou set the tone for the meeting by emphasising the importance of empowering cities to address hate, extremism and polarisation, noting that it is mayors and the local governments they lead that are confronted directly with the societal consequences of these threats, and that it is they who have the necessary proximity to communities to prevent such threats from taking root in the first place. This was reiterated by **Ylva Johansson, European Union Commissioner for Home Affairs**, who told the audience of city leaders that “we need to hear your voices on a global level”, further adding that the EU, as a generous sponsor of the Global Summit and Strong Cities' global portfolio of programmes, is committed to supporting local action against hate, extremism and polarisation. **Mayor Adams** followed the Commissioner's remarks by acknowledging that there is a lot that mayors can learn from one another, stating that a mayor's “goal should not be to outrun the problem, but to take care of it” and that this is done “by exchanging good practice and cross-pollinating ideas” with other local leaders.

Spotlight: New York City Mayoral Declaration

The Meeting featured a signing by Mayor Adams and Mayor Rhlalou of the **New York City Mayoral Declaration**, which enumerates a series of practical steps that endorsing mayors can take to address threats of hate, extremism and polarisation while promoting human rights. At the time of the Meeting, the Declaration, which remains open for endorsements, had already been endorsed by 105 mayors from across the world.



Mayors as Investors in Communities

Throughout the Meeting, mayors and other city leaders shared examples of how they and the local governments they lead are investing in policies and programmes that seek to build resilience and social cohesion. In **New York City**, for example, the Mayor has partnered with his [Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes](#) (OPHC) and his [Community Affairs Unit](#) to deliver a “[Breaking Bread, Building Bonds](#)” initiative that brings different community groups together to “learn about common

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bonds [and] share cultures and traditions”. As noted by **Hassan Naveed, Executive Director, OPHC**, the Mayor has also invested in partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) through allocating USD 2.7 million in funding to six “anchor organisations” that have credibility with the communities most often targeted by hate and can work with them to prevent hate across the city. New York City Deputy Commissioner for International Affairs, Kristen Kauffman noted how through these and other city initiatives, the city has seen a 16% drop in hate crimes since Mayor Adams entered office.

“As mayors, we have to lean into the diversity of our cities and help people understand it is our strength.”

Eric Adams, Mayor of New York City, USA

Dedicated Programmes for Marginalised and/or Disenfranchised Groups

One of the many ways in which mayors can build social cohesion is through driving dedicated city-led programmes for marginalised and/or otherwise disenfranchised groups.

For example, **Wilson Sanya, Mayor of Koboko (Uganda)** shared how, under his leadership, the City has invested in community-based partnerships to support refugees, particularly amidst rising levels of anti-refugee and anti-migrant sentiment. He shared that, as a border town, Koboko has a significant number of refugees who pass through every year, some of whom stay and some of whom move on, but that he considers each one his responsibility. To support them, he has invested in partnerships with CSOs to provide them with employability training and psychosocial support. This is supplemented with efforts to bring refugees together with long-term residents to facilitate social integration. To mitigate anti-refugee scapegoating, Mayor Sanya has also invested in campaigns to demonstrate that refugees are an integral component of the local economy and that they offer the city opportunities for growth. He shared that he is driven, in part, by his own refugee background and that he taps into this experience to ensure refugees are appropriately integrated into Kobokan society.

In **Katowice (Poland)**, **Mayor Marcin Krupa** has similarly driven efforts to support the integration of refugees, sharing how they have established physical welcome centres throughout the city where refugees can immediately seek medical and other assistance upon arrival. The City has additionally mobilised over 200 volunteers to help distribute aid to refugees, and has organised Polish language classes, cultural exchanges and more as a means to foster their social integration. Psychological support, professional advice and therapy are also all made available by the City to ensure refugees have access to as comprehensive a support package as possible upon their arrival in Katowice.

In addition, **Gladys Wanga, Governor of Homabay County (Kenya)** shared how she has invested heavily in young people, in recognition of the county’s large youth population and that many are

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unemployed, leaving them idle, disenfranchised and looking for potentially dangerous ways to occupy their time. To prevent this from escalating further, the County Government has, under her leadership, invested in youth entrepreneurship training and supplemented this with small grants that enable them to take their business ideas forward. This empowers them economically and demonstrates that the Governor and local government are there to provide for them.

Creating Forums for Community Engagement

Examples were also shared of how mayors can create safe spaces to help marginalised communities feel heard. In **Victoria (Canada)**, for example, the Mayor's Office has focused heavily on reconciliation with Indigenous communities, launching a [City Family](#) reconciliation programme in 2017 that brings Indigenous leaders together with city council members, community members and others to ensure Indigenous nations have a forum in which to share their views, inform city policies, raise concerns and jointly brainstorm ways forward. **Mayor Marianne Alto**, who has continued her predecessor's initiative, shared how this approach helps "lift up disenfranchised groups" by showing them that mayors are willing to create and maintain dedicated spaces for and with them where they can safely share their needs and priorities. The existence of this space for Indigenous nations has been particularly important given rising levels of anti-Indigenous hate in the city.

Ravi Bhalla, Mayor of Hoboken (New Jersey, USA) and his city have made similar efforts to ensure communities that are often targets of hate have mechanisms through which to safely and proactively raise their concerns to the mayor and local government more broadly. In particular, he shared how the City of Hoboken invested in constant communications with the local Jewish community after a spate of antisemitic incidents. This now enables the Jewish community to proactively raise concerns with the mayor and the City, including with law enforcement, which can then implement additional security measures (e.g., deploying more officers around synagogues) as needed.

Technology can also be used to enhance city-led community engagement efforts, as shared by **Youssef Al-Shawarbeh, Mayor of Amman (Jordan)**. Under his leadership, Greater Amman Municipality has invested in more transparent and regular communication with residents. This includes through pioneering an innovative platform called [Amman is Listening](#), which provides residents with interactive maps of the city that can help them report where there are gaps in public service delivery, if they have safety concerns, and more. The aim is to turn the platform into a one-stop repository of all the Municipality's open data, to ensure transparency with residents and to demonstrate that the Municipality is dedicated to evidence-driven and community-informed urban development. Importantly, recognising that not all residents can access the maps from within their homes (e.g., due to lack of internet bandwidth), the Municipality has also installed the maps at public landmarks and in community centres.

These are but a few examples of how mayors and other city leaders have invested in communities to build resilience and social cohesion. Importantly, mayors shared that the intention behind such programmes alone can make a difference: by allocating resources specifically to bringing communities together, supporting marginalised or otherwise disenfranchised communities, among

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other examples, mayors can increase trust in their leadership and in the local government more broadly, build meaningful relationships that can then inform future policies and programmes and, perhaps most importantly, demonstrate that they truly serve all their residents. As **Alexander Vandersmissen, Mayor of Mechelen (Belgium)** stated, “if you do not invest in your communities, they will feel like they are not full residents and that the city does not care for them”. The mayor further added that Mechelen itself experienced a 50% decrease in its crime rate in the past ten years in part as a result of the community-oriented approach to governance that the City has taken.

Mayors as Messengers of Positive Values

Throughout the Meeting, mayors also stressed the important role they play, as individuals, in promoting a culture of inclusivity and tolerance in their cities. This includes through how they speak with the public, with **Mayor Vandersmissen** noting that every time “we [as mayors] meet people, the tone of voice and inclusivity of what we say makes a difference”, but also symbolically, in how mayors and their administrations choose to acknowledge different traditions and communities. **Mayor Bhalla** shared, for example, that he has overseen many flag-raising, whether it is the pride flag or a country flag, all with the intention of showing that Hoboken is “an opening and welcoming community where you can express pride in your identity”. **Matus Vallo, Mayor of Bratislava (Slovakia)** similarly shared that he tries to ensure equal attention is given to all communities in his city, where he and the local government make an explicit effort to acknowledge all the different faith and cultural traditions of residents, for example. There are multiple ways mayors can do so: posting a message on social media to acknowledge a tradition, visiting the community as they celebrate, asking the community what they need to be able to celebrate safely, and so on.

“A mayor must be the force that brings people together.”

Tim Kelly, Mayor of Chattanooga (Tennessee), USA

Mayors and other city leaders further observed that, in addition to driving community-based programmes such as those shared above, they can build trust with communities simply by being visible leaders that are accessible to their residents. This was emphasised by **Benjamina Karic, Mayor of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**, who shared that she constantly tries to be among the people to demonstrate that she is truly in office to serve their needs. This includes concerted efforts to personally visit victims of hate and other crimes. **Dontario Hardy, Mayor of Kinston (North Carolina), USA** similarly shared that mayors can ensure “all segments of society have a voice” by meeting directly with communities to understand their needs. Reflecting on his eight years (2008-2016) as Mayor of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), USA, Michael Nutter underscored this as well.

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Several mayors also shared how they have dealt with moments of heightened tension through actively engaging – in a calm and considered manner - those who may be fuelling those tensions. **Mayor Kelly** shared, for example, that after launching the [Chattanooga Climate Action Plan](#), disinformation campaigns spread across the city, which questioned the need for the Plan and the evidence behind climate change as a whole. Rather than belittle those purporting these narratives, Mayor Kelly and other city officials met with them to explain “in easier language” the rationale for the Plan. The purpose of this engagement was not to validate the conspiracies, but to open a channel of communication with those proliferating disinformation, with a view to increase understanding as to why the City produced an Action Plan and debunk some of the conspiracies as a result.

Further, mayors play a role in setting the tone for a City’s response to more explicit crises like hate crimes and terrorism. This was the case in **Highland Park (Illinois), USA** where **Mayor Nancy Rotering** re-emphasised the City’s Statement Against Hate in the aftermath of a 4 July 2022 shooting that killed seven and injured countless more. Being able to refer to the statement, which is housed on [the City’s website](#), was important to remind residents that, despite this incident of violence, the City of Highland Park is welcome to all its residents. **William Peduto, Former Mayor of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), USA**, added that the community-oriented response he oversaw to the 2017 terrorist attack that targeted the city’s Jewish community, which was based around partnerships with theological seminaries and community-based organisations, was vital in unifying the city post-crisis.

Mayors as Amplifiers of Local Voices

Finally, there was consensus amongst speakers that mayors should seek to amplify local voices nationally and globally. Mayors can serve as interlocutors between their communities and national governments and relevant international stakeholders, sharing with them key concerns and needs related to hate and extremist threats and challenges and thus informing national and international frameworks for prevention and response.

“As mayors, we bear responsibility for what occurs in our cities, even within the confines of our limited jurisdictions.”

Lara Zara, Mayor of Al Qosh District, Nineveh Province, Iraq

Speakers observed that the role of mayors as amplifiers is particularly important in light of the evolving threat landscape, with the Mayoral Meeting itself shedding light on the number of challenges mayors are dealing with, often with little to no support from national governments. This includes the rise of hate speech, which was shared by **Mayor Zara, Mayor Hardy** and others as a key concern of local governments as it has led to violence and will continue to do so. Importantly, the proliferation of hate speech online and its implications offline is a concern that was raised not

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only in the Mayoral Meeting, but throughout the Fourth Global Summit. Mayors and other city officials continue to report that they feel ill-equipped to deal with hate speech, stressing the urgency to be supported to do so given the very real impact it has on the communities that are most targeted by hateful narratives.

Further, **Daithi de Róiste, Lord Mayor of Dublin (Ireland)** added that mayors and other city officials are increasingly targeted with threats of violence themselves, sharing an example of gallows being drawn up outside a Dublin City Council member's office. Women local leaders are also often targeted, as noted by **Elizabeth Sackey, Mayor of Accra (Ghana)**, who commented from her experience as the first woman mayor of Accra in 125 years.

What's Next?

This meeting placed the spotlight on mayoral leadership against hate, extremism and polarisation, recognising that mayors and the local governments they lead are a vital component of the whole-of-society approach to these threats that is globally considered as best practice. The practices shared throughout the half-day event are but a few examples of how mayors and city leaders have committed to building social cohesion.

“Networking and sharing ideas with other mayors, both nationally and internationally, offers tremendous value.”

Berry Vrbanovic, Mayor of Kitchener (Canada)

Strong Cities will continue to support mayoral leadership in prevention, including by continuing to ensure mayors have a space at Strong Cities' activities to exchange practices and inspire one another. This includes through a new dedicated stream of work to engage mayors and cities across North America in partnership with the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, which will bring North American mayors together for further sharing and learning.

Strong Cities will also disseminate **A Guide for Mayors**, providing catered support to mayors globally to apply the guidance therein. The Guide, which is a live document, will also be updated regularly to ensure that innovative practices and learnings are captured and distributed.

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“Cities are essential partners in combatting hate, polarisation and extremism... while national governments often respond with law enforcement, cities can offer a broader societal response”.

Ambassador Nina Hachigan, Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy, US Department of State

In addition, Strong Cities will build on its engagements with the United Nations (UN), Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and other multilateral partners to jointly meet some of the needs that emerged in the Mayoral Meeting and throughout the Fourth Global Summit. This includes a partnership with the UN to build an action plan for cities on addressing hate speech.

Donors & Partners

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Strong Cities is also grateful to the Mayor Eric Adams of New York City for hosting the Mayoral Meeting, and to Hassan Naveed, Executive Director of OPHC, Kristen Kauffman, the Mayor's Deputy Commissioner of International Affairs; the Mayor's Protocol Team and Gracie Mansion staff for their support in making this event happen.

The views expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of all workshop participants, Strong Cities, all its members, Summit partners nor sponsors.

Contact Us

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