



Strong Cities Network
Fourth Global Summit
19—21 September 2023

Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Unlocking the Potential of Cities to Contribute to Whole-of-Society Efforts to Rehabilitate and Reintegrate Returnees from Conflict Zones

New York City, USA
20 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](#).**

As part of this three-day programme, Strong Cities hosted a workshop on "Unlocking the Potential of Cities to Contribute to Whole-of-Society Efforts to Rehabilitate and Reintegrate Returnees from Conflict Zones", which brought together more than 50 mayors, local government officials and frontline practitioners to share good practices and lessons learned on rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R).

The workshop was informed by findings from Strong Cities' engagements with cities, which has shown that local governments across the world are concerned about their ability to effectively and

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sustainably reintegrate returnees from conflict zones, whether this relates to those who travelled to join the Islamic State (ISIS) or otherwise. While local government representatives agreed that cities need to be involved in R&R, many shared they are not included in related national frameworks and processes. Moreover, they commented how, where they are included, they are not adequately empowered and/or equipped to play the role envisioned for them.

This workshop sought to address these challenges by highlighting different examples of city-led R&R efforts and internationally recognised good practices and guidance, which local governments looking to become engaged in R&R can draw lessons from and contextualise for their own efforts and purposes.

Introducing R&R and the Role of Cities

The event opened with recognition of the complexities of R&R. **Fionnuala Ni Aolain, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism**, reiterated that one-size-fits-all templates in response to this challenge are inadequate given the unique experiences per returnee. This related both to the reasons they travelled to conflict zones and their experiences while there, including with the process of being repatriated. She added that R&R must also take a gender-sensitive approach, recognising that the experiences of men, women and children will differ significantly and that they will have different needs.



Further, **Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. Department of State, Ian Moss**, emphasised the need for whole-of-society responses that include national and local governments, civil society organisations and local communities. He called on all states to work together to address pressing issues around repatriation and develop human rights-compliant responses where national and local governments consult with and include communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) as critical partners in R&R. This includes working together to overcome barriers to effective R&R, such as stigma and a lack of community preparedness for 'receiving' returnees.

In this context, participants highlighted the need for more city-centred approaches to R&R, recognising that local governments are a vital component of truly whole-of-society efforts for R&R by virtue of a) their proximity to the communities into which returnees will reintegrate and b) their mandate to provide basic public service delivery, which returnees will require (e.g., housing, education, psychosocial support). However, the point was made that many cities lack the mandate,

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expertise, resources and, more broadly, institutional capacity to realise their full potential in this area.

To help address this gap and build the capacity of cities to get involved, the workshop featured an introduction to practical tools and guidelines that cities can use to support their R&R efforts. For instance, **Samira Benz, Strong Cities Advisor and former Head of the Returnee Coordination Unit at the Berlin Senate Department for the Interior and Sports** presented [Ten Lessons Learned](#) from Berlin's R&R experience relevant for other cities. This provides cities with practical steps for setting up an R&R coordination mechanism, including for example, appointing a single point of contact embedded within the local government to coordinate multiple actors such as social workers, community-based organisations, police and others to ensure the appropriate support is provided to returnees upon their arrival in the city. It also highlights how local governments can a) enhance awareness amongst community-based organisations of the complexities of R&R, b) enable the necessary information sharing among stakeholders, taking care to protect individual privacy rights while ensuring prompt and efficient case management, c) engage families and d) sustain these efforts by securing financial and human resources.

Participants were also introduced to internationally recognised R&R models. This includes the [5Rs Model for R&R of Women and Children](#), which was presented by **Heidi Ellis, Director of the Trauma and Community Resilience Center at Boston Children's Hospital** and **Stevan Weine, Professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago**. The 5R Framework takes the position – based on research on a wide range of programmes and literature from different fields – that R&R is in fact better described as operating across the '5 Rs' of repatriation, resettlement, reintegration, rehabilitation and resilience. The framework includes a theory of change and a logic model that elaborates the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes for each of these five domains, as well as a 5R outcomes measure that can be used for monitoring and evaluating such efforts. The framework, which is designed to be easily catered to different contexts, combined with the Ten Lessons Learned from the Berlin experience, offers an important resource for cities that seek to improve or implement R&R related initiatives.

Putting the Spotlight on City-Led R&R Efforts

After being introduced to the latest trends in R&R practice, participants were provided with the opportunity to learn from existing local government-led efforts to provide human-rights compliant and trauma-informed R&R support for returnees from conflict zones.

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John McCoy, Executive Director of the Organisation for the Prevention of Violence (OPV), shared that the **City of Edmonton (Canada)**, with funding from the Canadian federal government and support from his organisation, is using the 5R Framework to ensure evidence-based provision of robust trauma-informed and psychosocial support to returnees. A key aspect of the approach is the City's partnership with educational institutions, in which the City and OPV prepare schools to receive repatriated children and to proactively mitigate stigma and prejudice when they attend classes. He reported that their ability to recover, persist and socialise with peers, particularly in light of the hardships they have faced, is vital to their overall rehabilitation. However, he cautioned that external factors such as arrest warrants for returnees' parents can disrupt the 5Rs process, noting that R&R is not a 'quick fix', and that setbacks are commonplace. He concluded that cities should therefore be prepared to invest in R&R efforts long-term, noting that in some cases, it takes years for individuals to truly engage in the process (and be receptive to support) because of the deep trauma they have experienced.

Perparim Rama Mayor of Prishtina (Kosovo) elaborated on the integrated approach his city has taken to R&R, particularly in the context of Kosovo being one of the few countries to voluntarily and publicly repatriate more than 120 of its citizens from Syria and Iraq, with around 50 resettled in Prishtina. The City's approach involves regular and consistent cooperation among the Ministry of the Interior (particularly its National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons), law enforcement and various municipal departments, including for Social Affairs, Education, and its newly established Directorate for Security and Emergencies.

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Mayor Rama pointed out that assessing their motives for leaving and joining terrorist groups abroad is critical for developing a needs-based R&R plan. In order to reduce recidivism among returnees, he argued that institutional actors, especially at the local level, need to have the capacity to support their disengagement from violence. To this end, Prishtina developed several tools and manuals for frontline actors as well as multidisciplinary working groups across different regions supporting R&R while at the same time building capacities. Support is prioritised for children, ensuring their prompt access to essential educational and social services and psychosocial support. All female returnees serve conditional sentences of up to three years. This is closely monitored by the parole and probation service and is part of comprehensive R&R efforts that include specialised programmes on parenting and vocational training. This has resulted in many of them venturing into entrepreneurship and starting their own businesses.

The Vice Governor of East Java (Indonesia), Emil Elestianto Dardak, shared that his province adopted a community-based approach to R&R which is coupled with economic empowerment and the promotion of the Islamic principles of tolerance and harmony. The Provincial Government has recognised that successful R&R often depends on the host communities, particularly that if they are not accepted by their communities, the risk of return to extremist groups is increased. Therefore, he said that the East Java Provincial Government's approach to R&R also includes community and family engagement efforts where the government works with both stakeholders to build their confidence and willingness to support the reintegration process. To further facilitate communal receptiveness to 'receiving' returnees, returning individuals are also encouraged to pledge to uphold the laws of the country and commit to a path of Islam that is both peaceful and harmonious.

Fleur de Braaf, Policy Officer in the Security Department at the Municipality of The Hague (The Netherlands), shared that, faced with the highest number of returnees across The Netherlands, the City's response is coordinated the pre-existing Care and Safety House model. This is a collaborative structure involving the police, public prosecutors, and local authorities that is also used for the broader prevention of hate and extremism. It is ideologically agnostic and employs a person-centric approach to work with individuals that have radicalised to violence. Currently, the City mostly engages women and children returnees, while also providing support to returnee adults in prison to ensure a relationship between the City and incarcerated individuals is established ahead of their reintegration, to then facilitate smooth and prompt R&R upon their release. The city believes that, although measuring impact is not straightforward, its approach is generally successful as there has been no known 're-radicalisation' so far. De Braaf further shared that she believes this success lies partially in the city leveraging an existing multi-actor coordination mechanism – the Care and Safety House – to support this effort. This means relevant actors already have trusted relationships with each other and information-sharing and other collaboration protocols in place, which they can then continue to apply as they take on R&R case work.

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Key learnings from these city-led R&R efforts include:

- **Embrace a multi-actor response that considers the individualised experiences and needs of returnees:** A multifaceted approach to R&R that is sensitive to individual experiences and gender-specific needs while complying with basic human rights is crucial, with strategies ensuring involvement from local and national governmental entities, as well as civil society and local communities.
- **Enable cities to tap into their full potential in R&R:** City governments play a crucial role in R&R due to their proximity to communities and responsibility for vital public services. However, limitations in resources, expertise, and mandate are necessary for cohesive, community-supported R&R strategies. Additionally, networking with similarly affected cities is essential, enabling the exchange of strategies and learnings. This not only helps in understanding common challenges and identifying resourceful solutions but also fortifies both individual and collective R&R efforts, enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of responses by leveraging shared knowledge and coordinated actions.
- **Invest in long-term strategies that incorporate and localise existing R&R tools:** Employing structured frameworks, like the 5Rs Model, which encompasses various facets of R&R, and adapting them to local contexts, is vital. Experiences from various cities underscored the necessity of integrating such models with local adaptations and robust community engagement efforts to ensure holistic and sustainable reintegration processes.

What's Next?

Strong Cities will build on the momentum of this workshop to support cities with continued learning opportunities on R&R. This includes through expert support provided by Strong Cities Special Advisor, Samira Benz, amongst other experts, and focusing more attention on R&R issues in existing Strong Cities efforts, such as the [Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative](#) and regular regional workshops hosted by Strong Cities [Regional Hubs](#). Strong Cities will also use both its Ten Lessons Guide and – given the importance of national-local cooperation (NLC) in R&R – the [toolkit](#) Strong Cities developed on behalf of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to facilitate the implementation of the GCTF's 13 good practices for P/CVE-related NLC to support this effort.

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