



# Strategy

## 2023 – 2025

**Strong Cities**  
Network



## OUR VISION

**The vision of the Strong Cities Network is to catalyse greater involvement of cities in preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation and elevate their role in global approaches to these issues.**



# Contents

About Strong Cities	2
Our Rationale	4
Our Vision	6
Theory of Change	8
Our Strategic Priorities	10
Geographic Scope	12
Leadership and Management	13
How Strong Cities Works	16
Guiding Principles	18
Membership	19
Operations and Financing	21



# About Strong Cities

Launched at the United Nations in 2015, the Strong Cities Network is an independent global network of more than 200 cities and other local governments dedicated to addressing all forms of hate, extremism and polarisation at a local level.<sup>1</sup>

The Network fills a critical gap in efforts that have traditionally overlooked the unique roles that sub-national governments can play in preventing and responding to these threats, complementing both existing security-led measures and grassroots efforts led by civil society stakeholders.

Since its formation, the Network has primarily delivered capacity development initiatives emphasising multi-stakeholder prevention capacities at a municipal level, drawing on international good practices tailored to the local context and informed by lessons learned from other cities. From these and other engagements, Strong Cities has identified and disseminated good practices on city-led prevention and response efforts both amongst its members and more broadly.

Strong Cities now seeks to expand its reach and enhance its impact, while also ensuring its sustainability. This Strategy (2023 – 2025) provides the overall rationale and priorities for the Network, including its International Steering Committee and Management Unit. It is shaped by the priorities identified by its diverse global membership.

<sup>1</sup> Strong Cities uses ‘cities’ as a broad term to refer to all variations of sub-national authorities with which we engage, from capital cities and counties to rural towns and smaller municipalities.







# Our Rationale



## Why Cities?

Local governments of all sizes provide public services and are uniquely placed to understand and engage with their communities. Not only do they witness how wider tensions and conflicts play out locally, but they also bear the brunt of extremist and hate-motivated violence that disproportionately targets communities and infrastructure in urban areas. Equally, for residents, the main points of engagement with government are likely to be when they access services and interact at the local level.

Local resources and administration models vary, but around the world there are an array of social, public health, youth-related, business-oriented, cultural and educational functions that local governments hold that offer potential for enhancing social cohesion

and community well-being. Even for those that do not have dedicated public safety functions, local governments can build trusted relationships with the goal of strengthening inclusivity, participation and social cohesion while breaking down segregation, hate and polarisation.

Realising this potential can make an immediate, more sustainable and very practical difference to the peace and security of local communities the world over.



## What Cities Say They Need

**Our cities say they need to establish strong relationships with their national governments,** so that national policy can translate into local action and so that local realities inform better policy. This requires establishing a mandate for cities to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation at the local level. There is also a need for effective national-local coordination mechanisms.

**Our cities say they need to be able to address their challenges through holistic local prevention and response mechanisms,** making sure that relevant services and stakeholders build and deliver their work in communities with the goal of long-term resilience and cohesion, not a quick fix. This requires support to help build multi-stakeholder and whole-of-society ways of working that are non-discriminatory and non-stigmatising.

**Our cities say they need to feel connected to their counterparts,** both in regions where they share similar challenges and contextual realities and those where things may be done very differently. They want to access and understand good practices and learnings from elsewhere so that successes are replicated in a tailored manner and mistakes are not repeated. They want an active, facilitated network identifying priorities, sharing experiences and expertise and tackling the isolation that cities face when trying to confront these challenges.

**Our cities say they need capacity-building support** and resourcing, both technical and financial, to engage youth, women, minorities and marginalised communities and those most at risk but also often with most to offer when it comes to informed, targeted and effective approaches.

**Our cities say they need their voices heard** and they need to be recognised and taken seriously at national, regional and global levels in a field too often dominated by security actors and international organisations. This requires partnerships at all levels opening new platforms to mayors, governors and local civic leaders who have an unparalleled understanding of the realities on the ground.

# Our Vision

Strong Cities' vision is to **catalyse greater involvement of cities in preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation and elevate their role in national, regional and global approaches to these issues.**

This vision is underpinned by four core premises:

1

Hate, extremism and polarisation are often locally rooted threats, driven by local political, social and economic grievances, which are used to recruit and mobilise others to violence.

2

This localisation means that cities have a legitimate interest in being involved in efforts to safeguard communities and strengthen local security.

3

Although cities do possess a range of capacities and relationships which can be drawn upon to help prevent and respond to these challenges, there are currently gaps as well as a need for greater coordination.

4

Access to expertise and learning from their counterparts around the world ensures that mayors are more informed, connected and influential, and that the efforts of local governments and practitioners are more effective.







# Theory of Change

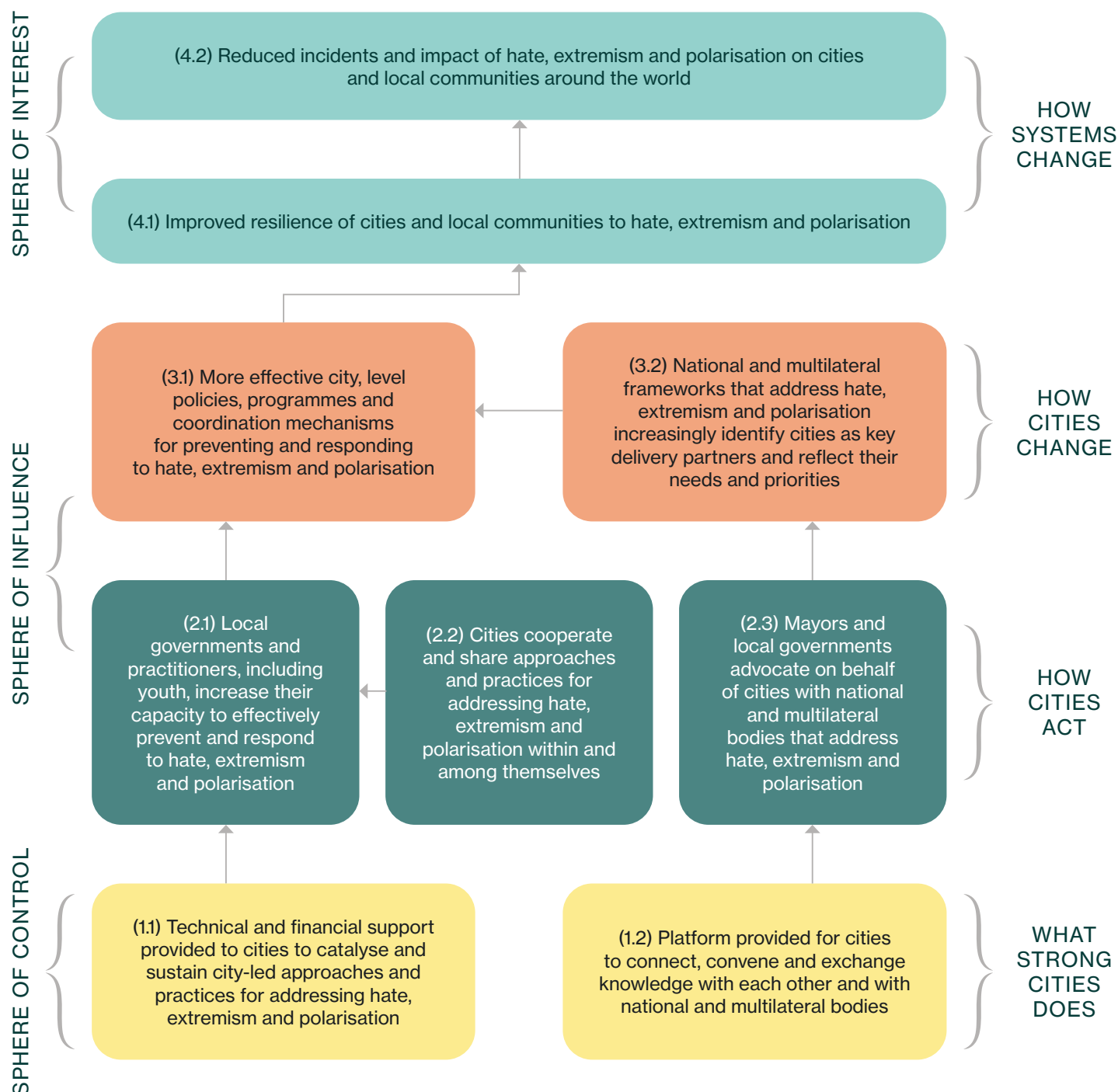
Drawing on these premises, Strong Cities will contribute to reducing hate, extremism and polarisation through a range of activities designed to influence how cities act and how they promote peace and security.

The underlying theory is that enabling cities to connect and exchange learning while providing them with accompanying technical and financial support increases their capacity to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation, ultimately resulting in more effective policies, programmes and systems.

Similarly, supporting mayors to advocate on behalf of cities strengthens their influence and thus increases the degree to which national and multilateral frameworks for addressing hate, extremism and polarisation reflect the perspectives of cities and identify them as key partners. Achieving these outcomes contributes to the resilience of cities and communities, thereby reducing incidents of hate, extremism and polarisation, and when such incidents do occur, limiting their social and economic consequences.







The full Theory of Change for Strong Cities can be found on our website.

# Our Strategic Priorities



1

Strengthen interaction among cities within and across different country and regional contexts to allow for local leaders and governments with shared interests to learn from each other.



2

Promote effective national-local coordination to ensure that relevant national policies and programmes are informed by local government needs and priorities and facilitate more local ownership and thus local application of them.





3

Support cities to develop or strengthen mandates and programmes to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation, which leverage the range of local services, interests, networks and skills that exist within cities.



4

Enhance engagement between cities and young people so that youth have the skills, confidence and opportunity to engage with local governments and that cities in turn have the frameworks, understanding and tools for policy and practice that is participatory and representative.



5

Elevate the voices and leadership of mayors and other local leaders at regional and international levels, so that national and multilateral approaches are connected to and better understand the realities on the ground.





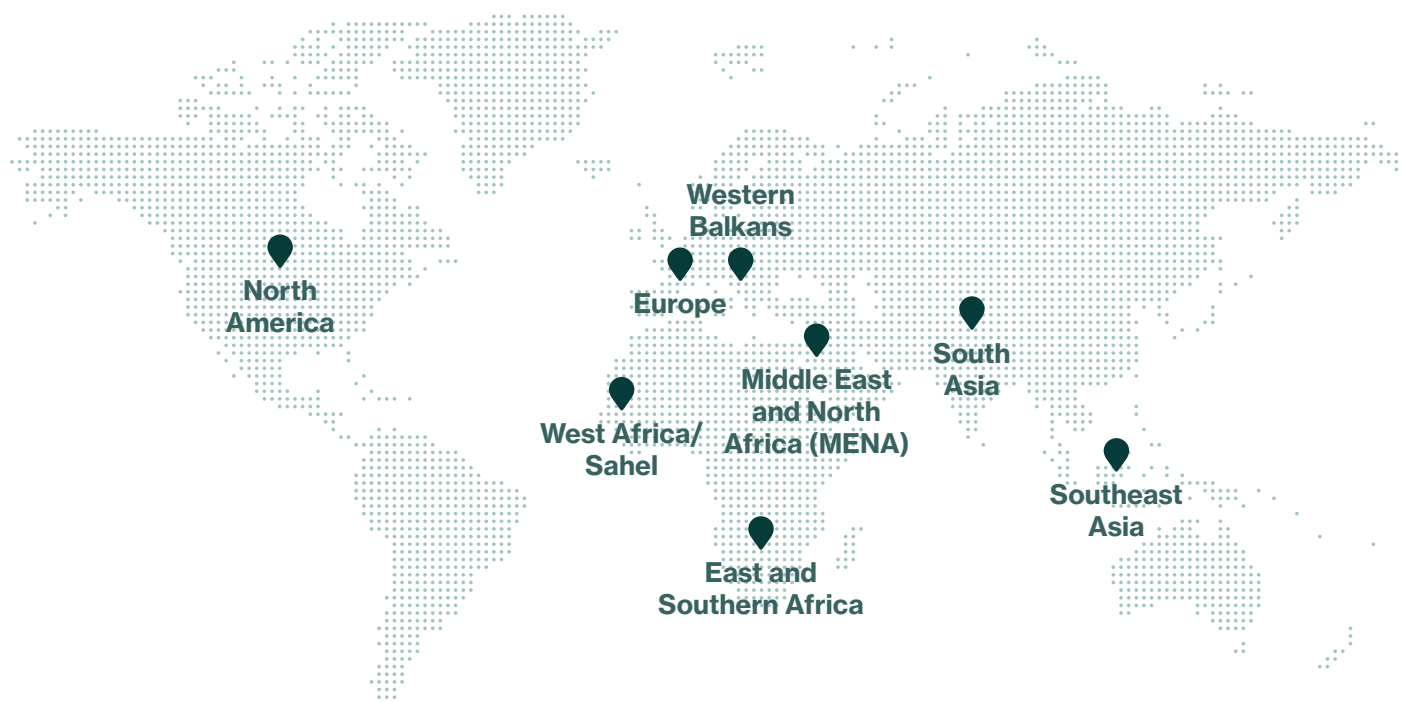


# Geographic Scope

Strong Cities' membership is global and includes cities in different geographic contexts. It is this diversity that provides a major strength of the Network; it means that wherever a city is located, including if it is in a remote region of a country, there will be other cities that have similar interests, capacities and needs. Strong Cities recognises and responds to the differences in capacities and local contexts reflected across its membership and cities more broadly; its engagement and wider approach is calibrated accordingly.



In delivering this 2023 – 2025 strategy, there is a particular focus on the following regions:



In addition, there is a focus on strengthening transatlantic cooperation between mayors and other local leaders and the local governments they lead in Europe and North America.

# Leadership and Management



## International Steering Committee

The International Steering Committee (ISC) provides overall strategic direction to the Network. It is co-chaired by two members, appointed by the membership for a renewable, two-year period and representing different regions. The Committee comprises a geographically diverse group of up to 25 mayors/local leaders and meets in virtual and/or physical gatherings semi-annually. The ISC's Terms of Reference, and minutes of ISC meetings are available on the Strong Cities website.

## Management Unit

The Management Unit drives and supports the overall Network, including the International Steering Committee. It includes a Central Team and a series of field-based Regional Hubs, which the Central Team directs and supports. It oversees the development and delivery of Strong Cities training and capacity-building tools, and it spearheads development of Strong Cities good practices and ensures these and lessons learned are being shared across regions and with international stakeholders. In addition, the Management Unit coordinates the Network's engagement with national governments, regional and multinational organisations, civil society and the private sector, and leads Strong Cities' resource mobilisation efforts.

The Management Unit is hosted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and is enhanced through strategic partnerships with other organisations. It reports on annual progress and priorities to the ISC.

## Expert Pool

The Expert Pool includes current and former local government leaders, practitioners and external stakeholders with relevant experience and expertise. These individuals provide advisory and other support to the Strong Cities Management Unit and members on an ad hoc basis. For example, they can help inform key activities, facilitate peer-to-peer learnings, and develop and/or deliver training and technical support to the Network's members. They can also help inform the work of both the Management Unit, including its Regional Hubs, and the ISC.



An aerial photograph of a densely populated city, likely Cairo, Egypt, taken from a high vantage point. The city is filled with numerous high-rise apartment buildings and commercial structures. The sky is a warm, hazy orange, suggesting the sun is low on the horizon, creating a silhouette effect on some of the buildings. The overall scene conveys a sense of urban density and global connectivity.

ISD

Institute  
for Strategic  
Dialogue

## Institute for Strategic Dialogue

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) worked with mayors and government partners to launch Strong Cities at a meeting during the opening of the UN General Assembly in 2015. Since then, ISD has expanded and supported Strong Cities membership and has delivered its programming. ISD continues to host the Management Unit and, where appropriate, contributes its research and expertise to meet the policy and practice needs of cities and local governments around the world.



# How Strong Cities Works



Strong Cities advances its strategic priorities through the following modalities:

- **Convening** mayors, local officials and other stakeholders, such as youth, civil society national governments, multilateral bodies and the private sector. The formats of these convening mechanisms vary and include **national, regional or cross-regional workshops or exchanges, mayoral leadership initiatives, global summits** and other online and offline formats to facilitate increased sharing of experiences, good practices and challenges on shared issues of interest. This includes both Strong Cities and partner-organised activities.
- **Regional Hubs** composed of small teams of local experts and tasked with facilitating the engagement of and providing support to local leaders and practitioners on a regional basis, with a set of responsibilities that include: mayoral/city events and convenings; training activities; needs mapping; good practice identification/dissemination; briefings and webinars; and maintaining an active 'help desk' to provide targeted support that addresses questions, challenges and gaps in individual cities. All Regional Hub responsibilities are directly overseen and supported by the Management Unit's Central Team, providing additional capacity, global linkages beyond the region where needed, and overall consistency approach despite context-sensitive regional engagement. Regional Hubs are staffed by regional NGO partners and/or contracted directly by the Management Unit.
- **Targeted training and capacity-building** support to cities and relevant stakeholders to improve and develop local approaches that take account of good practices internationally and can be tailored to local contexts. This includes a **Technical Support Fund** offering direct assistance to Strong Cities members with identified needs that align with the Network's strategic priorities. Led by the Management Unit, this fund could be used to facilitate the development and/or delivery of tailored training or other capacity-building activities involving one or more network members. Where possible, the Management Unit will ensure local leaders and local government practitioners from across the Network are included in the design and delivery of such activities. This support is provided through, or otherwise in coordination with, the relevant Regional Hub, to support sustainability and sharing of learnings.
- **A digital/online resource hub** for disseminating online training tools, local policies and good practices, including profiles and spotlights of approaches across member cities, accessible through the Strong Cities website.





- **Working groups** that include local leaders and/or local government practitioners, allow Strong Cities to focus attention on topics of particular interest to the relevant local stakeholders. These working groups share and develop good practices on key themes, informing wider network activities and feed into high-level strategic focus of the International Steering Committee.
- **Partnerships** with national governments, multilateral bodies, including the UN and regional and sub-regional entities, and relevant global, regional and country-specific city networks. These relationships are complemented by partnerships with a diversity of local CSOs and international NGOs to help ensure the voices of local leaders and perspectives of cities inform the relevant efforts of these partners and that Strong Cities' work complements and reinforce such efforts.
- **Monitoring, evaluation and learning** to understand Strong Cities' impact, assess results against key indicators, adjust methods and engagement accordingly, and improve efficacy of the Network, while also providing expertise to cities to inform local approaches.





# Guiding Principles

Strong Cities operates according to the following guiding principles and all members are expected to support and to commit to them in words and actions:



**To support, respect and protect** the rights of all people, regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or any other social, cultural or ethnic group.



**To proactively address** in their city any manifestation of discrimination or hate towards any individual or group.



**To partner with, support, and give voice** to local communities and civil society, including youth, women and religious leaders, on an inclusive, collaborative, non-discriminatory and rights-respecting basis.



**To monitor and evaluate** city-led activities and initiatives aimed at preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation that can lead to violence and, more broadly, approaches and initiatives aimed at building social cohesion and resilience.



**To share** relevant non-sensitive information across the Network to support peer learning and the Strong Cities' mission.



**To work actively and collaboratively** with Strong Cities' ISC and Management Unit to promote the above principles, share experiences and approaches, and support each other – and the Network's mission – in building strong, cohesive and resilient cities.

# Membership

More than 200 cities and other local governments from a diversity of regions have joined Strong Cities since its launch in 2015. They are united by a desire to exchange experiences, good practices, and evidence-based approaches to support them in addressing more effectively the shared challenges of hate, extremism and polarisation. Members are guided by a Membership Terms of Reference available on the Strong Cities website.

Membership is open to any local government that commits to Strong Cities' Guiding Principles and is not located on territory that is contested under international law.

Members receive invitations to participate in annual Strong Cities global summits, can benefit from the Technical Support Fund, and are eligible to serve on the International Steering Committee and benefit from targeted capacity-building support.

Strong Cities engages with non-member cities and other local authorities on a regular basis and encourages their active participation in relevant Strong Cities activities. Engaging non-members not only ensures that wider cities' challenges, experiences and approaches are shared across the Network, but it introduces non-members to the Guiding Principles and activities that drive forward our mission.



## Engagement Philosophy

Strong Cities recognises that cities and other local authorities have differing needs, capacities and interests and that not all aspects of the Network's work will be relevant or needed for every member or non-member city. Cities therefore self-select the parts of the Network that are most appropriate for them and this self-selection provides ownership and commitment. This is also a core value of the Network, allowing cities with already quite advanced arrangements to interact at a level that suits them, while others may choose a deeper level of engagement in terms of capacity development and interaction related to their needs. The advantage of a global approach offered by Strong Cities is that all cities interested should find something useful from their engagement.







# Operations and Financing

Strong Cities receives financial and in-kind contributions from a range of donors and other partners. Although its annual operational costs have fluctuated since its launch, in 2022 its costs were roughly USD 3.1 million.

Current and previous donors to Strong Cities activities include the following:

-  European Union
-  Australia
-  Denmark
-  The Netherlands
-  Norway
-  United Kingdom
-  United States



Ad-hoc funding has also been provided by a number of cities, funds, and the private sector. Strong Cities members and non-member cities with the resources available have self-financed their participation in Strong Cities and have made in-kind contributions.



Aurora, CO, United States



Denver, CO, United States



Halle, Germany



Helsinki, Finland

MAYOR OF LONDON

London, United Kingdom



New York City, United States



Oslo

Oslo, Norway





**This strategy provides a framework for existing and prospective donors to invest in Strong Cities with a common understanding of its functions, operations and ways of working.**

Five main types of support are envisaged:

1

**Support for activities across Strong Cities' priority areas**, including through an existing Regional Hub, for example supporting a national-local coordination dialogue or workshop(s) on a specific thematic priority;

2

**Support to launch a Regional Hub in a new priority region** (e.g., Coastal West Africa, North America or Southeast Asia);

3

**Support for cross-regional learning and sharing around one or more priority areas;**

4

**Support for country-focused city-to-city learning and sharing across one or more priority areas;**

5

**Support for city-focused technical support and capacity-building**, including the development of local prevention mandates, policies and mechanisms for sustained engagement between local government and young people.

In addition, the Network seeks to diversify funding beyond existing sources. This includes exploring options for membership fees or subscription models, encouraging more cities to make voluntary financial or in-kind contributions, including by providing venues, interpretation and other logistical support for activities and exploring possibilities for philanthropic and private sector support. Strong Cities is committed to transparency regarding its funding sources.






*The Strong Cities Network is hosted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.*

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