



Strong Cities Network
Fourth Global Summit
19—21 September 2023

Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Unlocking the Potential of Cities to Address Hate Speech

A Strong Cities – United Nations (UN) Roundtable

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](#).**

The programme included a **20 September** roundtable on the role of local governments in addressing hate speech, which was co-organised with the **UN Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT)** and the **UN Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect**. The roundtable was organised to the growing number of mayors and local governments who have voiced concern to Strong Cities about the rising levels of hate in their communities, the potential for hate speech in particular to manifest into violence and challenges with mounting an effective response amidst its rapid spread – often fuelled by misinformation – via social media.

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Understanding the Threat

Representatives from both the UN and local governments shared their perspectives on the threat of hate speech. For example, **Alice Wairimu Nderitu, the UN Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide**, emphasised how hate speech is a precursor to genocide. She reminded the participants how the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was fuelled by anti-Tutsi propaganda spread in newspapers and via the radio. The Special Advisor further expressed concern about the impacts of social media, noting that this makes hate speech accessible to a larger audience than ever before, exacerbating social inequalities and fuelled identity-based discrimination.



These concerns were reiterated by **Mattias Sundholm, CVE Specialist with the UN Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED)**, who commented on the clear connection between hate speech and violent extremism and terrorism. He further observed that the roundtable took place in the broader context of the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2686, which recognises that hate speech, racism, discrimination, xenophobia and extremism can fuel or otherwise exacerbate conflict. This was emphasised by representatives of cities that had experienced the violent consequences of hate speech. For example, **Monika Pochron-Frankowska, Deputy Director for International Cooperation for the Pomorskie Region (Poland)** shared how the Mayor of Gdańsk, which is in Pomorskie Region, was stabbed to death in January 2019, partially as a result of the proliferation of anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment. The Mayor was a staunch advocate of migrant and other minority rights and – like other Mayors who have publicly welcomed refugees to Poland – had previously received death threats including in the form of fabricated death certificates.

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Similarly, **Philomenah Kapkory, Deputy Governor of Trans Nzoia County (Kenya)** shared how inter-ethnic hate speech was a catalyst of the violence that has marred the country's past elections, particularly in 2007, which saw more than [1200 Kenyans killed and over 300,000 displaced](#), and to a lesser extent in elections that have followed since then. **Munira Bakali, Deputy Mayor of Zomba City (Malawi)** also raised concerns about the proliferation and consequences of hate speech in the context of the 2025 national elections in his country.

The Role of Local Governments in Response

The roundtable also provided the UN and city officials with the opportunity to jointly discuss the role of local governments in the prevention of and response to hate speech. For example, there was consensus amongst all participants that mayors and local governments more broadly play a vital role as a result of their often-unique understanding of local contexts, ability to foster inter-communal and other dialogue that can reduce tensions and build social cohesion, provide protection to targeted groups and serve as moral compasses through words and actions that promote inclusion, tolerance and co-existence.

Participants shared a number of inspiring city-led efforts to this end. For example, in light of rising anti-migrant hate speech and discrimination in Poland, the **City of Gdańsk** has partnered with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to facilitate the provision of free psychosocial and legal support to residents that have experienced bias, discrimination and other forms of hate. This has resulted in the creation of a dedicated [Gdańsk Centre for Equal Treatment](#) that manages several 'safe spaces across the city where victims of hate and discrimination can seek security and support from the seven NGOs the City has partnered with to deliver this work. Participants shared how this initiative has succeeded not only in terms of the vital provision of support it enables, but also in building trust among the City, NGOs and residents (particularly minorities). This, in turn, has helped

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residents feel more comfortable to report incidents of hate and discrimination to the local government, thus giving the City a more comprehensive understanding of the scale of these issues.

In **Trans Nzoia County**, the County Government also makes a concerted effort to work closely with civil society to prevent hate speech and related threats. This includes to promote digital literacy, responsible use of social media and critical thinking and to identify and address the underlying causes of hate, such as unemployment, economic and social inequalities and scapegoating of minority groups. To promote active citizenship, the County Government also provides training and stipends for youth to turn them into ambassadors for social cohesion and inclusion.

Oliviera Injac Mayor of Podgorica (Montenegro) shared how she actively engages different ethnic groups as part of her commitment to “serve everyone”. The City is also invested in providing psychosocial services to those that have been targeted by hate speech, and to otherwise build resilience amongst communities including by raising awareness of the psychological impacts of social media and the political exploitation of hate-based narratives in the context of elections.

Scaling City-Led Efforts through Enhanced Collaboration

Despite these inspiring initiatives, local government representatives at the roundtable expressed the need for urgent, dedicated support to help scale and sustain their efforts to address what continues to be a pressing threat to the safety and security of their cities. Amongst the needs identified were training and guidance for mayors and local government practitioners on how social media is used to spread hateful content and disinformation campaigns, particularly on fringe platforms, how they can advocate for better regulation and moderation of harmful content online, and the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of taking a public stand against hate (particularly with a view to raise awareness whilst not placing a counter-productive spotlight on hateful narratives and conspiracies).

Participants also agreed that roundtables such as this one allow local governments to learn about existing resources they can leverage. **Simona Cruciani, Senior Political Affairs Officer with the UN Office of the Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide (UNOSAPG)** noted, for example, that the UN has guidance on addressing hate speech, including on monitoring it and understanding early warning signs of escalations to violence. **Sian Hutchinson, Head of UNOCT’s Global Programme on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism** shared that the UN also offers capacity-building programmes relevant to hate speech prevention and is finalising a tool for countering hate speech. However, many local governments remain unaware of these tools and thus urged more proactive and sustained engagement between the UN and city officials.

Finally, participants agreed that an important next step in enhancing global-local collaboration and the role of cities in addressing hate speech is for the Strong Cities Network to work with the UN, mayors and the local governments they lead to form a working group and action plan for city-led prevention of hate speech. Strong Cities and the UN can then collaborate to disseminate such a plan, supporting cities globally with contextualising and applying it.

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Additionally, the recommendation was made for Strong Cities to work with the UN and other interested partners to help local governments enhance the digital literacy of young people and older adults in their communities, including through the design and delivery of training tailored to the relevant local environments.

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Strong Cities is also grateful to the UNOCT and UNOSAPG for their partnership in delivering this specific event.

The views expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of all workshop participants, Strong Cities, all its members, UNOCT, the UN Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, UNOSAPG or Summit sponsors.

Contact Us

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