Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Widening the Lens:
A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to City-Led Prevention and Response to Hate and Extremism

A Strong Cities – Columbia SIPA Event

19 September 2023

Summary

On 19 — 21 September 2023, the Strong Cities Network held its Fourth Global Summit in New York City, bringing together more than 240 participants, including mayors and governors, city officials and practitioners from more than 115 cities and 50 countries around the world. The Summit featured 11 events, providing participants with opportunities to share and learn from city-led innovations and approaches to prevent and respond to rising hate, extremism and polarisation. **Read the event report here.**

The Summit opened with an event co-hosted with Columbia University's School for International and Public Policy (SIPA) aimed at identifying multidisciplinary innovations and approaches that cities can adapt and tailor to support their efforts to address hate, extremism and polarisation. As

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SIPA Dean Keren Yarhi-Milo said in her opening remarks, responding to these challenges "is one of the most pressing issues of our time … it is of existential importance" this event was thus a timely platform for mayors and other city leaders and practitioners to share approaches and experiences.

Reimagining Public Safety

Ras J. Baraka, Mayor of Newark (New Jersey, USA), delivered the event's opening live-streamed mayoral keynote on how Newark is reimagining public safety around inclusivity; an eco-system to dynamically address both internal tensions as well as external threats. A personal priority for Mayor Baraka, he said his aim is to put "the public back in public safety". Like so many cities, Newark is becoming more densely populated as house prices in the suburbs push people back into city centres, which has led to rising hate and polarisation. Yet, in Newark, crime is down, and homicides are at a 60-year low, which the mayor attributes to the city's inclusive approach to public safety, one which promotes 'whole-of-community' responsibility for addressing mainstreamed violence and hate. Among the approach's key features are prioritising evidence-based responses, allocating funds for community-based programmes to work in areas where violence is prevalent, initiatives and other resources to support youth and to ensure their safe travel to school, providing psychological trauma support to police, and a robust referral process where law enforcement and medical professionals can work with the Office of Violence Prevention and community-based organisations to provide support and services to vulnerable individuals

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Disinformation: An Existential Crisis

Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (United Kingdom), delivered the day's second live-streamed mayoral keynote, focused on a threat which he described as an existential crisis for liberal democracy. Mayor Khan said he feared that online disinformation and manipulation campaigns were "spreading apace", with those driving the campaigns shielded by the anonymity afforded by the online environment. He noted that while social media had brought many benefits to society, it had also monetised intolerance and division through disinformation, and challenged social media campaigns to do more. "You do not need to wait to be led. You wield incredible power. It's long overdue that you meet your responsibilities and bear down on the attempts to distort truth."

Mayor Khan said that while governments have been too reluctant to regulate social media, even without regulation, social media companies should be more responsible and self-regulate to reduce these harms. He called on social media companies to apply the same efforts they use to protect their intellectual property to counter online harms and harassment. He also called on his fellow mayors and other city leaders to lobby governments for adequate digital regulation and to work with technology companies to develop safer products. More broadly, he pointed to the role of city leaders in "reinforcing stoicism, civic responsibility and engagement", both in terms of educating the public and of personal leadership. Noting his roots as a human rights lawyer had reinforced for him the understanding that the right to free speech is not absolute, Mayor Khan reminded the audience that exercising this right comes with responsibilities, including not inciting hate against a particular group. He underscored the importance of education around citizenship and civic responsibility, to ensure that cities – diverse melting pots – are providing people with the sense of belonging they need, and which is an essential foundation for building social cohesion.

The Hate and Extremism Cityscape: Challenges & Priorities for Cities

In her framing remarks, **Sasha Havlicek, CEO of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)** (which hosts the Strong Cities Network, launched in 2015 with ISD support), pointed to the evolution of the threat in recent years. This includes a widening conspiracy landscape, increasing misinformation and disinformation that is fuelling hate and exacerbating inter-communal division and tech platforms failing to counter extremist language and narratives. She emphasised the central role that mayors and local authorities can and must play in responding to this changing threat landscape to create a

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safe environment in their cities and how Strong Cities' mission has thus become more important than ever.

Across several of the event's sessions, mayors and other city leaders shared the threats and challenges their cities face and the measures they are putting in place to address the evolving threat landscape. A recurring theme was the challenge facing cities in **identifying funding** to both invest in opportunities for young people as well as broader investments in infrastructure and services that relate to or can otherwise be leveraged for prevention. **Daouda Gueye**, **Deputy Mayor of Dakar (Senegal)** said that his city is looking to increase opportunities for its young people through local government investment funding and other support for education, study abroad scholarships, training centres, summer camps, and 'hackathons' with local leaders.
Maximilian Iranqe, Mayor of Arusha (Tanzania), said his city is also investing in training, with a focus on skills that will lead to employment, and how to engage companies in a youth-oriented graduate employment programme.

Florence Namayanja, Mayor of Masaka (Uganda), underscored the challenge of stretching limited budgets to address the myriad challenges facing cities, from fighting against discrimination to supporting youth and protecting vulnerable people from "opportunists". She said she is working in partnership with communities to help improve city decision-making regarding where to prioritise limited resources and focus activities and engagement.

Mapping community needs and priorities was identified as an essential first step for understanding how and where to prioritise limited resources. The **Sharon Dijksma, Mayor of Utrecht (Netherlands), ,** said mapping helped ensure effective decision-making. "We put the money where it is most needed – working with the community to guide what is needed and how it is best delivered." Likewise, **Frank Scott, Jr., Mayor of Little Rock (Arkansas, USA),** said his city had also used mapping and infrastructure studies based on different factors to identify specific needs and guide city decision-making. This was important to not only address emerging community needs but to also identify challenges born of decades of inequality before they manifest in violence.

Historical inequality, a shift back to cities and welcoming new arrivals have also made **housing affordability and availability** a pressing concern for many mayors. For example, **Erion Veliaj,**
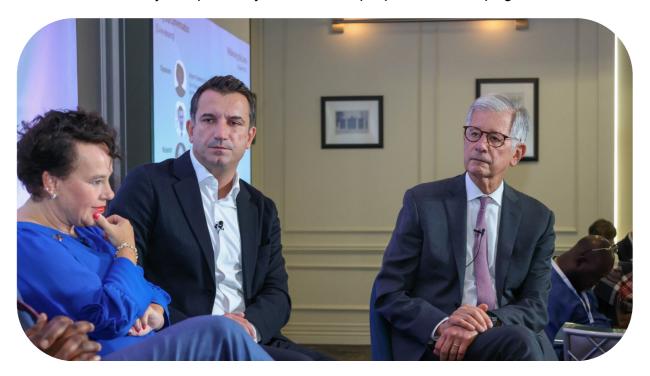
Mayor of Tirana (Albania), underscored the importance of affordable housing as a human right, and that it was the city's responsibility to ensure that people are not sleeping on the streets.

Many city leaders shared how the COVID-19 pandemic experience had **eroded trust in public institutions**. **Mayor Dijksma** explained how it had been a "game changer" in Utrecht and reinforced the importance of communicating with residents, being transparent and providing an opportunity for people to share their views. **Mayor Scott, Jr.** agreed that communication and information are crucial to establishing and maintaining the population's trust. He also noted the importance of *intentional relationships* in bridging gaps and breaking down walls, adding that hate comes from a lack of understanding and exposure. **Mayor Veliaj** noted that effective mayoral leadership also requires a willingness to speak truth to disinformation and misinformation.

Throughout the day, mayors emphasised the central role that **communication plays in building and maintaining trust** with the residents of a city, regardless of their background. They highlighted the need for cities to have in place a clear and accessible mechanism(s) through which to facilitate communication with and receive feedback from communities.

For **Mayor Dijksma**, talking directly to people and actively listening to community voices, rather than solely relying on feedback through social media, is a central priority. She also prioritises meeting with those in the community with whom she does not share views, to ensure that all people are heard and feel that their rights to voice their opinions are protected. Where possible, she will work with groups to uphold their rights to protest but in a way that does not risk the rights or security

of others. **Mayor Erion** also noted the challenges of ensuring that both the voices of a loud minority and a silent majority are heard and the importance of selecting the right messenger to deliver communications. **Mayor Scott, Jr**, also underscored the importance of building intentional relationships with faith communities, and his participation in community activities brings visibility which further reinforces those relationships.

City leaders emphasised the need to **work with the national government**, even where perspectives are different, or where there has been limited exchange at the national and local levels, a challenge that Strong Cities is addressing through its focus on enhancing national-local cooperation. There are also regional considerations, with challenges and opportunities in one country impacting neighbouring countries, a point made by **Deputy Mayor Gueye** with respect to dynamics in Senegal and the Gambia. **Himayat Ullah Mayar, Mayor of Mardan (Pakistan)** agreed, noting how regional (Afghanistan) and broader international dynamics continued to impact efforts to address extremism and affect change in his city. He cited continuing efforts to engage elders, youth and women in work to address extremism and strong policy collaboration with the national government.

What can we learn if we Widen the Lens?

A central aim of this event was to provide a platform for multidisciplinary sharing of innovations and approaches. Through a series of 'Ted-style' talks and breakout sessions across three key themes – technology and data; urban design; and participatory prevention – participants identified a series of recommendations and considerations for city-led action.

Leveraging Technology and Data

How to leverage technology and data for effective and efficient city-led prevention and response is a top-line concern for many cities. **Eric Apelgren, Head of Department, International and Governance Relations,** shared how **Durban (South Africa)** has created a dedicated strategy office to identify evidence-based solutions in responding to challenges, such as high unemployment rates, xenophobia, discrimination and migration. A central pillar of Durban's approach is the co-governance of the city together with communities, working to support city-level and community-level efforts to promote social cohesion across all faith communities, as well as a dedicated cabinet-level Office for Youth. He added that public-private partnerships, particularly with the ICT sector to leverage technology and AI and participation in international networks, such as Strong Cities and sister city programmes, are also being prioritised.

Robert Zachary Tumin, **Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University,** and former Deputy Commissioner for Strategic Initiatives with the New York Police Department, emphasised the need for cities to invest in systems to observe patterns, noting that the collection of data and analysis of patterns are key for detecting early warning signs – critical in prevention work – and for informing and improving decision-making.

The importance of access to and analysis of data to inform policymaking was also echoed by **Alejandro Gimenez Santana, Director, Newark Public Safety Collaborative and Deputy Director, Rutgers Centre on Public Security.** In Newark, moving from a law enforcement-centric approach to one that engages community stakeholders as co-producers of public safety started with a roundtable with police, community organisations, the private sector and other stakeholders. This democratised decision-making and promoted public safety burden-sharing. It also laid the foundation for the sharing of data and information, ensuring that community members, city officials and other relevant stakeholders were making collaborative and informed decisions. For example, they worked together to identify violence hotspots and instead of simply increasing policing, community stakeholders involved utility companies in installing street lighting for enhanced safety. This approach, which prioritised co-production of public safety, has resulted in the lowest homicide level in 60 years.

In Denver and Aurora (Colorado, USA), **Maria Vukovich, Assistant Research Professor, Graduate School of Professional Psychology, University of Denver**, is leading a pilot project with the Strong Cities Network, to identify the cities' needs, priorities and community stakeholders with a view to building a tool to support cities in gathering the data they required for evidence-based prevention policy-making and programming. Utilising both qualitative and quantitative data, cities can enhance their understanding of the challenges and opportunities within their communities.

In breakout groups, and inspired by the above examples, participants discussed a series of considerations and recommendations for how cities can use data and technology to enhance prevention and response. These included:

- Creating systems and mechanisms that support city outreach to the community in terms of available government services and initiatives.
- How to build cooperative relationships between the city administration and law enforcement to enable and support information sharing.
- Building city-led action teams, with whole-of-society representation, for more inclusive needs analysis and decision-making, that incorporates the experiences of those less engaged.
- Consider what data, beyond crime data, should be collected to guide social policymaking.
- Consider how to use AI-enabled (as opposed to AI-focused) data analysis to identify patterns and support analysis. At the same time, raise awareness across communities as to how AI can be used as a mechanism for generating disinformation/misinformation.
- How to use technology to help identify and model community needs and update regularly to ensure it is reflective of evolving needs.
- Using digital technologies/apps and platforms to engage youth in decision-making processes (e.g., through digital youth houses) and in identifying and debunking conspiracy narratives).
- How to collect, use and present data so it does not stigmatise communities
- How to use data to drive forward youth outreach, including around education
- Clarity around laws regulating data protection, collection and usage, to inform communities.
- Increased data sharing and funding from national level to cities, and localising that data.

- Using both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that the city is addressing how communities feel as opposed to only what the data shows.

Urban Planning and Prevention

City leaders also shared how the physical design of the urban environment can reduce polarisation and strengthen social cohesion. **Javier Ayala Ortega, Mayor of Fuenlabrada (Spain),** described his city's approach of using urban development and urban participation as key mechanisms for supporting democracy and social dialogue. The city has implemented several instruments to promote urban participation, including sectoral councils which are elevating the voices of women and youth. Mayor Ortega also emphasised the importance of leadership in this regard: mayors need to be aware of social change and dynamics to enable the city to be responsive and adapt to new opportunities for social participation. He also underscored his personal commitment, as mayor, to promote city-led action through networks such as Strong Cities.

Tainá de Paula, **Municipal Secretary of the Environment, Municipality of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)**, shared Rio's approach to combating racism, which includes support for the city's most vulnerable groups and new housing projects in the favelas. This includes improving connections to the city and providing and upgrading infrastructure, as well as addressing issues that have been forgotten or neglected.

Juma Assiago, Coordinator, UN-HABITAT Safer Cities Programme, briefed participants on the New Urban Agenda's action-oriented global benchmarks for sustainable urban development. He said that cities face a key challenge in shifting from an approach that criminalises to one that creates safe spaces. Safe spaces can both promote and support social cohesion and cities are uniquely placed to lead this shift given their proximity to their communities and understanding of local dynamics.

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Sharon Yavo-Ayalon, Ph.D., Architect, Co-founder, CEO of UrbanMix, then shared how virtual reality was used as part of a community resilience planning project in which the community imagined extreme climate change scenarios and worked to identify community needs in focus groups through which they shared fears, concerns and needs, and devised urban planning solutions to address. She shared some ideas for how cities might be able to leverage this tool to imagine the impact that rising levels of hate and extremism might have on different communities and identify corresponding community-level needs.

Participatory Prevention Practices

Drawing on his experience working with countries in Russia and Central Eastern Europe to design policies, laws and programmes to detect and prevent corruption, **Matthew Murray, Adjunct Professor, SIPA, Columbia University,** emphasised the importance of maintaining and promoting transparency and tackling corruption at the local level. He cautioned that not only is corruption a drain on finite local resources, but that even minor corruption at the local level can morph into larger-scale challenges, and erode public trust needed to govern.

Reverand Asa J. Lee, President, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, shared learnings from his 20 years working with faith communities. He described clergy as curators of imagination, framing a vision of the community they serve, and therefore important partners for cities. Faith communities are often responsible for caring for communities and providing services that might be underserved or overlooked by local government. He underscored the importance of engaging these communities in processes and exploring their ideas and aspirations as part of a shared community.

Laura Neuman, Senior Advisor, Office of the Vice President for Peace Programs, The Carter Center, emphasised information as crucial for meaningful participation, "a lifeblood, especially for women" and fundamental for women's empowerment. She cited a study of 700 interviews with

women across different countries and the obstacles they faced in accessing information. The lack of information can trap women; access to information can be transformational. Cities are uniquely placed to provide access to information at the local level, ensuring women can make informed choices and have greater agency over their lives, and more meaningfully engage and participate in public life. Ms Neuman also cited a project in Guatemala which used an 'access to information' approach, which saw a 200-fold increase in people accessing health services following an information awareness campaign. An 'access to information' approach, one that includes multi-lingual access in diverse communities, is a model that cities can use to support outreach and service delivery and promote more inclusive communities.

Bojan Francuz, Program Officer, Halving Global Violence, Pathfinders, Center on International Cooperation, New York University, shared learnings from collaboration with 23 cities and 40 community-based organisations in the Peace In Our Cities network to reduce the most serious forms of violence in communities. Participatory prevention requires time, patience and political will, and partnerships can provide the foundation for sustainability. He shared two examples of work with cities in Colombia. In Medellin, local authorities have used participatory recreational sports programs to drastically reduce violence and crime over the past decade. In Cali, the mayor has prioritised prevention strategies, which do take time, but are ultimately most effective in the long-term, reaching out to international partners for funding.

In breakout groups, and inspired by the above examples, participants developed a series of considerations and recommendations for how cities can use participatory prevention practices to enhance and support city-led prevention and response. Central themes throughout the discussions were the *centrality of people, places and processes* to effective and sustainable participatory prevention. Specific considerations and recommendations included:

- The need to identify and deploy credible messengers to maximise outreach to the community and encourage participation.
- Consider establishing advisory groups for local governments to tap into that include representatives of marginalised and/or hard-to-reach communities.
- Building cross-sectoral relationships to maximise the potential to catalyse the impact of community participation.
- Ensure funding models are sufficiently flexible to enable adaptation as community needs evolve or lessons learned are identified.
- The importance and potential of interfaith work and engagement as the foundation for encouraging community participation and leveraging existing community frameworks/ relationships for sustainability, including interfaith clergy councils that meet regularly with city leaders and can speak to community needs and priorities.
- Providing clarity around expectations and potential for community engagement in political decision-making.
- How corruption can corrode trust in any city-community efforts, and the need to be transparent and ensure that public institutions are not tarnished and can be viewed as trusted partners by the community.

- How to connect offline and online spaces, leveraging the digital space to catalyse the reach and accessibility of a program/outreach (including through multi-lingual access), but maintaining offline safe spaces and opportunities (e.g., townhalls) to connect with and hear directly from communities.

What's Next?

The Widening the Lens event highlighted many opportunities for cities to leverage innovations and learnings from other sectors and to tailor them to support local efforts to address hate, extremism and polarisation. In the coming months, the Strong Cities Network will be working to take the many considerations and recommendations generated through this robust and inspiring event and integrate them into our forward programming and tools. This will – crucially – include a forward focus on the nexus between urban design and social cohesion.

Donors & Partners

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The views expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of the Strong Cities Network, SIPA, event participants or Summit sponsors.

Contact Us

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