



# Unlocking the full potential of city-led action to address hate, extremism & polarisation

**Strong Cities**  
Network



**The Strong Cities Network is an independent, apolitical, global network of more than 220 cities dedicated to addressing all forms and manifestations of hate, extremism and polarisation that can lead to violence, within a human rights-based framework.**

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.



# About Strong Cities

Launched at the United Nations in 2015, the Strong Cities Network is an independent global network of more than 220 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 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.



**“As a proud member city of the Strong Cities Network since 2016 which knows all too well the impact that targeted violence can have on our residents, we are excited to now partner with Strong Cities on a two-year initiative to develop and implement a comprehensive prevention hate and extremism framework that responds to the needs and concerns of our communities. As laid out in One Chattanooga, we are eager to continue doing the work of reconciling our sometimes-divided realities with courage and honesty.”**

City of Chattanooga, Tennessee – USA



# Guiding Principles

Strong Cities operates according to a set of guiding principles, which all members are expected to support and commit to in words and actions. The Strong Cities [Guiding Principles](#) call on members to inter alia support, respect and protect the rights of all peoples, to proactively address discrimination and hate, to partner with and give voice to local communities and civil society, and to actively engage with Strong Cities to share experiences and approaches, and to support the Network's members and mission in building strong, cohesive and resilient cities.

# Forward Strategy

The Strong Cities Network's three-year forward strategy – endorsed by the International Steering Committee in September 2023 – is a roadmap for expanding Strong Cities' reach and sustainable impact. Following an intensive two-year consultation process, including bilateral and multilingual regional consultations with more than 100 Strong Cities members, as well as non-member cities, donors and international partners, the Strategy identifies a key set of city needs shaped across several geographical contexts amid a changing policy landscape and threat profile. By cities for cities, the Strong Cities Strategy reflects the needs and priorities of members, and is accessible in [Arabic](#), [English](#) and [French](#).



**“We are appreciative of Strong Cities convening representatives of national and local authorities from Uganda to discuss these important issues. This is the first time we have been in the same room with representatives of national government ministries to exchange views on preventing extremist violence in our country.”**

Senior Local Government Representative – Uganda



# Membership & Engagement Philosophy

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, or if it borders another country, there will be other cities that have similar interests, capacities and needs.

The Network also recognises that cities and other local authorities have differing needs, capacities and interests and that not all aspects of the Network's mission 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 Strong Cities value, allowing cities with already quite advanced arrangements to interact at a level that suits them, while others may choose a deeper level of engagement related to their needs.

Given the varied capacities of current and new Strong Cities members, the Strong Cities Management Unit works with individual members to set the appropriate level of expectations for each member. However, all members will be expected to meet the following expectations:

- Agree – in words and in actions – to the Strong Cities Guiding Principles that guide the Network's activities and engagement around the world.
- Nominate a Strong Cities point of contact from the local government.
- Participate in one Strong Cities event or regional workshop each year.

Additional expectations may include:

- Sharing information on relevant policies and programmes for inclusion in the Strong Cities online Resource Hub and leveraging Strong Cities resources, tools and guides.
- Responding to Strong Cities' surveys and requests for non-sensitive information.
- Contributing to the development and/or delivery of Strong Cities tools and training.
- Participating in Strong Cities-facilitated city exchanges and other peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- Taking advantage of deep-dives and capacity-building opportunities available in priority regions.



**“Cities are often on the margins of discussions about security or prevention, but first on the line of response when threats are realized. In 2015, our municipality was the target of groups intent to undermine the coexistence and stability of our municipality and country as a whole. With Strong Cities, we managed to bridge the gap between capacities and needs on the ground, and to engage more actively in preventing violent extremism, hatred and polarisation in our community.”**

Maksim Dimitrievski – Mayor of Kumanovo,  
North Macedonia







# Strong Cities Mission

The Strong Cities mission is based on the following five 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.



**“In 2022, I attended a Strong Cities conference in Nairobi. An extremely informative experience. There is much more South African municipalities can do. Following the event, I wrote to the Head of Disaster and Risk Management ... to create an intervention response focused on countering extremism. I realised we needed to step up and do more and anticipate a larger role for local governments in this space.”**

JP Smith, Alderman, Mayoral Committee Member for  
Safety & Security, Cape Town – South Africa



# Strong Cities in Action

Strong Cities supports mayors and local authorities through a variety of modalities, designed to build meaningful connections between cities, facilitate peer learning and exchanges, and to equip cities with tools they need to not only address a complex and evolving threat environment but to build strong, socially-cohesive and resilient cities:

**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; both Strong Cities and partner-organised activities.

**Regional Hubs** are comprised 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 Hubs are directly overseen and supported by the Management Unit's Central Team, providing additional capacity, global linkages beyond the region where needed, and an overall consistent approach despite context-sensitive regional engagement.

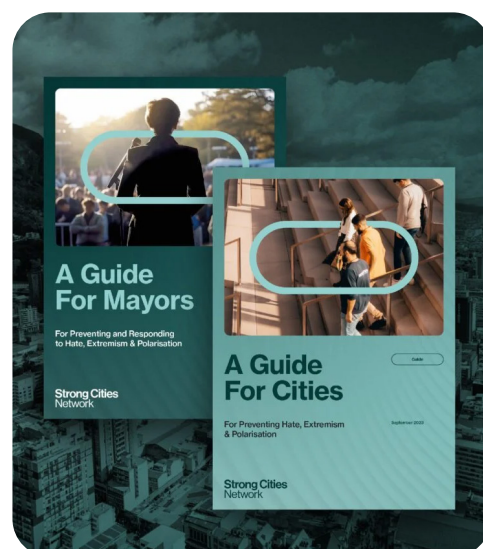


**Targeted training and capacity-building** support to cities and relevant stakeholders to improve and develop local approaches that take account of good practices internationally and can be tailored to local contexts. This includes a Technical Support Fund offering direct assistance to Strong Cities 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, provided or coordinated through the relevant Regional Hub to support sustainability.

**An online Resource Hub** for disseminating online training tools, local policies and good practices, including profiles and spotlights of approaches across member cities.

**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 cities inform relevant efforts.

**Monitoring, evaluation and learning** to understand Strong Cities' impact, assess results against key indicators, adjust methods and engagement accordingly, and improve the efficacy of the Network while also providing expertise to cities to inform local approaches.





# Strong Cities in Focus

Strong Cities is supporting cities to develop and/or strengthen mandates, approaches and programmes to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation, leveraging the range of local services, interests, networks and skills that exist within cities. The Network's thematic foci include:

## Global Crises, Local Impacts

Mayors and the cities they lead have been grappling with how to navigate local manifestations of global crises. From COVID-19 to rising levels of hate and polarisation to the cost-of-living crisis, to unprecedented migration and increased urbanisation, the impact of successive global crises is felt acutely at the local level. Strong Cities is working with local leaders to identify good practices and approaches for navigating local manifestations of global crises, such as the Israel-Gaza crisis, which has sparked protests in cities around the world, dividing communities, accelerating rising antisemitism and Islamophobia and threatening social cohesion. Learn more communities, accelerating rising antisemitism and Islamophobia and threatening social cohesion. [Learn more](#)

## Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative

Launched In October 2021 with US Department of State support, the Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative is strengthening cooperation between mayors, local governments and practitioners in preventing extremism, hate and polarisation, and safeguarding local democracy. Through workshops in Berlin, Bratislava, Brussels, Denver, Helsinki, London, Oslo, and Washington, D.C., and capstone events in The Hague and New York, Strong Cities is facilitating important city learning, sharing and recommendations for both mayors and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. [Learn more](#)

## City-Led Incident Response

The motive behind hate and extremist-driven attacks is not just to inflict violence but to create societal fear and division. In the immediate aftermath of an attack, national authorities take the lead in emergency responses, reinforcing public safety and launching criminal investigations. However, as the weeks and months progress, the impact of an attack can run deep, causing untold social consequences across communities and geographic borders. Communities, no matter how resilient, need strong local leadership and a coordinated, sustained response to help them heal, recover and rebuild. [Learn more](#)

## National-Local Cooperation

National-local cooperation (NLC) is an essential component of preventing and addressing hate, extremism, and polarisation; all multi-faceted phenomena requiring a whole-of-society approach that leverages the capacities of different actors at every level into a coherent and coordinated effort. NLC supports this need by enabling actors at both levels to work collectively and maximise the impact of prevention and response efforts. [Learn more](#)

## Multi-Actor Frameworks

Strong Cities is currently working in partnership with Boston Children's Hospital, the University of Illinois Chicago and the Prevention Practitioners Network, with support from the US Department of Homeland Security, to pilot a model for the development of local multi-actor prevention frameworks in six small and mid-sized cities across the United States. [Learn more](#)

## Young Cities

Working in partnership with young people and local governments to enhance youth-led, shared solutions to community challenges such as hate, extremism, polarisation and violence, Young Cities is fostering a shared understanding of local youth issues, facilitates new opportunities for cooperation, and ultimately enhances both groups' capacity to tackle community-level challenges. [Learn more](#)



# Theory of Change

Strong Cities is contributing 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.

## Governance & Structure

### International Steering Committee

The Strong Cities' member-led International Steering Committee (ISC), which provides strategic direction to the Network, was relaunched in September 2023 during the Strong Cities Fourth Global Summit in New York. This geographically diverse group of up to 25 mayors and other local leaders provides strategic direction to Strong Cities, including through the development of a bi-annual action plan that enumerates Strong Cities priorities (e.g., training/capacity-building themes, partnerships and advocacy). [Learn more](#)



The Strong Cities International Steering Committee is an advisory body and does not exercise executive powers over the management of Strong Cities.



## Management Unit

Strong Cities is facilitated and managed by a dedicated Management Unit, which is responsible for thematic development, membership and engagement, training, and the full range of Strong Cities activities and services. The Strong Cities Management Unit serves as the central point for coordinating Strong Cities' global media and communications strategy, including social media and ensuring a cohesive and common communication strategy. The Strong Cities Management Unit reports annually to the ISC on achievements, activities and impact over the past year. In addition to providing administrative support to the Network, and training and other capacity-building assistance to Strong Cities members, the Strong Cities Management Unit supports the development, dissemination, and amplification of human rights-based, city-led policies and programmes to prevent all forms of hate, extremism and polarisation.

[Learn more](#)

## Central Team

The Central Team manages the overall Network and Regional Hubs, drives the development and delivery of Strong Cities training and other capacity-building tools housed in the online Resource Hub, and spearheads the development of Strong Cities good practices and lessons learned, ensuring they are being shared across regions, the global network, and with the UN and other international stakeholders. The Central Team also coordinates Strong Cities engagement with national governments, the UN and other multinational organisations, national governments, civil society, the private sector, and represents Strong Cities in UN and other multilateral venues/conversations.

## Regional Hubs

To date, Strong Cities has launched Regional Hubs in four key regions, including [East & Southern Africa](#) (ESA), [Middle East & North Africa](#) (MENA), [South Asia](#), and the [Western Balkans](#). In late 2023, foundations were laid for the 2024 launch of a North America Regional Hub. Subject to funding, there are also plans for Hubs in Southeast Asia and West Africa. [Learn more](#)

Staffed by small teams of local experts, directly supported by the Central Team, the Hubs work closely with cities, local leaders and practitioners to catalyse the Strong Cities' mission on a regional basis, including:

- Overseeing Strong Cities engagement with members and other relevant stakeholders in a particular region, including national governments, civil society, the private sector, local embassies and multilateral organisations.
- Identifying the needs/priorities of Strong Cities members in the region.
- Providing and facilitating advisory and other support to Strong Cities members in the region, including ensuring that all Strong Cities training, and other support is tailored to the needs and priorities of cities in the respective region.

## 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. Visit [isdglobal.org](https://isdglobal.org)







# Funding & Partnerships

The Strong Cities Management Unit works collaboratively through both informal and formal partnerships to support and expand Strong Cities' reach, content and capacity in line with its mission and the needs and priorities of its members. Partners include local, regional and global bodies, as well as advisory, institutional and content-specific partners.

Partnerships are pursued to maximise synergies with other organisations and build on and dovetail with existing initiatives. This includes those with specific regional focus, such as Strong Cities' partnership with Nordic Safe Cities and the Foundation for a Path Forward to amplify engagement in the Nordic region and Canada respectively, and with the National League of Cities, with which Strong Cities is embarking on an exciting new partnership in North America.

As Strong Cities continues to expand its reach and capacity, building and enhancing partnerships will be a key priority, including inter alia with UN agencies, such as inter alia the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), UN-Habitat, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), and the German Marshall Fund.

## Donors

Strong Cities works with its city members, national governments and international partners to marshal financial and in-kind resources to support programmatic and ad hoc activities. Since its launch in September 2015, Strong Cities has benefited from support from a range of national governments, including inter alia Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States (both the Departments of Homeland Security and State), as well as funding from the European Union (Service for Foreign Policy Instruments) through the STRIVE Cities Initiative. The Network also receives voluntary and in-kind contributions from its members, the private sector and philanthropic foundations, including inter alia Irving Goldman Family Foundation and Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation.

## Cities

The Network also receives voluntary support from its members. Members such as Aurora, Colorado (USA), Berlin (Germany), Denver, Colorado (USA), Halle (Germany), London (United Kingdom), New York City, New York (USA), Oslo (Norway), The Hague (the Netherlands), and the State of Victoria (Australia), have also supported the Strong Cities mission by commissioning projects or through in-kind contributions.

## Friends of Strong Cities

In 2024, we will be launching Friends of Strong Cities, a community of mayoral and city associations to further catalyse the Strong Cities mission and to further raise awareness of and build local capacity to address rising hate, extremism and polarisation, and leverage each other's strengths to realise shared priorities.

# Reach Out

For further information about Strong Cities, please contact [info@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:info@strongcitiesnetwork.org) or visit [www.strongcitiesnetwork.org](http://www.strongcitiesnetwork.org).










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

*Copyright © Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024). Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a company limited by guarantee, registered office address PO Box 75769, London, SW1P 9ER. ISD is registered in England with company registration number 06581421 and registered charity number 1141069. All Rights Reserved.*

# Strong Cities Network

[info@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:info@strongcitiesnetwork.org)  
[strongcitiesnetwork.org](http://strongcitiesnetwork.org)

 [Strong\\_Cities](#)  
 [Strong Cities Network](#)  
 [Strong Cities Network](#)