

Event Report

## East & Southern Africa Regional Hub

### National-Local Dialogue: How Local Governments Can Prevent Hate, Extremism and Polarisation and Promote Unity and Social Cohesion in Malawi

Lilongwe, Malawi  
19 – 20 March 2024



## Summary

With support from the European Union (EU) as part of its [STRIVE Cities](#) Initiative, the Strong Cities Network's [East and Southern Africa \(ESA\) Regional Hub](#) convened leaders and other officials from district and city councils, representatives of the national government, the [EU Delegation to Malawi](#), [ICLEI Africa](#), [International Organisation for Migration \(IOM\)](#), [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#) and community- and faith-based organisations for a dialogue on **enhancing [national-local cooperation \(NLC\)](#) to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation in Malawi.**

The dialogue was held in two key contexts: firstly, it builds on findings from an EU-funded [mapping](#) that Strong Cities conducted in 2022 on the needs and priorities of African cities in preventing hate, extremism and polarisation, which revealed that a lack of NLC stands in the way of more city-level involvement in prevention. Secondly, in October 2023, the National Government of Malawi launched a five-year [National Counter Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism Strategy \(NCTPVE Strategy\)](#) and, in February 2024, launched its new



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Decentralisation Policy, which aims to “increase efficiency, transparency and accountability at the local government level”, as shared by **Darwin Pangani, Deputy Director, Local Government Services Responsible for Decentralisation**.

The dialogue provided national government actors with the opportunity to present on both these frameworks, while local governments were given a platform to showcase their vital role in preventing hate, extremism and polarisation and thus in helping to implement the NCTPVE Strategy. It also invited participants to reflect on achievements with, and barriers to, NLC, framed around the six pillars of the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s (GCTF) [NLC Toolkit](#), which Strong Cities developed in 2023 to support the implementation of the GCTF’s [Memorandum of Good Practices on Strengthening NLC](#).

The following key findings emerged out of the discussions:

1. While there has been some progress on NLC in Malawi, **communication and information-sharing between national and city-level actors needs to be strengthened**. Overall, participants agreed that the national government can do more to account for local contexts in policy planning, especially in programming interventions, language considerations – with a number of national policies not translated into local languages – and budget allocation.
2. **Existing structures can be leveraged to enhance local government-led prevention of hate and extremism and NLC on this topic**. This includes, for example, the Peace and Unity District Committees, which are multi-actor structures that have been launched by the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission in eight districts across the country.
3. The national government should **engage directly at the city level rather than just at the district level**, with participants sharing that engagement at the local level is currently limited primarily to district councils and civil society, thus overlooking city governments.
4. Cities should more proactively consider **partnering with community-based actors to build resilience at the local level**, particularly where there are resource and capacity challenges that lead to insufficient public service delivery and community engagement.
5. The urgent need for enhanced NLC is reflected in concerns – at the local and national level – of **rapid urbanisation and resource and migration-related challenges**, which are being exacerbated by climate change and violence in nearby countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Rwanda.

Based on these findings, participating cities and national actors identified a series of implementation priorities, which the ESA Regional Hub will support with over the coming months:

- The **Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture** will work with the ESA Regional Hub to create and implement a roadmap for: a) supporting cities with preventing hate and extremism; and b) sustaining NLC on this and related issue areas.



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- The **Ministry of Homeland Security**, which has an upcoming visit to Kenya to learn from its National Counter Terrorism Centre, has committed to ensuring there is local government representation at this visit to enable Malawian cities to learn from Kenyan counties on hate and extremism prevention.
- The **Malawi Peace and Unity Commission** will work towards establishing District Peace and Unity Committees in all 28 districts in the country and linking these more effectively with city councils. The Commission, in partnership with the above ministries, will also help enhance the capacities of these structures to provide early warning on threats of hate and extremism.
- At the city level, **Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba** will use their next city council meetings to raise awareness and disseminate learnings from the dialogue, including on city practices that were shared as well as national frameworks such as the NCTPVE Strategy and Decentralisation Policy. They also commit to hosting multi-actor engagements to further disseminate learnings from the dialogue and initiate greater multi-actor collaboration at the local level.
- At the district level, **Karonga** will prioritise dialogue with young people to mitigate youth involvement in criminal groups, while other districts, like **Kasungu, Mangochi, Mulanje** and **Salima** seek to empower their Peace and Unity Committees with the skills to sensitise communities on the risks and ‘indicators’ of hate and extremism so that these threats can be identified and managed as early as possible.

“There cannot be sustainable peace where there is no collaboration among stakeholders in addressing the underlying factors that cause conflicts...we need to promote unity and peace through amicable conflict prevention, management and resolution mechanisms.”

**Mary Nkosi, Chairperson, Peace and Unity Commission of Malawi**



## Threats & Key Challenges

Participants identified several challenges that are exacerbating hate, extremism and polarisation across Malawi. For example, there is concern over increased tensions over access to resources and economic opportunities and that this will only escalate considering the significant impact of climate change in the country. **Alina Zalewski, Programme Manager, IOM**, shared, for example, that drought, floods and other climate-related



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challenges have impacted the ability for rural communities in Malawi to continue making a living on agricultural outputs and that this, in turn, has required them to migrate (e.g., to urban centres like Lilongwe). The economic impacts of climate change are also fuelling increases in criminal activity, with people looking towards illegal wildlife trade and human trafficking to make a living. As **Alexander Nkunika, Senior Deputy Director for Counterterrorism Division, National Intelligence Service**, said, these conditions are “creating desperation, which extremists can use to spread hate”.

**Esther Salimu, Deputy Mayor, City of Lilongwe**, pointed to rapid urbanisation as an emerging challenge, with internal and cross-border migration at an all-time high. She expressed particular concern about overpopulation in Lilongwe and the absence of a directory or other mechanism to track and respond to the city’s rapidly changing demographics. Deputy Mayor Salimu and others observed that challenges with cross-border migration are likely to increase because of violence in neighbouring Mozambique.

Further, participants expressed concern over rising levels of anti-refugee and other anti-migrant sentiment, with some long-term residents perceiving new arrivals as a threat to their already limited access to land, resources and economic opportunities. **Archwells Katani, Chairperson, Salima District Peace and Unity Committee**, shared, for example, that competition over resources is fuelling tensions and violence between refugees and long-term residents in the district. Chairperson Katani also shared that inter-tribal hate is eroding community cohesion, a concern shared by representatives of other districts and cities, with participants noting that hate speech is likely to increase around the country’s upcoming elections.

## Key Themes

### Theme 1: Communication and Information-Sharing

To effectively address the above challenges, participants agreed that there needs to be **more proactive and consistent information-sharing and communication between the national government and local governments at both the district and city levels**. For example, while the Ministry of Homeland Security consulted with some district councils as it developed its NCTPVE Strategy, it did not engage city councils. Further, while the Strategy embraces a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach in its implementation, city representatives at the dialogue were not aware of the role envisioned for them, which is primarily around early warning. They therefore welcomed the presentation provided by the Ministry of Homeland Security and UNODC, which supported the development of the Strategy.

Importantly, participants identified existing structures that can be used to enhance national-local information-sharing on issues of hate and extremism. This includes, for example, **District Peace and Unity Committees**, which are multi-actor structures comprising traditional leaders, civil society, youth representatives, the private sector and district officials. They provide a space for dialogue and exchange of ideas, while also organising activities to defuse tensions and mitigate violence. As an example of an NLC good practice, each committee is supported by a designated officer from the national Peace and Unity Commission, with this officer responsible for serving as a liaison between the two bodies and



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identifying and organising technical support for committee members. Participants agreed that – while this is a good start – more can be done to ensure information from district committees is shared beyond the Peace and Unity Commission and with other relevant national government stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Homeland Security.

Participants also stressed that the national government must engage directly with city-level governments, noting that most engagement at the local level is limited to either district councils or civil society, with city councils largely overlooked. Representatives of the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture shared that members of parliament (MPs) are embedded in city councils for this purpose but recognised that more should be done to ensure MPs are aware that they must serve as interlocutors between local and national actors in this capacity.

To further address this gap, **Mary Nkosi, Commissioner, Malawi Peace and Unity Commission**, shared that the Commission will start working with city councils to establish similar committees as those that exist at the district level or to otherwise facilitate the inclusion of city officials in district committees. **Dyton Kang’omi, Deputy Director of Peace and National Unity, Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture**, similarly emphasised the importance for mayors and city council members to be included in district committees, urging mayors to “consider the committees as part of their ambit and as a resource”.

Other recommendations for improving national-local information-sharing included translating national policies and frameworks into local languages, with most of them currently only available in English. This is particularly important to enable more rural and isolated local governments and other important peacebuilding actors such as traditional leaders to understand their mandate and the resources available to them to achieve this mandate.

## NLC Spotlight: Malawi Peace and Unity Commission

### Approach:

Recognising the potential for local grievances to escalate into violence and the need to preventatively address the potential for spillover of violence from neighbouring countries, the National Government of Malawi launched a [National Peace Policy](#) in 2017, which is a “framework for structural conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict transformation” built around multi-actor partnerships. The Policy outlined two overarching structures responsible for upholding peace across the country: the national Malawi Peace and Unity Commission and District Peace and Unity Committees.

These committees, of which there are currently eight across the country, are multi-actor fora that bring together traditional leaders, civil society, youth representatives, the private sector and officials from the district. District Councils must nominate members, which the Peace and Unity Commission reviews and approves. District committees carry a dispute resolution mandate, leveraging traditional conflict management structures (e.g., through traditional leaders and community-based partners to identify and respond).



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Each committee is assigned an officer from the national Malawi Peace and Unity Commission, who serves as interlocutor between the two bodies. The officer is also responsible for facilitating technical support to committee members.

### Impact and Next Steps:

The development of District Peace and Unity Committees has helped decentralise Malawi's peacebuilding efforts, giving ownership to local actors on problem-solving and dispute management. The Commission is now working towards establishing a committee in all of the country's 28 districts and in enhancing collaboration between city councils and district committees.

## Theme 2: Strengthening City-Led Action Through Capacity-Building

The dialogue shed light on several initiatives being implemented by local governments that help build resilience against hate, extremism and related issues. For example, **Munira Bakali, Deputy Mayor, Zomba City Council**, shared that the city has numerous hyper-local committees that are responsible for swift and effective problem-solving and crisis management. This includes a grievance management committee that works with residents to address financial and other concerns. She advised that such structures – if trained to do so – can support hate and extremism prevention at the local level by disseminating peaceful messaging and providing the city with an early-warning function, leveraging their daily interaction with residents to monitor social cohesion and proactively address rising tensions.

The **City of Lilongwe** launched a **Know Your Neighbour** campaign convening residents of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to facilitate integration and inclusion. The City has also embarked on mass registration of residents to better understand the composition of its population – which is growing rapidly as a result of both internal and cross-border migration – so that it can better meet the needs of all its residents.

In **Blantyre**, the City Council is working towards improving its resource deployment. For example, its constituency development fund is currently deployed equally between the city's wards, despite significant differences in need per ward. **Deputy Mayor Funny Baraba Kanojerera** noted that a more informed approach to resource deployment is important to ensure the Council is responding to what is *actually* needed at the community level. Enhanced, needs-driven service provision in turn can build trust in the local government, serving as a protective factor against hate and extremism.

Despite these practices and to fully unlock the potential of Malawian cities in implementing the country's NCTPVE Strategy, participants agreed that city officials must be supported by the national government and other actors on several capacity needs, including:

- Sensitisation on different manifestations of hate and extremism, particularly on the 'types' of extremist and other militant groups that Malawi is at risk of and how this ties into the regional threat landscape;



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- Practical guidance and sample protocols for effectively identifying, reporting and otherwise responding to ‘signs’ of hate and extremism;
- Knowledge management, including how local governments can better track and coordinate responses to local concerns and manifestations of hate and extremism;
- Migration management, particularly amongst border cities, which serve as transit points and thus face consistently fluctuating populations, and urban centres where migrants tend to settle;
- In line with the country’s new Decentralisation Policy, strengthening citizen engagement structures and civil society at the local level to improve public service delivery, transparency and accountability and thus build trust between governments and residents.

In this context, participants welcomed opportunities for more city-city learning through the Strong Cities Network and presentations by IOM and ICLEI Africa during the dialogue on tools cities can use to safeguard social cohesion amidst rising levels of migration and other challenges. IOM, for example, has developed guidance for local governments on how to “mainstream migration” into their core functions. This includes recommendations for how to provide wraparound support to migrants and for fostering a welcoming environment for new arrivals. **Alina Zalewski** of IOM noted that the Government of Malawi has ratified [several](#) international conventions related to migration and should consider cities a vital partner in its implementation of such conventions. She also stressed the importance for actors at both the national and local levels to see migration as an opportunity in its enrichment of local social fabrics. This was echoed by **Monica Macy Namonde, Principal Civil and Political Rights Officer, Malawi Human Rights Commission**, noting that policies and programme that humanise migrants can help mitigate anti-migrant stigma.

Finally, participants also welcomed commitments from the Peace and Unity Commission to deploy multi-actor committees across *all* of the country’s 28 districts and supplementing this with a workstream to build the capacity of these structures on hate and extremism prevention.

“Everything must start in cities. If we create strong cities, towns and districts, we create strong countries.”

**Owen Chomanika, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture, Malawi**



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## Theme 3: Multi-Actor Collaboration for Inclusive Public Service Delivery

The dialogue emphasised the importance of city-led multi-actor collaboration to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation and thus implement the NCTPVE Strategy at the local level. For example, **Maulana Monjeza, Deputy Secretary General, Muslim Association of Malawi**, and **Nuwagaba Kaduyu, Executive Director, Allied Youth Muslim Uganda**, who provided insights into the Ugandan experience with hate and extremism prevention, urged local governments to partner with mosques and other religious institutions on public service delivery, noting that many communities will first look towards religious leaders when they are in need. They shared that religious and other community leaders can be an asset in supporting local governments with robust community engagement and local needs assessments.

City-led partnerships were also stressed in the context of urban design and planning to address inequalities and build resilience against hate and extremism. **Meembo Changula, Senior Professional Officer, Urban Planning, Urban Systems, ICLEI Africa**, noted that this is particularly important in the context of Malawi, where rapid urbanisation increases the risk of informal settlements forming on the outskirts of cities. Such settlements are often neglected in city-led public service delivery, leaving them isolated from the rest of the city's socioeconomic life and vulnerable to a number of social, health and other risks. She stressed that effective urban governance requires strong NLC, where national governments set policy frameworks to support local actors – which should be led and coordinated by local governments – with “integrative urban planning” that recognises “informal settlements as an integral part of the urban fabric”. Here, she shared that local governments should partner with faith-based and other community organisations to build trust with residents in informal settlements, identify and meet their needs.

In this context, participants also agreed that the national government should partner with local governments to make human rights-based migration management a core function of local government, as it is cities that have to grapple with the implications of mass migration on their resources and on the social cohesion of their communities.

## Next Steps

The dialogue concluded with district and city officials, as well as national government representatives, sharing priorities for enhancing city-led action against hate, extremism and polarisation and NLC on this topic. Participants created draft roadmaps for achieving both these objectives, which the ESA Regional Hub will consolidate into a single roadmap in consultation with the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture, which has committed to taking ownership over the roadmap's implementation.

Meanwhile, city and district representatives have committed to sharing learnings from the dialogue with council members and other local actors, while **Davie Maunde, Mayor, City of Zomba** and **President of the Malawi Local Government Association (MALGA)**, noted MALGA will raise awareness about the dialogue's outcomes and next steps with its network. The ESA Regional Hub will provide technical and other support throughout this process and with implementing the priorities outlined on pages two and three of this report.



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## Additional Resources

- [A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [A Guide for City-Led Response](#). Strong Cities Network, April 2024
- [Addressing the Overlooked Role of African Cities in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism](#), Strong Cities Network, July 2023
- [Preventing and Responding to Election Disruption and Violence: Ten Considerations for Cities](#), Strong Cities Network, March 2024
- [National-Local Cooperation Toolkit](#), Global Counterterrorism Forum, September 2023
- [Memorandum of Good Practices on National-Local Cooperation](#), September 2020
- [National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism](#), Government of Malawi, October 2023

## Donors & Partners

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## Contact Information

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