

Event Report

National Local Cooperation in South Asia: Barriers, Opportunities and Good Practices

A South Asia Regional Hub Webinar

27 February 2024



Summary

On 27 February 2024, the South Asia Regional Hub hosted a webinar to discuss barriers, opportunities and good practices on enhancing national-local cooperation (NLC) to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation in the region. Some 60 participants from Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka learned about key components for strengthened NLC based on the Global Counterterrorism Forum's (GCTF's) NLC [Good Practices](#) and its [Implementation Toolkit](#), which was developed in partnership with Strong Cities. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to reflect on an initial set of key findings developed by the Regional Hub on barriers to NLC in South Asia. Attendees also shared their experience, obstacles faced, good practices and lessons learned that helped them improve NLC in particular countries. This information will inform the Hub's mapping of barriers to and opportunities and good practices for enhancing NLC in the region as it continues to support cities, national governments and other relevant actors across the region as they work to build trust and enhance coordination and communication for prevention.

Key Takeaways

- Countries in South Asia are starting to move away from highly centralised approaches to preventing hate and extremism and towards more inclusive ones that allow for local actors, including cities, to play a role.** For instance, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have taken steps to empower local administrations by involving them in developing and implementing prevention measures at the community level. This shift is important, because while national governments are the driving force in addressing imminent security threats, local governments are often better positioned to understand and respond to inter-communal tensions and strengthen social cohesion.

2. **Cities are determined to contribute to or lead local action against hate and extremism including in countries that do not have a relevant national strategy.** For instance, cities in Sri Lanka have launched different activities to strengthen social cohesion and community resilience to extremism and hate despite a lack of national frameworks.
3. **Capacity and resource gaps have hindered the development and implementation of relevant city-level prevention policies and programmes.** The lack of adequate capacities and resources is even more pronounced in smaller and remote towns and villages that are targeted by malign actors. This includes border towns which are disproportionately affected by instability and violence in neighbouring states.
4. **To address capacity and resource gaps, cities in the region have tried to leverage civil society's (including community-based organisations) access, skills and knowledge to de-escalate inter-communal tensions and prevent violence.** Grassroot initiatives that promote inclusivity and peace have been key for municipalities to bring residents together and create unity within their cities. Some of these activities have been co-organised with, or supported or included the participation of, local councils and city administrations. This has allowed local governments to build stronger relationships with community members and particularly with youth, women and minority groups. This has also led to greater interest, and in some cases, participation of less represented groups in local decision-making and initiatives.
5. **Disagreements and distrust between the ruling party and the opposition create barriers to meaningful NLC.** This is most prominent in cities with mayors and local councils from the opposition and is characterised by inadequate coordination and communication between the city administration and law enforcement, which is controlled by national governments in the region. Furthermore, obstacles to NLC are also evident when there is a change of government at the local level. In many cases, when a newly elected mayor is from a different political party than their predecessor, the former discontinues ongoing programmes, reshuffles staff members and ignores frameworks and relationships developed by the previous government. This diminishes the institutional memory of the local government and undermines the sustainability of its initiatives.

The State of NLC in South Asia

The Regional Hub provided an overview of the barriers to and good practices for effective NLC that it has so far identified from its desktop research and consultations with city and other relevant stakeholders from the region. Some of the key obstacles identified include:

- A **lack of trust** among communities and between communities and authorities in some places, which stems from longstanding social, ethnic and religious divides, is a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of social cohesion and community resilience initiatives. Trust deficits between national and local authorities have also hindered information-sharing and coordination on extremism and hate prevention.
- Societal norms and **resistance to change** can hinder the adoption of new and whole-of-society approaches to engage communities. This is also an impediment to capacity-building efforts because beneficiaries at the national and local level are not always able to apply their new skills and knowledge.

- In regions with an active extremist threat, **security concerns** can hinder participation by local government and other local actors because law enforcement and other security agencies are reluctant to involve non-security actors in addressing the challenge.
- The **politicisation** of prevention efforts can result in the exclusion of important partners such as civil society organisations that are critical of the government and opposition municipal leaders, which are capable of leading and supporting local action.
- **Inefficient bureaucracies** and **uneven technological capabilities** among agencies and regions can slow down timely information sharing and coordination.
- **Limited resources** often impede the implementation of comprehensive prevention initiatives and capacity-building programmes at the local level.
- **Limited and uneven evaluations of** local policies and programmes to address hate, extremism and polarisation undercuts understanding about their effectiveness and can result in resource misallocation and lack of progress towards community wellbeing.

Despite these challenges, the Regional Hub also identified good practices and opportunities for strengthening NLC:

- **Increased decentralisation** in strategies to counter terrorism and extremism is creating more opportunities for local involvement: this has included more space for local government to contribute to the development and implementation.
- Enhanced city-led efforts to **engage communities** directly, both through consultations and local service delivery: this includes **community participation** in information gathering and sharing that provides insights into the realities on the ground as well as the launch of **youth empowerment and support programmes**.
- **Empowering** cities and encouraging local government and community actors to enhance their contributions, including through funding and other support from national governments and multilateral organisations.
- **Coordination meetings** between national and local authorities that enable ongoing cooperation: a key component of this has been the development of multi-stakeholder entities at the local or provincial levels to coordinate information sharing between and among agencies.
- **Capacity building of local government officials and law enforcement**, including dedicated programmes to train and support community actors, such as religious and other community leaders.

Hemanthi Goonasekera, Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities shared that local governments in the country lack a clear prevention mandate, which leads to confusion about their role and responsibilities. However, she highlighted that local governments are committed to leading efforts to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation despite the lack of strategies at the national level. Nevertheless, **Shan Ali, Chairman, City of Mirpur Khas (Pakistan)** cautioned that despite their goodwill and intentions, cities in Pakistan have limited jurisdictions and lack capacities and resources, especially those in remote and border areas.

Sarwat Jahan, Team Lead, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (Pakistan) pointed to trust deficits between local governments and citizens, which impede effective community engagement. She also emphasised that civil society organisations, which often

rely on short-term donor funding, struggle to contribute to this issue effectively and sustainably beyond project timelines. **Shafquat Haider, Working Group Spokesperson, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** emphasised that efforts at the national and local level should focus on community buy-in and inclusion for improved information sharing and impactful prevention.

Institutionalising Prevention Efforts in South Asian Cities

Moinul Islam, Urban Development Specialist, Narayanganj City Corporation (Bangladesh) presented his city's five-year development action plan, which is aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It is built on the following strategic priorities:

1. **Making Narayanganj More Liveable:** The city prioritises the sustainable development of new and improving already existing public spaces to address poverty and inequalities while encouraging community gatherings and interactions, fostering social cohesion and collective engagement among its diverse population.
2. **Youth Empowerment:** Narayanganj City Corporation established a youth council tasked with facilitating communication between the city councils and youth, while seeking to empower youth leaders and communities and contributing to social welfare by addressing issues such as child marriage.
3. **City-led Multi-Stakeholder Approaches:** The city has prioritised the establishment of various committees to tackle prominent issues that diminish peace and social cohesion. For instance, the city has developed a "City Coordination Committee" that addresses various issues including socially deviant behaviour such drug abuse. It has also established a "Civil Society Committee" dedicated to addressing communal issues as well as contributing to the improvement of the city's urban landscape.

The action plan is designed to address various social, economic and environmental challenges while promoting inclusive growth and community well-being.

Hemanthi Goonasekera, Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Sri Lankan Local Govt Authorities shared similar efforts to institutionalise prevention in Trincomalee Town and Gravets, Sri Lanka. The city is home to a diverse population which is segregated in different pockets of its territory with limited interaction. To address threats associated with a lack of inter-communal engagement, the city responded by conducting a mapping to identify common community needs, interests and values to build partnerships and bridging capital. The municipality also used the data to develop early warning plans to prevent and counter public safety issues. To systematise these efforts, the local council developed a framework, enacted policies and established a "Community Response Mechanism" to enhance community inclusion and coordination.

Saud Ali, President of Secretariat of South Huvadhu Atoll, Thinadhoo Council (Maldives) further emphasised the importance of systematically including civil society and community-based organisations in city-led prevention initiatives. He argued that they are an important stakeholder to amplify local action as well as hold local governments accountable to creating and maintaining safe, inclusive and tolerant cities.

Addressing NLC Barriers

While the region has seen some progress in terms of enhanced NLC, participants also emphasised that barriers remain. For example, **Ali Nizar, Mayor of Addu City (Maldives)** stressed that there has been a lack of policy and initiative implementation at the local level despite the existence of laws and regulations at the national level. There are various reasons for this, including capacity and resource gaps, inadequate coordination between the national and local governments and one-way communication channels between government and communities. Furthermore, he underscored the impact of political differences on collaboration efforts, especially if the national and local governments are led by opposing political parties.

Participants agreed that overcoming these challenges requires more investments in training local leaders and practitioners as well as increased financial support to address pressing local issues, such as tensions between ethnic and religious groups, youth radicalisation and gender-based violence. Moreover, they also agreed that leaders need to overcome political divides and prioritise collective goals and objectives that benefit of communities. **Sanskriti Shree, Project Manager, Centre for Civil Society (India)**, emphasised the important role civil society and community-based organisations play in continuously communicating local needs, advocating for locally-led solutions and bridging divides between national and local government.

Additionally, participants noted the need for greater cooperation between cities and law enforcement to address hate, extremism and polarisation. **Shafquat Haider, Working Group Spokesperson, SAARC**, suggested that home ministries across the region, which control the police, should consider investing more in community policing and/or develop community watch groups in cooperation with local governments and communities.

Additionally, some participants were interested to explore approaches to use emerging technologies to streamline and otherwise improve communication, service delivery and public engagement. This, they argued, could them more user-friendly for government officials and more accessible to local communities resulting in stronger relationships between local governments and city residents based on transparency and accountability. Participants also pointed out that leveraging new technologies can also support youth engagement, empowerment and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Next Steps

Following the webinar, the Regional Hub will incorporate the findings and feedback gathered during the session into its mapping of barrier to, opportunities for and good practices in NLC in South Asia, which will inform its engagement with national and local governments in the region. Strong Cities will continue to facilitate processes to enhance NLC at the regional and country level including through its Technical Support Fund and Resource Hub.

Additional Resources

- [A Guide for City-Led Response](#), Strong Cities Network (March 2024)
- [National-Local Cooperation Toolkit](#), Global Counterterrorism Forum (September 2023)
- [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)
- [South Asia Regional Hub: Regional Workshop on Inclusive, City-Led Approaches to Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network (August 2023)
- [Southeast Asia Regional Workshop: Strengthening National-Local Cooperation to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#), Event Report, Strong Cities Network (July 2023)
- [Implementing the GCTF Good Practices on Strengthening National-Local Cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conductive to Terrorism: Mapping Strengths and Challenges in East and Southern Africa](#), Strong Cities Network (November 2022)
- [State of Play: National-Local Cooperation in P/CVE – What We Learned & What Needs to Improve](#), Strong Cities Network (October 2022)
- [Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening National-Local Cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conductive to Terrorism](#), Global Counterterrorism Forum (September 2020)

Contact Information

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