Revitalising the International Steering Committee

22 September 2021 | Meeting Summary

Introduction

On 22 September 2021, mayors and other representatives from some 20 cities around the globe participated in an SCN meeting to discuss how to strengthen the network and further enhance its impact. The meeting was facilitated by the SCN's Interim Director, Eric Rosand, who spoke about some of the network's achievements since its launch in September 2015. He emphasised how the network continues to fill a critical gap in the multilateral preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) architecture, noting how it is the only multilateral initiative focused on strengthening the role of mayors and local governments around the globe in P/CVE.

Despite the network's successes over its first six years, the need to ensure the SCN is fit for purpose for its next phase of work was highlighted. This means, among other things:

- being able to engage on a more consistent basis with more cities to better understand and support their P/CVE needs;
- facilitating more sharing, learning and interactions among mayors and local government practitioners;
- ensuring the perspectives of local leaders and governments are heard more regularly in global, regional, and national P/CVE conversations, including through the identification and dissemination of city-level good practices; and
- ensuring that the network becomes a platform that is driven by the needs and priorities of its members. This starts with invigorating the network's International Steering Committee.

Reconstituting/revitalising the International Steering Committee

Participants noted how the committee was first constituted at the SCN launch in 2015 and has played an important, but largely ceremonial, role since then. However, as the SCN enters a new phase of its existence, and informed by six years of experience and practice, the need for the steering committee to assume a more robust posture was highlighted. Therefore, with the initial mandate of the committee and terms of its original members having expired, the SCN Interim Director noted the need to reconstitute the committee. The near-term goal is to bring together a diverse (including with respect to size, geography, and threats they face) group of some 25 cities and other local authorities which are committed to the SCN mission and willing to play an active leadership role in helping to advance it.

P/CVE challenges facing cities in 2021

Participants discussed some of the challenges cities are facing in addressing violent extremism, hate and polarisation today and how the SCN can help cities meet those challenges. Members shared different perspectives, including how COVID-19-related lockdown measures have been interpreted by some as anti-religious or against free speech, and have in some contexts diminished the trust and faith in local government which often finds itself having to enforce those measures. This has complicated efforts by cities to engage in P/CVE. The point was also made that inter-communal tensions and polarisation that can lead to violence are on the rise in the current environment and thus the need for local governments to contribute to defusing and reducing them remains critical.

It was noted that violent extremism is rarely a priority issue for cities, which are typically confronted with more immediate and widespread threats and challenges facing their communities, including drugs, crime and other forms of violence. Particularly where resources are limited, participants emphasised the value of integrating efforts to prevent violent extremism across a variety of municipal services or activities. These include education, psycho-social care, sports, culture and vocational training. Participants noted the important role that culture and sports can play in building trust among different communities within a city and between those communities and local government, with such trust being a sine qua non for locally-led efforts to prevent violent extremism.

Participants discussed the need to raise awareness of violent extremism – both the risk it poses if it does infect a community and the need to prevent it from doing so – as many citizens and public safety stakeholders do not see it as a pressing issue. Being proactive against the threat before it leads to violence was seen as critical and, for those cities which had not necessarily been directly affected by terrorist incidents, was a motivation for joining the network so they can learn from other cities about the preventative measures they could be taking. In this regard, the need for greater clarity between freedom of speech and hate speech and what content is acceptable and not acceptable was highlighted.

In addition, some of the cities represented said that they would benefit from more data on the issues that fuel violent extremism, hate and polarisation in their communities and how these

communities are affected. Access to such data, they said, would not only increase their understanding of the threat but of what existing resources could be leveraged to address it and what new ones might be needed.

Ensuring the SCN is fit for purpose

Participants exchanged views on some of the challenges the network has faced in supporting a membership that has reached some 150 local authorities spread across six continents. The SCN has engaged in an in-depth manner with some members, while others have had few touch points with the network, apart from participation in one of its global summits or regional workshops. Going forward, the importance of the SCN having more consistent and tailored engagement with more of its members was identified as a priority. It was stressed that the network needs to be able to cater to the different needs, expectations and capacities of its members.

Further, it will be important to ensure that the SCN's activities and approach, more broadly, meet the needs of its members. Given limited resources and other immediate priorities, cities need to more clearly see the benefits that accrue from engagement with the SCN.

Participants welcomed the 'regional hub' model that the SCN is looking to develop, whereby small teams will be established in different regions to allow for more consistent engagement with and support for members. They said that this approach would be a positive step towards ensuring that the SCN is relevant to more cities, can drill down on specific local issues and better connect the global P/CVE framework to a particular local context.

Participants also offered a number of other suggestions for enhancing the network's relevance to more of its members. For example, given the resource constraints that cities are often operating under, they said that the SCN should more regularly share funding opportunities with the membership and, where appropriate, support its members' applications. In addition, they recommended the SCN focus more attention on facilitating the sharing, across the membership, of city-level P/CVE lessons and blueprints for what has worked in other cities and mayoral and practitioner dialogues and member exchanges.

In this context, participants stressed that while the network is global, many of the issues cities are facing are specific to their region, sub-region or country. Participants thought that the proposed 'regional hub' model would allow for the network to be more attuned to the different needs and perspectives of the various regions, including by allowing for more regional exchanges and sharing, and for the development of region-specific city-level P/CVE good practices.

In addition, participants noted how this model could help offset the lack of resources and infrastructure in many cities, which has often impeded their ability to engage with the network and its steering committee. Participants further recommended that structured engagement with members by staff at 'regional hubs' would be more valuable than frequency of engagements.

During the meeting participants had the opportunity to discuss three documents that were shared in advance.

The [first](#) was released during the 30 September SCN side-event on the margins of the 76th UN General Assembly. It highlights [10 steps that cities can take to prevent and counter violent extremism](#) and is intended to help raise awareness among multilateral bodies, national governments and even cities who may not fully appreciate the range of P/CVE contributions they 'can make as part of a 'whole of society" approach.

The second is an updated [SCN fact sheet](#) outlining the network's mission, objectives and structure – to include the new regional hub model and a revitalised and more robust steering committee. The third is the terms of reference of the committee, enumerating the roles and responsibilities of the committee and its members.