The Role of Cities in Building Resilience against Radicalisation that Leads to Violent Extremism

Presentation by Eric Rosand, Executive Director, Strong Cities Network

29 April 2024

Slide 1: Dear colleagues, thank you so much for the invitation. My name is Eric Rosand, I am the Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network and will share some lessons learned from across our global network of more than 230 cities about how cities can build resilience and prevent and respond to hate, violent extremism, polarisation and – at the sharpest edge – terrorism.

Slide 2: First to provide you with a bit of background, Strong Cities Network is an independent, global network launched in 2015 at the United Nations General Assembly, in recognition of the vital yet overlooked role that mayors and other local leaders and local governments play in preventing hate and violent extremism in all its forms. We work with cities to place the spotlight on and scale city-led action and mayoral leadership against these threats.

We use "cities" as a catch-all to refer to all types of local authorities, from capital cities to rural towns, county and other regional governments, and our global membership of more than 230 cities across 67 countries is reflective of this diversity.

Our work is driven by cities and their experiences, achievements and challenges with prevention. We connect cities to one another to exchange ideas and practices, provide city-focused resources, facilitate dialogue with national and global preventing and countering violent extremism and other prevention actors and support cities with transferring learnings and good practices into local action and policy.

Slide 3: With regards to how we work, we have several regional teams that serve as "help desks" for cities in those regions, helping them contextualise and apply international good practices and frameworks, facilitating peer-learning and providing technical assistance to support implementation of prevention practices. We also host regular **transatlantic dialogues**, in which we convene mayors and other city officials from North America and Europe to discuss shared concerns and city-led responses, including around the impact of global crises on social cohesion in these cities. All this work is supported and scaled through partnerships, including with UN-Habitat, the National League of Cities in the US, and others.

Slide 4: Before I move to lessons learned when it comes to cities building community resilience, I would like to provide a quick overview of *why* we work with cities.

Firstly, cities are uniquely placed to understand and engage with and to provide public services to their communities, given their proximity and access to local populations.

They have an array of social, public health, youth-related, business-oriented, cultural and educational functions that local governments hold that offer potential for prevention.

They can build trusted relationships to strengthen inclusivity, participation and resilience while breaking down segregation, invest in soft-target protection, engage youth as partners

in peacebuilding, foster inter-communal dialogue, support victims of hate and extremism and help rehabilitate and reintegrate former extremists as well as returnees from conflict zones.

All of this contributes to preventing violent extremism and terrorism and facilitates the local implementation not only of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and counter-terrorism and other relevant Security Council resolutions, but the Sustainable Development Goals.

Slide 5: But cities face a number of challenges with meeting that full potential, including but not limited to a lack of mandate, limited resources or limited awareness of how they can leverage the resources they do have, a lack of opportunity to engage national, regional and international prevention stakeholders, bureaucratic constraints and a lack of expertise on the on- and offline threat landscape and how they can respond.

Slide 6: Strong Cities helps cities overcome these challenges by serving as a platform and amplifier of city-led achievements in and needs for preventing hate and building social cohesion. Through our city-focused Resource Hub and throughout our activities and engagements with partners, **we put the spotlight on city-led action and mayoral leadership**.

We do this through country-specific, regional and global mayoral and local government convenings in which we raise awareness and build the capacity of local governments to implement human rights-based practices against hate and violent extremism. We also advocate for the role of cities through national-local and global-local dialogues, amplifying the voices of city officials so that relevant national, regional and global policies and frameworks - including those by the UN - can be informed *and* implemented by those closest to the ground.

Slide 7: So what are some of the lessons we have learned working with cities on prevention and – more specifically – community resilience building?

Slide 8: Firstly, cities can prevent hate and violent extremism and localise relevant UN resolutions and frameworks even without a specific mandate and dedicated resources to do so by integrating this responsibility into existing mandates and structures. We have seen this in a number of cities. For example:

- In **Athens, Ohio**, with support from the US Department of Homeland Security, we are **working** with the City's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team to develop and incorporate a local framework to prevent domestic violent extremism and terrorism.
- **Zomba City Council** in Malawi is integrating resilience-building into the mandates of existing hyper-local committees (for example, ones responsible for handling financial and resource grievances) that already have credibility with the community and can leverage that trust to identify and proactively address inter-communal tensions.
- The **City of Elbasan, Albania** has integrated hate and extremism prevention into the mandate of a broader Local Safety Council, which is responsible for public safety and security of the city as a whole.

Integration as such recognises that hate, extremism and other factors that can lead to terrorism do not develop in silos, and that many of the local grievances that can serve as "risk factors" are able to be addressed within a local government's existing responsibilities and mandates.

Slide 9: Secondly, cities must invest in communities as **partners in**, not just as beneficiaries of, prevention efforts, whether its youth, grassroots organisations, local businesses, and religious and other community leaders. For example:

- The City of Cape Town in South Africa partnered with the national South African Police Service to train faith leaders – of various religious backgrounds– on soft-target protection so they can support the City with safeguarding places of worship.
- Wroclaw in Poland partners with civil society organisations to provide restorative justice programmes for minors that have committed petty crimes, offering them community service as a form of rehabilitation. This helps mitigate recidivism and takes many of these young people off the harmful path they were on.
- The City of Sousse in Tunisia – recognising the vulnerabilities of its young residents – established a dedicated youth municipal committee that the City taps into so that its policymaking and programme decisions are always informed by youth needs and concerns.

Slide 10: Thirdly, cities should think outside the box and consider practices that are transferable for preventing countering hate and violent extremism. For example:

- We are supporting Nansana Municipality in Uganda with implementing Neighbourhood Watch, historically a petty crime prevention model, to serve as an early-warning mechanism against hate and extremism. This comes at the request of the Mayor who – after learning from how Stellenbosch and Cape Town in South Africa implement Neighourhood Watch – identified it as a practice that can be replicated in her Municipality but with a more explicit mandate to enhance early warning against hate and extremism.

- Further, the Mayor of London's Shared Endeavour Fund – a grassroots funding initiative we have supported since it launched in 2019 – funds hyper-local sports, arts and cultural initiatives, whereby community football games, theatre and creative arts are used to enhance interactions between otherwise segregated communities and build healthy peer networks amongst young people.

- We are also increasingly looking at **urban planning and design** as a way to build resilience through enhancing social cohesion. In Rabat, Morocco, for example, the city recognised that feelings of idleness and insecurity are exploited by extremists and therefore consulted youth and civil society on creating safer public spaces where young people can keep busy with healthy extracurricular activities.

Slide 11: Finally, we cannot forget the specific role of mayors and other city leaders in resilience-building. As the 'face' of the city, they can take a stand against hate and extremism by promoting an inclusive city identity and otherwise demonstrating – in words and in practice – that they and the local government they lead are committed to protecting all their residents against hate, extremism and polarisation:

- We saw this in Edmonton, Canada, where the Mayor steered the development and launch of an anti-racism strategy, demonstrating to residents his commitment to creating a city that is safe to all its residents. Importantly, the strategy includes a dedicated focus on addressing institutional racism – including within the local government itself.

- In Narayanganj, Bangladesh, the Mayor has invested significantly in enhancing engagement with and socioeconomic inclusion of the city's minorities, underscoring her commitment to making her city one that is welcome to all.

Slide 12: Cities are extremely well-placed to ensure needs-based local action. Because of their access to communities, cities are best-placed to gauge realities on the ground, consolidating communities' needs to deploy prevention practices that respond to actual rather than assumed local threats and needs.

- Needs Assessments, informed by communities whether through Town Hall meetings to gauge general sentiment, engagement on specific topics, consultations with local expert organisations, etc

- Programme/Practice Development, informed by actual community needs (for communities, by communities), in partnership with local actors

- Coordination, Deployment and Evaluation, with local governments best-placed to coordinate efforts by relevant actors to address local threats and needs

Slide 13: These are but a few lessons and examples of how cities can build resilience against hate, violent extremism, polarisation and terrorism which I hope demonstrates the scale of potential and innovation at the local level. There is much that cities can do themselves and can tap into within their communities and they must be supported to do so. **Actors at all levels – national, regional and international – should engage with mayors and local governments as partners in the implementation of their policies and frameworks.**

Slide 14: Before I close, I would like to share that as part of our commitment to showcasing city-led action to a global audience – as you have allowed me to do here today – we are hosting our next **Global Summit** in Cape Town, South Africa on 3-5 December 2024. This follows the successes of our Summit in New York City in September 2023, in which we partnered with a number of UN agencies on topics such as countering hate speech and protecting soft-targets. Our Fifth Summit offers us the opportunity to continue this global-local cooperation, and to discuss emerging concerns amongst the cities we work with, which includes:

- Global Crises, Local Impacts, which is a key priority, with city officials globally sharing concerns about the impacts on social cohesion of climate change, migration, regional and international conflicts and other global crises.

- Safeguarding Social Cohesion around Elections, which we have just launched some considerations about.

- Addressing Violence against Elected Officials – this is also a thematic that our cities are increasingly asking for support with.

- Preventing and Responding to Hate Speech – as an outcome of our last Summit, we are working towards developing a plan of action against hate speech specifically for local governments.

- Digital Literacy/Digital Safety, helping cities understand the online threat landscape and - in particular – to support them with preventing and protecting themselves and their communities against mis and disinformation.

- Urban Planning and Social Cohesion – as I mentioned, this is an area we are increasingly looking at.

- Cross-Border City-City Collaboration – this is particularly of concern in areas where there is significant cross-border migration.

Slide 14: And finally, a quick spotlight on our resource hub, which is an open, **living library of tools and guides** to support mayors and cities in tackling hate, extremism and polarisation, and strengthening social cohesion. It features practical tools that are shaped by real-world examples and case studies to support city-led, whole-of-society approaches to address a complex and evolving threat environment.

Thank you so much – I hope that provides some insight into how local governments can build resilience. I look forward to hearing from the rest of the panel and to finding ways to deepen our cooperation with the CTC and its CTED.