

## ISSUE BRIEF

### PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY IN AFRICA:

*Don't Forget Cities*

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Across the African continent, radicalization and militancy are driving polarization and division, and the mainstreaming of disinformation, conspiracies, and extremism is threatening democratic values and institutions. The global pandemic has exacerbated these threats and fueled new hybrid challenges.
- African cities—home to the fastest global population growth—may offer a more direct and promising means to engage policymakers and practitioners on these challenges, given that national governments can sometimes contribute to the problem or are otherwise too slow to address it.
- With the right support, African cities can respond to the needs of their citizens in ways that can build community trust and social cohesion while providing security and protecting democratic values where national governments either cannot or will not.
- **Recommendations** include: increase the focus on subnational diplomacy; promote peer learning and networking for city officials; develop sustainable interventions, building on existing mechanisms; enhance vertical cooperation between national and local governments; and include local and city leaders in international and multilateral platforms.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## INTRODUCTION

Speaking in Abuja last fall, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken implored African governments to enact reforms in response to their citizens' demands for better governance.<sup>1</sup> The ongoing crises in Ethiopia,<sup>2</sup> Sudan,<sup>3</sup> and Burkina Faso<sup>4</sup> together with recent allegations of Nigerian police brutality<sup>5</sup> and a growing awareness<sup>6</sup> of the connections between weak or failed governance and terrorism and other political violence across the continent underscore the need for change. Communities across Africa are facing a hybridized set of threats—radicalization and militancy are driving polarization and division, and the mainstreaming of disinformation, conspiracies, and extremism is threatening democratic values and

institutions, and opening opportunities for foreign actors to further exploit these dynamics. These increasingly intertwined threats to security and the social fabric have only been exacerbated during the global pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the trend lines at the national level seem to be going in the wrong direction. Authoritarianism is on the rise,<sup>8</sup> corruption is spreading, civil society space is shrinking, and trust between the central government and local stakeholders continues to fray. But as we recognize both the complexity of the challenges and the urgency of the need, nation states—themselves often either part of the problem or otherwise too

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<sup>1</sup> *Associated Press*. "Blinken points to crises in Ethiopia and Sudan, says African nations must reform." *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-11-19/blinden-points-to-crisis-in-ethiopia-and-sudan-says-african-nations-must-reform>.

<sup>2</sup> Mackintosh, Eliza. "Ethiopia is at war with itself. Here's what you need to know about the conflict," *CNN*, November 5, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/03/africa/ethiopia-tigray-explainer-2-intl/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Kotasova, Ivana, and Eliza Mackintosh. "The military has taken over in Sudan. Here's what happened." *CNN*, October 26, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/25/africa/sudan-coup-explained-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Burkina Faso coup: return of the military strongmen to West Africa." *BBC*, January 27, 2022. [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-60138129?at\\_medium=RSS&at\\_campaign=KARANGA](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-60138129?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA).

<sup>5</sup> Korpar, Lora. "Peaceful Protesters Against Police Brutality in Nigeria Shot, Killed by Army, Police: Panel." *Newsweek*, November 16, 2021. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/peaceful-protesters-against-police-brutality-in-nigeria-shot-killed-by-army-police-panel/ar-AAQMolv?ocid=uxbndlbng>.

<sup>6</sup> Rosand, Eric, and Marc Sommers. "Militarized Counterterrorism in Africa: Moving Beyond a Failed Approach." *Just Security*, October 30, 2020. <https://www.justsecurity.org/73085/militarized-counterterrorism-in-africa-moving-beyond-a-failed-approach/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Analysis: COVID-19 – the security impacts in Africa." *Control Risks*, June 1, 2020. <https://www.controlrisks.com/our-thinking/insights/covid19-the-security-impacts-in-africa>.

<sup>8</sup> Hayden, Sally. "Coronavirus in Africa: Authoritarianism on rise in crisis, say activists." *Irish Times*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/coronavirus-in-africa-authoritarianism-on-rise-in-crisis-say-activists-1.4299459>.

slow to address it—may not be the optimal partners. Africa's cities, home to the fastest global population growth<sup>9</sup>—by 2100, 13 of the 20 most populous cities in the world will be on the continent—and the port of entry for a host of regional and geopolitical interests, may offer a more direct and promising means to engage on our most pressing human security concerns.

Local governments are typically the institutions responsible for understanding and addressing the daily,<sup>10</sup> practical needs of their citizens and are more agile and less risk averse than their central government counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Although not entirely freed from the bureaucratic and geo- and other political constraints that can impede national level policymakers, mayors and other local leaders often have no option but to work around

obstacles to deliver for their citizens. As we have seen with climate change,<sup>12</sup> corruption,<sup>13</sup> violence,<sup>14</sup> COVID-19, and other global challenges where cities are becoming increasingly active stakeholders, cities are often serving as laboratories for developing innovative initiatives that are designed and implemented in collaboration with local communities.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, this innovation is happening despite the central government.<sup>16</sup>

Given these realities, while continuing to use carrots and sticks, which could include economic or diplomatic measures, to incentivize a reversal of the trends highlighted above at the national level, more attention needs to be given to the unique, but often untapped, role cities and the mayors who lead them can play in Africa.

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<sup>9</sup> Bearak, Max, Dylan Moriarty, and Julia Ledur. "Africa's Rising Cities: How Africa will become the center of the world's urban future." *Washington Post*, November 19, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/africa-cities/?itid=hp\\_most-read\\_2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/africa-cities/?itid=hp_most-read_2).

<sup>10</sup> Quirk, Patrick W., and Eguar Lizundia. "Want the Summit for Democracy to develop solutions? Include local governments." Brookings Institution, May 21, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/21/want-the-summit-for-democracy-to-develop-solutions-include-local-governments/>.

<sup>11</sup> Rosand, Eric, and Ian Klaus. "It Happens on the Pavement: Putting Cities at the Center of Countering Violent Extremism." Brookings Institution, June 1, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/06/01/it-happens-on-the-pavement-putting-cities-at-the-center-of-countering-violent-extremism/>.

<sup>12</sup> Sánchez, Erica, and Stefanie Hodson. "5 Innovative Ways Cities Are Spurring Global Climate Action." *Global Citizen*, September 13, 2019. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-cities-are-fighting-climate-change/>.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Aled, and Kendra Dupuy. "Corruption and the city: How aid donors can support integrity building in urban space." U4 Anti-Corruption Research Center and Chr. Michelsen Institute, U4 Brief 2018:2. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/corruption-and-the-city.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Locke, Rachel, Anthony F. Pipa, and Max Bouchet. "Cities Using the SDGs to Reduce Urban Violence." Brookings Institute, December 18, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/12/18/cities-using-the-sdgs-to-reduce-urban-violence/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Bloomberg Philanthropies Announces 15 Winners of the Global Mayors Challenge." Bloomberg Philanthropies, January 18, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.org/press/bloomberg-philanthropies-announces-15-winners-of-the-global-mayors-challenge/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Eastern European mayors forge anti-populism pact." *Deutsche Well*, December 16, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/eastern-european-mayors-forge-anti-populism-pact/a-51700933>.

Pressure on city-level administrative structures, infrastructure, and services is growing as a result of rapid population growth.<sup>17</sup> However, with the right support, African cities, as has been demonstrated in Durban<sup>18</sup> and other local authorities in South Africa, for example, can enhance security and protect democratic values, a response that their national counterparts often either cannot or will not deliver. The United States can support such efforts by ensuring that these local actors are consistently and meaningfully engaged as part of the “year of action” that follows the recently concluded White House Summit for Democracy and feature prominently in the upcoming U.S.-Africa Leaders’ Summit, where the voices of local leaders and perspectives of local governments in Africa need to be heard and shared.

## LEVERAGING THE POTENTIAL OF CITIES IN AFRICA

A focus on cities offers as much potential for addressing the security priorities of local communities as it does for addressing their other needs—from housing to education to health to employment. Cities’ potential comes not only from their immediacy to the frontline and thus their acute awareness of

the cycle of causes and effects related to extremist and other forms of violence and conflict impacting their citizens and communities. It also results from having at their disposal an array of public services that engage daily with those most affected on the issues that really matter to local populations. Such is the breadth and comparative consistency of this engagement. Cities tend to know and understand their local communities and the challenges they face better than often distant, central governments typically do. At the same time, cities are more capable of generating the trust and credibility with grassroots communities that is so often found wanting when national governments try to lead the response to these threats alone, often adopting a heavy-handed approach.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly so with communities that have been historically marginalized and traumatized by the central government, including through abuse suffered at the hands of law enforcement or other security services.<sup>20</sup>

As much as they can at times dominate the international or multilateral agendas, violent extremism and terrorism are typically not the daily concern of Africa’s communities, or at least not in those terms. While the potential for extremism to break down traditional platforms of dialogue and resilience in communities may be a concern, other forms of violence, whether gang-related, ethnic or

<sup>17</sup> Ogunfemi, Bolaji. “Strategies for sustainable cities in Africa.” AfroDevelopment, Feb 17, 2020. <https://afrodevelopment.org/2020/02/17/strategies-for-sustainable-cities-in-africa/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Open Data Durban.” Open Cities Lab. <https://medium.com/open-data-durban>.

<sup>19</sup> “The Nordic Safe Cities Guide: Insights, inspiration and best practice for your city.” Nordic Safe Cities, 2017. [https://nordicsafecities.org/wp-content/uploads/nsc\\_guide\\_download.pdf](https://nordicsafecities.org/wp-content/uploads/nsc_guide_download.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Piro, Gregory, Robert Pittelli, and Yussuf Adam. “Cries from the Community: Listening to the People of Cabo Delgado.” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 31, 2021. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/cries-from-the-community-listening-to-the-people-of-cabo-delgado/>.

gender-based, or linked to security forces, are typically of more immediate concern. Beyond security issues, however, the struggle for housing, planning, public health services, and access to clean water and sanitation amid rapid urbanization, as well as the everyday registration of births, deaths, marriages, or new businesses, are more likely to be part of daily life. These are also most often the primary functions of cities and other local governments. Development donors are now focusing increased attention on helping sub-national authorities mobilize the resources needed to allow them to serve these basic functions.<sup>21</sup>

Where the interactions between locally-run services and communities build trust, cities can be powerful nodes for reinforcing good governance, accountability, human rights, and democratic renewal that open the way for peacebuilding, stabilization, and prosperity. Two positive examples stand out. The participatory and transparent budgeting process run by the State of Kano in Nigeria<sup>22</sup> provides opportunities for local citizens to influence the spending priorities of their local government and then to hold it accountable. The Open Street Map<sup>23</sup> project in a marginalized suburb of Tunis, Tunisia allowed young people to contribute to the development of a map for local authorities that includes points of interest for youth (e.g. alleys and cafes) and “pinpoint[s] problems in the community such as lack of street lighting.”

However, where ineffective local public service delivery damages trust with communities as it has sometimes done—for example, in Mombasa, Kenya and Yaoundé, Cameroon, where political factionalism and/or corruption of officials and public services is a real challenge—it can exacerbate existing fissures. This also runs the risk of creating fresh grievances ripe for exploitation by the state or non-state actors that seek to divide communities or fuel extremist- or hate-motivated violence.

Yet, beyond being well-positioned to address the daily priorities of their citizens, city leadership can also influence the changes needed higher up the chain at national, regional, and global levels. Effective approaches to addressing localized human security challenges depend on local insights and experience to ensure a tailored approach fit for purpose, which cities can bring through their mayors, local public service leads, and the host of civil society voices. Cities can also provide the connective tissue between national government and multilateral strategies and plans, and local action to address violent extremism and related challenges, ensuring that the former are informed by local practice and perspectives and that the latter is in line with national frameworks.

Unlike typically rigid, siloed, and slow-moving national government and multilateral

<sup>21</sup> “Improving Subnational Domestic Resource Mobilization: A Review of Issues and Opportunities for Strategic Donor Support.” USAID – Urban Links, April 19, 2021. <https://urban-links.org/resource/improving-subnational-domestic-resource-mobilization/>.

<sup>22</sup> “How SFTAS improves good governance at state level – OGP.” Kano Focus, October 7, 2021. <https://kanofocus.com/2021/10/07/how-sftas-improves-good-governance-at-state-level-ogp/>.

<sup>23</sup> Abboud, Noufal, and Elisa Dari. “Supporting Young Peacebuilders to Counter Extremism.” European Union – Capacity4Dev, July 28, 2016. <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/eutr-competent-authorities/articles/supporting-young-peacebuilders-counter-extremism>.

organization processes, cities understand how a hybridized threat is playing out in their communities, weaponizing hate and exploiting mainstream concerns with life-threatening consequences. When, for example, disparate far-right elements sporting an array of QAnon, Nazi, and nationalist insignia attempted to storm the Reichstag six months before the January 6, 2021 events at the Capitol, it was Berlin's regional government that sought to ban the protest, warning of the potential for extremist elements to hijack mainstream resistance to mask-wearing laws and broader COVID measures.<sup>24</sup> Cities can discuss these otherwise "macro" and somewhat abstract issues of polarization, disinformation, and extremism with communities in language that is accessible and connects with their daily lives. They can also help local communities better understand the relevant national and international frameworks, thus making local implementation more likely.

For this alone, rather than being relegated to city-focused platforms or side events at major international gatherings to discuss global challenges, city leaders deserve a seat at the table with national governments. They deserve a place, for example, at the United Nations when its bodies are considering how best to address the spreading terrorist threats across the continent. The perspectives of cities, which typically bear the brunt of most terrorist attacks, are rarely heard, and

representatives could play important roles in informing the deliberations of Security Council members negotiating responses to peace and security challenges in the region. Additionally, they might be given opportunities to share their experiences and needs at the upcoming White House summit on strengthening U.S.-Africa cooperation, where enhancing the city-level sharing and learning between the two sides should be a priority. In advance of the Summit, as one demonstration of the United States' recognition of the growing importance and untapped potential of African cities, including for advancing U.S. foreign policy priorities, the U.S. Congress should pass and resource the "City and State Diplomacy Act," which would establish an Office of Subnational Diplomacy within the State Department.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, during the Summit, President Biden should underscore that facilitating more engagement with and investment in African cities will be at the top of that new office's list of priorities.

Since its launch more than six years ago, the Strong Cities Network (SCN)—with more than 150 member cities around the globe, including some 20 in Africa—has experienced first-hand the potential that African cities offer to addressing extremism, hate, and polarization, while at the same time safeguarding local democracy. Dakar, Senegal has supported a network of over 1,000 youth in its municipal Volunteer Program<sup>26</sup> that aims to increase citizen engagement on

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<sup>24</sup> *Associated Press*. "Anti-corona' extremists try to storm German parliament." *The Guardian*, August 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/berlin-braces-for-anti-coronavirus-protest-against-covid-19-restrictions>.

<sup>25</sup> Rifkin, Jesse. "City and State Diplomacy Act would create Office of Subnational Diplomacy, to help governors and mayors interact with their foreign equivalents." *GovTrack Insider*, October 13, 2020. <https://govtrackinsider.com/city-and-state-diplomacy-act-would-create-office-of-subnational-diplomacy-to-help-governors-and-42a5d8df75a3>.

<sup>26</sup> "100 Promising Practices on Safer Cities: Collation of Urban Safety Practices." *The Global Network on Safer Cities*, 2014. [http://www.mercops.org/Vigentes/64.100\\_Promising\\_practices\\_safer\\_cities.pdf](http://www.mercops.org/Vigentes/64.100_Promising_practices_safer_cities.pdf).

community cohesion, public safety, and social resilience. The counties of Kwale, Nakuru, and Isiolo are developing multi-stakeholder “community teams” through their Community Engagement Forums that bring together national and local government with civil society organizations to develop and implement county action plans<sup>27</sup> to prevent violent extremism. Kolofata, in the Extrême-Nord region of Cameroon close to the Lake Chad basin, has a civilian-led “vigilance committee”<sup>28</sup> supported by tribal elders to warn of nearby militant activity. The town also has a mayor, Dr. Seiny Boukar Lamine,<sup>29</sup> who knows the impact of terrorism better than most, having himself been captured and held by Boko Haram militants.

Parsing out from these examples, Africa's cities can offer so much invaluable insight to discussions of how to prevent violent extremism and other threats to security and democracy if provided with the necessary support from the donor and wider international community, which tend to prioritize engagement with national governments, civil society, and the private sector. Such resources and platforms for local leaders' voices could shed light not only on the cities' potential to help their countries in addressing myriad inter-connected human security challenges, but also on how the continent as a whole could benefit from more subnational diplomacy and networking to share lessons from one city to the next.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Increase focus on subnational diplomacy:

Subnational diplomacy, which recognizes the unique role and agility of local governments compared to their national counterparts, needs stronger support from national governments and multilateral organizations. “Going local” can help navigate highly sensitive and often politicized issue areas and open avenues for cooperation where hardened national government positions and geopolitical stagnation at the international level otherwise prevent them. Furthermore, such approaches can forge ties at the critical level of cities and municipalities where public diplomacy efforts have a greater chance of impacting the everyday lives of citizens.

### 2. Promote peer learning and networking for city officials:

Cities in Africa need more opportunities to expand and share their local learning with their peers across the continent and globally. Given Africa's experience of urban growth, cities should be connected to international partners on addressing the hybrid threats their communities are facing in the same way that they are on issues like climate change and economic growth. Networking opportunities, which identify key examples of good practices and provide an

<sup>27</sup> “County Action Plans in Kenya: Progress and Next Steps.” Strong Cities Network, August 12, 2019. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/county-actions-plans-in-kenya/>.

<sup>28</sup> Hooton, Daniel. “Countering Violent Extremism in Cameroon's Far North.” Huffington Post, July 15, 2017. [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/daniel-hooton/cameroon-violent-extremism\\_b\\_10989120.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/daniel-hooton/cameroon-violent-extremism_b_10989120.html).

<sup>29</sup> “First-Ever Global Summit Of Cities Reinforces Powerful Message For Countering Extremism at the Local Level.” Strong Cities Network, May 25, 2016. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/first-ever-global-summit-cities-reinforces-powerful-message-countering-extremism-local-level/>.

opportunity for others to adopt and adapt them, should be made available to more city leaders, especially when international actors are developing regional programs and capacity-building measures. These should not only be in the “traditional” mold that connects cities from Africa with global north counterparts but should be within the continent and with other “Global South” counterparts so that lessons are always related to contextual similarities and shared challenges.

**3. Develop sustainable interventions, building on existing mechanisms:**

Donors should expand support to building the city-level infrastructure that Africa needs to drive integrated, local responses to increasingly hybridized threats. Investing in local capacities and capabilities should been seen as a key “catalytic” level of action that bridges change at the local governmental level with that at the civil society level. Donor investments should promote good and sustainable practices that build on existing mechanisms where possible, rather than creating new standalone infrastructures that immediately face an existential sustainability challenge.

**4. Enhance vertical cooperation between national and local governments:**

Greater attention should be given to strengthening vertical cooperation between national and local governments across Africa. Both have critical, but somewhat distinct, roles to play when it comes to preventing violent extremism, yet sufficient coordination is too often absent, and the opportunity to engage cities in a critical way is missed. Cities and other local governments require a national government mandate that recognizes their role in developing

community-wide prevention and resilience, given that the typically security-driven approaches of national governments alone have not been sufficient or sustainable.

**5. Include local and city leaders in international and multilateral platforms:**

As the Biden administration seeks to reinvigorate American diplomacy and demonstrate the renewed commitment of the United States to partnership and democratic reform across the African continent (and beyond), it should ensure that mayors and local leaders have a seat at the table. Cities should be represented at key multilateral fora, including in the UN and African Union bodies responsible for coordinating global responses to security and resilience challenges.





# THE SOUFAN CENTER

## ABOUT TSC:

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.