



PEACE, MY HEART:

Amplifying
Youth-Led
Peacebuilding
in South Asia

Overall Research Analysis Findings
Report Amplifying the Leadership of
Local Youth (ALLY) to Prevent Violent
Extremism in South Asia

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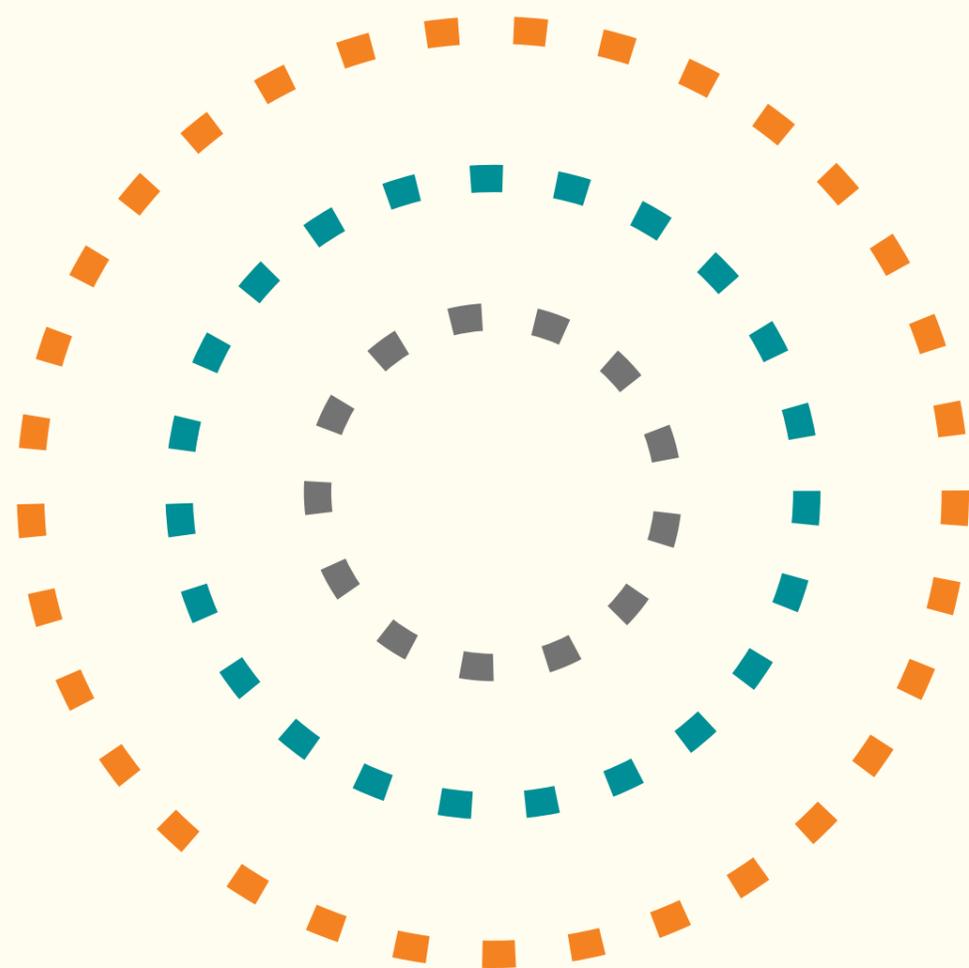
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Peace, my heart, let the time for parting be sweet.

Let it not be a death but completeness.

Let love melt into memory and pain into songs.

Let the flight through the sky end

In the folding of the wings over the nest.

Let the last touch of your hands be

Gentle like the flowers of the night.

Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment,

And say your last words in silence.

I will bow to you and hold up my lamp

To light you on your way.

Rabindranath Tagore

“The Gardener: Peace, My Heart”

This report is dedicated to the victims of violent extremism in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and to the young peacebuilders who hold the lamp aloft to show a better way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research paper is the outcome of a participatory action research process, which was the first component of the Amplifying Leadership of Local Youth (ALLY) program: www.unoy.org/project/ally. The 30-month program is implemented by a consortium of partners—The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers/Finn Church Aid, United Network of Young Peacebuilders, Rural Development Society in India, Centre for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Youth Development Foundation in Pakistan, and Sri Lanka Unites.

Led by Program Coordinator Mridul Upadhyay, this report was researched and written by the eight young ALLY researchers (two from each of the four research countries)—Kaush Weerakoon, Sameer Yadav, Shafaq Sarfraz, M. Rezwanur Rahman, Sumaiya Tanim, Janith Perera, Muhammad Salal, and Ritu Jain—together with the Lead Researcher, Felix Bivens, who facilitated and supervised the entire research journey. Through a participatory action research approach, the ALLY researchers engaged 69 active young peacebuilders, all under the age of 30, from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This unique peer-to-peer approach leverages the rich experience and knowledge of young peacebuilders, who are experts in the conflict dynamics in which they live. Felix trained the ALLY researchers—who conducted the data collection and analysis, and authored the research paper at various stages of the process—to produce this comprehensive evidence base on youth-led peacebuilding in South Asia.

“This initiative is setting a unique trend in developing the capacities of young peacebuilders as researchers. In fact, it was the triple impact of Felix, Mridul and Jaakko [lead researcher and programme coordinators], who didn’t leave any stone unturned to ensure a smooth journey for us young researchers.”

M. Rezwanur Rahman, ALLY researcher, Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ALLY report is a significant contribution to the expanding body of knowledge in the field of youth, peace and security (YPS). The study marks the first comprehensive analysis of youth-led peacebuilding specific to the South Asia region, as understood from the perspective of youth peacebuilders (YPBs). Carried out as a participatory action research process in which YPBs were the key informants, analysts and authors, this report offers a practitioner's view of youth-led peacebuilding in a complex and fragmented region, where violent extremism (VE) has long been an issue. This YPB-perspective reaffirms findings from earlier sectoral research while also identifying distinct regional opportunities, issues, and challenges. Significantly, YPBs in the four included countries—Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka-- view VE not as an external force which works to undermine the state and systems of governance; rather they most often experience VE as a tool of those in political authority, who use extremism to activate certain political constituencies and intimidate others in order to maintain elected office and power.

While religion is often the face and assumed cause of VE, the analysis of these YPBs points to underlying political goals and motivations in which religious misunderstandings are a ready lever for popular manipulation. While the identified drivers of VE for South Asian youth parallel findings from other regional and global analyses—including poverty, marginalization and incendiary social media narratives—the report also speaks in revealing detail to the other side of the equation: who are those youth who choose to become peacebuilders-- their motivations, successes, challenges and, too often, the negative consequences YPBs face for engaging in these activities. As much as it illuminates what drives youth to VE, the study also shows what is necessary to grow the youth peacebuilding sector, which is found to have many deficiencies: male dominance, urban bias, inadequate funding, bureaucratic impasses, and a lack of viable career paths-- and therefore a lack of sustainability.

The study makes clear the commitment of YPBs to deal with the complexity and dangers of facing VE in the communities in which they live, where they may be subject to discrimination, mistrust and even violent reprisal because peacebuilding is viewed by many in South Asia as a foreign agenda which threatens local culture and social norms. In order for the YPS agenda to prosper, governments and civil society groups need to understand not only the drivers of VE, but also the enabling factors which allow youth peacebuilders to thrive and achieve substantive impacts within the local contexts in which they work. The study speaks strongly through lived experience of YPBs in South Asia, making clear what is needed for peacebuilders in the sector to succeed, and, in turn, effectively prevent VE across the region.

ACRONYMS

CSO – Civil Society Organization
CVE – Countering Violent Extremism
GBV – Gender-Based Violence
ICT – Information and Communication Technology
INGO – International Non-Governmental Organizations
NGO – Non-Governmental Organizations
PAR – Participatory Action Research
PVE – Preventing Violent Extremism
VE – Violent Extremism
YPB – Youth Peacebuilder
YPS – Youth, Peace and Security
YR – Youth Researcher

INTRODUCTION

This study marks the first comprehensive analysis of youth-led peacebuilding specific to the South Asia region, as seen from the perspective of youth peacebuilders (YPBs). Following the UN's landmark 2015 Security Council Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security (UNSCR 2250), recognizing youth as central actors and contributors to peacebuilding processes, this research helps further illuminate the state of youth-led peacebuilding. Several progress studies have charted the growth and evolution of the youth-led peacebuilding sector since the passage of UNSCR 2250. Situating youth-led peacebuilding within the unique historical, cultural, and political context of South Asia, this study reaffirms findings from earlier research while also identifying distinct opportunities, issues, and challenges.

The research was conducted through a participatory approach, with sixty-nine active YPBs (four non-binaries, 26 females and 39 males), all under the age of 30, contributing their experience and knowledge to the project. Eight additional YPBs worked on the research team: collecting, analyzing, and authoring at various stages of the process. As such, this report truly amplifies the leadership—and voices—of local youth, speaking directly from the perspectives of YPBs in the field. The value of this research is in the depth and richness of the details, data, and in the daily, lived experiences of the contributors. There is much to appreciate in this report: such as the motivations of the YPBs, their creativity, innovation, and willingness to accept risk in order to move their countries towards more peaceful and inclusive futures.

This study elucidates the challenges facing the region, governments, partner organizations, as well as the YPBs themselves. The research provides a contextualized overview of violent extremism (VE), noting its particular forms and manifestations within the countries targeted in the study - Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, as well as how each country has organized to address these issues (which is largely by securitization measures collectively identified as counter terrorism). The more distributed, grassroots approach of preventing violent extremism (PVE) is discussed as an emerging approach within which the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda is situated. PVE offers a broader scope for engaging more diverse actors, including YPBs, to interrupt the processes and narratives which foster extremist worldviews and violent action. The enlistment of YPBs, to engage with and break the patterns and narratives that lead young people to extremism, is essential.

The perspectives, motivations, practices and impacts of YPBs within the South Asian context are examined in this research. VE is explored and redefined based on the experiences of peacebuilders as they encounter it. A particularly challenging picture emerges in which the politization and use of VE is often wielded to maintain of political power in South Asia. This creates a dangerous environment in which YPB sometimes find themselves working with governments, or against governments, sometimes even attacked by state-affiliated actors and officials.

With regard to youth who engage in VE, the push, pull, and other associated factors are analyzed and catalogued individually. While many of the factors that drive youth to extremism—deprivation, manipulative interpretation of religious texts, social media narratives which promote division and violence—correlate to global patterns; issues

such as mental health, legal impunity and gender bias are also seen hugely significant and under-acknowledged as contributing to extremist mindsets and violent actions.

This report goes beyond the perpetrators of VE to provide an in-depth analysis of the YPB sector. The identity and motivation of peacebuilders are often misunderstood and undervalued by families or local communities. The YPB sector in South Asia emerges as highly diverse in terms of gender, religious, and ethnic composition, urban and rural, as well as coming from both majority and minority groups within each national context.

The general concentration of YPBs and supportive networks in urban areas is noted as an opportunity for improvement, as intentional support and networking is lacking for rural and indigenous peacebuilders. Likewise, despite women comprising a large and notable part of the peacebuilding sector, effective support and opportunities for female peacebuilders are also seen as lacking.

Even with such diversity in identity, the motivation of YPBs remains quite consistent. Many YPBs have directly experienced violence in their communities or have lost loved ones to extremist activities. As such, the desire to engage in peacebuilding is more intrinsic than extrinsic. With little financial compensation for their work, YPBs often fund programs out of their own pockets or through fundraising. YPBs are often criticized for being self-interested or publicity-seeking, but this study points to a challenging environment in which there is little financial or moral support for peacebuilders within their families, communities, and political environments. Most support, backing, and encouragement arrives from international sources and networks, which can be a mixed blessing in and of itself, as international non-governmental organization (INGOs)—and hence peacebuilding itself—are often regarded as suspect and viewed as purveyors of foreign agendas and ideas.

This research categorizes the various methodological approaches that YPBs use for PVE, and peacebuilding more broadly, to address tensions, stereotypes, and conflicts within communities. While many programs identified are consistent with peacebuilding, advocacy and PVE efforts globally, regional innovations of YPBs are outlined here. This report also illuminates the mechanisms and factors that allow for particular YPB initiatives and networks to scale within countries as well as across borders. The impacts of these initiatives on participants, communities and institutions are variously considered and analyzed.

The overall experience of YPBs is systemically considered to identify enablers at multiple levels, from personal to institutional, that further their PVE and peacebuilding activities. Barriers which inhibit scale, sustainability, legitimacy, and impact are also highlighted. Based on the totality of these findings, recommendations are made for: YPBs, governments, local civil society organizations (CSOs), and INGOs. Each have the strong potential to strengthen the sector and deepen impacts dramatically if implemented collaboratively across these bodies and organizations.

PART 1: RESEARCH PROCESS

1.1: Research Design and Methodology

This research was conducted using an alternative methodological approach known as participatory action research (PAR). PAR focuses on bottom-up and collaborative knowledge production with community members and other stakeholders who possess the daily, lived experience of the issue at hand. PAR prioritizes communities and marginalized stakeholders to engage in identifying and researching their own issues rather than through externally organized research and outward-facing outputs. PAR supports those engaged in the research process by capacitating them to gather and analyze information as well as generate practical and applied solutions driven by their own needs and aspirations.

A key goal of PAR is to empower and give voices to those leading the research. Other rationales for the use of PAR include (Israel et al. 1998):



Enable local and community researchers to generate expert knowledge derived from their everyday participation in the contexts under investigation.



Contest epistemological hierarchies that assert certain forms of knowledge are superior to others.



Challenge the notion that academic knowledge has preeminence over knowledge created in practice and in the community.



Include the often-disregarded knowledge of youth, the poor and other marginalized groups.

Selection of the Research Team

Given Amplifying the Leadership of Local Youth (ALLY)'s focus on youth-led peacebuilding in South Asia, a PAR approach necessitated that experienced YPBs comprise the core of the research team. During the summer of 2020, a call for YPBs went out across the region. The criteria for application and selection required that the applicants be approximately thirty years of age or younger and already possess multiple years of experience as community-level peacebuilders. More than 450 youth applied to be co-researchers in the project. Ultimately, eight YPBs from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India were chosen. With two researchers from each country, they acted as the local research team within their respective home country. Once the research team was selected, the research process was facilitated by Dr. Felix Bivens of Rē: The Regenerative School, who brought to the project more than twenty years of experience with participatory research. Dr. Bivens has spent five years utilizing PAR to specifically deepen the theory and practice of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) sector through a variety of projects, publications and collaborations lead by peacebuilding organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

Capacity Building in Participatory Action Research for Youth Researchers

The research program began with an intensive immersion of the youth researchers (YRs) into the theory and practice of PAR. The first phase of the ALLY research program was an eight week (forty-eight-hours a week) synchronous, online training, and research design program. Over the course of the first month, the YPBs cum researchers undertook in-depth study: two weeks on PAR concepts and framing and additional two weeks on tools and practice for data collection. The synchronous program brought all of the researchers together in real time for an active, collaborative virtual learning experience.

Research Design

The second half of the training program focused on research design: one week of country-level conflict analysis and sector mapping, followed by two weeks of research design, with a focus on developing key lines of inquiry for data collection and mapping YPBs and other relevant stakeholders to engage in the research. The final week of the program finalized tools and other aspects of the collaborative design. Overall, the capacity building phase of ALLY enabled the YRs to have a firm grasp of PAR vis-à-vis more conventional, positivistic paradigms of research (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The training also provided an environment in which the researchers became confident in identifying and researching youth-led peacebuilding's role in mitigating the VE narratives and discourses in South Asia.

The finalization of the research design phase took longer than anticipated, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic was well underway by the start of the research training, optimism and oscillating degrees of lock-down kept hope alive that the teams would be able to travel extensively across their nations and meet other peacebuilders and communities face to face. COVID-19 endured, so the team was forced to confront the limitations of the project as the training phase ended. Travel was not possible outside of local areas and assembling in large groups for participatory workshops was also prohibited. Although the team was equipped with a wide variety of skills and anticipated using them virtually, the severity of restrictions in the region left the team with very limited tools for data collection, primarily interviews and online surveys. The complete sequester to virtual communication also led to a re-evaluation of who could be involved in the research. Many notable YPBs lived and operated in remote, rural areas or in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with limited connectivity. In time, accommodations were made to enable virtual data collection with minimal changes due to geography and lack of services. The YRs persevered until they were able to develop effective solutions to the obstacles created by the pandemic.

In this research, YRs engaged with a total of sixty-nine YPBs across Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The research specifically targeted early career peacebuilders, under thirty years of age, with work articulated as peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism (PVE). The gender distribution of the YPBs interviewed in the data collection is outlined in the table below. The table also notes the number of times the country-level research teams needed to “re-map,” or cast a new net, to locate YPBs who fit the parameters of the research study. Notably, the task of finding of YPBs under thirty in India was much more challenging than in the other countries.

	 Sri Lanka	 Bangladesh	 Pakistan	 India
Mapping Rounds	2	1	1	5
YPBs Mapped	37	53	43	45
YPBs Interviewed	20	20	20	9
Gender distribution of YPBs interviewed	Non-binary - 0 Female - 7 Male - 13	Non-binary - 3 Female - 5 Male - 12	Non-binary - 1 Female - 9 Male - 10	Non-binary - 0 Female - 5 Male - 4

An additional twenty non-youth stakeholders (approximately five per country) were interviewed, all of whom are actively engaged with the youth peacebuilding sector. Such stakeholders included religious leaders, journalists, civil society leaders, police officers, and senior peacebuilders, among others.

The eight YRs primarily carried out data collection using semi-structured interviews (SSI). Though the average interview lasted just over an hour, some lasted as long as two hours. YPB interviews also included an online survey for participants to map the primary peacebuilding organizations and partnerships within their networks. With a few exceptions, most of the interviews were conducted online using Zoom and Microsoft Teams while others were conducted offline following COVID-19 safety measures.

Collective Data Analysis

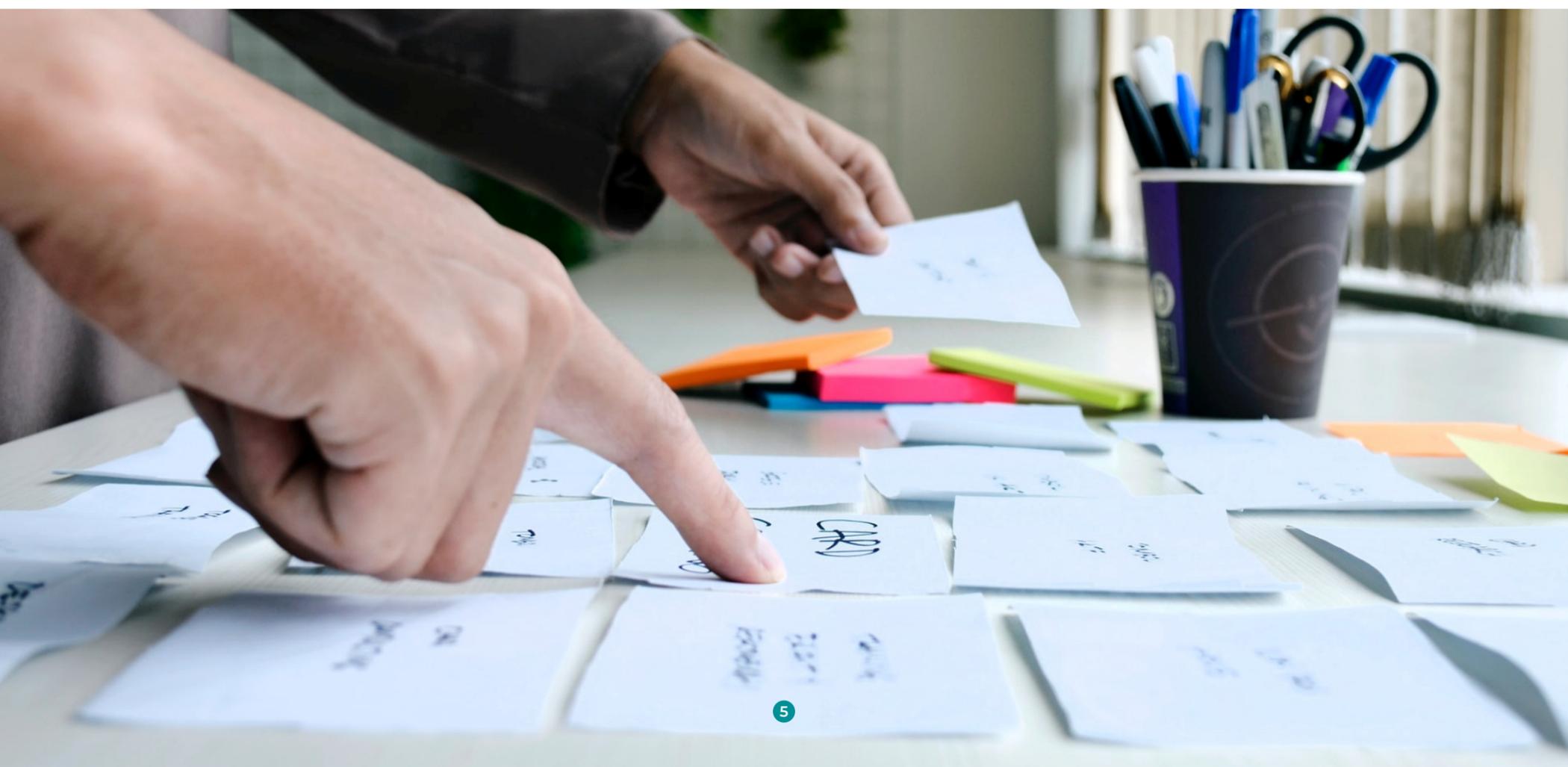
While COVID-19 imposed limitations on the project's fieldwork, the research facilitators were committed to maintaining a high level of participation of the YRs throughout. Although the data analysis phase of the program had been envisioned as an in-person workshop that could bring all the YRs and research facilitators together, the pandemic dictated a virtual analysis process. Over the course of three and half weeks, the lead researchers met with YR teams daily to carry out a collaborative data analysis process. The first round of analysis took a grounded approach. In grounded analyses, meaning is construed from the data itself, without the scaffolding of a thematic framework. YRs considered each interview as isolated, noting the key themes, ideas and concerns expressed by each interviewee. Having completed this exercise for each research participant, the YRs analyzed their refined country data holistically to identify cross cutting themes that dominated across the entire body of data.

Through their own analysis, all country teams collectively identified universal themes distinct to their national context. The value of this labor-intensive and challenging process is that it identified new issues and concerns not originally considered in the original framing of the research. The second round of analysis involved systemic coding and harvesting of the data in relation to the key themes articulated in the original research design. Through this double pronged process, the research covered all the expected terrain, such as barriers and enablers to youth-led peacebuilding. Additionally, the research revealed unanticipated findings such as the key role of universities in local peacebuilding and the ubiquity of mental health identification as an underlying factor in the growth of VE in South Asia. This multi-layered analysis also created an opportunity for the YRs to bring their own independent perspective to the research findings, and ultimately the final written outputs.

Collaborative Authorship of Written Outputs

The participatory nature of this research continued beyond the data analysis. Individual YRs were tasked with the development of different thematic and structural components of the report. They were mentored throughout the writing process by the lead researchers, while fellow YRs reviewed, fact-checked, clarified and augmented the written components utilizing information and quotes from their own interviews. The result is a highly detailed and richly layered picture of the challenges and opportunities confronting YPBs in South Asia, and the differences between home country contexts in the youth-led peacebuilding sector. This flagship report represents only a small portion of the ideas and information collected, analyzed, and reported by the ALLY team. YRs also produced a series of regional and country level policy briefs with recommendations for growing and strengthening the youth-led peacebuilding sector across South Asia.

This report and other related outputs are based on data and findings drawn from the sixty-nine interviews with YPBs across the region. The data has been internally verified against the perspectives of the other interviewees in the focus countries and across the region, as well as against the lived experience of the YPBs. The report speaks to the experience of youth peacebuilding through the lens of their practice, successes, and challenges. The findings are not intended to be generalizable across the whole of the population but are explicative of the situation of YPBs working in the context of South Asia. This report is intended to open deeper conversations about the impacts and needs of the youth peacebuilding sector. Governments, local NGOs, INGOs and educational institutions are invited to understand how YPBs understand their work and perceive barriers and the particular forms of resistance they face. As members of the UN, the four countries comprising this study have agreed to support, further, and measure the work of YPBs living within their borders. This report provides robust analysis for how they can make good on these commitments, to benefit not only the YPBs themselves, but also wide swaths of their populations who face daily conflict, division, and threat VE.



PART 2: CONTEXTUALIZING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTH ASIA

2.1: Core Terms - Violent Extremism, Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism, and Peacebuilding

To recognize the nuance of VE in South Asia and how YPBs respond, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of how these concepts are understood and defined on the global stage. By and large, these concepts are Western in origin and perspective, originating in the United States (US) and Europe (Ilyas 2021).

While the core premises of these ideas have existed for decades, the 9/11 attacks on the United States ushered into existence a “Global War on Terror” which saw the US and many other Western countries invest heavily in stopping global terror threats. This period saw the concept of VE further defined and world-wide efforts to counter VE operationalized. For example, the US's Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) defines VE as the “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals” (2021). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) offers a definition: “promoting views which foment and incite violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, and foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence” (2016). Frazer and Nünlist note that VE as a term emerged in the US initially, in response to criticism of the generalist term “terrorism,” to distinguish between violence as a means of spreading fear and violence as a tool for achieving political goals (2015).

In the wake of 9/11, there were rapid response actions that relied centrally on police, military, and other covert security agencies. Known extremists were killed or imprisoned, while surveillance was increased dramatically at all levels to intercept plans of future attacks. Additionally, financial flows for identified groups and networks were frozen. Despite extraordinary levels of spending and global cooperation, a decade later, serious critiques of this approach emerged. The discourse of countering violent extremism (CVE) arose as more holistic response that recognized that structural causes of VE must also be tackled, including intolerance, government failure, and political, economic, and social marginalization (Frazer and Nünlist 2015). There are few precise definitions that distinguish between CVE and PVE. CVE, despite having similar aims, remains a project of states, bureaucracies, and government actors. PVE, however, is typically understood as a bottom-up approach, that includes more local and civil society actors working on the ground to interrupt the process of radicalizing narratives and discourses which promote VE (UNDP 2016). PVE is an “all of society” approach (Ki-moon 2016) that engages local actors, such as religious leaders on the ground, to interrupt and challenge narratives shared at the local level to radicalize and recruit people—particularly young people—into extremist groups. Ilyas sees PVE as part of a broader

movement to “decolonize” what he calls the “terrorism industry”; he argues that the field needs more localized/contextualized definitions, framings, methods, and knowledge, rather than ideas which have been imported from the West (2021). The youth-led participatory research fits squarely within this broad understanding of PVE as rooted in contextualized actors and action (Amambia et al. 2018).

While PVE remains, even at the date of this publication, a work in progress, the opening of this effort to address extremism at its root in communities resonates well with the approaches and positionality of YPBs globally. While peacebuilding itself is a broadly defining concept, the UN emphasizes the role of local and “indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution” (2010). Youth-led peacebuilding exemplifies this focus on local capacity and action. As will be explored in this report, YPBs seek to mediate conflicts, misunderstandings, and misinformation at the community level, facilitating activities which build dialogue and deeper understanding between groups with perceived differences and long-standing conflicts/tensions.

2.2: Conceptualizing the Role of Religion in Violent Extremism, Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism

Religion is a complex concept and its role in peacebuilding and PVE requires a nuanced understanding. There are numerous religious traditions. How each tradition is practiced varies from one context to another, and can be influenced by cultural, social, political, and economic characters. Both the oversimplification of religion's role in conflict or VE and the dismissal its existence altogether can be problematic (USIP 2018, 8). The fundamentalist religious ideology may be a significant factor in conflicts that involve violent extremist groups. However, in these same conflict contexts religious minorities or moderate religious leaders can be the main targets of the violent extremists or religious leaders may act as peacebuilders or mediators (Mubashir and Vimalarajah 2016). Religion has the possibility to be either a connector (capacity for peace) or divider (a source of tension) (Frazer and Friedli 2015, 7). Considering that 84 percent of the world's population claims to have a religious affiliation (Pew 2017), the role of religious actors and communities in advancing peacebuilding and PVE is essential. Religious actors, however, can also be resistant to the kind of transformation that peacebuilding efforts strive for. Whether religious and traditional actors are inclined to be helpful or harmful, they should not be ignored (Network for Peacemakers 2020).

Prevention of VE and radicalization requires a whole of society approach since the phenomenon is multifaceted and affects all society in one way or the other. Religious and faith communities usually operate close to people's everyday life and are trusted go-to-places in moments of crises or need when authorities or other support services might not directly reach people due to distrust or insufficient knowledge. They also provide many services to communities beyond the immediate primary task of organising religious worshipping life that are relevant to PVE efforts. Especially when dealing with religiously motivated VE, the religious communities can provide the authorities and other civil society partners theological expertise. This can create, for example, alternative narratives to address extremist propaganda or to engage in dialogue with and mentor individuals, who seek to disengage from violent extremist narratives, but are deeply connected with faith and seek a community to integrate into as part of rehabilitation.

2.3: Violent Extremism in South Asia - An Overview

Home to almost one-third of the world's human population, South Asia is a region with many unifying cultural features. South Asia also hosts vast array of variations and differences between and within countries, such that it is almost impossible to capture the subcontinent with any degree of comprehensiveness.

South Asia's 1.7 billion population is divided religiously between Hinduism (64 percent), Islam (29 percent), and with much smaller populations which professing Buddhism (2 percent), Sikhism (2 percent), and Christianity (2 percent) (COTF 2002). This religious diversity has often been manipulated by extremist narratives, feeding escalations from opposing sides.

While religiously motivated violence in South Asia may not be as visible in the global media coverage as religious unrest in other regions, quantitative measures place India and Pakistan among the top ten countries globally suffering from religious unrest; India ranked fourth among the 198 countries scored, slotting between third-ranked Nigeria and fifth-ranked Israel. Pakistan ranked tenth—tied with Egypt—while its northern neighbor Afghanistan took the eighth slot (Pew 2015). Sri Lanka was ranked as the most violent Asian country on the Karstedt's (2012) Extremely Violent Societies Index, followed by Pakistan, which held the second slot.

Furthermore, Pakistan has consistently ranked in the top ten countries in the Global Terrorism Index since 2010 (Kanjil 2020). Such measures confirm the view of South Asia as a rising hotbed of religious tensions that are spilling over into ongoing violence. Such views are becoming ever more pervasive, involving not just the poorest or most marginalized populations. Even universities, long seen as sites of secular, humanist thought, have become areas of extremism, with increasing unrest on campus between students of different religious and political views. University faculty themselves have been purportedly involved in violence in on campus incidents (Ahmed and Jafri 2020).

Banerjee (2017) confirms that youth radicalization has become a regional challenge across South Asia, with extremism being pervasive in educational, political, and religious institutions. The majority of the region's population is young (with over 55 percent under the age of thirty), many in fragile and violence-affected contexts. The increasing recruitment of young women and men into extremist groups has particularly come into focus in the last few years, as well as religious and cultural framing of conflict fault-lines and escalations based on nationalistic or extremist narratives.

Youth are a vulnerable group for radicalization. According to the European Commission,



People are at their most impressionable in adolescence and early adulthood, and many of the values and attitudes they develop at this stage stay with them for much of their lives. Not surprisingly, therefore, those most at risk from radical propaganda are adolescents and young adults (2014, 9).

In 2017, the Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) released a report on countering youth radicalization and VE in South Asia. Their analysis of youth who perpetuated extremist attacks found them to have been radicalized by factors such as social exclusion, misinterpretation of a dominating religion, ethnic persecution, and financial depravity (2017). Further, researchers identified that radicalization occurs through multiple, complementary channels of influence in both the virtual and real world (COSATT 2017).

Radicalization in South Asia is not limited to young men. Women are active participants in extremist activities. Nonetheless, there is a significant gap in research on the unique experience and factors which contribute to the radicalization of women. A 2019 study by UN Women in Bangladesh found no government or state-level, gender-sensitive approaches for policy formulation or PVE program design. Recent research from Donnelly urges policy makers to use context-based gender analysis to understand female agency within extremist environments and to develop more nuanced analyses of the different effects of PVE initiatives on men, women, boys, and girls (2021). Qadeem's "Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan" report studied the role of women in supporting extremism. The study also explored the positive engagement of NGOs, women and women-led peacebuilding initiatives that have led to successful de-radicalization through economic

empowerment and behavioral transformation of community. Qadeem notes that these successes are doubly notable in that they are based on local innovation in the absence of any significant academic analysis of women's role VE in Pakistan (2018). Though focused on female peacebuilders rather than female extremists, this study makes different but significant contributions to the gender question by exploring how gender roles impact YPBs and their ability to carry out this work (see Section 3.3).

It is important to note that this report focuses on youth explicitly: YPBs and the youth that they engage with to reduce the spread of VE narratives and discourses. This should not, however, be interpreted as youth being the sole group which is engaged in VE and/or susceptible to VE narratives. Indeed, as will be noted in the following analysis of each country's national peacebuilding context, extremist groups have deep roots with senior leaders who have been active in extremist activities in the region going back so far as the 1970s. Though youth are rarely the leaders, creators, or purveyors of VE narratives, they are recruited as the next generation of these radical movements. Thus, empowering youth to disrupt these movements by breaking down misinformation campaigns and divisive narratives that attract young men and women is essential to stopping the growth of extremism in the region.

2.4: National Contexts - Setting the Stage for Peacebuilding

This section provides key points of history, culture, politics, and context for those unfamiliar with the countries in this study. It includes a brief overview of the environments, conflicts, and tensions that the YPBs operate in.



The Peace and Conflict Context of India

Home to 1.36 billion people, India is a very diverse country. A long history of conflicts and migration has fostered multitudes of language, religion, region, caste, ethnicity, class, and education. These various factors, however, give Indians separate identities, which at times lead to crises and conflicts. India has existed as a country for only seventy-three years. The country, however, is a union of multiple states and kingdoms that date back thousands of years. Those prior histories and identities do not dissolve when a new flag is raised. The formation of the country was defined by the world's largest migration; the partition of a continent based on religion. As millions of people migrated, two nations formed and became rivals, foes, and opposites; India as a secular nation, and Pakistan as a nation defined by Islam.

Though India chose a secular path, strong sentiments of Hindu nationalism have always existed within the country.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's assassination was carried out by an attacker angry that the country's founding father had not created the new nation state with a definitive Hindu identity. As such, religious nationalism has always existed as an undercurrent in the country. Periodic outbreaks of violence between groups with different religious identities are well-documented across India's seventy-three-year history; especially in densely populated urban slums where economic social challenges exacerbate perceived religious differences. One such example were the 1992 Mumbai riots which led to some 900 deaths over several months. A decade later, the Gujarat riots of 2002 left more than 1000 dead during a period of communal clashes that lasted more than three months.

In recent years, religious nationalism has become more pronounced, becoming a rallying cry for various political

parties. This has resulted in heightened political rhetoric that has elevated tensions across the country, leading to feelings of marginalization and insecurity amongst non-Hindu minorities. **As noted earlier, a 2017 Pew Research Center analysis of 198 countries ranked India as the fourth most-affected country in the world for increasing religious intolerance (Pew 2017).** Recent shifts in the political landscape in India have brought new parties and leaders to power, resulting in many controversial changes in policy. New national laws passed in this period are perceived as giving advantages to Hindu while marginalizing Muslims (Human Rights Watch 2020; BBC 2020). The February 2020 riots in Delhi, which lasted almost a week and left more than forty dead, are viewed as symptom of these rising tensions (CNBC 2020).



The Peace and Conflict Context of Sri Lanka

Dwarfed by its neighboring countries, Sri Lanka is a small island nation with a population of 20.3 million. Sinhalese are the ethnic majority, accounting for 75 percent of the population, while Tamil and Muslim Sri Lankans constitute 15 and 9 percent respectively. These ethnic identities correspond closely with religious composition of the country; Sinhalese are largely Buddhist and Tamils are predominantly Hindu. The country is also split along linguistic lines; with Sinhalese mainly speaking Sinhala, and Muslims and Hindus speaking Tamil.

A 26-year civil war between two ethnic groups, the Tamils and the Sinhalese, ended in 2009 with the conclusion of the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan Army and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The conflict resulted in countless human rights violations and grievances that have been left largely unaddressed (Human Rights Watch 2021). Only six years after the end of the armed conflict did the Sri Lankan government take the first official step towards a post-war reconciliation process. Although slow arriving, the government's adoption of the United Nation's Resolution for Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka, in October 2015, placed a high priority on peacebuilding in order to move the nation forward. Its government-mandated mechanisms were intended to address the past human rights violations of war victims.

Though the simmering ethnic conflict has not relapsed back to widespread violence since 2009, tensions between religious communities have recently become especially tense.

Divisive nationalistic attitudes promoted religious extremist groups have led to the radicalization of Buddhist and Muslim youth (Johansson 2018, Frayer 2019). This perspective was echoed by civil society leader Niroshan Ekanayake, who was interviewed for this research. On Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, Muslim suicide bombers targeted Christians worshipping in churches for the holy day. Over 250 people were killed and more than 500 were injured in a horrendous, synchronized attack on three churches and three hotels. The aftermath of this attack has seen anti-Muslim sentiment grow, leading to mob violence against Muslims on numerous occasions across the country. Moreover, political power changed hands in November 2019 elections. The new government ceased and has not yet resumed initiatives which were established and implemented by the previous administration regarding peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation programs, and related funding, thus substantially weakening the peacebuilding sector nationally (International Crisis Group 2020).



The Peace and Conflict Context of Bangladesh

Bangladesh was once known as a moderate, constitutionally secular state. Breaking from Pakistan in a civil war in 1971, the country fought to overcome famine and poverty. The very first constitution of independent Bangladesh in 1972 fostered four fundamental principles: democracy, nationalism, secularism, and socialism. Over the next thirty years, Bangladesh became a noted success story in global development as it made rapid economic and social gains. Today, more than 163 million people live in the country.

In 1988, the military dictator, General Hussain Muhammed Ershad, who took power through a military coup in 1982, declared Islam as the state religion. Ershad's move accelerated the rise of religious nationalism (Riaz 2017). After General Ershad was toppled from power following a popular uprising in 1990, democracy was restored. Although a return to secular government was debated throughout the 1990s, it was never achieved. Bangladesh remains an official Muslim state, with continued and increasing blurring of religion and politics (Riaz 2017).

Visible acts of VE began surfacing in 1999 with a bomb attack on a cultural festival that left ten dead and one hundred injured. From 2001 to 2005, several bomb blasts carried out across the country left ninety-five people dead (Islam and Liton 2016). Then on August 17, 2005, a series blast of 459 bombs within 30 minutes in 63 different districts across Bangladesh shook the entire country. The government acknowledged the existence of Islamist militancy as “Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (the assembly of holy warriors)” (JMB). Significantly, the militants who carried out these actions were all over the age of thirty-five and had previous experiences in Afghanistan with the Mujahedeen. The efforts of these groups, while carried out in the name of Islam, were against the government. In this time, attacks against ethnic minorities were extremely rare.

A new era of VE in Bangladesh arrived with the killing of thirty secular bloggers, writers, cultural and rights activists, academicians, publishers, scientists, free-thinkers between 2013 and 2016 (Graham-Harrison and Hammadi 2016).

Victims were specifically targeted for their advocacy and activism online, on blog sites and social media, like Facebook. Many of the victims had been active advocates against extremist Islamic ideologies or carried out activism supporting progressive causes like LGBT rights.

On July 1, 2016, militants sieged the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, taking dozens of hostages. Over the next twenty-four hours, twenty-nine individuals died, including twenty hostages. The Holey Artisan attack marked the single deadliest terror attack in the country's history and signified a “new chapter of terror in Bangladesh,” according to state officials (Roy 2017). Attackers were mostly in their early twenties.

Right after the attack, ISIS acknowledged the “sacrifices” of six of the attackers through Amaq News Agency. Pictures of the attackers posing with ISIS flag were released on the internet, stoking speculations of them receiving training and fighting with ISIS (Roy 2017). State investigations, however, concluded the attackers to be members of local terrorist group, the new JMB (Rabbi 2018). Other attackers were found to have been radicalized through the Internet, never having left the country. The site of the attack was also significant as the investigation found that the main goal of the militants were to let their existence know by drawing international attention. The bakery was a frequent gathering place for foreigners, business leaders and cultural activists (Rabbi 2018). A new generation of extremists had arrived, with a new group of targets in their sights.



The Peace and Conflict Context of Pakistan

Pakistan has long been a crossroads of the world. The only viable pass through the Himalayas lies in Pakistan thus it has been at the forefront of migrations and invasions throughout the millennia. More recently, Pakistan was the recipient of mass migration as Partition drove millions of Muslims out of India and into the newly formed, Muslim majority country. Today, more than 216 million people live in Pakistan.

Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has gone through phases of diverse but inter-related conflicts driven by sectarian and ethnic tensions. Of all the countries in the South Asian region, it has had greatest struggle with VE. Pakistan was ranked the fifth most-affected country in the world in the 2017 Global Terrorism Index (IEP, 18). Extreme views on the dominance of Islam are widespread through the society. In the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) 2017 Human Development Report for Pakistan, the authors note that nearly half of respondents did not approve of friendly relations with non-Muslims and more than 70 percent did not believe that non-Muslims should be allowed to preach their own faith (Najam and Bari, 2017, 26). In another survey conducted by Aware Girls, more than 1500 youth were asked about issues related to extremism and more than two-thirds of respondents supported the ideology of the Taliban either completely (23.3 percent) or partially (43.3 percent). Most alarmingly, 83 percent of respondents expressed support for jihadist groups fighting outside of Pakistan (2015).

Pakistan's government remains committed to eradicating extremism and radicalization. The 2014 massacre at a public school in Peshawar that left 150 dead led to the development by the army of a 20 point national action plan to combat terrorism and extremism which has resulted in a national reduction in deaths from VE (Kanjal 2020). **The issue of VE is a critical focus of the government, but these responses rely mainly on military and police responses. Multiple factors like political grievances, economic disparities, lack of participation and resources, and exposure to violence develop a vulnerable environment for young people, leading them to extremism and acts of violence.**

Historically, extremists have targeted the government and military. However, extremists are increasingly targeting minorities of all kinds at the local level. Religious, sectarian, and ethnic divides caused numerous conflicts and violence all over the country. Although Pakistan is notable for legislation that legally protects vulnerable minority groups against violence, these groups remain vulnerable.

2.5: Country-level Responses to Violent Extremism

State-led efforts to address radicalization and VE differ significantly from country to country across the region:

India

Compared to its neighbors, India is behind in its efforts to address radicalization, with practically no policy or programming in place to address this challenge, particularly at the level of youth. Sharma and Anand proposes the adoption of an Indian “Smart CVE” approach which would focus on empowering the communities by partnering with CSOs on cultural and economic development programs to build resilience against the root causes of extremism (2020). Likewise, Upadhyay (2020) has advocated for India's government to channelize funds from the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) fund to youth peacebuilding efforts. This would set up innovative and youth-friendly sponsorship mechanisms for youth-led peacebuilding programs and facilitate monitoring the implementation of UNSCR 2250. As of publication, these recommendations have not been acted on and India lacks a coherent policy and programming approach on these issues. Indeed, Upadhyay notes that YPBs are viewed with suspicion by the government and their programs are dealt with harshly and antagonistically rather than with support and encouragement (2020).

Bangladesh

Working from early counter-terrorism models, Bangladesh relies heavily on the police to manage its VE programming. Their framework for VE often excludes broader efforts to connect with diverse, local populations through PVE programs. Further, the government promotes an image that VE is well-controlled in Bangladesh and that expanded efforts at peacebuilding are unnecessary.

Sri Lanka

Until recently, Sri Lanka had strong systems for PVE and supporting YPBs. The government saw peacebuilding as a key strategy in the post-conflict era as a mechanism to support reconciliation processes at the local level and to break lingering generational cycles of violence. Multiple government bodies supported this work and provided resources to CSOs and grants to peacebuilders in communities. However, the 2019 change in government led to a rapid shutdown of these institutions and the end of funding to support such efforts by NGOs and peacebuilders. Peacebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka are now viewed suspiciously as international efforts to subvert the government's authority.

Pakistan

Pakistan's military plays a pervasive role at all levels and in all regions leading efforts to reduce and eliminate extremism. As arguably the most experienced country of the four in this domain—Pakistan was well-resourced by the US in the earlier days of the country's global “War on Terror”—Pakistan has also made efforts to expand peacebuilding and PVE initiatives through the country's Ministry of Youth Affairs. Most counter-terrorism initiatives, however, have been based on Western/US-based approaches, rooted in top-down, military and police interventions, resulting in less attention on local perspectives and leadership in peace programs. Pakistani researchers have recommended a more locally curated approach to PVE, shifting from a more military-focused approach to a more long-term soft/preventive approaches (Peace Direct 2017).

Though the situation, at both the country and regional level, is challenging with little direct or indirect support available from their governments, YPBs recognize that there is potential for change and progress in South Asia. Religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity is not just source of extremism but also a unique richness that enables solutions. Youth understand their role in creating a different view of the region, in constructing narratives that value diversity, while bridging the fault lines and conflicts of the past. The aim of this report is to amplify the young women and men's roles as strategic allies in addressing VE while emphasizing a nuanced understanding of the role of religion, ideology, and identity and its impact on communities across South Asia.

2.6: The Rise of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

Having provided an overview of the context of the research, the expanding role of youth in peacebuilding is explored in relation to the UN's Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. According to Bickmore, peacebuilding is a broad idea framing diverse efforts meant to foster social changes that address economic-political inequity, cultural exclusion, and other contextual primary and secondary causes of destructive conflict by building or rebuilding comprehensive procedures and norms that allow for the nonviolent resolution of conflict (2017). Peacebuilding has long been seen as the work of state, diplomats, negotiators and—at the forefront of active conflict—police and designated military peacekeepers. Yet recent research has shown that quantitatively, the peacebuilding sector is dominated by small, youth-led organizations. Youth-led peacebuilding is frequently an innate, independent response of youth to address the conflict and violence they see in their everyday lives (see Section 3.6). Their work adds to state-led structural peacebuilding efforts by taking forms that are highly localized and contextualized. As such, YPBs have a unique and critical role and comparative advantage in the ecosystem of peace work. The UN, recognizing this critical role, passed Security Council Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250) in 2015, which formally recognized the significant and distinct role youth perform in global peace efforts (United Nations 2015). UNSCR 2250 is considered the inception of the YPS agenda.

The UN's YPS agenda includes mandates for further study of youth-led peacebuilding efforts, strategies to grow youth-led peace activities and the inclusion of young changemakers across the world in decision-making processes with policymakers on peace and security issues that affect their lives. The primary YPS agenda has noticeable similarities with the initial Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda that preceded it. Historically, youth have been perceived as perpetrators or victims of extremist violence and were neglected when it was time to organize high-level peace efforts. YPS, as a global framework and agenda for action, validates existing youth-led peace work and seeks to address gaps so youths can be involved more substantively in activities and decision-making processes that ultimately create sustainable, lasting impact (Altiok and Grizelj, 2019).

Since 2015, the UN has adopted two additional resolutions reaffirming and deepening the body's ongoing commitment to youth-led peace work. All three resolutions are summarized below:

UNSCR 2250

2015

Global policy framework based on five pillars—participation, protection, prevention, partnership and disengagement and reintegration—which identify the constructive role youth play in preventing and mitigating conflict, defying VE, and settling peace. On the completion of fifteen years of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the idea of recognizing the contribution and participation of youths appeared and was unanimously adopted by the Security Council in December 2015. This agenda ensures global recognition regarding inclusion of youths in rebuilding society. UNSCR 2250 formally made this recognition by stating: “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.”

UNSCR 2419

2018

Affirms the efforts of youth globally to establish peace in their respective societies. The resolution also urges stakeholders to ensure active participation of YPBs in all possible levels of decision making.

UNSCR 2535**2020**

Calls for increased engagement from UN member states in the implementation of UNSCRs 2250 and 2419, to institutionalize the YPS agenda at each national level. It further calls for the development of protocols for the protection of YPBs. Finally, the resolution defines a regular reporting schedule for documenting the advancement of the YPS agenda.

Various factors have contributed to the recent rise in prominence of, and interest in, youth-led peacebuilding. Youth-led peacebuilding is not a new area. Various youth-led peacebuilding organizations such as the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, a key actor in the advocacy efforts that led to the UNSC adoption of Resolution 2250, have been in existence since 1989. Shifts and critiques in the peace sector have aligned to create a more elevated platform for youth and women, as grassroots actors embedded in the communities where extremism is known to originate. Resolution 2250 recognizes their longstanding contributions and opened the door for a more consistent and structured role in the future of the peacebuilding sector, a message that has been further reinforced by the UN's subsequent resolutions.

Demographics at the global level are another factor that has catapulted the YPS sector into the spotlight. Globally what is referred to as the “youth bulge”—a demographic spike in which the population of under thirty has grown to levels comprising between 70 to 80 percent of many countries' total populations in the Global South—has made youth a focus and a serious concern for policymakers. These oversized youth populations stress under-resourced education systems, often leading to sub-quality learning experiences.

Likewise, after schooling, most developing countries' economies grow too slowly to employ any more than a small percentage of young people in the formal sector, even if they have completed university-level education. As a result, youth populations are maligned as lazy, criminal, and dangerous because they often cannot secure employment and find themselves in intensely challenging situations. Moreover, some 1.8 billion people on the planet are currently living in conflict-affected areas, making the situation for youth appear even more dire (UNFPA 2018). Within such contexts, youth-created organizations also play a critical role of providing a sense of purpose and belonging for youth who are otherwise excluded and disempowered. YPBs flip the narrative of youth being victims and criminals of their circumstances. YPBs do not wait patiently for peace and for change, instead they step forward to create it. Each individual peacebuilder amasses colleagues to support and expand their work, and collectively participate in various trainings and awareness activities to engage and activate even more youth to act as peacebuilders in their communities.

2.7: Research on the Implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

To help refine practice and strengthen the sector, the UN and other global bodies have invested in multiple global research initiatives to map the youth-led peacebuilding sector more clearly and to understand its needs so that it can be sustained and expanded. The first study, “The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, And Security” (UNFPA 2018) surveys youth-led peace activities globally, identifies gaps and shortcomings, and recommends required responses at local, national, regional, and international levels. This research undertook an inclusive approach through all-encompassing regional consultation, case studies, focus group discussions, and survey-based mapping that covered four key themes: 1) tackling stereotypes and policy myths; 2) youth for peace; 3) addressing the violence of exclusion: from marginalization to meaningful inclusion; 4) and from a demographic dividend to a peace dividend. Among stereotypes, the report addressed the common perception that youth are the problem rather than partners in solutions. This misinformed view harms YPS programs globally, encouraging policymakers to ignore youth voices and avoid engaging youth in the formal policy processes. Because these spaces for engagement are lacking, youth create alternative approaches to peacebuilding within their institutions and communities. Yet, the youth note facing systematic exclusion in different forms. The study endorsed political and financial inclusion, ensuring education, addressing issues regarding gender, human rights, and injustice. The study also promoted disengagement from violence and reintegration to the mainstream society for meaningful inclusion of the YPBs. Additionally, it recommends investment and building partnerships among YPBs, state and non-state actors in peacemaking processes.

The practice note titled, “Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note” (Rogan 2016) was developed as an action and strategy guide for the policymakers and donors to better support the endeavors of YPBs. The study analyzed the notable youth-led peace activities from more than two dozen countries, including Pakistan. The study recommended that policymakers and donors initiate and sponsor comparative evaluations of peace projects by YPBs; take holistic and multi-sectoral approaches to project grants based on a cross-sectoral youth-focused study; decentralize peace programs from urban-based youth-only demography; develop project evaluation frameworks while being mindful of different demographic indicators; promote learning across successful peace projects; ensure participation of young women and maintain gender equality; and fund extensive research to evaluate the success and weakness of YPBs.

The report, “Mapping a Sector: Bridging the Evidence Gap on Youth-Driven Peacebuilding” (UNOY and SFCG 2017) specifically concentrated on youth-led peace-building initiatives. It analyzed a survey from 399 youth-led peacebuilding organizations from across the globe and developed a broad overview of the activities. The analysis categorically identified success, struggles, and needs of these youth-led peace organizations. The study found 49 percent of youth-led peace-building organizations have an annual budget under USD 5,000 and operate with 97 percent volunteers. YPBs typically utilize alternate funding sources like personal funds, crowdfunding, and donations. This is not a sustainable approach, resulting in inconsistency in the type and duration of each project. Both male and female youths were noted to lead the projects targeting people from all social strata and age ranges. The most common peace activities include advocacy, debates, dialogues, training, and capacity-building workshops. The YPBs face obstacles from conflict and violence, marginalization, and mistrust by the state and non-state actors, limited or lack of financial, logistical, knowledge resources along with the inadequate partnerships, networking opportunities, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms. The study recommended recognizing the youth-led organizations as peace practitioners and providing them with opportunities within state-led security programs/structures, emphasizing the implementation mandate of UNSCR 2250 at a local and national policy levels.

Despite the value the UN and other global bodies have placed on YPBs, most of these organizations persist on

minimal resources and survive largely through volunteerism. Because many organizations emerge endogenously, they are isolated and lack networks for learning and sharing information. While fellowships programs are emerging, such as USIP's Generation Change Fellows Program, UNESCO MGIEP's Youth Waging Peace, KAICIID's Interfaith Dialogue for Peace Program, iDove (Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism) and the ALLY Fellowship related to this research, most YPBs receive little outside guidance or resources. Even fewer programs of this kind are available in South Asia, vis-à-vis Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Del Felice and Solheim (2011), urged donors and policymakers to recognize peacebuilding efforts by youth and to develop accessible training and knowledge resources to accelerate the pace of peace education. Another major challenge in youth peacebuilding is the lack of documentation and evaluation (see Section 3.4). This leads to an evidence gap where burgeoning programs do not have strong data to demonstrate their impact and, as a result, fail to be seen as valid or significant actors by local officials and funders. Without encouragement, relationship and resources, programs stagnate and fail rather than scaling their impact.

Further, policymakers often overlook YPBs' innovative and replicable methods while simultaneously complaining of a lack of grassroots PVE approaches to root out extremism; thereby failing to see the value that youth bring in terms of their geography, access, and networks (Agbiboa, 2015).

2.8: Knowledge Gaps for Youth, Peace and Security

Like PVE, YPS is an emerging field. Research is limited and fragmented. Significantly, the majority of YPS reports have been commissioned by governments and international bodies to study youth. Youth themselves rarely have a platform to research and communicate their own experiences and accomplishments regarding YPB. While the reports discussed previously, created in response to the UN's call for studies to better understand the sector, give a clearer picture of youth-led peacebuilding/PVE in the aggregate, the localized grassroots approaches have been little documented, analyzed and replicated.

Though a picture of the global sector has emerged, it remains unclear what youth-led peacebuilding and PVE look like at the regional and country levels. Moreover, analysis of how these approaches vary from region to region, country to country, and even within individual countries is needed. This is a gap our report seeks to address, at least within the context of South Asia.

Though growing bodies of research exist on youth-led peacebuilding and PVE activities in Africa and the Middle East, South Asia has been neglected in this respect, despite the longstanding presence of conflict and terrorism in the region. This research is a major step in illuminating the youth-led peacebuilding and PVE sector in South Asia. It deepens the broad analysis provided in the proceeding chapters and delivers a more nuanced perspective on the realities of day-to-day peacebuilding practice. The overarching theme of religious conflict in the region is revealed to be more complex. Rather than religions pitted against each other, the grassroots experience often finds divided religious communities within the same faith identity, emphasis not on religious identity but on urban versus rural identity, between secular and religious worldviews, and the growing challenge of the politization and rejection of peacebuilding as a concept.

Written by YPBs and chronicling the experiences of wider communities of young change agents, this paper captures the contributions YPBs are making in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and analyzes how they are able to succeed while also identifying the many barriers that stand in their way as they contemplate heightening their impact in the region.

PART 3: YOUTH PEACEBUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA, THE PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Having outlined the national contexts for peacebuilding, and reviewed current understandings of VE in South Asia, as well as the development and evolution of the YPS agenda, the third part of the report turns to the findings of the research. This research is distinctive in that the data collected is predominantly from YPBs and that these findings are based on the analyses by the researchers who themselves are also YPBs. As such, the knowledge in this report has been produced through a practitioner's lens. It offers an inside view of youth peacebuilding in South Asia from those who live these questions, issues, and challenges daily.

This chapter of the paper, consisting of nine sub-sections grouped into five thematic areas, comprises the core analysis and findings of the ALLY research. The following issues are presented:

1

Understanding Violent Extremism from the Youth Peacebuilder Perspective

- > VE and VE narratives are explored and redefined based on the experiences of YPBs as they encounter it
- > The various factors that are found to drive youth toward VE are enumerated

2

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: Who

- > The diversity of the youth-led peacebuilding sector is explored in relation to particular tensions and positionalities

3

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: Why

- > Why youth choose to become peacebuilders is explored

4

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: What

- > The overall methodological variety of peacebuilding initiatives is delineated with particular focus on innovation in youth-led PVE programs
- > Levels of impact of youth-led peacebuilding and PVE activities are disaggregated

5

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: How

- > Mechanisms and factors that allowed for YPB initiatives to scale and network across border are defined
- > The enabling factors that supported and encouraged strong, effective peacebuilding efforts are explored
- > The main barriers that YPBs see limiting the growth and the impact of these efforts is described

Understanding Violent Extremism from the Youth Peacebuilder Perspective

3.1: Re-Defining Violent Extremism in South Asia Through the Eyes of Youth Peacebuilders

This study is the first detailed analysis of VE and VE narratives in South Asia as understood from the perspective of YPBs working in communities throughout the region. What emerges from the interviews is a complex but distinct vision of VE in the region. While the countries featured in the research, particularly Pakistan, have endured and continue to face challenges from groups like Al Qaeda, this is neither the prevailing face of VE in Pakistan nor regionally. Even in the more nuanced perspectives that guide PVE programming, there are still two clear sides battling each other—the state and civil society uniting to disrupt the inculcation of young people into illegal terror organizations, which act violently to disrupt the power and stability of the governments. The experience of VE in which these peacebuilders operate is not this binary, however.

Increasingly, VE in South Asia is not anti-state terrorism which seeks to disrupt or topple governments and institutions of authority. It is not typically organized groups. It is community-level tensions which are stoked by the media and local factions, political and otherwise, which benefit from unifying one group by turning it against another. It draws on the fractured history and brewing animosities in the region. It is deeply rooted in religious and ethnic conflict but is in no way limited to these. VE in South Asia is increasingly a force aimed at suppressing minorities of all kinds—religious, political, ethnic, and sexual.

Women are a key target of VE in the region as well, being understood by YPBs as perhaps the group most universally impacted and harmed by VE. Gender-based violence, sexual violence and online hate speech—particularly misogynistic social media against women—was depicted as one of the most identified and ongoing forms of VE in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh: “In any inter- or intra- community-based violence, the women become victims of hate: by getting raped, molested or brutally killed as a mark of dominance by the opposing parties.

Transgenders, gays, lesbians are also at risk of being killed because they are considered not “normal” men and women (YPB, India). As the remainder of this report will describe, however, these groups are not powerless. Women and members of the LGBTQI community contribute actively to youth peacebuilding in South Asia and have been effective change agents and innovators in the movement.

Violent Extremism as Tool for the Maintenance of Political Power

Particularly troubling in the South Asian context is the shift in the focus of VE and VE narratives from anti-state actors and groups, to actors within the state. Indeed, many peacebuilders report VE as a tool of the state—or least of politicians who hold roles within government and use VE as

a tool to maintain their power at the local level. Rather than maintaining elected office by achievement and delivering resources and programming to their constituents, these politicians sow fear and distrust within their constituency, for the purpose of turning groups against one another in violence and repression. This involves narratives that exploit and inflame tensions between identity groups (often religious, but also other kinds of differences such as ethnicity, caste, linguistic differences, etc.). Such tactics are used even within the religiously homogenous Bangladesh. According to Gohel, Bangladeshi political leaders have often mobilized identity-based nationalism, sparking VE within the Islamic community, presenting certain expressions of Islamic identity as being in opposition to Bangladeshi national identity (2014). As such, VE becomes a tool for the maintenance of state power rather than a tool to dismantle or disrupt it.

This line of analysis illuminates why VE has become so pervasive throughout the region. It is no longer defined by large, coordinated acts and attacks which seek to wrestle power away from the government at large. Rather, it is infinite small uses of violence to silence, intimidate, and eliminate those who challenge the power of state officials and leaders, to maintain their political power, further agendas, and remove opposition. It is the de facto weaponization of the public and of political constituencies, particularly when one group in an area is understood to be dominant. This transmutes political power from electoral dominance achieved through democratic competition into long-term, authoritarian dominance enforced through violence.

While this, on the surface, may appear overstated, VE is sanctioned, directly and indirectly, through the imputation of various laws across the South Asia region. These laws are widely viewed by YPBs as enabling, justifying, and exonerating the use of VE. Perhaps the most explicit of these are blasphemy laws, notable in both Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are not religious edicts emanating from religious institutions but are rather state-legislated, legally enforceable statutes which outlaw certain expressions and actions deemed to be outside of the limits of Islam, villainizing even particular expression of Islam. While these laws are rarely used in a courtroom setting, the practical result of blasphemy laws is citizen adjudication. Mobs in the street can identify perceived violators, determine the sanction, and inflict penalties—potentially even death—in the name of upholding the state's blasphemy laws. Given the sensitive nature of these issues, such activities are often not investigated afterward. As such, VE can be carried out by the general public with a high level of confidence of immunity, simply by invoking these laws and directing accusations at any persons whose actions are deemed offensive.

Similar state-sanctioned religious protections are invoked for other types of violence, particularly toward women around the issues of forced marriages and honor killings. Such discriminatory laws are not limited to Muslim-dominated states. A variety of laws are actively used to suppress and eliminate the rights of non-dominant groups. Emergency declarations in Sri Lanka, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to the widespread cremation of Muslims who had passed away from the virus, even though this is explicitly against Muslim practice.

Rather than working with Sri Lankan Muslims to determine an effective solution, the emergency laws facilitated the suppression of Muslim minority rights for many months until the practice was finally stopped in the final weeks of 2020. More broadly, COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated issues such as the aforementioned gender-based violence and online hate speech.

While women and religious minorities are often the primary targets of VE, they are certainly not the only victims; minorities of all kinds—ethnic, tribal, sexual, etc., are often under threat—and too frequently those who would use violence against these groups are able to find validation for their actions within frayed community dynamics and problematic laws which are widely interpreted as providing permission for these very kinds of violent tactics in order to maintain good order in society.

This analysis of the situation also reinforces that youth are not the primary catalysts for VE. The misapplication of laws is rooted in more dominant and established structures and the demographic groups that control them. While youth may be persuaded into participation in particular VE episodes that are justified/excused through these laws, they do not have the power to influence how or if such laws are enforced.

At a systemic scale, political leaders have taken to misusing antiterrorism laws as weapons against internal political opponents, including peacebuilders and activists. Antiterrorism laws, which enable the government to detain prisoners without evidence of crime, are used to punish those who speak out nonviolently and criticize and expose governmental abuse of authority. In India, for example, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) has been used to detain young activists who do not have histories of working with extremist groups. Two Pinjra Tod gender activists from Delhi have been jailed for almost a year on UAPA charges (Maniktala 2020), while an environmental activist, Disha Ravi, was jailed in February 2021 with UAPA charges for distributing an environmental toolkit (Narayanan).

Anti-terrorism laws are just one set of laws in India which are widely perceived as being anti-minority, particularly anti-Muslim. India is notable for its recent tightening of its citizenship laws, which was seen by many critics as an overture to growing populist sentiments of Hindu nationalism. The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) includes various provisions which disadvantage Muslims relative to other religious groups in the country regarding their ability to claim and attain Indian citizenship. The law shortens the timeframe for gaining citizenship from twelve years to six for Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists and Christians—but not Muslims. Law makers argue that the immigrants the law targets are often escaping religious persecution in Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, such a position overlooks the point made throughout this report, that there is significant inter-faith conflict, violence, and persecution of Muslims by fellow Muslims who have different ethnic, linguistic, and/or sectarian identities. As such, Muslims are not uniquely immune to persecution. The controversial law, and more specifically the heated political rhetoric that often follows, has led directly to increases in

violence between Muslim and Hindi groups. CAA was notably cited as key contributing factor to the February 24, 2020 riots in Delhi which left fifty-three people dead, the majority of whom were Muslim (Frayer 2020).

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)—which has been in effect since 1982—allows arrests without warrant for unspecified “unlawful activities,” and permits detention for up to eighteen months without producing the suspect before a court (Human Rights Watch 2018). This statute, created during civil war, is actively used today for entirely different purposes than were originally intended during wartime.

The use of legal structures to promote discrimination and excuse VE leave YPBs in difficult, isolated situations. Whereas YPBs are embraced in some national contexts, such as in East Africa where YPBs and the state understand themselves to be partners in reducing the influence of terror groups bent on undermining the state (Amambia et al. 2018), YPBs in South Asia often find their work set in opposition to the state—a much more challenging and vulnerable position from which to work. This translates practically into a lack of government support in terms of funding, partnerships, and infrastructure. It also deters many young people from joining the sector. Support of government is key, as the experience of Sri Lanka attests, where previous administrations supported peacebuilding work, provided resources, and established clear linkages with government agendas to collaborate on larger peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation processes.

The exception to this lack of government support tends to be the police, who are keener to work with YPBs than governments. This is because police, by and large, function under a traditional counterterrorism/CVE rubric. They are still on the lookout for extremist agitators with anti-state agendas. While YPBs agree that working against conventional forms of VE and terrorism is critical, their contexts and experiences point toward a much more prolific, dynamic, mainstream incarnation of VE which goes well beyond the remit of police organizations. As such, the support from police is ultimately so limited in scope that it does not provide an adequate platform for advancing localized, community-based peacebuilding in the current moment in South Asia. There is also a paradoxical question of how to empower police to work against these more pervasive forms of VE, when they are affiliated with/leveraged by state actors to enforce the very laws that legitimize, and protect, particular forms of VE. This challenging dynamic highlights the realities of VE in South Asia and reinforces the need for, and work of, independent YPBs to work with officials and civil society to address these escalating levels of VE in the region.

These findings echo those of the UNDP's “Journey to Extremism in Africa” report where weak governance, failure of authorities to deliver basic services to marginal groups, and lack of trust in the state was found to be a measurably larger driver of radicalization than religious ideology (2017). The UN study, however, focused on the perspectives of those who had been radicalized and recruited by violent extremist groups. By contrast, the views expressed here are those of YPBs, underlining the challenges they face in achieving effective collaborations with their governments.

3.2: Factors Contributing to Violent Extremism for Youth in South Asia

Various factors that contribute to an environment in South Asia where VE can flourish were specified by the YPBs and other stakeholders in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka that contributed to this research. Although there are distinct, country-specific manifestations of these factors, all the drivers listed here are understood as common across the region for catalyzing youth engagement in VE.

Factors contributing to VE are often classified as push, pull, and personal (Vergani et al. 2020), determined by how they relate to the society or to the individual. Wider societal factors are often framed as push factors. These include forms of structural violence—ongoing conflict, the marginalization of/discrimination against a group to which a person belongs, i.e., minority, gender, etc.—or collectively socialized perspectives like nationalism narratives that pit one nation against another.

Conversely, pull factors make individuals more susceptible to undertaking VE behavior (Nanes and Lau, 2018). Pull factors at the individual level are connected to personal grievances, experiences of discrimination, lacking a sense of belonging, victimization, disconnection from other communities, and mental health issues in the aftermath of experiencing or committing violence. Push and pull factors are interlinked and often overlap, with the structural issues being amplified through experiences at the personal level. Within this contextualized South Asian research, the primary factors described by interviewees which motivate people to engage in VE, include religious manipulation/misinterpretation, education and schools, social media, government discrimination and bias, divisive religiously infused politics, mental health, economic disparity, and international terror networks. For the sake of brevity, factors are not analyzed specifically as push or pull, as they often can be experienced as both.

Divisive, Religiously-Infused Politics

Governance, across the whole of the region, was described by interviewees as weak and discriminatory. Weak enforcement of laws, inefficiency, and corruption in political institutions was identified as an indirect factor that perpetuates the conditions for VE. More directly, interviewees stated repeatedly that political parties play a major role in growing VE, as political parties increasingly established and operated based on a particular ethnic/religious group. Furthermore, gender power dynamics are conspicuous, as there are more men than women in politics promoting greater divisiveness. As a civil society leader in Sri Lanka commented, “the practice of governance has been on the basis of 'divide and rule' where religions are used as a dividing factor to gain and retain in power” (see Section 3.3).

Religious Misinterpretation/Manipulation

Among the religious factors, misinterpretation and/or manipulation of religious teachings/texts was highlighted as a primary impetus for VE. A YPB in India noted that the use of “religious teachings, extremist narratives by politicians while campaigning” is common, despite it “being contradictory” to the secular rule of law. Citations from the Quran for instance were frequently manipulated by extremist groups, politicians, social media, media, and religious (often male) leaders to mobilize youth to promote terrorism, religious extremism, and nationalism. This was noted most often in India and Sri Lanka but was also referenced as a common issue in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. Extremist groups were seen to operate by openly perpetuating religious animosities, within religions (intra-faith conflict) as well as between them (inter-faith conflict). Intra-religious conflicts, such as Sunni against Shia, and violence against minority sects of Muslims, such as the Ahmediyas, have led to VE in Pakistan. Similarly, ongoing intra-religious conflicts between Catholics and other Christian groups in Sri Lanka and India are also significant and lead to violence. Intra-religious conflict arises from different practices and interpretations within the same religion, leading to misunderstanding and distrust between citizens, or even within states, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, which might superficially be perceived as religiously homogenous.

Education and Schools

Cultural and social factors identified in this research are interconnected and have different levels of impact and contribution towards VE in the four countries. Lack of equal accessibility to basic needs and services were all noted as significant, especially with regards to education. For instance, the access to and the level of education can be/ is often lower for girls and young women affecting the numbers of illiteracy. Schools were identified as particularly critical spaces that construct mindsets from an early age that are susceptible to extremist narratives. The absence of content on peace and tolerance, lack of peace and civic education, absence of comparative religion in school curriculums, and lack of mixed school systems that create de-facto ethnic segregation over time leads to VE. Even where groups are mixed, one group may still dominate over others in terms of how religion is taught: “stating one religion as good and other religion as bad in schoolbooks is problematic.” One Pakistani YPB revealed that though “[non-Muslim] minorities students are compelled to read about Islam, [the teaching] also has bad words about our religion” (YPB, Pakistan).

Social Media

Social media was identified as a flourishing space for VE in the region. These platforms can reach wider audiences than traditional media and have the capacity for an unlimited number of channels and mediums to communicate extremist views. Among social media channels, Facebook and WhatsApp were identified as main platforms where VE ideologies are disseminated. Hate speech, intolerance, conspiracies, false news, and unchecked religious material run rampant in these spaces. Lack of media literacy is accelerating the culture of hate speech both online and offline.

Government Discrimination and Bias

Discrimination, particularly by the state, is also seen as another driving force. Laws are enforced unevenly depending on caste, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. Social injustice is also supported by discriminative laws and policies such as the Citizenship Laws in India and Sri Lanka. Specifically, discriminatory language barriers were highlighted as a contributing factor for VE. Not being able to converse in secondary languages creates a gap between communities. As an example, many YPBs in Sri Lanka stated the 1956 Official Language Act No. 33, which is commonly referred to as the “Sinhala Only Act.” The Official Language Act made Sinhala the only official language in Sri Lanka, marginalizing the Tamil language which is spoken by Sri Lanka's minority groups. Although the act was officially amended only two years due to external/foreign pressure, in practice Sinhala is frequently the only language in which Sri Lankan citizens can access government services, such as the police, even in areas where Tamil is dominant (Wickrematunge 2016). As such language remains a major political and cultural flash point. Language barriers, especially when politicized, create misunderstanding, miscommunication and misinterpretation which has led to many instances of religious tensions and conflicts between religious communities. Such examples echo findings from UNDP in Africa where weak governance and perceived abuse by the state was found to be a larger push factor for VE than religious beliefs (2017).

Mental Health Concerns/Trauma

One of the most highlighted factors identified across all countries that contributes to VE was mental health issues. As an effect of the high levels of violence in the region, most young people have experienced violence directly or in their close network of friends and family, through armed conflict or through ongoing cycles of community violence. YPBs identified that most members of their communities experience various combinations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety resulting from violence, loss, and other hardships they have endured and continue to endure. Lack of proper psychological support for emotional recovery, resilience, and well-being is a significant factor making youth more vulnerable to VE, according to many YPBs. Suffering from emotional trauma with no tools or systems to help manage these issues manifests as chronic anger and grievance that can lead to violent behavior.

Such trauma is also intergenerational:



Youth have revengeful thoughts from their bad experiences—from the conflicts, mostly as victims. As an example, from Pakistan, when a drone attack kills an innocent in any area like Waziristan, it generates revengeful thoughts in the family and relatives of the victim. Their [desire for] revenge...is transferred from generation to generation. Stress/anger/frustration caused due to conflict-filled backgrounds is also a leading inner factor of individuals which leads to VE (YPB, Pakistan).

Peacebuilders identified emotional overwhelm as common among those who have directly carried out acts of VE: “In my research, I got to know after each of any terrorist incident the perpetrator says, 'I was depressed, I was frustrated, and I was angry.' This means that mental health awareness and platforms to seek help are highly needed” (YPB, Pakistan). Because public grief is associated with violence, governments suppress collective acts of remembrance, which only exacerbates the anger and emotion: “There are restrictions to organize and participate in commemorations for Tamil citizens in the country to commemorate Tamils who died from war. We also do not have collective memorials where we can share our pain and grievances as a country” (YPB, Sri Lanka).

Economic Inequality

Economic issues such as poverty, low income, disparity in resource allocation, lack of resources, youth unemployment, limited access to opportunities in education, inadequate information technology infrastructure in rural areas, and lingering underdevelopment in war-torn areas were all described as factors which push youth toward VE. As an example, in Sri Lanka, huge economic constraints in war-affected areas—such as property losses due to the war, ongoing communal clashes, delays in reparations, delays in land resettlement, etc.—mobilize youth toward VE. Further, YPBs point out that minority ethnic and religious communities are the primary victims of inequitable resource allocation and distribution. Such deprivation fuels resentment and grievance among young people. In Pakistan, natural gas is produced in an area called Sui, located in Balochistan, one of the most economically deprived provinces in the country. Once bottled, this gas is disseminated to all parts of the country except where it actually originates from. Youth and villagers live in poverty without the financial capacity to buy the gas. As a result, groups from the community often attack the Sui plant and its workers. Deprivation and disparity have created a sense of victimization in young people that often lead them to VE.

Transnational Terrorism Networks

While there are many forces within each country that effectively cultivate VE, international terror networks from outside of the region also play a role. The young people responsible for the Holi Artisan attacks in Bangladesh were trained by ISIS, some in person in Syria, others recruited online. Sri Lankan internal armed conflicts, as well as the Easter Sunday bombings, were supported by regional terrorist groups. Investigators found the Easter Sunday bombers, who belonged to the National Thowheed Jamath Terrorist organization, had been financially supported by other countries—both in and out of the region—with ISIS ultimately claiming responsibility for the attacks. Such groups are historically stronger in Pakistan and Bangladesh but have reach and influence across the region via social media.

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: Who

3.3: Redefining South Asian Youth Peacebuilders - Diversity and Heterogeneity in South Asian Youth-Led Peacebuilding

Despite elements of shared culture and history, South Asia is an infinitely diverse region. That diversity creates beauty, complexity, and conflict. The diversity of the region is also reflected among the YPBs that contributed to this research, in terms of ethnicity, language, and geography. To effectively support South Asia peacebuilders, it is important to better understand that they are not a homogenous group. In this section, several contextual and social factors, which influence how peacebuilders carry out and think about their work, are discussed. These include urbanicity, gender identity, religion, and ethnicity.

Urban and Rural Peacebuilders

In South Asian countries, 66 percent of the population lives in rural areas (World Bank 2019). As the region's cities grew over the past century, they flourished, offering jobs and opportunities that attracted migrants from all corners of the region. While life in South Asian cities is difficult, cities offer resources and infrastructure that far exceed those offered in rural areas. Most rural areas remain underdeveloped with fewer facilities for health and education, as well as high rates of unemployment. This disparity extends to peacebuilding. Peace-focused organizations, trainings, university events and exchange opportunities are concentrated in urban areas. Many peacebuilders report that universities are often where they first encountered peacebuilding ideas. As a result of these dynamics, YPBs themselves are primarily

urban. Urban peacebuilding also confers additional benefits; YPBs can easily network and learn from other peacebuilders and mentors in the field; peacebuilding is a recognized idea in urban areas; and peacebuilding is viewed positively in urban areas. All these factors help create a supportive and resource rich environment for peacebuilders in the city.

By comparison, rural peacebuilders face a much steeper climb to carry out their work. They are often working alone with very little support, even in terms of peer collaborators. They do not have access to organizations or networks where peacebuilding ideas are developed or shared. They often create their own content and programming from their own ideas and experiences, without having existing models and materials to borrow from. More so than urban peacebuilders, rural peacebuilders work from personal experience, from traumatic and unjust events they, their family, or their communities have directly suffered as a result of VE. They also frequently face resistance from their communities. Peacebuilding is an unknown concept in most rural areas and people find it hard to apprehend what “peacebuilding” really offers them. Reflecting on work in her own rural community, one Pakistani YPB noted,



In my village there is no school, and there are no medical facilities. People don't know what peace is. They are just trying to live and struggle to meet basic needs.

To the extent that peacebuilding is recognized, it is viewed as suspect, as a body of ideas sent by foreign powers to undermine the culture and upend political authority. In addition, rural peacebuilders may have less room to maneuver in small communities, where VE may be in close proximity at all times. Similarly, YPBs are more visible and exposed to retaliatory action due to the size and nature of smaller communities. An indigenous peacebuilder in rural Bangladesh reported having been beaten by people from his own community because of the ideas he was sharing as a peacebuilder.

Across the research, a class divide emerged between urban and rural peacebuilders. With access to more publicity, urban peacebuilders can build their reputations, compete successfully for awards and fellowships, and potentially make careers and build organizations to support their peacebuilding work. For rural peacebuilders, sustainability is much harder as they have little sense that their work is appreciated locally, and fewer opportunities attract resources to continue their activities.

Urban peacebuilders are keenly aware of the disparity in peacebuilding opportunity and awareness that exists between urban and rural environments. They recognize their privilege as urbanites and make efforts to bring their programs into rural areas.



Our peacebuilding efforts are urban centric, they should be scaled up in grassroots, rural areas as well. YPBs in urban areas have more access and exposure to engage in regional and national level efforts fighting VE (YPB, Sri Lanka).

However, when confronted with the many rural challenges listed above, as well as a lack of relationship with particular communities, urban YPBs report that it is difficult to make a significant contribution, especially when they are generally only offering one-off programs versus multiple activities over time. Also, many of the materials that are developed for use in urban areas are in English. Working in rural areas requires knowledge of the local language as well as the ability to translate all the relevant materials and information for local access and consumption. Further, rural YPBs without strong English skills are unable to access information that could help them with their local activities because these materials do not exist online or elsewhere in local languages.

More recently, COVID-19 has added additional disparities between urban and rural peacebuilding as the virus has required a shift away from in-person events to online campaigns. The lack of digital infrastructure in rural areas in South Asia adds an additional challenge for those working outside of urban and peri-urban areas.

Recognizing the difference contexts and challenges between rural and urban YPBs is important and helps to better understand the diverse needs of these practitioners. Approaches that have been successful in cities will not be as effective in rural areas, for the reasons discussed above. Ultimately the goal of this analysis is to acknowledge the diverse, context-dependent needs of YPBs and to build this practically into future programming and funding design. Both urban and rural areas are critical in the struggle for PVE. YPBs are present and working in all contexts. Thus, it is imperative that institutional actors, working to fulfill the YPS agenda, think more comprehensively and pluralistically about supporting YPBs in all manner of diverse contexts. Interestingly, the role of traditional community-level peacemaking and conflict resolution processes/actors did not arise in discussions with YPBs; suggesting that current discussions of peacebuilding are not yet connecting with older indigenous practices which may historically exist in most cultures/communities.

YPBs are diverse actors across South Asia. How can the growing YPS sector be responsive and embrace their heterogeneity, so as to leverage diversity as a strength to fulfill the sector's potential impact?



Gender Identity for Peacebuilders: Disparities and Potentials

When turning to the question of how gender variously impacts the work of peacebuilders, the issue of urban and rural still looms large. Peacebuilders report that urban areas are more tolerant of women participating in peacebuilding activities than in rural areas. One specific aspect is that many peacebuilding activities and trainings occur at universities or with CSOs. Both spaces are more progressive and generally have articulated commitments to gender parity and women's participation. However, even these progressive spaces are noted as having unbalanced gender boundaries/expectations.

In Bangladesh, interviewees report that more females are getting involved in peacebuilding activities, but when it comes to the actual work, peacebuilders are pigeonholed by sex: male peacebuilders are expected to work on PVE, while female peacebuilders are expected to work within a limited set of issues: gender equality, women empowerment. "I am a girl! That's the first barrier I have faced as a peacebuilder," commented a Bangladeshi YPB. This was echoed by this Sri Lankan YPB:



There is a huge gap of female participation in peacebuilding due to cultural barriers. Girls are sometimes not allowed to travel outside of their hometown. As most of the peace capacity building work is conducted in main cities, they cannot travel and participate. There is limited support for female youth to participate and be peacebuilders compared to male YPBs.

Further, YPBs lamented the gender lens in peacebuilding remains widely unacknowledged. Female peacebuilders speak of being frowned upon for raising their voices as activists and contributing their perspectives about social justice, conflict, and violence. Women and girls noted being shamed online for taking strong, visible stands on various contested issues. Female peacebuilders also face obstacles in undertaking fieldwork. This is particularly true of workshops/activities in remote, rural areas where female peacebuilders must travel overnight with their work colleagues. This arrangement is often perceived negatively by members of rural communities, who question the integrity of females traveling in a manner they consider morally questionable/inappropriate. Likewise, in rural villages, local women from the community may not be allowed to participate in peacebuilding workshops, thus making it difficult for female peacebuilders to engage with women on issues like domestic violence, sexual harassment, assault, and rape. There is misperception among the public, sometimes seen among peacebuilders as well, that women and girls are not affected or vulnerable to radicalization and VE. This framing is used to push gender analysis to the margins of the peacebuilding conversation.

Participants from Pakistan reported more positive outcomes regarding the role of women in the peacebuilding sector, including several women working for peacebuilding in local organizations and at the national level. This is seen as part of a cultural shift towards women's rights and international funding that has helped women rise to prominent roles in peace work and beyond.

Religious and Secular Perspective

Another significant factor that influences the way peacebuilders carry out their work is religion. As discussed above, religion is among the most significant factors that contribute to VE. As such, both peacebuilding and PVE generally require engagement with religious leaders and religious communities from various faith groups.

Among the YPBs interviewed for the research, data indicates that the majority view themselves as more secular. Those who identify as faith-based peacebuilders consider themselves religious moderates. In the views of multiple YPBs who contributed to this study, the concepts of interfaith harmony, diversity, acceptance, and tolerance are more acceptable and regarded by secular people.

Part of this, as discussed in Section 3.7, is the politicization of peacebuilding. In trying to discredit peacebuilding, those who gain power through fearmongering and fomenting conflict, have labeled peacebuilding as a foreign, colonial concept meant to undermine national sovereignty and drive Western secularism. As such, peacebuilding becomes synonymous with suspicion of foreign, ulterior motivations. Furthermore, YPBs find that the more religiously conservative a person or community is, the less likely they will be to work on peacebuilding because their views on religion are exclusive, seeing those outside of their religious identity as misguided and wrong.

This creates a particular challenge for peacebuilders, as they often engage with belief systems which are quite different

than their own, and on particularly sensitive issues. As noted in Part 2, peacebuilding offers an alternative language that focuses on peace, tolerance, and harmony rather than violence and religious conflict. All religious texts have passages and stories which apotheosize peacemakers and promote tolerance and forgiveness. The more nuanced issue then becomes who is qualified to engage in such discussions and interpretations of sacred words and texts. For those South Asian peacebuilders who profess secularism, this engagement across belief systems can be challenging. A Bangladeshi YPB cautioned, "Secular minded people aren't well aware of the contexts or teachings of particular religion." Particularly when working with traditional/orthodox people in rural areas, interviewees pointed out that peacebuilders need to be more conscious about the wording they use, as they can easily offend and undermine their own efforts.

Sri Lankan YPBs noted the need to be adaptive and agile: when working with highly religious communities, those with a similar religious identity tend to promote their identity as part of their work, whereas those more secular take a more middle road on religion and instead emphasize national identity instead of religious. Those who are religious speak from religious texts and systems while secular peacebuilders speak to national symbols and identity.

Majority and Minority

The analysis of peacebuilders' religious perspectives and how this can help or hinder their work leads naturally to another, significant consideration that peacebuilders must wrestle with their social positionality as a member of the majority ethnic group or as a minority. Numerical dominance of one ethnic group within a geographical area confers majority status. It also, almost universally, confers power and privilege. Conversely, ethnic minorities face social exclusion, identity-based discrimination, and economic deprivation. These social divisions are frequent sources of conflict. In South Asia, most of the conflicts are ethnic by root, preceding several of the contemporary religions of the area.

The majority of YPBs interviewed in this research are members of the majority group in their respective country. As such, they have better access to opportunities and resources compared to minority peacebuilders. There is a strong correlation between the analysis of majority/minority and urban/rural peacebuilders. Majority peacebuilders often come from urban environments, while minority peacebuilders are rural. In addition, minority peacebuilders are more likely to be fighting for their own rights and peace in their own communities. Bangladeshi YPBs from the hill tract areas, in particular, directly face injustice, discrimination, and even violence, sometimes from their own communities.

Likewise, in Sri Lanka, most peacebuilders in the study are from the majority Sinhala group. Having seen the horrors of civil war and its aftermath, both majority and minority peacebuilders have come to the peacebuilding field to work towards reconciliation and minorities. Majority YPBs, however, often report that they are stigmatized for their work with minority groups.

Their motives are considered suspect by the majority, even when peacebuilders also belong to the majority. One peacebuilder suggested the need to shift focus from minority communities to majority areas:



Awareness raising on PVE is mostly being done in reaching minority communities in war affected areas. Need of increased level of awareness and engaging youth from [the] southern part of the country, where there is ethnic and religious majority representation, is much needed in addressing VE in Sri Lanka (YPB, Sri Lanka).

Indeed, as VE becomes more pervasive and more aligned with religious nationalism and majoritarian politics in South Asia, marginalized minority groups are no longer the singular source of VE. As one Pakistani YPB asserted, “religious extremism in Pakistan is not just an issue for minorities. One of my Muslim friend did a comment on a YouTube video of a Muslim religious scholar and he got called and threatened. Finally, he had to remove his comment.”

The positionality of peacebuilders is likely to become a more important question South Asia. In India—which hosts a small community of peacebuilders—most of those interviewed were from minority groups, such as Muslim, Sikhs, and indigenous communities. Given rapidly the rising tide of Hindu nationalism across the country, it is not surprising that these peacebuilders have faced intense resistance, including discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, incarceration and state-supported religious extremism/violence. When YPBs articulate their goals of interfaith harmony, they report frequently receiving antagonistic responses from dominant actors in the majority and even been called traitors.

By highlighting this issue of the majority versus minority status of YPBs, the intent is not to argue that peacebuilders from majority communities are better or more effective, or vice versa. This analysis has raised concerns of equity and balance that should be considered as the sector advances. But just as important, the diverse experiences reported by the contributors to this research point to a vital need for both majority and minority peacebuilders. Increasingly, VE is not the province of one group or another. At this point in time, both majority and minorities have engaged in VE and are poised to create further acts. Peacebuilders with linkages to all groups are needed, to work on both sides of the equation.

While this chapter has sought to define, or redefine, the breadth and diversity of YPBs in South Asia, the next section seeks to identify what traits and experiences link and unify YPBs across the region.

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: Why

3.4: The Hearts of Peacebuilders: Why Youth Choose Peace

Given the challenges—and escalating dangers—that YPBs face at all levels, it is worth noting the motivations that lead youth to take up the role of community peacebuilders. Through the analysis of more than seventy YPBs interview, four major motivating factors are clear: 1) desire for challenge; 2) vision and idealism; 3) support and mentoring; 4) personal experiences of violence, loss, and trauma.

Desire for Challenge

YPBs are tenacious. Rather than cowering from the violent realities that surround them, they step forward, vulnerably, to be voices and forces for change. Violence is not a hypothetical in South Asia. It is ubiquitous and known. Peacebuilders know what they are taking on when they take up this identity. They know the risky work will make them objects of condemnation in some circles. They are aware that they may become outcasts for challenging prevailing norms and prejudices. They quickly learn that there is little reward or compensation; but they are uninterested in financial gain and often use their own funds to organize programs and activities. They are condemned as foreign agents and as self-seekers who are looking to win foreign scholarships, but the YPBs interviewed in this research are clear about their commitment to the work. They invest money and time in higher education to build their peacebuilding knowledge and skills. The challenges and barriers compel them work harder because they believe fundamentally in the value and importance of their work.

Mentoring and Support

The peacebuilding sector itself has become an engine that attracts young people who want to do important work. They are exposed to peacebuilders campaigning through social media. YPBs see peacebuilding NGOs and their various projects and work in the media and recognize the kind of work that they themselves aspire to facilitate. As YPBs become more involved, peers become role models and organizational leaders become mentors. Urban peacebuilders in particular see the possibility of a career in devoting their entire professional life to the cause of peacebuilding, witnessing the opportunity to build upon the work of the YPBs who have come before and guided them.

Vision and Idealism

South Asia's YPBs have a vision of their countries and their region freed from the specter of violence and division that has plagued the subcontinent for generations. They grew up surrounded by violence and want to break cycles that lead to its perpetuation. They want to stop other young people in their families and communities from being drawn into the extremism and violence. They want their countries to break free from the lingering effects of colonialism. They want to help their fellow citizens come and work together to build a brighter future for future generations.

Responding to One's Own Experience of Violence

Many peacebuilders described their commitment to peacebuilding in personal terms. Peacebuilding was seen as a response to individual and communal violence/trauma that they, their families and/or communities had experienced directly. To provide a clearer sense of the motivations of peacebuilders, several of these personal stories are quoted at length.



Sonal Dhanani belongs to the Ismaili religious minority in Pakistan. Her brother was among forty-eight who were brutally killed in a bus attack by terrorists. Though that was the first time that she was directly affected by violence, she had long realized that other communities were suffering through this same violence. She wondered, “Who is helping these young people to come out of such trauma? Who will help them to stay positive and not allow their victimization to drive them to retaliatory violence? Realizing that when somebody loses their loved one in a terror attack, they have a lot of anger to take revenge against the perpetrators groups and to take revenge on the government as well.” She herself, for a time, was obsessed with vengeance. “If I had gotten the chance to kill my brother's killers—I would have killed them.” Her community, however, supported her through voluntary engagement. Her victimization was transformed into a desire to help others who had experienced the same. She started her journey by building a platform for young people to express their anger, frustration—a safe place for expressing their emotions and trauma. She started engaging young people through art therapy and teaching them about nonviolence and peacebuilding. To date, she has trained hundreds of students and young people using these tools and her own experience of transforming loss into a source of strength and motivation for action.

My own community continuously got tortured, raped, and evicted from their ancestral lands by the influential locals. I wanted to bring peace through making fruitful dialogues between these two parties (YPB Tarun Munda, Bangladesh).

I got tortured by the extremists of my own community when they learned that I wanted to normalize relations between my community and the settlers in those regions. It made me realize that I should keep working to bring harmony in my society. (YPB Bana Ratna Tanchangya, Bangladesh).

I've been bullied throughout my childhood for thinking differently. I have also faced discrimination, because of my religious belief and sexual orientation. I have also seen many to face the same which I wanted to change. That's why I've made up my mind to become a peacebuilder in my adulthood (YPB Tushar Kanti Baidya, Bangladesh).



My mission is to translate stories of the war—which are now only in Tamil language—to Sinhala, which is the language that the majority speaks. I want them to know all hidden stories. Being a victim of the then-ongoing war, I experienced all the hardships and brutality of the war. I want people to know our side of the story—to make sure that something like this will never happen to all of us, or to this country (YPB Anusha Shivalingam, Sri Lanka).



Anujitha Sivaskaran has experienced the brutality of the war firsthand. She was born and raised in one of the most embattled areas during the long war. She, her family, and her neighbors faced many difficulties due to internal displacement. Having lost their home, land, friends, and relatives from the ongoing conflict, she chose to pursue her higher education training in peacebuilding. She obtained a bachelor's degree in Peace and Conflict Resolution from the University of Kelaniya, the first university in Sri Lanka to host a degree program in peacebuilding. She now works for the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, as a project officer for the Collective Youth Engagement for Pluralism program, working with youth in universities to create awareness on building a pluralistic Sri Lanka.

As this small collection of vignettes makes clear, most of the YPBs from the South Asian region are survivors of direct violence or have lost someone in war or to terrorism. They do not want to return to an era of the past where violence was experienced daily. They dedicate themselves to positive transformation and to creating positive impact on the lives around them and their countries at large.

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: What

3.5: Youth-Led Approaches and Innovation for Preventing Violent Extremism

As outlined previously, VE in South Asia, while having many contributing factors, is largely defined by religious conflicts. Ethnic and political conflicts are often expressed through violence and justified on religious grounds. There is a lot of sensitivity in South Asian cultures in speaking about religion; particularly religion's relationship to controversial issues such as radicalization, extremism, nationalism, and violence. Beyond culture, there is also significant political sensitivity on these issues given the increasing linkages between politics and VE. To adjust to this challenge, peacebuilders enter the conversation with communities through different linguistic/discursive avenues. Rather than the problem-focused language of VE, youth present themselves as practitioners of peace, using the narratives of tolerance and respect, communal harmony, good governance, rule of law, and human rights. Programs attract young people with offers of building skills in leadership, cross-cultural awareness, journalism, the arts and more.

The topic of religiously motivated violence is examined as one of many forms of violence to which young South Asians are exposed, including militarized inter-state conflict between countries in the region, violence against refugees, gender-based violence (GBV) and localized juvenile violence.

Occasionally, there are activities that directly address issues such as Islamophobic narratives and other topics pertaining to religious conflict. Such a mix of lenses also allows for a more holistic and critical analysis: just because extremist acts may involve people from different religions, is religious animosity the actual root cause or rather a symptom of other issues? How, why, and by whom are religious sentiments manipulated to foment extremism?

While addressing extremism explicitly can be a challenge, peacebuilders aim to sensitize their audiences to the various contributing factors that drive VE: including efforts to prevent GBV, information literacy to combat false news and hate speech on social media, reformation of educational content, and other development initiatives that are focused on livelihoods and access to basic services. Indeed, the value of YPB is their ability to engage in PVE at the most grassroots level. YPBs engage proactively with those who may in time become radicalized because of their marginalization, material deprivation, or through their direct and indirect cultivation to become hostile to other groups. As such, YPBs activate young people and communities not by addressing/preventing VE directly per se, but through causal factors such as marginalization, deprivation and narratives/media which inflame violent action. They do so by working with stakeholders to overcome stigmas (religious, ethnic, national, caste, gender, etc.) that create marginalization. They initiate traditional community development projects that provide food, employment and help with community-level processes such as the organization of self-help groups. They cultivate youth as citizen journalists to ferret out false information in the media, centering public accurate information and stimulating critical analysis rather populist reactionism.

Before looking more deeply at the types of peacebuilding programs and their content, it is important to also clarify how youth-led initiatives are created and delivered.

Implementation Structure: Partnered Versus Independent

Youth-led initiatives can be categorized by how they are implemented, either in partnership with another organization or independently without any external support.

Many of the peacebuilding initiatives discussed here are developed in cooperation and funded by CSOs/NGOs but are implemented in the field by the YPBs—voluntary or paid. Beyond partners in civil society, some PVE initiatives are started by law enforcement authorities and are supported by the government. These generally target university students in urban areas. Due to the size and financial resources of these state actors, these programs are usually held at a national level. The role of youth is smaller in the design of the content, but YPBs serve to attract and connect with the youth who are targeted to participate in the programs. In this sense, the programs remain youth-led, as the peer-to-peer engagement is key.

Partnership models often have multiple levels. While regional governments can be hugely helpful in supporting the work of YPBs, their support has not been consistent. Instead CSOs carry the bulk of the efforts. They play a key role in the multi-level partnership process, acting as middlemen to solicit large international pools of funding which can then be distributed downstream to local YPBs who work as implementing partners to carry out specific programs. The British Council, Finn Church Aid, Search for Common Ground, and the Gullen Movement were all noted as international CSOs which input significant financial and training materials into the peacebuilding sector.

Alternatively, independently organized and implemented PVE or peacebuilding activities are developed and executed by individual or small groups of young volunteers utilizing their own limited resources. These organizers are typically students at college and university, most of whom are urban based, though not exclusively. When organized independently, the scope of activities is limited, covering a locality or cluster of cities within easy traveling distance. Very few independent activities run at a national scale, though the comparatively small size of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh makes national campaigns more feasible. In all cases, the organizers constantly face challenges with funding and sustainability. There is significant variation between independently organized efforts in cities versus peacebuilding/PVE efforts in rural areas. In urban areas, YPBs have dense social networks where other peacebuilders collaborate, attend capacity-building trainings, and develop their own programming which utilizes all these collective resources. Rural peacebuilders are often working much more endogenously, creating their programs from scratch, because they do not have access to organized peacebuilding networks and because peacebuilding materials online may not be linguistically accessible to those who do not speak English.

As outlined in more detail in Section 3.6, replicating and scaling independent youth-led initiatives is challenging, though there are documented exceptions. However, when such breakthroughs happen, it is because of the support of new partners joining the YPB to help expand their reach of the program. Both partnered and independent implementation models are important, but the sector would be far smaller in reach without the support of various kinds of partners.

Principal Modalities

Almost all the youth peacebuilding initiatives use one or more of the following six methodological approaches: 1) capacity building/facilitation training; 2) advocacy skills; 3) dialogues; 4) social media/online campaigns; 5) community cohesion strengthening activities; and 6) arts-based approaches. Typically, these are targeted to and adapted for particular audiences, most commonly: university students, secondary school students, teachers, parents, political leaders, religious leaders, or policymakers. Recently, because of COVID-19, online campaigns, especially those utilizing social media platforms, have gained popularity for the ability to reach more participants. They have also enabled access to a wider range of age groups and diverse backgrounds.

Content/Themes

Although the majority of peacebuilding activities fall into the 6 modalities above, peacebuilders constantly innovate to approach and develop different kinds of content that can help participants become sensitized and aware of VE, and to encourage those same participants to become active peacebuilders themselves. Because most peacebuilders work independently, they are creating much of their own content and materials, which are quite tailored to their unique, local contexts.

The chart below compiles the principal modalities in conjunction with the most frequently reported content and audiences based on the activities of more than seventy YPBs who contributed to the study.

Modality - Capacity Building Workshops
Content - Peace and Civic Education, Media and Information Literacy, Cyber Crime, Soft Skills, Leadership Development
Target Audiences - University Students, Secondary School/College Students

Modality - Dialogues
Content - Interfaith and Intercommunal Harmony, Conflict Mediation, Intergenerational and Community Dialogues
Target Audiences - Youths, Policymakers, Religious and Political/Government Leaders

Modality - Advocacy Campaigns/ Workshops
Content - Pluralism, Good Governance, Freedom of Speech, Right to Information, Human Rights, Minority Rights, Preventing Gender Based Violence
Target Audiences - University Students, Secondary School/College Students, General Public, Policy Makers, Police/Law Enforcement, Political and Religious leaders

Modality - Community Cohesion**Strengthening Activities****Content - Peace, Harmony, Unity, Pluralism**

Sports, Games, Cultural events Interfaith

Festival Celebrations, Exchange Visits

Target Audiences - Youth, Religious Leaders,

Civil Society Leaders

Modality - Arts-Based Activities**Content - Short Films, Documentaries,**

Reading Discussion Groups, Essay Contests,

Art Exhibitions, Murals, Street Drama

Target Audiences - Youth, Primary School

Children

While most peacebuilding activities are captured in the chart above, distinct, and innovative programs were located in all four countries in the study. A few outstanding examples from each country include:

Bangladesh

> The Power to Bloom program engages adolescent girls across Bangladesh on difficult topics to help them feel more informed, confident, and resilient to systemic gender-based violence. Most girls move from childhood into early marriage without feeling empowered by own voices and ideas. The program creates a platform for young women to speak up against the violence and oppression they face. One of their core initiatives is “Stories for Peace” in which children are taught peacebuilding skills through storytelling. “Project PeaceNet” provides young women with media literacy tools which focus specifically on protection against on gender-based cyber violence against women.

> SURGE Bangladesh is a peacebuilding organization working in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar on CVE/PVE through engaging children, adolescents, orphans, and the youth. The SURGE Community School for orphans conducts a workshop titled “Route to Fortune” where it equips youth with employable skills—technological expertise, organizational culture, leadership, and meditation skills. For its social media, SURGE mostly publishes posters with quotes from Quran and Hadith on peace, charity, mutual respect. They also conduct “Harmonizing Soul” trainings with volunteers on the religious perspective of social work and activism.

> Shekor is a non-profit platform working with youth on “Behavioral Change Communication” to instill a sense and skill of being responsible citizens through regular “Youth Self-Worth” trainings, which include content on detoxification, positive attitude, soundness of soul, mind and body, personal well-being, “feedback for self-growth,” etc. Shekor aims to cultivate compassionate and empathetic youth to work as local YPBs.

> Peacemaker Studio and Ohnish Films are two initiatives harnessing the power of media to reach wider audience

through music, movie, and documentary. Their approach explores the heritage and cultural diversity of different regions, professions, and ethnic communities in Bangladesh. In addition, the movies include content on the importance of strong family bonds, environmental peace, mental health, as well as the prevention of suicide, hate speech, and misuse of religious narrative. They regularly conduct online talk shows, featuring religious experts and youth, where Quranic interpretation is discussed, with a focus on peace. These discussions also include critical analysis on how media, particularly films and dramas, encourage violence against women.

India

> Indialogue Foundation offers the following two programs:

Certificate Program in Dialogue Studies and Internship Program—This a six-month certificate program has been running for the past two years. In the 2020 batch, thirty students from eighteen countries participated. Guest-speakers were invited from many countries. During this program, participants explore various faiths and probe into the notion of being a dialogue practitioner, like Gandhi.

Gandhi Conference—The Foundation organizes an annual conference on Gandhi and Peace Studies. Gandhi is an icon of peace and dialogue. Various research papers are presented, and panel discussions take place. They bring the relevance of the Gandhian approach in today's times, and motivate the youth to walk on the path of non-violence. On an average 1000-1500 youth participate in these conferences.

> Peace Channel organizes a week-long workshop in schools and universities to orient students on peacebuilding and conflict, and to teach them dialogue techniques. Students then create a Peace Club as a safe space to talk about conflicts in daily life and at the larger level as well. Several activities are organized to sensitize youth, parents, and educators towards peacebuilding. Peace Channel also organizes themed summer and winter camps on Peacebuilding.

> Student Political Studies Group is a self-organized, student-led group at Sri Ram College, Delhi, engaged in a unique PVE initiative. They connected students from India to students at the University in Karachi, Pakistan. The project was based on email correspondence. This project took place in 2018-19, at a time when India had launched a Surgical Strike on Pakistan and there was a lot of anti-Pakistan, anti-Islamic rhetoric circulating in both mainstream and social media. The project intended to reduce extremism and discuss fact-based information. Gender discrimination was also discussed in both societies over email. Various protests and campaigns on both sides were also explored. The group also organized discussion sessions regarding anti-Islamic/anti-Kashmiri narratives, and attempted to challenge stereotypes.

➤ RegioD was created to counter the violent intra-regional divides within Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, by sharing positive stories from one community to another. Through this project, people belonging to marginalized communities write letters to other communities, sharing griefs and sorrows which they have encountered during communal quarrels. By exchanging such apolitical and honest narratives within the communities, the aim was to inculcate open mindedness and respect towards other cultures and dispel stereotypes.

Pakistan

➤ Gives Peace a Chance: Bridging the Gap Between Communities, was a collaborative project between a group of students from South Punjab and another group from Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Students decided to use cricket as a tool to unite two different groups—urban students from the universities and rural students from the madrasa. Qualifying cricket matches were held regionally in the city of Multan and Muzaffarabad between different local teams belonging to Madrasa and Universities. After preliminary regional rounds, the best players were selected for regional teams—comprised of a mix of university and madrasa students—to represent for their region at a national tournament in Islamabad. Learning to collaborate as one team, the process helped to bridge the gap and build friendships between the university and madrasa students.

➤ The Paint It Peace initiative was run by Sumaiya Changezi. The Mariabad Hazara community is one of the worst hit communities by sectarian violence, with significant loss of lives, forcing many of the Hazara community to migrate to other cities in search of livelihood and security. Inspired by the brightly painted villages in Morocco and Greece, Changezi initiated a community service project to paint all of the houses in Mariabad to promote goodwill toward the Hazara minority. This initiative was supported by local people including Hazara and non Hazara. The project was led by the community without any political or institutional support.

➤ Give Peace a Chance: A Sufi Mystics Documentary in which students from Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) in Multan collaborated to produce a unique documentary titled “Tu Bhi Shams, Main Bhi Shams” (We Are All Light). The video highlighted the role of Sufi mystics in promotion of peace and tolerance in the region and featured both Shia and Sunni scholars. It was screened in three different locations. The response of the audience showed visible change in attitudes and behaviors towards peacebuilding and co-existence among people from different sects and religions. With this initiative, this project reached out to more than 250 community members through screening the documentary at different locations within the city of Multan.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's peacebuilding sector is an outlier compared to the other three nations. While governments in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan were not very involved in the aforementioned programs, the Sri Lankan government, until 2019, was actively supporting YPBs as part of post-war reconciliation programs. Some key government initiatives included:

➤ 2015 Year of Good Governance and Peacebuilding was a campaign by the old government. The government which came to power after the presidential election and parliamentary election in 2015 campaigned on a platform of good governance, peace and reconciliation, and democratization. The government implemented the mandate by establishing new institutions and policies, including designating 2015 as the Year of Good Governance and Peacebuilding to start of their administration.

➤ Three government institutions were created to actively support peacebuilding and included youth in PVE initiatives:

Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) – Under ONUR “Ahanna, Listen” dialogue on diversity was implemented targeting school children; “Sahodara pasal, Neighboring with Schools” was conducted with school children through exchange visits from North to South and vice versa; and established Youth Committees at district level for community level conflict mitigation.

Ministry of National Language and Integration – A new cabinet-level ministry of the Government of Sri Lanka, was made responsible for formulating and implementing policy for communal coexistence by way of official and national languages and creating a national dialogue. Under the new ministry, government officers at district and divisional level were appointed “National Integration Officers”, The Ministry also established and trained District Reconciliation Committees (DRCs).

Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) – Worked with the Community Policing Division of Sri Lanka police to capacitate street-level police officers on peacebuilding

➤ All above mentioned government institutions targeted youth as key stakeholders and funded YPBs to conduct cohesion, advocacy, and exchange activities at the local level.

➤ INGOs, local level CBOs and national-level NGOs were all backed by the government to implement youth-led peacebuilding initiatives.

➤ Youth-led peace centers, youth parliament and camps were initiated in all districts. Sri Lanka has a youth parliament which creates opportunities for youth to engage in politics. The main mandate, however, is peacebuilding. Sri Lanka Unites, a well-established youth-led organization, created district level Reconciliation Centers which are led by youth. Yowun Puraya is a National Level Youth Camp, organized by National Youth Services Council. “The City of Youth” is a leadership and outward-bound training program bringing together over 8000 Sri Lankan and one hundred international young people. One of the key thematic areas and objectives of this camp is peacebuilding and reconciliation. Apart from this national camp, youth have initiated their own camps in their local communities as well.

➤ Funding available to implement youth-led projects at community level through arts, movies, films, drama, photo exhibitions and theater. Small funding opportunities have been available to youth to lead dialogues for peacebuilding through arts, movies, films, drama, photo exhibitions and theater.

➤ A group of CSOs initiated “Truth Seeking Forums” in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. One of them has been with the Tuk Tuk drivers in the city of Kandy as an exercise in dialogue and building community cohesion.

Several of these initiatives ran at the national level in Sri Lanka. However, in 2019, the new government came to power and withdrew the resources supporting the initiatives and closed the governments offices which supported the work. Now, without government resources, many of these programs are struggling financially and may not survive.

Regional/Cross Border Programs

While most youth-led programs are localized to a single city or region, regional programming which brings participants together from various South Asian countries does occur, as do programs that virtually engage participants in more than one country. These programs which are larger and facilitate cross-border travel and engagement are well-resourced and led by international foundations, such as the Indialogue Foundation's Gandhi Conference. Indialogue is supported by the Hizmet Movement which organizes similar activities globally. Youth-led cross-border activities generally occur on a small scale and are mainly facilitated through digital platforms which enable interaction and collaboration without travel, at a low cost. For examples, Words for Peace, which was started by a YPB in India, fosters intentional conversations between Indian and Pakistani university students via email exchanges. The Power to Bloom program has also begun to have reach beyond Bangladesh, though still on a small scale. As is noted throughout this report, funding structures will need to change to facilitate wider-scale, regional impacts from strictly youth-led initiatives.

Youth Peacebuilders in South Asia: How

3.6: Network Building and Scaling

It is well understood that a synergy of collective efforts can accelerate the pace as well as intensify the impact of the initiatives that are aimed at PVE and peacebuilding. This research engaged multiple YPBs, who explained how PVE and peacebuilding activities are carried out in partnerships and through larger coalitions that facilitate scaling and networking across national borders.

Various examples of interfaith, cultural exchanges, sensitization programs, and capacity building trainings have scaled from community level to national, regional, and even to global levels. Crucially, this is achieved when local CSOs join hands with INGOs to achieve these aims. The support of governmental agencies is also a necessary ingredient for expanding the reach of peacebuilding programs and activities. Given the resources and levels of coordination required for these efforts, YPBs often play supporting roles in the actual scaling process. However, scaled and network programs open opportunities for collective sharing and learning across the whole of the region and create a more integrated and cohesive field of youth peacebuilding. They are vital for equitable capacitation and growth of the sector.

Scaled-Up Projects

PVE and peacebuilding projects from all four countries in this research have successfully scaled. The following chart documents all scaled programs and activities identified by the YPBs in interviews and surveys.

Bangladesh

Local Level - Y Coalition, SURGE Bangladesh

National Level - Manusher Jonno, Active Citizens Training; Social Action Projects (British Council)

Regional Level - Manusher Jonno Foundation, Project Enlightening Youth, Active Citizens Training; Social Action Projects (British Council), SAVE Youth, Power to Bloom

India

Local Level - Building Bridges for Sustainable Peace in North East (Youth-led project which has been scaled up by Peace Channel)

Regional Level - Words for Peace, Gandhi Conference for Peace and Certificate in Dialogue Studies (Indialogue Foundation), Academics and Professionals for Certificate in Dialogue Studies, Peace Channel, STEARS

Pakistan

Local Level - Young Professional Fellowship, National Agri-Tourism Conference, We are the Answer, Nonviolent Communication (Workshops), Youth Creative Expression Fest 2020, A Theatre on Peaceful Co-Existence, Give Peace a Chance: A Sufi Mystics Documentary

National Level - Emerging Policy Institute, The Daysprings, Bolo Jawan, Salamti Fellowship, Peace Club

Regional Level - Pak Afghan Youth Forum, Asian-Pacific Children's Convention, Markhor (Youth Impact), MAPS Young Professional Fellowship in Uzbekistan

Sri Lanka

Local Level - International Youth Alliance for Peace: Capacity Building Programs, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, SEDEC CARITAS: Capacity Building Programs/District-Level Youth committees, Future Leaders Conference, Online Training Programs and Webinars, Youth-Led District Level Centers (Sri Lanka Unites), Cemetery Walks, Interfaith Festival Celebration and Interfaith Quiz (Interfaith Colombo and Interfaith Kandy)

National Level - Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (2015 to 2019), Active Citizens Training; Social Action Projects (British Council), Center for Communication Training PVE Activities, Three-Day Youth Peace Champions Event, "Ahanna" Program by the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms

Regional Level - AHA! Awareness with Human Action Project, Sri Lanka Unites and Global Unites, Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka, Generations for Peace, KAICIID Fellows network in Sri Lanka, Interfaith Colombo, IYAP, Master Peace Sri Lanka

youth through schools. Both SURGE and Y Coalition started in the home cities of their founders, Chittagong and Cox's Bazar respectively, both large urban areas. By leveraging their YPB networks, they were able to replicate their programs in other larger urban centers, with SURGE also delivering programs in nearby Cox's Bazar and Y Coalition scaling their programs by replicating their workshops in the capital city of Dhaka. This kind of scaling might be termed a "bootstrapping," working with very limited resources (largely one's own), leveraging social connections, and finding access to audiences that are already in one place, as opposed to having to market and build them.

For youth-founded peacebuilding organizations/activities to scale beyond one or two urban-center replications, outside funding and partners are needed. Power to Bloom founder Mithela Haque was able to scale her women's focused peacebuilding work beyond Chittagong when she was recognized by the US-based Ashoka Foundation with a Youth Venturer Fellowship. The small funding and the recognition from the award helped her to scale the program to reach thousands of young women. Likewise, the work with Adivasi communities expanded from one village to the whole of northeast India when local government officials became involved and actively helped to promote and replicate activities in other districts.

Most all peacebuilding programs that are truly national in scale, are created and built in partnership, featuring links between well-established CSOs and/or governmental bodies. YPBs tend to play more of an implementation role in these programs. This process, however, is part of the iterative capacity building that has been described earlier in the report, that equips YPBs, especially in urban areas, to have a strong foundational knowledge of peacebuilding and PVE, that then enables them to generate their own initiatives.

Most programs that scale beyond one country and touch the whole of the region require an international funding partner, usually an INGO or a foundation, that partners with large national NGOs. Examples include the work of Indialogue Foundation in India, which leads many peace camps and formal peace education programs. It is funded and supported by the Gullen/Hizmet Movement that has roots in Turkey. The work led by Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka is part of large regional consortium project AHA! Awareness with Human Action, implemented in partnership with the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and funded by European Union via implementing INGO Finn Church Aid. Organizations like Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka are country-level chapters of larger global peacebuilding INGOs.

One limiting factor in this report's analysis is that all the YPBs interviewed in this research were thirty years of age or younger, and thus still quite young in their careers. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the initiatives of very young YPBs scale slowly and have not reached national or regional levels of replication. However, taking a longer view and looking at older peacebuilders in the region in their thirties and forties, it is clear to see that, over decades, it is possible for small youth-founded organizations to grow into large, anchor institutions in the sector.

Analysis of Scaled and Network Programs

This meta-analysis of programs across the whole of the South Asian region reveals several insights. It reinforces findings throughout this report that YPBs cannot operate successfully in isolation. Effective youth peacebuilding requires partnerships with a variety of stakeholder groups, from peer volunteers, to community leaders, CSOs, universities, government officials, and government institutions.

For youth-led peacebuilding programs to flourish beyond the level of individuals' localized efforts, there must be social/networked-based resources available to sustain the peacebuilding/PVE activities and support livelihoods for the YPBs themselves. Most typically, social resources are the mechanism, meaning that YPBs join forces and collaborate to build programs together and carry these activities out in their home location to other cities where their youth peacebuilding networks are developed.

Two features stand out when independent youth-led programs scale: 1) they target educational institutions, students, and youth generally, rather than the general population or the community at large; 2) they work within urban areas. For example, SURGE Bangladesh focuses their programs on children, adolescents, and orphans. Organizing programs around schools and orphanages is an effective but easy method, especially when those institutions are responsive to new and diverse programs.

Likewise, one of the main activities of Y Coalition, a youth-led peacebuilding organization in Bangladesh, is the "6 Schools Program" which is built around accessing large numbers of

Such examples are Sri Lanka Unites and Generations for Peace in Sri Lanka, which both now facilitate programming on a regional scale despite humble origins as YPB-founded organizations more than a decade ago. These programs are sustained by international partnerships and funding. As the youth peacebuilding sector grows over the coming years, bolstered by the global YPS agenda, it is likely that new, small initiatives across the region which are led by YPBs in their 20s will in time grow to large influential organizations in the national and regional sector.

Scaling requires cooperation and relationships at many levels, across countries, and across borders. YPBs under thirty, even in urban contexts, do not have at this stage in their careers such extensive networks to achieve rapid scaling of their activities. Although regional fellowship and exchange programs can help augment YPB's individual networks and relationships across the sector, effective scaling at the national and regional level require buy-in and heavy engagement with larger, most established CSO, INGOs, foundations and government bodies. They also require significant time to grow.

The meta-analysis of programs—the volume and distribution in the chart—is also revealing. Pakistan and Sri Lanka stand out as having a higher number of programs in all categories, with India lagging behind significantly at both local and national levels. These reflect the overall contours of the peacebuilding sectors in the countries. Pakistan has a very mature peacebuilding sector that has been developing for some time with significant international support. Sri Lanka likewise has a mature peacebuilding sector, due in large to earlier administrations that prioritized peacebuilding as a post-war reconciliation strategy, supporting peacebuilding in various ways and working intentionally to establish programs and activities across the whole of the country. Bangladesh has fewer programs scaling at the local level, suggesting gaps in terms of supportive structures to help YPBs scale their innovative programs beyond local implementation—which is consistent with reports from the peacebuilders interviewed for the study.

India is the clear outlier, however, dominated by international network programs that are primarily resourced from outside of the country, while its national and local programs are negligible or nonexistent. Again, this is consistent with the findings of the research; the peacebuilding sector in India is in its infancy, particularly compared to its neighbors in the region. As such, Indian YPB often feel isolated under pressure from the government. Indeed, a significant number of potential interviewees refused to participate in this research. This was not the case in any of the other countries. India's resistance and politicization of peacebuilding poses a series challenge for the growth of the sector. From the chart, it is clear to see this negative undercurrent is inhibiting innovation from YPBs at the local grassroots and middle level. Efforts from international foundations and actors in India remain sequestered as free-standing programs rather than finding uptake, diffusion, and replication at the national or even local levels—as can be seen occurring in the other countries where INGOs can partner with national NGOs for widespread implementation. Given the extensive levels of international

peace programming promoted in India, the absence of other programs and activities following on from these pioneer programs suggests a difficult future for Indian YPBs until there is a significant shift in climate and policy that will enable YPS activities to take better root in the country.

3.7: Impact of Youth Peacebuilding Programs

Having surveyed the diversity of peacebuilding modalities, content and audiences for peacebuilding programming, this report now seeks to summarize the known outcomes and impacts of youth through these peacebuilding efforts.

Missing Data

While a significant cadre of YPB exist in South Asia—particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan—information on the impact of their work, individually and collectively, is quite limited. Most available data is anecdotal rather than comprehensive. Data collection among peacebuilders is limited, with little to no systemic measures and tracking of outcomes for program participants. This missing impact-related data is attributed by peacebuilders to a variety of factors.

As noted throughout this report, peacebuilders have very limited resources to carry out their work. Their few materials and financial resources, as well as volunteer support, are directed in full toward recruiting participants and programming. This leaves meager time, energy, and money to be directed towards evaluation or other forms of follow-up and assessment.

YPBs also noted a lack of training and emphasis in this area. Trainings organized by government, police, and CSOs do not necessarily recognize that YPBs are building their own organizations which have technical needs. As a result, few YPBs felt they had adequate tools and knowledge to carry out effective evaluation of their work. Their lack of training in evaluation leads to misinterpretations/ misunderstandings. In their minds, measuring for impact requires sophisticated analytical tools and software. Most do not realize that a basic pre/post assessment could be conducted with nothing more than note cards or cell phones.

These are not the only reasons the YPBs identify as to why they rarely track the impact of their activities, however. YPBs are often at odds with local authorities and other powerholders in government. As such, they often, by choice and intention, keep a low profile of their activities and avoid documentation of what they have been discussing and communicating in the trainings for fear of confrontation with local leaders. This is not because peacebuilders are anti-state or insurrectionist. Rather, it is because local authorities are often complicit with the very violence that YPBs are trying to respond to and address in their work. As a result, YPBs engage in levels of self-censorship as a means of not running into direct conflict with the local powers that be.

Some YPBs reported not collecting data because they were not required to, even when partnered with other organizations.

They would rather emphasize other aspects of the work and put energy into things that they consider more important. Still, others noted that they were concerned that reporting their impact accurately—regarding scale—could actually undermine their credibility rather than increase it. They are aware that their work is small-scale, volunteer-dependent, frequently informal, and generally quite localized. While they put a great deal of effort into these activities, they recognize their activities are a small fraction of what is needed. They fear that reporting the actual impact that they manage to deliver given their bootstrap budgets would discredit their hard-won achievements. Instead, they focus on the need for their work rather than trying to promote it based on the scale of their engagements and highly quantified impacts.

This is not to say, however, that there are no impacts generated by these peacebuilders, their volunteers, and their organizations. Many examples of impacts were shared in the research interviews. Based on the stories and narratives communicated by the peacebuilders, this report will discuss impact at three levels: 1) the impact on other youth, 2) the impact of peacebuilding on communities, and 3) the impact on institutions.

Impacts on Youth

The impact of youth-led peacebuilding on other youth is by far the most substantial outcome of these actors' work. Youth are the primary target audience of peacebuilders. YPBs feel they have credibility with other youth and so this is the first audience peace leaders have in mind when creating activities and programs.

YPBs conduct training and education sessions around three key bodies of information and skills building. The first of these focuses is on increasing knowledge around VE and its causes—namely key push and pull factors, as well as other more contextualized factors dependent on location/group. There is also a focus on sensitization and how youth can create activities which address root causes, namely: developing programming which promote tolerance and communal harmony; practicing skills to de-escalate conflict; and learning the requisite skills to create dialogue between parties in conflict. Often a central goal of youth-led peacebuilding trainings is to produce more peacebuilders, so that the people attending the programs take on the role of being peace leaders in the communities where they are based. This may include taking on advocacy roles to place demands on local government officials, addressing extremist activities in the community, or more generally engaging the leaders of local institutions to play a more active and informed role in understanding and preventing VE.

Impact on the Community

Some YPBs take on more ambitious agendas, reach out beyond their own demographic and attempt to impact the community more broadly.

The most common group that YPBs engage with in their communities are religious leaders. Understanding that VE is often ignited through

online narratives rooted in religious mistrust, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding, YPBs seek to train religious leaders to better understand how these narratives are used to incite violence. YPBs also seek to sensitize religious leaders to the unique roles that they can play to interrupt the escalation of religiously motivated violence. For instance, how can religious leaders intervene to change the narratives to be more tolerant and favorable towards the de-escalation of violence.

YPBs, however, often reported mixed results when engaging with local religious leaders. Some were hesitant, fearful of backlash in their communities, or did not want to challenge the prevailing norms of violence for fear that it would bring harm to them and their families. Other YPBs shared experiences where the religious leaders were inconsistent and not always trustworthy in their motivations. They would appear to agree and be in full support of the YPBs when invited to participate, using the language of tolerance and pluralistic engagement during workshops and training. But then they would be seen or heard within a few days back in their religious institutions and communities promoting the same hateful rhetoric which the YPBs asked them to embargo. Another YPB approach is to focus on youth themselves as representatives of their religions rather than looking to religious leaders. Indialogue's Certificate in Dialogue requires young participants to visit various religious sites and temples together as a group, having the youth from the group speak to their experience, beliefs and hopes from their particular faith perspective. While religious leaders are also part of the program, the emphasis is on youth building empathy and friendships with others of differing religious identities as the mechanism for better interfaith harmony and collaboration.

Another prominent force in the communities that YPBs engage with creatively is the media. As in other regions, Social media is seen to be prominent driver of VE by inflaming antagonisms and creating simplistic narratives that pit one group against another. Even mainstream media outlines were often viewed as catering to particular political narratives and agendas such that their information was skewed and inaccurate. Rather than taking on these institutions directly, YPBs emphasize the need to build capacity to respond to hate speech and media misrepresentations. At Bolo Jawan, Pakistan's first student-led citizen news portal, youth act as media watchdogs to point out when misinformation is being promoted by broadcast or social media. The portal has national participation and reach. Similarly, The Daysprings, Pakistan's first youth-centric newspaper, aims to highlight youth achievements and challenges. Published every two weeks in Islamabad, The Daysprings' mission is to support “capacity building of young journalists/writers and change makers who can help change the society by inculcating pluralism, tolerance and optimism.”

Likewise, YPB fight fire with fire by harnessing the power of social media to share their own narratives and ideas that counter those of mistrust and violence.

In Pakistan, the Liyari Literature Festival encourages youth to share recognized literature that advocates an interfaith tolerant worldview. The festival encourages young people to create their own stories and poems that promote peace over violence. In all cases, the literature is shared extensively over social media in order to create a diverse series of messages which actively work to counter the narratives which drive division and create the volatility which can easily erupt into violence. Social media, however, can be a highly problematic environment in which GBV is promoted and encouraged, leading to increasing cybercrimes against women. Youth-led Power to Bloom has been equipping young women with the skills to protect themselves online, to help others, and to call out GBV when witnessed online.

Through experiences and anecdotes shared by peacebuilders during their interviews, YPBs revealed that they believe themselves to have a greater influence in urban communities than in rural areas. This is a result of the cumulative impact of multiple trainings occurring in the same urban areas and reaching the same people repeatedly, resulting in a much higher level of sensitization around VE.

Rural areas, on the other hand, have very limited access to peacebuilding trainings. Furthermore, there is suspicion and stigma regarding peacebuilding activities in rural areas; as most peace builders are urban and come from outside rural communities. Peacebuilding is frequently maligned by its detractors as a tool of foreign interference; indeed, it is oftentimes described and criticized this way by critics within government who want to dismiss and undermine the work of peacebuilders. As such, youth working on peacebuilding in rural areas face a double challenge of trying to overcome this rhetoric as well as trying to create substantial learning and transformation, likely in a one-off engagement versus the multiple engagements possible in urban environments.

Nonetheless, there are exceptions where rural peacebuilding can be successful. In Nagaland, India, a peacebuilder noted success with her work with indigenous communities. As a member of the community herself, she was able to gain good support and trust. She was also able to bring onboard local government authorities to support her programming, which enabled the programs to be scaled to other nearby communities. Later, with support from various government agencies, the program was scaled even more broadly, across India's remote northeast states. This is a strong example of what a powerful partner the government can be, particularly in the rural context where few other peacebuilding programs, organizations, and resources exist. The success of the program is particularly notable given conflict and mistrust that exists in the region between the government and various indigenous groups native to the area.

Impact on Institutions

In looking for impact on institutions, there is very limited data and stories related to such work. Rarely do YPBs look at institutions (religious bodies, local political organizations, labor unions, local government agencies, etc.) as targets for their programming, advocacy work, capacity building and peacebuilding initiatives.

There is, however, one notable exception: universities have been, in many instances across all four countries, energetic partners in peacebuilding work. They are supportive entities who provide resources in terms of rooms, food and workshops materials that enable peacebuilders to conduct well-organized and well-structured trainings in safe environments.

While there is active support in terms of assistance and resources, and even though universities may themselves be sites of VE activities and are highly aware of these issues in the community. University leaders are unlikely to take PVE information from the peacebuilding trainings and promote it widely, out of fear of retaliation from those perpetrating the violence.

There is also a notable disconnect within universities, in that conflict studies programs, which on the surface would be logical partners for peacebuilding work, are consistently resistant to engaging with YPBs in their activities at the grassroots level. These programs tend to focus on international relations, on conflicts between nations, and therefore do not prioritize local conflict. As such, there has been limited success in establishing collaborations with such programs. There are some encouraging exceptions in Pakistan, including the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) at the University of Peshawar, which offers courses focused on peace education and peacebuilding approaches, with strong thematic focuses on indigenous groups, arts, creative writing, and historical analysis through tribal and gender sensitive lenses. Another example is the Department of Politics and International Relations at Islamic International University, Islamabad, which has proposed to initiate a course on peace and conflict studies, taught as an interdisciplinary subject with a focus on humanities, environmentalism, and gender studies.

Of course, as noted in the earlier analysis of program implementation, YPBs have significant institutional relationships with CSOs. Partnerships with national NGOs are key structural component of the YPS sector. The relationship between CSOs and YPBs, however, is generally one-way, similar to knowledge transfer in agricultural extensions programs: knowledge flows from experts in the head office to practitioners in the field (YPBs) who then diffuse/spread that knowledge into the community. There is significant value to this process, but there is currently no mechanism in place for CSOs to intentionally learn from work of YPBs. As a result, it is very rare for YPBs to influence CSOs or add foundational knowledge to the sector. This report and greater ALLY project aims to address this lack of knowledge about the grassroots experience of YPBs. That said, this report does not replace the need for more formal and consistent mechanisms of learning exchange. Learning from field practitioners should flows back to organizations to advance and assist in future program designs, national PVE strategies, etc.

Overall, the lack of institutional impact and influence by YPBs is an issue of concern. The UN's YPS agenda is not concerned with proliferation or growing the number of YPBs.

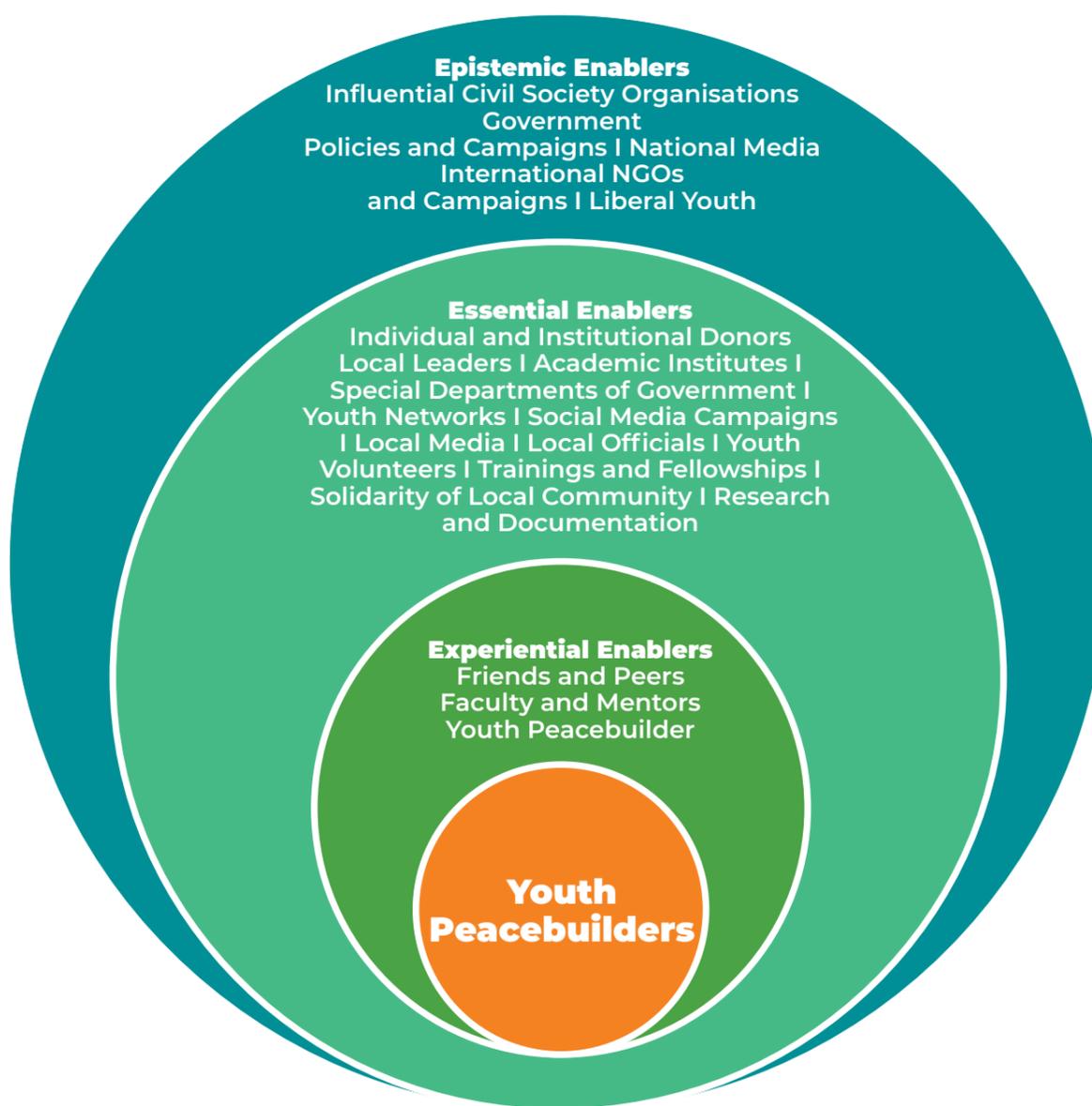
UNSCR 2250 acknowledges that an entire sector of YPBs already exist and have been at work for many years. The goal of the YPS agenda is to increase their voice and augment knowledge—and to leverage that perspective institutionally. The UN anticipates that YPBs will have national level platforms through which they can input and influence civil society and government strategies on peacebuilding and PVE. This does not appear to be

happening in South Asia especially with the change in government in Sri Lanka that has closed government-based platforms for supporting peacebuilding work. Please see Part 4, for recommendations on how INGOS and other funders should work to establish multisectoral spaces when bringing YPBs to the table with institutional actors to collaborate on strategy and policy.

3.8: Enablers of Youth-Led Peacebuilding

As YPBs often lack funds and are overlooked, especially in rural societies and by religious communities with negative sentiments towards other religions, it is vital to understand the enablers of youth-led peacebuilding. The following section will illustrate what are the key enablers of youth-led peacebuilding work and why it is essential to support these enablers for the benefit of sustainable peacebuilding.

The interviews conducted across four countries are evidence that the key enabler for YPBs is constant support from partners. The relationship between the enabling stakeholders and YPBs is represented using the following infographic:



Experiential Enablers

These enablers motivate and support the YPBs, as they influence daily lives by occupying the private circle of the YPBs. Section 3.4 places these enablers, and the motivations of YPB, in perspective. Peacebuilding work can be very challenging, as discussed in the following section on barriers to the process. This is especially true in the South Asian context. People within the close circle of the YPBs, however, provide face-to-face encouragement, emotional support, and guidance/mentorship, which eventually contributes towards making peace initiatives more sustainable and impactful.

➤ Family and Peers (friends) are important for any young person. Support within the home and/or from close friends is essential.

➤ Often, the missing factor for YPBs is professional experience. This gap is filled in by the faculty and mentors. In some cases, YPBs start their peacebuilding work after learning about peace and conflict from university faculty.

Essential Enablers

As we move outward towards the public sphere, this section outlines the second circle of enablers in peacebuilding work. It illustrates the actors that fund the work of YPBs, and foundationally amplify their advocacy work. The contextual analysis discussed in the previous sections ascertains that these enablers are very essential for the success of peace initiatives in South Asia. Most points discussed are again partnership-based but some are tools-based as well.

The following are the essential enablers in this regard:

> Funding from institutional or individual donors is a significant enabler for youth peace initiatives. The level of funding determines the scale of youth-led initiatives.

> Support from local leaders like politicians, religious leaders, various office-bearers, and other influencers, is very crucial. This support helps in mobilizing local resources and community. At times, they are gatekeepers to the target community for peace activities.

> Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have government bodies or departments constituted for the promotion of peacebuilding, communal harmony, youth engagement, information and communication technology (ICT) regulations, cultural development, and the promotion of historical figures. These departments or bodies may be titled differently in different countries, but they are focused similarly. YPBs collaborate with the initiatives undertaken by these various agencies. Thus, these departments emerge as important enablers as they provide multilevel support to YPBs, from funding to permissions, to advocacy and on-the-ground logistical support.

> Academic Institutes and universities play the role of a key catalysts for peace initiatives in the South Asian context. Mostly, institutes are not directly involved in initiatives but provide resources/ingredients for impactful peace initiatives. These ingredients are comprised of the YPBs themselves (they are often students), a youthful audience, experienced faculty, necessary information-based resources, and infrastructure. Some institutes are more proactive and allow YPBs to conduct workshops and seminars for PVE, as well as to establish peace cells/clubs.

> Effective youth-led peace initiatives have spread their word and been successful in getting the most participation. Youth social networks, therefore, become a very prominent enabler. In some cases, these networks eventually convert into highly influential stakeholders/campaigners. Take for example, the youth groups that emerged during the CAA-NRC protests in India.

> For youth-led initiatives in the time of COVID-19, social media and other digital platforms are relevant and effective enablers. They help engage a wider audience, launch successful campaigns, demand and exercise democratic rights, reach out to influencers for advocacy, and organize crowdfunding. Some YPBs also mentioned that these tools help them to make serious issues lighter, more engaging, and more relatable to a larger youth audience.

> Consent and support from local government officials ensures the smooth functioning of peace initiatives. Their cooperation is very important in all countries as permission is needed to organize any major event. Local government officials are often representative of the national administration. These officials include the local police, district administration, village or town heads, and even low-ranking officials.

> Youth volunteers are the fuel for youth initiatives. Their passion, solidarity, and pro bono services help in program implementation tremendously. After engaging in several

initiatives, some of volunteers even become YPBs themselves, creating new programs and expanding the reach of the work.

> Skill-development/capacity building creates a larger impact by increasing effectiveness of the peacebuilder's activities. Fellowships, training programs, and educational programs for youth enhance impactful peacebuilding. These capacity building programs, as reported by YPBs, were available at both national and international levels.

> South Asia has heterogeneous cultures surviving in small spaces, both literally and figuratively. Therefore, if a peace initiative is targeted towards one community, the solidarity and support from the neighboring and other stakeholder communities is a key enabler for significant impact.

> Some YPBs reported that proper research and documentation of their initiatives is very crucial for the future as they undergo extra scrutiny from their partners due to their young age and relatively few years of experience. Documentation and analyses help to improve their initiatives in the future, establish trust among stakeholders, secure funding, and measure the impact of their initiatives.

Epistemic (Systemic) Enablers

The epistemic enablers exemplify the existing peacebuilding work and act as a source of inspiration to the YPBs. The usage of the word episteme here refers to the concept discussed by Michel Foucault, a term that is similar to the concept of a paradigm. These enablers are not directly in contact with the YPBs, but they determine the fate and impact of their initiatives. Section 3.6 explains how these factors can cultivate support for future peace-building initiatives. The following are the systemic enablers for youth-led initiatives:

> Several influential CSOs/NGOs have strong visions towards peacebuilding. Their existence and support for youth-led initiatives are vital enablers. These organizations involve YPBs in their own projects or guide them to lead other projects. As reported by YPBs, these organizations exist at national and international levels.

> In the South Asian context, the government plays an important role in setting the field for peacebuilding. Generally, governments leverage significant control on the peacebuilding initiatives. Therefore, government projects, campaigns, and policies become key enablers for youth-led initiatives. If these are favorable, then youth initiatives can do wonders. Take, for instance, the initiatives in Sri Lanka under the previous administration. The implementation of peace policies or programs requires collaboration and support which are provided best by YPBs.

> The media is also an important enabler. Positive and extensive media coverage makes youth-led initiatives more prominent. It creates a peace-friendly environment, while also giving due recognition to YPBs and volunteers, which can be a motivating factor for involvement.

> International campaigns and funding for peacebuilding

➤ As discussed in Section 3.2, a prominent feature of South Asian democracy is party politics. The political party that forms the government also has significant indirect power. The support of such a political party smooths approvals, evades bureaucracy, and encourages the execution of peacebuilding initiatives. If the ruling party is not in favor of peacebuilding then it can prove to be challenging for YPBs, as demonstrated by Sri Lanka's rapid change in priorities from an old government to a new one.

➤ International campaigns and funding for peacebuilding are important enablers for YPBs. They assist in advocacy for domestic governments and communities. International funding is crucial as there is little support from domestic and government sources. As will be pointed out in the next chapter, YPBs have immense difficulty accessing international funds directly. Instead, international funds percolate through large national CSOs, with money eventually reaching YPBs to carry out project implementation for the CSOs on the ground.

3.9: Barriers to Youth-Led Peacebuilding

YPBs articulated a number of significant barriers that complicate and limit their efforts. These are organized into four categories:



Social Barriers

Lack of Family Support

In South Asian countries, it is common for the parents to create obstacles for their children to become involved in peacebuilding activities. Some parents feel that peacebuilding work will not be helpful in shaping careers. Such parents believe that voluntary activities hamper life goals and career paths of their children. Family members, neighbors and relatives may rebuke the YPBs for not choosing a more stable career path. Secondary educational institutions may also discourage peacebuilding through certain curricula.

Lack of Capacity Development in the Sector

There is a lack of capacity building and training opportunities across the region. As noted in Section 3.3, YPBs in the suburban and rural areas lack exposure to national and international level training. There is a tendency for urban based YPBs to dominate over rural peacebuilders. As outlined in Section 3.5, there is a lack of capacity development at the organizational level for YPBs. As such, YPB struggle with task like record keeping, data collection, program evaluation and impact assessment.

Gender Bias

Gender is a significant but sensitive issue. In rural and remote areas of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the presence of young female peacebuilders is quite low. Families are supportive of their daughters engaging in peacebuilding work when it is in office-based contexts, close to home. However, they are reluctant to allow their unmarried daughters to travel outside of the city on overnight programs/field assignments with their predominantly male colleagues. This can be a limiting factor on the professional development of young female peacebuilders. The female peacebuilders in Pakistan noted having received death threats.

Community Resistance

Indigenous peacebuilders in Bangladesh often get threats from their own community when they try to normalize relations with outsiders or settlers. Older generations in Kashmir try to deter young people from getting involved in peacebuilding activities.

Misinformation

The frequency of false news and rumormongering has increased with the rise of social media in the last decade. Peacebuilders and peacebuilding are often subject to misinformation efforts to discredit their work as unreligious and/or unpatriotic.

Institutional Barriers

Organizational Registration Challenges

Getting registered with the government as an organization is a time-consuming, overly difficult process due to bureaucratic complexities. As most YPBs work on voluntary basis, they also lack the organizational and financial requirements that are mandatory to fulfill the criteria. The youths lack of transparency in government in their interviews. Most felt the ability to get registration was also linked, or certainly aided, by political connections and family status/reputation. Though pursuing funds from more local sources is comparatively easier, the amount is often too low for making projects sustainable on larger scale.

Government Restrictions on International Funding

India (FCRA 2010) and Bangladesh (FDRB 2016) have acts and ordinances to monitor sources and uses of foreign donations that make the use of any type of funding harder for the registered organizations. Pakistan has strict FATF policies and some ordinances under FERA (1947) to curb foreign funding that can be used, ostensibly to prevent funding unrest by outside actors. After the Easter Sunday Attack in 2019, all the foreign funding in Sri Lanka was disbursed to organizations only after getting clearance from the Ministry of Defense. Sri Lanka has the Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organizations to monitor all civil society activities including finance and programming. They have introduced a reporting system for all NGOs in Sri Lanka to send information quarterly on funding and program progress. This strict scrutiny of foreign funding notwithstanding, most YPB programs are rarely able to solicit or compete for international support as they are unable to successfully complete the registration process.

Lack of Government Capacity/Knowledge/Support at the Local Level

The local administration and law enforcement agencies are often apathetic towards peacebuilders as agencies often lack knowledge and training regarding the purpose, goals, and impacts of peacebuilding activities. More broadly, there remains a lack of support by the governments in South Asia to encourage peacebuilders. YPBs note the lack of innovative ideas from governments to prevent VE. There is no effective platform to hold regular dialogues between youth and policymakers. While Sri Lanka would have once been a strong counterexample of strong government engagement of youth peacebuilding, the supportive government mechanisms once in place in Sri Lanka have been deactivated by the new government. Because of this change in posture, there little to no practical implementation of the promises made to YPBs by the previous administration.

Politization/Criminalization of Peacebuilding

There is a growing tendency of religious nationalism in South Asia. YPBs believe that narrowing public views of who can be a citizen—further enforced by new amendments to citizenship laws—will hamper social and communal harmony. Peacebuilders feel that various laws meant to control terrorism are being applied unjustly against activists and peacebuilders who criticize the government. As mentioned earlier, Pakistan has blasphemy acts that are used to restrain activities of YPBs. YPBs of Bangladesh showed concerns about implications of Digital Security Act (2016) which makes their communications vulnerable to constant monitoring. The peacebuilders in Sri Lanka expressed similar concerns about the use of ICCPR Act (2007) to counter VE, a relic from the civil war period that is now used to imprison activists without due cause or process (Please see additional discussion on legal barriers and threat to peacebuilding in Section 3.1).

Economic Barriers

Insufficient/Inequitable Sectoral Funding

The most common problem for all the youth-led peacebuilding initiatives is insufficient funding. There is a lack of options for local sources of funding. Foreign funding is very difficult to obtain due to various country-specific rules and regulations. The money that is available within the sector is highly concentrated, in two ways. First, the majority of peacebuilding funding comes to and often stays in urban areas. Second, most of that funding flows to pioneering, first-generation peacebuilders in their thirties and forties, who direct well established organizations that dominate the sector in terms of compressing funding in a few hands. These factors reduce available opportunities for younger urban YPBs, and doubly so for those in rural areas.

Weakness of International Capacity Building Programs

Even from foreign entities that support the YPS agenda, there is an absence of clear policies that encourage sustainable youth-led peacebuilding initiatives. These foreign donors usually run projects that last about six months to a year, with no follow-up or long-term vision to

make the projects long-lasting. Without further mentoring, youths get flustered. Without opportunities for ongoing financial support, these initiatives do not sustain in the long run.

Absence of Peacebuilding Career Path

Most urban YPB come from middle-class families. They are under much pressure from their families to establish careers, earn a livable income, and contribute to the family's needs. Because of the current state of affairs with regards to funding, most YPBs function on a voluntary basis. While demonstrating commitment to the cause of peace is admirable, the long-term implication is that youth often get derailed from serving society as their economic needs become more pressing as they grow older. As a strategy to remain active in their peace work, many urban YPBs take up part-time employment as a means of creating income to keep themselves going, though it reduces their time and energy for peace activities considerably.

Cultural Barriers

Lack of Locally-Adapted/Culturally-Sensitive PB Materials

YPBs are often labeled as purveyors of western ideologies. Lack of proper materials for the local context, language, and religious perspectives are a major obstacle to the uptake of peacebuilding concepts. This scenario is common across peri-urban and rural areas of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In these places, it is not uncommon for people to treat YPBs as foreign agents working with nefarious intent. Because the toolkits/training materials are not available in local languages of any of the South Asian countries, YPBs face difficulties improvising accurate interpretations and translations of complex ideas and terminology.

Partisan Conflict

YPBs often try to maintain good relations with the political parties in power to increase access to funding and permissions, etc. This is often negatively viewed by the general public, as YPBs are considered biased if they try to cultivate relationships with the ruling government. Maintaining neutrality while also remaining in the good graces of the prevailing powers to carry out the work can be a tricky balancing act that sometimes offends all sides.

Patriarchal Gender Norms

Prevailing patriarchal social norms across the whole of South Asia creates a significant hindrance for female peacebuilders. While some opportunities for women YPBs are on the rise in urban areas, the conditions for female peace leaders are not promising in rural areas across South Asia. When working in rural areas, female team members endure accusations regarding their character and morality while working with male team members. Notable exceptions are women peacebuilders from rural areas

working within their own communities/cultures. As noted in Section 3.3, however, even urban peacebuilding organizations required further work and growth in terms of effectively engaging young female peacebuilders, who are often sidelined to focus only on women's issues, which are often a sidebar to larger VE efforts.

Heteronormative Bias

Peacebuilders belonging to the LGBTQI community face added problems as many conservative South Asian communities/regions are not receptive to any gender, sexual orientation, and lifestyle, that is not heteronormative.

Distrust Outside of One's Own Ethnic/Religious Identity

Peacebuilders who do not match the ethic and religious identity of a community face challenges of trust and acceptance. Simmering tensions between majority and minority groups are difficult for the general population to cast aside without long-term relationship building.

Safety and Security Barriers

Threats and Personal Insecurity

Peacebuilders remain under constant threat from their own communities and beyond. In rural and remote areas of Pakistan, peacebuilders continuously receive death threats. A few have lost their lives while raising their voices against discrimination. In the conflicted Kashmir region, peacebuilders are afraid to talk about this key issue due to political conditions and state surveillance. Through interviews, Kashmiri YPB report the personal security aspects of regional peacebuilding efforts have not received enough consideration and action. These safety and surveillance concerns led to a noticeable number of YPB declining to be interviewed for this research project.



PART 4: RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

After six months of rigorous participatory training, data collection—including more than ninety one-hour interviews and ninety online surveys—and collective analysis; the research team, comprised of eight experienced YPBs, have compiled the following recommendations based on interview data and analysis. Recommendations were made for each of the four major players in the South Asian peacebuilding sector: 1) YPBs, 2) CSOs, NGOs, and INGOs, 3) governments/policy level, and 4) educational institutions. Detailed recommendations follow categorically.

4.1

Recommendations for Youth Peacebuilders

Network and Collaborate Responsibly

PVE requires collaboration with various stakeholders and staying united against VE. YPBs can unknowingly isolate themselves. YPBs need to take initiative to create more networking opportunities. They should aim to collaborate actively with multiple local, rural, international, regional organizations, networks, peer groups, local politicians, religious leaders, and journalists to equip themselves with technical and conceptual knowledge on peacebuilding and PVE. In the absence of funding to support such engagements, YPBs should actively and intentionally create such spaces for learning and collaboration themselves.

Enhance Contextual Understanding

YPBs should amass knowledge about demographics, history, climate, economic conditions, social issues, conflicts, and their drivers, etc., as well as understand the political structure, religious perspectives, local language, local rules, and laws in the community they are collaborating with. Respectful engagement requires advanced research to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications that may hinder the ineffective implementation of PVE activities

Working in Underserved Areas and Marginalized Communities

There are many areas in South Asia that would benefit from PVE projects, but the youth peacebuilding sector is not well organized to serve rural and suburban areas. YPBs need to take initiative to expand operations to reach such areas, as well as seek out and support rural peacebuilders who are already doing this difficult work with little peer or network support. This is also true for reaching out to other hard to reach populations, including individuals with disabilities.

4.1

Recommendations for Youth Peacebuilders**Adopt a Diversity-Focused Approach**

Communities are sensitive to the language and approach that peacebuilders use. Context is key. Rural attitudes are different than urban perspectives. Majority ethnic and religious communities view issues differently than minority communities. Groups will likely have stereotypes about youth peacebuilding and PVE. It is important to be adaptive and responsive to the community's needs and context. As a YPB, one may not agree with a local perspective, but it is critical to engage from a place of informed understanding and move towards broadening the conversation and perspective: initiating intra-faith and interfaith dialogues, meetings between conflicting groups/communities, people from different cultures, castes, and classes, etc.

Make Initiatives Engaging

YPBs should utilize a diversity of methodological approaches, including art, literature, social media, sports, and entertainment tools to make their initiatives more engaging for youth and other stakeholders. Initiatives should build understanding and relationships. They should be substantive and thought-provoking but also fun and interactive. If people can interact together in a facilitated activity, it may inspire them to interact together outside in their daily lives.

Create Sustainable Projects

Most of the PVE projects in South Asia are not designed for the long term: they are neither economically nor socially sustainable. PVE is a very challenging task. It requires a significant investment in time and relationship-building to yield concrete results. It is commendable how YPBs launch projects for PVE using whatever resources they can muster and deploy. However, thinking about the sustainability of projects is equally important. Quality is better than quantity. Sustained engagement with a local group of stakeholders over time is more valuable than traveling far and wide for one-off engagements. COVID-19 has opened doors for greater acceptance of virtual engagements, thus, YPBs can do more virtually with no extra cost.

Support Female Peacebuilders

Women are an essential demographic in youth-led peacebuilding. They must be co-equal members of the movement. This report demonstrates how effective and valuable female YPB are, but also recognizes the unique social and cultural barriers that young women face as peacebuilders. Young women should be given the space to lead and participate within these activities. To address the lack of family support from being seen as not capable or morally worthy of addressing peace and conflict issues, sensitized approaches for their active engagement will need to be taken into consideration when working with their families and communities. Their active engagement should also address all issues of CVE and not just the gendered lens of these issues. Young men must also be educated on these issues directly.

Volunteering as an opportunity for better intercultural understanding:

While peacebuilding is considered as an appealing career path for YPBs in the global North, participating in voluntary initiatives continues to be the cornerstone of peacebuilding work in South Asia. As mentioned before, most YPBs come from urban settings and middle-class backgrounds. More initiatives in the rural societies, and co-operation between urban and rural youth would provide young people more equal opportunities and promote healthy intercultural and interreligious relations between social divisions.

4.2

Recommendations for CSOs, NGOs and INGOs**Fellowships and Training programs for YPBs**

CSOs should organize more fellowships and trainings on PVE with youth from the South Asian region. Trainings should focus on key peacebuilding and PVE tools such as communication, negotiation, mediations, public speaking, leadership, and team-building skills, as well as more concrete skills for countering VE narratives and discourses. Fellowships should offer capacity building for facilitation and peer-to-peer learning so that YPBs can be effective in how they support learning and critical thinking in the field with communities and other youth.

4.2

Recommendations for
CSOs, NGOs and INGOs**Formalize and
Grow YPB
Networks**

Regional CSOs should support efforts to strengthen and expand existing grassroots YPB networks. Established CSOs in the sector can help with mass communications to reach peacebuilders who are otherwise unconnected to dense urban networks of YPBs. CSOs should provide access to digital tools and platforms so that data on YPBs can be easily stored, sorted, and used for targeted communication of information about trainings, opportunities, and best practices in peacebuilding and PVE.

**YPBs as Members
of Multi-Sectoral
Collaborations**

As noted in Section 3.7, YPBs have limited influence on institutions—government, CSOs, police, religious bodies, universities, etc. At best, YPBs are viewed by government and CSOs as mechanisms for sharing/disseminating information. Instead, they should be viewed as contributing partners with ideas, knowledge, and expertise of their own which should contribute to PVE strategies and inform policy formation. INGOs—the most catalytic actors in the sector—should create platforms that bring multi-sectoral actors together to collaborate on innovative thinking, program design and collaborative implementation.

**Facilitating
Funding for
Youth-Led
PVE Initiatives**

As discussed in Section 3.9, funding is a major challenge for youth-led PVE initiatives. Well-established INGOs and CSOs can help YPBs and small peacebuilding organizations to have a deeper impact with their PVE initiatives. Depending upon the project, the partner NGO can support by giving direct and flexible small grants and/or connecting YPBs to relevant funders. Providing direct support to YPBs, however, is a short-term solution. Long term, INGOs and CSOs should organize trainings to teach YPBs institutional fundraising skills, so that organizations large and small can play active roles in bringing funding into the sector.

**Promote Youth
Sensitization
on PVE**

CSOs should expand opportunities to engage young people in PVE sensitization, engaging YPBs as grassroots implementers. Outside of large urban cities, little PVE work has been carried out. Leveraging the regional network of YPBs, CSOs could organize far reaching rural campaigns targeting vulnerable youth. CSOs could deploy youth-only teams to manage these campaigns.

**Institutional
Peacebuilding/
PVE Network for
South Asia**

South Asia does not have a regional network for PVE. Unity between organizations, supporting each other as a network, is crucial. Currently YPBs see more competition than cooperation between big peacebuilding organizations in the region. A CSO network for peacebuilding should be established with regional- and national-level bodies.

**Support
Community
Leaders**

Engagement of local community leaders is often missing in YPS and the overall PVE effort in South Asia. Misinformation through social media has tainted the public's views on peacebuilding and the vocabulary/concepts of PVE. This is especially true in suburban and rural areas where the prevalence of peacebuilding and PVE activities is exceptionally low. This cultivated resistance makes the work of YPBs particularly challenging. CSOs should work via existing networks and projects to sensitize local community leaders to PVE and YPS concepts. YPBs should be recognized as a critical part of the strategy to help communities address the challenges around VE narratives and discourses. Linking their work to indigenous mechanism for conflict resolution in these communities is critical.

**Support
Women
Peacebuilders**

Young women make up a large part of the YPB demographic. This report has noted multiple examples of successful programs created and led by female YPBs. This report has also noted, however, the inequitable treatment of female peacebuilders, particularly by CSOs. Women are pigeonholed into only focusing on gender related issue, such as GBV, sidelined from wider discussions on PVE and peacebuilding. Female YPBs can contribute across the whole of the field, in addition to their focus on gender-specific issues. Civil society can also help in building the specific capacity barriers of young women, including that there may be different levels of education than young men. With young women facing additional barriers because of their gender, direct and flexible funds should be targeted for them specifically to close the gender gap among youth participation and leadership. Young women should be connected with mentors to facilitate their institutional learning. Young women also face higher rates of gender-based violence, including online violence. Their unique security concerns should be addressed through additional safety and security trainings.

4.2

Recommendations for CSOs, NGOs and INGOs**Support Rural Peacebuilders**

As this report documents, YPBs are primarily urban. Moreover, most peacebuilding and PVE trainings occur in large cities. INGOs and CSOs need to engage proactively to support known rural peacebuilders and the development of new peacebuilders in non-urban areas. Urban YPBs can be leveraged to support peer-to-peer trainings for new rural peacebuilders. CSOs need to support these efforts with language appropriate materials to help communicate key ideas in local languages and develop fellowships and other formal recognitions that help build legitimacy and acceptance for the work of YPBs where peacebuilding and PVE is little known or accepted.

4.3

Policy Level Recommendations**Establish Government Bodies for PVE and Collaboration with Youth**

All the countries in South Asia need to create a regional coordinating body for PVE. This body should include significant YPB representation. This body needs to have grassroots reach by having district-level representation. The body should launch coordinated, funded projects for PVE, as there is currently a shortage of such activities at the regional level. The body should organize awareness campaigns on VE narratives and discourses for the general public. Rural and suburban areas, where distrust of peacebuilding and PVE programs has arisen because of misinformation, should be considered target communities for engagement. This body should also ensure that peacebuilding and PVE programs are being conducted in a systematic way in rural and other underserved areas. The proposed regional coordinating body should collect data, conduct ongoing research at the regional level, and generate policy proposals for the member states.

Lead Transformation Through Transnational Justice and Reconciliation Processes

Past conflicts between South Asian countries fuel grievances that drive VE, particularly in this current moment of heightened religious nationalism across the region. While grassroots PVE work is essential, the nation states themselves should take formal actions to address past grievances and embody reconciliation at the national level. South Africa, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka all offer models for reconciliation processes between parties/ groups within countries that have engaged in violence against one another. South Asia could be pathbreaking in also engaging in transnational dialogue about conflicts at the state level, to adopt statements of acknowledgement and reconciliation which aim to move the region beyond historical divisions and potentially diminish public animosities that fuel VE.

Flexible Policies and Regulations for PVE

Bureaucratic barriers can overwhelm YPBs, who may spend months and even years attempting to register their small organization. As noted throughout this report, without formal registration, YPBs have no ability to solicit funds and grants to support their work. This results in a lack of sustainability in the sector and lower impact in target communities. To support the fulfilment of the YPS agenda, differentiated policies should be established that make registration less complex and costly for youth-led organizations with small budgets. Alternatively, funds for YPS could be routed through a central registered body and channeled to YPBs for particular projects.

Establish Peacebuilding Network

Governments in each of the four countries should establish a regional membership network consisting of both individual YPBs and peacebuilding organizations for the purpose of networking, sharing ideas, and finding mutual grounds for collaborating. Regular updates on PVE issues and research from across the region could be made possible through such a network. This network could also be closely linked to the government coordinating bodies described in the first recommendation of this section.

YPB Policy Platform

Governments should provide recognized platforms and interfaces to connect the voices of YPBs to national, regional, and global policymakers. This is essential infrastructure for achievement of the UN's YPS agenda.

Digital Literacy Campaigns

Governments should work with YPBs and peacebuilding CSOs to conduct digital literacy campaigns for the general public and to promote a narrative of collective peacebuilding. Narratives and discourses which encourage VE are rife on social media platforms. A large-scale, regionally- and nationally-coordinated effort is needed to stem the proliferation of misinformation and violence-inciting narratives.

4.3 Policy Level Recommendations

YPB Fellowships

Youth ministries should provide more fellowship opportunities for peacebuilders under thirty years of age. Given the scale of populations and rising levels of VE in the region, the current number of programs is inadequate to support meaningful change in society. Fellowships should target rural and remote locations where peacebuilding efforts have been limited or absent, in particular.

YPB Exchanges

Youth ministries should create YPS-focused exchange programs for youth of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. Engaging YPBs to carry capacity building training with these participants would not only expand the cohort of YPBs in the region, but also create regional YPS networks and build relationships.

4.4 Recommendations for Educational Institutes and Other Stakeholders

Introducing Universal Peace Curriculum

As noted in this study, there is content in the curricula of government and religious schools that encourages VE, furthers intolerance, promotes stereotypes, and fuels antagonism between groups. Serious steps need to be taken to review and revise the curricula of various educational entities. YPBs should advise in the creation of age-specific peace curricula that showcase examples of non-violence, peaceful change, and reconciliation between parties formerly in conflict, highlighting South Asian examples.

Establishing Peace Clubs and Centers at Educational Institutions

As discussed in previous sections, schools and universities are the primary access points for YPB to engage youth and the wider community. YBP can coordinate with these sites through informal and ad hoc agreements, usually on a per event basis. The establishment of Peace Centers at education sites would set up an expectation of ongoing peacebuilding and PVE related programming which could translate into more consistent and sustained coordination between these educational institutions and local YPBs and CSOs.

Teachers Development Program for PVE

PVE and peacebuilding are relatively new concepts for academics in South Asia. With curricula development and the establishment of Peace Clubs, teachers and professors at educational institutions will require capacity development and faculty training programs for peacebuilding and PVE. Engaging teachers and faculty in the peacebuilding/PVE effort will result in better linkages between local education sites and local YPBs. Efforts should be made to contextualize these concepts and link them to traditional peacemaking and conflict resolutions mechanisms within South Asian culture and history.

Providing a Safe Neutral Environment

In the current climate of rising intolerance and religious nationalism, educational campuses are becoming sites of VE, with noted incidents of faculty and campus leaders taking politically- and/or religiously-oriented positions which are neither neutral nor inclusive. The role of educational institutions should be to provide a safe environment for the growth and development of students. Investigations should have leaders removed if evidence is found that such instances of intolerance and bias are supported or encouraged by staff and faculty at institutions.

Research Conferences and Publications for PVE

South Asian universities and think tanks produce less research on PVE than those in East and North Africa. Educational institutes have a responsibility to conduct more research, conferences, and publications in such a crucial area. The establishment of Peace Centers at universities could help drive interest in the area among faculty. Departments working in International Relations and Conflict Studies should be encouraged to direct their research efforts towards grassroots analyses of VE narratives/actions and PVE activities within their own immediate vicinities/communities, countries, and regions.

4.5: Ways Forward for Youth, Peace and Security in South Asia

This report extensively documents the state of youth-led peacebuilding in South Asia as it stands at the date of publication. This study is a snapshot of a complex environment in which history, culture, religion, politics, and media intertwine to create a context in which VE is expanding quickly. The need for peacebuilders in the region is immense and ever-growing. This analysis of youth-led peacebuilding has documented successes and highlighted the selfless commitment of young changemakers. YPBs, however, are in an uphill struggle—against extremism, against misinformation, against negative public perception, even against their own governments. There is immense potential for YPBs to actively reduce tensions and conflicts at the community level and prevent radicalization that leads to VE. But this potential will only be fulfilled if governments, local CSOs, national NGOs, INGOs, the media and other actors come together to work collaboratively with YPBs. In addition, the youth peacebuilding sector must grow in size, expand its skill set, improve data collection, and build strong partnerships with other sectors.

Key ways forward for maximizing the impact of youth-led peacebuilding in South Asia include:

- ⦿ Grow the number of YPBs across the region through trainings, fellowships, and regional collaborations, with an express goal of reaching youth in rural areas and other underserved areas where peacebuilders have been few.
- ⦿ Establish better funding mechanisms that provide YPBs with the resources they need to operate on a long-term basis and ensure such funding reaches beyond the urban areas. As peacebuilding is often voluntary-based, let alone time and resource consuming, YPBs should be provided with more career opportunities in peacebuilding from global funders that initiate and amplify projects in South Asia in order to have sustainable solutions
- ⦿ Build partnerships with schools and education centers, of all kinds and from all faith traditions, so that YPBs can systemically engage with school-age youth to share their peacebuilding knowledge and PVE tools.
- ⦿ Establish regional and national peacebuilding bodies that work directly with YPBs to build policies, programs and coordinate campaigns. A clear and direct interface is needed where government and YPBs can coordinate and support each other in the mutual goal of preventing VE.
- ⦿ Emphasize and reframe youth-led peacebuilding as a local/indigenous process; building linkages locally with traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, processes, and actors so that peacebuilding is not perceived as a foreign agenda but as a local effort, owned by the community, for the purposes of managing conflict, and building more cohesive communities across differences.
- ⦿ Engage local community leaders—political, religious, academic, civil society, business—that can see the value of peacebuilding for the wellbeing of the community, so that local leaders can act as the local advocates and champions of youth-led peacebuilding.
- ⦿ Engage media companies—broadcast, radio, print, social—at the highest levels to be part of regional- and national-level campaigns aimed at refuting and responding to VE narratives and misinformation that turn groups and communities against one another.

Peace cannot be built on exclusivism, absolutism, and intolerance. But neither can it be built on vague liberal slogans and pious programs gestated in the smoke of confabulation.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

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