A large circular graphic with an orange gradient background. Inside the circle is a photograph of a cityscape with a prominent hilltop fortification. To the right of the circle is a yellow silhouette map of South Asia. In the bottom-left corner of the circle, there are three concentric dotted circles in teal and white. To the right of the main title, there is a small icon of a stylized wave or sound wave.

The Status of Youth-Led PVE Efforts in South Asia

REGIONAL LEVEL POLICY BRIEF

**AMPLIFYING THE LEADERSHIP OF LOCAL YOUTH (ALLY)
IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTH ASIA**



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Acknowledgements

This policy brief illustrates the results of the research phase in the Amplifying Leadership of Local Youth (ALLY) project: www.unoy.org/project/ally. The 30-month ALLY project 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, Centre for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Youth Development Foundation, and Sri Lanka Unites. The policy brief has been prepared by the ALLY Young Researchers, together with the Lead Researcher Felix Bivens, and led by Program Coordinator Mridul Upadhyay.

Intended Audience and Overview

The policy brief is intended for policymakers at the national level in the Governments of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. It may also be of interest to local elected officials, police, and other security personnel engaged in preventing violent extremism (PVE) activities.

This brief explores the underlying reasons for violent extremism (VE) in the four South Asian countries outlined above and recommends practices and policies to better prevent the phenomenon. The study, which resulted in this brief's policy recommendations, aims to amplify the voices of young peacebuilders by advancing their views in the policy recommendations. Their experiences provide valuable data, which will help policymakers, NGOs, INGOs and other stakeholders better understand the Sri Lankan VE context and hopefully implement the suggested policy changes accordingly.

South Asia has a long history of ethnic and religious diversity, but has also experienced conflict and tension along these lines. This policy brief introduces lessons learned and best practices in order to achieve sustainable peace. For instance, the policy brief reviews key enabling factors for youth-led peacebuilding, barriers, and analysis of push, pull factor which lead youth to VE. Additionally, as NGOs and other private stakeholders have carried the main responsibility of PVE in the region, this policy brief will illustrate the benefits of institutionalizing the field and creating cohesive national PVE action plans.



This brief provides a concise review of findings and policy recommendations related to strengthening the youth peacebuilding sector in South Asia, as a mechanism for enhancing and broadening PVE activities throughout the country. Specifically, this document provides summaries of:

- Key Terms
- The ALLY research approach
- Summaries of Country Level Findings and Cross Cutting Regional Themes
- Analysis of push, pull and other factors which lead youth to VE
- Overview of the youth peacebuilding sector in South Asia
- Analysis of motivations of Youth Peacebuilders (YPBs)
- Summary of enabling factors which promote youth-led peacebuilding
- Summary of barriers which inhibit and limit youth-led peacebuilding

Together, these factors provide a comprehensive picture of the peacebuilding work in South Asia, and what can be done to improve and support this work. This brief concludes with recommendations that were informed by the discoveries presented here.

Key Terms: Violent Extremism, Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism, and Peacebuilding

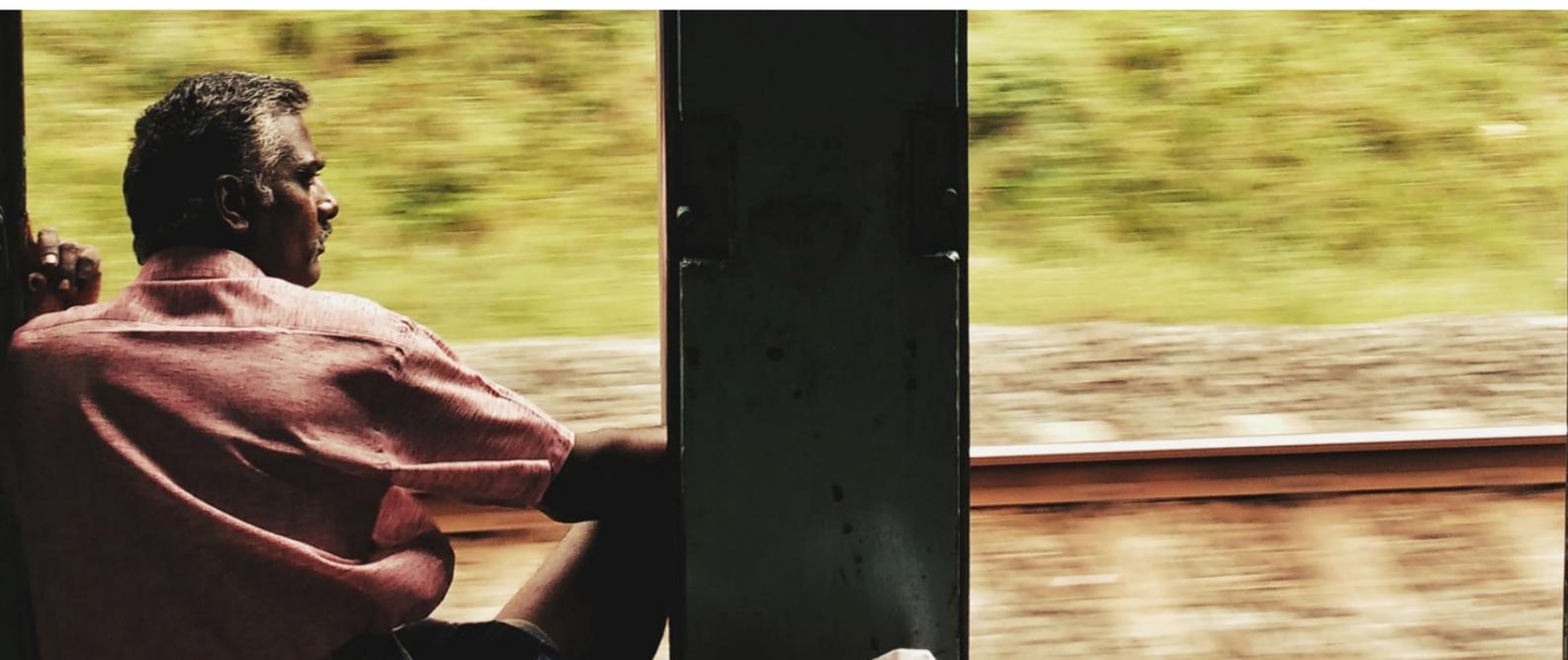
To contextualize VE in South Asia, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of how these concepts are understood and defined on the global stage. By and large, VE and related concepts are Western in origin and perspective, originating in the United States (US) and Europe (Ilyas 2021).

While the core premises of these ideas have existed for decades, the 9/11/2001 attacks on the United States 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 of "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 9/11/2001, there were rapid response actions globally that relied centrally on police, military, and other covert security agencies. 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 a 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).

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. Youth Peacebuilders (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.



The Research Approach

The findings and recommendations contained in this brief were produced through the ALLY project, which seeks to amplify youth voices and actions dedicated to PVE in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The project aims to increase the knowledge of the push and pull factors, enhance the multidimensional capacity and strategies of youth leaders, as well as strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships to prevent VE in South Asia.

The aim of this study include:

- Highlight the experiences and perspective of YPBs in South Asia.
- Document the factors behind youth engagement with regional violent extremist discourses.
- Examine youth-led innovative approaches to PVE in South Asia.
- Analyze impacts of youth-led initiatives and constructive narratives on individuals, communities, and institutions across South Asia.
- Contribute to an increasingly evidence-based approach to policies and programs related to PVE by deepening the existing knowledge-base of youth-led peacebuilding.

This research was conducted using an alternative methodological approach known as participatory action research (PAR). PAR focuses on collaborative, bottom-up knowledge production with community members and other stakeholders who possess the daily, lived experience of the issues at hand. The PAR approach necessitated that experienced YPBs comprise the core of the research team. Eight YPBs were chosen to form the core research team, with two researchers from each country in the study. The researchers completed eight weeks of research training in participatory research methods. During this time, each team collected publications, newspapers articles, video clips, and other media documenting VE and PVE activities in their respective countries. The team of researchers also reviewed several policies, reports, articles, and research papers to develop a holistic understanding of the Youth Peace and Security Sector (YPS) sector. The YPS discourse originated with the UN's Security Council Resolution 2250 (UN 2015). UNSCR2250 calls on governments to recognize the role of youth in peacebuilding and PVE activities and to actively support and enhance the opportunities for youth to engage in these activities.

The ALLY project research team collected data for YPBs across South Asia to better understand the current state of the YPS sector and to produce recommendations for strengthening the sector so that YPBs can contribute more extensively and effectively to PVE activities and to community level peacebuilding as well. The youth researchers surveyed and interviewed 69 YPBs—26 women and 39 men (women are notably under-represented in the sector) and four YPBs who identified as gender-fluid/non-binary—to develop an in-depth understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and limitations faced by YPBs across South Asia. The research specifically targeted early career peacebuilders, those under thirty years of age with work articulated as peacebuilding and PVE.

Additionally, another 20 non-youth stakeholders were also interviewed, all of whom are actively engaged with the youth peacebuilding sector in their respective countries. Such stakeholders include religious leaders, government officials, parents, journalists, civil society leaders, police officers, and senior peacebuilders, among others.

Summary of Key Findings

Bangladesh: In recent decades, politically and religiously motivated violence has become an increasingly regular phenomenon in Bangladesh. Election-related violence, restrictions on freedom of speech, and militant student wings of political parties have become regular features in the country. Historically, religiously motivated VE has been strongly countered by the government, such as the widespread, indiscriminate bombings in early 2000. However, violence resurfaced in 2012, incited by false news and social media posts against religious minority communities. Between 2013 and 2016, 30 social and cultural activists that were speaking out against conservative religious views were murdered by Islamist extremists. (Graham-Harrison and Hammadi 2016). Even so, VE remained largely a concern of the state and police. Government peacebuilding efforts rarely sought involvement of civil society and communities, let alone youth. It was not until the July 2016 terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery killed twenty-two people in Dhaka that VE began to be recognized as a national and societal issue (Roy 2017). The government once again instigated strict countermeasures and law-enforcement efforts. Several civil society initiatives and spaces for YPBs to support national efforts were also created. While the YPBs interviewed acknowledged that the government welcomed YPB efforts, several reported the absence of accessible resources and lack of networking platforms and tools for peacebuilders to connect and support each other's efforts. Interviewed YPBs were concerned about social media contributing to violence and spoke of the utmost importance of involving religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts. Most peacebuilders agreed that efforts should be made to support female YPBs and make the peacebuilding space more inclusive and gender-informed.

India: Though India was born as a secular nation, Hindu nationalism has always been an underlying issue in the country. There is a well-documented history of violent conflicts and riots between different religious groups. The current political environment has exacerbated such divides. The 2019 amendment of the Citizenship Act, for example, is widely seen as disadvantaging Muslims (BBC 2019). Such political actions have inflamed social divisions, increasing acts of intolerance, hatred, and extremism in India (Human Rights Watch 2020). YPBs and the non-youth stakeholders participating in the interviews recognized VE as a growing problem for the country as a whole, with a high risk of increased radicalization within communities. Inter-communal conflict, hate speech against minority communities, false news and inflammatory social media posts and actions have triggered online hatred and offline violence. Peacebuilders have noted the political shift towards supporting religious nationalism. Political leaders often leverage religious sentiment, glorifying one religion over others, to consolidate their own political and religious base, leading to polarization and Islamophobia. Geopolitical disputes within the country and with neighboring countries further religiously-rooted animosities. Despite growing concern of religion-based political extremism, radicalization, and violence, YPBs feel preventive measures and support for peacebuilding efforts are necessary but currently minimal.

Pakistan: Pakistan has faced decades of social unrest and instability from VE. The country has been at the forefront of the West's "War on Terror." Prolonged socio-economic inequality and the use of religion to bolster political interests have resulted in widespread intolerance of those within the country who are not Muslim and even sectarian violence towards particular Islamic minorities. YPBs and non-youth stakeholders interviewed for this research noted the constant threat of VE. State-driven counter-terrorism measures have been enacted at both national and community levels to address the problem. While these initiatives focus on youth as the most vulnerable group to radicalization, youth are not engaged in the design or implementation of these programs and processes. YPBs and non-youth stakeholders have observed the urban-rural divide in terms of accessibility of education and awareness of social issues, including peacebuilding. Religious educational institutions are often sites for radicalization (Sayeed 2019). As such, YPBs recommend reforming and mainstreaming these institutions as a means of PVE. Despite many challenges and disconnects, YPBs in Pakistan are hopeful about their efforts and impacts. While they acknowledge a lack of support from within their local communities, larger efforts from state and civil-society actors have allowed them to pursue relevant knowledge and skills to begin impacting their society and addressing the root causes of VE.

Sri Lanka: For twenty-six years, Sri Lanka suffered from civil war, resulting in extensive human rights violations and societal trauma. Though the armed conflict ended in 2009, post-conflict grievances have facilitated radicalization and VE in the country (Human Rights Watch 2021). In 2015, the United Nations passed a resolution to push the country toward post-conflict reconciliation. This prompted a series of national peacebuilding efforts including the establishment of government bodies to investigate war crimes and pursue reconciliation at a national level. These efforts, however, were halted in 2019 after national elections led to a shift in governance (International Crisis Group 2020). Despite no visible ethnic conflict since the end of the civil war, communal tensions leading to outbreaks of violence have been on the rise between Muslims and non-Muslims.



The YPBs interviewed for this research perceive VE as one of the biggest threats to the future of Sri Lanka. In April 2019, Muslim suicide bombers attacked churches and foreign tourists destinations killing over two-hundred-fifty people in what would be known as the Easter Sunday attacks. This tragedy has since heightened anti-Muslim sentiment and mob violence exacerbating interfaith tensions. YPBs and non-youth stakeholders recognize the importance of national-level and government-backed PVE initiatives in terms of scale, credibility, and access to resources and support. Those interviewed called on the Sri Lankan government to relaunch peacebuilding programs and reopen reconciliation-focused bodies and processes which have been paused by the new administration.

Cross Cutting Regional Themes: All YPBs interviewed, irrespective of nationality, expressed concerns about VE at local and/or national levels. YPBs believe VE poses a threat to peace and stability in South Asia. Political conflict, religiously-motivated violence, inter-communal conflict and hate speech against minority communities, especially through social media, have contributed to the radicalization of youth in the region.

Despite youth being targets for radicalization across the region, many South Asian youth instead engage with peacebuilding processes and initiatives. This involvement of youth is an important shift. Not long ago, peacebuilding was exclusively undertaken by the government and a small number of large INGOs. Now, as more and more young people join the sector, peacebuilding has become more localized and contextualized. Even so, peacebuilding information and ideas remain quite broad, methods and narratives must be tailored to the local languages and contexts in which YPBs work.

Effective involvement of YPBs is found to depend on a few factors across all four countries.



There are significant disparities in accessibility of resources and access to information between urban and rural areas. This is significant as sixty-five percent of population in South Asian countries live in rural areas (World Bank 2020). Rural youth are mostly uninvolved, unengaged, and unaware of youth PVE work. Peacebuilding activities remain mostly urban-centered, as funding and networking opportunities are concentrated in cities, providing little opportunity for training or professional networking for rural YPBs.

In terms of gender distribution within the youth peacebuilding sector, the rate of engagement of female YPBs is low compared to their male counterparts. The patriarchal culture in the region has made it difficult for female peacebuilders, especially when working in remote areas. YPBs reported an absence of gender analyses in existing peacebuilding initiatives and research, which has led to a common misunderstanding that VE does not affect women as much as men.

As previously mentioned, VE in the region largely originates out of interfaith tensions and communal conflict. Therefore, any peacebuilding initiative on inter-religious and inter-communal harmony is often faced with obstacles from within communities, as these dynamics in communities are often deep-seated and long-standing. Peacebuilding and PVE efforts are not well understood and are often viewed as foreign initiatives intended to undermine local culture and beliefs. Moreover, YPBs face a lack of support from family, society, and the government. There is also a widely held misperception of youth being the perpetrators of VE. Altogether, the efforts of YPBs are often met with distrust both from the state and non-state actors.

In most cases, youth-led peacebuilding initiatives are voluntary and unpaid. Even when funded, compensation is rarely sufficient enough to lead to a sustainable career or profession within the peacebuilding sector. Funding is often only available to registered NGOs. YPBs reported that registering organizations is often overly complex, costly, bureaucratic, and requires network knowledge and connections. Thus, YPB efforts are often restricted to informal and voluntary because of these structural hurdles. When funding is available, YPBs often noted undue interference from the state given the sensitive issues at hand (i.e., human rights, freedom of speech, interfaith and communal harmony, etc.). Taken together, these factors have increasingly created an unfavorable situation for YPBs to continue their work in the South Asia.

YPBs find NGOs and INGOs to be primary enablers that provide them with opportunities to learn about and engage in peacebuilding activities. YPBs also noted the importance of youth peacebuilding networks for peer-to-peer support, learning, and collaboration.

Factors Contributing to Violent Extremism in South Asia

IYPBs and other interviewed stakeholders shared factors which contribute to VE in South Asia. Although there are distinct, country-specific manifestations of these factors, all the drivers listed here could be understood as common across the region for catalyzing youth engagement in VE.

Push factors contributing to VE include forms of structural violence—ongoing conflict, marginalization, and discrimination of the group to which a person belongs (i.e., minority, female, religion, etc.). YPBs also cited collectively socialized narratives that place one nation against another.

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.

Within the South Asian context, the primary factors motivate people to engage in VE include:

- **Religious Misinterpretation and Manipulation:** Among the religious factors, misinterpretation, and/or manipulation of religious teachings and texts was highlighted as a primary impetus for VE. Extremist groups were seen to operate by openly perpetuating religious animosities, within religions (intra-faith conflict) and between religions (inter-faith conflict).
- **Cultural and Social Factors:** Cultural and social factors are often interconnected and have different levels of impact and contribution. Unequal accessibility to basic needs and services, including health care, food, mental health services, and education, were all noted as significant cultural and social factors. The lack of peace and civic education, nonexistence of comparative religion in school curricula, and absence of mixed school systems furthers ethnic segregation and leads to VE.
- **Social Media:** Social media was identified as a flourishing space for VE in the South Asia. These platforms are able to reach a wider audience 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 the main platforms through which VE ideologies are disseminated. Hate speech, intolerance, conspiracies, false news, and unchecked religious material run rampant in these spaces in the region. 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 a driving force of VE. Laws are enforced unevenly depending on caste, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. Social injustice is also supported by specific discriminative laws and policies in some scenarios.
- **Divisive, Religiously Infused Politics:** Governance, across the whole of the region, was described by interviewees as weak and discriminative. Weak structures, inefficiency, and corruption in political institutions were identified as indirect factors that perpetuate the conditions for VE. Interviewees repeatedly stated that political parties play a major role in growing VE as political parties increasingly operated on the basis of mobilizing one particular ethnic or religious group against others. Parties essentially become cyphers for religious or ethnic identity.
- **Mental Health Concerns and Trauma:** One of the most important contributing factors to VE identified was mental health. As a result of high levels of violence in the region, most young people have experienced violence directly or indirectly through friends and family, nearby armed conflict, or through ongoing cycles of community violence. YPBs reported that most members of their communities experience various combinations of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety from violence, loss, and other hardships they have endured. Lack of proper psychological support for emotional recovery, resilience, and well-being pushes youth to engage in VE. Suffering from emotional trauma without tools or systems in place to help manage these issues manifests as chronic anger and feelings of grievance toward particular groups. VE narratives sympathize with these feelings, encouraging acts of violence against groups toward which grievances are held. YPBs identified emotional overwhelm and grievances as common among those who have directly carried out acts of VE.
- **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 digital infrastructure in rural areas, and lingering underdevelopment in war-torn areas were all described as factors which push youth toward VE.
- **International Terror Networks:** While there are many forces within each country that effectively cultivate VE, international terror networks from outside the region also play an important role. The youth responsible for the Holey Artisan Bakery attacks in Bangladesh were trained by ISIS in Syria. 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 the other countries, with ISIS ultimately claiming responsibility for the devastating Easter attacks.

Youth Peacebuilding Sector Analysis: Disparities and Opportunities

To effectively support young South Asian peacebuilders, it is important to understand that they are not a homogenous group. In this section, several contextual and social factors are discussed which influence how YPBs carry out and think about their work. These include ethnicity, urban, religion, and gender identity. This section seeks to define, or redefine, the breadth and diversity of YPBs in South Asia.

By highlighting the heterogeneous identities of YPBs, the intent is not to argue that peacebuilders from one group or another 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. Peacebuilders with linkages to all groups are needed, to work on all sides of the equation, across differences of all kinds.

The Urban and Rural Divide

In South Asian countries, about 66% percent of the population lives in rural areas (World Bank 2019). Most rural areas remain underdeveloped with fewer facilities for health and education, as well as high rates of unemployment. This disparity also extends to peacebuilding.

| URBAN | RURAL |
|---|---|
| <p>More opportunities, resources, access to organizations active in PVE and peacebuilding sectors.</p> <p>Peace-focused organizations, trainings, university events and exchange opportunities are concentrated in urban areas.</p> | <p>Limited opportunities, resources, access to organizations active in PVE and peacebuilding sectors.</p> |
| <p>More PVE activities are urban-based.</p> | <p>Less PVE activities in rural areas.</p> |
| <p>PVE and peacebuilding vocabulary is familiar and mostly accepted.</p> | <p>PVE and peacebuilding vocabulary is challenged, suspected as foreign, and not accepted by rural communities.</p> |
| <p>Urban youth are more engaged in PVE policy and advocacy.</p> | <p>Rural youth are rarely engaged in PVE policy and advocacy.</p> |
| <p>PVE and peacebuilding materials are often in English.</p> | <p>PVE and peacebuilding materials are rarely offered or translated to local languages.</p> |
| <p>Most peacebuilders are from urban areas</p> <p>As a result of urban centric PVE and peacebuilding initiatives, YPBs are primarily urban. Urban peacebuilding also confers additional benefits, as</p> | <p>Few peacebuilders from rural areas</p> <p>Rural YPBs face a much steeper climb to carry out their work. They often work 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.</p> |

Recognizing the contexts and challenges between rural and urban YPBs helps to better understand the diverse needs of these practitioners.

Gender Identity for Peacebuilders

- When turning to the question of how gender variously impacts the work of peacebuilders, the following findings are significant:

- YPBs report that urban areas are more tolerant of women participating in peacebuilding activities than in rural areas. “There is a huge gap in female participation in peacebuilding due to cultural barriers,” said one Sri Lankan YPB. “Girls are sometimes not allowed to travel outside of their hometown. As most of the peacebuilding work is conducted in main cities, they cannot travel and participate.”
- There is limited support for female YPBs compared to male YPBs.
- YPBs noted that gender analysis are rarely conducted in peacebuilding processes and projects.
- Female peacebuilders speak of being discouraged and shamed for raising their voices and contributing their perspectives to social justice, conflict, and violence. Female peacebuilders often face obstacles in their work. In rural villages, women 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 a common misperception among the general public, sometimes even among peacebuilders as well, that females are not much 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 and Sri Lanka reported more positive outcomes regarding the role of women in the peacebuilding sector compared to Bangladesh and India, including the number of women working for peacebuilding in local NGOs.

Religious versus Secular Peacebuilding Perspectives

Another significant but less visible factor that influences the way peacebuilders carry out their work is their own views on religion:

- Most of the YPBs interviewed for the research viewed themselves as more secular. Those who identified as faith-based peacebuilders considered 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 byto secular people.
- YPBs observed 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 engage in particularly sensitive issues.
- YPBs stated that when working with highly religious communities, those with similar religious identities tend to promote their identity as part of their work, whereas more secular YPBs take a 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 versus Minority

The analysis of YPBs identities leads naturally to another, significant consideration that peacebuilders must wrestle with their social positionality as members of majority ethnic group or as a minority. In South Asia, most conflicts are ethnic in origin, often predating contemporary religions of the area.

- The majority of YPBs interviewed in this research are members of the majority group in their respective country. Compared to their counterparts, they have better access to opportunities and resources than minority peacebuilders.
- Majority peacebuilders often come from the city while minority peacebuilders are operating in rural areas.
- Minority peacebuilders are more likely to be fighting for their own rights and peace in their own communities. Bangladeshi YPBs from the hill tracts areas, for example, directly face injustice, discrimination, and even violence, sometimes from within their own communities. In Sri Lanka, most YPBs interviewed belonged to 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 for minorities rights and for reconciliation.
- YPBs 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 Sri Lankan peacebuilder suggested the need to shift focus from minority community engagement to majority areas to more effectively combat and address VE.
- When YPBs articulate their goals of interfaith harmony, they receive antagonistic responses, mostly from dominant actors in the majority, but also from the minority. Some report being called traitors for their efforts.

Why Youth Become Peacebuilders

The four countries have commonalities regarding the influx of youth into peacebuilding and PVE activities. One commonality is gender segregation. Each country experiences a huge gender divide, where fewer women are engaged in peacebuilding initiatives.

Both men and women see a significant need to expand the role of women in peacebuilding activities and to devote more attention to the role that women – particularly young women – play in violent extremism itself, a topic that has received limited research attention.



As noted in the above country-level analyses, most YPBs from the South Asian region are survivors of violence. The majority of youth do not want to return into an era of the past where violence was common. They opt for being part of a positive transformation, aiming to create a good impact on society at large.

Another dynamic that is common among YPBs is the presence of guidance, support, and mentorship. If a professor, senior peacebuilder, or other NGO leader is willing to support youth in developing their peacebuilding skills and knowledge, then it becomes easier for YPBs to feel like part of the larger peacebuilding sector and process. This is a far more likely scenario in urban areas, however, where there is also much peer-to-peer support. As noted previously, rural peacebuilders are often quite isolated and work almost exclusively within their own community contexts with little outside support or input.

Enablers of Youth-Led Peacebuilding in Asia

In this analysis, enablers for youth-led peacebuilding are divided into primary and secondary categories:

Primary Enablers:

- **Passion:** Youth feel the urge to do something good that reduces social injustice. Their personal experiences to violence and traumas serve as motivation to work towards building an inclusive and peaceful society for their fellow human beings and citizens.
- **Support:** Initial support to fuel this work comes from family members, close friends, peacebuilding peers, and other supporters in their close network. Continuous support from networks helps YPBs move forward.
- **Motivation:** YPBs also feel motivated when their ideas are backed by the educators, university faculty, and other leaders. They feel valued having support from their mentors.

Secondary Enablers:

- **Networks:** As they start working, YPBs take part in different online and offline trainings run by different local and international NGOs. They also begin to recognize the scope and scale of the peacebuilding sector as they develop their personal networks. Eventually YPBs start working in larger groups with other like-minded youths serving on a voluntarily basis. As their work gains visibility, YPBs find opportunities to connect or collaborate with other youth groups and networks.
- **Funding:** YPBs may receive funds from local sources, individuals, or through crowdfunding. Local and international NGOs may also show interest to work with and support these YPBs.
- **Social Media:** YPBs use social media to increase their visibility. It becomes easier to reach larger audience without needing to have larger financial resources.
- **Exposure and Exchange Programs:** In-country networking and collaborations lead YPBs to international exposure where they start leading sessions, seminars, and workshops. National-, regional- and international-level cultural exchange programs and scholarships may help young people interact with and better understand different societies while developing leadership skills for civic engagement.
- **Recognition:** Gaining recognition from different government organizations, senior officials, media outlets, celebrities and/or other social influencers gives YPBs a moral boost for their work.

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- **Recognition:** Gaining recognition from different government organizations, senior officials, media outlets, celebrities and/or other social influencers gives YPBs a moral boost for their work.
- **Relationships:** Maintaining good relations with various political parties is important. To arrange larger events and campaigns, YPBs need support and acknowledgment from the local representatives. Staying in favor with the current administrations helps them address issues that may arise.
- **Government Departments:** India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have ministries or departments established for the campaigning, peacebuilding, youth engagement, cultural development of all existing communities, Information Communication Technology ICT monitoring, and the preservation of historical sites and figures. These departments might be titled differently in different countries, but they serve similar purposes. YPBs partner with these government organizations. In this way, these departments function as significant enablers because they ensure multilevel support to YPBs, from advocacy, training, and funding.
- **Documentation:** Proper documentation of programs in their early stage increases credibility of YPBs and their programs.
- **Organizational Support:** Ongoing support from local and international NGOs and can make a smoother pathway to create sustainable impacts in the society.

Barriers to Youth-Led Peacebuilding in South Asia

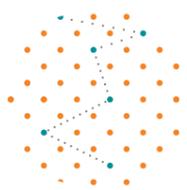
Analyses across the four surveyed countries has revealed the following barriers based on interview data:

- **Lack of Support:** Among the South Asian countries, the most significant barrier for conducting PVE initiatives is the lack of support from government, families, and the public. Youth face stigmas about their character and doubts regarding their motivations. Well known examples of youth radicalization and extremism have generated a perception that the “youth bulge is a problem”. Youth are widely viewed in the aggregate as dangerous and directionless. The financial instability of youth peacebuilding also reinforces the view that YPBs are not doing “real work,” even amongst friends and family.
- **Skill Deficit:** There is a lack of awareness and capacity among YPBs to effectively equip more young people with the tools and knowledge to act as peacebuilders. Lack of consistent and extended peacebuilding education prevents YPBs from bringing scalable changes in society. The absence of a strong professional peacebuilders' network also makes it challenging for peacebuilders to engage in peer-to-peer learning beyond their immediate circle of friends and colleagues.
- **Gender Bias:** The patriarchal social norms which dominate South Asian culture are an obstacle for a female peacebuilders and PVE initiatives. Many reasons have contributed to the marginalization of women in peacebuilding: early marriage, motherhood, safety concerns, travel restrictions, and stereotypes about the role of women in extremism have left female peacebuilders with very narrow, office-based roles. This has also led to huge gap in ratio of male and female peacebuilders. Further, the lack of a gender lens for analyzing VE has resulted in research gap on the role of women in VE groups in South Asia.
- **Religious Sentiments:** Religion has played an outsized role in the formation of the South Asia's modern nation states. Religious animosity fueled violence during partition and has continued to be a source of conflict well into the new 21st century. PVE requires engaging with differences and tensions between and within religions, in order to create dialogue and deeper inter- and intra-faith understanding and tolerance at the local level. Because religious issues are sensitive, it is often difficult for YPBs to address these issues without the support of local religious leaders. Moreover, the majority of YPBs come from secular backgrounds and as such are not viewed by communities as legitimate agents in the discussion of religious matters.
- **Registration and Validation:** To solicit funding, youth-led peacebuilding organizations need to be legally registered with the government as NGOs. This registration process, however, is costly, time-consuming, and bureaucratic. YPBs from each studied country reported that there is insufficient information available to complete registration requirements without inside assistance from government officials. Therefore, most peace organizations give up or do not attempt registration and their organizations remain permanently informal—which ultimately undermines their sustainability. This also increases the likelihood that YPBs may leave peacebuilding for other careers or sectors that offers more financial stability.



Regional Policy Recommendations

Youth are essential actors in contributing to PVE and peacebuilding work. Youth are not only highly affected by VE, but they also play an important role as positive change agent. The following recommendations for the governments of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, would, if implemented, facilitate the increased engagement and impact of youth in peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism across South Asia:



Establish Regional Action Plan for PVE

Formulate a comprehensive regional roadmap towards preventing violent extremism that includes youth – based on the 2015 plan of action to PVE of the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN 2016).



Establish Bodies for Preventing Violent Extremism and Youth

In order to fulfill the requirements of UNSCR 2250, all the countries in South Asia should create a coordinating body for preventing violent extremism. These bodies will need to have a significant youth representation with grassroots outreach through district-level arms. These bodies should be responsible for launching coordinated, funded projects for PVE across the region. Further, they should organize awareness campaigns on VE for the general public, as well as targeted campaigns for rural and suburban communities. The established bodies should also ensure the systemic coordination of peacebuilding and PVE programs in rural and other underserved areas. The bodies could also collect data, conduct research at the regional levels in order to generate policy proposals for the member states, in collaboration with entities such as regional bodies, INGOS, law enforcement agencies, etc.



Promote Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Processes

The countries in South Asia have a long, complicated history of conflict. As noted in this policy brief, these past conflicts fuel grievances that drive VE, particularly in these current times. While grassroots PVE work is essential, nation states themselves must take formal actions to address past grievances and embody efforts to create reconciliation at the national level. South Africa, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka all offer models for reconciliation processes between intra-national parties and groups which have engaged in violence against one another. South Asia could also be path-breaking in engaging in transitional dialogue on conflicts at the state level, adopting statements of acknowledgement and reconciliation which aim to take the region beyond historical divisions, thus potentially diminishing public animosities that incite VE. This work could be supported at the grassroots level by YPBs, especially in regard to making visible and acceptable the personal and community-level trauma that lingers from these regional conflicts, impacting mental health and further these conflicts at the local level.



Encourage Flexible Policies and Regulations for Preventing Violent Extremism and Peacebuilding Organizations

All countries in South Asia have very strict rules and regulations for registering, managing, and funding (national or international) NGOs for PVE. These bureaucratic barriers can overwhelm YPBs. There are also costs like filing fees and other expenses which further increase barriers.



As noted throughout this research, without formal registration, YPBs have no ability to solicit funds and grants to support their work. To support the fulfillment of the YPS agenda, differentiated policies should be established which make registration less complex and costly for youth-led organizations with small budgets. Further, the registration processes need to be transparent and consistent. Alternatively, funds for YPS could be routed through a central registered body and channelized to YPBs for particular projects.



Include PVE in Educational Curricula

Integration of peace, tolerance, interfaith understanding, inclusion, diversity, and global citizenship in existing national education curricula would boost peace and reduce extremism. Applying an approach of behavioral change to nurture mutual understanding, empathy, compassion, and regional/global citizenship as part of every student's would make a huge difference. YPBs are innovators in this regard as they have been imparting training and workshops on peacebuilding to teenagers across the region. Their collaboration and input should be sought to create the academic curriculum to expedite a regional peacebuilding effort.



Institutionalize Youth Participation

Youth-led peacebuilding and PVE efforts cannot be considered in isolation from other ways in which youth engage with the government. Ensure youth inclusion in political decision-making processes (e.g. through youth councils/parliaments, etc.), at local, national, and regional levels in order to establish a collaborative environment between youth and government.

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Network for Religious and
Traditional Peacemakers



Youth Development
Foundation
Building Movement of Interfaith Actions in Pakistan.