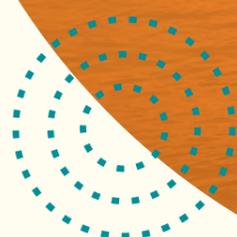
A large orange circle containing a background image of a sunset over water with silhouettes of people. The text is overlaid on this circle.

# The Status of Youth-Led PVE Efforts in Sri Lanka

COUNTRY LEVEL POLICY BRIEF



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

*“We had government institutions working on the mandate of peacebuilding. They included youth in their implementation. We were engaged in many government-led peacebuilding activities by then. That is a positive transformation for youth in Sri Lanka.”*

*- Ravidu Sadaruwan, Youth Peacebuilder*



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# Intended Audience and Overview

The policy brief is intended for national level policymakers in the Government of 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 Sri Lanka, and recommends practices and policies to prevent the phenomenon better. The study, which resulted in this brief's policy recommendations, aimed to amplify the voices of young peacebuilders in Sri Lanka 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.

Sri Lanka has a long history of ethnic and religious diversity, but has also experienced civil war between Tamil Muslims and Sinhala Buddhists. While the civil war ended in 2009, the events of the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic have destabilized the precarious relationship between the two. This policy brief introduces lessons learned and best practices in order to achieve sustainable peace in Sri Lanka. For instance, the policy brief will review how lack of funding, current education curricula, and existing peacebuilding initiatives and policies could be improved or transformed to help Sri Lanka with its ongoing commitment to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Additionally, as NGOs and other private stakeholders have carried the main responsibility of Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in the country, this policy brief will illustrate the benefits of institutionalizing the field and creating a cohesive national action plan for PVE.



This brief provides a concise review of findings and policy recommendations related to strengthening the youth peacebuilding sector in Sri Lanka as a mechanism for enhancing and broadening PVE activities throughout the country. First, it introduces the concepts related to violent extremism in the Sri Lankan context. Second, it explains the Participatory Action Research approach used in the base study, particularly its crucial role in illustrating the present context through the perspectives of peacebuilders. Third, it explores the key level findings. The reader will learn the push and pull factors to VE and, on the other hand, the previous and current initiatives to prevent violent extremism in Sri Lanka. Together, these factors provide a comprehensive picture of peacebuilding work in Sri Lanka, and what can be done to improve and to support this work. Finally, this brief concludes with recommendations that were informed by the discoveries presented here.



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

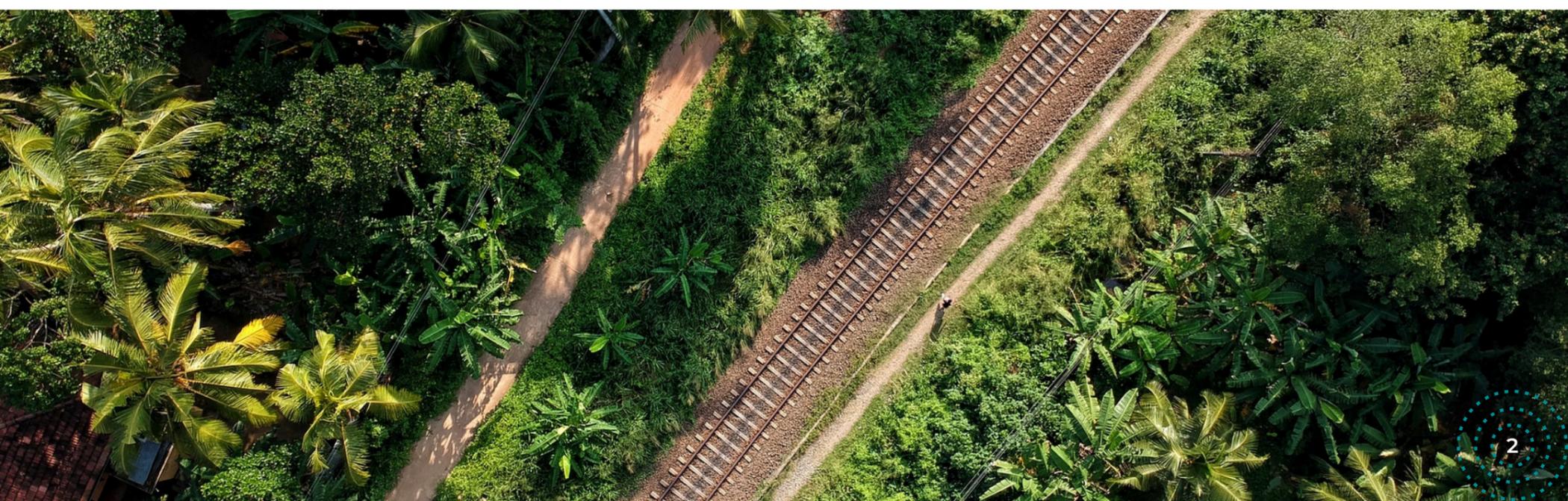
To contextualize VE in South Asia, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of how these concepts are understood and defined on the global stage. By and large, VE and related concepts are Western in origin and perspective, originating in the United States (US) and Europe (Ilyas 2021).

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 aims 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, including two YPBs from Sri Lanka. 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 Sri Lanka. 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 in Sri Lanka 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 in Sri Lanka surveyed and interviewed 20 YPBs, 7 women and 13 men (women are notably under-represented in the sector) to develop an in-depth understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and limitations faced by YPBs across Sri Lanka. The research specifically targeted early career peacebuilders, those under thirty years of age with work articulated as peacebuilding and PVE.

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



# Summary of Key Country-Level Findings

## Youth Peacebuilders' Perception of Preventing Violent Extremism and Violent Extremism Contexts in Sri Lanka

In the viewpoint of many YPBs, VE is a significant threat to peace and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Many YPBs define VE as extremist viewpoints and perspectives held by individuals or groups based on differences (religious, ethnic, etc.) in society, and acts of violence committed based on these extreme viewpoints and beliefs.

The severity of VE in Sri Lanka was assessed through semi-structured interviews and surveys. When asked on a scale of one to ten (ten being high and one being low), “what is the level of risk of radicalization for members of the communities you work with?” most responded with an answer between five and ten. This confirms that Sri Lankan peacebuilders perceive VE as a rising issue in the country. The majority of YPBs also reported that risk of radicalization had increased over the past five years.

To further examine this issue of VE through a PAR approach, YPBs were asked “Do you see VE as a problem in your community and in the country as a whole?” This question was also presented to the non-youth stakeholders. The following is a summary of those responses:

- Sri Lanka is a center of VE in South Asia.
- Though twenty-six years of civil war ended in 2009, human rights violations remain unaddressed. This is cited as a significant cause of emerging VE in Sri Lanka.
- Six years after the end of armed conflict, the Sri Lankan government agreed to the UN Human Rights Council resolution titled “Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka” in 2015. This could be considered as the first official step taken towards a Sri Lanka post-conflict reconciliation process, other than the Lessons Learned Reconciliation Commission LLRC (2010) (this report/LLRC function was meant to deal with the years of 2002 to 2009) and Paranagama Commissions (2013) which were both implemented by the previous government.
- A government mandate on peacebuilding must be implemented to address past human rights violations. According to YPBs, majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, the two main ethnic parties in conflict, have very incompatible positions on coming to terms with the painful past and deciding the country's future direction. This is due to fixed stereotypes in how the two ethnic groups view each other as well as lingering animosities and differing perspectives about the civil war.
- Although there has not been full-scale civil war since 2009, there has been a pattern of heightened communal unrest and physical violence between Muslims and non-Muslims since 2010. This phenomenon poses a significant obstacle to establishing and sustaining long-term peace and reconciliation.
- Tensions between religious communities have become especially challenging in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka on April 21, 2019. Muslim suicide bombers targeted Christians at worship. Over two-hundred-fifty persons were killed and more than five-hundred were injured in this synchronized attack on three churches and three luxury hotels. The aftermath of this attack has been growing anti-Muslim sentiment, leading to mob violence against Muslims in some instances.
- Sri Lanka has managed to implement peacebuilding initiatives on PVE. Government institutions, INGOs and local NGOs have conducted a vast number of PVE activities. YPBs noted that there was an increase in PVE initiatives in Sri Lanka under the previous administration, as their electoral mandate was to promote good governance and peacebuilding. This was reversed when a new government was elected in 2019.

## Push, Pull, and Other Factors Contributing to Violent Extremism

The following are noteworthy push and pull factors contributing to VE in Sri Lanka, as reported by YPBs and other interviewed stakeholders:

## Religion

Misinterpretation of religious teachings and texts is common. Fundamentalist groups supported by local and national level political parties, politicians, religious leaders, and religious entities produce continual streams of religiously biased and inflammatory propaganda. A few examples of extremist groups named by respondents include Bodu Bala Sena, Shiva Sena, and Thawhith Jama. Such groups push extremist narratives that instigate hate against other social groups, mostly related to religious identity. There is a tendency for majority religious groups to dominate and disparage minority groups, even to the extent of requiring forced religious conversion, for instance, under the guise of providing incentives like food assistance to poor families. During the Covid-19 pandemic there has been cases where religion has been used to distribute misinformation and hate speech online creating ethno-religious tensions (Berkley Center 2020)

## Society and Culture

Inequality along social and economic lines create tensions which fuel VE. These dynamics are partially a result of conflict and civil war, as the root causes remain unaddressed. There is also a lack of compassion and solidarity between different socio-economic groups. Segregation and discrimination between religious and ethnic groups remain very visible. Few people are able to understand and speak both primary local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, which leads to misunderstanding and tensions.

## Institutions

Participants viewed law enforcement as biased and discriminatory based on religious and ethnic identity. Both were noted as push factors for youth. Unequal service delivery by government institutions has created frustration and anger within Muslim and Tamil minority communities. Most of government institutions lack officers who speak Tamil, as most government activities are conducted in Sinhala. There are few opportunities for youth to participate in government and be a part of policymaking without knowledge of Sinhala. The absence of government mandates on peace and reconciliation are also a significant institutional gap which create conditions for increasing VE. Similarly, there is a lack of policy formulation and implementation for PVE. PVE is not identified as a thematic focus area for the current government.

## Education

School curriculum lack content on peace and tolerance. There is no standardized civic education nor is comparative religion taught. Schools often serve students from one religious group and promote biases and intolerance against others. Such views, fostered in school, are reinforced by the media.

## Social Media

Social media perpetuates a culture of hate speech, intolerance, conspiracies, false news, and unchecked religious material. Bias media reporting aggravates ethnic and religious tensions. There is a widespread lack of media literacy, and people find it difficult to recognize biased and inflammatory information.

### Gender

Women were described as a social group vulnerable to violence, marginalization, and victimization. A patriarchal culture in which discrimination is commonplace is a major impediment to participation of women in economic activities, politics, and decision making. When women's voices are not heard, they may opt for other avenues of recognition and purpose, leading some to participate in and perpetuate VE. Misogyny, hate-speech, and violence against women remains a widespread phenomenon and has a destructive impact on social cohesion and community peace. Promoting LGBTQIA+ rights in civil societies and institutions still remains taboo.

### Politics

Governance as a whole was described as weak and discriminative towards ethnic and religious groups. Corruption in administrative institutions was also highlighted as a factor that facilitates VE. Government surveillance on civil society activism, including youth led initiatives on PVE, human rights defenders, and peacebuilders, is identified as a factor which undermines non-state PVE efforts. In recent years civic space has been increasingly limited in Sri Lanka, stifling an open political discourse and making it more difficult for civil society organizations to operate in.

### Mental Health

Mental health problems were seen as another significant factor contributing to VE. Widespread post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of the conflict, depression, and anxiety due to death and/or disappearance of family members, trauma, sexual violence and exploitation were all mentioned as experiences and conditions that can lead to vulnerability to extremist mindsets. This is especially the case given the lack of proper psycho-social support for emotional recovery, resilience, and emotional well-being. Delayed reconciliation, lack of healing, and government restrictions on memorialization/public commemorations of those lost in the conflict when on the other side a war victory has been celebrated by the majority and the government itself has made mental health a collective issue, not just as an individual experience. According to YPBs, many youth harbor vengeful thoughts from their traumas. Without proper support and interventions at the individual and community levels, these feelings may result in acts of VE.

### Economics

Economic factors such as low income, disparity, resource misallocation, unemployment, and poverty were identified as contributing to VE, especially given the marginalization and sense of powerlessness that comes with these conditions. Specifically, the rural and war affected areas in Sri Lanka have far less access to opportunities in education, employment, and technology. Youth with limited education and lacking livelihoods are particularly vulnerable and often targeted by extremist groups. This socio economic status has now highly influenced youth towards substance abuse/drugs and illegal business and radicalization, politicization and manipulations highly seen in low income communities.

### History of Civil War and Conflict

Sri Lanka experienced thirty years of civil conflict which came to an end in 2009. Sri Lanka has since experienced an resurgence in communal clashes and religious tension between Buddhist and Muslim communities. The Easter Sunday bombings were a clear indicator of how rising tensions result in widespread VE. The aftermath of these attacks have led to further social fragmentation as anti-Muslim sentiment grows. The lack of reconciliation initiatives to address the underlying causes of these tensions encourages further conflict.

## Youth Peacebuilding Sector Analysis

Sri Lanka has a relatively small community of YPBs. Some work under the title of peacebuilder, while others are social workers and youth workers. Youth peacebuilding in Sri Lanka has emerged as a result of so many youth having experienced and witnessed the civil conflict and the subsequent unrest in the country. Most youth-led peacebuilding organizations are urban-based rather than rural. There is a concentration of these peacebuilders in Colombo. Though individuals from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds engage in peacebuilding, they all face different challenges and obstacles in their work.

## Why Youth Become Peacebuilders

Youth engagement in peacebuilding derives from several factors and influences. Some are unique to the individual, but several are common across the YPBs who were interviewed:

- **Personal Experience:** A majority of the interviewees stated that as children, they had seen and experienced the horrors of civil war. They reported having undergone physical violence and/or experienced psychological violence, and there was finger pointing and framing of the other side. They genuinely feel that violence should remain in the past and not carried into the future.
- **Protection of Minority Communities:** Several YPBs stated that they joined the peacebuilding sector to protect the rights of minority religious and ethnic groups, and to safeguard their communities from discrimination.
- **Non-Recurrence:** All the YPBs interviewed expressed that they work as peacebuilders to avoid a recurrence of war, conflict, and communal violence in Sri Lanka. They do not want future generations to experience the hardships that they have endured.
- **Development:** Youth believe in working for national development. Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has been regarded as a developing country. YPBs have identified the absence of peace as a reason that the country has not developed more rapidly and equitably. Ethnic and religious tensions have hindered Sri Lanka's economy and development.
- **Self-Motivation and Passion:** YPBs hope to make Sri Lanka a better country and society where all communities live in peace irrespective of differences. Youth also realize the importance of giving back to the community and the country. They have a strong determination to change and reform the national political culture.
- **National Unity:** A united country is a vision of many YPBs in Sri Lanka. YPBs say that they want to contribute for national unity by working for peace.
- **Career Development:** In this work, YPBs find career opportunities, mentorship appreciation, international exposure, likeminded networks, and access to INGOs and NGOs.
- **Government Mandate:** Promoting reconciliation was a key mandate of the former administration. The government's initiatives always included youth in peacebuilding efforts. This has continued to motivate youth to continue their peacebuilding journeys despite the absence of support for such programs under the current administration.

## Youth-Led Preventing Violent Extremism Initiatives and Impact

Youth-led PVE initiatives are supported mostly by INGOs and local NGOs. Some have been scaled up to regional and national level. Many initiatives were supported by government institutions under the previous administration as well from 2015 to 2019. Most common types of youth-led PVE activities include capacity building programs, awareness campaigns, inter- and intra-religious dialogues, exposure visits, interfaith celebrations, peace marches, youth summits, youth camps, online dialogues, social media campaigns to counter hate speech, as well as sports and entertainment to bring diverse groups together. Youth in urban areas have also been active in policy advocacy. For example, YPBs have campaigned for a social media policy to curb hate speech, establish peace curricula in schools, and increase the role of youth in governance via "youth quotas."

**Local Level Youth-Led PVE Initiatives:** YPBs identified several youth-led organizations and a few youth-led projects that are supported by larger peacebuilding civil society organizations (CSOs), NGOs, and INGOs.

YOUTH-LED ORGANIZATIONS FOR PVE	YOUTH-LED PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY (I)NGOs
<p>Sri Lanka Unites: Future leaders conference, online/offline PVE training programs, PVE webinars, countering hate speech unit, youth-led district-level centers for reconciliation.</p> <p>International Youth Alliance for Peace: Online dialogues, panel discussions, capacity building trainings for youth.</p> <p>Interfaith Colombo: Cemetery walks, interfaith festival celebration, interfaith quiz, online/offline dialogues, interfaith picnics.</p> <p>Hashtag Generation: Online dialogues, campaigns to counter hate speech.</p> <p>CREATE INITIATIVES International Peacebuilding engagements with marginalized minority communities in rural areas . youth volunteerism for PVE. Non formal education and Development. Promoting Peace education in Schools and Universities. Initiating members of YPS Coalition of Sri lanka</p>	<p>Center for Communication Training: Organizes a training series for youth on PVE through performing arts, funded by United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).</p> <p>National Peace Council of Sri Lanka: Youth-led projects “Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka” and “Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka.” Also offers youth-centered events on pluralism and transitional justice, capacity building trainings, and a youth master trainers workshop on pluralism, conflict transformation and transitional justice.</p> <p>CARITAS- SEDEC: Capacity building programs, district-level youth peacebuilding committees.</p> <p>Search for Common Ground: Female youth capacity building programs. Female youth committees by “Women as Drivers of Peace.”</p> <p>Sarvodaya: Project Tharunodaya, Shanthi Sena – United Religions Initiative (URI).</p> <p>Chrysalis (Gte) Limited Youth Peace panel. women and youth empowerment towards peacebuilding and reconciliation and PVE</p> <p>Jaffna Social Action Center Youth in governance / women in politics / safe house programs / Active citizens , implementing partner of British Council SL</p>

### National-Level Youth-Focused PVE Initiatives:

The following are a few youth-focused PVE initiatives and projects implemented at the national level by some of the government institutes, CSOs, and NGOs in Sri Lanka.

(\*\* Currently active initiatives.)

(\*^\* Initiatives that are no longer active.)

- **Youth district-level networks for reconciliation**\*^\* were established by the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR). Each network consisted of forty youth from each district. Each network worked to raise awareness on pluralism, as well as engage with local youth and school children. Unfortunately, this program has been halted under the new government administration.
- **“Ahanna”**\*^\* (or Listen) was a youth-led project supported by the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanism between 2015 and 2019. It was a major awareness project about peace and reconciliation that was initiated at the national level to work with school children across the country.
- **“Yowun Puraya”**\*^\* (also known as “The City of Youth”) is a national level youth camp, organized by the National Youth Services Council. Focused on leadership, peacebuilding, and reconciliation, the program brings together over eight-thousand Sri Lankan and one-hundred international youth.

- **The British Council Active Citizens Training: Social Action Projects\*\*** is a youth-led project in which youth activists are trained on peacebuilding and PVE. Trained youth are provided with grants to implement awareness raising programs on PVE.
- **Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka\*^\*** was a youth-led project under the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka. Youth from twelve universities and twenty-one districts across the country met in Colombo for a three-day Youth Peace Championship Event. The project was funded by the UN Peace Building Fund with support from Legal Action Worldwide and Harvard Law School. During the event, students came up with over one-hundred recommendations on how government, civil society, media, and victims could contribute to the effective implementation of transitional justice and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.
- **Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka\*^\*** was a youth training program on transitional justice and pluralism. Trained youth presented their recommendations to build a pluralistic Sri Lanka to 2019 Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe.
- **Youth Peace Panel\*\*** is a group of thirty young Sri Lankan advocates for peace from all nine provinces, selected through an open-call process. The panel is a part of United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) "Youth4Youth" program, delivered in partnership with Chrysalis and supported by the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The Youth Peace Panel is an independent and nonpartisan group of young leaders who aim to connect youth at grassroots level with key decision-making stakeholders to advance peacebuilding.

### **Regional-Level Youth-Focused PVE Initiatives**

The following are a few youth-focused PVE initiatives and projects implemented regionally

- **AHA! Awareness with Human Action Project\*\***, implemented jointly by Sarvodaya and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers with support by the European Union, awards grants to CSOs, individual YPBs, and youth-led projects focused explicitly on PVE. Conducts capacity building events and runs a regional and national level advocacy campaign.
- **Sri Lanka Unites\*\*** is a locally started movement for peace and reconciliation. The program has scaled up to the regional and global level. Global Unites is now an amalgamation of thirteen movements across four continents. These movements work collectively on PVE awareness, mainly through social media activism, online dialogues, trainings, and community programs connecting youth regionally and globally.
- **Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka\*\*** conducts numerous trainings, workshops, and online campaigns on PVE and peacebuilding. Through international collaboration, the not-for-profit organization mobilizes youth and women for peacebuilding.
- **Generations for Peace\*\*** first became active in Sri Lanka in 2009. It initially focused on the country's northern regions, particularly within the districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Through international support and collaboration, Generations for Peace has supported the overall peace and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka.
- **The KAICIID Fellows Network\*\*** consists of a cohort of educators from a variety of religious and secular institutions. The KAICIID Fellows cohort includes ten fellows from Sri Lanka who implement PVE initiatives such as youth-led inter- and intra-religious dialogues and peace walks.
- **Interfaith Colombo\*\*** is a platform for enhancing understanding, relations, and trust between people of different faiths and beliefs.
- **International Youth Alliance for Peace (IYAP)\*\*** is a Sri Lankan youth-led organization that has scaled regionally. Youth engage to network and conduct trainings, dialogues, and awareness campaigns.
- **Master Peace Sri Lanka\*\*** is another Sri Lankan organization that partners with international organizations and conducts training and workshops for PVE and peacebuilding.

The above-mentioned organizations, programs, and projects have impacted PVE and peacebuilding outcomes positively. Beneficiaries have developed friendships irrespective of cultural differences. They have built trustworthy relationships with youth of other ethnicities and religions and shed stereotypes. Furthermore, these activities have empowered youth to take action and organize locally.

### **Enablers and Barriers for Youth-Led PVE Initiatives**

**Primary Enablers:** Youth are passionate about peacebuilding and want to contribute actively. They believe their time and energy should be devoted to creating a better society. This volunteer spirit of the YPBs is a primary enabler.



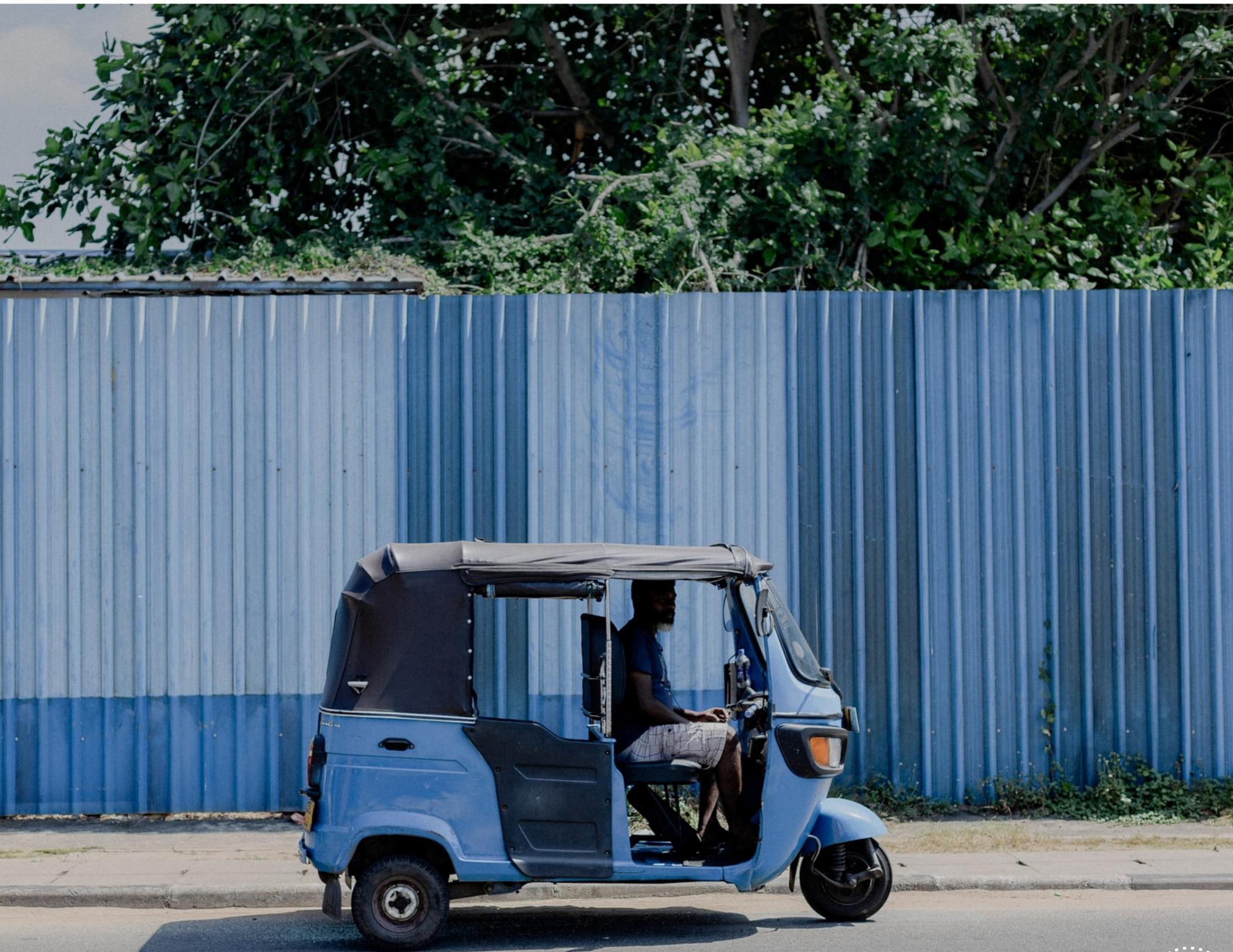
As mentioned above, there are several youth-led peacebuilding organizations in Sri Lanka that recruit volunteers and conduct programming. NGOs and INGOs have also initiated peacebuilding projects in which youth play a vital role. International funding and grants, channeled through CSOs, support YPBs and their projects. The government supported a greater national institutional framework for peacebuilding as well until 2019. With the withdrawal of the state from peacebuilding efforts, fewer senior peacebuilding NGOs prioritize youth initiatives under the new administration.

**Primary Barriers:** YPBs reported that their initiatives are no longer supported by the government and are instead monitored and under surveillance by the current administration. Youth are mostly engaged in peacebuilding as volunteers; they engage only after they have met their basic economic needs. Financial instability of youth and conventional full-time occupations result in them having little to no time to dedicate. YPBs also do not have funds or financial capabilities to fund their activities and projects long-term. Finding sponsors and donors for long-term programming is often also very challenging. There is also the aforementioned focus on urban areas, as reaching rural youth is challenging and YPBs often have obstacles communicating in local languages. Most peacebuilding materials exist only in English and have not been translated to local dialects. This reinforces skepticism and aversion by community members against peacebuilding, as it can be viewed as an international attempt to subvert local sovereignty and undermine cultural norms. Another barrier to sustainable youth-led peacebuilding is that most youth-led projects are one-off efforts due to the lack of funding. Lack of resources, monitoring, and persisted engagement makes measuring impact of peacebuilding efforts difficult over time. The lack of peace and reconciliation efforts by the present government is another barrier, as there are no longer government channels that engage youth in peacebuilding. Another barrier YPBs face is lack of support from adults, families, and religious leaders. Many parents and elders consider peacebuilding a task for the government, not a proper role for youth. Some parents of the interviewees consistently raised concerns about safety and complained about how little financial and career security is achieved by engaging with the peacebuilding sector. Lack of media support is another barrier as media organizations do not report or cover youth-led peacebuilding.

The table below summarizes enablers and barriers to youth-led peacebuilding in Sri Lanka:

	ENABLERS	BARRIERS
SOCIETY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International support and donors</li> <li>• Academic institutions and degree programs on peacebuilding (i.e., University of Kelaniya, University of Colombo, Kothalawala Defense University)</li> <li>• Government institutions which were active until 2019 (i.e., Office of National Unity and Reconciliation, Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, Office of Missing Persons, Office of Reparations, Ministry of National Integration)</li> <li>• Government staff such as National Integration Officers</li> <li>• Fellowship programs such as KAICIID and SEA-AIR</li> <li>• Youth-led organizations (i.e., Sri Lanka Unites, IYAP, Interfaith Colombo, Hashtag Generation)</li> <li>• INGO and NGO projects</li> <li>• Youth-led district level centers established by Sri Lanka Unites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of initiatives which reach rural, grassroots communities</li> <li>• Lack of integrated PVE efforts: PVE is not linked with economic development, health, mental health and other sectors</li> <li>• Suspension of former government institutions and activities for peacebuilding</li> <li>• Lack of PVE policies and mandates</li> <li>• Lack of PVE research</li> <li>• Lack of government support</li> <li>• Lack of long-term, outcomes-driven programs and funding for PVE</li> <li>• Public suspicion of PVE</li> <li>• Public suspicion of peacebuilding</li> <li>• Lack of media support and visibility for PVE</li> </ul>

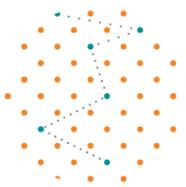
	ENABLERS	BARRIERS
INDIVIDUAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-motivation and determination</li> <li>• Mentorship from trained professional peacebuilders, senior civil society leaders, and academics</li> <li>• Peer-to-peer support from other YPBs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure from families and communities against working with others of different religion and ethnicities</li> <li>• Peacebuilding may be misperceived as self-interested and attention-seeking</li> <li>• Lack of opportunities for youth in governance</li> <li>• Language barriers, especially in rural areas</li> <li>• Surveillance and intimidation by government agencies</li> <li>• Low salary and career opportunities: peacebuilding as an unpaid volunteerism</li> <li>• Gender based discrimination</li> </ul>





# Policy Recommendations

YPBs in the study brought forward several important recommendations that are specifically relevant for the post-conflict country. The following recommendations for the government of Sri Lanka would, if implemented, facilitate the increased engagement and impact of youth in peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism in Sri Lanka:



## Resume Transitional Justice Processes and Relevant Government Institutions

YPBs emphasized resuming the transitional justice process in Sri Lanka. They recommend that the Office of the Missing Persons, the Office of Reparations, the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation, Truth and Reconciliation Committees, the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, and the Ministry of National Integration would be re-opened, strengthened, and empowered by the government to fulfill their various objectives.



## Non-discriminatory Policies

YPBs recommend the government reform policies and legislation that are discriminatory against minorities. Policies and legislations must treat everyone equally in order to ensure fair service delivery and equal treatment by law enforcement.



## Establish National Action Plan for PVE

Formulate a comprehensive national 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.



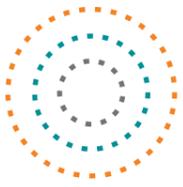
## Enhance Youth Engagement in PVE

The establishment of a National Peace Institute dedicated to peace and reconciliation regarding policy and pragmatic level is recommended. Such an Institute should engage YPBs to contribute and participate. A national mandate for youth inclusion in PVE policies was also emphasized by the YPBs. Youth voices should be considered in all matters via youth consultations.



## Creating International and National Fellowships and Training Programs for YPBs

Fellowship opportunities have been identified as an effective way to support youth collaboration and capacity building. YPBs emphasized the need for long-term programs in order to include youth from both rural and urban areas to implement PVE programs. Such programs could be funded by the national government and managed by INGOs and local CSOs.



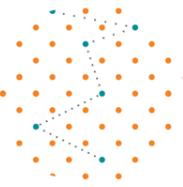
### Facilitating Nation-wide Funding for Youth-Led PVE Initiatives

YPBs emphasized that most funding is only available to urban-centric youth-led initiatives. YPBs from rural areas require more support for PVE efforts. More funding and support should be made available to YPBs in rural areas.



### 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, etc.) at local and national levels in order to establish a collaborative environment between youth and government.



### National Peace Studies Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education

Though Sri Lanka already has peace education at the tertiary level, YPBs suggest adding peace studies and comparative religion as mandatory subjects to school curricula. This would help promote better understanding of community-level reconciliation in a post-conflict context. Act, 2017 National Youth Policy, and 2019-2022 National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.



### Mixed Schools

Schools segregated by religion and ethnicity reproduce and perpetuate existing tensions among younger generations. YPBs proposed education sector reforms which prioritize mixed school systems as means to promote tolerance and co-existence with other religions and ethnicities.

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