



## **Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers: Asia Working Group – 2024 Small Grants (July – October 2024)**

### Introduction

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers Asia Working Group (AWG) collaborates with international, regional, national, and local actors across South and Southeast Asia to enhance regional peacebuilding efforts, particularly, the role of religious and traditional actors, including youth and women, in peacebuilding, mediation and conflict transformation. The AWG emphasizes communication, dialogue, training, analysis, and knowledge exchange, acting as a catalyst for advocacy, research, and networking. Recognizing that small grants serve as a vital tool for empowering localized peacebuilding strategies, the Asia Working Group, with support from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, provided funding for four initiatives in India, Pakistan, Thailand, and Myanmar. These grants are crucial in offering essential resources to grassroots organizations, enabling communities to develop tailored strategies that align with their unique cultural and social contexts. By doing so, they catalyze significant change and empower local actors who understand their community dynamics. Selected through an open and competitive process, these grants specifically support religious and traditional peacemakers using local methods to foster peace and resolve conflicts. This initiative is in line with the global acknowledgment of traditional peacebuilding approaches, as highlighted in the UN Plan of Action. From July to October 2024, four small grants were awarded to the following grantees: (1) Saumya Aggarwal, CEO and Co-Founder, Youth for Peace International, India; (2) Beydaar Society X Brhythm Creatives, Pakistan; (3) Myanmar Youth Foundation; and (4) Digital4Peace Foundation, Thailand.

### Objectives

The grants are aimed to:

- Enhance community-level engagement through confidence-building, inter-and intra-faith dialogue, capacity building and training
- Support traditional and local peacebuilding methods, promoting sustainable national and regional dialogue platforms.
- Advocate for and amplify the roles of religious and traditional peacemakers, including women and youth, in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, while strengthening locally led initiatives by connecting grassroots peacemakers with national and international stakeholders.

Having completed over 10 in-person training sessions, a youth fellowship, multiple online campaigns, and events with local and national stakeholders, these grants significantly enhanced community-level engagement. The initiatives fostered robust networks that were responsive to the unique contexts of India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Thailand, with grantees adopting localized strategies to address specific challenges. Religious and traditional actors were prominently featured in the planning process to ensure local peacebuilding methods remained central to promoting peace and harmony. Except in Myanmar, where active advocacy is limited, all grants launched coordinated digital campaigns to disseminate tools and results, with Thailand utilizing local news outlets for a broader reach.

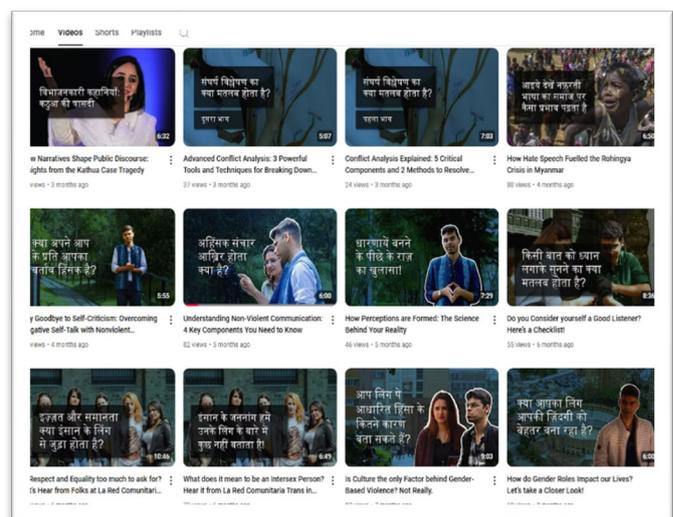
## Youth for Peace International, India

Youth for Peace International (YfPI), co-founded by Saumya Aggarwal, is a youth-driven organization committed to fostering peace through empowerment and sustainable community development. Its core efforts are focused on capacity building, grassroots action, and advocacy, aiming to train 170+ million young people in India to build sustainable societies and a peaceful world. YfPI conducts training sessions in conflict resolution and peace education primarily targeted at youth, including children and educators. At the community level, YfPI provides rehabilitation support to Rohingya refugees and runs a national mental health support helpline to provide emotional and wellbeing support. The organization also engages in creative online campaigns and policy advocacy, implementing the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda by forming a nationwide network of young peacebuilders in India.

Despite India's extensive youth population, and their being among the most affected by multiple and often interlinked forms of violence that plague the country and communities, bearing enormous and long-lasting human, social and economic costs, government support for youth-centric affairs, especially peacebuilding and social harmony, is limited. This is evidenced by the allocation of resources in the National budget and lack of focus on 'peace' or 'harmony' in the National Youth Policy. YfPI fills this gap by empowering young people to address the effects of violence and drive conflict resolution.

With support from the Peacemakers Network's 2024 Small Grant, YfPI set out to expand the accessibility of peace education across India, with a targeted focus on Manipur. The ongoing conflict in Manipur is fueled by ethnic tensions and insurgency, driven by historic grievances and competition for resources. Despite attempts at fostering peace through dialogues and ceasefire agreements, sporadic violence and ethnic clashes continue to obstruct the peacebuilding process. The communities in Manipur aspire to enhance their internal capacities to manage conflicts and engage in collaborative efforts rooted in shared values of peace, harmony, and mutual understanding.

To address these challenges, YfPI team developed [10 e-learning modules](#) on Peace Education and Conflict Transformation. These modules, available in Hindi and English, reached over 400 people, including those from minority and indigenous communities in remote and conflict-affected areas. The modules provide tools to manage communication in conflict, hate speech, and analyze and transform conflict. YfPI and its partners conducted a Digital Peace Campaign to spread the digital modules further, engaging communities in Bangalore, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Bihar and Delhi. The campaign included quizzes, instagram reels and two instagram live sessions, involving over 600 live viewers and reaching over 13,000 young people.



In Manipur, YfPI conducted a series of in-person peacebuilding training sessions. These programs empowered 81 young peacebuilders, community leaders, and women to manage conflicts at personal, interpersonal, and community levels. Trainings centered on self-awareness, prejudice reduction, non-violent communication, conflict transformation and negotiation. Despite challenges like floods and rising

conflicts, YfPI organized three workshops in different locations in Manipur. The first workshop, in collaboration with Development of Human Potential (DHP), involved 22 young peacebuilders. The second, with the Institute of Rural Education in Wangjing, Thoubal District, engaged 28 women leaders already active in local mediation and dialogue. The third was with Realm of Nature Based Action, involving 31 participants. The grant's final activity was a two-day Community-Based Dialogue involving different faith actors and 20 youth on 'Building Relationships Beyond the Divides.' Despite the escalating conflict, this session brought together individuals from various ethnicities, including Meiteis and Kukis and various other tribes, to build relationships and find common ground. A total of 39 youth, including IDPs, LGBTQI+, and community leaders, participated, enhancing their skills in dialogue, negotiation, and mediation amidst challenging circumstances. To raise awareness about indigenous efforts for peace in Manipur and to spotlight both their challenges and achievements, YfPI further documented 10 videos showcasing the experiences and practices of indigenous communities, focusing particularly on youth and women. These videos, along with others sharing lessons, challenges, and recommendations from young peacebuilders, traditional peacemakers, and community leaders, were produced to enhance understanding and recognition of local peacebuilding efforts.



Through this targeted and localized approach, YfPI strengthened the capacity of 120 traditional, indigenous, and grassroots peacemakers through in-person trainings. They also engaged over 400 young peacebuilders through e-learning modules and reached more than 13,000 youth via their digital campaign on peace education and awareness. Additionally, YfPI built a growing network of peace actors in Manipur and developed 10 educational modules that can be further disseminated and amplified for greater impact.

The support from the Network through the small grant showcases the significant impact such funding can have by enabling work with local actors directly on the ground and testing new, tailored approaches. However, for this work to be sustainable and have lasting effects, longer-term funding for locally led initiatives is essential.



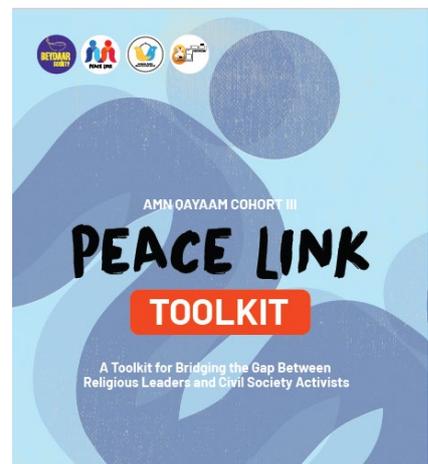
## Beydaar Society X Brhythm Creatives, Pakistan

Beydaar Society, co-founded by Hussain Haider and Hiba Ikram, is a youth-led peacebuilding organization, is dedicated to promoting peace, interfaith harmony, and religious freedom using tools like peace education, performing arts, and indigenous cultures. With over a decade of experience in Pakistan, Beydaar has established the National Youth Coalition for Peace, Pakistan’s largest youth coalition with over 200 partner organizations and 800 ambassadors.

With support from the Network AWG Small Grants 2024, Beydaar initiated the Youth Fellowship Programme: “Bridging the Gap Between Young Religious Leaders and Young Civil Society Activists for Sustainable Peace” from August to October 2024. The project fostered collaboration and understanding between diverse young religious and civil society leaders, addressing biases, discrimination, and sectarian divides, enhancing their capacities for conflict resolution and dialogue.

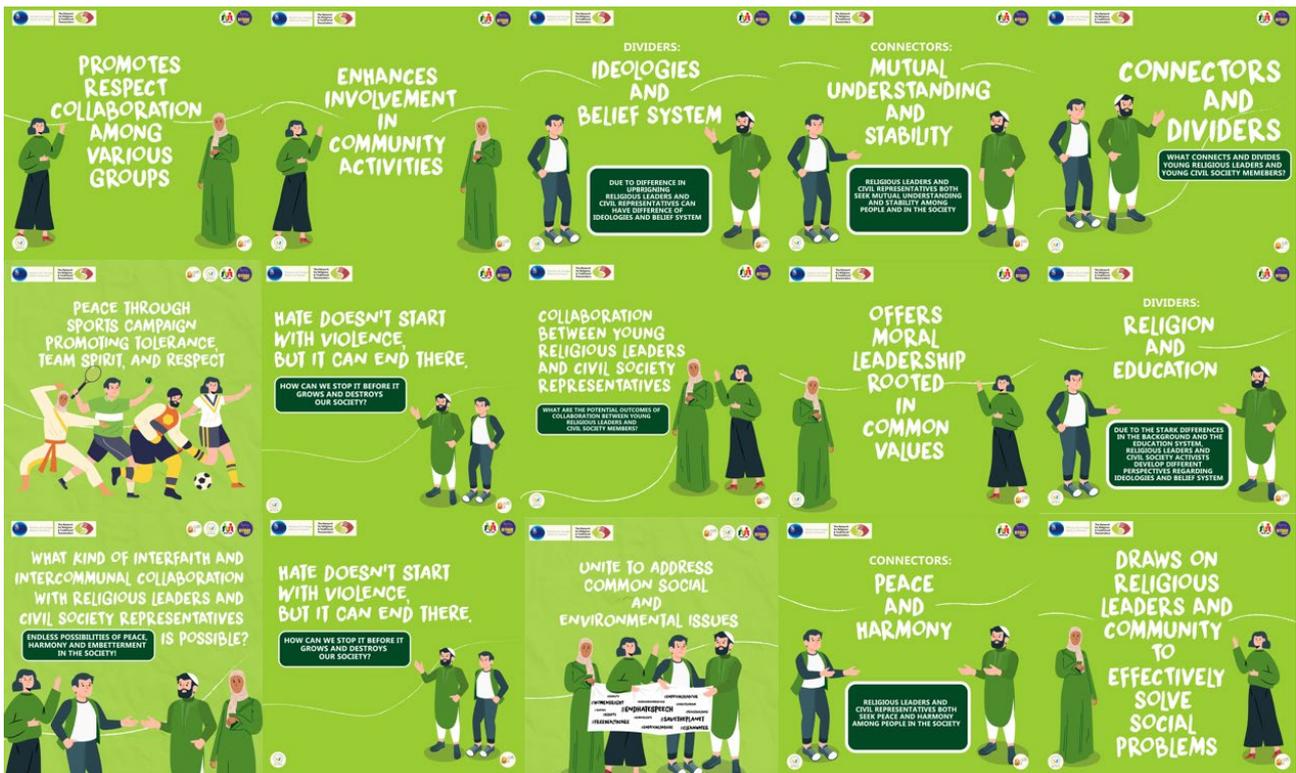


Prior to launching the Youth Fellowship Programme, Beydaar Society developed a comprehensive and context-specific toolkit designed to provide young leaders working at the community level with the knowledge and skills needed in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Collaborations with the Sheikh Zaid Institute and the Center of Research and Dialogue helped identify focus areas and tailor the fellowship to young leaders' needs. Receiving over 2,000 applications from across Pakistan, the project showcased young people's strong interest in peace initiatives. 24 participants—16 women and 8 men—from the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, were selected. The cohort comprised 10 young religious leaders and 14 civil society activists from Hindu, Christian, Sectarian Minority, and Sunni Muslim backgrounds.



The fellowship, organized at the University of Peshawar Summer Campus in Baragali, emphasized non-violent communication and peaceful coexistence through workshops, exercises, and group discussions. Participants, many of whom were initially hesitant to collaborate on sensitive topics like gender equality, peacebuilding and youth leadership, formed a unified network committed to peacebuilding in Pakistan, demonstrating that young religious and civil society leaders, despite political, sectarian and mindset differences, can come together with shared common goals and values in peacebuilding. Pakistan’s religious landscape is diverse and often divided along sectarian lines. Young religious and civil society leaders from different sects and religions (Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, etc.) find it challenging to collaborate. As these divisions hinder trust-building and shared peacebuilding efforts, creating dialogue platforms for

people from diverse backgrounds, in a safe and controlled environment, is key to the promotion of understanding, peace and collaboration. Hiba Ikram, Co-founder and Director of Beydaar Society, noted that several participants were inspired to apply the fellowship insights, such as viewing feminism and extremism through the lens of religious tolerance, in their communities. Post-project, participants held successful community sessions in KP and Punjab, focusing on reducing biases and stereotypes against religious groups. In parallel, Beydaar's sister organization, Brhythm Creatives, conducted a digital campaign using videos, animations, posters, and interviews to engage communities nationwide. This outreach, aided by consultants like musician Wajih Nizami, and journalist Sabookh Syed amplified the project's message and reach, spreading awareness.



**Key Quotes and Commitments:**

**Umer Farooq, Young Religious Scholar:** *“I come from a very religiously conservative family where there's no concept of socializing with women, and civil society is often viewed as a tool for promoting a Western agenda. This training has completely changed my perspective. I've realized that civil society and religious communities are often working toward the same goals, but because of misconceptions and stereotypes, they hesitate to come together and collaborate.”*

**Sumbal Javed, Young Civil Society Leader:** *“It's incredibly encouraging to see how welcoming and understanding our young, emerging religious leaders are. This fellowship has completely changed my perspective on religious communities in Pakistan. I'm now planning to conduct similar sessions in rural areas around Lahore.”*

**Israr Hussain, Young Religious Scholar:** *“Everything I've learned during this fellowship should be shared in my Friday sermons at the mosque, because it's all about tolerance and peace. I never had the opportunity to view issues like feminism, gender, violent extremism, and discrimination in the way I've seen them through this training. It has given me an entirely new perspective on religious norms and values.”*

Operating under escalating political and operational constraints presented significant challenges during the fellowship program, including:

- **Security Concerns:** In regions like KP where extremism and militancy are prevalent, young leaders faced threats, harassment, and violence. To ensure safety, participants requested anonymity, avoiding social media exposure. The project team respected privacy, collaborated with local security networks, and used closed online forums to facilitate safe participation.
- **Logistical Challenges:** Organizing in-person sessions was difficult, especially in involving participants from remote or politically tense areas. Flexible planning and digital platforms for follow-ups helped overcome these challenges, ensuring broader engagement and participation.
- **Regulatory Constraints:** Grassroots peacebuilding efforts in Pakistan are hindered by tight state restrictions on foreign funding, eroding trust between civil society and authorities, and heavy regulatory requirements. Beydaar Society addressed these issues by focusing on building local peace leaders' capacities through training, allowing participants to independently apply their learnings, minimizing direct intervention. This approach facilitated sustained impact while operating within restrictive environments.

Despite these challenges, the project successfully equipped 24 young leaders to lead broader peacebuilding efforts across Pakistan. The creation of a peace network and continued community-led initiatives are expected to further the project's impact and sustainability. This initiative not only enhanced young leaders' capacities but also promoted enduring peace through collaboration between religious and civil society sectors. The project's success lays a solid foundation for future peacebuilding efforts, with plans for continued engagement, support, and capacity-building.

To ensure long-term sustainability, Beydaar Society aims to establish ongoing training and mentorship opportunities for participants through virtual workshops, refresher sessions, and access to relevant resources. The society also intends to form a network of trained peacemakers from various sectors, including religious and faith-based actors, CSOs, NGOs, the UN, academia, and government agencies. Participants will be encouraged to assume ownership of peace-building activities in their communities and actively report on successes, opportunities, and challenges.



## Myanmar Youth Foundation (MYF) for SDGs

Myanmar Youth Foundation (MYF) for SDGs, led by Dr. Aung Than Oo, recognizes the importance of faith-based dialogue in fostering inclusive and supportive environments, and the crucial link between peace and social harmony and addressing the mental health crisis in Myanmar.

Amid ongoing internal conflicts, faith-based traditional peacemakers require platforms for social dialogue, sustainable peace, social protection, and mental health resilience. The escalating crisis, including human rights violations and violence, particularly impacting Indigenous and ethnic areas, increases the need for mental health support among internally displaced persons (IDPs) and local communities, as well as the demand for religious and traditional leaders to fill this need. To address challenges, Myanmar Youth Foundation (MYF) for SDGs implements youth-led interfaith dialogue for empowerment and social cohesion in Myanmar.

Trauma exacerbates social dynamics, raising the risk of serious mental disorders such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, particularly among marginalized groups like Indigenous women and youth who suffer from isolation and discrimination. Political instability, economic hardship, and the spread of misinformation heighten tensions, emphasizing the necessity of local community and religious leaders as first responders.

To inform their approach, MYF conducted community assessments through interfaith groups, identifying a clear need for more dialogue platforms among traditional peacemakers to promote sustainable peace and mental health resilience. Supported by the AWG Small Grants 2024, MYF implemented the project “Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Into Faith-Based Dialogue Efforts” from July to October 2024. The project was developed through consultations with diverse faith leaders, community leaders and relevant stakeholders, and further supported through online and in-person networking activities.



The project included a five-day MHPSS training and a Training of Trainers (ToT) session for 120 participants comprising religious, traditional, and community leaders. Trainings integrated counseling perspectives with Buddhist, Hindu and Spiritual teachings to develop emotional resilience, inner peace and community strength. The community-based MHPSS five-day training, held on September 28-29-30 and October 1 & 5, 2024, significantly enhanced participant knowledge and skills. 37 participants engaged in the first three-day session, followed by a two-day technical dialogue training with 32 participants, led by a Buddhist monk, focusing on the intersection of spirituality and mental health. The second training targeted indigenous women, youth, and local actors, to equip them with essential conflict resolution skills and strategies for the provision of mental health support.

Following the MHPSS training, a three-day Training of Trainers (ToT) on Empowering Faith-Based Dialogue took place from October 11 to 13, 2024, in the Naung U Bagan Heritage Zone, Myanmar, with 35 participants. This training enabled participants to develop 15 concrete action plans for fostering interfaith dialogue and enhancing MHPSS support within their communities. On October 14, 2024, MYF organized an interfaith dialogue involving 9 faith leaders and 16 local community leaders in Nyaung-U Township, aimed at empowering participants to manage stress, build relationships, and engage positively with their environments. The discussions focused on spiritual well-being, aspirations for peace, and actionable strategies. Participants included Buddhist monks, educators from the BaKa Schools, intercultural practice teachers, and community members involved in rescue and volunteer efforts aimed at promoting social cohesion. Through collaborative networks with various diverse groups, MYF's project reached an additional 400 individuals, including marginalized and indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, internally displaced persons, and community leaders, including former regional Hluttaw representatives, Civil Disobedience Movement leaders, education rights activists, social workers and revolutionary youth leaders.

#### Success Stories:

- **Venerable Thura** (name changed for privacy) is a Buddhist monk from Myanmar, whose community has been deeply affected by the ongoing conflict and political instability in the country, and he moved to an ethnic area to initiate his plans for social cohesion. As a respected faith leader, Thura has always been committed to serving his community and providing spiritual guidance and support. After the MHPSS 5-day training, he initiated weekly support group sessions, combining spiritual guidance with mental health support.
- A displaced young girl named **Marlar** (name changed for privacy), struggled with anxiety and fear. Through the MHPSS program and other various faith-based workshops, she was able to overcome her anxiety, express her feelings and build confidence, leading to increased community engagement and improved emotional well-being.

Challenges included cultural sensitivities, with individuals finding it difficult to discuss personal mental health issues openly due to cultural norms. Additionally, limited resources meant that many activities relied on unstable internet connections and high costs, presenting logistical obstacles for participant involvement. Finally, organizing in-person sessions posed significant security risks amidst armed conflict, necessitating strong safety measures for trainers and participants. It is essential to continue and expand MHPSS training programs, ensuring they are context-specific and locally driven. Future initiatives should focus on both online and offline training modes while creating flexible networks for collaboration and resource sharing. Fostering accessible support in remote and conflict-affected communities requires innovative approaches to address security and logistical challenges.

## Digital4Peace Foundation, Thailand

Digital4Peace Foundation, led by Maruf Chebueraheng, is a CivicTech organization committed to leveraging media, technology, and innovation to foster inclusive peace and sustainable development in Thailand's conflict-affected southern provinces.

Supported by the AWG Small Grants 2024, Digital4Peace initiated the Cultivating Peace Project from July to October 2024, aiming to empower youth through interfaith dialogue and media literacy training. The project convened representatives from various organizations in Deep South Thailand, including faith-based institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, and policymakers. 13 individuals from key organizations participated in pre-workshop meetings and online consultations, establishing a strong foundation for the project's goals. Key partners include: IBHAP Foundation, COFACT Thailand, The Buddhist Network for Peace (B4P), Christian Association of Pattani, and Religions for Peace, Inter-religious Council of Thailand (RfP-IRC Thailand).



On October 5, 2024, the Cultivating Peace youth interfaith dialogue event drew 55 participants from the region's three main religious communities: Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian. The event focused on fostering dialogue, enhancing media literacy, and empowering youth as peace agents. Noteworthy attendees included Mr. Sanan Sontimuang, the Deputy Governor of Pattani, who expressed governmental support for the initiative and future cooperation between state authorities and civil society in promoting interfaith understanding. This collaborative spirit between state authorities and project stakeholders is crucial for creating a sustainable impact and fostering a more cohesive approach to addressing the peacebuilding challenges in the region.



Media coverage from government outlets like The Government Public Relations Department (PRD), the National News Bureau of Thailand (NBT CONNEXT), NBT YALA, and NBT Songkhla amplified the project's message of interfaith harmony and reached a wider audience, raising widespread awareness about the importance of interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding in Deep South Thailand. The link to media coverage can be found here: [ข่าวเด่นประเด็นไต้หวันที่ 9 ต.ค.2567 โครงการ Cultivating Peace –พัฒนาศักยภาพเยาวชนชายแดนใต้](#)

The day kicked off with an ice-breaking session, followed by a panel discussion, "Faith in Conversation: Building Interreligious Bridges in a Digital World," featuring interfaith leaders who discussed religion's role in peace and countering information disorder. A practical workshop on media literacy and fact-checking, conducted in collaboration with COFACT Thailand, equipped participants with techniques to identify and counter disinformation and misinformation within religious contexts. COFACT also disseminated live updates and created an informative infographic summarizing key insights. The day concluded with a brainstorming activity titled "Re-imagine the Future," leading to innovative youth-led initiatives. These included collaborative volunteer work at religious sites through a Youth Interfaith Volunteer Initiative, promoting diversity and respect with an "Under the Same Sky" Initiative, and enhancing relationships, interfaith dialogue and understanding through an envisioned Interfaith Youth Programme. Additionally, they proposed a National/International Inter-religious Youth Leader Exchange for leadership experience, and Comparative Religion Learning to promote interfaith understanding via education. Others included the Interfaith Short Film Initiative for storytelling and the Faith-Related Fact-Checking Initiative, engaging youth in verifying religious news.

Collaboration with eight network organizations successfully engaged 55 youth from Thailand's southern provinces in comprehensive interfaith dialogue and media literacy training, as well as support from key religious and traditional leaders, CSOs and policymakers Thailand's southern provinces. Post-training surveys indicated high satisfaction, with participants rating their enhanced skills at an average of 4.5 out of 5. Feedback highlighted the value of open dialogue with peers from different faith backgrounds and the practical media literacy skills gained.

The dedication of the youth and their commitment to addressing the conflicts' limiting opportunities underscores their readiness to engage in peace-promoting strategies. The support from state authorities creates opportunities for ongoing collaboration in fostering interfaith dialogue and social cohesion across the Southernmost provinces of Thailand.

