

Building Peace Together



Youth-led initiatives
to prevent violent
extremism

Inspiring practices from
South & Southeast Asia



Key recommendations and Executive Summary

About the partners



The Kofi Annan Foundation & Extremely Together,
Switzerland

The Kofi Annan Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organization that works to promote better global governance and strengthen the capacities of people and countries to achieve a fairer, more peaceful world. One of our key areas of focus at the Foundation is promoting youth leadership in the context of preventing violent extremism which we work on with our Extremely Together initiative. Launched in 2016, the Extremely Together initiative works with a global network of young people who help us respond to the increasing threat of recruitment and narratives of violent extremist groups. The network is made up of ten young leaders from around the globe and four country chapters in the Philippines, Pakistan, Somalia, and Uganda. Through our initiative, we aim to provide a sense of identity and purpose to young people worldwide, helping them to take action for positive change and peace in their communities.

Learn more about the Foundation: <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/>

The College of Youth Activism and Development (CYAAD), Pakistan

CYAAD is a non-profit organization based in Pakistan which aims to empower local youth. Its main areas of focus are poverty alleviation, youth inclusion in politics, countering extremism and radicalization, and empowering young people through education and technical training to encourage entrepreneurship and social development. It subscribes to the philosophy that young people are brimming with energy and potential, and that they should be given the knowledge and confidence to act.

Learn more about the organization: <https://www.cyaad.org.pk/>

The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), Bangladesh

GCERF is the global fund dedicated to preventing violent extremism. They connect local communities to global resources and support grassroots initiatives that are typically out of reach for international donors to help them develop and thrive. GCERF has been active in Bangladesh since 2016 and supports local level initiatives that work to strengthen community resilience against violent extremist agendas.

Learn more about GCERF's activities in Bangladesh:

<https://www.gcerf.org/bangladesh/>

The Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (KRIS), Philippines

KRIS is a non-profit organization based in the Philippines that aims to promote peace through education by empowering young people to become pillars of peace in their own families, schools, and communities. KRIS commits to developing Filipino youth by building avenues that cultivate a cycle of peace and empowerment. The organization aims to strengthen the networks between the youth and its fellow civil society organizations through different projects, campaigns, and exhibits to showcase unity in the country despite differences between individual Filipinos.

Learn more about the organization: <https://www.krisforpeace.org/>



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About the project



From 2020 to 2022, the Kofi Annan Foundation's Extremely Together initiative worked on the "Leading the Way to Peace – Youth Together for Social Cohesion" project with the financial support of the European Union. The Foundation partnered with the Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (KRIS) in the Philippines, the College of Youth Activism and Development (CYAAD) in Pakistan, as well as the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and Rupantar in Bangladesh to promote youth engagement in peacebuilding efforts in urban communities across the region. Together, we conducted extensive research¹ in three countries on how and why urban youth may be vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist organizations. This project led us to test different strategies to strengthen social cohesion in these settings and gave us the chance to support close to 60 youth-led initiatives, and train and empower over 2,700 young people² to act for peace in their communities. Through this collaborative effort, we were able to learn from one another's experiences, improve our practices and share our insights with partners and other youth organizations from the region.

1 Read about our research here: https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/publications/research-urban-youth-building-peace-in-south-southeast-asia-key-drivers-of-violent-extremism-and-ways-to-prevent-it/attachment/urban-youth-building-peace-in-south-and-southeast-asia_2021_final/

2 Based on figures reported by 31 January 2022.

Recommendations to the European Union and its Member States

Based on the lessons drawn from this project, we have identified policy and programmatic recommendations to the European Union (EU) and its Member States for their external action on how to foster youth leadership in preventing violent extremism (PVE). While these lessons and recommendations are mainly inspired by this work with urban youth in South and Southeast Asia, they can provide valuable insight into youth-led PVE action in various settings.

Why are these recommendations relevant to the EU and its Member States' external action?

- The EU is the world's first development aid donor. As a value-driven global actor, The EU's external action relies on several principles, including a human rights-based approach which highlights the need for cross-cutting inclusivity to help promote ownership of activities. In that spirit, the EU is evolving towards the mainstreaming of the youth lens, notably in its external action.
- By having trained over 2600 young people in PVE and supported design and implementation of over 30 projects that promote peace in their communities, the KAF initiative supports the Council of the EU's conclusions of 5 June 2020 on Youth in External action.
- More specifically, the conclusions recognize the important and positive contribution of young people in efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. They also stress the need to actively engage youth in efforts to build lasting peace, to contribute to justice and reconciliation and to counter violent extremism.
- These recommendations come at a timely moment as the EU has declared 2022 to be the Year of the Youth, and an EU Action Plan on Youth in External Action is expected by the end of the year.

Political and policy recommendations

1 Do not overlook urban, educated, middle-class youth in PVE efforts, especially if identified as a key target group through baseline research. Think beyond the poor, less educated young people who are usually targeted by PVE work

- Young people in urban settings are vulnerable to recruitment because they lack the community-based social structures that hold youth accountable in rural settings. In addition, the technical expertise developed by university students is sought after by violent extremist groups. In Pakistan, the phenomenon of radicalization in elite universities is reinforced by a social pop culture that glorifies violence and toxic masculinity. The easier access of urban youth to the digital space also increases their vulnerability, as 82% of radicalized youth in Bangladesh are recruited online.
- Digital natives, urban youth are the most enthusiastic when it comes to connecting, learning and sharing content on social networks. As such, they hold considerable influence over contemporary social, cultural and religious narratives, which gives them a comparative advantage when they engage in PVE efforts.

2 Invest in learning and joint action within and between regional networks

- There is a need for sustained exchanges of knowledge and best practices between CSOs at different levels (i.e., national, regional, interregional, international).
- Youth CSOs working in PVE, in Asia or elsewhere, lack support structures to which they can resort to when faced with a question or a challenge.

3 Prioritize partnerships with local actors, especially existing youth organizations and networks

- Existing networks are usually the best point of entry for further action.
- Their context-specific knowledge can provide critical insights into the priorities, interests, and motivations of young people, which will increase legitimacy and ownership of the action.

4 Make donor support more flexible and long-term

- PVE efforts require changes in attitudes, behaviors and relationships. Upholding the positive impact PVE interventions have on young people requires adequate accompaniment. This would prevent young people from falling back into old ways once the project has been completed. Such long-term changes are hardly compatible with the short duration of the project cycle and funding.
- Young people and youth organizations often lack resources (human, technical, administrative), which makes it difficult to access funding. Establishing lighter procedures would enable youth organizations to access grants.

5 Include a bottom-up approach in EU's PVE programs

- A study conducted by KAF showed that encouraging and supporting youth to lead their own PVE projects and campaigns develops a sense of ownership among youth and keeps them engaged.

Programmatic recommendations for cooperation funding

1 Engage with relevant youth and beyond

- Ensure that a diverse range of young people are systematically included in all baseline studies and early consultations at the beginning of any PVE program that engages young people.
 - > This would help refine the target audience and tailor the action to their needs, thus favoring the young participants' ownership of the process.
- Invest time and resources to find strategic allies to PVE within the youth environment, such as young opinion-makers, teachers, families, elder members of the communities, religious leaders and local governments.
 - > These persons of influence, or "middle-persons", act as facilitators and points of contact. This would sustained and lasting engagement of young people.

2 Use innovative dialogue formats

- Encourage initiatives that combine a peer-to-peer approach and capacity building as an effective method to engage youth in PVE:
 - > If youth are put in the driver's seat and are given skills and support to come up with solutions, it gives them the opportunity to resort to what they learned to implement local interventions and campaigns and strengthen their voices in the community.
 - > This also develops their self-confidence, communication and leadership skills, which are particularly useful to them as they grow up, enter the job market and play an increasing role in their communities.
 - > Letting youth lead the intervention and mobilize peers creates a multiplying effect.
- Create safe spaces to enable full participation of youth.
 - > The environment should ensure increased attention to the needs of marginalized groups such as young women and minorities, as well as facilitate intergroup and interfaith dialogues, in order to hold constructive discussions that allow to break existing prejudices and taboos.

- Ensure that PVE activities enable participants to communicate in their local/regional language.
 - > It will enable to build a strong link with the participants quickly.
 - > It will enable to grasp the participants' understanding of PVE more accurately, and therefore making it simpler to demystify the concept of violence and how to prevent it.
- Encourage innovative approaches when designing online activities, such as interactive outreach activities using games and storytelling.
 - > It can help counter digital fatigue caused by the prevalence of "socially distant events" due the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Encourage initiatives that use art and culture to make PVE relatable and engaging for young people.
 - > Using art, music and sports-based interventions will help to mobilize young people around contested and sensitive issues in a less controversial way. It could also help overcome existing barriers and create a sense of common belonging between young people from different groups.

3 Use a comprehensive PVE approach

- Include awareness-raising activities on disinformation and cybersecurity in programs dealing with youth and PVE.
 - > This could help minimize the risk posed by the digitalization of extremist narratives and mitigate its adverse effects.
- Ensure that health support, especially mental health support, is included in all programs dealing with PVE.
 - > It is crucial to create safe spaces and healthy movements for vulnerable youth who feel excluded. In addition, the creation of mental health support groups could allow young activists to manage the heavy impact of social pressure and loneliness experienced by those working in PVE.

Executive summary

Building Peace Together: A guide on inspiring youth-led initiatives to PVE



Building Peace Together is an in-depth guide for young peacebuilders and their allies to prevent violent extremism. It assembles learnings and advice from diverse civil society and youth-led organizations, drawing on inspirational practices of young peacebuilders in South and Southeast Asia. The guide aims to motivate youth, especially from urban areas, to work towards building peace in their own communities, focusing on three key areas of action:

- Encouraging young people to rally around preventing violent extremism (PVE)
- Promoting a strong sense of shared responsibility amongst youth, and creating a healthy environment in which they can grow and thrive
- Leveraging the power of youth to scale up movements and provoke systemic change

Under these three main goals that encourage youth-led efforts to prevent violent extremism, the guide identifies seven key challenges that practitioners face. It offers 30 solutions for overcoming these challenges and takes young people through the process of reaching out to their peers through to scaling up their movement and putting it on the global map. It also includes ten case studies from different civil

society organizations around the region that help demonstrate how the guide's principles can work in practice.

The impulse behind the guide was given by the Kofi Annan Foundation's "Leading the Way to Peace – Youth Together for Social Cohesion" project supported by the European Union. Since 2020, the Foundation and its Extremely Together initiative have been working with young leaders across South and Southeast Asia on preventing violent extremism in the region. The project was carried out in collaboration with our partners the Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (KRIS) in the Philippines, the College of Youth Activism and Development (CYAAD) in Pakistan and the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and Rupantar in Bangladesh. Together, we researched the motivations behind youth involvement in violent extremist activities, trained over 2700 young people in PVE, and supported the implementation of close to 60 participant-led activities designed to promote peace in their communities.

In the past decade, the South and Southeast Asian region has witnessed a series of attacks that were perpetrated by educated, middle-class and urban youth. These attacks challenged previous PVE approaches in the region, which had been focusing on low income, marginalized communities. A new, more holistic approach was needed. This is where Extremely Together sought to fill the gap by involving young people who by their energy, creativity, and idealism, are uniquely positioned to push for positive change and prevent violence in society.

ACTION**1****Encouraging young people to rally around PVE**

Getting youth excited about preventing violent extremism (PVE) and peacebuilding is often the greatest hurdle young peacebuilders face when seeking to promote change. To overcome this, the guide encourages young peacebuilders to make PVE less daunting, and as relatable as possible – for instance, by organizing recreational activities to attract new members and make the topic more engaging. When rallying other young people to their cause, young peacebuilders must also be specific about their target group. Understanding who their target is, what they do, and where their interests lie will help them curate their messages, and tailor their activities to specific groups. Partnering with local youth organizations and engaging with a large of community actors can also help young peacebuilders establish trust and credibility with those they wish to reach. Finally, once they have crafted a strong message and adopted an audience-specific approach, the guide highlights how young people can spread their message via online campaigning and other outreach methods.

ACTION

2

Promoting shared responsibility, and creating an environment in which young people can grow and thrive

Another challenge that many PVE organizations and actors face is how to create meaningful inclusion of youth and foster belonging – especially when it comes to youth from marginalized communities. To do so, the guide encourages young peacebuilders to take note of their contextual biases, and conduct a personal reflection on stigma, discrimination, and cultural biases they carry within. Having worked on their internal awareness, young peacebuilders are then better equipped to communicate it outwardly. For instance, the guide encourages youth-led activists' organizations to publicly challenge discriminatory narratives and support the inclusion of diverse communities, even within their own frameworks. Creating meaningful inclusion of young people also involves engaging them in every step of the process, from ideation to implementation, as this will strengthen their sense of ownership. Whenever possible, young community members should be called on to co-create and co-lead projects which guarantees their long-term engagement. Special attention should be paid to ensuring that minority groups and marginalized communities feel included. This can be done by challenging stereotypes, building trust, listening to their needs, and elevating their voices.

Having explored how to initiate contact, the guide then turns its attention to sustaining engagement and gaining momentum within a youth-led movement. One way for movements to sustain participation is for them to offer their members incentives. The guide outlines suggestions for various incentives that may be used to strengthen ownership amongst one's peers. Findings in the guide suggest that reaching out to young participants both online and in face-to-face activities works best for sustaining engagement. While a strong social media presence helps movements stay connected to their online community, regular in-person meetings are important for creating strong emotional connections between participants. By utilizing both approaches, movements can stay connected with young participants and retain engagement over time. Building trust, friendships, and encouraging community participation is an essential component of every unified movement. This directly impacts young participants' capacity to work together and the quality of a movement's output.

A second aspect of sustaining engagement and growing momentum is guaranteeing the physical and emotional safety of young practitioners and those working with them. For a youth-led movement, guaranteeing the safety of its participants should be of utmost priority and this guide outlines the steps it can take to do so. Reconciling different points of view goes hand in hand with building healthy and unified youth-led

ACTION

3

Scaling up movements and provoking systemic change

action, but this needs to be done respectfully and sensitively. It is also crucial that movements provide mental health support to help manage the heavy impact of social pressure and loneliness experienced by those working in PVE. When guaranteeing the physical and emotional safety of its young people, the guide encourages movements to pay attention to their cyber health and the safety tools at their disposal. In an increasingly hostile cyber world, youth must be able to identify and protect themselves against hate speech and disinformation.

Once youth-led movements have solidified their engagement strategies, the guide motivates them to start scaling up their activities beyond the local level to reach more people either nationally, regionally, or even globally. Fostering mutual learning and joint action between young PVE activists at different levels is an important first step. One way for movements to do this is by setting up networks of peer-to-peer learning which provide an opportunity for groups to increase their visibility, elevate their voices, get inspiration, share experiences, and lean on other like-minded groups to build their capacity. Creating partnerships with larger organizations can also help movements strengthen their credibility, especially if they are still operating on a smaller scale. To scale and grow their movement, and create systemic change, youth-led movements should also seek the support of policymakers and government leaders to advocate for and invest in youth-led PVE actions. For this, priorities for youth-led action must align with policymakers' key thematic priorities. This will help movements reach out to multipliers and allies within the government who can help amplify youth voices and elevate their concerns.

In addition to working towards systemic change, youth-led movements must be able to translate their work and message into the broader arena. To gain visibility and scale up their PVE efforts, movements should align their programming with local, regional, and global agendas for peace. Capitalizing on critical moments that galvanize public attention (e.g., mass protests, elections, constitutional reforms, or security incidents) can also help move forward a given narrative. The fact that people are more open to change at these pivotal points in time can also give youth-led action just the right impulse to grow into tangible organized action.

