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Discussion Paper: The State of Civic Peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia, 2023

About the study

Discussion Paper:

The State of Civic Peacebuilding
in South and Southeast Asia, 2023



- The study explores how civil society actors engage in peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia, and how civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives have been shaped by regional conflict dynamics and broader changes in the relationship between civil society and states.
- The purpose of the study is to reveal initial insights, identify key issues, and identify areas for further programming and research.
- The research design for this report consisted of a literature review and interviews.
 - **A desk-based literature review** was conducted with a focus on media reports, research from non-government organizations (NGOs), and statements made by governments between 2010 and 2022.
 - **25 semi-structured interviews** including young (under 30 years old) and experienced peacebuilding practitioners from civil society, academia, and the NGO sector, with a nearly 50-50 gender split.
 - **Interviewees' backgrounds ranged across ten countries:** Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.



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Key finding #1

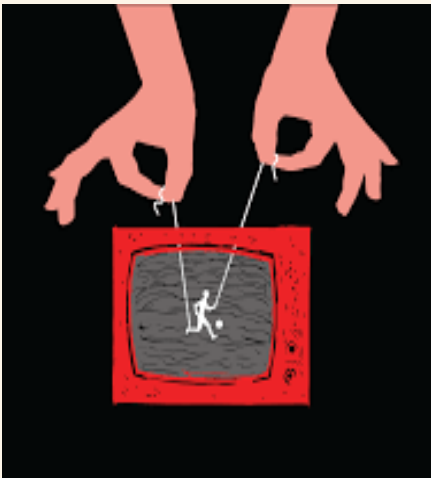


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In my context, I think special laws like martial law, emergency decree, lèse-majesté, and criminal procedures add to the root cause of the conflict. These have damaged the peace processes [...] These laws politically favor the military government [...] Judiciary has now become a key factor, which does not contribute to peace but to conflict.” – Interviewee, Thailand

In line with the global trend of democratic recession, civic space is shrinking throughout Asia, requiring civil society to adapt its approach to peacebuilding.



The rise of populism poses a threat to civil society and thus to fundamental democratic principles.

The rising geopolitical tensions and the impact of climate change have led to a more challenging environment for civic engagement in peacebuilding.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the decline of democracy in the region.

Key finding #2



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In spite of restrictions and the coup, civil society organizations have proven very resilient and have adapted to become a key component of the resistance movement. This should bode well for the future when peacebuilding comes back to the fore.” – Interviewee, Myanmar

The reconfiguration of civic space has led to the emergence of new actors and types of peacebuilding activities to address contemporary conflicts.



Civil society peacebuilders have adapted their peace work by utilizing new spaces, strategies, and alliances in oppressive environments.

Increasing public discourse in many Asian countries has allowed civil society to address local conflict issues.

Key finding #3

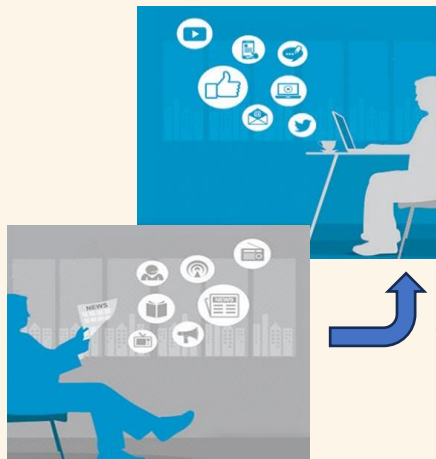


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“ *It was during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic that we invested much in online spaces because we realized that we could do a lot on social media for advocacy and training [...] First, it gives us more credibility. Second, we expand our audience. And third, we forge collective alliances and solidarity through social media. – Interviewee, Bangladesh*

New media technology can serve as a tool for enhancing civic engagement in peacebuilding activities, but may also be used to drive polarization and violence.



Civil society peacebuilders have adapted and moved some of their peace work online, with a greater focus on advocacy and networking.

The increase in social media use fuels divisive politics and polarization of opinions and facilitates the use of violence.

There has been an increase in online mis/disinformation and governments' responses with various digital governance strategies.

Key finding #4



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This is just our experience in engaging in formal processes. There is still a structural limitation in terms of engaging civil society like us [youth-led organizations] in formal processes. There are limited rooms and spaces for us to sit in the negotiations or to observe the processes.” – Interviewee, The Philippines

Increased attention to the potential of youth and women has led to more inclusive and intergenerational approaches in peacebuilding, despite ongoing barriers.



Youth movements have forged novel regional solidarities.

Intergenerational tension and divides amongst peacebuilders in some countries

Peacebuilders of all generations agree that current peacebuilding spaces continue to exclude young voices.

There is an increased role for women in conflict resolution and prevention at the grassroots, national, and regional levels, despite cultural barriers in some places.

Key finding #5



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One reason [for restriction on funding] is the anti-terror law. This policy limited NGOs and civil society organizations to looking for funding agencies. This law gives the government authority to impose more requirements on banks, which prevents us from applying for funding. Also, this limits funding agencies to support local NGOs. And now, it's been tough for us. – Interviewee, The Philippines

Civil society peacebuilders have experienced increased challenges accessing funds and must seek alternative fundraising arrangements.



The funding environment for peacebuilding activities has drastically changed over the past three years (since Covid).

Increasing government surveillance of financial transactions restricts civil society's access to international funding.

The existing funding architecture excludes social movements or less formally organized entities.



In response to funding challenges, peacebuilders have turned to self-funding their operations, or sought alternative fundraising activities.

Implications for peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia

- The international community should **work with local civil society groups** to understand increasingly complex and unpredictable dynamics, strengthen alliances, and support local needs.
- The international community should **build on the capacity** of a mature peacebuilding community at both national and community levels, to support **local ownership**.
- International actors can play an **enabling and facilitative role** in connecting civil society with governments, the private sector, and other key actors, to support greater regional cooperation.
- **Trust building and long-term relationships** between local organizations, as well as between local and international organizations, should be prioritized.
- In the digital age, **dialogue** between policymakers and civil society actors in regulating and creating safe digital space is also required. There is a need for **capacity-building programs, youth training, and financial support for youth-led peace activities**.
- **Women**, though often excluded from formal peace processes, **should be supported to play a central role in conflict management**, especially at the communal level.



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Available at
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