

# Strengthening Resilience to Covid-19 Online through Social Cohesion



**The Asia Foundation**  
Improving Lives. Expanding Opportunities

The global sweep of the Covid-19 pandemic poses serious challenges for developing countries and regions such as South Asia. Marginalized populations that share intersecting identities, such as women and girls, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities, are especially vulnerable to the health, rights and security, economic, and broader governance implications of the crisis. The Asia Foundation's regional project, the South Asia Regional Project to Strengthen Community Resilience to Covid-19, supported by the European Commission, aims to address the immediate threats and long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic faced by the most vulnerable populations of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

Make compassion  
**contagious**



In Sri Lanka, the Foundation hopes to address the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the most vulnerable populations, especially youth located in the Western Province, which was identified as a high-risk area. The project primarily targets young men and women, as well as general netizens, who engage on social media, sometimes spreading misinformation and promoting negative mindsets and multiple narratives on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

The project builds and strengthens young people's resilience against the negative impacts of Covid-19, future pandemics, and other emergencies in Sri Lanka, specifically through the promotion of shared values and concepts such as social cohesion and social media literacy.

The Foundation believes that if young men and



women, especially vulnerable groups and netizens, are given necessary awareness on countering online misinformation and disinformation related to Covid-19, and if fundamental humanistic values are embodied within the youth communities in relation to broader discrimination, then the online resilience of vulnerable populations against the negative impacts of Covid-19 and future pandemics and other emergencies will be strengthened.

## **COUNTERING ONLINE DISINFORMATION & DIVISIVE NARRATIVES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA & TRADITIONAL DIALOGUE**

To better understand vulnerable groups and the issues they faced during the pandemic, the Foundation recently completed a rapid qualitative

assessment within the Western Province from March to September 2020. The findings indicate that misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech were already commonplace and widespread on social media before Covid-19. However, the onset of the pandemic added another layer of disinformation that has compounded existing tensions and vulnerabilities. It was also observed that the use of social media as an information tool had increased during this period. Key findings derived from the research are being used to ascertain the core focus of an online counter-messaging campaign that aims to encourage young people to engage and take a stand on important community issues related to the pandemic, especially with regards to hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation.

In partnership with Sarvodaya, Roar Media, Hashtag Generation, and other youth-focused organizations with an established online presence, the Foundation is developing and disseminating regular interactive content via social media platforms under a hashtag campaign titled #StrongerTogetherSL. The campaign consists of diverse content from graphics, infographics, animations, videos, and articles designed to foster awareness among youth. Through this gender-sensitive content, the Foundation aims to highlight messages on the importance of possessing better values during times of crisis and identifying fake news, among other timely topics. The campaign promotes messages that convey the need for greater social cohesion and focuses on values such as respect, tolerance, peace, compassion, honesty, sincerity, and cooperation.

## PROMOTING SHARED VALUES AND POSITIVE

This program is funded by the European Commission.

## ETHNORELIGIOUS DYNAMICS AMONG YOUTH

To strengthen the Values Curriculum developed by the Foundation in 2012, 14 new innovative activities that focus on understanding and countering misinformation and disinformation were developed through the project. These activities were integrated online through the Values4All website ([www.values4all.lk](http://www.values4all.lk)) and an Android-based mobile application.

In partnership with Sarvodaya, a series of trainings of trainers were conducted for these 14 activities among a core group of 60 youth leaders from across the three districts within the Western Province. These youth leaders are being supported to implement the activities among their peers across the Western Province.

## SENSITIZING AND SHARING KEY MESSAGES ON ONLINE CAMPAIGNS WITH SUBNATIONAL AND NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

The Foundation supports the Institute for Health Policy (IHP) to conduct a monthly tracking survey of public well-being and views during Covid-19. These activities build on and support an ongoing national initiative conducted by the Sri Lanka Health and Ageing Survey (SLHAS), led by IHP and local universities. Some areas which will be addressed through the survey include social, economic, and health well-being, access to health care, and access to education.

The Foundation intends to share the outcomes of the online campaign, feedback from young people, and lessons learned from the rollouts with local and national level authorities through engagement with project participants to inform future policy development.

*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*



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