Discussion Paper:

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

This paper details the opportunities and challenges facing civil society actors working in the field of peacebuilding or peace activism in South and Southeast Asia. Shrinking civic space has become a global phenomenon, and while this trend towards greater authoritarianism and populist politics has heavily infringed on civil society-led peacebuilding across the region, national-level impacts are mixed. Laws, regulations, and attitudes have combined to constrict the programming of and funding opportunities for civic actors in Asia—a trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and by legislation that restricted public assembly and free speech. At the same time, both traditional nongovernment organizations and less traditional peacebuilders—such as social movements, youth organizations, and academics—have demonstrated ingenuity and resilience in negotiating and reconfiguring the parameters placed on civic space. Though the overall trend in many countries may be one of democratic backsliding, civil society peace actors have navigated these challenges through the use of new and old tools and tactics such as social media, digital mediation, and civil disobedience. These tools have also led to new civic solidarities that have pried open spaces through cooperation and coordination across the region. Evidence for this study is drawn from 25 interviews with a diverse group of civil society peace actors from countries in South and Southeast Asia, as well as an extensive review of relevant literature and media. The evolving dynamics described in this discussion paper hold important implications for peacebuilding policy and practice across the region.

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Introduction

Between 2010 and 2020, armed conflicts in South and Southeast Asia were in decline.[1] Over this period, deaths recorded from conflict dropped by two-thirds.[2] At the same time, global trends such as rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, polarization, and the divisive impact of social media have led to, exacerbated, or otherwise contributed to different forms of conflict and fragility. These sometimes less overt, but no less dangerous, forms of conflict have included urban protests, civil uprisings, and increasing social tensions. Many protracted conflicts, such as those in southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Sri Lanka, teeter on the edge of violence; while the military takeover in Myanmar has led to widespread conflict. This baseline study seeks to understand how the shifting context in which these conflicts occur has affected the role of civil society and its role in peacebuilding. It examines the current concerns, strengths, and future needs of civil society actors as they engage in peacebuilding initiatives.

Across South and Southeast Asia, civil society actors are involved in a range of peacebuilding processes, using various means to pursue their interests and support peace in their communities. Often operating beyond the gaze of international attention, these actors complement various efforts of national governments, local governments, and non-governmental bodies in the region to prevent or resolve conflict. However, in the last decade, global democratic backsliding has shrunk civic space in a way that has tested the ability of civil society to adapt. Legal or de facto restrictions on civic action have led to a reconfiguration of the civic space, with new tools, strategies, technologies, and forms of cooperation emerging. While online spaces have provided new platforms for peacebuilding activities, they have simultaneously become a new frontier for conflict and violence. Increasing recognition of the potential of women and youth has led to more inclusive and intergenerational approaches being embraced by civil society actors. Finally, funding challenges continue to shape how civil society operates, while the increasing surveillance of financial transactions by governments poses new challenges for peacebuilding initiatives in some regions. Recognition and appreciation of these trends are vital for understanding the evolving nature of civil society-based peacebuilding, the challenges civil society actors face, and opportunities for civil society's role and contributions to increase.

Through desk-based research and interviews, this baseline study explores civil society initiatives at both the national and regional levels. Its purpose is to provide international actors with a broad understanding of the way community-based civil society groups in Asia currently operate, what challenges they face, and how they are evolving. While serving as a starting point for future analysis and reporting, this preliminary research provides an initial picture of how international actors could support civil society initiatives and/or leverage their expertise in peace processes across Asia.

About the study

Peacebuilding is defined as the practice of addressing structures of inequality and root causes of conflict.[3] This baseline study analyses the current state of peacebuilding activities led by civil society actors. Civil society refers to communities, groups, or organizations that operate outside the governmental and for-profit sectors and aim to advance the interests of citizens or to serve as interlocutors between communities and government.[4] These groups operate outside of government and business, in the so-called 'civic space.'[5] Civic space is defined as the physical, discursive, administrative, and virtual spaces where citizens can gather, discuss interests and concerns, and take individual or group action.[6]

This baseline study explores how civil society actors engage in peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia, and how this has been affected by changes across the region. Specifically, it explores 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. Secondly, the research team conducted 25 semi-structured interviews. Interview participants included young (under 30 years old) and experienced peacebuilding practitioners from civil society, academia, and the NGO sector, with a near 50-50 gender split.[7] Interviewees' backgrounds ranged across ten countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.

Key findings

> **1. In line with the global trend of democratic recession, civic space is shrinking throughout Asia, requiring civil society to adapt its approach to peacebuilding.**

66 The place for peacebuilding work is shrinking. And it has shrunk in such a way that it has become very difficult, particularly for the national organizations to operate and to do that kind of work."

—Interviewee, Myanmar

A rise in authoritarian-style politics emerged globally in the mid-2000s.[8] At the center of these political dynamics was the rise of leaders who have used the region's rising sectarianism, polarization, and explosion of social media to bolster their political bases. These leaders deploy divisive rhetoric against political rivals and ethnic and religious minority groups, sometimes blaming them for entrenched societal problems.[9] This trend has combined with the deepening of market reforms that, in some instances, have allowed military-linked domestic conglomerates to consolidate their political, economic, and military power.[10]

This trend is particularly evident in South and Southeast Asia, due to rising geopolitical tensions and the impact of climate change. The increasing economic and strategic competition in Asia between major global powers directly impacts bilateral and regional diplomatic engagements. Furthermore, the Asia-Pacific region is highly vulnerable to the impact of global warming. Climate change has already led to localized conflicts over land and water resources in some areas.[11]

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated ongoing democratic declines in the region.[12] From February 2020, governments in Asia began enacting emergency laws, introducing policies, and setting up task forces to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak in their countries. Many of these measures placed restrictions on civic activities, such as freedom of assembly and movement.[13] For example, the Thai military-led government maintained the March 2020 emergency decree even after the spread of Covid-19 was contained. The

degree, along with other draconian laws, has been used to charge anti-government protesters and suppress the public backlash against allegations of government-linked human rights violations.[14] More generally, the economic downturn caused by the pandemic and associated public health measures has exacerbated economic inequality, prompting rises in protest and civil unrest across the region.[15]

These global and regional trends have led to a restriction of civic space. A key element of effective civic space is the facilitation of individual and group participation in policy processes through engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent or disagreement, and joining together to express a certain view.[16] However, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, geopolitical competition, climate change, and the ongoing consequences of the pandemic have drastically reduced the ability for individuals and groups to engage in this kind of dialogue. This has forced civil society to adapt to a new and more restricted environment. A 2021 regional analysis undertaken by Solidar, a network of over 60 NGOs, concluded that civic space is shrinking, particularly in Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand.[17] As described by an interviewee of this research:

> " In my context, I think the 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. They actually discriminate against or even stereotype some particular populations and become more violent, like arresting suspected or innocent people, accusing them of being terrorists or extremists without any due process. […] Judiciary has now become a key factor, which does not contribute to peace but to conflict."
>
> —Interviewee, Thailand

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

> " 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

Civil society peacebuilders have adapted their peace work by utilizing new spaces, strategies, and alliances in oppressive environments. Civil movements have played a critical role in opening up civic space and confronting authoritarianism. The protests and major social movements that have occurred since 2020 in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, and Thailand involve loose networks of fluid and constantly changing actors cooperating in broad coalitions. They are united by one or more common overarching causes—often despite disagreements on other issues or visions for the future. These disparate movements mostly align through their choice of tactics, such as the use of protests, sit-ins, vigils, boycotts, and civil disobedience.

Universities and think tanks are playing a significant role in social movements, complementing the efforts of traditional peacebuilding NGOs. Some universities in Asia have peace studies departments that function as hubs for peacebuilding activities, bridging research and even mediation efforts across the region. These specialty departments may cooperate closely with universities in other, often Western, countries. The university environment provides a space for individuals to connect and organize around common interests, and to occasionally provide education and support to civil society groups. However, in some countries, universities and think tanks are aligned with or controlled by governments. This limits their impartiality and autonomy to engage in peacebuilding activities. Universities may also restrict the freedom of speech of students within their control, leading to a further reduction in civic space.[18]

Increasing public discourse in many Asian countries has allowed civil society to address local conflict issues. For example, a peacebuilder from Timor-Leste cited increasing public knowledge and popular acceptance of peacebuilding activities as a benefit of the country's positive trajectory toward peace and democracy. The respondent described the growing willingness of Timorese people to talk openly about their complex and fractious history. He stated that Timor-Leste now manages societal conflict, "*based on the rule of law and democratic processes* [...] *we can now agree to disagree with each other in a good way, a peaceful way.*"[19] He also acknowledged that peacebuilding and reconciliation activities have tremendously contributed to Timor-Leste's growing democracy.

Despite a different historical context, a similar trajectory can be observed in Sri Lanka, where diverse political and civil actors united in protest against the government in early 2022. Peacebuilders, victim groups, civil society organizations, labor unions, political parties, and grassroots community organizations mobilized for greater economic, civil, and political rights. In this case, an economic crisis, democratic backsliding, and the perceived impunity of political elites united what were otherwise diverse groups. The mobilization against the Rajapaksa government opened space for a critical re-evaluation of the ethnonationalism that has defined Sri Lankan politics since the end of the civil war (1983–2009).[20] After the mass protest movement that began in March 2022, cooperation between civil society and the new government that emerged from the crisis was at an unprecedented high. Despite the economic crisis and political instability in Sri Lanka since this time, civil society peacebuilders continue to recognise the current political climate as a great opportunity to "*heal the wounds of the civil war and create a more inclusive society in Sri Lanka.*"[21]

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3. 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.

> " 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. Until now, we still always have online sessions, and we post posters and infographics about our courses and activities on social media. First, it gives us more credibility. Second, we expand our audience. And third, we forge collective alliances and solidarity through social media. Also, because [...] with all the negative propaganda, we counter these narratives online and present an alternative, grassroots narratives from the people."

—Interviewee, Bangladesh

Covid-19 lockdowns significantly challenged traditional peacebuilding initiatives, such as training, dialogue initiatives, reconciliation efforts, and other activities, due to restrictions on in-person group meetings. In response to these constraints, **civil society peacebuilders have adapted and moved some of their peace work online**, **with a greater focus on advocacy and networking.** New actors and networks emerged as more people were able to participate in peace dialogues and activities worldwide by using digital platforms and technologies. These emerging networks then facilitated and fed into offline movements. In this sense, new media technologies have strengthened civil society networks and enhanced the accessibility of peacebuilding activities to allow civil society actors to participate. However, the gap between those that have access to modern information and communications technology and those who do not—called the 'digital divide'—has created and reinforced inequalities in communities' access to peacebuilding initiatives. Access to technology often hinges on different demographics, regions, and knowledge, creating inequalities around access to information and resources.[22] This leads to a situation in which only those with access to the internet and a certain degree of technological savviness can engage in online peacebuilding processes.[23]

Following the dramatic increase in social media use during Covid-19 lockdowns, governments across the region responded with various digital governance strategies. Many governments extended existing media and cyber-security laws to regulate misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic. However, these laws have also proved effective in managing dissent and silencing public criticism of governments' pandemic responses.[24] Besides technological censorship, existing laws were used to punish dissent and promote self-censorship.[25] For instance, critics have said that Indonesia's 2008 law on electronic information and transactions was applied against independent researchers who were critical of measures taken by the government to combat the pandemic.[26] The Bangladeshi government detained political opponents and civil society leaders who criticized Dhaka's Covid-19 response, often under the *Digital Security Act,* which extended powers of arrest for online actions.[27] Other South and Southeast Asian political actors (such as in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) have also adopted strategies, marked by the existence of hired social media influencers ('cyber troops') aimed at manipulating public opinion on controversial government policies.[28]

> " People of different religions or people of different social classes post something inflammatory towards other groups, which increases the conflict in society…I think social media has got good and bad aspects."

—Interviewee, Nepal

The sharp rise in social media usage fuels divisive politics and polarization of opinions and facilitates the use of violence. As Amnesty International claimed, Facebook's algorithms produced an echo chamber of anti-Rohingya content in Myanmar, contributing to an environment which enabled widespread and systematic military atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in 2017.[29] In many contexts, social media have undermined the ethics of journalism, substituting laypersons and tech companies' algorithms for editorial decisions and principles of 'Do No Harm'. To enhance user engagement, these algorithms filter information towards the biases of its users, showing them more of the content they are interested in by responding to the pattern of 'clicks' and 'likes' generated by each user. This process, designed to boost engagement and maximize targeted advertising revenue, funnels users into like-minded groups, amplifying divisive voices in the process and creating echo chambers with downward spirals towards more extreme content.[30]

> " Given its powerful messaging, speed, and scope, social media has tended to cement opinions and positions without adequate reflection. This has hindered the work of peacebuilding. And misunderstandings tend to become more difficult to resolve."

—Interviewee, the Philippines

In this way, social media can mobilize and shape users' values. Research has demonstrated how sectarian, ethnic, or other social divides are susceptible to the "weaponization" of the digital space, in which existing divisions are exploited and further polarised. In conflict-affected environments, crisis, insecurity, and fear can lead to increased screen time for many users as they attempt to make sense of the chaos and rumors. In addition, these downward spirals can be exacerbated by intentional aggressors who use social media to promote inflammatory public narratives, whip up discriminatory views and actions, raise funds, recruit fighters, and organize acts of violence.[31] These methods often operate to transform latent social divisions or unrest into violent conflict.[32]

> ## 4. Increased attention to the potential of youth and women has led to more inclusive and intergenerational approaches in peacebuilding, despite ongoing barriers.

" We've been doing a lot of intersectional work, not only focusing on peacebuilding but also pushing for gender justice, climate justice, human rights. We see these as interconnected, intersectional struggles to achieve a more just and inclusive society. We focus not only on young people but also women, indigenous people, and LGBTQ groups."

—Interviewee, Myanmar

The younger generation holds a more holistic view of justice, conflict, and peace. This research indicates that young people are more likely to perceive social, political, economic, gender, and environmental rights as interrelated, and accordingly recognize the benefits of supporting campaigns across a wider and frequently cross-cutting range of social issues. For example, individuals and groups in Myanmar's civil disobedience movement highlighted the connection between military oppression and the oppression of women and minorities, thus increasing their support for these groups.

In addition, **youth movements have forged novel regional solidarities**. For example, the Milk Tea Alliance is a network of anti-authoritarian youth activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Myanmar, and Thailand, who engage with each other primarily online and through such institutions as the Asia Democracy Network. These new connections are forged between seemingly disparate struggles using new technologies and online spaces. This trend is both driven by, and itself reinforces, a greater sense of regionalism in South and Southeast Asia.

Generational differences in values, preferences, and practices on peacebuilding have led to intergenerational tension amongst peacebuilders in some countries. Having grown up in a decade in which violent conflicts have drastically decreased in some countries, the younger generation has views, needs, and priorities that differ from those of the older generation. Moreover, youth-led peace activities are more likely to use new methods and types of discourse, which often focus on creativity and public engagement. This includes methods such as story-telling videos, sit-ins, and flash mobs.

> **"** We [older people] have a different way of approaching things, you know. I'm not conservative, but you can't always go in 'guns blazing.' The younger NGOs are just more radical. Just last week, one of the organizations had just gone off to one embassy big time and told them off."

<div align="right">—Interviewee, Malaysia</div>

Social media contributes to intergenerational divides in peacebuilding, as younger generations engage more online, form connections between social movements, and leverage online technologies to enhance collaboration. A good illustration is transnational solidarities formed between activists in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Many of the mostly young and digitally savvy protesters have united online under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. The online coalition has allowed protesters to share tactics and amplify one another's messages.[33] Many older peacebuilders are not involved in these movements, relying instead on more traditional networks.

However, peacebuilders of all generations agree that current peacebuilding spaces continue to exclude young voices. In many places, the role of youth in formal peace processes and the related political sphere has been limited, even though the potential and contribution of young people to peacebuilding are widely acknowledged. Consequently, a sense of exclusion has remained among the younger generation. Many established peacebuilding organizations have failed to incorporate youth movements, ideas, or knowledge of popular culture, new media, and digital technologies in their peace activism. The absence of youth voice and role in peacebuilding activities has contributed to a generational gap among civil society peacebuilders.

As both experienced and young peacebuilders explained:

> **"** Youth engagement in this online space is also sort of increasing in countering hate speech and disinformation. That's what we have seen in the last two or three years, especially during the Covid-19 [pandemic], it has increased not only in Bangladesh, but globally [...] But I think that one of the missing things is they are good at online, but an offline mode where they really want to engage in political discussion, I do not see that much engaging at that level [...] Engagement on the political process is still around two to three percent overall."

<div align="right">—Interviewee, Bangladesh</div>

> **"** 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."

<div align="right">—Interviewee, the Philippines</div>

Women are increasingly pivotal in conflict resolution and prevention at the grassroots, national, and regional levels in Asia.[34] Women's participation in peacebuilding has been shown to generate more buy-in from communities and makes peace more sustainable.[35] To leverage women's role and influence, the Southeast Asian Network of Women Peace Negotiators and Mediators was established by the Indonesian government in 2019 to connect women negotiators and mediators in the region. Other

networks—including the Southeast Asian Peacebuilders Network established in 2020 by IMAN Research Malaysia, the Asian Muslim Action Network Indonesia, Walailak University Thailand and The Centre of Excellence on Women and Social Security—have formed in recent years.

However, **cultural barriers in some places continue to deter women,** and young women in particular, from actively participating in peace activities and processes. Women peacebuilders are often targeted with defamation and online and offline hate speech.

> " In post-conflict areas that you have seen in different parts of the world, women are becoming more engaged. Still, again, the spaces for women's engagement in political and peacebuilding processes, there are some restrictions where they can really bring forward all those issues. […] I would say that the nature of the state, the more restrictive or authoritarian, the more or less there are limited scopes for civil society and also from a gender perspective to get into this space."

—Interviewee, Bangladesh

> " When I joined the field, I didn't have much of a voice as a young woman. At that time, it [peacebuilding] was mostly male-led."

—Interviewee, Sri Lanka

> " We are living in a patriarchal society. Nowadays, young females have progressed or have the knowledge to fight for gender equality. But we still live in this patriarchal society, so when we give our voice on digital platforms, we still get gaslighted. We are labeled as social justice warriors, liberal or radical activists, and so on. So, we should keep our mouths shut and remove our campaign. There are many negativities or labels that we got […] There are a small number of Muslim feminists in Indonesia. The perspectives on women are still conservative […] We should stand up to say that gender equality is valid from the Islamic perspective."

—Interviewee, Indonesia

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

> " Because of the global situation, it has become quite difficult nowadays actually to get funding. And I do not think it will change in the future […] We probably have to accept that we have to operate within a reduced financial environment."

—Interviewee, Bangladesh

The funding environment for peacebuilding activities has drastically changed over the past three years. Covid-19 redirected funds toward the health emergency, resulting in most civil society organizations facing challenges in securing funds for traditional peacebuilding work.[36]

> " During the Covid-19 pandemic, funding had been cut off. Before covid, we had two projects funded by a US donor, but later in 2021, we got lost. We seem to no longer have a sustained budget to work on the issues that we are working on such as gender-based violence."

—Interviewee, Cambodia

In addition to this trend, certain conflicts in the region, such as in the Philippines, Nepal, and Timor-Leste, are subsiding. This has led donors to reduce or cease funding of peacebuilding initiatives in the region, notwithstanding the persistence of ongoing low-level conflict. Where funding is available, it tends to be restricted to shorter timelines, typically one to three years at most, and is almost exclusively reserved for defined programmes rather than essential core support, especially for local organizations.[37] The short-term funding affects the sustainability of peace initiatives and leaves many organizations without core funding and uncertain about their future operations. In some countries, the reduction in funds has made organizations more reliant on government funding, which in turn increases government oversight. This financial reliance restricts the independence of peacebuilding organizations and is problematic when a state is a party to a conflict.

Increasing government surveillance of financial transactions restricts civil society's access to international funding. Imposing restrictions on transactions is a potent way for the state to monitor, uncover, make inferences about, and ultimately shut down NGO activities.

> " 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 prevent us from applying for funding. Also, this limits funding agencies to support local NGOs. And now, it's been tough for us. There was like a policy because this was part of the anti-terror law to have full disclosure. This means all the funding we receive should be disclosed to the government, and there is a surprise auditing from the government."

—Interviewee, the Philippines

> ❝ The current situation in Sri Lanka is very challenging because we are forced into self-silence. There are all kinds of operations happening to hamper a person's peace works in terms of legal amendments. For example, if you are running a peace organization, you have to register under the NGO Secretariat, which is now established under the Ministry of Defense. If you transfer funds to a local NGO, the banks will scrutinize and ask for documents and reasons, copies of the project proposals, and all these things. So, at the organizational and individual levels, you are under the government's surveillance."

—Interviewee, Sri Lanka

Furthermore, **the existing funding architecture excludes social movements or less formally organized entities**. Traditional funding models, which prioritize partnerships with established organizations that have transparent and verifiable accounting structures, create a structural limitation on funding for emerging peace actors and their informal peace activities. Consequently, this barrier not only impacts peace activities led by youth, which are usually informal, but also reduces the willingness of organizations to innovate in peacebuilding generally.

In response to funding challenges, some peacebuilders have turned to self-funding their operations, while some use alternative fundraising activities, such as religious-based charity donations and holding concerts or dinners. Rapid economic growth over recent decades in much of the Asia-Pacific region has increased disposable incomes across some sectors of the population, improving the scope for local fund-raising in several countries. This is potentially a very significant change for current and future generations.

> ❝ In Muslim countries, we have Zakat Fund [obligatory charity in Islam]. It is a religious-based charity. So, the [Zakat] fund is an initiative led by the [Bangladesh] government."

—Interviewee, Bangladesh

> ❝ Most of our programs are self-funded. And we do not really have a fund. So sometimes, when we have to do fundraising, we invite the musicians and have a concert where people can donate. That is how we organize ourselves, and we do not really rely on international organizations' funding or the government per se."

—Interviewee, Timor Leste

Implications for peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia

This study illustrates that both traditional civil society organizations, as well as a set of less traditional peacebuilding actors such as social movements, youth organizations, and academics, display great ingenuity and resilience in negotiating and reconfiguring the infringements placed on civic space. This space is not just shrinking (though that might be the overall trend in many places) but is constantly being

negotiated through the use of new and old tools and tactics such as social media, digital mediation, and civil disobedience. These tools have also led to new civic solidarities that further pry open spaces through cooperation and coordination across the region. This dynamic and emerging understanding of civic space holds important implications for peacebuilding policy and practice across the region.

Conflicts, as well as the peace processes that address them, increasingly demonstrate complex and unpredictable dynamics. In some cases, states which have historically practiced prolonged repression of civic space have liberalized, allowing past conflicts to be discussed freely for the first time, as in Sri Lanka. In others, such as Myanmar, new and intense challenges have emerged, leading local peacebuilders to call on neighboring countries to intervene. Viewed over a longer timeframe, local peacebuilding is highly and often directly political as shifting spaces for civic action and blurred distinctions between government and non-governmental roles often illustrate. The international community should work with local civil society groups to understand these dynamics, strengthen alliances, and support local needs.

At the same time, the international community should build on the capacity of a mature peacebuilding community at both national and community levels, including through customary and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, and ensure peacebuilding assistance supports local peacebuilding efforts first and foremost.[38] The South and Southeast Asia regions have gained immense experience in addressing and managing conflicts through the post-colonial and Cold War era.[39] Peacebuilding in South and Southeast Asia has traditionally adhered to locally-led approaches, emphasizing the leading role of domestic or regional bodies and restricted engagement with intergovernmental institutions. This approach prioritizes the role of domestic or regional bodies and neighboring countries to prevent and resolve conflict, rather than international bodies such as the UN and Western nations. Past examples of concerted international engagement exist—in Timor Leste and Cambodia, perhaps most obviously—but they are no longer recognized as a norm.

> " … Asia has grown up, especially Southeast Asia. We are saying we have all of these capacities. So, we thank for all your help, but we don't need a UN envoy for that, and we don't need you to come with that patronizing program. So, in a way, we've started to shed […] colonial baggage. I think that in Asia, we've moved past that. I don't think we talk anymore about colonialism and how it held everybody back. I think everybody's sort of grown up and moving forward."

—Interviewee, Cambodia

Local actors should drive and own all associated processes. Joint participatory analysis can be a useful tool to map out new actors and approaches, while collective learning can subsequently be used to distribute innovation across organizations and in different contexts, adjusting for variations. Given the localizing tendencies of peacebuilding in Asia today, this process should primarily be achieved through regional peer-to-peer and South-South cooperation that can gradually develop into a community of practice.

In this regard, **international actors can play an enabling and facilitative role in connecting civil society with governments, the private sector, and other key actors through open, inclusive, safe, and equal platforms.** Meetings and conferences should aim for the broad inclusion of government and non-government actors under the banner of conflict management, and should facilitate intra- and inter-regional and cross-level conversations on the critical issues associated with the effective implementation of peace processes. This allows common strategies to be developed based on an alignment of priorities and objectives in response to the needs and capacities of different actors.

Additionally, trust building and long-term relationships between local, as well as international, organizations should be prioritized. With greater trust, collective action can be more flexible, adaptable, incremental, and built on continuous learning. Appropriate funding models that promote long-term engagement and dynamic program activities should be pursued with peacebuilding actors throughout the region.

> 66 "The most important thing, if you (international organizations) would like to support us, is trust in us […] We know better the local context […] we need certain kinds of flexibility in doing things with local people. They (local people) are the most important stakeholder that we need to take care of"
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> —Interviewee, Indonesia

> 66 A kind of support [from international organizations] that enables me to do my work effectively is a more flexible approach to peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is complicated and unpredictable. To require peacebuilders to submit long-term activity plans is to ask for the impossible."
>
> —Interviewee, Myanmar

In the digital age, dialogue between policymakers and civil society actors in regulating and creating safe digital space is also required. While intergovernmental and governmental bodies monitor, oversee, and tackle violence on online platforms, there is a need for capacity-building programs that enable peacebuilding practitioners to strategically and systematically use social media technologies for conflict prevention and management. In addition, given the high proportion of young people engaging in digital peacebuilding, financial and other resources must be invested in youth training and youth-led peace activities. Incorporating youth's energies and practices into peace activism helps to bridge the generational gap and build solidarity across different sectors.

Women, though often excluded from formal peace processes, should be supported to play a central role in conflict management, especially at the communal level. Increasingly, women peacebuilders have become present at the center of peacebuilding efforts. Women should be actively involved and take on leadership roles at all stages of peace processes, including planning, execution, and evaluation. The mainstreaming of gender perspectives in peace activities is also essential and can be ensured through gender-specific training for peacebuilders.

This paper has identified and addressed two related yet seemingly opposed trends. First, civic space appears to be shrinking across the region as more authoritarian governments restrict freedom of speech and public assembly. Second, civic peacebuilders are finding ways to engage through social media and other new tools, in the process reinvigorating longstanding tactics from dialogue to civil disobedience. Most civic engagement remains local or national, while regional cooperation has also offered channels of support and action.

The tensions between these two trends are likely to persist, generating a vibrant and sometimes challenging field for supporting peacebuilding measures at a time of rising regional tensions and concerns over increasing risks of instability. Further research can explore this field in greater depth through more detailed comparative assessment and case studies, thereby improving understanding of ongoing changes and potentially considering the complex interface between state-led peacebuilding and the role of civil society.

Endnote

1. These figures are excluding Afghanistan, as conflict deaths greatly outnumber incidents from South and Southeast Asia. Burke, A., et al. (2021). *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia 2021: Identity-based Conflict and Extremism*. San Francisco: The Asia Foundation.

2. See above footnote.

3. United Nations General Assembly Security Council (2018) *Peacebuilding and sustaining peace (A/72/707–S/2018/43)* https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/015/53/PDF/N1801553.pdf?OpenElement

4. World Economic Forum (2018) "Agenda in Focus: Civil Society, Who and What is 'civil society?'", April 2018, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/

5. CIVICUS (2018) "People Power Under Attack: A Global Analysis of Threats to Fundamental Freedoms," November 2018, https://www.civicus.org/documents/PeoplePowerUnderAttack.Report.27November.pdf.

6. Ibid.

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21. Interview, Sri Lanka

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37. Interviews, the Philippines, Nepal, and Timor-Leste

38. The indigenization of peacebuilding practice is embedded in a larger localization process, stepping away from the western peacebuilding model that relied on Western experts, mediators, and intergovernmental institutions.

39. One way to understand the trend away from Liberal Peace is as a particular post-colonial stage in peacebuilding and state building in the region, where the peacebuilding of post-colonial wars and various wars of succession, gave rise to a cadre of local peacebuilders embedded in strong civil society institutions.