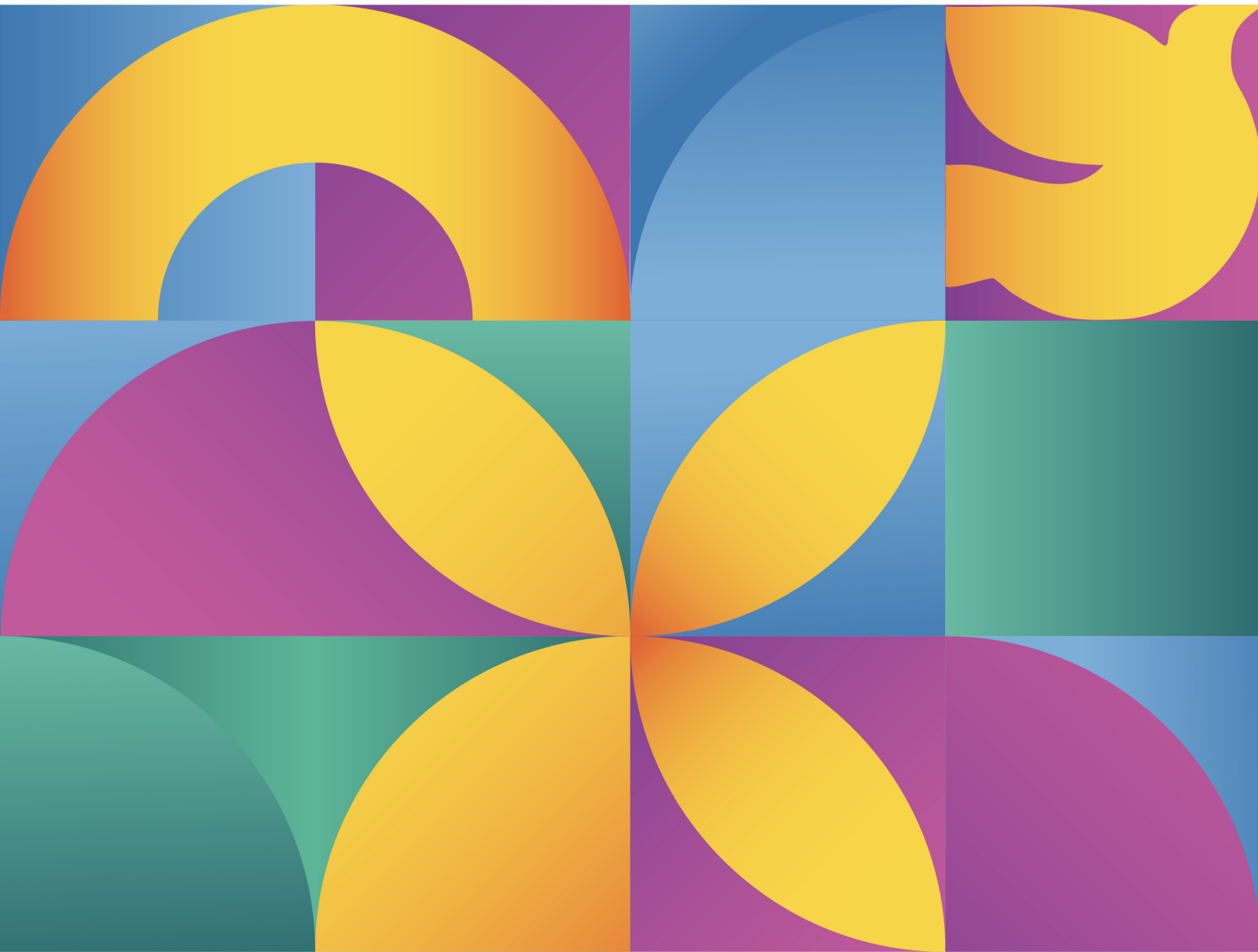


Strengthening Local Conflict Prevention in Asia and the Pacific

October 2025



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The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of The Asia Foundation or its funders.

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The Asia Foundation is an international nonprofit organization working to solve the toughest social and economic challenges in Asia and the Pacific. Informed by more than 70 years of experience and deep local knowledge, we work with partners across more than 20 countries through 17 offices to improve lives and expand opportunities. Our funding comes from a diverse array of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

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October 2025



The Asia Foundation

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Executive Summary



Despite decades of peacebuilding efforts and remarkable progress against development indicators, violent conflict persists across parts of Asia and the Pacific.

Ongoing challenges include unstable politics, violent extremism, and protracted subnational conflicts, alongside emerging risks presented by climate change and technological disruption. These threats are entrenched in many places by unresolved grievances, weak formal mechanisms, criminal networks, and persistent poverty.

The impact of violence is often felt most acutely at the local level, especially where these trends are compounded by other, unresolved conflicts that directly affect people's lives such as disputes over land or access to water, gender-based violence, and tensions between communities.

While international frameworks and commitments to preventing and resolving all forms of violence regularly stress the importance of locally determined paths out of conflict, wider understanding of what approaches or practical steps are most effective remains limited.

Drawing on decades of experience, The Asia Foundation and its partner organizations have built a proven track record of strengthening the capacity of communities, civil society, and local governments to prevent conflict and mitigate its effects. This report summarizes a comparative assessment of these locally led initiatives.

The researchers asked what common elements made local engagement successful across many types of conflict prevention work: early warning systems; preventing and countering violent extremism; community policing; community mediation and dialogue; transitional justice, reconciliation, and social cohesion; local governance and institutional reform; women, peace and security, and gender-sensitive programming; and research and analysis.

The evidence for this assessment is drawn primarily from evaluations of programs implemented by The Asia Foundation and its local partners across the region. The practical insights and reflections presented here are intended to inform future efforts by policy makers, practitioners and donors in strengthening context-specific, locally led conflict prevention initiatives across the region.

Key Findings

The research findings identify five factors that are critical to the success of local conflict prevention.

1. Placing Communities at the Center

A community-centric approach is key to local conflict prevention, with local actors directly involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating efforts. Supporting local communities, civil society, and governments is vital, but equally important is ensuring that people from vulnerable groups or communities are integrated into conflict prevention frameworks.

2. Building Trust through Long-Term Engagement

Consistent and sustained engagement with local partners is crucial. Maintaining open communication with communities, government bodies, and other key stakeholders, alongside active participation in meaningful dialogues, is vital for building mutual trust. Long-term collaboration fosters deeper understanding, which ultimately strengthens the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts.

3. Building Stronger State-Community Relations

Facilitating dialogue among local communities, civil society, and government institutions, promoting participatory governance, and enhancing local government capacity will help ensure that peacebuilding efforts are locally owned, state-supported, and more effective in ensuring long-term sustainability and accountability.

4. Staying Agile: Flexible and Adaptive Management

Conflict prevention in complex or post-conflict settings requires flexibility to navigate evolving circumstances. An adaptive management approach throughout program cycles enables organizations to respond to shifting needs and environments, ensuring that interventions remain relevant, effective, and aligned with the intended outcomes. This dynamic process not only enhances program effectiveness but also promotes accountability to communities, governments, and donors.

5. Using Research Evidence to Drive Context-Specific Responses

Relevant research data strengthens conflict prevention efforts by ensuring they are context-specific, well-informed, and address the root causes of conflict and violence. Key research methods such as conflict analysis, stakeholder mapping,

baseline assessments, and political economy analysis can be applied to examine the social, economic, and political dynamics in conflict-affected areas. Over time, building organizational knowledge of local contexts through research and through the contributions of experienced local staff proves invaluable, allowing for the design of tailored and impactful interventions.

Despite much progress, challenges remain, such as navigating the complexities of local governance, addressing political resistance, and securing sustainable funding. Adapting to shifting political dynamics and integrating local perspectives remain essential to ensuring the continued effectiveness and relevance of conflict prevention work.

Recommendations for Strengthening Locally Led Conflict Prevention

To stay ahead of emerging challenges and ensure sustainability, funders and practitioners looking to strengthen local conflict prevention in Asia and the Pacific should:

1. **Foster collaboration and learning** that strengthens cross-country and regional collaboration and enables organizations to integrate and adapt successful strategies.
2. **Enhance evidence-based approaches**, investing in data collection, analysis, and robust monitoring and evaluation. Strengthen partnerships with local research institutions and researchers to build long-term capacity.
3. **Expand the role of women and youth in peacebuilding**, not only as beneficiaries of conflict prevention programs but as critical agents of change.
4. **Support local government and local institutions** through innovative ways of strengthening accountable and participatory governance mechanisms at the local level, and work with governments to embed conflict prevention in broader agendas and frameworks.
5. **Engage for the long term**, ensuring that programs are framed within broader development agendas and developing innovative financing mechanisms.

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Introduction

This report draws on The Asia Foundation’s extensive experience in locally led conflict prevention to distill key lessons, emerging trends, and practical recommendations for strengthening community-driven approaches to peace.

Based on comparative analysis of conflict prevention programs and direct engagement with local partners across Asia and the Pacific, it sets out what works, where challenges remain, and what donors and practitioners can do differently to better support sustainable responses at the local level.

Led by conflict prevention specialists at The Asia Foundation (TAF), the report focuses on practical, context-specific approaches to preventing violence and addressing the root causes of conflict. This report focuses on locally led or locally-defined conflict prevention approaches, which broadly include community-driven actions led by local civil society organizations, local governments, traditional leaders and other subnational institutions that address sources of tension before they escalate into violence. Grounded in TAF’s institutional experience and a review of regional programming, it offers actionable insights for policymakers, donors, and practitioners committed to advancing more effective, locally led peacebuilding.

The aims are to:

- Understand current approaches to locally led conflict prevention
- Identify best practices, successes, and challenges
- Develop guidance to strengthen future conflict prevention work

To achieve these aims the research employed multiple methods, drawing on TAF’s programming experience in more than 20 countries. The research process included a review of global best practices and relevant TAF programming from 2019 through 2024; interviews with experienced program specialists; and a regional workshop convening TAF staff, regional experts, and partners to explore emerging trends and develop a framework for conflict prevention.

This multi-layered approach ensures that the findings presented in this report are grounded in practical experience and diverse regional perspectives. An Annex provides an overview of The Asia Foundation’s experience in conflict prevention, including a list of relevant programs reviewed, and further detail on the research methods.

The report begins with an overview of current conflict trends in the Asia-Pacific, providing important context for understanding the role and potential of locally led prevention efforts. We hope that these practical insights, and reflections on their strengths and weaknesses, inform future efforts across the region.

Conflict Trends in Asia and the Pacific

Despite decades of peacebuilding efforts, violent conflict persists across parts of Asia and the Pacific. While some conflicts have stabilized, subnational and localized tensions continue, and new risks are emerging in an increasingly uncertain world.¹ National governments and international actors have often responded with military and kinetic security action, high-level dialogue, and policy reforms. However, these strategies frequently fall short of addressing the root causes of instability, particularly at the local level. In many cases, conflicts are contained rather than resolved, as underlying political, social, and economic grievances over huge wealth disparities between regions and perceived collusion among self-interested elites remain unaddressed.

Rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, socioeconomic inequalities, and the divisive impact of digital platforms are reshaping conflict dynamics.² These trends are further exacerbated by geopolitical rivalries, resource scarcity, environmental changes, rapid urbanization, and shrinking civic space—the latter has constrained civil society’s ability to contribute to peacebuilding.³

While national and international peacebuilding efforts remain important, there is growing recognition of the value of locally led conflict prevention approaches, which can avert costlier interventions once conflict has erupted.⁴ These community-based efforts draw on local knowledge, relationships, and contextual expertise to address the deeper drivers of conflict and foster long-term resilience. Yet, despite their demonstrated effectiveness, such initiatives often remain underfunded and under-supported.⁵

Conflicts such as Myanmar’s post-coup crisis continue to dominate headlines, but numerous subnational and localized conflicts persist even in otherwise stable states. Armed confrontations, unresolved grievances, and weak governance structures fuel long-term instability.⁶

Despite some genuine progress, such as expanded civic engagement and peace dialogues in places like Mindanao, the Philippines, conflict data indicate that civil and subnational conflicts across the region remain widespread and persistent.⁷ In many cases, governments continue to prioritize short-term stability over solving deeper political and socioeconomic drivers of conflict.

The cumulative impact of these trends further strains social cohesion and increases the risk of future instability. Without greater investment in inclusive, locally led conflict prevention and peacebuilding, these underlying dynamics will continue to undermine efforts to build lasting peace across the Asia-Pacific.

Enduring Subnational and Localized Conflicts

Subnational conflicts continue in places such as Mindanao, the Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Myanmar, where long-running insurgencies and ethnic-based tensions persist. In Mindanao, the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was an important step forward, but political rivalries, economic disparities, and security concerns continue to affect stability. In Southern Thailand, Malay Muslim insurgents remain engaged in a protracted struggle against state authority, citing political and cultural marginalization as key drivers. While civil society organizations (CSOs) and peacebuilding networks have contributed to localized conflict mitigation, state security responses continue to dominate.⁸

In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup has escalated violence, leading to tens of thousands of fatalities and mass displacement. The crisis has intensified long-standing subnational conflicts involving ethnic armed organizations and newly formed pro-democracy resistance groups, making Myanmar a regional outlier in terms of conflict intensity. According to conflict data, Myanmar was the second-deadliest country in the world in 2022 after Ukraine.⁹ In addition to the broader political conflict, localized ethnic and religious tensions persist, exacerbated by military repression, armed resistance, and intercommunal violence.¹⁰

Localized conflicts, particularly over land, resources, and identity-based grievances, remain prevalent across the region. In Bangladesh, disputes over land access and resource management have triggered local unrest, while tensions involving ethnic and religious minorities persist. Similarly, in Nepal, land ownership disputes and historical caste-based discrimination continue to create chronic instability and social fragmentation. While these conflicts may not escalate into large-scale violence, they undermine social cohesion and trust in institutions.

A key theme emerging from this research is the importance of **locally led approaches in conflict prevention**. Effective strategies must be context-specific, responsive to local dynamics, and designed with direct community engagement.

The Case for Locally Led Conflict Prevention

The persistence of localized conflicts across Asia and the Pacific highlights the need to learn from and scale up successful approaches. This section draws on insights from TAF practitioners who work across different country contexts and outlines why locally led conflict prevention is essential to building sustainable peace. While TAF and many of its local partners may struggle to end or prevent large-scale violent conflicts on their own, they have played key roles in managing localized tensions in many countries and have supported more extensive or high-level measures and policies through their actions.

Why Local Actors are Central to Effective Conflict Prevention

Across the region, state institutions often struggle to resolve local disputes, leaving space for community-driven responses to emerge and play a critical role in conflict resolution and prevention. These approaches draw on local knowledge, relationships, and trust to engage with conflict dynamics before they escalate. They encompass mediation initiatives, local governance reforms, and informal justice mechanisms. Despite their demonstrated impact, such efforts often remain under-resourced and disconnected from formal peacebuilding processes.

Regardless of where conflict originates, its impacts are most acutely felt at the local level, where exclusion, marginalization, and weak governance are experienced in daily life. Communities live with the direct consequences of unresolved grievances or insecurity and suffer when formal mechanisms stall or high-level actors contribute to tensions.

Those working and living at the local level are also closest to both the root causes and immediate effects of conflict. Their proximity enables them to identify emerging risks early and implement responsive solutions. While national-level engagement remains important, locally led initiatives offer critical opportunities to address tensions and mitigate violence in ways that are grounded in community realities.

Locally Led Approaches Can be Flexible and Scalable

Due to the variety of local-level governance structures and civil society actors, conflict prevention efforts offer diverse entry points for engagement and can be adapted to different contexts. Many communities already demonstrate strong capacities for mediation, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, which can be further strengthened through targeted support and investment. This adaptability makes locally led approaches particularly well-suited to diverse and dynamic conflict environments.

Investing in Locally Led Prevention Delivers High Impact at Low Cost

International support for conflict prevention remains crucial, yet increasing donor emphasis on security concerns has marginalized funding for both local and national conflict prevention efforts. Despite growing recognition of the value of locally led approaches, many remain under-supported, disconnected from formal peacebuilding frameworks, or reliant on inconsistent project-based funding. This funding gap limits the potential of community-driven prevention efforts to deliver sustained impact.

This makes it all the more critical to prioritize investment in approaches that deliver sustained impact and value, such as locally led conflict prevention. National-level responses alone have proven insufficient to address the full complexity of community-level grievances and power dynamics. While governments frequently deploy security measures and policy interventions, these strategies rarely foster the trust and resilience that is often associated with long-term peace. Locally led conflict prevention efforts that engage below the national level are uniquely positioned to engage with affected communities in ways that external interventions cannot, and they also offer significant economic and social returns, preventing violence at relatively low cost.

PRACTITIONERS' INSIGHTS. WHAT MAKES CONFLICT PREVENTION LOCAL

Locally led conflict prevention is more than just working at the community level—it's about who drives the process, how interventions adapt to local contexts, and how communities take ownership of peacebuilding. It also means recognizing the role of informal networks, traditional justice mechanisms, and long-term resilience building. In some cases, the language used by both practitioners and local communities when talking about 'conflict prevention' is significant.

Key Practitioner Perspectives:

“We use the term conflict prevention, though it can be misunderstood. For many, conflict means armed violence, but we use it to refer to preventing any form of conflict, including escalation and recurrence. Sometimes we use terms like dispute or contention to avoid the negative connotations associated with conflict.” — TAF program specialist, Nepal

“We ask them [communities] to identify their vulnerabilities and potential solutions. We then hold local and regional governments accountable for supporting these community-defined solutions. This approach shifts power to the communities themselves.” — TAF program specialist, The Philippines

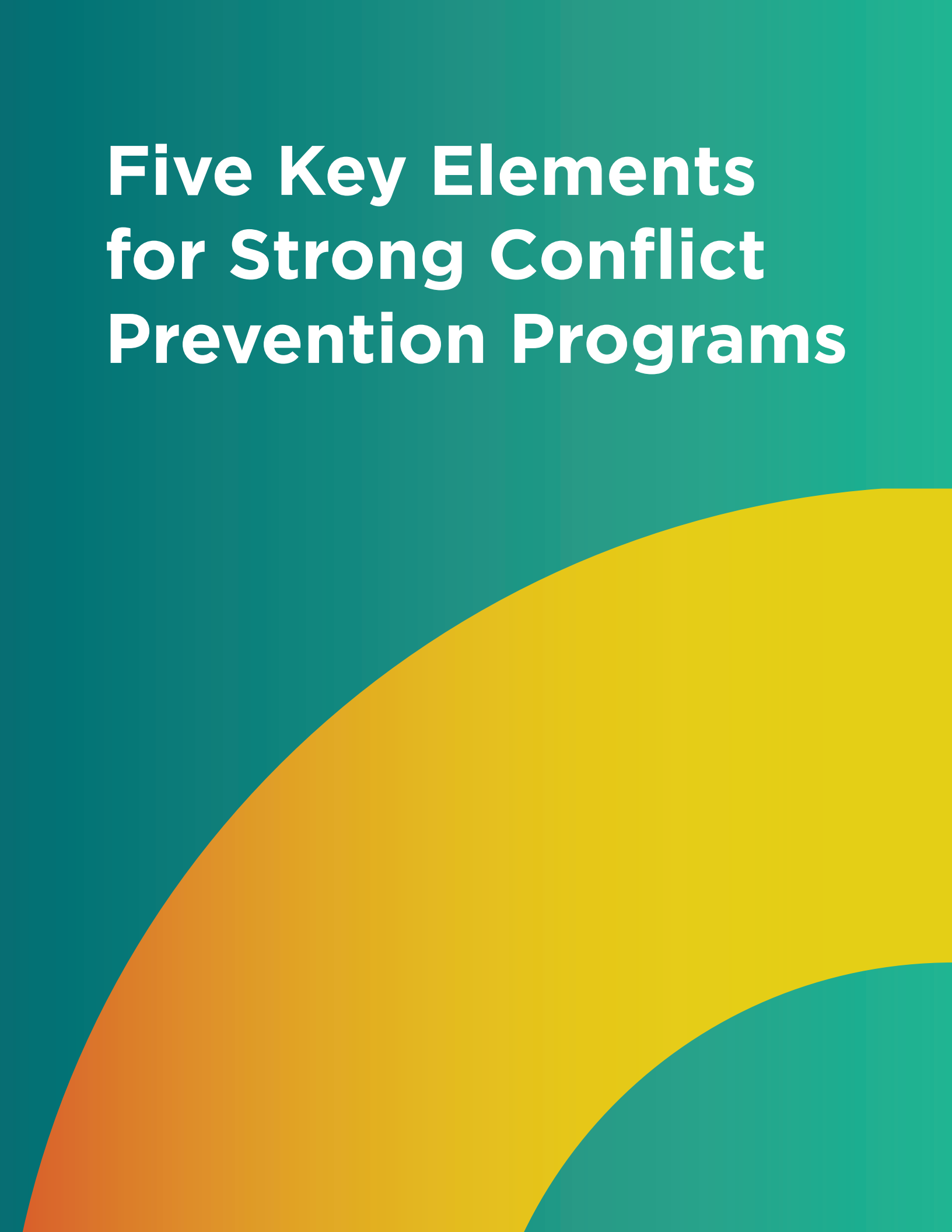
“Conflict prevention often involves traditional cultural practices and local mechanisms. ... In our context, preventing conflicts often means using traditional systems and local customs to handle situations before they escalate. Traditionally, community leaders and local customs play a significant role.” — TAF program specialist, Timor-Leste

“We always try to get buy-in from local governments. Just focusing on community cohesion does not guarantee sustainability. We need to ensure local institutions engage in conflict prevention work to make it last.” — TAF program specialist, Sri Lanka

“Conflict prevention refers to strategies and actions aimed at identifying and addressing potential sources of conflict before they escalate into violence or broader disputes. ... We emphasize community engagement, with local efforts tailored to the grassroots level.” — TAF program specialist, Bangladesh

During interviews, practitioners stressed that local conflict prevention involves a blend of community participation, traditional mechanisms, and engagement with government structures to prevent and address conflicts at various levels. Local prevention efforts aim to enhance community cohesion and resilience, focusing on participatory governance and community empowerment rather than top-down security or policing. Practitioners advocate for a holistic and inclusive approach to building resilient communities and preventing conflicts from the ground up.

Five Key Elements for Strong Conflict Prevention Programs

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Conflict prevention efforts are most effective when they adhere to key principles that ensure local ownership, flexibility, and sustainability.

This section explores lessons learned on developing and implementing effective conflict prevention programs, ensuring that these initiatives remain relevant and adaptable in an ever-changing landscape. The following five elements have been identified as foundational to successful conflict prevention programming across diverse conflict contexts.

I. Placing Communities at the Center

Sustainable conflict prevention at the local level empowers communities as key actors in peacebuilding rather than viewing them as passive beneficiaries. Community-driven approaches enhance resilience, strengthen social cohesion, and foster local ownership over peace efforts. However, ensuring effective community engagement requires careful attention to language, power dynamics, and long-term support structures.



CASE STUDY. COMMUNITY-DRIVEN EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS IN RAJSHAHI, BANGLADESH

Ethnic and religious tensions have historically flared up in the Rajshahi district in northwestern Bangladesh. With a diverse mix of ethnoreligious groups, the district is prone to outbreaks of violence, heightening concerns over potential escalations. In response, The Asia Foundation launched the Promoting Community-Driven Early Warning Systems to Reduce Religious Freedom Violations project to mitigate these risks and empower local communities.

A key aspect of the project was its focus on a **community-driven approach** to early warning systems (EWS), involving local stakeholders in conflict resolution. The project mobilized diverse groups, including religious leaders, marginalized populations, the wives of religious leaders, and young women.

This broad participation fostered an inclusive peacebuilding process, allowing communities to take ownership of their peace efforts. Project assessments show that this approach has proved effective. On at least one occasion, active monitoring and intervention by project volunteers helped to keep Rajshahi peaceful during a sensitive religious incident that sparked unrest elsewhere in Bangladesh.

Building Capacity for Conflict Resolution

Creating early response units and training community peacekeepers was central to successful local conflict prevention. These groups received training in conflict mediation, religious tolerance, and other skills vital for navigating complex social dynamics. This empowered local community leaders to address grievances before they escalated, thereby managing volatile situations and promoting peaceful coexistence. The success of the early response units and the peacekeepers highlighted the importance of equipping communities with the tools to manage conflict independently.

Promoting Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration

Interfaith dialogues were another critical element of the project. These dialogues provided a platform for members of different religious communities to engage in open conversations, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. This helped to build trust and social cohesion, which are vital for sustaining peace in a diverse community like Rajshahi.

Harnessing Technology for Real-Time Response

The project also introduced a cloud-based reporting system, enabling community members to track religious freedom violations in real-time. This technological tool facilitated quick responses to emerging issues and improved data management and coordination among stakeholders. Its efficiency greatly enhanced the scope to address potential conflicts.

Overall, the EWS project in Rajshahi successfully empowered local communities to prevent and mitigate religious and ethnic violence. By following a participatory approach, building local capacity, fostering interfaith dialogue, and employing technology, the project strengthened local resilience and reduced the risk of religious freedom violations and ethnic tensions.

Shifting to a community-centric approach in conflict prevention involves the prioritization of community support and resilience-building without reinforcing hierarchical structures. The subtle use of language here is important. When asked about how to develop an organizational framework for conflict prevention “from below,” an experienced conflict prevention specialist with TAF in the Philippines clarified:

“The term ‘below’ might be problematic. It implies a hierarchy that doesn’t align with our community-centered approach. We should focus on supporting communities, strengthening, and building resilience without implying they are below any other structure.” — TAF program specialist, The Philippines.

Instead, programs need to enhance subnational governments’ capacities to better serve and assist communities. This can be done by providing technical training to government officials and stakeholders in participatory governance and facilitating inclusive dialogues and decision-making processes that encourage diverse perspectives, social cohesion, and resilience.

Assessments and programming experience from many countries indicate that long-term prevention of conflict and violence will often be more effective if the community is protected from potential exposure to radicalization or extremism, or is otherwise made more resilient. Identifying and focusing on vulnerable groups can also help to avoid costly and ineffective implementation.

Locally driven programming is better placed to avoid cultural barriers and navigate sensitivities. For example, attempts to involve women in conflict prevention may meet resistance from male leaders in traditional settings unless initiatives are planned and taken forward with strong local input and through intensive negotiation.

In some cases, community-centered efforts can complement and support government actions to strengthen local conflict prevention strategies. Engaging formal structures should enhance community resilience without shifting the entire responsibility onto the community, and it should boost rather than undermine efforts to promote the accountability of authorities and officials.



CASE STUDY. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, faces ongoing challenges in countering violent extremism, particularly among youth aged 15 to 35 who are vulnerable to radicalization due to economic disparities, political alienation, and identity crises. The Strategic Countering Violent Extremism Capacity Building Initiative, implemented by The Asia Foundation from 2018 to 2021, strengthened community resilience by partnering with trusted local organizations and leaders to deliver targeted counter-narratives, capacity-building, and grassroots engagement which involved partnering with trusted local organizations and community leaders.

Capacity Building for Civil Society

The initiative worked with seven civil society organizations (CSOs) that had existing ties to vulnerable communities by providing training and support, including using political economy analysis to map local drivers of extremism. This training improved understanding of local sociopolitical dynamics and helped CSOs identify the most effective responses. For example, Fahmina Institute collaborated with local religious leaders to engage communities in Cirebon, West Java, and combat radical narratives spreading through religious study groups. By providing CSOs with tools and methodologies, the project ensured local organizations could take ownership of the intervention process.

Creating Internal Cadres

Internal cadres were local leaders and community members selected for their social influence and proximity to at-risk groups, enabling them to engage directly with individuals vulnerable to radicalization. By training the cadres to continue counter-extremism efforts, the program ensured that its impact would be sustainable after the end of the project. For instance, in Pasuruan, East Java, the Gusdurian Network worked with local high schools to train students as peace agents. These students were taught to identify extremist ideologies in their communities and counteract them using peaceful, pluralistic narratives.

Working with Local Leaders

By leveraging the influence of local leaders, the initiative was able to reach deeper into communities and ensure that its messages were heard and acted upon. For example, in the city of Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, the Indonesian Child Protection Agency worked closely with local village heads to engage community members in dialogue about the dangers of extremism.

II. Building Trust through Long-Term Engagement

Strong, long-term partnerships between civil society, government, and, at times, international organizations can enhance trust, legitimacy, and coordination, ensuring that interventions are both locally owned and contextually relevant. This is particularly important when working on sensitive conflict issues. For organizations like TAF, strong partnerships with civil society and government agencies have led to localized, evidence-based programming that directly responds to community needs.

Key elements of effective local partnerships include sustained engagement and mutual trust through engagement that outlasts short project cycles. Long-term relationships foster credibility and cooperation, ensuring sustained impact. A prominent example is the decades-long engagement at multiple levels that TAF has supported with the government of Nepal to support transitional justice after a peace process ended years of civil war.

Consistency in communication and participation in meaningful dialogue are key to building trust. In complex environments with many risks and interests, strategies to enhance the government's understanding of critical issues in a non-confrontational manner increase the likelihood of successful impact. This approach facilitates productive collaboration and creates a conducive atmosphere for addressing challenges.

An example is found in the work that counters violent extremism in Indonesia. One long-term project, which aims to increase the capacity of Indonesian civil society organizations and to support their role in addressing violent extremism, is framed around peaceful and tolerant religious values aligned with the mainstream national ideology. By focusing on embracing diversity rather than on countering extremism, the project can enable involvement across government and civic institutions without provoking potential resistance, particularly among conservative religious groups.

However, building trust between communities, civil society, and state institutions remains challenging. For example, a high turnover of government officials and skepticism toward international organizations can hinder sustained engagement. It is imperative to engage in long-term relationship-building efforts and capacity-sharing mechanisms to help overcome these obstacles.

Clear and open communication with donors about the long-term benefits of community-centered approaches helps to build a shared basis for programming in conflict environments. The importance of local ownership and sustainable impact should be clarified from the start, at the proposal stage, before initiatives begin.

“This distinction helps in meeting donor expectations and aligning projects with community needs. ... Our work isn't about intelligence gathering. We focus on supporting communities, filling the gap left by more militarized approaches. There's already significant support for security measures, but our role is to support the communities that have survived conflicts and need to rebuild. We focus on community resilience. Our role is complementary, not oppositional, to government efforts.”
— TAF program specialist, the Philippines



CASE STUDY. LOCAL COLLABORATION TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN: THE CATALYTIC ROLE OF A PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Violent extremism, particularly in its religious and ethno-nationalist forms, remains a pressing security challenge for Pakistan. The nation's intricate dynamics demand continued focus on combating and preventing violent extremism, even during periods of relative calm. Punjab, as the country's most populous province, remains acutely vulnerable to both internal and external threats, highlighting the need for proactive monitoring. Key conflict prevention challenges include deep-rooted ethnic and sectarian divisions, socioeconomic disparities, weak governance, radicalization in educational institutions, the emergence of extremist and militant groups, widespread violent narratives, and geographic vulnerabilities due to its proximity to conflict zones and porous borders.

As part of efforts to address these challenges strategically, TAF established the Promoting Social Cohesion in Punjab project. The project set up an advisory committee, a multi-stakeholder forum that brings together government representatives, civil society actors, education commissions, religious leaders, journalists, and grassroots activists to foster collaboration and develop sustainable peacebuilding interventions.

The advisory committee serves as a critical bridge between policy-level discussions and on-the-ground realities, ensuring local communities have a direct voice in shaping preventative strategies. Its creation was based on the understanding that no single entity—whether government, donors, or civil society—can independently address the root causes of violent extremism. This approach emerged from a scoping study and impact analysis of previous programs in the region, underscoring the need for diverse expertise and perspectives to identify, understand, and prevent violent extremism effectively.

A key success of the advisory committee is its oversight and support of a vulnerability assessment tool to identify at-risk youth in communities. This tool ensures that grassroots insights inform both local action and overall national strategies, such as Pakistan’s National Internal Security Policy and Countering Violent Extremism Strategy.

The role of the advisory committee extends beyond traditional advisory functions. It has evolved into a dynamic platform that operates like a think tank, fostering innovative and inclusive approaches to preventing violent extremism. The committee exemplifies how collaboration can drive meaningful and lasting change by convening diverse stakeholders. It provides a model for inclusive governance, addressing immediate concerns while laying the groundwork for long-term peace and social cohesion in Punjab.

III. Stronger State-Community Relations

Improving relations between people and the state is a key aspect of conflict prevention and a success factor of many programs. Organizations and conflict prevention programming may provide a bridge between governments and communities by facilitating meetings, helping communities share their challenges and experiences with government officials. Long-term engagement helps donors and implementers understand the local context and supports their work.

“We act as a bridge, helping to bring community issues to the government’s attention and supporting local leaders in addressing these issues. We facilitate meetings and help communities share their challenges and experiences with government officials.” — TAF program specialist, Timor Leste

Long-term commitments to supporting more responsive local governance can help make peacebuilding sustainable. Work focuses on building accountable and democratic systems, promoting inclusive political participation, and reforming institutions to address underlying grievances.

The FORWARD program in the Bangsamoro region of the Philippines focuses on working at multiple levels to support the transition to self-governance and promote democratic practices following the adoption of a peace agreement (see case study below). The approach recognizes that achieving and maintaining peace requires more than just negotiations between governments or community-level responses; it involves a range of actors and activities across different levels of society.

Elsewhere, approaches often focus on improving security and access to justice where mainstream systems are struggling. For example, Bangladesh has just one judge for every 94,444 citizens, far short of neighboring countries, and millions of legal cases remain pending.¹¹ Struggles to access justice regularly fuel wider frustrations, especially among groups that already feel marginalized or oppressed. TAF has worked on training advocates and paralegals to enable access to the formal legal system in many countries.

Many community policing initiatives have followed a proactive, problem-solving approach to make police services more responsive to local contexts and realities. In Sri Lanka, the Support for Police Reforms initiative focused on transforming the police force into a more professional, accountable, and community-oriented institution.

By engaging local stakeholders in the reform process, the program helped design police practices that are more responsive to the community’s needs, thereby fostering a climate of cooperation and social cohesion. When implemented for

long periods, these initiatives can have a measurable impact on people's trust in authorities.¹²

Support for alternative dispute resolution offers a different approach that must carefully link formal and informal approaches. If alternative approaches are made too formal, they “can have the unintended consequence of in fact undermining those very practices.”¹³ Yet, if they pay insufficient attention to formal frameworks, they risk undermining the rule of law. In Timor-Leste, TAF has aimed to strengthen the local role of the state police, increasing public reliance on them, while also ensuring that the state takes responsibility for commonly used customary dispute resolution mechanisms.¹⁴



CASE STUDY. RESOLVING DISPUTES IN THE POST-EARTHQUAKE RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS, NEPAL

Since the end of the Maoist insurgency in 2006, Nepal has avoided a return to civil war. But the country continues to experience political instability along with localized tensions and social divisions.

In the years preceding the upheaval generated by “Gen Z” protests in 2025, TAF played a key role in facilitating community mediation, “Track 1.5” or multi-stakeholder diplomacy, and crucial dialogue initiatives. With the formal justice system unable to address the needs and grievances of individuals and communities, and lacking coherent national policies, community mediation practices became an essential mechanism for resolving disputes and fostering reconciliation.

When two massive earthquakes struck Nepal in 2015, conflict in disaster-affected districts intensified. Vulnerable groups faced greater exclusion, while those with power disproportionately accessed relief resources. Recognizing the urgent need for dispute resolution, TAF leveraged its decade-long experience to quickly train and deploy mediators across 370 project locations in seven severely affected districts. These mediators, most of them trusted residents, helped communities resolve disputes effectively and inclusively.

Mediation Methodology

The program's mediation approach included facilitated dialogue to bring disputants together and understand each other's perspectives, a step which can often achieve resolution without needing formal mediation. For more complex and entrenched disputes, the program enabled mediation through negotiated settlements between disputants.

The method's real strength came from involving residents in the process. This approach ensured community participation and gained stronger support from the local government. The outcomes were more easily and effectively achieved compared to using staff based in the capital, Kathmandu.

Mediation supported social justice by encouraging disputing parties, regardless of caste, gender, or class, to find solutions that were more satisfactory than those that could have been decided under the law. The relationships between state and citizens also improved as mediation services provide speedy, inexpensive, and accessible justice.

These steps encouraged community resilience based on dignity, control, belonging, and purpose, a crucial foundation for successful post-earthquake recovery efforts.

Many programs also work closely with private sector companies willing to partner in peacebuilding or social cohesion programs. In cases, chambers of commerce or other private sector interest groups can play valuable roles in organizing community responses to reduce the risks of violence.

“This holistic approach—community, government, and private sector—sets and enhances the impacts of our initiatives. We conducted a matching process, aligning local government community priorities with corporate foundations that operate in those areas. This approach is very context-specific, addressing the specific needs and grievances of community members. These priorities range from nutrition to education.”
— TAF program specialist, the Philippines.



CASE STUDY. BRIDGING DIVIDES IN THE BANGSAMORO, THE PHILIPPINES

The Bangsamoro region in the southern Philippines has endured decades of conflict. The creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 was a key step toward peace. However, over the past two decades, deep-seated divisions have intensified. Armed groups splintered in response to peace progress, exacerbating tensions between Muslims, Christians, and Indigenous peoples. Clan feuds, known as “Rido,” continue, driven by land disputes and political rivalries. To build lasting peace, efforts must go beyond institutional reforms and address the region’s deep social divisions.

Two developments in the Bangsamoro highlighted the need to build a more cohesive society and a more responsive government: the transition to new autonomy arrangements and the growth of violence and violent extremism. As the region navigates these challenges, TAF is working to fortify the relationships between state institutions and communities, supporting the foundation of trust essential for sustainable peacebuilding.

Supporting Inclusive Governance

The establishment of new regional institutions in the Bangsamoro marks significant progress, yet acceptance of these institutions remains uneven. To address this, TAF focuses on fostering social cohesion and broadening support for the new autonomous government and its leadership, including former armed combatants. Working with senior officials, key interventions support inclusive governance by addressing key issues such as education reforms and transforming ex-combatant camps, while also working to shift perceptions among politicians wary of the new structures. At the local level, TAF works closely with local government officials to resolve conflicts effectively and address pressing community issues.

The continued threat of violence and conflict in the region, particularly the recruitment of youth into armed groups, has heightened the need for improved local security mechanisms. In response, an information and education campaign—in collaboration with the Philippine National Police and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front—has focused on educating security forces about peace agreements, the normalization process, and the importance of coordination between former adversaries. This initiative has led to better coordination in law enforcement operations. Local security forces now collaborate more effectively with former rebel bases and communities, ensuring military actions align with peace objectives, preventing displacement, and addressing grievances more promptly.

Bridging State and Community

TAF has enabled project partners to pursue proactive and targeted conflict prevention measures based on reliable and evidence-based information. Training sessions, workshops, and accessible resources covered various aspects, such as the types of narratives perpetrated by extremist groups, their recruitment methods, and risk factors present in the community.

These initiatives foster collaboration between local communities, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and officials. Establishing networks and platforms for information sharing, coordination, and joint initiatives enhances the collective ability to address violent conflict comprehensively.

IV. Staying Agile: Flexible and Adaptive Management

Effective conflict prevention initiatives in complex conflict and post-conflict settings must remain flexible and adaptive. Program design should enable modification in response to changing conditions.

Flexibility in program design and throughout the lifecycle of programs allows for locally driven interventions based on local understanding of specific contexts. Programs should not be overly prescriptive but can follow Adaptive Management approaches that aim to “counter the weaknesses of tightly pre-designed projects.”¹⁵ Political resistance, shifting donor priorities, and emerging crises often create barriers to long-term programming. However, programs designed with built-in flexibility can adjust while maintaining stakeholder accountability.

By leveraging data through ongoing monitoring and evaluation, projects can make informed decisions, measure progress, and adapt strategies to meet evolving needs. For example, baseline and endline surveys have been used in Sri Lanka to inform programming and assess progress on a community policing initiative.¹⁶

These surveys provide critical data on the effectiveness of interventions, allowing for adjustments based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, the project systematically tracks reported cases of domestic violence, enabling a focused response to this prevalent issue. This tracking helps identify trends and gaps in service delivery, ensuring that police and support services can respond effectively and improve over time.

“Our measures focus on community outcomes rather than traditional security metrics. Instead of counting the number of people who didn’t join armed groups, we measure the number of communities that feel less vulnerable to violence and more resilient. We also track local government commitments to funding community-identified solutions. This distinction helps manage donor expectations and align projects with community needs.” — TAF program specialist, The Philippines.



CASE STUDY. OVERCOMING CHALLENGES THROUGH FLEXIBLE APPROACHES IN THE BANGSAMORO, THE PHILIPPINES

In the face of persistent recruitment and radicalization by extremists in conflict-affected parts of the southern Philippines, one initiative has looked to reduce the drivers of violent extremism and increase community resilience against violence. Despite a landscape marked by unpredictability and evolving challenges, assessments of the Countering Violent Extremism through Responsive Government-Civil Society Engagement (CONVERGE) program showed that adaptability and flexibility were not just tools but essential lifelines for success. By embracing a community-first mindset and empowering local leadership, the project, managed by TAF, achieved its goals while navigating the complexities of a changing environment.

CONVERGE placed communities at the center of its work—not as beneficiaries, but as active partners in shaping a more peaceful future. This was not about simply checking boxes; it focused on deeply engaging people and ensuring they felt ownership of the process. The project adopted a conflict-sensitive framework to avoid exacerbating local tensions while fostering trust and cooperation.

Understanding that sustainable change comes from within, CONVERGE built on the strength of local civil society and local government units (LGUs). Significant progress was observed in the capacities of partner LGUs, particularly in their ability to monitor, manage, and document incidents related to violent extremism.

This improvement is evident in various aspects, such as the formation of monitoring groups or the appointment of focal persons dedicated to incidents relating to violent extremism, the deployment of teams to conflict sites, the establishment of contingency plans for escalating conflicts, and active consultation with conflict-affected communities.

These partnerships weren't passive; they actively shaped the course of the project, from design to implementation, enabling greater ownership and resilience. As the operating environment shifted, these local leaders became vital in steering the project toward success, ensuring diverse voices from the community were heard and represented in key decision-making processes. People from vulnerable groups were integrated to prevent stigmatization and promote unity, creating a positive ripple effect across conflict dynamics. The project facilitated a process of listening to community stakeholders and understanding the circumstances that limit their options, how these circumstances lead to violent conflict and extremism, and bringing a holistic perspective in designing interventions that weave in addressing the felt needs and grievances of local communities, as well as processing the trauma from personal experiences with violence.

Staying ahead of the curve meant knowing when to pivot, when to push forward, and when to pause. CONVERGE maintained a real-time understanding of its operating context through regular communication with CSO and LGU partners and by pursuing continuous monitoring. In addition, the project's internal tracker monitored potential shifts within partner LGUs that could impact activities. This proactive stance gave the team the agility to adjust on the fly, ensuring that decisions were informed and timely.

V. Using Research Evidence to Drive Context-Specific Responses

Designing interventions based on robust conflict analysis, local stakeholder engagement, and research-driven methodologies ensures that initiatives are relevant, context-specific, and address the root causes of conflict.

“For designing new projects, we conduct conflict analysis, stakeholder mapping, and baseline assessments. We define clear objectives and goals, design intervention strategies, and implement monitoring and evaluation plans. Our approach includes a theory of change, considering inputs, risks, and community needs.” — TAF program specialist, Bangladesh

A strong evidence base enables conflict prevention efforts to be context-specific and to address the root causes of conflict and violence. Conflict prevention programming typically begins with a comprehensive analysis of local conflict dynamics, making use, where relevant, of available tools: conflict analysis and political economy analysis to assess power dynamics and sociopolitical structures, stakeholder mapping and consultation to ensure programs are in alignment with community needs, and baseline and needs assessments to define clear objectives.

Building organizational knowledge of local contexts over time is invaluable for designing effective, context-specific interventions. By conducting conflict analysis and research and adopting practices of thinking and working politically, organizations can develop a deep understanding of local contexts. This approach enables the development of responsive programs that address the unique needs and interests of the communities they serve.

“We start by mapping out who is doing what in the field to avoid duplication and understand the context. We engage with various stakeholders, including local government, judicial officials, and the communities we plan to work with, to gather their perspectives and understand their needs. This helps us design programs that are relevant and effective.” — TAF program specialist, Nepal

Successful conflict prevention programs undertaken by TAF typically start by establishing networks with influential actors from an early stage, particularly in vulnerable communities, employing intensive communication and collaboration.

This approach recognizes the importance of seeking support, building collaborations or partnerships, determining partners, and building their capacity. Encouraging local leaders to participate in bolstering the community's resilience in the face of conflict is also a key component.

Access to high-quality, localized data is a major challenge across Asia and the Pacific. Programs often struggle with limited research capacities and inconsistent methodologies. Therefore, it is valuable to build the capabilities of local research institutions and researchers to ensure conflict-sensitive analysis and generate knowledge from conflict-affected areas rather than relying on the perceptions of external observers.



CASE STUDY. LOCALLY LED RESEARCH TO INFLUENCE POLICY: AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Conflict and instability persist in contested border regions in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, where local tensions intersect with broader regional and global dynamics. Recognizing the complexity of these cross-border conflicts, The Asia Foundation, alongside research partners in the UK-funded XCEPT consortium, launched the X-Border Local Research Network in 2018 to produce critical research that informs more effective policymaking and program design.¹⁷

A Grounded Understanding of Conflict

The X-border Local Research Network employs mixed-methods research, field data collection, satellite analysis, and open-source investigations, enabling insights into regions that are often difficult to access and into conflicts that may be poorly understood by analysts and policymakers in distant capitals. The program focuses on explaining the opaque and complex dynamics that drive cross-border conflict, emphasizing how local and regional factors shape violent and peaceful behaviors. By engaging with local researchers and institutions and enabling them to define the specific research topics, the network seeks to generate grounded, timely evidence that can inform effective policies and interventions.

A critical element of the network is its focus on capacity-building for local researchers through a combination of virtual and onsite learning activities. For example, quarterly peer exchange sessions, one-on-one mentoring sessions, and training in political economy analysis and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in research.

Furthermore, the program actively supports local researchers in presenting their work at international conferences, enhancing their professional development and global engagement. The network partners with research institutions, scholars, and young researchers based in conflict-affected regions, such as Myanmar, the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and South Sudan. Since 2018, there have been 117 local researchers involved in the research. This collaboration links research to the everyday realities of local communities while enhancing the capacity of local actors to conduct independent, policy-relevant studies. It also fosters innovative research methods, improving the quality and impact of findings.

Bridging Local Realities and Policy Responses

The network has produced research reports, policy briefs, blogs, news releases, and podcasts. The evidence generated feeds directly into policy development and program design. For instance, research has shown the challenges of militarized border economies, the precarity of informal markets and illicit activities, and the impacts of climate change on the borderland. These insights have enabled the design of more nuanced, context-specific interventions.

I found it useful in shaping my understanding of both the conflict and wider region and subsequently used it to inform some of our thinking on New Zealand's development programming in Myanmar. ... The research findings, as relayed in the podcast [Myanmar: Resistance and the cost of the coup in Chin State], added a new dimension to my understanding of the diaspora dynamics and geopolitics around the Indian border"—senior policy officer for ASEAN at New Zealand's Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade

The XCEPT Local Research Network exemplifies how an evidence-based approach, grounded in local knowledge, can drive more effective conflict interventions. By engaging local actors, strengthening research capacity, and producing timely, context-specific evidence, the network delivers solutions that address the complexities of borderland conflicts. This approach bridges the gap between the realities of conflict-affected communities and the policies designed to support them, ensuring interventions are both well-informed and sustainable in the long term.

Technical Briefs

This section presents summaries of key points from programming and analysis by The Asia Foundation in four prominent technical areas of conflict prevention work: early warning and monitoring, social cohesion, women, peace and security, and preventing violent extremism.

BRIEF 1**Early Warning and Monitoring**

Early warning systems (EWS) are an effective way to detect potential risks of conflict or human rights violations before they happen. By monitoring signs of tension and providing timely alerts, EWS enable preventive actions to maintain peace and protect vulnerable populations. A multi-track approach involving strategic partnerships at various levels can be instrumental in ensuring government buy-in, sufficient resources, and sustainability, while benefiting from local knowledge and experience.

Early warning needs good data. Violent incidents monitoring systems (VIMS) use local sources, including networks of contributors and traditional and online media, to record information on a wide range of variables for each incident. Clear operating guidelines and verification can help to ensure accuracy and include smaller-scale violent events. VIMS can address under-reporting and enable evidence-based policy responses. Information can be recorded at a highly disaggregated level, allowing for granular analysis across different forms of violence and identification of how violence evolves. The Asia Foundation has supported VIMS in many countries.¹⁸

Collaborate with public institutions.

Institutionalizing EWS within national, provincial, and local government structures helps create a systemic and sustainable approach to human rights protection. Collaboration can involve training government officials, expanding support networks, and strengthening partnerships with civil society and other actors.

This model worked well in Pakistan, where an EWS was established at the national, provincial, and sub-provincial levels across three provinces (Sindh, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) to reduce violence against religious minorities and other vulnerable populations. In this example, the project team collaborated with the National Commission for Human Rights, provincial and district-level public institutions, and existing networks of religious and community leaders to institutionalize the EWS, ensuring a more effective government response to rights infringements and enabling support networks to strengthen and expand.

Facilitate cross-regional knowledge sharing.

At the regional level, knowledge exchanges and specialized training on early warning and conflict monitoring can support comparative learning and good practice. Technical inputs and grants from international organizations, including universities and donor agencies, have helped improve the availability and quality of data in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, Bangladesh, and elsewhere. Steps have included:

1. Providing financial and technical assistance to local violence monitoring projects
2. Establishing a regional community of practitioners through regular country-to-country technical exchanges and regional seminars
3. Improving methodology standards with the publication and dissemination of methods toolkits
4. Supporting wider use of the data in academic and policy-oriented research

Financial and technical assistance to local violence monitoring projects can promote the collection and management of high-quality, real-time data, essential for evidence-based practices.

Establishing a regional community of practitioners encourages knowledge sharing, while improving methodology standards ensures reliable data for research and policymaking.

Involve local communities.

Involving local communities in EWS design and implementation is often important. The focus should be on understanding community needs, priorities, capacities, and cultural sensitivities. Essential long-term capacity building can be achieved through:

1. Providing technical training to improve community, research institute, or government capacity to track and report violations
2. Establishing and strengthening networks to increase collaboration among relevant agencies and stakeholders
3. Providing resources/grants to respond to emerging issues and opportunities, including community initiatives, particularly those led by youth
4. Promoting awareness of ethnoreligious, social, and gender issues or differences at the core of tensions among community leaders and members

BRIEF 2

Social Cohesion

More cohesive societies are generally associated with desirable political, social, and economic outcomes: stability, growth, resilience to shocks, and violent conflict. Researchers and policymakers consider social cohesion a precondition for building trusted, effective institutions necessary to promote growth and prevent conflict.¹⁹

For The Asia Foundation, social cohesion involves the resilience of relationships within and between communities that enable diverse groups to peacefully coexist, collaborate, and address shared challenges. Social cohesion can encourage individuals within communities to intervene in the interest of the common good to prevent or manage violent conflict. These principles inform a wide range of aid programming that builds trust, encourages inclusive participation, or reduces the drivers of conflict. Specific fields include intercommunal dialogue, civic engagement, youth empowerment, and countering violent extremism.²⁰

A broad yet useful concept. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of social cohesion as a basis for programming is its flexibility, enabling adaptation to fit specific situations and navigate complex political terrain. In Sri Lanka, social cohesion programs address an array of grievances and societal fractures that have persisted since the end of the civil war in 2009. However, social cohesion invites broad interpretation and should be managed carefully in any one context. Challenges have arisen over what social cohesion means in practice and how to keep a clear focus.

“One challenge we face in Sri Lanka is drawing the line with locally led social cohesion projects ... establishing a focused framework becomes crucial. It’s such a broad concept that having a structured approach would be immensely beneficial.”
— TAF program specialist, Sri Lanka

Linking people and the state. TAF has worked with both local government and communities in many areas of long-term tension.

“*Social cohesion can also reveal how relationships at different levels—community, to regional, to national—determine larger political, economic, and social outcomes. In this sense, it has both vertical (how institutions relate to society) as well as horizontal (how members of society relate to each other) aspects.”*²¹

In Nepal, TAF supported local dispute resolution mechanisms to address grievances before they escalate, building community and local government capabilities to respond. In the deep south of Thailand, TAF has backed interfaith dialogues and youth engagement to bridge divides between Buddhist and Muslim communities and reduce sectarian tensions.

In the Bangsamoro autonomous region of the Philippines, social cohesion is intentionally seen as multidimensional—in any given context, some factors contributing to tensions that drive conflict may be stronger than others. Consequently, programs can build social cohesion by engaging across a range of sectors depending on the specific context and popular demand.

BRIEF 3

Women, Peace and Security in Conflict Prevention

A growing body of evidence shows that women's participation and leadership increases the probability of lasting peace agreements, that women are overwhelmingly the first responders in addressing community needs during periods of crisis, that conflict-affected communities where women are more empowered experience more rapid economic recovery, and that the security of women is the most reliable indicator of the peacefulness of the state—more so than a country's wealth, democracy status or religious identity. Yet programs focusing on women and gender equality are often relegated to short-term or patchwork measures within larger conflict prevention programs or subsumed into other programs promoting inclusion.²²

Turning a global foundation into results. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a policy framework emphasizing women's participation, conflict prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. It provides a comprehensive approach to addressing women's unique challenges in conflict-affected settings while reinforcing their leadership in peacebuilding efforts. Building on decades of advocacy and action, and formally created with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the WPS agenda has

become a comprehensive and normative framework.

An effective WPS strategy should include working with governments, policymakers, women-led CSOs, grassroots organisations, and local communities. It requires buy-in from a range of state actors to ensure sustainability and effectiveness. Across Asia and the Pacific, TAF has worked closely with women-led initiatives, integrating gender-sensitive approaches into community-driven conflict prevention efforts. In Nepal, post-earthquake reconstruction efforts underscored the importance of integrating women's leadership in community mediation, ensuring grievances are addressed and recovery efforts are inclusive. In the Philippines, the *Accelerate Sulu program* has demonstrated how economic inclusion can be a foundation for peace. By equipping women, particularly former combatants and conflict-affected populations, with financial literacy, digital skills, and psychosocial support, this initiative has strengthened their leadership within their communities, enhancing local stability and resilience.

Boosting Women's Participation. Women-led mediation efforts have been integral to conflict resolution.

In Myanmar and the Philippines, for example, women peacebuilders have facilitated dialogue between state and community actors, advocating for governance structures that are inclusive and responsive to local needs. These efforts highlight the importance of ensuring that women are not only represented in formal peace processes but also acknowledged for their long-standing contributions to informal, community-based mechanisms for sustaining peace.

- In the Philippines, women’s organisations lobbied to ensure that gender provisions were prioritized while implementing the Bangsamoro Organic Law, turning commitments into action.
- In Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation has worked with women—including the wives of imams and religious leaders—to strengthen conflict monitoring and prevention. Their engagement has improved responses to emerging tensions and contributed to greater social cohesion.
- In Pakistan, women-led initiatives have played a key role in addressing the root causes of extremism by fostering community resilience and offering alternative pathways for at-risk populations.
- Also in Pakistan, legal aid and advocacy networks have expanded to support women from marginalized communities, providing critical assistance in the face of systemic discrimination and violence.
- In Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste, gender-sensitive community policing initiatives have fostered trust between women and law enforcement, strengthening security responses to community concerns.

Incorporating Conflict Prevention.

National plans of action and other measures to further the WPS agenda often overlook conflict prevention. At times, efforts to back WPS measures also fail to adequately integrate local institutions and respond to specific conditions. The AMPLIFY program, a regional initiative led by The Asia Foundation, pursues a “whole-of-system” approach to engage women at multiple levels. This strategy focuses on community-level engagement, seeking to integrate women’s needs and perspectives into peace and security decision-making by strengthening grassroots participation. It strengthens networks and platforms for collaboration among women’s CSOs, advocating for women’s inclusion in peace and security decisions.

BRIEF 4 Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Violent extremism remains a pressing concern for numerous Asia-Pacific countries, and its root causes are deeply intertwined with specific local tensions or grievances. Repeated evaluations conclude that effective responses need to encompass security dimensions while also addressing the underlying conditions that create an enabling environment for violent extremism.

Tackling these threats is typically accomplished through targeted strategies that address underlying causes, foster social cohesion, and build community resilience. A commonly recommended approach focuses on protecting vulnerable groups at risk of radicalization by enhancing social cohesion and resilience rather than directly targeting radical groups. Key activities such as capacity building, community engagement, evidence-based practices, counter-narrative campaigns, and providing financial support are central to these efforts.

Design and implement based on comprehensive, grounded analysis.

Existing guidance already suggests the essential components of sound analysis in the sector: assessments such as

political economy analysis to identify the drivers of radicalization; robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks; and adaptive approaches that integrate community feedback and respond to evolving contexts.

However, it can be difficult to turn the results of analyses into effective programming, partly because they can easily miss sensitivities and legal constraints. The following steps should be integrated into assessments of the scope for supporting local responses:

- Understand relevant policy and legal frameworks, factors that may contribute to ambiguity, and barriers that may impede civil society responses. These frameworks usually define the parameters of civil society engagement and inform government counterterrorism approaches.
- Identify context-specific sensitivities and their implications for navigating the political environment safely. For instance, terminology on radicalization, terrorism, extremism, and related risk factors varies greatly across Southeast Asia.
- Avoid assessments that assign monocausal explanations to violent extremism. Appropriate responses require grasping the combined

effect of multiple factors and recognizing differences across a population by gender, status, class, and identity.

- Identify and consider existing government and civil society initiatives and their relationships (e.g. tensions, gaps, and potential clashes between government and civil society actions). Identify successful collaborations that are complementary and can be further developed.
- Assess both online and offline spaces in rural as well as urban settings.

Link prevention with development and peacebuilding. Many organizations in this field approach the issue of violent extremism indirectly. Sometimes this approach avoids unwanted associations with security services, and other times it enables them to maintain a core, long-term approach. Adopting a broad perspective helps to address local root causes or drivers of extremism rather than concentrating on downstream symptoms. Reviews indicate that the long-term prevention of violent extremism is most successful when it reinforces protective factors within communities. Examples of indirect approaches include support for prison

reform in Indonesia, access to justice promotion in Pakistan, efforts to build a strong local identity around pluralism and tolerance in Malaysia, and development initiatives to tackle entrenched rural poverty in the Philippines.

Support community-level engagement in finding solutions. Local engagement and context-specific interventions are pivotal to prevent existing as well as latent extremist threats. By equipping communities with the necessary resources, knowledge, and tools, they can effectively address the root causes of extremism. Projects that provide small grants for communities or local institutions to develop their own responses to violent extremism have been successful. Many programs have engaged local leaders and community members selected for their social influence and proximity to at-risk groups, enabling them to engage directly with individuals vulnerable to radicalization. In East Java, Indonesia, the Gusdurian Network worked with local high schools to train students as peace agents. These students were taught to identify extremist ideologies in their communities and counteract them using peaceful, pluralistic narratives.

PRACTITIONERS' INSIGHTS. REAL-WORLD CHALLENGES

Specialists working with TAF and partners on conflict prevention identified challenges especially prominent in their work, beyond universal concerns over funding and program sustainability.

Navigating local politics: Local leaders and government officials can either support or hinder conflict prevention efforts. Finding constructive ways to engage is a core task for program teams.

“We faced challenges such as power dynamics, local politics, and sustainability issues. Initial resistance from certain religious groups and difficulties involving women participants were notable obstacles. We addressed security risks by coding the names of volunteers and ensuring confidentiality. Coordination challenges also arose, especially with government officials and local religious leaders.” — TAF program specialist, Bangladesh

Cultural sensitivities are usually best navigated by those closest to the ground. While traditional leaders and religious authorities can be strong advocates of peacebuilding, they may see conflict prevention measures as threats to their authority or to traditional beliefs. Additionally, steps to involve women often need to address established expectations, including exclusion from decision-making.

“...creating collaborative spaces and overcoming resistance from traditional mediators can be difficult. Traditional mediators might see new mediation programs as parallel systems that undermine their authority.” — TAF program specialist, Nepal

Trust-building with communities and partner organizations is a further major challenge.

“Local government officials are often skeptical of INGOs like us. We need to demonstrate reliability and build strong relationships, which takes time. Another challenge is staff turnover in local governments. When officials change, we often have to start building relationships from scratch.” — TAF program specialist, Nepal

Defining the scope of projects can be a struggle, with grantee requests sometimes exceeding the intended project capacity.

“One challenge we face is drawing the line with locally led social cohesion projects. ... For instance, one grantee sought additional funding for promoting employment opportunities to prevent mothers from going abroad.

While they framed it as conflict prevention, it exceeded our capacity and framework. So, when delving into locally led social cohesion efforts, establishing a focused framework becomes crucial. It's such a broad concept that having a structured approach would be immensely beneficial." — TAF program specialist, Sri Lanka

These practitioner insights underscore the complex, on the ground realities of locally led conflict prevention and show why responses must be flexible, inclusive and tailored to local contexts. They also point to practical entry points for funders and practitioners, including long-term engagement, clearer frameworks and deeper collaboration, and the next section builds on these lessons with strategic recommendations to strengthen impact, sustainability and local ownership.

Recommendations for Funders and Practitioners



By remaining adaptable and committed to principles of inclusion, evidence-based action, and community empowerment, international and domestic organizations can continue to make significant contributions to conflict prevention initiatives across the Asia-Pacific region.

The lessons learned from past and ongoing programs of The Asia Foundation provide a robust foundation for strengthening the impact of conflict prevention work in the coming years, promoting peace and stability in a complex and rapidly changing global environment.

1. Foster cross-country collaboration and learning

It is imperative to further strengthen cross-country collaboration or regional knowledge sharing on conflict prevention. Formalizing platforms for shared learning and dialogue, such as regional workshops and online forums, can strengthen peer networks and enhance the exchange of best practices and resources. This will enable organizations to integrate successful strategies from diverse contexts and refine their approaches to conflict prevention based on collective insights. Long-term funding for networking organizations generates sustainable and locally driven responses.

2. Enhance evidence-based approaches

For The Asia Foundation, a commitment to evidence-based conflict analysis has been a key factor in the success of its initiatives. Moving forward, programs should invest systematically in data collection and analysis, the development of databases, and robust monitoring and evaluation processes. Partnerships with local research institutions and researchers should be strengthened to build long-term capacity. This will enable the continuous adaptation of programs and ensure they remain responsive to evolving conflict dynamics.

With donor priorities shifting away from areas such as violent extremism, there is an increasing need to generate and present **contextualized, data-driven evidence** to secure sustained funding. Strengthening communication with donors through research and tailored funding applications can help bridge this gap and sustain long-term initiatives.

3. Expand the role of women and youth in peacebuilding

Programs should recognize women and youth not only as beneficiaries of conflict prevention programs but as critical agents of change. Strengthening their leadership and participation in peacebuilding initiatives will be pivotal to long-term success. Future programs should integrate gender-responsive frameworks that elevate the participation of women and youth in decision-making processes, ensuring that they are central to the design and implementation of peacebuilding strategies.

4. Support local governance improvements and institutional strengthening

Programs should explore innovative strategies to strengthen governance mechanisms at the local level and work with governments to embed conflict prevention in broader policy agendas and frameworks. Supporting local governments to address conflict proactively by providing training and technical support should improve accountability and responsiveness and contribute to the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts over the long term. Fostering deeper collaboration between state institutions and local communities will ensure that peacebuilding initiatives are both locally led and state-supported.

Scaling up successful initiatives remains challenging given the need to remain context-specific. There is a need to explore how national frameworks or policies can institutionalize locally led conflict prevention while maintaining adaptability across diverse contexts. Developing flexible national policies that allow for localized adaptations can help bridge this gap and ensure the broader application of successful community-driven initiatives.

5. Engage for the long term

Finding ways to work over sufficiently long periods to build sustainable capacity remains one of the primary challenges for conflict prevention initiatives. Organizations should diversify their donor bases and ensure that programs are framed within broader development agendas rather than relying on funding tied to short and finite project cycles. Demonstrating the long-term value of conflict prevention, through rigorous impact assessments and policy advocacy, will be essential in maintaining donor support. Developing innovative financing mechanisms, including private-sector partnerships and other domestic or regional backing, will be crucial for ensuring the continued sustainability and scalability of conflict prevention efforts.

Endnotes

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Annex: Background and Approach

Conflict Prevention at the Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is involved in a range of conflict prevention initiatives that address different context settings and conflict drivers at all levels. This variety of programming reflects the diverse needs of countries tackling active, latent, or emerging, and post-conflict challenges. TAF operates across Asia and the Pacific, and many of the organization's country offices are engaged in conflict prevention programming, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar, with countries such as Laos and Cambodia included in broader peace and security programming. Country teams at TAF are supported by a global headquarters in the United States and by thematic regional programs which engage in evidence-based research on conflict settings and drivers of instability in the region, drawing from the wealth of experience and country-level knowledge.²³

The Asia Foundation supports local efforts to improve engagement between government and citizens, strengthens peacebuilding efforts and transitional institutions, and strengthens informal institutions that provide justice, stability, and services where the state has limited reach or legitimacy.

TAF has a long record of implementing conflict prevention programming at the country level, driven by local teams who understand the specific needs and dynamics of each context. This decentralized approach has enabled the development of evidence-based interventions and robust partnerships. TAF has also sought to facilitate cross-country collaboration, integrate global good practice, and foster regional working where it is most effective. A commitment to innovation and knowledge sharing seeks to ensure that conflict prevention programming remains effective and responsive to the unique needs of each community. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the development of a framework that guides future conflict prevention efforts in the region.

This study builds on TAF's experience of local-level conflict prevention, working alongside partners at the grassroots level. Recent and ongoing local conflict prevention initiatives tackle a range of context-specific issues and topics: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, Women Peace and Security, strengthening social cohesion, peacebuilding, transitional justice, governance and institutional

reform, and the impact of digital technology on conflict. Approaches have included developing early warning systems, strengthening community-led mediation, supporting community policing, and conducting evidence-based conflict analysis and research (see Table 1). As conflict dynamics across Asia and the Pacific countries vary widely, tailored programming has been essential.

From our programme review, we identified the following key conflict programming types.

Table 1: Main types of conflict programming at The Asia Foundation, 2019-2024

TYPE OF PROGRAMMING	COUNTRY AND KEY PROGRAMMING	FUNDER (S)
Early warning systems	Bangladesh – community-driven early warning systems	U.S. Department of State
	Pakistan – upholding human rights monitoring through early warning systems	U.S. Department of State
Preventing and countering violent extremism	Indonesia – supporting civil society to address violent extremism	U.S. Department of State
	Philippines – countering violent extremism through government-civil society engagement	U.S. Department of State
Social cohesion	Pakistan – people-to-people links for peacebuilding, promoting social cohesion in the Punjab	U.S. Department of State
	Sri Lanka – Social cohesion and reconciliation activity	U.S. Agency for International Development
	Sri Lanka – Strengthening Social Cohesion	Global Affairs Canada
	Sri Lanka – Peaceful inter-ethnic relations through economic development activity	U.S. Agency for International Development
	Regional – enhancing civil society use of social media for conflict prevention	Meta Platforms, Inc.
Community policing	Sri Lanka – community policing	U.K. Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
	Timor Leste – community policing	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
	Myanmar – community safety and security (before 2021 military coup)	U.K. Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
Community mediation, justice	Thailand – Inside mediation, countering extremism and conflict transformation in the Far South	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
	Philippines – Cohesion, advocacy, and resilience for Peace	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

TYPE OF PROGRAMMING	COUNTRY AND KEY PROGRAMMING	FUNDER (S)
Community mediation, justice	Philippines – Restoring Mutual Trust in Mindanao	U.S. Agency for International Development
	Sri Lanka – Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution in Sri Lanka	British Council
	Sri Lanka – Inter-Faith and Inter-Communal Dialogue in High-Risk Areas	U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
	Sri Lanka – Local Capacities for Dispute Resolution in Sri Lanka	U.S. Department of State
Local Governance and Institutional Reform	Sri Lanka – Support for Sri Lanka Police Reforms	U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
	Philippines – Democratic governance assistance to the Bangsamoro transition	U.S. Agency for International Development
	Nepal – Strategic Partnership on Subnational Governance involving community dialogue	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Women, Peace, and Security	Regional – Amplifying women’s voices in ASEAN Women	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Conflict research and analysis	Myanmar – Research and analysis, policy dialogue on political devolution (before 2021 military coup)	U.K. Department for International Development
	Myanmar – Myanmar Eastern Borderlands Research	U.K. Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
	Regional – Research on cross-border and transnational conflicts	U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
	Regional – assessment of civil society engagement in preventing and countering violent extremism	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
	Regional – Myanmar regional dialogue platform on conflict and current affairs	U.K. Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
	Regional – assessment of international Peace Support in Myanmar, 2010-2020	Global Affairs Canada
	Regional – Support for conflict prevention policy, capacity, and analysis	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
	Regional – Youth Peace, and Security: support for regional participation and consultation with ASEAN	U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
Regional – Research on Information Disorder	International Development Research Centre (Canada)	

Methodology

This study consisted of a combination of qualitative research methods, including a light desk review of literature on global best practices of locally led conflict prevention, a comprehensive review of internal TAF programming documents over the past five years, and an assessment of evaluation material produced by TAF on conflict prevention over a longer timeframe. Through this analysis, the team sought to identify best practices and common trends, terminology, strategies, and methods currently practiced by TAF for locally led conflict-prevention, guided by the following research questions:

- How does TAF currently define “local” conflict prevention initiatives?
- How do we approach program design and implementation on conflict prevention?
- What are examples of common/successful approaches?
- What are TAF’s main strengths?
- What limitations or even failures were noted?
- How can we work better together?

Five semi-structured interviews were then conducted with country team project managers to identify the common factors behind successful projects. The review’s findings and the interviews formed the basis for a regional workshop attended by 18 program leads and 5 external conflict experts.

Conflict prevention initiatives at TAF were broadly defined to encompass:

1. Initiatives that directly addressed drivers of conflict and violence
2. Initiatives designed to directly support peacebuilding efforts and increase social cohesion and inclusion/empowerment of people from marginalized communities, e.g., religious, ethnic groups, women, and youth

The projects included in the analysis fulfilled the following criteria:

- A prominent role for The Asia Foundation
- Ended between 2019 and 2024
- Directly addresses ongoing conflict, post-conflict, or latent tensions in the country of focus, where addressing conflict is the project’s clear objective

- “Locally led” or involves the inclusion of “local” actors, such as, but not restricted to, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, communities, local governments, or groups directly impacted or involved in conflict/violent/tensions locally
- May involve higher levels (for example, national or provincial government), but must involve local communities
- Total funding greater than US\$100,000

The assessment covered eight countries: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Timor Leste, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar. Regional initiatives were also included.

Thirty-three projects met the criteria. Key project documents, such as proposals, contracts, donor and evaluation reports, were scanned for information such as project objectives, theory of change, strategic approach, activities, and lessons learned. The list of projects was then confirmed with participating TAF country offices, who had the opportunity to add significant projects/programs that may have been missed. An analytical framework was then developed by comparing across the projects and identifying common features.

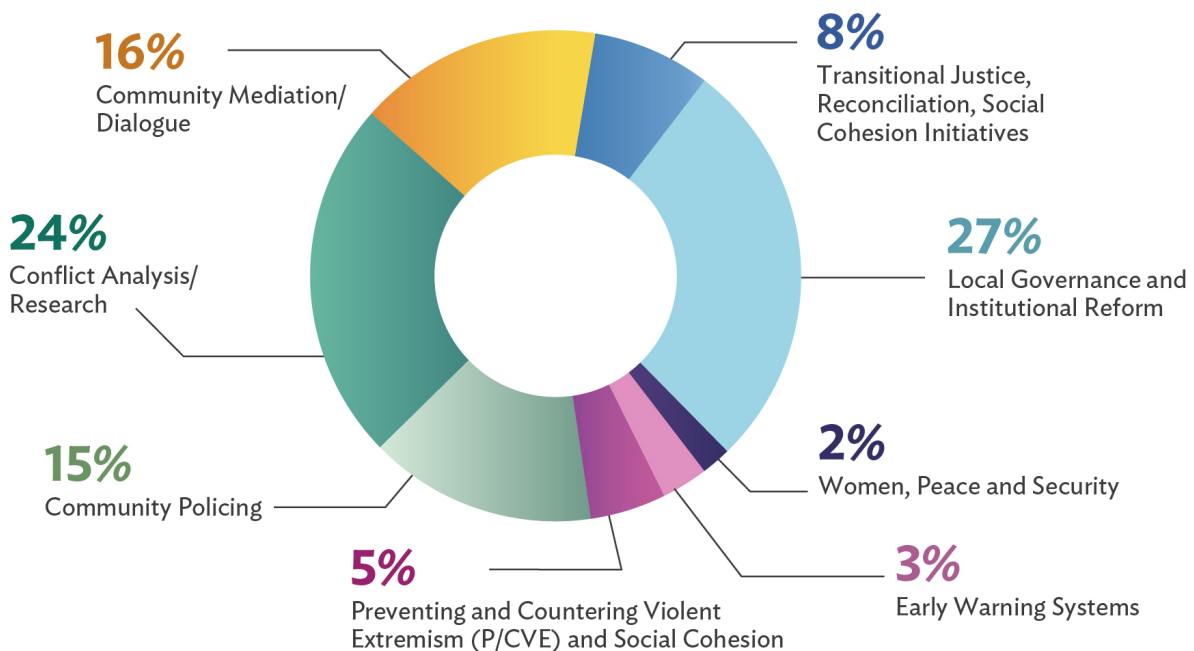
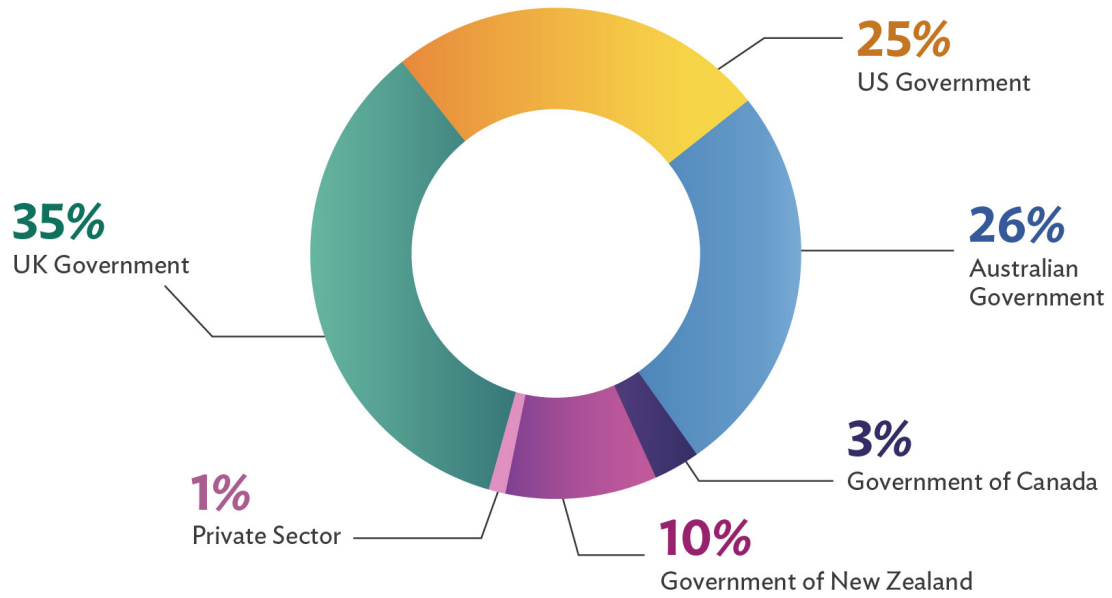


Figure 2: Donors Supporting TAF Conflict Programs, 2019–2024 (by proportion of funds provided)





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