

Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360⁰ Support to Emerging Women Leaders

Project Learning Document



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INDEX OF ACRONYMS

YWLs – Young Women Leaders

SFCG – Search for Common Ground

FGD – Focus Group Discussions

YR – Young Researcher

YLR – Youth-led Research

MSC – Most Significant Change

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The project “Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360 degree Support to Emerging Women Leaders” came into existence in a context where ethnic and religious communities were divided due to an unfortunate event and the situation was further worsened by the pandemic. Therefore, it is an understatement that this project was challenging from the outset and the carrying out this project would have been impossible without all the stakeholders who were a part of this project and particularly the team which operationalized the project. First and foremost, my sincere gratitude goes to the SFCG Sri Lanka team. None of this would have been possible without the immense guidance of Nawaz Mohammed, Country Director of Search for Common Ground, Sri Lanka and the enabling role played by Marisa Fernando, Head of Programs was effortless yet effective. Fellow SFCG staff members Kiruthika Thurairajah and Saumya Amarasinghe tirelessly worked in every step of the way to keep this project moving forward at such a critical time. Also, the continuous support rendered by the Mohammed Sadaath, Program Manager for Monitoring and Evaluation is much appreciated.

The instrumental role played by four regional partner organizations, namely Women’s Resource Centre in Kurunegala, Muslim Women’s Development Trust in Puttalam, Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena in Batticaloa and Muslim Women’s Research and Action Forum in Ampara, to carry out this project in their respective districts was commendable to say the least.

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Preface

This report delves into the lessons learned of the Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360-degree support project implemented in four districts covering the Ampara, Kurunagala, Batticaloa and Puttalam discussed in detail. It was compiled and written by Neranjan Maddumage with the support of Kamani Senevirathna and Hakkani Majeed, who comprise the young researchers team.

This report is structured in six parts; part 1 provides a context analysis and approach of the youth 360⁰ project. part 2 sets out the methodology and methods employed to assess outcomes and generate the learnings. Part 3 discusses the key findings and learnings while part 4 provides an account on unforeseen observation and learnings. Part 5 discuss the conclusion remarks of the learnings. Part 5 provide several recommendations for the future course of actions and improvement.

Executive Summary

Since gaining independence, Sri Lankan history has been a tumultuous one, rife with conflict. A civil war that raged for over 30 years, episodic communal violence against ethnic and religious minorities and youth uprisings which resulted in mass violence, were part and parcel of Sri Lanka's historical landscape.

The Easter Sunday attacks of 2019 were yet another extension of the island's conflict-ridden history, which significantly altered the inter-ethnic and religious dynamics of Sri Lankan society. Following the attacks, tensions arose in specific regions of the country, especially in the districts of Puttalam, Ampara, Batticaloa and Kurunegala, where ethnic and religious polarization intensified with the boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, physical attacks, vandalism, desecration of religious sites and communal riots.

This project came into being amidst the above prevailing social conditions, with the aim of fostering the restoration of peace among communities, hand in hand with the empowerment of young women leaders (YWLs). This was to be achieved via the project, Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360⁰ Support to Emerging Women Leaders, which enabled community-based peacebuilding initiatives at the grassroots level.

The target group of this project were informal female youth groups, that were often overlooked in the context of peacebuilding, or otherwise in general. In engaging informal grassroots female youth groups, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) collaborated with four partner organisations, based in four different districts as follows;

- Muslim Women's Development Trust – Puttalam District
- Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) - Ampara District
- Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena – Batticaloa District
- Women's Resource Centre - Kurunegala.District

The SFCG team documented all the data and observations during the implementation of this project, from various stakeholders, in line with the Youth 360⁰ approach. Youth-led research (YLR) was the main tool used in data collection. In order to execute the above, three young researchers were 'embedded' within the designated project locations, tasked with engaging with the young women who were participating in the project.

The YLR used specific data collection tools such as;

- Focus-group Discussions

- Interviews & Informal Conversations
- Observations.

The methodology adopted in the project was developed based on, the key principles of Youth 360⁰ Approach listed below;

The key principles of Youth 360⁰ approach are as follows;

1. Working with the excluded majority.
2. Power in the hands of youth.
3. Redefining sustainability.
4. Enhancing collective impact on conflict geographies.

The following key learnings and outcomes of the project are based on what worked and what did not work, when implementing the project, in line with the above stated 4 key principles.

1. The Excluded Majority

Excluded Majority was defined by a set of criteria that regional partner organisations were expected to follow, when Young Women Leaders (YWLs) were selected to participate in the project. According to the approved criteria, the main target group were to be young women between the ages of 18 and 29, ethnically representative of the particular district. This was a demographic considered difficult to reach. Although, most of the selected YWLs complied with the expected criteria, there were certain instances where there were shortcomings, due to the following reasons;

- Significant drop out rates of selected participants that fit the criteria, at the initial stage of project implementation.
- According to research findings in the Ampara and Batticaloa districts, a vast majority of YWLs representative of the excluded majority, had never had any experience in social or community engagements.
- In the Kurunegala district, most of the YWLs did not seem to be socio-economically marginalized, and had no experience or understanding of the prevailing ethnic and religious conflict or the knowhow to overcome such conflicts.

2. Power in the Hands of Youth

Several project activities and elements were designed to achieve the principle of Power in the Hands of Youth, namely, YWLs undergoing capacity development training, followed by opportunities to put it into practice. Collaborative Analyses; the collaboration between YWLs, their mentors, facilitators, and partner organisations was an integral element of this principle.

These parties collectively worked on ‘small grants initiatives’ which involved identifying issues, planning small grant initiatives and analyzing their viability and feasibility within the framework of a given period and available resources. This was an excellent opportunity for YWLs to collaborate, interact, negotiate and debate with a wide range of stakeholders, within their communities.

In Kurunegala and Puttalam, YWLs discussed and negotiated with partner organisations and other stakeholders when planning small grant initiatives. In certain scenarios, these YWLs took a strong stand in decisions related to their initiatives, while strengthening bonds with collaborators. Capacity building further shifted power into the hands of YWLs. They were enthusiastic to take part in training and capacity building programs. Overall, all the training sessions and capacity building programs, in all four districts captivated the audiences, due to the quality and effectiveness of delivery.

Participatory decision-making, was a crucial aspect of the project which ensured that power was in the hands of YWLs. Mutual decisions were made by YWLs when organizing small grant initiatives. This opportunity increased the confidence of YWLs. For example, in Puttalam and Kurunegala, YWLs who actively made mutual decisions within the groups, performed well when implementing their chosen small grants initiatives. Furthermore, participatory decisions were made even at various other phases of the project, such as the final selection of peace-building initiatives, for the small grants program.

However, it must be noted that not all YWLs succeeded in conducting collaborative analysis to its optimal level. In certain instances, positive relationships with their communities and stakeholders could not be established, due to the challenges stated below.

Challenges, Observations and Learning Outcomes

- The YWLs lack of experience and skills in the art of communication, coordination and ability to successfully resolve internal group conflicts.

- Due to time constraints, YWLs had to expedite their peacebuilding initiatives. This put them under a lot of pressure, as most of them were involved in community projects, of this nature, for the first time.
- A majority of YWLs experienced capacity building for the first time. As observed in Amapara and Kurunegala, in certain instances YWLs seemed to have severe capacity deficits and knowledge gaps. To counter this, additional training activities and sessions were arranged by SFCG and partner organisations, in order to bridge the existing knowledge gaps. It was observed that the expected outcomes of capacity building, may not come into fruition in the short term, as the inculcation of certain qualities and attitudes essential to peace-building were more of a long term process and goal.
- The contribution of mentors in providing mentorship and coaching in capacity building of YWLs seemed to be marginal in Ampara and Puttalam. This shortcoming could have been overcome, if partner organisations recruited mentors with a higher level of expertise, or alternatively provided these mentors, more capacity building training.

Successes, Observations and Learning Outcomes

- The ‘small grants’ further empowered YWLs, by giving them the opportunity to organize peacebuilding initiatives in their communities. These initiatives resulted in YWLs becoming visible in their communities, in terms of making significant interventions in socio-political affairs.
- The small grants initiatives allowed YWLs to have firsthand experience in leading community projects. For the majority of YWLs, this was the first time they participated in such a project.
- Small grants initiatives, further served as a platform for YWLs to communicate and interact with a wide range of stakeholders, which included government officials, religious institutions, and local government representatives. In return, YWLs were acknowledged within their respective communities and community members had the opportunity to witness the potential of YWLs, as they strived to initiate positive changes in their communities.
- In the course of implementing the initiatives, YWLs showcased their skills at contingency planning and effective leadership, as seen in the following instance. A group in Kurunegala originally planned to organize a Sinhala-Hindu New Year Festival, but could not go ahead as planned, due to COVID19 and the ensuing

government health guidelines. Alternately, they organized an awareness program in two days, where participation was in line with COVID19 safety guidelines.

- The Youth-led M&E component provided an opportunity for youth, to engage in decision-making. The YWLs determined their own indicators to measure changes that had taken place in the community, as a result of small grant initiatives. The key learning here was the need to support YWLs to be objective oriented, when planning initiatives. This component also enabled effective communication between partner organisations, YWLs and SFCG staff to monitor the progress of YWLs.

Redefining Sustainability

This project enabled youth to engage with community members, government officials and other duty bearers beyond the immediate project, in order to maintain a rapport with community members to sustain peacebuilding initiatives. The research findings in this regard are extremely diverse and outcomes sharply vary from one group to another, even within the same district.

Puttalam

- One group failed to connect with the community and thus, only two persons turned up at the initiative. In contrast, another group managed to bring more than 150 participants to their initiative, including a government service officer and other state duty bearers.
- A group had a somewhat strained relationship with at least one particular religious institution in the area, but this was not a shortcoming on the part of the YWLs. In most cases, such institutions were inherently resistant towards participating in a dialogue that would promote peace and harmony. This could have been averted, if religious institutions in these selected areas, were informed or sensitized at an early stage of the project.
- YWLs had to overcome cultural restrictions that were placed on them by parents and families, as a result they failed to intermingle with their community.

Kurunegala

- Certain groups could not build a strong bond with community members, as expected, even though they managed to connect with government officials and other duty bearers. In contrast, certain groups where YWLs had a great rapport with the community showed impressive results with their initiatives.

Enhancing the Collective Impact on Conflict Geographies

Catalyzing YWLs to pursue an active role as peacemakers, was well-respected within certain communities and had a resonating impact, while in other communities, people were indifferent toward such interventions. Certain groups were well-received, appreciated and trust was built due to the initiatives. As a result, some parents began to see the potential and capabilities of their young daughters, in both a positive and new light.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this project was carried out at a time when COVID19 brought about drastic changes, in the everyday lives of citizens. In such conditions, conducting a project of this nature-with the objective of building peace among conflicted communities was a challenge. However, it highlighted significant experiences and realities faced by YWLs in the aftermath of the Easter attack, in polarized ethnic and religious communities living with underlying conflict.

Introduction

1.1 Context Analyses

Sri Lanka's track record as a nation has been tarnished due to violence inflicted upon ethnic and religious minorities and resistance groups; From a protracted civil war to two youth revolts which were brutally controlled by armed means, as well as, episodic communal violence against Muslim minorities in the country. The Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 were an extension of this violent history, which perpetuated mistrust and suspicion among ethno-religious groups. This event altered the inter-ethnic and religious relations of Sri Lankans to a great extent. It not only shone a light on the lapses of national security but it was a deadly strike on national harmony and reconciliation.

This project focuses on polarized ethnic and religious communities, as a result of deep-rooted mistrust and tension that resurfaced, consequent to the Easter Sunday attack. Subsequently, inter-ethnic and religious tensions raised its head in certain parts of the country, such as Kurunegala, Puttalam, Ampara, and Batticaloa. Inter ethno-religious polarization, boycotting Muslim-owned businesses, physical attacks, vandalism, desecration of religious sites and riots were among such acts. This volatile environment disproportionately affected the women more than the men, in these communities.

Amidst the above mentioned background, the project: Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360⁰ Support to Emerging Women Leaders, came into existence. The aim of the project was to empower YWLs of the excluded majority, to actively contribute towards the restoration of peace and harmony, by enabling them to engage in community-based peacebuilding initiatives.

The key target group of this project were informal grassroots female youth groups, that were often overlooked, in the context of peacebuilding or otherwise in general. In approaching informal, grassroots female youth groups, SFCG collaborated with four partner organisations based in the four districts, namely Muslim Women's Development Trust in Puttalam, Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) in Ampara, Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena in Batticaloa and Women's Resource Centre in Kurunegala.

1.2 The Youth 360⁰ Approach

One of the significant elements of this pilot project was the integration of the Youth 360⁰ approach. This approach was used as the primary model behind the formulation of project activities. Youth 360⁰ is a holistic approach in supporting youth-led groups, engaged in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The Children and Youth Division of Search for Common Ground are the pioneers in the formation of this approach, which has already been tested in several countries, by strategizing according to the individual and respective country context.

The Youth 360⁰ Approach has four key principles, namely,

- Working with the excluded majority
- Power in the hands of youth
- Redefining sustainability
- Enhancing collective impact on conflict geographies

These key principles, will be further discussed in the following sections of this learning document by relating it to the project's outputs, outcomes, key learnings, and challenges.

In terms of the Youth 360⁰ programmatic components, the capacity development program is a combination of both training and mentorship. Additionally, the collaborative context assessments, seed grants process which reinforces the participatory decision making of the

participants and the Youth-led M&E framework which gives space for the youth, to develop their own change matrix, for peacebuilding initiatives, are unique aspects of this approach,

Participants in the Youth 360⁰ capacity development program, define their own learning objectives, at the beginning of the program. With the support of their mentors, they develop indicators of success for their initiatives, that aim to strengthen social cohesion in their own communities. Therefore, this approach can also be referred to as a youth-adult partnership.

2. Methodology

This section describes the research design that was chosen for the purpose of this learning process, the reasons for this choice and the data collection methods adopted. This section also provides a brief account on the limitations of the study.

2.1 Learning Documentation: The Approach

In the given context, documentation of learnings is considered indispensable, where the main purpose is to capture all the important learnings, findings and project outcomes to generate strong evidence on the replicability and the scalability of the Youth 360⁰ approach. Documentation of learning required collecting a wide range of data from various stakeholders.

In this project, SFCG followed a youth led research approach, to generate evidence on the project's progress and of the YWLs who engaged in peacebuilding in their respective communities, community members and all data related to the project. In short, it is a compilation of findings and outcomes of the implementation of the Youth 360⁰ approach.

The overall programmatic approach of this project was youth-led and youth-oriented, to engage young people in peacebuilding, strengthening leadership skills and support them to build strong relationships with members of their communities. Youth-led research (YLR) is a tool for youth empowerment and engagement in communities, which contributes to a better understanding of the problems that exist therein. It is an approach that engages youth in decision making, strengthens their leadership skills, and improves their relationships with members of their community¹.

As this project was embedded with a new approach SFCG was focused on capturing the learnings and documenting it in a method, which would facilitate greater effectiveness,

¹ Search for Common Ground (2009). Children You and Conflict: An Introductory Toolkit for Engaging Children & Youth in Conflict Transformation. Retrieved from <https://www.sfcg.org/programmes/childrenand youth/pdf/toolkit.pdf>.

efficiency and impact. As such, the Youth-led Research Approach was prioritized. In this approach young researchers (YRs) engaged with emerging young women leaders (YWLs) and other stakeholders, rather than need based data collection. This embedded process enabled the YRs to unearth experience-based learning, throughout the project process.

This project had three young researchers embedded in selected districts, working in locations where this project was being conducted. These researchers used multiple data collection tools, to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

Exploratory Research & Experiential Data

This research is exploratory in nature, as it attempts to explore the experiences of YWLs, experienced women mentors, trainers and community members. Their elusive subjective perception of the 360⁰ project experiences, formed the core data of the study. Therefore, it required an approach that could effectively document the experiential nature of this behaviour. Exploratory research deals with topics where a problem/phenomenon is not clear or clearly defined².

For the purpose of this learning process, the research paradigm that was followed is of a qualitative nature, using an open-ended mode of interview. This method has revealed that qualitative research is based on the belief that firsthand experience provides, the most meaningful data. It is also a proponent that qualitative data provides large volumes of quality data, from a limited number of people. It is aimed at understanding the world of participants, from their frame of reference.

It would have been impossible to collect large amounts of quantitative data on this study, except by means of mini surveys with community members, participating in the small grant activities, because generating learning in this project, is based on the perception of YWLs, mentors, trainers and community members and cannot be scientifically measured³. Furthermore, the flexible nature of exploratory approach assimilated well with the 360⁰ project learning processes. This research approach sought to answer questions such as how, what and why, in order to deep dive and explore the phenomenon, to capture what worked and what didn't work in the 360⁰ approach.

² Hallingberg, Britt, et al. "Exploratory Studies to Decide Whether and How to Proceed with Full-Scale Evaluations of Public Health Interventions: A Systematic Review of Guidance." *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 28 May 2018, 10.1186/s40814-018-0290-8.

³ *ibid*

2.2 The Participants

The target population of this research included all YWLs from all four districts (Amapara, Batticaloa, Kurunegala and Puttalam), mentors, regional partner organisations, community members that attended peacebuilding initiatives and other stakeholders.

2.3 Data Collection: The Tools Deployed

The study predominantly relied on qualitative data from primary sources, which was collected deploying a combination of data collection tools such as observations, FGDs (Focus Group Discussions), one-one-one conversations and unstructured observation.

These data collecting tools were utilized to capture the perceptions, views, perception shifts and behaviors of YWLs, experienced mentors and community members in relation to the youth 360⁰ project. The numbers of interviews or FGDs required was decided by young researchers, based on the information emerging with ongoing data collection and what further information was required, for each thematic area of the learning document.

FGDs with Young Women Leaders

The number of FGDs to be conducted, in each district was decided by the young researchers. For each FGD a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 10 young women leaders participated, ensuring that at least 40-50% of the young women leaders in each district were represented. The FGDs were conducted through both in-person and online modes due to the prevailing pandemic. FGDs were conducted for a duration of 1 to 1.5 hours.

One-on-One: with Mentors and Community Leaders

One-on-One interviews were conducted with selected community leaders. The youth participated in the small grant initiatives and with mentors in each district. These interviews focused on obtaining the perspectives of the experience, with regards to the youth 360⁰ project's process; what worked and what did not work. The interviews were 45 and 60 minutes in duration.

Data Collection & Direct Observations

The YRs own perspective also played a vital role in this learning process. The young researchers adapted to the context and were able to study the environment, participants and events to collect reflection driven data. During the project, YWLs participated in all processes,

events and initiatives and made first hand observations. Direct observation was the main observation technique used by the young researchers.

Respondents	District	Number of FGDs conducted	Number of One-on-One Conversations
YWLs	Ampara	4	5
	Batticaloa	4	5
	Kurunegala	2	6
	Puttalam	5	12
Mentors	Ampara	N/A	2
	Batticaloa	N/A	2
	Kurunegala	N/A	5
	Puttalam	N/A	6
Community Leaders/Youth	Ampara	N/A	4
	Batticaloa	N/A	4
	Kurunegala	N/A	3
	Puttalam	N/A	8
Observations	All targeted districts	N/A	Participating and observing all the trainings, collaborative context assessments, initiative designing process and small grant initiatives

Figure 1 Data collection Details

2.4 Limitations

As a result of the prevailing travel restrictions and social distancing requirements due to COVID-19, the ability of the young researchers to physically reach the communities on a regular basis, was challenged. As such, FGDs were carried out on virtual mode, which limited the collection of in- depth data. However, the limitations were managed via in-person FGDs and one-on-one conversations with other YWLs, mentors and community members and youth.

Sometimes as respondents, YWLs found it uncomfortable when their mentors were present while FGDs were being conducted. For instance, while conducting FGDs in Puttalam and in Batticaloa, in the presence of their mentors, the YWLs were self-censored when expressing opinions. A stark difference was observed at FGDs that were conducted without the mentor's presence. However, this was not the case in every group and district and therefore, cannot be generalized throughout the entire data collection process.

3. Key Findings & Learnings

3.1 Working with The Excluded Majority

3.1.1 The Excluded Majority: Definition within the Youth 360⁰ Project

The concept of 'excluded majority' was defined by a set of criteria by the SFCG team to fit the Sri Lankan context. Regional partner organisations were expected to follow the stated criteria, when selecting YWLs for the project.

The Excluded Majority was defined as follows,

- The primary target group of the project must be young women between the ages of 18 to 29, (This demographic is usually considered a group that is difficult to reach)
- The final selected group should be ethnically representative of the particular district.
- There should also be an opportunity for young women, who belong to any other minority ethnic and religious group, who may not be represented in forums.
- They should represent a youth group or a youth organisation and especially those who are active in their communities, even if their work is not officially recognized by their community.
- Young women who are being marginalized/ostracized by their community or other communities based on their ethnicity, religion, caste, class, sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Young women who have limited opportunity and access to empowerment programs and other capacity building initiatives and are excluded from any form of participation.
- Those who are unable to take part in any form of social work due to a physical disability.
- Young women whose voices have not been heard beyond their community and who have gained limited leadership experience, from school age to the present.

3.1.2 The Final Selection: YWLs & Meeting the Defined Criteria

The final groups of YWLs in Puttalam, Kurunegala, Ampara and Batticaloa, were selected for the most part, in accordance with the given criteria. For example, all the YWLs in the final groups were between the ages of 18 and 29 and have had limited opportunities to participate in trainings of this nature. As such, the first criteria were met 100% by partner organisations, when selecting YWLs.

The final group of YWLs consisted as follows,

Selected District	Number of YWLs
1. Ampara	31
2. Batticaloa	37
3. Kurunegala	24
4. Puttalam	34

Table 2 Final Young Women Leaders

The final group was also ethnically representative of selected districts, specifically YWLs who belonged to minority ethnic and religious groups. The following is an overall break down of how the final group of YWLs were able to reach different ethnic minorities in the selected four districts.

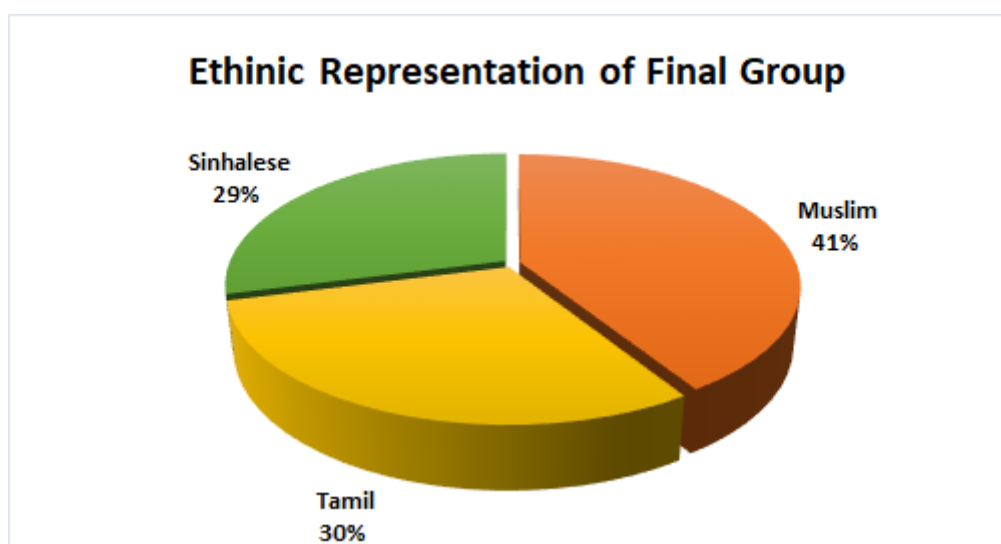


Figure 2 Ethnic Representation of Final group

There were deviations due to the dropout rate that was prevalent in certain districts, which was observed in the early stages of the project, when some of the originally selected YWLs, dropped out largely due to marriage or parental disapproval.

Research findings suggested, that in all four districts, there were cases where regional partner organisations, could not manage to meet all the above criteria, when selecting YWLs. The YWLs who were recruited, belonged to the excluded majority in one aspect or the other.

During interactive training sessions, the YWLs revealed they had very limited experience in terms of social engagements and leadership experience, within their respective communities. The cross-cultural experiences and exposure of these YWLs were extremely limited, while for most the first time, was within this project. As a result, during the initial stage of the designing of small grant initiatives, YWLs found it challenging to identify peacebuilding issues, in their respective communities

Though YWLs represented districts diverse in terms of their ethnic and religious composition, they lacked cross-cultural exposure. This was due to inter-ethnic and religious interactions not being common, even in districts where the population was diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion.

According to the 2012 Census, in Batticaloa, the ethnic composition was Tamil 72.80%, Muslim 25.49% and Sinhala 1.17%. The ethnic composition in Ampara was 43.59%, Sinhalese 38.73%, Sri Lanka Tamil 17.40% and Indian Tamil 0.03%. Though the district level ethnic and religious composition might seem to be diverse, this data can be quite misleading. This was a result of the communities and settlements in these districts being mono-ethnic or mono-religious which led to limited inter-ethnic and religious interactions.

Despite the above socioeconomic background, in some instances the YWLs were not perceived as capable of bringing about, positive change in their communities. In the 2nd round of training, YWLs were asked to talk about their aspirations. Here they stated that though they always had leadership aspirations, but opportunities never came their way, at a community level, as reflected in the following statement;

***“My ambition has always been to help others in my community but till
now did not know how to do it.”- YWL, Puttalam***

This project was an opportunity for them, as otherwise they would be excluded from social and community engagements. As far as the existing phenomenon in the community, girls,

especially young women, are excluded from participation in social, economic, and political life⁴.

3.1.3 Project Engagement: Factors that Contributed to the Enthusiasm & Continuous Engagement of YWLs

1. Novelty of Experience

The data reflected that only a component of the selected YWLs, had the opportunity and exposure in participating in any community development project, leadership program, capacity-building programs or such endeavors, before they joined the Youth 360⁰ project. The above data is depicted in the following bar chart,

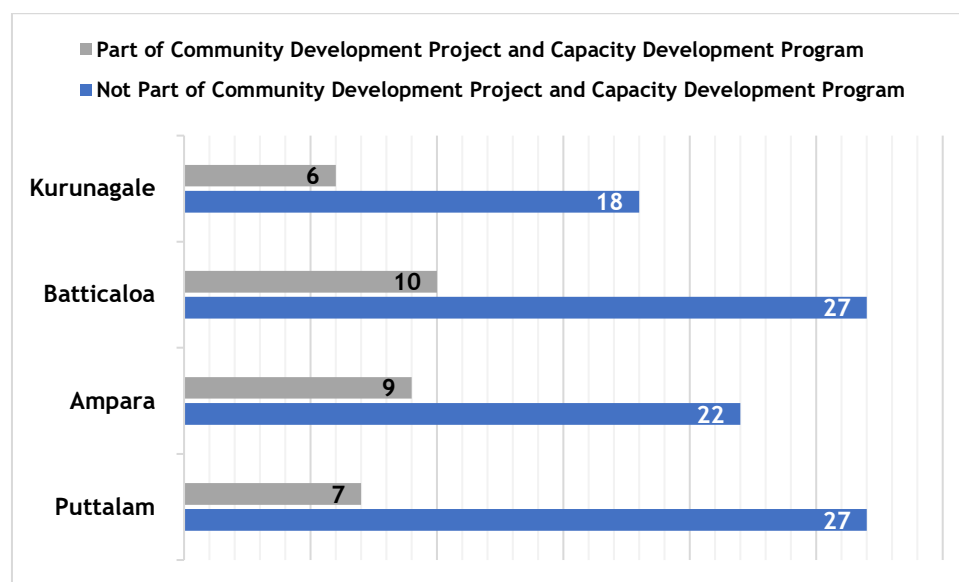


Figure 3 YWLs participation in Community Development Projects & Capacity Development Projects prior to project

As a percentage only 25.39% of YWLs across all four districts had prior experience with community development projects, leadership programs or any similar kind of experience. Therefore, this program was a novel experience for most of the YWLs. This was a platform for YWLs, who had limited or no opportunities to access empowerment programs and other capacity-building initiatives. It showcased the true potential of YWLs to their communities, their interpersonal and organisational skills, as well as decision-making ability through community peacebuilding initiatives.

⁴ Hallman, K., & Roca, E. (2007). Reducing the social exclusion of girls. <https://doi.org/10.31899/pgy12.1038>

During FGDs and one-on-one conversations YWLs stated that the novelty of this experience kept them engaged as reflected in the statement below;

“I feel that the time flew so fast. We weren’t bored, but enthusiastic though we had connection issues. There was no waste of time. A lot of experiences in life were gathered. We got an idea as to how to execute our peace building initiatives. I will join any program of Search and actively participate in those. And also, I’m proud that I have a lot of Muslim friends now.”

-YWL, Sinhalese, Ampara

2. Interactive and Activity Based Training

According to YWLs, one of the main elements of the project, which contributed to their consistent engagement was the training series they underwent. The level of engagement by YWLs at training sessions, across all four districts was enthusiastic and remained so until the conclusion of the project. It was revealed in all of the FGDs that were conducted in Ampara, Batticaloa, Kurunegala and Puttalam with YWLs that the interactive and activity-based nature of the training, kept them interested and engaged. This is highlighted in the below statement;

“We thought training was something to write about but now we have gained a lot of knowledge and experienced a lot of things. We worked as a team. We had the real experience of team leaders.”

- YWL, Puttalam

3. Virtual Engagements

YWLs carried on the project through online platforms and apps when the project threatened to come to a standstill, due to the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. WhatsApp groups were created for each district and thereafter, YWLs themselves created parallel WhatsApp groups (based on small grants) under the supervision of their mentors.

The following table depicts the breakdown of WhatsApp groups that were created for YWLs in all four districts.

Districts	Number of WhatsApp groups
1. Ampara	5
2. Batticaloa	5
3. Kurunegala	5
4. Puttalam	6

Table 3 WhatsApp Group Created

Regional partner organisations were instrumental in getting YWLs to create these groups and interact with each other on them. This served as an instrument in supporting and facilitating the YWLs to engage with one another and regional partners, as well as, to be updated on the project and forthcoming events, at a time when the project was at a crossroads due to Covid-19 restrictions. The following statements from YWL's across all four districts reflects the above;

“There was a gap of 6 months after the first training but our WhatsApp team was important to share our ideas and get involved with the project.....The Women's Resource Centre shared various knowledge, through the WhatsApp group. They discussed various topics and built a dialogue among our team. It was very important to keep our team connected and increase our knowledge.

-YWL, Kurunegala

“We created a WhatsApp group for team members and mentors to discuss the matters related to community initiatives, since we found it was easy to communicate with each one in the group. This helped a lot in terms of developing the proposal, sharing the documents, planning the community initiatives and taking decisions. Our mentors also supported us by responding and giving their comments and suggestions.”

- YWL, Ampara

“A WhatsApp group was created by Sarvodaya staff in order to communicate with us and share relevant information about the project activities and training. Soon after, we were divided into groups, we created a separate WhatsApp group having only our group members and mentors. This group helped us develop a bond from the beginning of the project. It was also very helpful in planning and implementing the community initiatives, as we were not able to physically meet all other group members due to COVID-19 pandemic threat”.

-YWL, Batticaloa

“In this program I learned how to speak and how to express what we are thinking. We also learned to improve our leadership skills and accountability of our actions. We were also trained on how to solve a conflict and what we should do in order to provide a solution to a conflict through conflict analysing tools such problem tree, connectors and dividers and stakeholder mapping.....I learnt if there is a problem or conflict, we must not come to a conclusion before we analyse the causes and effects, parties involved and connected to the conflict.....This program has trained me well to face the challenges in the community and to overcome as a young woman leader”

-YWL, Batticaloa

3.2 Power in the Hands of Youth

3.2.1 Power in the Hands of Youth: The Effectiveness of Strategy & Process

‘Power in the Hands of Youth’ was one of the key principles of the Youth 360⁰ approach. The objective of this principle was to make sure that young women had the power and ability to make their own decisions, concerning their peacebuilding initiatives. Following are the key elements of ‘Power in the Hands of Youth’ principle,

1. Collaborative analysis.
2. Capacity building (mentorship and training workshop).
3. Participatory decision making.
4. Small grants.
5. Youth-led M&E.

This is an account of the research findings of this project corresponding with the above-mentioned key elements of the ‘Power in the Hands of Youth’.

1. Collaborative Analyses

Collaborative analyses involved collaboration between YWLs, their mentors, facilitators, and partner organisations. The parties collectively worked to identify issues, decide on appropriate initiatives, their viability and feasibility within the given period and available resources and decide with regard to the funds required to implement the proposed initiatives.

Based on the data collected and the observation of young researchers, the following aspects worked well in terms of collaborative analysis.

Collaborative analyses facilitated the YWLs and the peace building initiatives in the following manner;

- It was an instrument in identifying conflict within their respective community or area and thereafter designing a viable intervention based on the collaborative decision of all YWLs representing the group.
- It enabled the YWLs to make informed, balanced decisions within the group.
- The YWLs were empowered to make decisions on the issues considered significant to address in the community, as well as, decide on the approach in which to address it.

- It was revealed during the FGD the youth 360⁰ program's process opened up new avenues to participate in the public sphere and thereby, make decisions with regard to local peacebuilding aspects.
- It was also disclosed that the entire training and capacity building process nurtured the YWLs to analyze the actual conflict and make objective/non-partial decisions gave them accountable for their decisions and actions.

Collaboration between YWLs and Mentors

YWLs and mentors were brought together in carrying out the context assessment. YWLs and mentors discussed and debated over various conflicts faced in their communities and analyzed and studied them with the use of analysis tools. According to YWLs in Batticaloa and Ampara, their mentors were supportive in identifying the peacebuilding needs of their communities.

Collaboration Between YWLs

The collaboration among YWLs was a crucial part of the entire process. Though there were internal group conflicts at times, such occurrences were not common. As was demonstrated by YWL groups in Ampara (4 groups), Batticaloa (5 groups), Kurunegala (4 groups) and Puttalam; the context assessment provided them the opportunity to collaborate with each other, by sharing their opinions on certain conflicts and communal issues, which were to be addressed with their initiatives.

For instance, in the district of Kurunegala, a conflict arose as to which project should be implemented. Eventually a collaborative decision was arrived at by the young women, after an extensive discussion that analyzed the cause and effect of each project and its impact on the community.

Collaboration between YWLs and Regional Partners

The 'collaborative analysis' required YWLs to connect with various parties and stakeholders, in conducting the context assessment, in order to decide the peacebuilding requirements of each community. The experience of regional partner organisations was instrumental to YWLs in conducting the context assessment, as they had a better understanding and knowledge of the dynamics of their communities.

Regional partner organisations facilitated YWLs to conduct context assessments, which allowed them to collaborate with each other and with partner organisations. Regional partner

organisations also played an enabling role, in coordinating YWLs with community members and various other stakeholders.

Power in the Hands of Youth through Capacity Building

Capacity Building is the second key component of empowering youth. This was identified as the most successful element in the project, according to YWLs in FGDs. Capacity building focused on areas such as active listening, empathy, leadership and interpersonal skills.

The training focused on identification of conflicts, root-cause analysis, conflict analysis, planning, budgeting, problem-solving, conflict assessment and analysis. The above knowledge that was transferred to YWLs through capacity building, was crucial. This knowledge sought to explore the current level of knowledge, skills, potentials and attitudes of YWLs which could be harnessed for community-based peacebuilding initiatives. The knowledge that YWLs gained through capacity building, enabled them to work on their peacebuilding initiatives, in order to exercise their power in several ways.

Capacity building encouraged YWLs to voice and respect one another's opinions. YWLs from 16 FGDs, across all four districts, stated that capacity building instilled in them the confidence to firmly express their views, as well as respect the views of others, even if they did not agree with them. This skill enabled and empowered YWLs, when required to decide on small grant initiatives and processes.

According to YWLs the capacity building process worked well in terms of the following aspects:

- The training sessions and capacity building programs captivated and successfully held the YWLs interest. This was achieved by their design, which was engaging, fun and interactive, with ice breakers, group activities and games.
- The virtual platform on which the programs were conducted also contributed to the success of the project. The virtual cross exchange of participants, across districts was an opportunity for YWLs to interact and exchange views which would otherwise have been impossible, due to Covid19 government restrictions. This sentiment is reflected in the following statement made by a YWL;

"I never expected that these two days would be so enriching like this. I am so happy that I was able to meet young women leaders from other districts. I learnt a lot from all of them. During offline training, I was hesitant to talk, but here all of us spoke with each

other without any hesitation. Until today I was able to work only with women from my community but from now onwards, I can work with others as I got to know many other girls"

- YWLs were enthusiastic to participate in the training and capacity building programs, as the majority had participated in this nature of capacity building, for the first time. It was a novelty experience to them. Only 25.39% of participants across all four districts had prior experience and had undergone capacity building, leadership training or any similar training related to peacebuilding or community development.
- It was revealed by YWLs in FGDs that the context assessment and proposal development training sessions were found to be content-heavy. YWLs found it challenging, yet not disengaging. It was observed, during the context assessment sessions, across all districts that some YWLs had difficulty differentiating root causes and consequences of communal conflicts. Yet they persevered, engaged with facilitators and received guidance, to clarify these concepts, in relation to proposed peacebuilding initiatives.
- All 4 regional partner organisations and 17 experienced mentors, across all 4 districts held the following view of YWLs by making the following statement or similar statements;

"Thanks to capacity building they have begun to see their communities in a different light and their social awareness has improved through what they learnt in those trainings."

- According to regional partner organisations and experienced mentors, the improved social consciousness and raised awareness of YWLs, led to an increase in self-confidence. The very first residential training that YWLs underwent set the tone for the on-going program, in which they enjoyed the interactive and engaging format of the capacity building sessions. The following sentiment made by a YWL in Kurunegala, is also shared by the YWLs in the other 3 districts;

"The interactive and engaging vibe of the program made us at ease and that was able to bring out our confidence well."

Participatory Decisions

This project allowed YWLs to actively engage in planning, designing, implementing and evaluating peacebuilding initiatives. For example, 10 groups of YWLs in Ampara and Batticaloa stated that the process of planning, budgeting, selecting initiatives and evaluating peacebuilding initiatives was done through participatory decision-making, through mutual interaction, which ensured power was in their hands. These groups viewed participatory decision-making as a positive process.

Although decisions regarding peacebuilding initiatives were mutually agreed upon, at times it led to disputes within certain groups, as observed in the district of Kurunegala. Here one particular group had a major dispute, where the group was not in agreement over their peacebuilding initiative. However, a consensus was arrived at through active, in-depth discussion and a mutual decision was ultimately made.

Participatory decision-making was successful to a great extent. Across all four districts YWLs took great pride in making their own decisions, through the process of participatory decision-making, as can be seen in the below statement made by a YWL;

“Every decision that we made in due course of organizing peacebuilding initiatives was participatory and never made by one person, always agreed by a majority of members. This opportunity equally enabled the decision-making power of all the YWLs.”

Small Grants

It was the responsibility of the YWLs to score and thereafter select the peacebuilding initiatives, which were considered suitable to be funded by way of small grants. The proposals were scored based on the criteria of feasibility, peacebuilding outcomes, do-ability within the given time frame, clarity of the budget breakdown, engagement of other stakeholders and leverage of external resources. This element further strengthened the idea of decision-making power in the hands of youth.

Small grants allowed YWLs to exercise the power that was given to them, by enabling them to carry out community-based peacebuilding initiatives, through financial support. With this came the power and freedom to execute the initiatives, with financial independence. YWLs were enabled with financial support, mentoring and the knowhow to effectively manage finances. A YWL from Kurunegala stated as follows,

“This project reassured power was in our hands by providing us financial aid and technical knowledge to implement our community-based peacebuilding initiatives.”

The Small grants program also became a platform for YWLs to network and interact with a wide range of stakeholders, which included various authorities, government officials, religious institutions and local politicians. In return, YWLs received recognition and acknowledgement within their communities and community members had an opportunity to witness the potential of YWLs, initiating a positive change in their communities.

Sinhuja, a young woman with a hearing impairment stated, that this opportunity gave a platform for disable groups in Batticaloa to interact in the community, despite language barriers and successfully implement a community initiative. Further, they emphasized that YWL received the recognition from community leaders and stakeholders which led YWL carryout these types of activities successfully in future.

Taking into consideration the YWLs previously limited exposure and experience in the sphere of community leadership and peacebuilding initiatives, what they achieved was commended by community members. It was a positive sign of how receptive certain communities were, towards peacebuilding initiatives organized by YWLs.

Overall community feedback was positive in all four districts. A mini survey conducted by SFCG of community members and youth who participated in small grant implementation confirmed this further. An aggregate of 83% acknowledged the capability of YWLs to provide leadership in resolving local conflict in their areas as reflected, in the following graph;

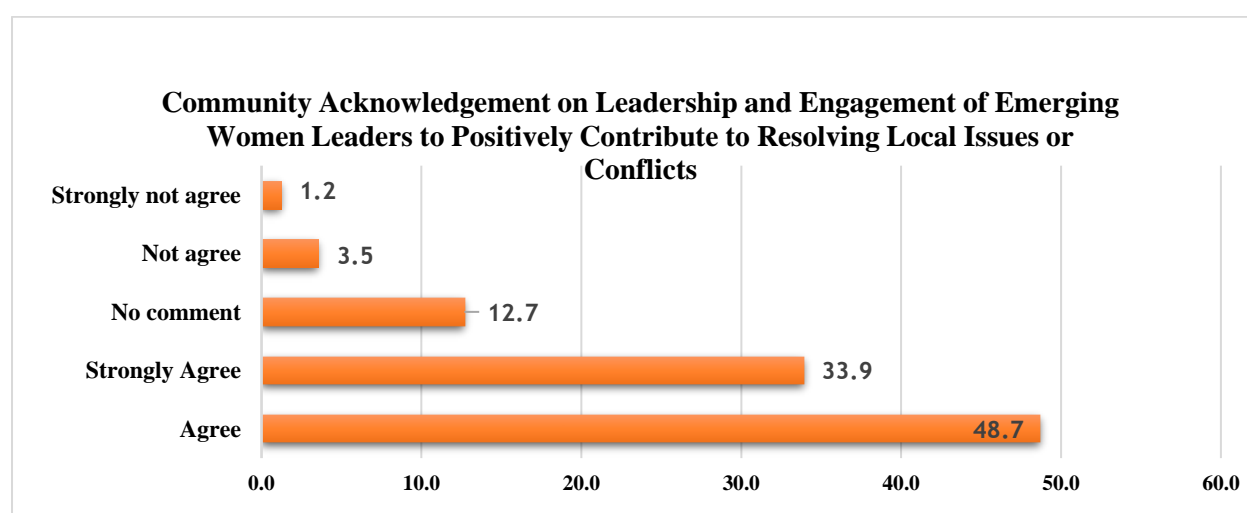


Figure 4 Community Acknowledgement

Youth Led M&E

Youth-led M&E was one of the key components in which YWLs had the opportunity to take the lead in measuring and evaluating the progress of their respective peacebuilding initiatives, under the guidance and monitoring of the M&E consultant. The Youth-led M&E was responsible for directing the YWLs to be more result-oriented, in terms of planning their small grant initiatives and providing input to assess the progress, based on the change matrix prepared by themselves.

During the FGD, 11 groups of YWLs disclosed that the concept of M&E was new to them and that it was a valuable takeaway. For example, 22 YWLs in Ampara, 27 in Batticaloa, 18 in Kurunegala and 27 in Puttalam voiced that they were unaware of M&E, until they learnt it in this project. They also added that youth-led M&E was an avenue to exercise their power, by giving them the opportunity, to decide on and prepare the change matrix, as well as, decide on what qualified to be considered as changes, as well as, the methods of assessment to be followed. The follow up survey conducted by SFCG found that 89% of YWLs were prepared to change metrics, monitor and assess the changes of their initiatives, based on the change matrix prepared by them⁵.

Initially YWLs found it difficult to absorb the knowledge on the M&E element of this project, but eventually with the guidance of consultants they understood it. However, the main expected outcome of Youth-led M&E was to direct YWLs to be result-oriented and systematic with their initiatives, which would ultimately facilitate the exercise their power as YWLs, as explained above. The expected outcome was achieved for the most part as per the above research findings.

3.2.2 Power in the Hands of Youth: The Shortcomings

As mentioned earlier ‘Power in the hands of youth’ comprised of five elements. These elements played out differently within different contexts. The practical implications of these elements were context-bound. Therefore, the following instances, where expected outcomes could not be achieved, were not deviations or lapses on their part but due to inherent shortcomings beyond the YWLs sphere of control.

⁵ Follow-up monitoring assessment results carried out by the Search in 2021

1. According to some YWLs their decision-making power was curtailed by their mentors due to interference. As seen in the examples below;

- In Puttalam, a YWL found her ideas were disregarded by her mentor and therefore other group members were reluctant to support her ideas, due to fearing the disapproval of the mentor.
- In Batticaloa, some YWLs in certain groups, alluded to the fact that at times, experienced mentors overstepped their boundaries. As such, participants were cautious not to explicitly criticize their mentors.
- YWLs also implied that the generation gap between themselves and their mentors was an obstacle.

2. The contribution made by experienced mentors seemed to be quite limited, in the districts of Ampara and Puttalam. According to observations and what was being said by YWLs, experienced mentors seemed to have knowledge gaps and some of them were not adept at effective demonstration of their experiences.

For example, during the context assessment and proposal drafting stages, some experienced mentors in Puttalam, could not effectively guide the YWLs. They had difficulty identifying conflict analysis tools and therefore, were unable to support YWLs to carry out root cause analysis, effectively. During FGDs, YWLs of two groups emphasized that they did not receive adequate support or guidance from their mentors. The impact and the effectiveness of the role and contribution of experienced mentors, varied on a case-by-case basis, but overall, they contributed positively, to the success of the project by guiding and mentoring the emerging young women leaders.

3. The collaboration between YWLs and mentors did not live up to the expected outcomes. In certain cases, collaboration with experienced mentors did not bring about expected results as mentors remained in the background and did not participate actively, as expected and let YWLs take the lead

4. A few of the groups took a long time to complete the Youth-led M&E, as strict social distancing and travel restriction guidelines, were re-imposed by the government as COVID19 resurfaced across the country. Conducting a comprehensive youth-led M&E required time. Most of the community-level changes were impossible to witness overnight or in the short-term and furthermore, all the preparations to carry out the M&E were disrupted by the outbreak of Covid19. However, YWLs did their best to carry out the Youth-led M&E and 17 groups of

YWLs managed to work on Youth-led M&E, even amidst the obstacles they needed to be overcome.

5. Due to the nature and gravity of the content YWLs seemed to be struggle to grasp some of the concepts. This was highlighted during the proposal writing and context assessment process. YWLs had difficulties grasping conflict analysis tools, when carrying out the collaborative analysis, due to a lack of knowledge and experience. The YWLs of 17 groups, across all four districts said they found it difficult when they were called upon to apply the theoretical knowledge, when conducting a context assessment.

The above was observed amongst YWLs in Kurunegala and Ampara. The latter training sessions were found to be content-heavy and had YWLs baffled, but as observed they were never disengaged with capacity building sessions. When YWLs struggled with knowledge and capacity deficits, SFCG and regional partner organisations responded by arranging additional activities and training programs.

However, in reflecting on how this project, worked out well or not, in relation to, power in the hands of youth, it is important to understand that its principles played out differently in different districts and different groups. Elements of 'power in the hands of youth' were not challenged and successful to the same degree, therefore, it is not possible to draw uniform conclusions based on research findings. However, considering the fact that this project was being carried out at a very challenging time, across geographical locations with complex communal relation, it still succeeded in laying the groundwork for YWLs to commence their community peacebuilding initiatives.

3.3 Redefining Sustainability

3.3.1 Redefining Sustainability through Project Processes: The Impact on Youth, Collaborators & Community

This principle, looked at the manner and effectiveness with which the processes of the project (**Tools, Skills, Collaboration & Networks**), enabled the youth to engage with community members, government officials and other duty bearers, beyond the project in order to maintain a rapport with community members, crucial to sustain peacebuilding initiatives.

The research findings, outcomes and learnings related to this aspect, varied sharply from one group to another and among districts. For example, in some places YWLs could not maintain

a strong rapport with communities and their initiatives were poorly attended, due to the pandemic, while in other locations, YWLs were supported and their efforts were acknowledged by their communities. According to the data gathered from FGDs, certain groups of YWLs were more sociable than others, therefore they had a **stronger network of community relations**. Some YWLs did not have this advantage, as this was the first time, they had an opportunity to interact with their communities, in this manner.

Some YWLs had the capability to take advantage of their community networks and accomplish tasks, while others were supported by their community throughout the project. For example, in Batticaloa, Puttalam and Kurunegala certain groups were supported by their communities. YWLs were able to connect with the community by using **the networks and contacts of their parents**⁶. YWLs stated that they relied on the network of their parents and friends, and they were adept in bringing these resources to the project to achieve the expected outcome. It is important to emphasize the instrumental role played by regional partner organisations to strengthen relations between the YWLs community members and stakeholders, to ensure the sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives.

The Youth 360-degree approach was created to accommodate and facilitate youth-led peacebuilding initiatives, in order to sustain and ensure their longevity. In this regard, YWLs were expected to demonstrate the impact of their peacebuilding initiatives and be equipped to effectively **mobilize local resources**. These efforts were successful in many cases, as some YWLs managed to make use of local resources. For example in Batticaloa, Ampara and Puttalam, YWLs collaborated with other youth groups, community organisations and networks in their respective areas, while other groups of YWLs garnered the support of public officials. A YWLs group in Ampara received support from a religious leader, some community leaders and a young men's youth club in order to organize workshops. Yet another group collaborated with youth services officers and *Grama Niladaris*, with the objective of engaging youth and community members in their community initiative. They organized *shramadana* and engaged the youth and their parents from Tamil and Muslim community and created a common platform to work together in future.⁷

Another example can be cited from Batticaloa. One of the YWL groups in Batticaloa organized a cultural night in which parents and family members took part. Interviews with the parents

⁶ Learning report, Kurunegala

⁷ Learning report, Ampara

that attended the cultural night, revealed that this was the first opportunity, for most of them to interact with persons from another ethnic group. It was observed that they were happy to get to know each other, which paved the way to remove the misconception they had earlier, of other ethnic group⁸.

93% of YWLs have confirmed that they have leveraged community support for their small grant initiatives. Support was given ranging from human resources to physical support, such as resource personnel for training and awareness programs, providing free or partial fee hall facilities and voluntarily helping to organize the events etc.⁹.

YWLs who bonded with other youth groups, resulted in contributing to the community development efforts of other organisations and youth groups, as well. This was observed in a group in Puttalam, **where transactional contributions** were reciprocated in certain cases. In Batticaloa and Ampara, YWLs had connected with woman's' organisations in carrying out peacebuilding initiatives. In certain districts, YWLs were keen to get youth volunteers on board their peacebuilding initiatives. This was an excellent strategy in terms of redefining sustainability, by carrying forward peacebuilding initiatives, with broader youth participation. For example, YWL groups (3) in Ampara, (2) in Batticaloa, (2) in Kurunegala and (3) in Puttalam, succeeded in on-boarding youth volunteers.

The selection of YWLs for the project with a pre-network in the community was a value addition that ensured the sustainability of the process and project. There were YWLs, selected to participate in the 360⁰ project, who had previously closely associated with youth groups and community organisations, This was an advantage that impacted the sustainability of the project, as these established contacts, were beneficial resources to call upon, in their peacebuilding initiatives. A pre-established contact base within, the community the YWLs implemented their projects in was an asset. Following are examples where YWLs had such an advantage;

Kurunegala - The Vice President of the District Youth Council along with 5 YWLs of the project were all members of a prominent club.

Puttalam - A parent of a YWL was previously been engaged in community activities, while a YWL selected for the project had attended youth camps organised by an international civil society organisation.

Kalpiyiya - Two YWLs, who were siblings were members of a youth organization.

⁸ ibid

⁹ Follow up monitoring assessment results of Search. Sri Lanka

Though the pandemic had a severe negative impact on creating a wider network with external stakeholders and community, the YWLs and partners contributed their very best efforts, to ensure the sustainability of the project.

3.3.2 Collaboration & Engagement: Factors that Influenced Youth & Community

Discussed here, are the factors which influenced the effective collaboration and increased engagement, between YWLs and other stakeholders.

- Parental support was one of the major factors which enabled increased engagement of YWLs. This was particularly observed in Kurunegala.
- YWLs managed to attract more community members to their initiatives, whenever they had a cordial relationship with the religious institutions, in their respective community. This was observed in the district of Kurunegala. It was a different story in the district of Puttalam, where out of all six groups, at least four of them, faced issues or difficulties in approaching religious institutions. Many religious institutions did not have a positive attitude toward NGO-backed or NGO-enabled community-based peacebuilding projects. These religious institutions had a typically fixed view of NGOs which were backed by foreign aid. As stated by YWLs, the hostility that was experienced from religious institutions, did not stem from a close, objective examination of NGOs, but more from the ideological support towards the dominant political, hyper nationalist narrative on NGOs.
- Muslim YWLs specifically found it difficult to reach Buddhist monks and Catholic churches due to the mistrust which existed among ethnic and religious communities. For example, two groups in Puttalam faced issues, when they tried to approach the Catholic clergy, who were not receptive toward Muslims. In one instance, a group of YWLs were not allowed into a Catholic church, when they tried to meet its head priest. In another case, a Buddhist monk had declined an invitation for a peacebuilding initiative, which was made by YWLs¹⁰.
- The names of partner organisations, which had an ethnic or religious identity attached to them, had an impact on how well they were received by the community, such as, ‘Muslim Women’s Development Trust’ in Puttalam and ‘Muslim Women’s Research

¹⁰ Learning report, Puttalam

and Action Forum’ in Ampara. This distanced many non-Islamic religious institutions from the project, as it was incorrectly assumed that the project was led by Muslims or only for the benefit of Muslims, instead of being a project for people of all ethno-religious identities.

The role played by partner organisations, in managing the above stated challenges, by demonstrating the purpose and scope of the Youth 360⁰ project, to various stakeholders and parties, when its legitimacy was being questioned was truly commendable. It reflected partner organisations strength of commitment to the project, as well. This also made YWLs secure and safe, since it made sure that regional partner organisations were always behind them every step of their way¹¹.

3.4 Enhancing Collective Impact on Conflict Geographies

3.4.1 Promoting Diversity & Trust: Factors & Project Processes which had a positive impact & drove change among participants, collaborators & stakeholders

The peacebuilding initiatives designed and implemented by the YWLs were instrumental in earning the approval and respect of community and external stakeholders. Furthermore, these initiatives increased the confidence they had in the YWLs capability and skills in providing leadership, in order to pursue local reconciliation and peacebuilding. It was a laudable achievement on the part of YWLs to bring people of different ethnic and religious identities together, especially after the polarization that arose post Easter Sunday attack.

This is confirmed by the mini survey conducted in the targeted districts, with community members who participated in the small grant initiatives. A 98% of community members agreed that YWLs could make a positive contribution in providing leadership in peacebuilding, while 95% of survey participants, acknowledged that YWLs were significant contributors, in resolving local conflict.

Overall, community members acknowledged that the leadership, involvement and engagement in the initiatives positively contributed to resolving local conflict. The graph below exemplifies the above perceptual change¹².

¹¹ Learning reports-Amapara, Kurunegala, Batticaloa and Ampara

¹² Mini Survey with community members assessment results, Search Sri Lanka

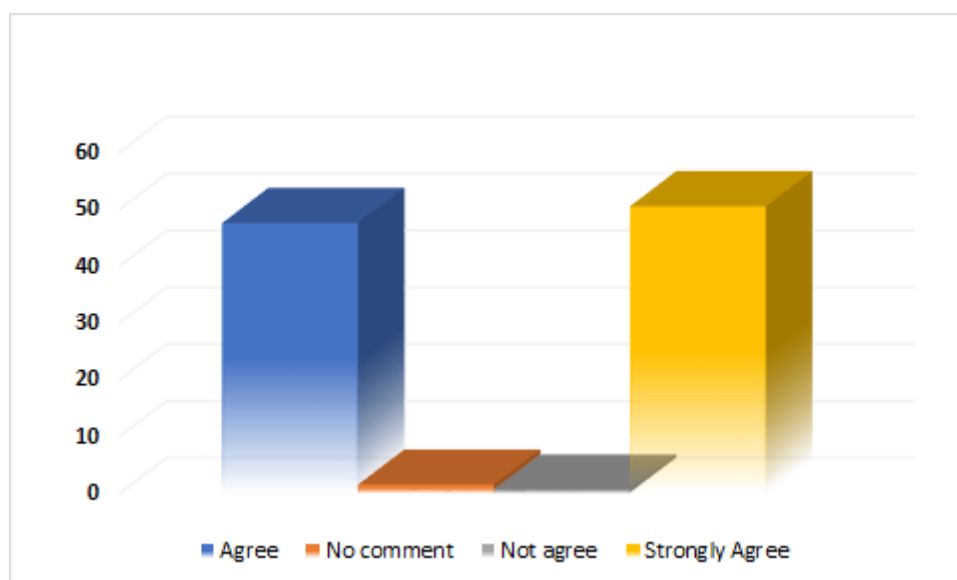


Figure 5 Community Acceptance

A 98% (an aggregate of strongly agree/agree) acknowledge/attested that YWLs leadership and engagement contributed to resolve local conflict.¹³ Though the pandemic impeded the sustainability of the process, this project catalyzed YWLs to pursue an active role as peacemakers, which was acknowledged within the communities.

Community members were enthusiastic about their leadership and engagement in local peacebuilding. This acceptance was reflected in the degree of support extended by youth organisations and collectives. For example, in Puttalam three groups were able to build rapport with other youth groups and youth organisations based in Puttalam and Kalpitiya. YWLs came into contact with these youth organisations, in order to source volunteers in organising peacebuilding initiatives. Such similar developments were observed in the other targeted districts, to various degrees.

In general community members and other stakeholders appreciated the previously unseen and unheard capacity and potential of YWLs in the role of peacebuilders, who were generally excluded from community-led peacebuilding and reconciliation process. It was noted that there should be a long term holistic process in place, running parallel to future initiatives, in order to change the deep rooted norms and structures within communities that create obstacles to women in leadership roles.

¹³ Mini Survey with community members assessment results, Search Sri Lanka

The virtual cross -district exchange was another element in the 360-degree project that contributed to increased knowledge with regards to diversity and building trust among YWLs, as discussed below;

1. YWLs from all the districts got an opportunity through the virtual exchange visit to learn about other religions, rituals and habits. Overall, across districts 69% strongly agree, while 31% agree that the exchange visit was a catalyst on the above-mentioned aspect.¹⁴ The chart which follows, depicts the above sentiments.

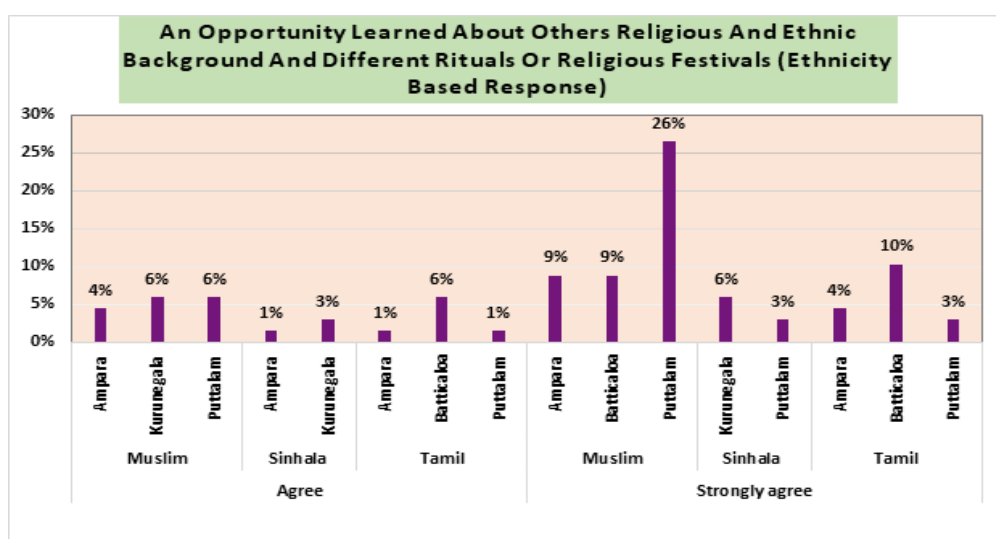


Figure 6 Opportunity to Learn Other Religion and Ethnicity

2. The virtual exchange visit played a role in creating a sense among YWLs in respecting diversity. 74% of YWLs strongly agree that they learned to respect and accept diversity, while the rest of the YWLs just agreed. However, it should be noted here that it is too early to establish, if the virtual exchange visit had any correlation/contribution in building trust among YWLs.
3. An important development was that most YWLs who participated in the exchange visit, have gained friends from other districts and obtained fellow participants mobile contacts. It has been reported that 97% of YWLs have confirmed that they have made several new friends, as a result of participating in a virtual cross exchange visit. It was found that more than 60% of YWLs have collected 4 names of fellow participants from other ethnicities, religions and districts; while 40% of YWLs have obtained at least two

¹⁴ Virtual cross-district exchange visit's post-event evaluation analysis, Search. Sri Lanka

friends from other ethnicities, districts and religions. It should be noted here that 68% of YWLs said their counterparts provided their telephone and contact details.¹⁵

For the purposes of an impartial analysis, the impact of a change from a physical mode of exchange visits to a virtual one should be analysed with regards to the project and its degree of effectiveness in relation to the objective of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

3.4.2 Small Grant Initiatives: The Project Processes & their Impact on Youth in Driving Positive Change

This segment of the learning document will discuss the extent to which the process of the project, enabled participating youth to make the expected changes through small grant initiatives.

According to observations, across all four districts, YWLs were successful in bringing together, community members of diverse ethnic and religious identities, to a certain degree. Certain groups performed beyond expectations, where their initiatives were attended by community members of all ethnic and religious identities and there was high level of interaction and engagement. In these instances, the YWLs were highly appreciated by their communities and this positive response uplifted the morale of YWLs, to engage in similar, future endeavours.

It is difficult to ascertain to which extent the project implementation process enabled YWLs to make expected changes, through small grant initiatives. This was due to the lockdown and the resulting inability to carry out in-depth observations and research, when implementing small grant initiatives.

One of the main objectives of the project was to empower YWLs through their small grant initiatives. This was successful for the most part, as the youth 360⁰ approach was able to shift decision making power into the hands of the YWLs. As a result, YWLs planned, proposed, funded and implemented their respective peace-building initiatives, as independent empowered young women.

¹⁵ Virtual cross-district exchange visit's post-event evaluation analysis, Search. Sri Lanka

3.4.3 Small Grant Initiatives: Factors that Contributed to the Successes & Shortfalls

As a few of the successes and pitfalls were discussed earlier in this document, with regards to the principle of ‘enhanced collective impact on conflict geographies’, the same points will not be discussed, in detail, here.

In anticipation of the difficulties and limitations caused by the COVID19, such as travel restrictions and social distancing guidelines, the SFCG team arranged a series of virtual cross district exchange programs, between YWLs in the 4 selected districts. This series of virtual cross district exchange programs included, 5 programs, each consisting two half day sessions. Each YWL had to attend one online virtual exchange program session (2 half day sessions). A total of 70 YWLs, across all four districts attended virtual cross district exchange programs. This would have proved to be more effective, if the exchange visits were in-person, rather than online.

YWLs from different districts were keen to share their experiences of peacebuilding initiatives, as well as, get acquainted with one another. The SFCG team facilitated this process by creating five WhatsApp groups for YWLs, who were selected to take part in the virtual cross district exchange program. They were given an opportunity to get to know each other on this social platform, prior to participating in the virtual cross district exchange program. These WhatsApp groups became increasingly active, since their inception. One group remains active to date.

YWLs were frequently in contact with one another and exchanging peace-building related content on the WhatsApp groups. For example, one YWL posted a photo of a Muslim individual sewing Buddhist flags in preparation for celebrating Vesak, in the district of Puttalam. Once it was shared on the group, other YWLs started re-posting the image as their WhatsApp status. This was a glimpse into the power of a positive attitudes potential to influence and inspire one another and become viral.

However, some communities were indifferent to the efforts made by YWLs to promote peacebuilding. In these cases, religious institutions and community-based organisations were resistant towards peace-building initiatives. For instance, in Puttalam, long established women’s groups and community organisations were hostile toward YWLs and even questioned the legitimacy of their community-based initiatives. Another group faced constant criticism from religious institutions. YWLs did their best to have a positive discussion with these religious institutions and women’s organisations, yet were unsuccessful in changing

perceptions. This did not deter them from carrying on their initiatives, even amidst such resistance.

YWLs had the responsibility of selecting proposed initiatives that would be funded by small grants. The primary pitfall of 'small grants' was that certain proposed community-based peacebuilding initiatives did not qualify for funding, as a result, the YWLs who proposed such initiatives and their mentors would become disappointed and demotivated. This was observed in Batticaloa, when YWLs of groups which did not qualify for funding were assigned to groups who did qualify and subsequently, decided to leave the project altogether.

4. Unforeseen Observations & Learnings

This segment of the learning document intends to briefly discuss a few unexpected learnings, that were observed during the project. It was unexpected to observe that cultural and ethno religious disparities played a significant role, when collaborating with various stakeholders. For example, according to certain Muslim YWLs, they sometimes faced challenges when attempting to interact with Buddhist monks and Catholic priests.

The interventions made by regional partner organisations when resolving matters YWLs faced while reaching community members and other stakeholders should be taken into account. These partner organisations played an important role in promoting a positive message, across their communities, with regards to the project. They also resolved matters with multiple stakeholders when the legitimacy of the project or YWLs were questioned. These challenges were diligently faced and addressed by regional partner organisations,

The above is a challenge, YWLs will continue to face in the future. As such, this situation needs to be managed with a different approach, as regional partner organisations may not be able to resolve or manage similar issues, all the time. Therefore, it is important to prepare YWLs for such possible issues. A strategy of managing such challenges within the purview of YWLs should be put in place.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that this project: Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360⁰ Support to Emerging Women Leaders, was carried out during challenging circumstances, brought on by a pandemic. In such given conditions conducting a project of this nature called for greater creativity, commitment and dedication. Organizing and implementing the project brought to light significant realities and experiences faced by YWLs in a post-Easter

attack Sri Lanka, where ethnic and religious communities were increasingly polarized and creating a hot bed of simmering conflict.

This project suggested an alternative approach to peacebuilding namely, a youth-led, youth oriented one, firmly in hand with youth-led research. This youth driven project engaged, otherwise excluded youth in the peacebuilding process, thereby, achieving one of the primary objectives of the project. The project's success can only be measured in the long term, as it will hinge on how it will unfold in the future, as empowered YWLs forge ahead, undeterred on peacebuilding initiatives.

It is important to highlight that at times, YWLs lacked the confidence required for decision making, as a majority of them, previously never had an opportunity or experience of this nature; where the decision making power lay in their hands. This was a novel and exciting experience, for some YWLs, who were brought up in conservative and sheltered backgrounds.

Today and in the future, YWLs with a passion to pursue a path of peace-building will no-doubt have to negotiate with authorities, establishments and stakeholders, resistant to peace and reconciliation. These YWLs are emerging community peace-builders and will have to be open to adapting, accommodating and re-aligning strategies, as they progress along the challenging yet rewarding journey of community peacebuilding.

An objective of the overall project was to promote inter-ethnic and religious harmony on a community level. YWLs successfully brought together community members of different ethnic and religious identities, in an initial step in the direction of restoring inter-ethnic and religious harmony,

The factors and processes within the project that contributed to the increased respect toward diversity and trust among different stakeholders, could have been identified better if YWLs were able to conduct a comprehensive youth-led M&E process. This was hindered due to the impact of the pandemic. On the other hand, youth-led research could also have been carried out further, on a community level to closely examine the community perspective and impact of the peacebuilding initiatives organized by YWLs and the youth 360⁰ approach, but unfortunately this possibility too was hindered by the rise of COVID19 and government health guidelines in place.

Despite the obstacles faced, young researchers were able to get feedback on the community's perspective on the impact of peacebuilding initiatives on communities. This was accomplished

via community feedback, stakeholder interviews, observations and documentation during the course of peacebuilding initiatives.

It must be kept in mind that although the selected districts were very diverse in terms of their ethnic and religious compositions, they rarely interacted with each other. According to the findings of FGDs and interviews of community members, who attended the peace building initiatives, a major factor that contributed to the respect for diversity and trust among stakeholders was a platform attributed to the Youth 360⁰ project. This platform was that which called for YWLs to bring different stakeholders and community members of different ethnic and religious identities together, in peacebuilding initiatives.

6. Project Recommendations

6.1 Working with the Excluded Majority

1. The project team should consider reaching the excluded majority by using official state produced and non-state produced records, statistics and data to select young women from socio-economically and geographically marginalized regions, areas and enclaves. For example, young women from families, which are below the poverty lines, from ethnic and religious minorities and other marginalized groups.
2. It is recommended to approach the excluded majorities with the recommendation of *Grama Niladhari* officers, District Secretariat or other government office bearers. This can also be done by reaching various village-based welfare organisations, cooperatives and other grassroots level organisations. Yet another option to tap into an excluded majority is via local schools and source information of students, who have ended their education early due to social and economic challenges.
3. It is recommended for partner organisations to fully adhere to the principles of excluded majority in selecting YWLs to the best of their ability.
4. The dropout rates should be anticipated at the initial planning stage of the project. In response to this a pool of subjects should be maintained and shortlisted according to the set criteria, to replace the dropouts in a timely manner.
5. It is vital to keep the excluded majority engaged. This can be done with the use of various online platforms and apps. This has been done by the SFCG team along with the help of regional partner organisations, but can be further optimized. Currently online engagements have only been conducted on Zoom and WhatsApp. In the future it should venture across diverse platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

6. Improve the cross district interaction by arranging more frequent and regular virtual cross district exchange programs. This would be of a two-fold benefit, firstly, the ability to keep YWLs connected at a time when physical engagements are curtailed and secondly, it would facilitate consistent knowledge and experience sharing.
7. Brainstorming the role of peace-building initiatives online, in relation to the project, since physical interactions are extremely restricted. For example, what more, in the way of online or social media-based initiatives can be implemented to keep YWLs in the future engaged?

6.2 Power in the Hands of Youth

1. Power in the Hands of YWLs can be further re-instated and distributed by creating more opportunities in training, community involvement and dispute resolution processes. This allows YWLs to contribute to their communities and exercise their agency by transforming theory into practice.
2. Under the given circumstances, YWLs can be encouraged to continue their community peacebuilding efforts, by taking them to a virtual space where they have the opportunity to initiate their own online peacebuilding campaigns, under the guidance and expertise of the main implementing project partner.
3. As YWLs are trained, guided and empowered, this momentum should be continued by creating more opportunities for community-based peacebuilding initiatives.
4. This project succeeded in shifting power into the hands of YWLs by laying the groundwork to commence community peace-building initiatives. The project attempted to create and foster a conducive environment, where YWLs could exercise their empowered skill-set. These skills were not fully realized, due to challenges faced within their communities. Deeply rooted challenges were observed due to the undue influence of religious institutions, power dynamics and patriarchy. It is essential that stakeholders and community members YWLs are required to collaborate with are sensitized to make space for a supportive environment, where empowered of Young Women Leaders can thrive.

6.3 Redefining Sustainability

1. The engagement and collaboration of the youth with community members and government stakeholders succeeded to some extent. Its effectiveness was curtailed by the lack of experience of YWLs. At times YWLs had difficulty identifying local

resources and connecting with stakeholders. This was not always due to a lapse on the part of YWLs. In order to counter these challenges, concrete communication channels such as frequent meetings, creating advisory/ working groups between YWLs and local stakeholders, including intensive training of YWLs is required.

2. It is crucial that more capacity building is implemented in areas such as, project sustainability, with a focus on how to sustain peace-building initiatives, with locally available resources. This will create access to, as well as, pave the way for YWLs to take forward their initiatives, in a sustainable manner.
3. In terms of ‘redefining sustainability’, it is essential that YWLs maintain a strong bond with community members and other stakeholders. Unfortunately, not all stakeholders are receptive or supportive toward peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. There can be various parties that are resistant to peacebuilding efforts. But it is instrumental that YWLs have the confidence, knowledge and the skill-set to manage such situations and the ability to navigate through them independently.

6.4 Enhancing Collective Impact on Conflict Geographies

1. The process of collective impact on conflict geographies can be enhanced by involving community stakeholders in the project from an early stage. This provides an opportunity for community stakeholders to familiarize themselves with the project. This in turn will make community stakeholders more approachable, thereby, ease the role of YWLs.
2. Create more opportunities for YWLs of different districts to interact on a virtual space. The lessons learnt from the virtual cross district exchange programs can be put into action, when planning similar ventures in the future
3. In reference to the Virtual Cross District Exchange Program sessions, where survivors of communal conflicts shared their experiences, was effective. Therefore, sharing personal experiences, motivated YWLs to be more determined in their peacebuilding endeavours. It is an effective strategy to organize and conduct more of such experience or knowledge sharing sessions.