

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka has faced violent extremist attacks and uprisings since the 1980s, including the 26-year civil conflict and the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings by IS-inspired suicide bombers. These events have fueled anti-Muslim sentiment and ethnic tensions, leading to riots and mob attacks.

Sri Lanka became a GCERF partner country* in 2019. To date, GCERF has invested USD 1.8 million in the country, with one active grant currently supporting that has supported up to thirteen local civil society organisations (CSOs). The investment is currently supporting the active involvement of civil society organisations to address the drivers of violent extremism through leveraging activities that strengthen youth resilience in the country.


In Sri Lanka, the Accelerated Funding Panel is chaired by Chief of National Intelligence (CNI) and brings together relevant government agencies, civil society organisations, and donor representatives to provide strategic direction for the programmes, ensure results, and progressively inherit ownership of funding community-level efforts to prevent violent extremism.

GCERF'S INVESTMENT STRATEGY IN SRI LANKA

GCERF's investment strategy outlines a comprehensive approach to address the drivers of violent extremism and guides civil society organisations in designing their programmes. According to GCERF's needs assessment and consultations with relevant stakeholders, there are three main drivers of violent extremism in Sri Lanka:

1. Ethnic and religious tensions
2. Limited economic opportunities
3. Lack of sense of purpose

CURRENT GRANT

 IMPLEMENTED BY	 PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES
Principal Recipient: Helvetas Sri Lanka Sub-recipients: Child Care Path Lanka – CCPL, Group Action for Social Order – GAFSO, Lanka Development Journalist Forum – LDJF, Asia Lanka Social Development Cooperation (ALSDC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced capacity of youth to engage and advocate; Enhanced trust and interactions between youth and people from other religious and ethnic communities and between students from different education institutions; Enhanced youth awareness on VE and resilience against hate speech; Youth have improved livelihood and employment skills.
 AREAS OF IMPLEMENTATION	 GRANT AMOUNT
Ampara, Batticaloa, Colombo, Kalutara, Kandy, Kurunegala	USD 1,826,391.00
	 PERIOD OF THE GRANT
	March 2021 – December 2025

*Partner countries are those in which GCERF funds civil society organisations to implement initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism.



WHERE

- Ampara district, Eastern province
- Batticaloa district, Eastern province
- Colombo district, Western province
- Kalutara district, Western province
- Kandy district, Central province
- Kurunegala district, North Western province

WHO

- Unemployed and underemployed youth, youth in tertiary and university level education, youth in associations and clubs
- Secondary school and madrasa students – middle and upper school
- Youth in multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities; and
- Youth disenfranchised from mainstream culture

STORY OF CHANGE

TRANSFORMATION OF RESHMA SEWWANDI: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF SILENCE & ISOLATION

Reshma Sewwandi, a 23-year-old from the Yahalakele tea estate in Kalutara, grew up surrounded by the misty hills and lush greenery of the estate, her world confined to its narrow borders. Like many others in her community, her life revolved around the tea fields. She worked alongside her mother, picking tea leaves, and attended a local estate school. But once school was over, so too were her educational opportunities.

For Reshma, the estate was both home and a barrier, cutting her off from the larger world. Her only friends were from the estate, and the idea of stepping beyond its boundaries seemed daunting. "In the estates, all we discuss is small welfare programs—our houses, water, food. These are important, but I always felt like these are reflections of much larger problems which we never talk about," she said.

The sense of isolation extended beyond the physical. Estate communities like hers often feel marginalised and unrecognised by society. Government offices and public functions felt inaccessible. "Even the youth in my community fear and do not understand the important role played by government offices. Because of the legal power the estate company has, we are cut off from accessing these offices. It feels like we do not belong with other people," Reshma shared.

This cycle of exclusion was broken in January 2024, when Reshma was introduced to the EMPOWER project by a Youth Development Officer (YDO) in Bandaragama. Reshma joined EMPOWER as a Local Youth Advocate (LYA), marking a major turning point. Through structured training and workshops focused on building capacity, promoting pluralism, and preventing violent extremism, Reshma began to find her voice. She learned how to navigate conversations with government officials, how to advocate for her community's needs, and, perhaps most importantly, made friends outside the estate for the first time. For Reshma, these connections boosted her confidence and gave her a sense of belonging.

Today, Reshma leads the Bandaragama LYA group, championing initiatives that promote inclusivity and community resilience. At a youth camp organised for the LYA and BRAVE teams, she took on key roles as a committee member and resource person. The camp brought together 80 young people from diverse backgrounds, and Reshma's guidance helped in creating a space for dialogue and unity as she actively championed initiatives that bridge divides among youth from different backgrounds.

"The exclusion of our community is a push factor for frustration among the youth, which could lead to extremism."

Reshma Sewwandi, Yahlakele Tea Estate



Theatrical performance by Hindu and Muslim members of Coexistence Club in Gampola Muslim School hosted by SR CCPL

KEY RESULTS

160

civic and safe spaces established to foster dialogue, mental health, and well-being

890

young people equipped with vocational skills to strengthen their economic resilience against violent extremism

7,580

Community members engaged in interreligious and interfaith dialogues to foster tolerance and solidarity

14,050

individuals, primarily youth, benefited from initiatives that strengthened critical thinking, promoted tolerance, improved livelihoods and enhanced trust with diverse communities

GCERF'S VALUE PROPOSITION

GCERF'S UNIQUE MODEL OF INVESTMENT PRIORITISES:

Community-ownership and localisation: We invest in trusted grassroots civil society organisations that prioritise the needs and grievances of communities most affected by violent extremism. Many of these organisations have never received international funding before.

Sustainability: Our programmes involve all groups of society and strengthens trust between government, civil society and community members to build stronger, more resilient societies. This ensures that initiatives and structures continue to be relevant and effective.

Robust monitoring and evaluation processes: Our multi-layered monitoring and evaluation system, operating locally and globally, provides continuous feedback on programme effectiveness, identifies areas for improvement, and ensures objectives are consistently met.

Knowledge sharing: Our global network of civil society organisations working on PVE facilitates the exchange of good practices and lessons learned, fostering collaboration and enhancing the effectiveness of interventions. We also share our experiences through our participation in various conferences, publishing of articles and research papers in reputed journals to advance the understanding of PVE.

Capacity strengthening: We strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to manage large-scale grants and implement effective initiatives, while also enhancing government capacity to develop comprehensive, holistic strategies to prevent violent extremism.



GCERF
Preventing Violent Extremism
and Terrorism

Find out more about becoming an investor, our work, and the collective impact we make at:
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