

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 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. **Sri Lanka is set to transition out of GCERF funding by the end of December 2025.**

In Sri Lanka, the Accelerated Funding Panel is chaired by the 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

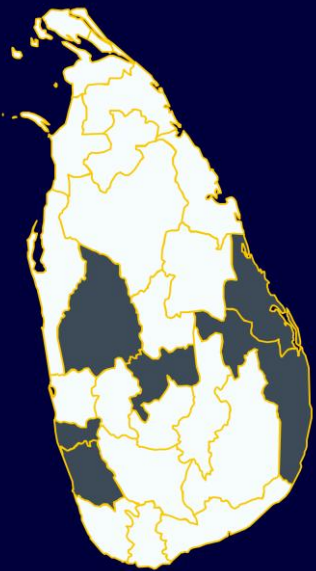
GCERF's investment strategy outlines a comprehensive approach to address the drivers of violent extremism and guides civil society organisations in designing their programmes. According to GCERF's needs assessment and consultations with relevant stakeholders, there are three main drivers of violent extremism 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 (2025): Child Care Path Lanka (CCPL), Group Action for Social Order (GAFSO), Peace Community Action (PCA), Asia Lanka Social Development Cooperation (ALSDC)	- 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 1,583,413.00
	 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

BUILDING TRUST, ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME

In the quiet coastal town of Karaitivu, nestled in Sri Lanka's Ampara District, 28-year-old Z.M. Naskhan spent his days observing the shifts in his community – some subtle, others deeply troubling. Many of his peers were slipping into drug and substance abuse. Conversations between people of different faiths had grown rare, replaced by a thick silence filled with suspicion. Naskhan himself often felt isolated, unsure of where he belonged or how he could help.

That began to change in 2024, when Naskhan joined a PVE programme run by GAFSO. Through interactive sessions on human rights, social harmony, and interfaith understanding, he started to see his community and himself through a different lens. Visits to temples and churches, and open dialogues with young people from other backgrounds, gradually built his confidence and broke down the invisible walls he had grown used to.

Motivated by this new perspective, Naskhan joined a local youth group of 25 volunteers facilitated by GAFSO. At their very first meeting, as the group sat discussing challenges facing the community, Naskhan shared his observation on how a dangerous narrative had begun circulating that the Muslims were intentionally distributing drugs to harm Sinhala Buddhist youth. ***“Substance abuse is only half the problem. These addictions are also fueling dangerous stereotypes.”*** He urged the forum to confront the issue of addictions, but also the mistrust and miscommunication feeding intercommunal tensions.

Spurred by this conversation, the youth group under Naskhan's leadership organised awareness campaigns and produced a short story to challenge harmful narratives. They invited religious leaders from different faiths of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism – to join conversations around healing, discipline, and mutual respect.

But for Naskhan, that was just the beginning. Aware of the lingering religious tensions in his neighbourhood, he initiated interfaith dialogues that brought together Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim youth.

They began with simple conversations and gradually engaged youths in sharing meals, stories, and personal experiences. Over time, what started as a tentative exchange evolved into a regular practice of listening, understanding, and building trust. ***“I always wanted to help,”*** he says. ***“But I didn't know how. Now I know and I'm not alone.”*** He stands for equality, compassion, and the belief that peace is everyone's responsibility.

“On the day I learned about violent extremism for the first time, when the resource person explained to us push and pull factors of violent extremism. I thought about it a lot. And I thought in my community this drug addiction, and how Sinhala people see it could be a major push factor that radicalizes Sinhala people against Muslims”

– Z.M. Naskhan, Karaitivu



Workshops on basic counselling skills for social development, career guidance, prevention of drug among youth and Social Media literacy for PVE hosted by SR GAFSO

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.