

SUB-NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING IN SRI LANKA: ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DE-RADICALIZATION AT THE LOCAL LEVELC Shamini¹**Abstract**

Sri Lanka's post-war peacebuilding efforts remain hindered by persistent ethnic divisions, political marginalization, and economic disparities, particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Despite the formal end of the civil conflict in 2009, radicalization and social fragmentation persist, driven by unresolved grievances over land, identity, and power-sharing, as well as inter-communal distrust (De Silva, 2021; Uyangoda, 2020). Nationally driven de-radicalization programs, such as the 6+1 Rehabilitation Model, have achieved limited success in addressing root causes like unemployment and exclusion, underscoring the limitations of centralized, top-down approaches (Ministry of Defence, 2022; Jayasundara, 2023). This study examines the critical gap between national peacebuilding frameworks and the lived realities of conflict-affected communities, emphasizing the untapped potential of local governments in fostering sustainable peace. The research conceptualizes sub-national peacebuilding and evaluates Sri Lanka's existing frameworks through three objectives: defining the role of local governments in de-radicalization, assessing the effectiveness of current sub-national mechanisms, and proposing strategies to enhance local governance capacity. Key questions explore why local governments are better positioned than national authorities to address radicalization, how they can operationalize context-sensitive interventions, and what reforms are needed to empower them. Employing qualitative desk research and comparative analysis, the study situates Sri Lanka's challenges within global debates on liberal versus illiberal peacebuilding and hybrid governance (Rampton & Nadarajah, 2017; Höglund & Orjuela, 2019). Findings demonstrate that local governments, with their proximity to communities and contextual knowledge, are uniquely positioned to design tailored interventions that address drivers of radicalization, such as economic despair and historical grievances. Case studies from conflict-affected districts reveal that community-led initiatives, including interfaith dialogues and localized land dispute resolution, have reduced radicalization risks and fostered social cohesion. However, legal constraints, resource shortages, and centralized governance structures-exemplified by the underperforming 13th Amendment-continue to undermine local efforts (Gunasekara, 2024; Karunasundera, 2018). The study concludes that sustainable peace requires legal reforms to devolve power, capacity-building for local councils, and inclusive governance models. By bridging national policies with grassroots realities, Sri Lanka can empower local governments as key actors in preventing violent extremism and achieving lasting reconciliation.

Keywords: Centralized governance structures, community-led initiatives, De-radicalization, local governments, sub-national peacebuilding.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's post-war context remains shaped by a protracted conflict (1983–2009) with deep ethnic, religious, and regional divides. Despite the LTTE's defeat in 2009, root causes such as political marginalization, economic disparities, and land- and identity-related grievances persist, especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces (Shinoda, 2011; De Silva, 2021). Moving from negative to positive peace remains incomplete, as many communities face insecurity, distrust, and exclusion from national decision-making (Karunasundera, 2018). Structural drivers of radicalization—Tamil political disenfranchisement, Muslim–Buddhist tensions in Ampara, and Sinhala nationalist mobilization—remain unresolved (De Silva, 2021; Uyangoda, 2020). The 2019 Easter attacks highlight the limits of centralized counterterrorism in addressing localized grievances, such as Muslim youth marginalization in Kattankudy (Jayasundara, 2023). This underscores the need to address systemic inequities and localized tensions to prevent extremism and foster reconciliation, while recognizing that the path to durable peace requires both bottom-up community initiatives and reforms that enable more inclusive decision-making at the local level.

Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka followed a domestically driven path, lacking formal peace agreements or major international mediation, with the government pursuing a nationally led, centralized approach that fostered local ownership but entrenched developmental authoritarianism—prioritizing stability and growth over deep reform (Shinoda, 2011; Uyangoda, 2020). Liberal peace ideals clash with Sri Lanka's illiberal or hybrid peacebuilding, where state control and selective local engagement prevail (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012; Höglund & Orjuela, 2019). The 13th Amendment's limited autonomy and fiscal powers further weaken sub-national responsiveness to local grievances (Gunasekara, 2024). Within this context, emerging evidence suggests that meaningful sub-national and community-driven peacebuilding can create more responsive governance and address grievances more effectively, provided the design aligns with local realities and fosters genuine devolution of authority.

Comparative lessons offer nuanced insights: Bosnia's entity-level governance demonstrated how localized power-sharing can reduce violence despite deep-seated divisions, whereas Sri Lanka's 13th Amendment offers only modest devolution, limiting capacity to address Tamil self-rule demands (UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2022; Gunasekara, 2024). Growing attention to sub-national and community-led peacebuilding points to the potential of grassroots efforts—led by local governments, religious leaders, and civil society—to enhance reconciliation, resolve disputes, and mitigate re-radicalization risks (Peace Direct, 2024). The Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation illustrates how clergy and youth can drive community-level conflict resolution, reinforcing the value of local agency and a stronger social compact between local governments and communities (Karunasundera, 2018). Together, these strands imply that durable peace in Sri Lanka hinges on a cohesive strategy that couples devolved governance with context-sensitive interventions and sustained investment in local capacity.

In this light, the study advances four guiding questions: why local governments may counter radicalization more effectively than national bodies; how they can operationalize de-radicalization within diverse local contexts; how the broader peacebuilding framework shapes de-radicalization outcomes; and what targeted reforms or capacity-building measures are needed to empower local authorities to advance durable peace.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative desk research methodology, synthesizing secondary data from Sri Lanka's National Action Plan on Peacebuilding (2017), 6+1 Rehabilitation Model reports (2020–2023), and government policy documents alongside peer-reviewed literature on peacebuilding and de-radicalization. The analysis incorporates case studies of five Sri Lankan local governments (Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Batticaloa, and Ampara) and comparative frameworks from Nepal, Bosnia, and Colombia, while utilizing comparative analysis to contextualize findings within broader debates on liberal versus illiberal peacebuilding, hybrid governance, and local governmental roles in conflict-affected societies.

Results and Discussion

Limitations of Centralized Peacebuilding and De-Radicalization

Sri Lanka's post-war peacebuilding framework has been dominated by a centralized, securitized approach that prioritizes top-down control over grassroots participation, resulting in systemic failures to address the root causes of radicalization. The 6+1 Rehabilitation Model, while lauded for demobilizing over 12,000 ex-combatants, exemplifies these shortcomings: it focused narrowly on vocational training and ideological “re-education” while neglecting long-term psychosocial support, livelihood security, and community reconciliation (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Post-release monitoring programs were chronically underfunded, with less than 5% of the rehabilitation budget allocated to tracking reintegration outcomes, leading to high recidivism rates and persistent distrust among Tamil communities (Jayasundara, 2023; CPA, 2023).

This centralization compounds the failure to implement meaningful devolution promised by the 13th Amendment, whose potential has been rendered largely symbolic due to deliberate underfunding and bureaucratic obstruction; provincial councils lack authority over critical areas like land rights and security, while Colombo retains veto power over even minor local decisions (Gunasekara, 2024). For example, Northern Province councils cannot independently allocate budgets for war memorials or mass grave exhumations, which are criminalized under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (HRW, 2023). This centralization creates a vacuum in addressing localized grievances, such as militarized land grabs in Mullaitivu—where the military still occupies 30,000 acres of civilian land—and the criminalization of Tamil memorialization practices (Adayaalam Centre, 2017; CPA, 2023).

The same pattern of militarization and erasure persists in other areas of policy: massive shortcomings in Sri Lanka's peacebuilding model include militarized development, where economic projects in conflict zones, such as state-run hotels on seized Tamil lands, prioritize securitization over community needs and deepen ethnic marginalization (Adayaalam Centre, 2017); historical erasure, characterized by the systematic destruction of Tamil memorials and the state's refusal to acknowledge wartime atrocities, including the Mullivaikkal massacre, which has perpetuated intergenerational trauma (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023; International Crisis Group [ICG], 2021); and exclusionary policies, whereby Muslim and Tamil communities are sidelined in national counter-radicalization strategies that disproportionately align with Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian interests (Jayasundara, 2023; Uyangoda, 2020).

The Case for Sub-National Peacebuilding Community-Led Initiatives

Grassroots peacebuilding initiatives have demonstrated significant potential in addressing the root causes of conflict and radicalization. The CPBR's work in Batticaloa, for example, has empowered religious leaders and youth to facilitate inter-religious dialogue, mediate local disputes, and promote reconciliation. In one notable event, a Hindu priest trained by CPBR organized community meetings on inter-religious harmony, attracting participation from 30 religious leaders and local educators. The success of these meetings led to further workshops in local schools, exemplifying the ripple effect of community-led interventions.

Such initiatives are effective because they leverage local knowledge, trust, and networks. They are able to respond to specific grievances—such as disputes over land, livelihoods, or cultural practices—that may be overlooked or misunderstood by national authorities (Peace Direct, 2024). Moreover, community ownership fosters sustainability and resilience, reducing dependence on external actors and building a foundation for long-term peace (Karunasundera, 2018).

The Role of Local Governments

Local governments are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between national policies and community needs in de-radicalization efforts. Their proximity to local populations enables them to understand and address the specific drivers of radicalization within their communities, such as social exclusion, economic grievances, and inter-group tensions, which may be overlooked by centralized authorities (USAID, 2005). By fostering participatory decision-making, local authorities can tailor prevention and reintegration programs—including education, vocational training, and psychosocial support—to local realities, thereby increasing their effectiveness and legitimacy (Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, 2019). National policies, while essential for setting frameworks and standards, often lack the flexibility to adapt to diverse community contexts across Sri Lanka. Decentralization and empowerment of local governments, as articulated in Sri Lanka's National Policy on Local Government, are therefore critical for enabling responsive, people-centered approaches to de-radicalization (Government of Sri Lanka, 2009). Furthermore, local councils can act as conveners for civil society, youth, and religious leaders, facilitating dialogue and early intervention in ways that build trust and resilience at the grassroots level (Peacemakers Network, 2022). By serving as a conduit between national strategies and community needs, empowered local governments can help ensure that de-radicalization initiatives are both contextually relevant and sustainable. Their proximity to citizens enables them to identify early warning signs of radicalization, mediate local disputes, and deliver tailored services (Karunasundera, 2018; UNDP, 2022).

In this context, the Jaffna Municipal Council's youth vocational training program, implemented in partnership with Colombo-based tech firms (e.g., Virtusa and WSO2) and civil society organizations, has reduced radicalization risks by providing alternative livelihoods and fostering social integration. By 2023, these coding academies enabled 1,200 war-affected youth graduates to secure employment, with recidivism among ex-combatants reported below 5% (Nadarajah, 2024). However, centralized funding restrictions have limited scalability, resulting in only 15% of applicants being admitted annually due to budget constraints (UNDP, 2022). Mannar's community-managed kattupadu frameworks—traditional systems for regulating fishing rights and equitable resource distribution—help reduce tensions associated with radicalization by addressing livelihood

disputes and strengthening communal bonds through collaborative conflict resolution. Local councils have successfully resolved fishing rights disputes through customary kattupadu systems, achieving higher rates of satisfaction and compliance than national tribunals (Hettiarachchi, 2024). Local government authorities, such as the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (ADF-Mannar), have formally recognized these systems and enforced bans on destructive fishing methods (e.g., dynamiting, monofilament nets) since 2010 (AIT, 2021).

Sri Lanka's persistent failure to address wartime atrocities—such as the Mullaitivu Mullivaikkal massacre—through formal transitional justice mechanisms has perpetuated intergenerational trauma and undermined prospects for reconciliation. Despite the government's initial commitment to transitional justice, including the establishment of multiple truth commissions, the lack of a holistic approach, meaningful victim engagement, and political will has resulted in limited accountability and unaddressed grievances. In this context, local governments in Mullaitivu have unofficially preserved mass grave sites as community memorials, even as national authorities continue to ban LTTE-linked commemorative events (HRW, 2023).

Despite the 2021 ban, residents of Mullaitivu continue to hold private memorials on Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day, often coordinated through local fishing cooperatives. These community-led rituals serve as acts of mourning and resistance against state-imposed erasure of Tamil history, reflecting the “politics of memory” described by Jelin (2003), where sub-national actors challenge dominant state narratives through grassroots memorialization. This dynamic is intensified by the destruction of Tamil memorials and the militarization of public memory in the region. A 2023 survey found that 78% of Tamil youth in Mullaitivu consider these memorials essential for justice, while 43% report increased distrust in national institutions due to the criminalization of remembrance practices (CPA, 2023).

The Batticaloa Municipal Council established hybrid land tribunals that integrate formal legal frameworks (e.g., Sri Lanka's Prescription Ordinance) with informal mediation practices such as vanakkam rituals, resolving 320 land disputes between 2020–2023, particularly prioritizing women-headed households affected by wartime displacement (Nadarajah, 2024). A 2023 survey revealed that 68% of participants reported diminished support for extremist groups following tribunal resolutions, attributing this shift to restored livelihoods and strengthened community trust (CPA, 2023).

Ampara's counter-radicalization efforts face significant challenges at the intersection of online and offline spaces. The District Council identified 17 Facebook groups actively promoting anti-Muslim narratives, directly linked to eight perpetrators involved in the 2019 Easter attacks (Jayasundara, 2023). Despite this connection, Sri Lanka's 2021 Online Safety Bill does not include provisions for municipal-level monitoring, unlike Malaysia's approach of appointing state-level Digital Peace Officers to address digital threats locally. Institutional barriers further complicate local efforts; for example, the Ampara District Council's 2022 proposal to establish a Social Media Monitoring Unit was rejected by national authorities in Colombo on the grounds of “jurisdictional overreach” (Ministry of Defence, 2023). These gaps highlight the broader issue of inadequate local empowerment and fragmented counter-radicalization strategies in Sri Lanka, where the lack of grassroots monitoring and coordination allows extremist narratives to proliferate unchecked, both online and offline.

These examples illustrate the comparative advantage of local governments in addressing the specific drivers of conflict and radicalization within their jurisdictions. Hybrid and illiberal Peacebuilding Sri Lanka's experience also highlights the complexities of hybrid and illiberal peacebuilding. While the government has resisted international intervention and liberal peacebuilding models, it has selectively engaged with local actors and civil society organizations to advance its own vision of stability and development (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). This has resulted in a hybrid governance structure, where elements of liberal peace (e.g., civil society engagement, dialogue) coexist with illiberal practices (e.g., centralized control, limited political reforms). The challenge, therefore, is to harness the strengths of local ownership and community engagement while addressing the limitations of centralized, illiberal governance. This requires a recalibration of the relationship between national and sub-national actors, with greater emphasis on decentralization, capacity-building, and inclusive decision-making (Karunasundera, 2018; UNDP, 2022).

Comparative Perspectives

Nepal's Local Peace Committees (LPCs) offer an instructive template for Sri Lanka. Following the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord, Nepal established LPCs at the district level to mediate local disputes, facilitate dialogue, and implement peacebuilding projects, with committees comprising representatives from political parties, civil society, and marginalized groups to ensure broad-based participation and legitimacy (Adhikari, 2021). The effectiveness of LPCs is reflected in their ability to resolve thousands of local disputes, build intercommunity trust, and bridge the gap between national policies and local realities, underscoring the value of

inclusive composition, local knowledge, and context-specific interventions (Adhikari, 2021). However, similar to Sri Lanka's experience, Nepal faced challenges such as limited resources, political interference, and uneven implementation across districts, which tempered overall impact and highlight the necessity of sustainable funding and robust governance mechanisms to maintain momentum (Adhikari, 2021).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity-level governance illustrates an alternative devolution model that grants sub-national units' significant authority to manage security and reconciliation, a structure initially forged under the Dayton Peace Agreement (UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2022). While scholars critique it for potentially entrenching ethnic divisions, the model also demonstrates how meaningful local autonomy can enable responsive and localized conflict management, including power-sharing arrangements attuned to complex social fabrics. For Sri Lanka, Bosnia's experience emphasizes the importance of meaningful devolution and local autonomy in post-conflict governance, while also warning against excessive fragmentation. The key takeaway is the need for coordination mechanisms that ensure coherence across government levels to prevent governance gaps that could undermine reconciliation efforts (UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2022).

Colombia's Territorial Development Plans (PDETs), devised under the 2016 peace accord, present a robust blueprint for de-radicalization through local empowerment. PDETs decentralize funding—about \$1.2 billion—and empower local councils and communities to design thousands of initiatives across areas such as rural reform, social participation, and ex-combatant reintegration, thereby fostering social cohesion and integrating marginalized groups into decision-making processes (OECD, 2019; ICG, 2021). For Sri Lanka, adopting a PDET-style model could address the longstanding “development vs. reconciliation” stalemate by enabling Northern Province councils to allocate resources toward war memorials, mass grave exhumations, and land restitution programs. Such locally driven frameworks would shift de-radicalization toward community ownership, bridge structural inequities, and reduce dependence on centralized, securitized strategies (HRW, 2023; CPA, 2023; OECD, 2019).

Across these cases, the common thread is the potential of devolved governance to connect high-level policy aims with local realities. In Sri Lanka, this suggests a pathway to more contextually grounded de-radicalization that leverages local legitimacy, fosters participatory governance, and strengthens ties between communities and state institutions. The Nepal LPCs demonstrate legitimacy through inclusive participation; Bosnia's model underscores the need for coordination across levels; Colombia's PDETs show how targeted funding and locally led initiatives can produce tangible reconciliation outcomes. Collectively, these comparisons illuminate practical design principles for Sri Lanka: ensure inclusive local representation, establish clear intergovernmental coordination, and couple financial decentralization with strong accountability and monitoring to sustain peacebuilding and de-radicalization gains (Adhikari, 2021; UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2022; OECD, 2019; ICG, 2021; HRW, 2023; CPA, 2023).

Challenges and Gaps

Despite the promise of sub-national peacebuilding, several challenges persist in Sri Lanka. Legal and Institutional Constraints are evident at the local level, where local governments often lack clear mandates, legal authority, and resources to implement de-radicalization and peacebuilding initiatives (Gunasekara, 2024); Capacity Deficits persist as many local officials lack training in conflict sensitivity, mediation, and trauma-informed approaches, limiting their effectiveness (UNDP, 2022); Centralized Funding remains a concern, with the majority of peacebuilding resources controlled by the central government and only a small proportion allocated to local projects (Karunasundera, 2018); Political Interference further undermines local autonomy and responsiveness as local governments may be subject to pressure from national parties (Shinoda, 2011); and Social Divisions continue to impede trust-building and inclusive governance at the local level due to deep-seated ethnic, religious, and regional cleavages (Peace Direct, 2024).

Significance and Implications

The findings indicate five interlocking implications for peacebuilding policy and practice in Sri Lanka and comparable contexts: Local Ownership and Sustainability emphasize empowering local governments and communities, with community-led initiatives more likely to address root causes of conflict and build resilience against radicalization (Karunasundera, 2018; Peace Direct, 2024); Decentralization and Legal Reform highlight the need for meaningful devolution of authority and resources, accompanied by legal reforms that clarify mandates, enhance autonomy, and ensure accountability (Gunasekara, 2024); Capacity Building calls for targeted investment in the skills and knowledge of local officials, religious leaders, and youth to strengthen local peacebuilding capacities (UNDP, 2022); Inclusive Governance stresses ensuring the participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in local decision-making to bolster legitimacy and effectiveness (UN Peacebuilding, 2024); and Intergovernmental Coordination underscores the necessity of mechanisms for

coordination among national, provincial, and local actors to align policies, share resources, and avoid duplication (Karunasundera, 2018).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that local governments in Sri Lanka are better positioned than national authorities to address the complex drivers of radicalization and build sustainable peace. Their proximity to communities, contextual knowledge, and capacity for tailored interventions make them indispensable actors in sub-national peacebuilding. Community-led initiatives and local councils in the selected districts, have shown tangible results in reducing radicalization risks, fostering reconciliation, and promoting social cohesion.

However, the effectiveness of local governments is constrained by legal, institutional, and resource limitations. The centralized nature of Sri Lanka's post-war governance has hindered meaningful devolution and limited the impact of local peacebuilding efforts (Gunasekara, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that combines legal reform, capacity-building, inclusive governance, and intergovernmental coordination.

Practical Recommendations

Legal Reforms. Amend the Local Authorities Act and related legislation to clarify and expand the mandates of local governments in peacebuilding and de-radicalization, drawing on models such as Nepal's Local Governance Act and Bosnia's entity-level arrangements for guidance (Adhikari, 2021; UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2022). **Resource Allocation** emphasizes increasing the proportion of national peacebuilding funds allocated to local governments, with earmarked budgets for community-led initiatives, capacity-building, and monitoring. **Capacity Building** calls for developing training programs for local officials, religious leaders, and youth on conflict sensitivity, mediation, trauma-informed approaches, and inclusive governance, partnering with organizations such as UNDP and CPBR to deliver these programs (UNDP, 2022). **Inclusive Participation** stresses ensuring the meaningful participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in local peacebuilding processes, including the establishment of women's dialogue circles, youth councils, and interfaith committees at the local level (UN Peacebuilding, 2024). **Intergovernmental Coordination** advocates for formal mechanisms for coordination and information-sharing between national, provincial, and local governments, such as joint committees or task forces to align policies, share best practices, and monitor progress (Karunasundera, 2018). Finally, **Monitoring and Evaluation** recommends robust systems for tracking the impact of local peacebuilding initiatives, incorporating regular community feedback and independent assessments to ensure accountability and learning.

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