

Opening spaces for youth in Jammu & Kashmir

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Summary

- Youth are vital, potential agents for positive societal change. But in Kashmir the ability of young people to engage in socio-political transformation is hindered by the lack of safe space and continued political insecurity. The use of non-violent means to voice their aspirations has failed to make an impact, resulting in widespread disillusionment.
- Safe spaces for dialogue within and across academic and social institutions in Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh will enhance a sense of ownership and confidence in political processes. These spaces would benefit from independent, participatory, bottom-up approaches.
- Young people can play a distinct role in the socio-economic and political development of their communities. Education and livelihood options that support the development of relevant skills and capacity can better support youth to constructively contribute to their communities and Kashmiri society as a whole.
- An environment that enables youth to help address community issues should also be encouraged. These could include opportunities to affect change to the local education system and support localised entrepreneurial capacity.
- Efforts to support the role of youth will be more effective if they are complemented by efforts to resolve the political dispute that are transparent, focused on the concerns of the Kashmir people, and improve the situation on the ground.

Introduction

The preamble of the UN World Programme of Action for Youth states that, “people represent agents, beneficiaries and victims of major societal changes... Young people in all parts of the world, living in countries at different stages of development and in different socio-economic settings, aspire to full participation in the life of society.” Youth in Kashmir also aspire to contribute positively to their society; yet the continued political insecurity and the challenge of finding fulfilling educational and meaningful employment opportunities hinders their ability to do so.

Civically engaged and active youth can be important and positive agents of change. Political and socio-economic developments that meaningfully engage Kashmiri youth will be better able to move society as a whole away from the current trend of political polarisation and tension towards constructive processes of long-term conflict settlement. Involving young people also enhances confidence in political, non-violent processes as well as a sense of ownership. This requires a better understanding of the priorities of young Kashmiris as well as facilitation of safe spaces for them to articulate their interests.

The findings in this paper highlight the role of civil society, education institutions, and policy makers to create and promote spaces in order for youth to engage constructively with political and socio-economic processes without fear and insecurity. They also provide suggestions on how to open up space for youth to engage in dialogue and work on their vision for a peaceful, inclusive and prosperous future. However, without a serious and sincere effort to address the political dispute and without much improvement in the ground situation the impact of implementation of these suggestions will be limited.

Insecurity and youth

Increasing disillusionment with non-violent means

The continued political stalemate and day-to-day violence experienced by youth have increased scepticism of the use of non-violent means of protest to bring about change. There are concerns of a growing sentiment that political violence may be the only option left to push the relevant governments towards dialogue and negotiation. A cursory analysis of recent militant activity in Kashmir supports the claim that many young people are ready to join the ranks of armed fighters, despite the experience of violence by Kashmiri society in the recent past. Recent funeral processions of militants show increased attendance of youth shouting slogans in their support and demanding freedom despite the fear of repercussions.

Ramifications for participation in protests

Since the start of the uprising in 1989, youth have borne the brunt of political violence in Kashmir. This has continued despite the shift from an armed struggle to unarmed street protests. For example, 80 per cent of the 120 people killed in police and paramilitary action to control the street

protests during the uprising of summer of 2010 in the Kashmir valley were below thirty years of age. A study conducted by the Center for Dialogue and Reconciliation, a Delhi-based NGO also found that 39 out of the 97 cases of killings, whose demographic information was documented, were students¹. The 2008 protests, in which over 70 people were killed - the majority of them young - tell a similar story.

A number of other incidents involving the arrest of youth, including juveniles (youth aged below 18 years) have been documented. This has included reports of youth accused of attempted murder, charged under laws like the Public Safety Act (PSA) or detained at police stations and humiliated along with family members for participating in protests and stone throwing. There is growing criticism that acts like the PSA, which allows state authorities to place people under administrative or preventive detention without charge or trial, and the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act (AFSPA), which gives state security forces increased powers to ensure 'public order', grant impunity to security forces and have led to gross human rights violations.

1 Ahmad Dar, Zubair. *Behind the Numbers: Profiling Those Killed in Kashmir's 2010 Unrest*, Center for Dialogue and Reconciliation

Lack of space for dialogue

The ability to speak with fellow citizens on issues of mutual concern is an invaluable tool to promote understanding of different perspectives and transform competing narratives on political, social and economic issues into narratives of shared concerns and coexistence. Dialogue within communities as well as between communities across Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh has proved challenging and presents a barrier to widespread youth engagement with political processes.

An atmosphere of fear and censorship

The experience of violence, the fear of repercussions for speaking out, the shrinking of traditional social spaces (such as public parks, cultural gatherings, platforms for showcasing art and debating issues of concern), and the frequent restrictions put on the movement of people and modes of communication, have negatively affected the mental and physical health of Kashmiri youth. They often describe life in Kashmir as "living in constant fear of being watched." Fear,

anxiety, unhappiness, aggressive behaviour and psychological distress are commonplace².

The lack of diversity in education spaces

In times of distress and insecurity educational spaces can play a key role in providing a sense of safety and hope, and room for productive engagement with a diversity of perspectives. This can support the capacity of young people to take ownership of issues that affect them and contribute to the desired transformation of their communities.

Yet education institutions in Kashmir have struggled to provide such a space. For example, some student union associations have been restricted in their operations and faculty members at some institutions assert that they self-censor events and initiatives by students. In the current context men-only interactions are also the norm; these tend to focus on the issues and perspectives of men, who

2 *Kashmir: Violence and Health*, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), (2006)

often end up representing women in public forums on issues concerning them.

Many young people choose to leave Kashmir to study at institutions in India or elsewhere. In some of these institutions, Kashmiri students are able to engage in formal and informal dialogue and debates on various issues including the conflict in Kashmir. These students have asserted that if they, to an extent, can debate and organise peaceful protests about the situation in Kashmir at these institutions, why is it not possible to do that inside 'their own' institutions like Kashmir University?

Creative expression and use of social media

Many young Kashmiris have turned to creative

expression to tell their stories and voice their opinions. This includes writers, poets, filmmakers, musicians, cartoonists and others. They are now narrating the Kashmir story through these mediums documenting the history, the political conflict, and current situation in Kashmir. The use of online social forums and street graffiti has provided an avenue for them to voice their aspirations and share information about their situation. However, this has also faced restrictions - engagement in such activities is discouraged and there is limited space on the ground where youth can freely articulate their stories, discuss their positions or pursue artistic activities.

Economic challenges for youth

Unemployment and entrepreneurship

Unemployment is a huge concern for youth in Kashmir. Over 600,000 young people are unemployed in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) out of which over 300,000 are from the Kashmir valley. A 2010 Chatham House study³ found that 87 per cent of people thought that unemployment was the most significant problem in J&K. A 2012 study of entrepreneurship challenges by Mercy Corps⁴ also found that in addition to a high rate of unemployment, "a depressed market economy, protracted and episodic conflict, and a disparity between the educational system and the demands of the labour market thwart Kashmiri young people in their pursuit of consistent and steady income generation." Some young people have benefited from various government and NGO sponsored schemes and institutions, such as the J&K Entrepreneurship Development Institute and Mercy Corps, which support youth engagement in entrepreneurship to start new livelihood initiatives in agriculture, handicrafts, healthcare, information and communication technology, and tourism.

However, such schemes have been unable to fully capture the interests and priorities of the majority of youth. This has been for a number of reasons including:

- The lack of capacity in youth,
- A programme design based on similar initiatives implemented outside Kashmir, without taking into

account the particular circumstances in Kashmir,

- The impact of bureaucratic corruption and public mistrust of government on the perceived credibility of the initiatives.
- The lack of public participation in the design or planning phase.

Other development initiatives in rural areas including self-help groups and employment generation schemes are restrained by similar factors.

Challenges in educational capital

Schools, colleges and universities – institutions responsible for preparing future leadership and workforce – face a number of challenges in Kashmir in providing young people with the skills required for future employment. Curricula and pedagogical techniques have changed little in 40 years and no longer reflect the present reality and needs of the region. Graduates often find that:

- Their skills do not match the available jobs,
- The situation is not conducive to start new businesses nor do they have the requisite skills and confidence to do so, and
- The mainstream educational system does not allow students to engage with their traditional and family professions such as farming, carpentry or handcrafting, nor innovation in these fields.

Professor Nisar Ali, an economist and former lecturer at the University of Kashmir, says, "Our education system created a supply of educated labour that needed to be absorbed in the 1960s and

³ W Bradnock, Robert. *Kashmir: Paths to Peace*, Chatham House, (2010)

⁴ *Youth Entrepreneurship in Kashmir: Challenges and Opportunities*, Mercy Corps (2011)

1970s... thereafter we did not create any change in the system. We needed skills for which there is a demand in society. But our education system has been the same since 1947. There is a continuing gap between the absorption capacity and supply side.”⁵

The role of civil society

Civil society can play a key role in providing spaces for young people to come together and discuss issues of common interest – cultural, social and political. However in Kashmir, civil society has faced a number of challenges in doing so. Where normally civil society can be a space to embrace and promote a diversity of voices, in Kashmir any difference can become a fault-line. The exacerbation of such fault-lines – various political preferences, religious beliefs, rural-urban discourse, the Kashmir/Jammu/Ladakh discourse, a modern rather than an integrated indigenous development model – impacts the ability of youth to move beyond such stereotypes.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

The nascent civil society in Kashmir was severely destabilised by the escalation of conflict in the early 1990s and has only recently begun to resurrect itself. However, it still faces limitations in

operational space, which hinders the effectiveness of its work, in particular the ability to create safe spaces for youth at the grass-roots level for meaningful dialogue on substantive and contentious issues. There are a number of factors that contribute to this, including the difficulty in bringing together people with different political or religious ideologies to have an open dialogue and the lack of transparency and accountability of many NGOs. In a politically contentious environment, initiatives set-up by the military or police such as youth recreation centres can reinforce the perception that independent members of Kashmiri society are not leading socio-political change in Kashmir. International NGOs face a similar operational challenge, which hinders their ability to support meaningful socio-political change. As a result, and together with the lack of any meaningful progress on socio-political issues, a large section of the Kashmiri youth has come to believe that NGOs do not or cannot work on the core issues of concern to them, and that they are ineffective at best.

However, in addition to some effective relief and rehabilitation work, some NGOs have been able to generate support for confidence building measures, build loose networks across different parts of the region, and have helped build some individual and institutional capacity for socio-political transformation. This has generated some hope in a section of youth.

⁵ Ahmad Dar, Fayaz. *‘Living in a pressure cooker situation’: A needs assessment of youth in India-administered Kashmir*, page 20, Conciliation Resources, (2011)

Transforming spaces for youth – suggested points for action

Young people are naturally socially and politically aware, and provide an invaluable potential to build a critical mass of young change leaders. The challenges facing Kashmiri youth today and the risks of continued marginalisation highlight the urgent and necessary need to support safe spaces for youth. A failure to do so risks: further exacerbation of the existing problems discussed above; fuelling a growing sentiment of alienation among young people and the next generation; and pushing more youth towards the use of more radical means.

These spaces should promote exchange between those with different experiences and opinions about issues of common concern; to understand the aspirations of youth and their vision for the future; and to allow them to engage with the substantive socio-economic priorities of their communities. Dialogue on socio-political issues including resource sharing, sustainable livelihoods, ecology, art and culture, gender, healthcare, and recreational activities could be supported within education institutions, in grassroots communities and between institutions in different parts of the region. This would allow interested young people to develop their capacity, skills and expertise on these issues, as well as provide opportunities for them to contribute to progress in areas of concern to their community.

Creating space in academia and communities

- Civil society initiatives that provide safe spaces for participatory dialogue should be supported at a community level across the region. These could be based on the public libraries infrastructure and local youth should be allowed to take a leadership role. Specific groups could take up issues such as leadership capacity, sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship, socio-political concerns, creative expression and recreational activities.
- Educational institutions – schools, colleges, and university faculties – are a vital arena where space can be made available to youth to discuss and explore their concerns, questions and interests, without any interference from the state, political, religious or security agencies, or threat of surveillance. More space is also needed for women-only and gender balanced dialogue.
- A monthly, uncensored Open Dialogue Day (ODD) on university campuses would provide another space for students to dialogue and express their interests. This would provide students with a forum to ask questions, discuss their concerns – official or personal – in a variety of formats (individual, male-only, female-only, small group or open to all). ODD would have the added benefit of helping to improve the functioning and accountability of institutions. The learning from these sessions could also feed in to the design of the curriculum and administration of these institutions.
- Intra-regional spaces would provide crucial opportunities for promoting dialogue and developing shared understanding on issues of common concern across Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh. This could involve people to people contact as well institutional and informal education, social and cultural exchanges across the various parts of the region.

Role of civil society

- Civil society actors (media, NGOs and activists) can play a key role in creating space for constructive and participatory engagement of people, especially youth, in issues of concern to society in Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh. But this requires political support and space for a vibrant, independent civil society able to work on socio-political issues.
- It is important to support local, non-governmental organisations and individual civil society actors to build their capacity, connect with the international community, and ensure they are sustainable. This could include opportunities such as fellowships, specialised programmes of study, research, or professional development in the fields of: conflict transformation; leadership; economic and entrepreneurship development; human and citizens' rights; educational reform and cultural education; strategic planning; and sustainable and localised development.

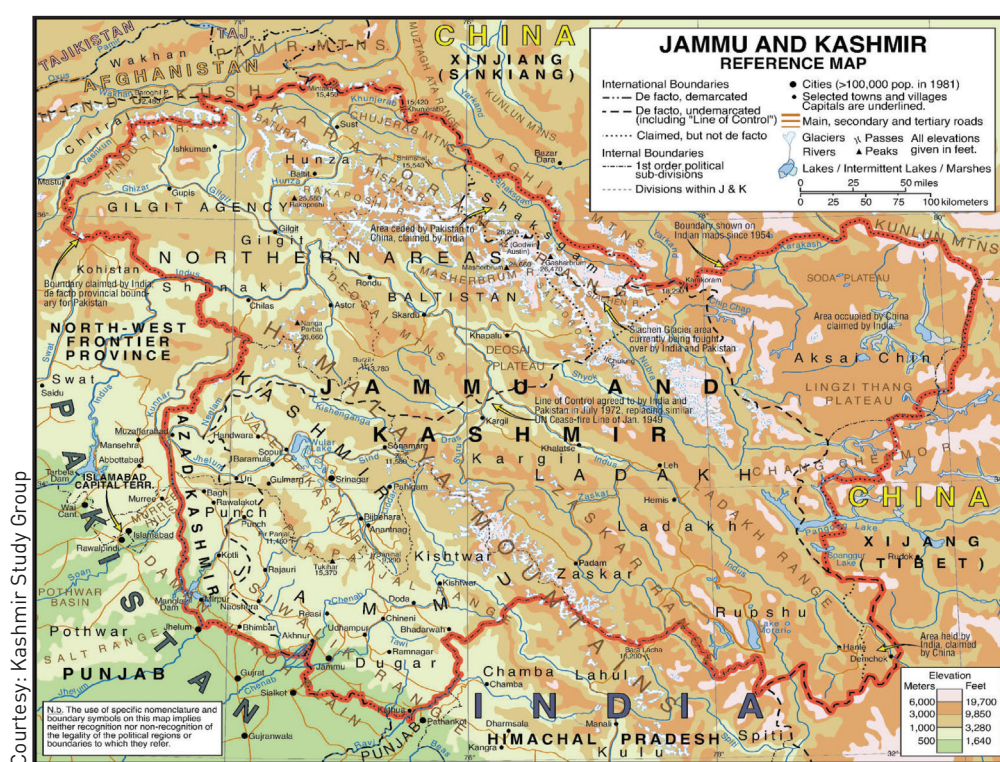
Support for entrepreneurship

- Non-governmental community-level support systems, such as private foundations or credit unions that support entrepreneurship, are a useful way to support economic opportunities for youth as well as boost their confidence in effecting the political and social change they desire. Such initiatives could be based on locally available agricultural, handicrafts and other resources, and primarily target the local needs. This would help lower the overwhelming dependence on government jobs, which are seen as a stable source of income in the present uncertain circumstances, as well as imports, which are draining the regions economy.
- School curricula that reflect the experience of local community life will be better able to promote a sense of ownership as well as entrepreneurial and leadership capacity. This would involve engaging students in vocations such as farming, carpentry, handcrafting, resource sharing, communal living, computing, communication, and other localised and needed skills. Initiatives with tangible outcomes (for example vegetables or fruits grown, furniture made, a community census done or improved community health and hygiene) that can generate resources for the school and the local community, will also give students a sense of accomplishment.

Centres for participatory action research (PAR)

- Community-led, independent PAR centres in each district would play a valuable role in helping to find localised solutions for economic progress, promoting socio-political transformation, and supporting accountability of administrative structures. The centres would train youth in PAR, build their capacity in strategic planning, provide training on life skills, as well as conduct participatory research on issues communities face; they could also. This work could then feed into government policy. For example the outcome of a participatory research project on how schools or other institutions can best serve a particular district could be useful for education policy and the school curriculum of that district.

Map of Jammu and Kashmir region



Kashmir Initiative Group Members

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About the Kashmir Initiative Group (KIG)

KIG mission statement:

'An intra-Kashmir peacebuilding platform,
building bridges between community
perspectives and policymakers.'

Aims of KIG

- To influence policymaking
- To engage in advocacy
- To promote peace and reconciliation
- To empower local narratives through advocacy, research, and capacity building
- To network and provide a platform for peace
- To provide Kashmiris more agency
- To bridge local level civil society with policymakers



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About Conciliation Resources

We're an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. Conciliation Resources is there as long as we're needed to provide advice, support and practical resources. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and practice worldwide.

Our programme work focuses on seven conflict-affected regions around the world, including Kashmir, and we take a further in-depth look at specific conflict contexts and peacebuilding themes through our *Accord* publication series: www.c-r.org/accord

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Conciliation Resources promotes participation of Kashmiris in the India-Pakistan peace process. We work in all regions of the disputed area including Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, and in India-administered Jammu and Kashmir. We also work with Kashmiri diaspora. Together, we can find peaceful alternatives to violence.

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