

Youth-Led Post-War Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: An Experiential and Institutional Model

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Abstract

In Sri Lanka, reconciliation after the war has frequently been interpreted as a top-down political or legal process. In this paper, we propose an alternative view: reconciliation is mainly an experiential, relational, and youth-driven process. Utilizing longitudinal evidence from youth-centred programmes, in particular the Enhancing Knowledge and Virtues: Youth Empowerment (Sisu Diriya) initiative and university-based reconciliation platforms, the study investigates how lived encounters, shared cultural practices, language learning and institutional embedding within higher education create durable pathways towards social cohesion. This paper provides an analytical model of youth networks as peace infrastructure and universities as strategic reconciliation institutions. The findings are consistent with SDG 16 and SDG 4.7 and provide a scalable Global South model for post-conflict societies.

Keywords: youth reconciliation, post-conflict Sri Lanka, social cohesion, peace education, community resilience

Introduction

Post-war reconciliation is often conceptualised as a political or legal process, top-down, involving constitutional reform, power-sharing arrangements, truth commissions or elite-led dialogue. Although these mechanisms remain important, they often fail to address the social fractures, emotional residues and polarizations of identity that persist long after armed conflict has ended. This paper takes a different analytical proposition: reconciliation is mainly experiential, relational and youth-driven.

Drawing on longitudinal evidence from Sri Lanka, this paper explores how youth-centred programmes, particularly the Enhancing Knowledge and Virtues: Youth Empowerment (Sisu Diriya) initiative and university-based reconciliation platforms, have created sustainable pathways to social cohesion. The text argues that reconciliation is a lived encounter, a shared cultural practice, a language learned, and an institutional embedding within higher education, and not merely rhetoric or symbolic gestures.

The paper contributes empirically and theoretically to peace and development research by

framing youth networks as peace infrastructure and universities as strategic reconciliation institutions, providing a scalable Global South model compatible with SDG 16, SDG 4.7, and Erasmus+/PEAI frameworks.

Conceptual Framework: Post-War Reconciliation Beyond Words

Reconciliation as a Social Process

Here reconciliation is not the absence of violence but the rebuilding of social relationships across lines of division. In the Sri Lankan context these were ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional and class divisions. The evidence suggests that the process of reconciliation moves forward when people experience emotional safety, receive recognition and dignity, develop trust through repeated interaction, and reconstruct identity from exclusive to inclusive. This framing echoes relational peace theories but expands them through practice-based youth engagement.



Thematic Alignment

This study is located within the thematic area of community resilience and post-conflict recovery (ICHR-2026, Theme ix) but also intersects with ethics, equity and social impact (Theme ii), literature for peace and reconciliation (Theme iii) and fostering unity through collaboration (Theme v). The Sri Lankan case provides a rich empirical site to explore the making of adaptive social landscapes through youth action, institutional embeddedness and culturally embedded practice.

Post-War Reconciliation Architecture (Framework): Multi-Domain Ecosystem

Sri Lanka's experience presents reconciliation as a multi-domain ecosystem. Table 1 summarizes core domains, interventions, reconciliation functions and observable outcomes identified through longitudinal programme evidence.

Source: Compiled from programme data (Sisu Diriya and university-based reconciliation initiatives).

The framework illustrates that reconciliation is cumulative, growing out of overlapping interventions rather than distinct occurrences. The interaction of leadership development, the arts, language, education and institutional embedding creates lasting change, not any one domain alone.

The Analytical Model: How Reconciliation Happens

Causal Pathways

Empirical data consistently support the following causal sequence: experiential engagement creates emotional safety, which facilitates trust development, cross-ethnic friendship, identity change, civic participation, and ultimately durable reconciliation. This causal logic is also reflected in youth testimonies, programme outcomes and institutional records. Crucially, relationships precede narratives, and trust precedes ideology.

Youth-Centred Reconciliation Logic

Young people are not passive consumers but active co-creators of peace. Their role is characterized by the mobility of regions and identities, openness to languages and cultures, ability to normalize coexistence and their long-term relational maintenance through digital networks. This youth-centred logic re-conceives reconciliation as intergenerational investment rather than short-term conflict resolution.

Reconciliation Ecosystem Model

The reconciliation ecosystem model places youth at the heart of the catalytic agents. Universities are institutional anchors that support and legitimize the process. Arts, language and culture serve as relational accelerators that decrease psychological distance and facilitate empathy. The state and civil society provide legitimacy and scale. The metaphor of an ecosystem emphasizes interdependence and explains why isolated or single-silo interventions will never deliver durable results.

Identity Transformation Path

The narratives of identity among youth reveal a clear trajectory: fear and inherited prejudice, exposure and curiosity, emotional recognition, trust and friendship, and an integrated civic identity. This trajectory represents reconciliation as a developmental process, not a binary outcome. The implication for programme design is that short-term interventions are insufficient to trigger identity transformation and that sustained, progressive engagement is required.

Campus to Community Flow of Impact

Universities are peace incubators where dialogue and diversity are normalized, leadership skills are developed, and reconciliation practices then diffuse outward into communities. This flow confirms higher education as a strategic peace institution with the potential to create systemic, long-term social change beyond the campus.

Table 1: Sri Lanka: Post-War Reconciliation Framework

Domain	Core Intervention	Reconciliation Function	Observable Outcome
Leadership	Youth leadership training	Agency and responsibility	Social confidence, civic action
Arts & Culture	Painting, dance, drama, exhibitions	Emotional expression and trust	Empathy, cross-group bonding
Language	Sinhala–Tamil–English learning	Psychological de-othering	Reduced fear, communication
Education	School and university programmes	Norm internalization	Shared civic values
Religion	Multi-faith observances	Moral legitimacy	Ethical coexistence
Social Support	Humanitarian and IDP support	Solidarity	Shared suffering narratives
Health and Counselling	Trauma care	Emotional stabilization	Readiness for interaction
Universities	SRCs and campus platforms	Institutional continuity	Sustainability of peace

Key Findings and Discussion

Reconciliation is Not Rhetorical, It Is Experiential

Policy talk alone cannot heal divided societies. Reconciliation happens when people behave as one before they say it. Programmes that enable sustained experiential interaction across ethnic, linguistic and regional lines produce measurable attitudinal and behavioural change, rather than programmes based on declarations or symbolic gestures.

Youth Networks as Long-Term Peace Infrastructure

Digital and social networks cultivate cross-regional friendships that generate durable social capital, often more resilient than formal institutions. The youth involved in Sisu Diriya and university programs maintained cross-ethnic relations and civic engagement long after the programs ended, illustrating the long-term return on investment of experiential reconciliation.

Arts and Culture as Drivers of Reconciliation

Artistic engagement, such as painting, drama, dance and joint exhibitions, allows for emotional expression, reduces defensiveness, and builds trust faster than structured dialogue, especially in post-trauma settings. Arts-based approaches do not face the cognitive resistance that formal dialogue often encounters, and offer an accessible entry point for participants of all backgrounds.

Language Learning as Psychological Intervention

Sinhala–Tamil–English language learning humanizes the “other,” reduces fear and allows for relational equality. It functions as a low-cost, high-impact peace technology. Learning the language is a mark of respect to the identity of the other community and provides practical conditions for everyday contact and friendship.

Universities as Strategic Institutions for Peace

Universities are not neutral spaces. They are sites where norms, identities, and leadership trajectories are actively shaped. The institutionalization of reconciliation in higher education, such as

Student Reconciliation Centres, intercultural programming and multilingual environments, guarantees the sustainability and legitimacy of peace processes that could otherwise depend on fragile external funding or political will.

Policy Implications and Global Relevance

The Sri Lankan model has several policy implications which can be acted upon. Evidence on SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) indicates that sustained youth engagement builds trust, strengthens inclusive institutions and boosts civic participation. The results operationalize experiential global citizenship education as a quantifiable peace intervention for SDG 4.7 (Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship). The model proves that youth mobility, intercultural learning and university alliances are concrete peace mechanisms for Erasmus+/PEAI frameworks.

Sri Lanka's experience shows that reconciliation can be youth-led, institutionally embedded, culture-based, cost-effective and globally transferable. This places Sri Lanka as a knowledge contributor, not only a post-conflict recipient, an important distinction for South-South learning and the global peacebuilding architecture.

The evidence points to scaling up experiential reconciliation models through higher education partnerships around the world, especially for societies emerging from ethnic, linguistic or religious conflict in the Global South.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that reconciliation does not come through declarations, but through shared experience, through sustained relationships and through institutional anchoring. Youth-led initiatives in Sri Lanka, particularly the Sisu Diriya programme and university reconciliation platforms, demonstrate how societies can convert division into coexistence through investment in lived unity. This paper presents an analytical model that makes both a theoretical contribution to peace studies and a practical framework for programme designers, policy makers and international development partners.

Reconciliation is not a thing people are told to believe in, but a thing they learn through living together. To sustain this learning, the twin pillars of youth agency and institutional embeddedness are required, and Sri Lanka's post-war trajectory provides a compelling, evidence-based case for both.

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