In 2017, Search for Common Ground launched an initiative to apply the collective impact methodology for youth-inclusive peacebuilding in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The project helped organizations and individuals to find collaborative ways to tackle issues of injustice arising from rapid redevelopment and gentrification. Unlike typical projects, where NGOs or donors drive the agenda and selectively invite stakeholders for participation at different stages, this approach puts the decision-making power in the hands of the people most affected by the issue across local communities, business, government, civil society, academia and religious platforms. In Colombo, the initiative took the name We Build Colombo Together. Search provides “backbone” support, facilitating and guiding the initiative through a dedicated coordinator.
We Build Colombo Together (WBCT) is an informal network of approximately 150 representatives of communities and organizations across critical sectors in Colombo dedicated to improving urban wellbeing through collective action. WBCT connects people at the grassroots with traditional leaders, enabling collective action.

INCLUSIVE DECISION MAKING - ACROSS SECTORS & DIVIDES

WBCT members come from business, civil society, academia, government and security agencies, and local communities in central Colombo. Decision-making is inclusive, as the group relies on the diverse perspective of those most affected by urban conflict and.

→ The core leadership team currently includes 12 members who meet monthly and represent the state, private sector, community, and civil society at various levels and capacities, including a university student, a government officer, community leaders, a theater activist, a mobile journalist and a mid-level CSR representative for a major local developer.

→ About 60% of the core team are below the age of 30.

→ Over the past two years, WBCT has built trust and facilitated new collaboration between communities, private developers, and state officials in this community, and the initiative has now expanded to over 100 communities across the city, reaching an estimated 50% of the city’s resident population.

In 2017, the initiative began in the underserved and stigmatized neighborhood of Wekanda in an area known as “Slave Island” in central Colombo. Historically a site where enslaved people were held during British colonization, today Slave Island is a highly commercial area located just outside the central business district of Colombo. Home to a number of ethnic communities, the area is experiencing rapid gentrification due to enormous land development pressure as part of the country’s multi-billion dollar redevelopment plan. The communities living in the areas targeted for redevelopment are often accused of urban violence and drug addiction, low educational attainment, and poverty. However, the residents blame the city for marginalizing and excluding ethnic and religious minorities from development dividends.

BOLD VISION & SYSTEMS FOCUS

Too often, the people working on urban marginalization and most affected by it have very different understandings of the root causes and solutions. A critical element of WBCT is bringing together the diverse actors involved to review the data, develop a shared vision, and determine how to drive change.

→ To establish a common starting point before bringing the various leaders together, we conducted research with local organization Centre for Poverty Analysis to identify the broken dynamics and conflicting perspectives in a key flashpoint for urban conflict: Kompannaweediya (also known as “Slave Island”), including: ambiguity over future land ownership and housing, stigmatization of poor urban communities, and growing disconnect and distrust among ethnoreligious groups, between urban communities and formal markets, and among state, private developers, and communities.

→ This research provided a launching point for the conflicting parties to hear each other’s concerns and plans, but it took nearly a year more of one-on-one consultations and intra-group meetings to build sufficient trust and dialogue for a joint systems analysis in March 2018.

→ What resulted was a collective vision for our work.

Our local research and systems analysis revealed key gaps & leverage points:

• Develop a more collaborative urban housing and redevelopment model that takes human well-being into account when making physical development changes, e.g. in involuntary resettlement of urban poor communities to state-built residential towers

• Leverage the connection between quality of education, employability, income, quality of life, and local development challenges in poor urban communities, recognizing progress on one front can influence others

• Engage underprivileged youth groups as a change agent who can actively and strategically advance a new approach to collaboration around urban conflict

• Build on the community’s existing organizations and structures and its historically multilingual and
After initial efforts to build collective action around urban redevelopment, the WBCT team shifted focus to “urban wellbeing” which has inspired and mobilized a wider, more diverse set of people and organizations.

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*multicultural nature*, which have both been a source for resilience in managing tensions.

- Introduce new methods of collaboration into existing design processes and development plans between communities, state agencies, and development companies for better outcomes

**JOINT & INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES LEVERAGE LEARNING & LOCAL RESOURCES**

Systems thinking allows us to identify patterns and gaps and focus on “high-leverage” opportunities for individual and joint activities to have the greatest impact. While some of our activities are conducted jointly, others may be pursued independently by members taking different approaches to reach different populations at different levels. Shared learning has yielded valuable insights, as JSCP members coordinate and adapt activities for greater impact. Equally important is the dedication to collective action, with JSCP members donating their time and resources to stretch the limited budget as far as possible.

- WBCT facilitates collaboration between communities and the private and public sectors to align resources and improve urban wellbeing.

- Ranging from digital literacy training for young people to community computer centers, from rehabilitation of community facilities to capacity building for community leaders, each of our activities connects community, private, and public sector in innovative ways, replacing one-off one-sided engagements with longer-term partnerships.

- In 2017, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects joined Search’s initiative as a learning partner. They published a learning paper on WBCT in January 2019.

- In little over a year, WBCT mobilized over 75% of its activities budget through individual financial contributions and in-kind support from local communities, government institutions, national businesses, and major development companies who offered meeting places and venues free of charge, provided services at no-cost, and aligned their own funded initiatives.

- The network has also facilitated more than 12 partnerships between the state, private sector, and communities to transform planned CSR initiatives and public services to respond better to the needs and aspirations of the communities and youth, from English language and livelihoods training to neighbourhood beautification projects.

- WBCT members communicate and share information regularly through Facebook and Whatsapp, as well as in-person

**WBCT in Action:**

- WBCT is revitalizing the community development committees (CDCs) of Colombo in collaboration with Colombo Municipal Council, by empowering 330+ community leaders from 115 communities with ID cards. In a second phase, public, private, and civil society organizations will strengthen the skills of community leaders, and WBCT will set up a reporting and monitoring mechanism.

- At the level of public policy, WBCT proposed a cabinet paper to ensure that new mega-city development projects account for collaboration with communities. Our proposal was accepted, and the WBCT coordinator was selected to the ministerial working committee for the urban redevelopment project. The change in leadership with the presidential election ultimately nullified this cabinet order. However, WBCT plans to resume the process in mid-2020 following parliamentary elections.

- In the wake of the devastating Easter bomb attacks, the Slave Island neighborhood was further stigmatized when a cache of weapons was discovered. WBCT organized an interfaith solidarity event and social media campaign to respond to the rise in hate speech and anti-Muslim rhetoric, promoting the diversity and tolerance of Slave Island’s residents. Our video received over 40,000 views.

- In collaboration with a local partner and the municipal council, WBCT organized and designed a training series on digital literacy and mobile journalism for youth recently re-housed by the Urban Development Authority. Youth have used the skills developed to create videos and social media campaigns to promote economic growth and tolerance in their communities.

- WBCT is mobilizing and connecting local resources to rehabilitate a dilapidated local school. While a local architect firm offers pro-bono technical drawings and visualizations, youth from the community volunteered to create an urban garden for the school and clean up surrounding public areas, while local philanthropists and residents have donated school supplies.
meetings and conference calls to review learning and make joint decisions about collective actions.

BACKGROUND & CAPACITY

**Search for Common Ground** (Search) is one of the largest conflict transformation organizations in the world. Since 1982, we have led programs around the world to help societies channel their differences away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative solutions, with young people as key partners. Our long-term programming in 43 countries and network of over 1,200 partners around the world enabled Search to reach over 700,000 direct participants and 50 million people through media programs in 2016, in many of the world’s most challenging conflicts.

Since establishing our Children and Youth division in 2002, Search has led the global peacebuilding field in working with young people as partners for peace.

As a founding co-chair of the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, we have convened UN agencies, NGOs, youth-led civil society and other partners to create what is now known as the youth, peace and security agenda. In close partnership with both young people and power-holders, we innovate at the edges of peacebuilding practice and bring what we learn into the mainstream. Simultaneously, we work with power holders to transform traditional establishments and ways of engaging young people. This approach has seen considerable results in recent years, including the adoption of UN Security Council resolutions 2250 (2015) and 2419 (2018). We are currently at a key turning point to use these global frameworks to develop international and national mechanisms for meaningful youth participation.

CONTACTS

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**For more information on Search for Common Ground’s programs**, please visit the following links:

- www.sfcg.org
- www.sfcg.org/children-and-youth/
- www.sfcg.org/sri-lanka/