



PEACE By DESIGN:

How HIVE is Reimagining Peace Leadership and Education in Pakistan

Written by Dr. Aleen Bayard

In Pakistan, peace education is not merely an aspirational ideal. It is a vital strategy, fraught with the complexities of entrenched conflict, bureaucratic red tape, and extremist threats. And yet, from within this turbulence emerges a powerful example of intersectional peace leadership and education: the work of HIVE, a social impact organization led by Syed Ali Abbas Zaidi.

Interviewing Mr. Syed Ali Abbas Zaidi, the founder of HIVE, was an incredibly enriching experience that deepened my understanding of what transformational peace education can look like in practice.

His approach is both innovative and courageous—rooted in local realities and informed by global best practices. HIVE's model redefines peace education by weaving together civic engagement, creative expression, and grassroots organizing in ways that are both contextually relevant and strategically effective. What stands out most is the intentionality behind every aspect of their work—from how they design culturally resonant programs to how they measure impact using tangible indicators of everyday peace. Mr. Zaidi's insights challenge conventional notions of peacebuilding, which often are anchored chiefly in conflict management, and illuminate how education, when done thoughtfully, can be a radical tool for social cohesion, resilience, and long-term change.

"We define ourselves as a social impact organization to navigate the socio-political issues and security challenges," Zaidi explains. That identity also informs HIVE's strategy and programmatic themes.



Ali delivering a keynote to students on the importance of tolerance (2024).

As Mr. Zaidi described HIVE's programs, I marveled at how strategically their work reflected Johan Galtung's vision and model of positive peace, which distinguishes between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace (the presence of conditions that foster justice, equity, and sustainable harmony) and paints peace with a very broad brush.

Intersectional Peace in Practice

"Peace is a loaded term," Zaidi says. "It means different things to different people." HIVE's model, therefore, is intersectional: community-specific approaches to peace tailored to local conditions and needs.



Female bikers during a bike rally under "reclaiming public spaces for all genders" campaign by HIVE (2021).

In some areas, women's suppression is the dominant challenge. "There, we promote women's leadership as a pathway to peace," Zaidi explains. "When women play an active civic role, the peace quotient in that region improves."

In other regions, environmental degradation creates conflict. Zaidi tells the story of two tribes clashing over grazing land after a shared water channel was destroyed. "We convened a citizen body, redirected a stream, brought in climate experts, and helped restore water access," he recounts. "The conflict deescalated."

Digital hate and misinformation dominate urban challenges. "We use tech for peace," Zaidi says. "We engage TikTok and Metta to take down hate content, while using digital campaigns to promote tolerance."

Education as an Instrument of Peace

Education is another vital gateway to making a local impact. HIVE's efforts go beyond formal schooling to embed conflict resolution and civic leadership training into learning environments. And in many cases, what distinguishes HIVE from other "peace education" initiatives is the focus on learning environments that are literally down the street.

Zaidi offers a compelling example from a refugee camp: "There was a school hosting Afghan refugee children in tension with the host community. We helped re-energize the school and added peace content—conflict mediation, interfaith harmony, and community leadership." This content was delivered weekly by a PhD in conflict management. "We never teach just for education's sake," he emphasizes. "Our goal is peace. Education is the vehicle."

Vocational training for women also incorporates peace elements. "We teach skills to help women earn income, but we also embed modules on civic agency, conflict management, and leadership," Zaidi says.

Rethinking What Peace Education Looks Like

HIVE's approach is radically different from legacy peace education models.

"We never walk into a community and say, 'we are peace experts'", Zaidi explains. "Instead, we ask communities, 'What does peace mean to you?' Then we design interventions around those lived experiences. We work with local people. We co-produce solutions." By doing so the interventions have a level of authenticity, integration and sustainability that cannot be measured through traditional tests and other classroom metrics.

HIVE's methodologies include Outcome Harvesting, Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI), and "Civic Imagination and Worldbuilding," a framework Zaidi co-developed with USC Professor Henry Jenkins. "It's about imagining a desirable future and then co-designing how to get there," he says.

Measuring Peace Through Daily Realities

Frustrated with those traditional (and often vague), donor-driven metrics, HIVE adopted the Everyday Peace Indicators framework. "We were filling out reports for donors, not measuring real change," Zaidi says. "So, we asked: How do you define peace in your everyday life?"

The answers are as unique as the communities.

"In Lahore, Christian boys said they felt at peace when they could wear their crosses in public without harassment, particularly when competing on a soccer field. In a Taliban-influenced area, people said they checked for satellite dishes before moving—if a neighborhood had antennas, it meant the Taliban's grip was weaker." That type of indicator is a stunning example of what a social impact organization can accomplish.

In one nomadic community, peace was manifested through a very unlikely activist: a toilet. In that instance, the women had no safe, private or hygienic place besides a latrine. That lack of space constrained the women's freedom of movement and, therefore, their independence. "We installed portable toilets. Soon, women started hosting tea gatherings. It gave them agency, privacy, and even reduced domestic violence," Zaidi shares. "A woman told us, 'Now I don't have to wake my husband to use the toilet at night.' That's peace."

In Hazara Shia communities, who have suffered genocidal violence, psychosocial support was key. "Mental health became their peace indicator," he says. "We partnered with specialists to deliver trauma-informed programs."

From Engineer to Peacebuilder

At the heart of HIVE's success is its founder and director, Syed Ali Abbas Zaidi—a visionary leader whose unorthodox career arc has uniquely positioned him to challenge the status quo of peacebuilding in Pakistan. Zaidi's journey into peace leadership was unconven-

tional. Trained as an aeronautical engineer and employed by Siemens and Pakistan's military-industrial sector, his career pivoted when terrorism surged in the late 2000s.

"Bombs were going off in hotels, schools, and universities. No one was offering a counter-narrative," he recalls. "We couldn't join any peace movement—because there wasn't one. So, we became the movement."

Over the past decade, he has launched multiple civic initiatives including Pakistan Youth Alliance, Khudi, Dil Say Pakistan, and finally HIVE—all aimed at addressing Pakistan's most pressing issues, from violent extremism and interfaith discord to civic apathy and misinformation.

Zaidi has spearheaded more than 30 projects across Pakistan focused on peacebuilding, interfaith harmony, civic education, and social innovation. His work has been recognized globally: he is profiled in a 2012 Al-Jazeera documentary, "Pakistan: The New Radicals," as one of nine of the most influential activists in the world. He has received accolades including the Intercultural Innovation Award by the United Nations and BMW Group and was honored as the "Bravest Blogger of the World" by The Daily Beast. His projects have frequently been cited by international think tanks as models of best practice in the P/CVE (preventing and countering violent extremism) field.

In recognition of his extraordinary commitment and global impact, Zaidi was selected by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as one of ten Young Leaders for the "Extremely Together" initiative of the Kofi Annan Foundation. Through that fellowship, Zaidi deepened his work in global peace advocacy, while emphasizing the critical role of youth-led, locally rooted interventions.

Despite his international recognition, Zaidi remains deeply grounded in his belief that transformative change must come from within communities. "The dream of a plural, progressive, and equal Pakistan," he says, "can only be realized through meaningful collaboration across society's fault lines."

Community-Led Learning

HIVE doesn't only intervene—they train. Zaidi recounts their creative approach with children in schools: "We simulate conflict by giving fewer chairs than children and asking them to solve it. The kids form committees and negotiate. It works 80% of the time."

But not all issues are easy to address. "Gender and LGBTQI topics are tough in some regions. There's pushback," he admits.

Still, HIVE persists—always contextualizing, always localizing.

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Toward Decentralized Peace Architecture

Our conversation also explored the broader implications for peace leadership. "We need a decentralized peace architecture," Zaidi argues. "Too much policy is designed by people far from the front lines."

He advocates for participatory action research and stronger ties between policymakers and peace practitioners. "Collaboration must be rooted in empathy and first-hand experience."

A Blueprint for the Future

In 2025, HIVE will launch three new projects in 30 neighborhoods, each beginning with the same question: What does peace mean to you?

For more information about HIVE, here is its website: https://hive.org.pk/

For more information about Every Day Peace Indicators, click here: https://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org/



Ali during a training session on peacebuilding with urban youth in Lahore, Pakistan (2020).