



Paths To Peace

March 2017

Community Action To Mitigate Ethnic and Religious Tensions

Phase III of NPC's Reconciling Inter Religious and Inter Ethnic Differences (RIID) project, which was implemented with partner organizations that collaborated with District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) at the district level to build support for a Transitional Justice (TJ) process within the framework of the Geneva Resolution, concluded after nine months.

The project focused on reconciling inter ethnic and inter religious differences through DIRCs, which were established five years ago. The nine DIRCs have been functioning in the Ampara, Batticaloa, Galle, Jaffna, Kandy, Mannar, Matara, Nuwara Eliya and Puttalam districts. The total number of members of DIRCs is 625, increasing by 112 since the beginning of Phase III.

Even after almost eight years since the end of the war, inter community tensions are increasing due to acts of violence by extremist groups. Therefore inter community relations in some areas have continued to deteriorate and the sense of vulnerability felt by different ethnic and religious minorities remains unchanged.

The government is establishing reconciliation in the country in accordance with TJ mechanisms within the framework of the Geneva Resolution. But the public is unaware of what the recommendations of the Geneva Resolution are and what the government is doing in its reconciliation process.

Opponents of the government and extremist groups carry on their campaign against the implementation of resolution, adding to the polarization of the communities.



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NPC addressed these issues and promoted effective district level mechanisms by supporting reconciliation through DIRCs' engagement in building community support for a reconciliation process based on TJ, especially truth telling, and mitigating inter ethnic and inter religious tensions by networked and capacitated DIRCs to build trust within their communities.

Provincial truth forums, organized as a pilot initiative on truth seeking, served as an example on truth seeking in an eventual truth and reconciliation process. Seventy-two cases from war victims were recorded during the truth telling process.

The forums showed victims how to present their cases and stories before an official truth commission in future.

The people who were on the panel hearing the stories understood the need for follow up action by identifying victimhood from multiple perspectives. In the South, government agents on the panel told victims how to get relief.

Under this project a series of training programs on TJ, the Geneva Resolution and democracy and good governance were conducted for DIRC members, community leaders, religious leaders and local level politicians. Participants learnt about the recommendations of the Geneva Resolution including hybrid courts and justice mechanisms. They accepted that necessity of avoiding another war by establishing a concrete TJ mechanism and highlighted the importance of having more awareness programs at the grass root level.

Three examples of success in mitigating inter ethnic and inter religious tension:

- When Puttalam DIRC was trying to find information on an issue, its first step was to identify the chief incumbent of the Buddhist temple whose monk had placed a Buddha statue in a Hindu shrine and broken the till. DIRC members went directly go to the chief monk and talked to him without going through a middleman. This solved the problem in a short time.
- Students of Jaffna University were having a protest about two university students who were accidentally shot dead by policemen. Jaffna DIRC religious leaders went to the site and asked the students to stop the protest and peacefully solve the problem through negotiation. The students listened to the religious leaders and stopped the protest. This method of intervention should be practiced in the south.
- In Galle DIRC members contributed to and participated in a foundation stone laying ceremony as an entry point to intervene in a case in which Tamils from Igalkandawatta and Sinhalese from the adjoining village were fighting over an attack by a Sinhala youth on a Tamil youth. The stone laying ceremony was to reconstruct a damaged Hindu temple with blessings of all the religious leaders. It showed that no matter which religion, everyone could participate to build unity.

"It is necessary to remove the misunderstanding that rural people have on reconciliation. Implementing reconciliation related activities without raising awareness on the Transitional Justice process among the rural population will lead to these activities being unsuccessful."

**Ven. Mulatiyana Gnanaloka
Thero
President of Southern
Province Bhikkhu Society**

Preparing Communities For Conflict Resolution

Under NPC's project Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka, 81 members of the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Trincomalee and Batticaloa were trained on mediation, documenting issues, making referrals and engaging with the media.



Another aspect of the project was to familiarise DIRC members with the report of the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform by publishing booklets containing relevant chapters in all three languages for distribution.

The training programme aimed to increase knowledge of methods used to resolve conflicts, expand awareness about mediation, create understanding about the qualities of a mediator and improve knowledge and skill of active listening.

The participants identified ethnic and religious concerns they faced. Some of issues presented in Trincomalee included problems between Muslim and Sinhala fishermen, language usage, building religious statues in inappropriate places, spreading wrong rumours about religions, resettlements, not respecting other religious leaders as equally as Buddhist religious leaders and biased development activities by politicians.

In Batticaloa the issues included land disputes between the ethnicities, tension between mosques and kovils due to broadcasting prayers at the same time, placing religious symbols in inappropriate places, resettlement and religious conversions.

During discussions, it was evident that tension among communities was still prevailing. Racist propaganda for business advantages was one subject that arose. Apart from inter religious conflicts, intra religious issues were also raised. In the Batticaloa district, the graveyard allocated for Roman Catholics was not shared with other Christians, who had to carry out their burials in distant places. In Kattankudy, the Muslim community wanted government owned lands in Tamil areas but the Tamil community was reluctant to share its space with the Muslim community.

The media plays a vital role in creating ethno religious tensions as well as minimising the negative impact in the grassroots level communities. During the sessions, DIRC members said public believed only social media. Through the training, 83 DIRC members acquired knowledge and skills on how to select stories and document them.

The participants identified local, national and international media and their influences in their communities. They also mapped out local media to gain publicity for DIRC activities. The DIRC members were provided with user friendly guidelines on how to use social medias. Both DIRCs created Facebook groups and live streamed some presentations.

Young Writers Bring Vanni and Border Villages To Life

Stories in the third anthology of the Write to Reconcile project focused on Sri Lanka's post war situation with emphasis on border villages and the Vanni.

Participants travelled to the Vanni and the Sinhala border villages to hear stories of what the people had undergone and to get a sense of their lives and issues post war. In addition, human rights workers visited the workshop in Anuradhapura and spoke about their work and the ongoing issues for war affected people.



The writing project brought together 25 emerging writers from Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan diaspora, as well as Sri Lankan teachers and professors, who were interested in writing fiction on the issues of conflict, peace, reconciliation, memory and trauma.

Over the course of a weeklong residential workshop and two three-week online forums, participants learnt the craft of writing and produced work that addressed the themes of the project, which was run by international award winning author Shyam Selvadurai, supported by NPC and funded by the US embassy.

At the launch of the anthology, NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera said Write to Reconcile was a microcosm what Sri Lanka should be like – people of different ethnicities and religions working together in harmony. “The different stories give us a sense of what divides us and exposes the multiplicity of viewpoints in our country,” he pointed out.

Mr Selvadurai thanked NPC for giving the project a home from the beginning and putting him in contact with human rights activists. “We still have a long way to go in terms of reconciliation and dealing with the wounds of the war. This anthology will, I hope, provide help in this process,” he said.

US Embassy Public Affairs Officer James Russo said the embassy was glad to support Sri Lanka's reconciliation process and heal the wounds of war. Young people, he said, are the key to the process and Write to Reconcile gave them a platform to be heard.

“Everyone had stories from their own culture so we got to learn about different cultures. This project was not just about literature but also about humanity. We saw the hardships faced by villagers affected by the war and heard their stories. The project taught us about life, love and hope.”

Sandeep Chamodaya

Peace Building Organisations Face Many Post Conflict Challenges

Guest Column By Sunil Bastian

The current context poses challenges to organisations interested in peace such as NPC.

In my view many of the activities that goes under the term peace focus mainly on two issues - responding to issues linked to the last stages of the war and constitutional reforms on devolution.

But I think this is very partial view of what we need to do if Sri Lankan is to be peaceful country. This perspective is trapped in the conflict, post conflict discourse. This is also supported by many donors. This in turn is leading to very negative aspects, where many organisations are just adding to their project proposals terms like reconciliation, without any idea about what they are doing. I had to make negative comments about some of these proposals in my professional capacity.



My own scenario is the UNHRC resolution and constitutional reforms will not be implemented in a manner that has legitimacy with Tamil nationalist politics. Ultimately constitutional reforms discussion will end up around the 13th amendment. But even if these reforms are implemented it can amount to installing a section of the Tamil elite in a regional unit. For me Tamil issue included two types of struggles - one between Tamils and Sri Lankan state and the other intra-Tamil struggle, which had many other dimensions.

Then there is the question how do you get support from the Sinhala community for these reforms so that we can isolate the more extremist elements within the Sinhalese. I think in this regard the politics of economic reforms is important. This is something UNP of Wickremasinghe always forgets.

At the moment there is little thought about strategies to get the support of the Sinhala majority, except appeal to their good nature. There is not much thinking about this. There is also great degree of hope that some sort of an agreement within the political class will deliver this. If I am to learn form our history, I have my doubts about how successful this will be. Agreement within the political class can unravel very quickly.

Perhaps it is time that organisations interested in peace think beyond the narrow focus on tackling issues that the last stages of the war generated and constitutional reforms. I am not saying these are unimportant. But I have a feeling this narrow focus is not going to get us very far. Finally we also need to convince donors on these issues.

Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

Our Mission: To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.

Timeline Needed For Implementing Geneva Commitments

The ongoing session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva is generating strong hopes and emotions especially in the former war zones of the north and east of the country and amongst the Tamil Diaspora. Many of the people living there have been direct victims of the war that lasted nearly three decades. They look to the process unfolding in Geneva to obtain justice for themselves and for their kin. They are hopeful that international intervention will resolve their problems and bring justice to them. There is much dissatisfaction about the present situation where progress in finding missing persons, return of land, compensation to victims and demilitarization have been slow in coming.

At a previous session of the UNHRC in October 2015, the government promised to deliver on these and other targets and report on implementation at the current session. While the government has reported the constructive changes it has made, the progress does not encompass the gamut of promises made either in depth or in spread. The government has therefore asked for two more years to implement its commitments. Many in the Tamil community see a repetition of broken promises by successive Sri Lankan governments where it concerns political solutions to the ethnic conflict. A joint appeal made by Tamil civil society organisations, political parties and trade unions calls on the UNHRC to deny the government the time it seeks and to conduct an independent international investigation instead.

In considering how to move forward it is important to note that in the current international context, Sri Lanka is one of the more positive examples of post-war progress despite the infirmities of its reconciliation process. This is why it appears that the international community seeks more to support the government's actions rather than to engage in punitive or coercive actions with regard to it. This is a government that has been agreeable to cooperation with both civil society within the country and with the international community on human rights issues, unlike its predecessor.

The National Peace Council believes it is necessary to give the government the additional time it seeks. We also urge that as a confidence building measure and to sustain its own credibility before the Tamil people and international community, the government sets a time line to meet its commitment to the joint resolution of October 2015, which includes among others, concerns articulated by victims on missing persons, return of land, compensation to victims and accelerated demilitarization.

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