



# Paths To Peace

## Tolerance Fostered by Religious Leaders, Study Shows

August  
2018

Since the end of the war, tension among Sri Lanka's different ethnic and religious communities has been escalating.

However peace groups have, through their collective efforts with authorities, been able to curb some of the potential violence.

Under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom, a Religious Freedom Index (RFI) was formulated in 25 districts.

The RFI is a research study based on opinions about the status of religious freedom gathered from religious leaders, government officials, police and community leaders. Respondents voiced their beliefs on how much religious freedom was enjoyed in their communities.

One major finding of the study was that in areas where there was a good understanding among religious leaders, there was greater religious freedom and tolerance. It was not due to enforcing the law but emerged from the community itself.

The majority of respondents claimed that people "live peacefully helping each other". However about 27 per cent said there was not much interaction between some religious communities. Five per cent stated the there was some tension between religious communities in their areas.

The opinion that people lived peacefully helping each other was less in the Christian community and less prevalent in the Kurunegala, Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts.

According to the respondents, reported incidents of tension were highest in the districts of Mannar, Kandy, Ampara, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Jaffna, Matale and Anuradhapura. However, when compared with actual reported incidents, the number was less than those perceived by the respondents.

*"Inter faith dialogue and initiatives aimed at improving trust and cooperation between different religious groups in the area are essential for building a society with tolerance and religious freedom."*

Of those who participated, 62.5 per cent felt there was no obstacle to practicing their religion but 27 per cent said they could not always carry out their religious observances freely. Nine per cent said that their religion cannot be practised freely at certain times and places.

While most Buddhists and Catholics felt there was no hindrance to practicing their religion, Hindus, Muslims and evangelical Christians did not agree. Among them, 52.9 per cent of Muslims said they could not freely practice their religion.

The most prevalent concern for all religions was the matter of religious conversions while other respondents said rituals of other religions caused disturbances and also that certain practices of other religions violated their own culture.

## When the Other is No Longer the Other

There is depth and wisdom in Sri Lankan society that is enabling it to transcend thirty years of war at the present time and can also transcend the political storms that are about to descend upon the country.

The last weekend of August saw a meeting between 120 members of district inter religious groups from Mannar in the Northern province, Puttalam in the Northwestern province and Nuwara Eliya in the Central province. This was organized under the Religions to Reconcile project supported by USAID.

Although diverse in region, ethnicity and religion, these community leaders demonstrated a high degree of goodwill in engaging with each other in private and group dialogue. Their meeting and their dialogue was a reassuring sign that that the vast majority of people in the country, whether Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, and whether Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, share a common desire to live in peace and harmony with each other.

The overall warmth of the interaction, and their hope that their future engagement would be constructive, contrasts with the rhetoric of political leaders that threatens to sunder the peace in the days to come.

At political forums the speakers whose voices are most likely to be strident are those who talk in terms of threats to the nation and the dangers posed by the ethnic and religious minorities. Another would be to protest against the alleged persecution of government's opponents by trying them before special courts.

At the gathering of the community leaders of the three districts there was evidence of thought and relationships that belie the strident and racist rhetoric of political leaders. One woman community leader said that gatherings such as the one she was attending with participants from different regions, ethnicities and religions had provided a platform for her to see what is not seen, to hear what is not heard and to learn what is not known.

A Buddhist monk spoke of the Maha Gosinga Sutta where deep in the forest the Buddha urged his disciples to see the beauty of human diversity and coexistence that dwelt within that forest and not only the natural beauty of the forest environment.

The government needs to deliver on its election time promises having confidence in the people and not hold back for fear of the political backlash.

# Youth Trained on Transitional Justice

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A workshop to promote awareness on Transitional Justice (TJ) mechanisms for youth was held in Jaffna for 35 participants including school students, NGO workers and law students under the UN Peace Building Fund (UNPBF) supported project, Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka.

Through this project NPC seeks to engage with young men and women throughout the country through a three-fold strategy in which law students will be trained and mentored to be able to utilize the transitional justice mechanisms as an effective and nonviolent way to address past abuses; university students will be empowered and capacity built to become engaged in positive dialogue, including with policy makers on TJ and reconciliation activities; and young grassroots activists will be supported to understand and address key youth concerns and transmit them to policy makers.

The workshop included a combination of individual work, small group discussions and large group discussions. Participants were asked to illustrate how they saw war. They drew the damage and destruction caused by shelling and bombings.

One session focused on examining the current problems and identifying possible solutions. Some of the problems included employment, child abuse, harassment of women, drug abuse, poverty, Family disputes missing persons and army interference. Some solutions included awareness programmes, better communication, new laws, and providing employment for youth.

An action plan was formulated to share knowledge of TJ to other areas of Jaffna.

Also under the UNPBF project, a workshop on TJ was held for students of the South Eastern University, where Sinhala Tamil and Muslim students study.

The basic concepts of TJ were explained to the students who then had discussions on their experiences during the war, the government's reconciliation process and international involvement. Some Tamil students said they felt uncomfortable in Muslim areas where they were a minority. It was suggested to conduct exchange visits among the three communities as a means of understanding each other's cultures, beliefs and attitudes.

## New Project for Community Reconciliation

NPC has launched a new project in collaboration with Global Communities, the Association of War Affected Women and Shanthiham Association for Health and Counselling to set up local reconciliation platforms at community level and empowering them to be part of the reconciliation process in the country.

The project is funded by USAID under its Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity. Its aim is to work towards a sustainable and inclusive peace by building a pluralistic society that embraces Sri Lanka's religious and ethnic diversity.

It recognises that sustainable peace is best achieved by combining institutional and personal approaches and by changing attitudes through interaction among different identity groups.

NPC's activities will be centred in the Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Kilinochchi and Moneragala districts by training and mentoring community members, civil society organizations and local authorities to engage in dialogue with different communities and to identify and address potential issues that may cause conflict.

# Diffusing Tension Through Understanding

Addalaichenai Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) organized a workshop for youth to increase their understanding and knowledge on diversity and pluralism under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The objective of the workshop was to improve coexistence in the area in order to avoid the violence that arises because of differences in religion and ethnicity.

Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese live in Addalaichenai. Trust and understanding among the different communities collapsed during the war. In June tension flared when a Muslim person who was renovating his fence was attacked by a group of Tamils, who accused him of taking over land belonging to them, although he had a deed for the land. The matter was resolved in the courts.

Participants were given an overview of pluralism and its importance in religious and ethnic coexistence as well as an explanation of the negative impacts of violence. Other topics explored included conflict transformation, Transitional Justice, peace building and the South African experience.

Under the same project, Akurana LIRC organized a regional youth leadership reconciliation camp in collaboration with the youth community association and the police. The 88 participants consisted of Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil youth.

Music for healing, games, a bonfire night and discussions were among the activities. Participants were told about the importance of the rule of law and of living peacefully in a multi ethnic and multi religious society. Speakers included members of the local business community from different faiths.



# Religious Leaders Unite to Promote Reconciliation

Forty national and provincial level religious leaders representing Sri Lanka's four major religions met in Moratuwa to discuss the reconciliation process and Transitional Justice (TJ) mechanisms in the country under NPC's IMPACT project in collaboration with the Dharmashakthi Organization.

At the two day workshop Secretary to the Buddhist Affairs Ministry, Chandraprema Gamage, explained the legal aspects of building new places of religious worship and conducting religious practices.

Centre of Policy Alternatives Senior Researcher, Lionel Guruge, discussed the TJ process while Director of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, Sanjeeva Wimalagunaratne, spoke about reconciliation process of the government. NPC Executive Director, Dr Jehan Perera, explained civil society's responsibility in promoting reconciliation and NPC Project Manager, Saman Seneviratne, spoke on dealing with a violent past in relation to World War 2.

At the end of the workshop, the religious leaders decided to form a committee of seven to discuss the issues that were raised and to come up with possible solutions. They agreed to meet regularly. They will also meet relevant government officials follow up on decisions taken.

The resolution formulated by NPC's National Inter Religious Symposium was handed over to the religious leaders who participated at the workshop.

Also under the IMPACT project, a leadership training course for 40 members of Kalutara DIRC and partner organizations was held where participants explored planning strategies, new procedures for operation and management and ways to improve leadership skills.

Participants were told that the basic leadership objectives were trust, productivity and leadership development. While productivity was important, it was also vital to build trust and develop leadership qualities. Among the topics covered were monitoring and evaluation, performance measurement, documentation, financial procedures and funding sources.



# Promoting Pluralism at the Grassroots

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Mahiyangana Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members organized activities for youth to address rising religious tension in the area between Buddhists and Muslims under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

Around 90 youth were trained on pluralism. Muslim and Buddhist youth were brought together to learn about each other's religions and culture. A workshop was also held for 70 female preschool teachers to build their awareness on pluralism.

Most of the participants said that it was the first time they had been able to get to know people from other religious and ethnic communities.

The preschool teachers emphasised the need for awareness on pluralism, reconciliation and peace building at the grassroots level.

Also under the CERF project, 25 children from a Muslim religious school and their teachers went on an exchange visit to a Buddhist school to learn about Buddhist teachings, and about the rituals and practices in a Buddhist temple. The other objective of the visit was to create awareness among children on pluralism.

The Buddhist children welcomed the Muslim children to the temple. The Chief Monk, Ven. Ahangama Maithreemorthi Thero, showed them around the temple and explained the rituals that were practiced. The monk spoke about the teachings of Buddha on peace and reconciliation.

In another activity, two training workshops on Nonviolent Communication (NVC) were conducted for LIRC members in Mahiyangana and Beruwala including religious leaders, government officials, police officers and civil society leaders.

The training was facilitated by two resource persons from the Center for Communication Training. There was an emphasis on skills and processes necessary for creative nonviolent strategies using presentations, group work, role plays, flow dances and reflections.



*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.*

## Taking Responsibility For the Past

A report issued last week by a UN fact finding mission into human rights violations in Myanmar has recommended that its most senior military commanders should be investigated and prosecuted for genocide in dealing with the Rohingya and other minority ethnic communities. In response to the Myanmar government's refusal to accept responsibility for what has happened, the UN mission called on the UN Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court or for the creation of an ad hoc international criminal tribunal. They also called for an arms embargo and targeted sanctions against individuals who appear to be more responsible.

Prior to the change of government in January 2015 Sri Lanka too was going down the road that Myanmar has taken of denying responsibility for what has happened in the past. The National Peace Council notes that the international community's pursuit of Myanmar on grounds of war crimes and human rights violations might have been the fate of Sri Lanka had it not co-sponsored the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council and taken charge of its reconciliation process in October 2015.

The evolving situation in Myanmar suggests that the Sri Lankan government acted with prudence and foresight in agreeing to cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council in October 2015. Due to the changed approach of the government in regard to dealing with the past, and ensuring human rights, Sri Lanka is now on a positive path of national reconciliation. We also note that the international community has given Sri Lanka the time and space to implement its commitments.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to implement the commitments given to the UN Human Rights Council without being deterred by allegations that it is betraying the country and its security forces as alleged by opposition and nationalist groups. It is the implementation of those commitments that will ensure the healing that will unify Sri Lanka in heart and mind as well as in territory and obtain the greater support of the international community.

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