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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

Focus on Inclusion to Mitigate Conflict

March
2019

NPC's project, Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) - the U.S. Government's development agency - has been extended for another year.



The project will continue its work with religious leaders and community leaders to address and mitigate religious and ethnic tension by working within the pluralistic framework.

During the extension period, NPC will carry out several new activities that fall within the framework of the ongoing intervention and seek to enhance the capacity of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), sub groups and peace delegates, especially in the area of preparedness, to deal with violent conflict at community level.

The DIRCs and sub groups will continue with their mitigation work with refresher training on applied conflict sensitivity and conflict analysis. This will be complemented with training in Non-Violent Communication to enhance their communication ability and empathetic engagement.

Longer term mitigation will focus on chronic or emerging conflicts and inclusion. Three districts have been identified for this type of intervention: the intra community Tamil-Catholic and Tamil-Hindu conflict in Mannar; long term Sinhala-Muslim conflict in Ampara; and inclusion for people with disabilities in Puttalam.



Assessing Community Issues in Moneragala and Jaffna

Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Activity (SCORE) implemented by Global Communities in partnership with NPC, community assessments were done in the Moneragala and Jaffna districts to identify issues related to social cohesion and reconciliation as well as development issues in the villages chosen for the SCORE activity.

In this project, NPC is looking at conflict in a generic sense, keeping in mind that there are economic, caste-based and resource-based conflicts.

From the Buttala Divisional Secretariat, the Puhulkotuwa village assessment was done by the Community Connectors of the Moneragala District. The Puhulkotuwa Grama Niladari (GN) division has three villages with 2,668 people.

During the assessment, the main issues raised by the community included the shortage of water for harvesting, lack of income generation for women and the absence of market space to sell items produced by the self-employed. The community does not have a common play ground, which has become an obstacle for the youth and children to spend their leisure time interacting with each other.

An alarming problem for the community was the growing presence of illegal drugs.

The community, which is made up of mainly Sinhalese people with one Muslim family, also needs to be empowered to be more resistant to national ethnic tensions.

The community connectors of the Jaffna District prepared a conflict mitigation plan for the Illavalai Northwest GN division. The area has eight villages with 656 families consisting mainly of Tamil speaking Hindus and Christians.

The main issues that were brought up included a drinking water shortage, sea erosion and garbage problems. Suggestions for dealing with them included youth-led tree planting activities to reduce sea erosion, production of bio fertilizers with household garbage and plans to reduce plastic and polythene use.



Difficulties of Plantation Workers Highlighted in Nuwara Eliya

Project orientation meetings, cohesion activities and town hall meetings were held in several districts across the country under NPC's project, Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

Forty four participants attended the project orientation meeting in Polonnaruwa where the objectives, expected outcomes and activities of the COMPACT project were explained and the current political crisis was discussed.

About 75 people from NGOs and trade unions, and religious leaders, attended a seminar organized by Nuwara Eliya DIRC on a Constitution to ensure the rights of the up country people held in Hatton, as a local level cohesion activity.

Civil activist S. Vishvalingam said the government should take steps to address the difficulties of plantation workers, who contribute a lot to the economy, such as the daily basic wage, housing, education and health.

Colombo University Professor Chandragupta Thenuwera called for the new Constitution to ensure the rights of plantation workers as citizens of the country. Up country people had been talking of labour rights for a long time, he pointed out.

Trade Union leader Saman Rathnapriya said that like India, which practiced multiculturalism and ensured the rights of the disadvantaged, Sri Lanka's Constitution should guarantee the rights of all communities and enshrine pluralism to build a sustainable peace.

At the Puttalam local level cohesion activity, the government's waste management project was discussed. The Muslim people opposed the idea of bringing waste from other places to their area. Since this could have developed into a conflict between Muslims and non Muslims, government officials asked NPC to arrange a discussion with religious leaders and community leaders. At the discussion, government officials explained the project and participants asked questions. A site visit was also arranged.



Exchange Visit Promotes Understanding and Harmony

Members of the Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) visited Mannar on an exchange visit programme organized under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project. Participants included religious leaders, Grama Niladharis, police officers and government officials.

On the way to Mannar, visits were arranged to places of religious, cultural and historical significance, which included the Puttalam grand mosque, Thanthirimale temple, Madu church and the Mannar fort.

Discussions on the importance of lasting religious coexistence and inter faith harmony were held at each place where LIRC members expressed their thoughts and concerns on the issues. When meeting war affected communities, the members from Weligama were distressed to hear about the sufferings of those who had lost their loved ones.

Through group activities, a strong bond was created between the two committees, which will facilitate better learning and sharing. Each committee made a presentation about completed activities, challenges encountered and the lessons learnt.

Participants were taken to Talaimannar, where they spoke about their work on LIRCs. They also talked about their experiences during the civil war and how the war had affected them living in the North and the South. Weligama LIRC members gifted stationary items to primary school children in the area.

On the final day, a panel discussion was conducted with the participation of religious leaders and police officers. They spoke about the value of religious harmony and the teachings of each religion about coexistence.

One issue that was discussed was the tension in Mannar between Hindus and Christians over a decorative arch that was built by Hindus and destroyed by some young people. Religious leaders and police officers explained that social media users had spread misinformation, exacerbating the conflict. They stressed the importance of ethical media use.



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.

Strong National Institutions Needed to Meet UNHRC Commitments

The ratification by consensus of Resolution No 40/1 by the UN Human Rights Council has given Sri Lanka another two years in which to implement the commitments it made at this same forum over three and a half years ago in October 2015. The willingness of the international community to grant this extension is a reflection of its continuing reliance on the country's commitment to work within the framework of a national reconciliation process in which international standards are met. The National Peace Council welcomes the extension and calls on the Sri Lankan government to fulfill its commitments within the framework of transitional justice that meets international standards.

We note that on both sides of Sri Lanka's ethnic divide, parties have sought to prevent the government getting a further two-year extension to implement UNHRC Resolution 30/1 of October 2015. Tamil parties called upon the international community not to provide Sri Lanka with an extension of the time frame and have called for direct international intervention that bypasses the Sri Lankan government. On the other hand, the main opposition party called for Sri Lanka to withdraw as a co-sponsor of the resolution. They have been especially critical of the UN Human Rights Commissioner's report which called upon the government to establish a full-fledged OHCHR country office, establish a hybrid court and for the international community to utilize universal jurisdiction principles to advance accountability in the absence of credible domestic processes.

The UN High Commissioner also noted "The importance of the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and other checks and balances in a democratic society was highlighted by a number of situations in 2018. The judiciary and independent commissions, including the Human Rights Commission, continue to play a vital role in strengthening reforms and cementing good governance in Sri Lanka." We are confident that if the Sri Lankan government performs its duty through strengthened national institutions there will be no need for either universal jurisdiction or hybrid courts to become operational or for further international intervention in the form of a specialized new UN human rights office to be set up in the country. The present slow implementation of commitments made by the Sri Lankan government needs to be speeded up. In the run up to elections which will likely be politically and ethnically divisive we also appeal to the international community to practice do-no-harm principles in getting its message across.

Media Release issued on 22.03.19

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