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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Youth Take Ownership of Reconciliation Process

Over 540 students from 12 universities and another 400 grassroots level youth activists and leaders in 21 districts were trained on the Transitional Justice (TJ) process, enabling them to be active participants in the country's reconciliation process under NPC's two-year project, Youth engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-lasting peace in Sri Lanka, which concluded after two years.

The project intended to provide space for youth to understand and support the process of transition that Sri Lanka needs. The initiative succeeded in mobilising the energies and idealism of youth in a variety of innovative ways including trained students conducting awareness programmes for other students by organizing debates and theatre performances.

Another key focus of the project was to improve youth engagement in the transition process, and their evolution as internal mediators within their communities.

The project established links between youth and policy makers leading the national TJ process enabling them to be involved in the national discussion on issues related to reconciliation. The project also encouraged youth to take ownership of post-war reconciliation efforts.



Young people's creativity was harnessed to bring in the different perspectives on TJ cutting across ethnic divides. This helped to reduce the susceptibility of youth to one-sided nationalist propaganda and activities that continue to impede the country's post-war peace building and reconciliation efforts. The project evolved according to political situation in the country.

The project provided a range of training and mentoring opportunities, building young people's capacity and confidence to engage in dialogue processes and to connect and consult with their peers and also with policy makers and to be internal mediators.

After taking part in knowledge and capacity enhancement workshops, the students conceptualised and conducted follow up activities in 21 districts, broadening the discourse on TJ and reconciliation among their peers.

A drama developed by students of the Eastern University was staged involving over 700 students who came from across Sri Lanka. Another major activity was the debate competition at Jaffna University, which was attended by over 2000 students who took part in the university's art week programme.

The production of a short film by South Eastern University students, an opinion survey video made by Kelaniya students, and organization of a TJ Day by Ruhuna and a TJ campaign by Sabaragamuwa University were also among activities carried out by university students. Members from the law faculty of Jaffna University went on a study tour to Harvard University in the United States. A human rights clinic and a curriculum including TJ were designed at Jaffna University.

"During the training process I understood that absence of war is not peace. I also learnt many creative ways to solve conflicts between communities," said Ms Sirany Thevakumar, Secretary of the Batticaloa District Women's Federation.

"There are lots of conflicting narratives about TJ in our society. People in our district fault different groups for rights abuses, war crimes and victims' situations. It's important to use our time and energy to develop a positive discourse by engaging with different groups and communities. In our discussions, we can explain to people about how the TJ processes in other countries also took a long time to resolve people's issues," said a Jaffna University student.



DIRCs Will Work With New Political Leadership to Promote Reconciliation

Religious leaders and coordinators of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) convened in Colombo for a National Inter Religious Committee meeting where they agreed to work with the new political leaders and use government mechanisms to promote reconciliation.

Held under NPC's project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT), the meeting was attended by 35 participants who expressed their views about the recent Presidential election and going forward with their work as peace builders.

A Puttalam DIRC member was worried about the army barriers that were going up in the north and east in increasing numbers, adding that it was causing a disturbance to the daily lives of the people. "People feel that military rule is happening," he said.

A Buddhist monk from Kurunegala DIRC was of the view that NPC and civil society had tried hard to get their views across to people but that they had not been able to change people's views about democracy and reconciliation. Instead of listening to people's views, they had put their own views forward, he said. He added that most people wanted to work with the government.

A kurukkal from Ratnapura DIRC thought it was necessary to change the views of those Buddhist monks who were not for reconciliation. He believed that all Buddhist monks who supported reconciliation should come together and change the opinion of the others.

Another monk from Anuradhapura DIRC said that reconciliation should be encouraged because it was what was most needed at this time. He suggested working with the government and agreed to organize cooperation among Buddhist monks in the Anuradhapura district who supported reconciliation.

A moulavi from Kegalle DIRC felt that the dignity of other religions and ethnicities was not recognised. It was important to give respect to other religions and make the government understand this, he said.

The participants agreed to take views of the meeting to their respective DIRCs to build a strategy for the future.



Solidarity Visits to Cement Peace

Civil Society Organizations conducted two visits to Galle and Batticaloa to build solidarity among different communities and bridge the rift caused by the Easter Sunday attacks under NPC's project Actively Countering Extremism (ACE) funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI).

During the visit to Katugoda, a Muslim village in Galle, Mr Dickson Gamage, Police District Community Coordination Officer and Moulavi Ajmaal Naleemi spoke on the importance of building solidarity among communities in order to go forward as a strong, peaceful nation.

NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne and Mazziya Hillmy facilitated team games among the participants who consisted of government officers and youth. The games showcased the importance of working together as a team regardless of different ethnicities, religions and gender. Participants said that the various differences of their teammates were not relevant as they only worked towards the one goal of winning as a team.

One of the participants commented that she realised that it was possible to go forward more effectively working with the strength of the different communities than to advance alone with just one group of people.

In the evening musician Jayathilaka Bandara performed a collection of peace songs that highlighted the importance of living in harmony and coexisting with different cultures and communities.

The solidarity visit to Batticaloa was conducted in Kattankudy, home to Muslims and Tamils. The first session was an activity for the children where they took part in an art competition and drew paintings depicting people living in peace and harmony despite their ethnic and religious differences.

The visitors were invited into the Muslim homes to have tea while lunch was being prepared by local Muslim women, with the help of the visitors, who were mainly Tamils. They discussed their daily rituals and activities and the current political situation of the country. At the Methodist Church at Aarayampathi, several speeches were given regarding the importance of all communities living and working together to promote ethnic and religious harmony.



Local Inter Religious Committees Take Part in Idea Bazaar

A project orientation and progress review meeting for representatives of existing and new partner organizations of NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) was held in Colombo. Representatives of seven partner organizations who implement Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) activities in seven locations participated in an idea bazaar where they demonstrated their work.

Each LIRC was assigned a stall where it was asked to present the work it has carried out using banners, posters, power point presentations, impact stories, photographs and newspaper articles while the new LIRC members and the CERF team members were asked to visit the stalls and obtain more information about the activities of the committees.

Participants shared three impact stories from each committee, which allowed them to learn from each other about identifying and capitalising on the strengths of their members where they are able to influence positive change in their areas.

“We network with members through social media. We have created an identity for our committee so that we are being recognized by both state and non-state entities working in our area. The Easter Sunday attack was a wakeup call for the committee where we realised the importance of getting together and acting to re-establish ethnic and religious coexistence. We have conducted multiple community interventions including mediation sessions as well as other advocacy activities. We have established a solid network of contacts that includes state officers and political actors as well as prominent religious leaders,” explained the Addalachenai LIRC Coordinator.

“Weligama LIRC has been able to get the cooperation of young people by creating of a youth wing, which is a vital aspect in any coexistence process. We have also been successful in obtaining the support of high level state officials,” the Weligama LIRC Coordinator said.



Waiting for an Answer Ten Years On

Information sessions for government officers on ethics, human rights, the Right To Information (RTI) Act and the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) were held in Jaffna under the National Peace Council's project Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), funded by the European Union.

The aims of the sessions were to educate civil society and state actors about the purpose of the new laws and institutions aimed at achieving Transitional Justice and empowering those whose rights have been violated to use new and existing mechanisms.

People who had been affected by the war were also invited to participate in the sessions and some of them told their stories.

Valipuram Pawalakodi, 70, is from Naguleashwaram in Jaffna. In 1990, the war came to her village when it was attacked by the security forces. When the fighting started, Pawalakodi and her husband ran to another village.

"My husband decided to go back to our village and get some clothes from our house. That was the last time I saw the man I loved and married. It's 2019 and still he has not returned," she said.

Pawalakodi waited for her husband to come back but the situation was getting worse so she moved to the Vanni. The couple had married against the wishes of their families so they had no relatives to turn to. They had built a house but it was now in the high security zone so she could not go back.

To make a living, Pawalakodi started selling gram and seeds. She is still waiting and dreaming that her husband will come back to her one day. At the very least, she wants to know what actually happened to him.

"Will I get a response before I cease to exist in this world?" asked Pawalakodi. Her last wish is to live in her birthplace where she belongs and to be buried in her home soil.



Human Rights Education for Community Leaders

The Human Rights First Aid Centre in Galle held a workshop for 40 community leaders under NPC's project Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) to discuss Transitional Justice and the on going reconciliation mechanisms of the government including the Human Rights Commission, Office on Missing Persons (OMP), National Police Commission, and the Right to Information Act (RTI).

The community leaders said that they were now able to understand the issues pertaining to human rights. They also raised human rights concerns relating to their areas. They said they had learnt how to complain to the OMP and how to obtain a Certificate of Absence as well as the monthly allowance and compensation. They had heard about the implementation of the RTI at ground level.

The participants wanted the workshop to be held for the public in general without being limited to community leaders. "We gained a better understanding of the state mechanisms established for peace and reconciliation in the country," a participant said.

A programme to create awareness among people in rural areas on how to use their votes in the Presidential election was held at the Human Rights First Aid Centre, Batticaloa under the same project. Twenty five people attended the programme, where two resource persons explained the voting procedure.

The participants also gave their views on the new leadership. "We hope that the new President will protect the human rights of the minorities," one participant said while another added that he hoped the mechanisms currently in place to protect human rights would continue.

"We believe that the new President will work out reparations for the families of missing persons," another participant said.

Improving Service Delivery to the Public

A one day training programme was conducted for 30 local government representatives and staff of the Tellippalai Pradesiya Sabha in the Jaffna District under NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) activity.

Lawyer Karthikadevi Sharma of the Kilinochchi District Court facilitated the programme, which was aimed at creating awareness on the rule of law, understanding of the basics of good governance and delivering non-discriminatory and good quality of service to the people.

"We were elected for the people by the people but we did not have a basic knowledge of the rule of law and even local government law. We learnt many aspects about the rule of law and its importance. We were able to understand the message very easily," one participant said.

"We need such training sessions to improve the quality of our service delivery to the public. Both elected members and staff members were able to understand how to do this," another participant said.

Preparing for Potential Conflict at Community Level

Two preparedness training programmes for District Inter Religious Committee members (DIRCs) and Sub Group members were held in Akkaraipattu under NPC's project Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka.



The project is supported by USAID. The aim of the intervention was to work with community networks mentored by religious leaders and community leaders to engage better with communities and build consensus for Transitional Justice and a pluralistic Sri Lankan identity.

The preparedness training programmes were carried out to enhance the capacity of DIRCs, Sub Groups and peace delegates in the area of preparedness to deal with violent conflict at community level, should the need arise.

The topics covered included addressing escalating violence, early warning, conflict identification and analysis and practical application of knowledge through cases studies. The training programmes were especially relevant in light of recent events in Sri Lanka that saw local level violence based on religious and ethnic hatred.

“The media has a responsibility to report events correctly. If we start reporting on religious and ethnic lines, we will be doing more harm than good. It is clear how media manipulation led to violence during recent events. The media must be responsible when reporting and that is part of preparedness,” said a member of the Media Sub Group from the Ampara District.

A majority of participants said that they gained insight on how another DIRC had handled the eruption of violence between communities. The training was carried out by two senior members of the Kandy DIRC who were directly involved in addressing and mitigating the incidents of violence that took place in Digana in the Kandy District.



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.

Sri Lanka's Political Future Calls For Cooperation and Collaboration

In his inaugural speech the newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa gave an assurance that he will be the president of all, including all ethnicities and religions and those who did not vote for him. This assurance is especially important as the recently concluded presidential election was divisive and along communal lines. The National Peace Council compliments the new president on his positive sentiments and wishes him all success in making them come true. In particular, we will cooperate with his policies to promote peaceful coexistence and reconciliation as in the past.

Even as we congratulate the new president on obtaining 52.5 percent of the vote in a field of 35 candidates, we note that 47.5 percent of the electorate voted for other candidates. Most of them were the ethnic and religious minorities. Therefore, respecting the plural nature of Sri Lankan society will need to be an essential feature of governance in the immediate future in which there will be equal rights, equal opportunity and equal protection to all citizens which aligns with the concept of a meritocracy also espoused by the president.

NPC appreciates the new president's directive not to put up his portrait in public offices but only the state symbol. In drawing this distinction between the state and the government, we see President Rajapaksa as following the spirit of the advice given by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission appointed by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2011, which addressed the issues of the three decade long civil war, and stated that the rule of law ought to prevail over the rule of men.

We note that there is currently a spate of hate speech against the ethnic and religious minorities who are seen by as having failed to vote for the new president and therefore as not patriotic. President Rajapaksa needs to call for an end to this as one of his first steps in reassuring the ethnic and religious minorities and in reuniting the divided polity. There needs to be an assurance that all people of all communities will enjoy equal protection before the law.

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