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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

November
2020

Constitutional Proposals from Grassroots Sought

A national workshop for 62 Local Government Authority (LGA) members from different political parties on building a pluralistic society was organized by the Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project via a hybrid Zoom and face-to-face interaction.

The theme of the workshop was to promote the importance and value of a pluralistic society and to examine the legal provisions in the country to foster pluralistic values. Participants gathered in their respective districts while resource persons and the NPC staff facilitated the workshop from their homes. Five LGA members from each district took part and a majority of participants were female as a result of NPC's efforts to empower and strengthen women's participation in decision making roles.

The resource persons were NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, who spoke on the importance and value of a pluralistic society, and lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi, who explained the legal provisions to promote pluralistic values in society. The lectures were followed by a group activity where the participants discussed and suggested ideas for creating a pluralistic society to be included in the new constitution.

Some of the suggestions that came up were the need for the government to take decisions regardless of political and religious influences; the importance for school children to be educated on pluralistic concepts from an early age; strengthening Provincial Councils; and the need for resolving language disparity.

Participants presented their proposals, which will be taken on by a panel to develop a proposal to be presented to the constitution drafting committee. Participants were thankful for the opportunity to express their ideas and suggestions that could help the country embrace pluralistic values on its path to peace and reconciliation.



NVC Training for Human Rights Volunteers in Nine Districts

November 2020

NPC carried out a series of training programmes on Non Violent Communication (NVC) for Human Rights First Aid Centre (HRFAC) volunteers in nine districts through its Accountability through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) project, which is supported by the European Union (EU) and the Open Society Foundation (OSF). Right to Life Human Rights Centre is the local partner.

The training programmes, which were scheduled to be carried out in Colombo, were restructured to address travel and gathering restrictions placed by the government due to the spread of Covid-19. They were conducted online and offline using hybrid methodology by the Centre for Communication Training (CCT) with 277 HRFAC volunteers participating.

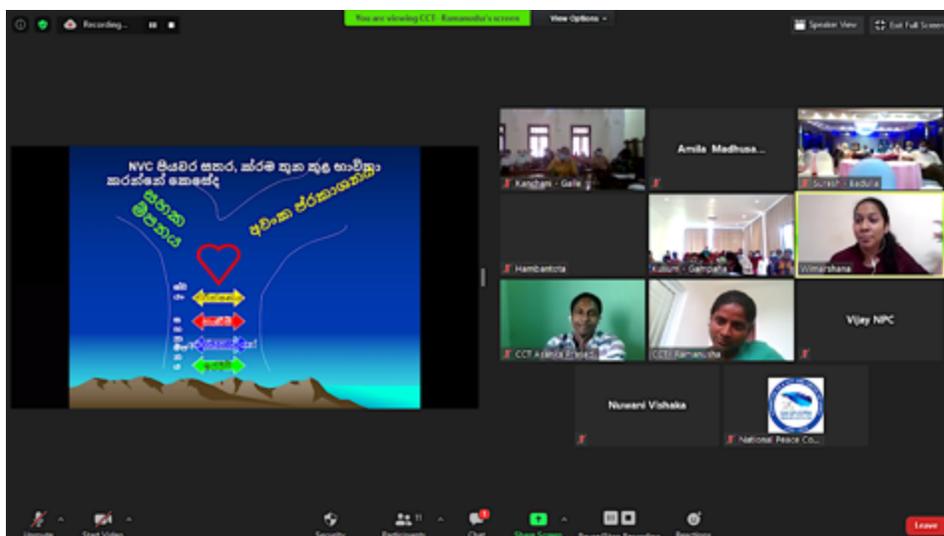
The volunteers learnt basic NVC methods and familiarised themselves in the practical application of NVC when dealing with victims and survivors and when intervening in conflicting situations.

Online and offline activities were carried out with support from NPC beneficiaries who had previously received NVC training. A majority of the HRFAC volunteers were receiving NVC training for the first time and showed interest in its application in actual situations.

The questions centred on how to observe without judgement when carrying out human rights work, especially when working with victims and survivors, to avoid judging them and how to express their feelings fully and honestly.

Participants discussed how they must show empathy for the victim/survivor. Most of the participants said that prior to the training, they would automatically judge and evaluate people who came for support but after the training, they will observe before coming into any conclusions.

“I now recognise the difference between observation and conclusion. I think people make their decisions based on observations, which leads to conflicts. So we should not make decisions based on observations,” a participant from Matara said.



Exploring Religious Freedom and the Rule of Law

The Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project conducted a training session on religious freedom and rule of law for the 48 members of the Religious Freedom Network using an online communication platform, which was both a challenge and a novel experience for the project team as well as the regional partners of the network.

The NGO network was established by the CERF project in 2019 to promote and protect religious freedom in the selected localities, highlighting the importance of community level collective efforts for the promotion and protection of religious freedom, which also serves as one of the projects overall objectives. The network consists of members of civil society organizations representing the 12 locations where the project is implemented.

The training session, which was facilitated by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi, was conducted to raise awareness of the new NGO network members on religious freedom and rule of law.

Topics discussed included an introduction to rule of law and religious freedom, the available legal provisions in the domestic legal framework to protect religious freedom and the duties vested upon collective ground level initiatives such as the religious freedom network in creating local environments conducive to religious freedom.

Participants expressed their views and raised questions on issues pertaining to the enforcement and enactment of rule of law within the constitution. Many participants said that laws were in place but not enforced.

“We should understand that culture and practices differ from one religion to another. Hence there should be tolerance among religious communities, which will pave the way for true religious freedom that is beyond the grasp of justice and law but lies within one’s self,” said M.S.M. Ikram, a participant from Addalachchenai.



“The NGO network is a solid platform for us as members of civil society to collectively make a broader and more effective impact in advancing the discourse on religious freedom. As each of us represents different localities, we can focus on creating a localised impact and move on to make a national level impact,” said Bhanuka, a participant from Kuliyaipitiya.

CERF also conducted a series of sessions to collect recommendations from religious leaders, state officials and members of civil society on religious freedom to be submitted to the constitutional drafting committee.

The sessions were held using an online communication platform. Participants came from the 12 districts where the CERF project is being implemented. They were given an introduction to existing domestic constitutional provisions on religious freedom.

“Religious freedom of minorities is being hindered. If proper enforcement and implementation is not being practiced, it doesn’t matter if there are a thousand laws in the constitution,” said Father Nalaka from Addalachenai.

Conflict Analysis and Management for Communities

Six training programmes on conflict analysis and management for local government authorities, state officials, religious leaders, women community leaders and youth were conducted by master trainers under NPC’s project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka in Kegalle, Kandy, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa and Badulla.

The first part of the training programme focused on basic human needs and identity, which are important concepts when learning to respect and accept other cultures. The second part explained conflict analysis and management, showing how in order to resolve or manage a conflict, it was essential to understand the conflict. Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools of the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline.

The next stage of the training programme was to identify the pluralism process to understand the importance of living and interacting with all religions and cultures. There was a discussion on the role and responsibilities of youth in building a pluralistic and peaceful society.

Among the other topics discussed were minority religious rights, overcoming prejudice, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.



Preparing For The New Normal

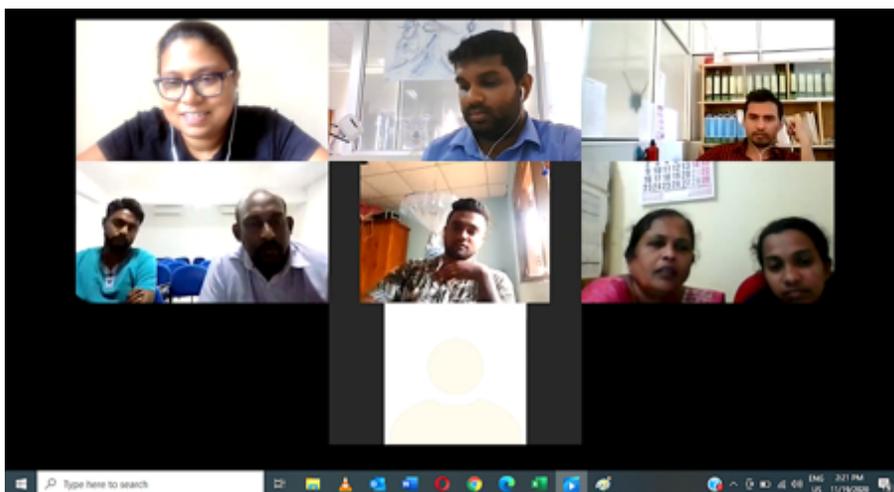
NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) engagement held an online facilitation training for its local partners as part of its strategy to adapt to the new normal that has arisen with the spread of Covid-19. This was supplemented by a survey on Digital Literacy among target groups – 291 members of Coexistence Societies across four districts (Ampara, Monaragala, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya) and 10 Grama Niladari divisions.

The online facilitation training was on a training of trainers (ToT) model focused on building a cadre of co-facilitators on the ground to support training delivered virtually. NPC will adopt a hybrid model where resource input will be virtual and consultations and group interaction will be offline. Key elements of the training were the positives and drawbacks of hybrid facilitation, responsibilities and tasks of facilitator and co-facilitator, time management, and tactics for effective coordination. The sessions were interactive, encouraging and enabled partners to anticipate problems and issues that may arise in trainings.

The need for intensive and meticulous preparations and the management of time were key elements that were discussed. Another factor that was highlighted was the issue of online-fatigue. Participants in the training were from SCORE's partner organizations in Ampara, Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Monaragala.

The facilitation training is in preparation for a series of trainings on "Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy", which will be conducted in the coming months. This will be across the 10 districts of Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Jaffna, Kandy, Monaragala, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Anuradhapura and Ampara.

The scoping on online communication capacity focused on the following themes: 1. Availability of a device 2. Availability of network facilities and 3. Digital literacy of the member. The findings indicated that 24 percent out of the total number 291 of respondents had some kind of a device to access the internet. In terms of the knowledge components, 22 percent were capable of using online apps. It was revealed 24 percent of respondents used the internet every day. At the end of the survey, a few recommendations were made to carry out future project activities. It was decided to divide the number of Co-Existence Society members who had a considerable level of digital literacy into a few groups and conduct the trainings online for them.



University Academics Discuss Pluralism

NPC's Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project held an online lecture for 45 academics from the Ruhuna, Jaffna, Sabaragamuwa and Eastern universities as well as NPC staff on the subject of constitutional reform in relation to pluralism.

The lecture was presented by Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda to capacitate the academics to motivate and support young people in their communities to explore social issues.

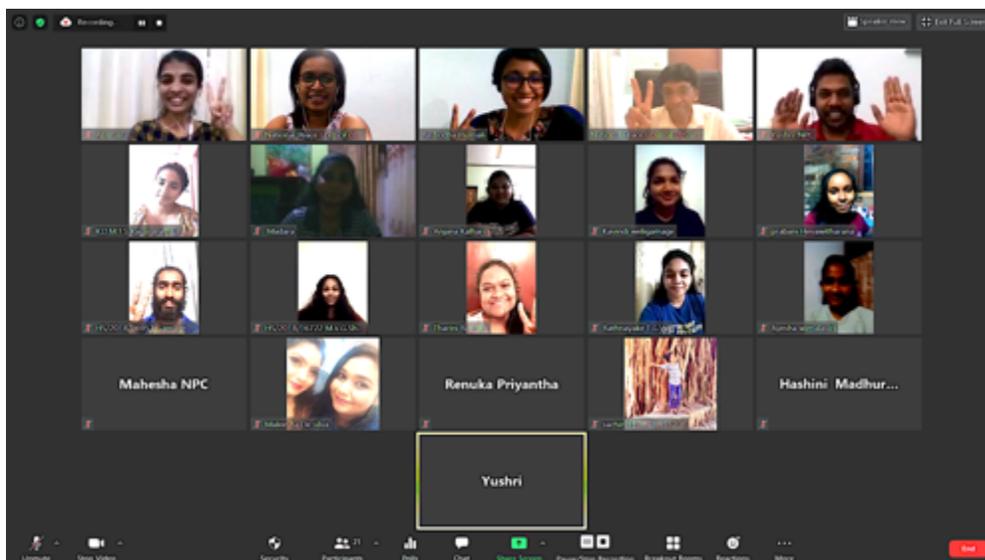
It focused on what type of a constitution could command the trust and loyalty of all citizens against the backdrop of the country's unresolved ethnic conflict and tense majority-minority relations.

C-YEP held a follow up question and answer session to a talk on socio-historical experience of pluralism in Sri Lanka given by Professor Sasanka Perera.

More than 30 academics from Ruhuna, Jaffna, Sabaragamuwa and Eastern universities participated in a constructive discussion on issues and challenges in practicing pluralism as well as individual responsibilities and sustainable solutions for building a pluralistic society.

C-YEP also conducted a project orientation meeting for students on project activities and expected outcomes of the project. NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera explained Sri Lanka's conflict history and the failures of reconciliation while emphasising the importance of pluralism to build peace among communities.

"I live in Trincomalee where there are different kinds of ethnic groups who are divided. As young people, we have a responsibility to build a peaceful nation with all ethnic and religious groups. This project is a start," one participant said.



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.

Covid Cremation is Test of Equitable and Responsive Governance

From the time the first Covid death was reported in Sri Lanka in March this year, the government's policy has been to cremate Covid victims. This has been a source of unusual controversy as it goes against both science and religion. Islam in particular requires the burial of all human beings who die regardless of the circumstances of death. The World Health Organisation's Covid guidelines permit burial of Covid victims. However, the government continues to take the position that Covid burial is not permissible due to the threat to the health and safety of the larger population as it leads to the possibility of groundwater contamination.

The steep rise in Covid infections due to the difficulties in controlling people-to-people spread of this highly infectious disease has brought into question the efficacy of Sri Lanka's strategy to contain the spread of Covid infection. The enforced cremation of Covid victims should not be part of a viable strategy of containment especially as it is a source of great distress to the members of the Muslim and Christian communities to whom burial is an honoring of their faith. There are reports of vulnerable members of the Muslim community leaving the country due to their fear of being eternally damned by cremation.

The National Peace Council is pleased that the government is reported to be willing to consider the burial of Covid victims in specially located sites which would pose no risk of groundwater contamination. If there is no evidence for or against such contamination, then the prevailing law and practices relating to burial should continue as the course of justice. If proven otherwise, then the rationale would be to mitigate this in larger interest of the society. By disregarding the strongly felt sentiments of a significant section of the population, NPC fear that the government is risking the buildup of conflict in the future. We urge that a start be made and viable options for the burial of Covid victims are found as many of the Christian faith and others too prefer their loved ones to be buried with religious rites when they pass away.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has frequently reiterated that he will ensure justice and equal treatment to all sections of the people. In his address to the nation last week the president said that "An administration that protects the rights of all citizens regardless of racial or religious differences will be established during my tenure." Individuals should be treated the same, unless they differ in ways that are relevant to the situation. The issue of Covid cremations is a test of more responsive governance, as the application of one law equally to those who are differently situated and hence unequal, in this case on the grounds of religious convictions, is not equitable especially as it is also not scientific.

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