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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

February
2021

Building Pluralism Through Food Culture

A series of food bazaars were held in regions across the country to enable people of different ethnic communities to learn about each other's cultures and traditions to build an understanding of pluralism through food culture.

More than 50 youth as well as community leaders representing different ethnic and religious communities took part in the festivities in Monaragala, Badulla, Jaffna and Anuradhapura, where food representing Sri Lanka's multi ethnic culture was cooked and displayed.

The highlight was cooking demonstrations of food representing different cultures that was prepared by local culinary experts representing their ethnic communities. The dishes included watalappam, kavum, udu walalu, payasam, laddu and vadai.

In Jaffna, young people from the north learnt how to make kavum, a Sinhala sweet, while those from the south learnt how to make vadai, a Tamil snack, with each group helping the other. Soon they were exchanging phone numbers to maintain their friendships through a WhatsApp group that they created soon after the food festival.

Most of the young people did not know the origins of the food that was cooked and shared at the festival nor of its cultural significance. The festival allowed them to see how pluralistic Sri Lanka's food culture is - different food from different cultures is enjoyed by everybody irrespective of their cultural origins.

Four more food festivals will be organized in Matara, Batticaloa, Kegalle and Negombo.



School Supplies Gifted to Disadvantaged Children

Members of the Galle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) and philanthropists in the Galle area purchased Rs. 300,000 worth of school supplies for school children of low income families in Jaffna. This effort materialised as a result of the friendship between Mr. Tharmarajah of Jaffna and Mr. Karunadasa Welikala of Galle, who are members of their respective DIRCs.

To help Galle DIRC to distribute the school supplies and to strengthen relationships between the North and the South, NPC organized a visit to Paramankirai village. Twenty two Galle DIRC members and 22 youth representing other DIRCs took part in the visit along with six religious leaders from Colombo DIRC.

The group distributed the school supplies at the Paramankirai primary school in the Kilinochchi district. DIRC members from the South managed to communicate with the villagers and Jaffna DIRC members despite the language barrier, with both communities voicing the importance of peace and harmony.

The group then went to Navakkuli College for a volleyball match where youth from the South and a youth group from Jaffna played as mixed teams. The players worked together to play the game and win the match despite language barriers. At the end of the match the young people were seen exchanging telephone numbers which they later used to create a WhatsApp group called reconciliation visit to continue their new friendships with friendly banter and exchange of news from their daily lives.

Later they took part in a cultural event organized by the Jaffna DIRC where they experienced different cultural practices with songs, dance and cooking demonstrations which gave participants an insight on how pluralism is embedded in the country's history.

After visiting Nagadeepa and a shopping trip to Jaffna town to buy souvenirs, the visitors left for home. The relationships built during the visit would inspire them to help build a pluralistic and peaceful Sri Lanka.

The exchange visit was organized under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) funded by MISEREOR and CAFOD.



Taking Pluralism and Gender to the Grassroots

A three day residential training workshop on pluralism was conducted for 48 representatives of the NGO Network on Religious Freedom under NPC's project the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The training event was conducted to sensitize participants on the incorporation of pluralistic values when carrying out their activities and to help them to plan, design and implement public interventions that will have broader representation and reach. It included sessions from facilitators whose work is related to pluralism including Dr Sunil Wijesiriwardena, Professor Sasanka Perera, Mr. Velusamy Weerasingham and Mr. Jagath Liyana Arachchi.

“We engage in community level activities regularly. But we sometimes face challenges as we have limited theoretical knowledge on particular topics. This affects both the effectiveness and the reach of activities. The training programme provided us with this knowledge and I am glad that I attended the training,” said Vimalsena from Negombo.

“As members of the NGO Network on Religious Freedom we conduct community level interventions to promote religious freedom. The training helped us to understand that the elements of pluralism are essential to make the interventions more holistic and that we must be mindful of inclusivity in terms of gender, ethnic and religious representation,” said Ikram from Addalachenai.

Also under CERF, training programmes on gender were conducted for over 35 members of the Negombo and Addalachenai Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) as part of seven thematic training programmes to improve the effectiveness of committee-led interventions. It also sensitised participants on the principles of inclusion and gender parity in terms of the composition of LIRCs.

“Gender inclusivity is a relevant topic. I am glad that the LIRCs consist of members from different fields of work and professional backgrounds; they can take what they have learned to others who are working with them. It was informative for us as committee members because we have to be mindful of the gender balance and inclusivity of committee membership,” said Fathima Josinka from Negombo LIRC.



Learning About Democracy

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2021

Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, NPC organized a training programme on the Resilient Communities Through Everyday Democracy module in Vavuniya for 36 participants. The group included 31 co-existence society members and five Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members. Through the Training for Trainers that was held last year, co-facilitators were trained to handle the training for the grassroots level community platforms.

The training was conducted by two co-facilitators to enhance the participants' basic understanding of the democratic society and its values; brainstorm and recall learnings from participants' past on a value-based democratic society; and identify key issues and areas to focus their efforts on for a value-based democratic society.

Interactive tools and techniques were used based on adult learning principles to encourage a productive dialogue among participants on different thematic areas including reflection activities and games, group work, plenary discussions and brainstorming and individual reflections and follow-up agreements.

During the first session, an explanation of democracy was given through an activity of self-reflecting and presenting one's identity through various images, keywords or paper cutting while empowering individuals to respect their uniqueness and differences. The second session provided a theoretical understanding of the concept of democracy while allowing participants to brainstorm their opinions, perceptions and reflections on their version of democracy with practical examples.

During the third session, facilitators explained the presence of multiple opinions in society. The session provided a snapshot of participants' opinions, perceptions and reflections on democracy. It reflected on realities such as divisions in the society, how they are created and consequences of such divisions.

The fourth session was carried out based on a role play to reflect the challenges in collective decision making and action. The intention was to let participants to use their aesthetic talents while reflecting on the practical challenges they faced at the community level in collective decision making efforts.

“Ensuring a cohesive relationship among the communities while creating the path to reconciliation is necessary to strengthen democracy, which should be practiced in our daily lives,” said LIRC member Veluppillai Thanapalan.



Language Rights as Fundamental Rights

Three training programmes on policy rights for religious leaders, government officials, health service officers, civil society members, university students and police officers were conducted in Kalutara, Trincomalee and Kandy under NPC's project National Language Equality Advancement Project (NLEP) conducted by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachichi.

Mr. Liyana Arachichi explained the concept of language rights in Sri Lanka and their inclusion in the Constitution, pointing out that violation of language rights was a violation of a person's fundamental rights. People could seek redress by filing a fundamental rights case in the Supreme Court or a lodging a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. They could also complain to the Official Languages Commission and the Ombudsman when government institutions or officials violated language rights.

Participants said that they had not been aware that language rights were enshrined in the Constitution. Discussions revealed that it was the minority communities that faced language issues while Sinhala speakers were not affected. In all three languages, spelling mistakes were common due to carelessness.

"Learning a second language is essential. This will lead to reconciliation," said a Buddhist monk from Kandy. A Catholic priest from Trincomalee pointed out that the national anthem was not sung in Tamil on Independence Day despite Tamil being an official language.

Preventing of Hate Speech Training for Master Trainers

NPC's Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project held a three day residential training of trainers programme on the prevention of hate speech for 60 master trainers and ten district coordinators. It was conducted by Professor Kalinga Tudor Silva from the University of Peradeniya. He explained the sociological frame work of hate speech, the role and responsibilities of the Office on Missing Persons and the steps taken by the government for granting reparations.

The second session was conducted by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi who spoke on defining hate speech and the application of international standards. It was followed by a discussion on media literacy and mindful social media engagement on hate speech by Hashtag Generation and a session on the trends and consequences of hate speech conducted by senior journalist Lakshman Gunasekara.

Also under the justice project, 11 training programmes on conflict analysis and management for community police, school teachers, religious leaders, women community leaders, youth and local government officers were conducted by master trainers in Anuradhapura, Kandy, Badulla, Polonnaruwa, Monaragala, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Kegalle and Kurunegala.

Reconciliation is When the Country Sings Together

The singing of the national anthem became a matter of controversy last year at the National Independence Day celebration when it was sung only in Sinhala and not in both the official languages as it had been sung in the previous years in keeping with the national reconciliation process. The singing of the national anthem in both the Sinhala and Tamil languages is in accordance with the recommendation of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission appointed by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2011 when he was president.

The national anthem, like other national symbols of a country, should represent the tradition, history, and beliefs embedded in the country, its society and its people. Singing it together will help to evoke feelings of patriotism among the country's citizens irrespective of ethnicity and religion and remind them of their country's history, diversity, and rich cultural heritage, as the words of our national anthem convey. Those in the majority should have the magnanimity to accommodate the minority to encourage their sense of belonging.

The point about reconciliation is to find unifying factors. Singing the national anthem in a language that all can understand is an act of unity. The National Peace Council believes that this coming Independence Day Celebration will be an opportune moment for the government to publicly demonstrate its commitment to the reconciliation process to the people of Sri Lanka and the international community by having the national anthem sung again in both official languages. Sustainable peace is pleasing all communities and not victory to anyone.

As one of the lessons learnt from the past, and in keeping with the reconciliation process, the National Peace Council calls on the government to take up this issue of the national anthem and the languages in which it is sung as it affects the sense of dignity, equality and belonging of those who are Tamil-speakers. The importance of symbolic acts of reconciliation at the present time is heightened by the fact that Sri Lanka is currently facing international strictures by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for failing to implement the commitments on reconciliation made by government representatives over the past several years.

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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.

Decision on Covid Burial Shows Way Forward in Geneva

The government's decision to permit the burial of Covid victims was long overdue. For ten months this policy caused needless grief to those whose religious convictions demanded burial of the departed. The decision to enforce cremation of Covid victims on health grounds had no basis in science which was pointed out by the Health Ministry's expert committee and the College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka. The National Peace Council appreciates the political courage of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa who made the early announcement that Covid burial was going to be permitted. Our hope is that this decision will also herald a shift in government policy to a more inclusive one that is fair by all sections of the country's multi ethnic, multi religious, multilingual and multicultural polity.

Even though ten months late, the government's decision to permit the burial of Covid victims in the face of strong internal opposition needs to be commended. We anticipate it will have a positive bearing on the discussions in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where the issue of enforced Covid cremation was a matter of censure. This decision will also contribute to make Muslims citizens of Sri Lanka feel that the government has finally responded to their deeply felt sentiments. Likewise, the National Peace Council calls on the government to be responsive to the Tamil citizens of Sri Lanka, their political aspirations and in particular whose grievances that continue to remain unaddressed eleven years after the end of the war. We note that the grievances of the ethnic and religious minorities in Sri Lanka long predate the three decade long war and continue to this day.

At the ongoing UNHRC session in Geneva, there is the likelihood of a resolution on Sri Lanka and its post-war reconciliation process being presented by a group of likeminded countries. The indications are that the resolution will be focusing on war-time violations of human rights and current trends that indicate the weakening of institutional checks and balances. NPC urges the government to agree to recommendations that advance the rights and privileges of Sri Lankan citizens, strengthen principles of good governance and are in keeping with the parameters of Sri Lankan sovereignty. Instead of mobilizing countries in the UNHRC with questionable human rights track records to reject the resolution, we urge the acceptance of those sections of the resolution that advance the quality of life of the Sri Lankan people and their human rights and which therefore could be accepted by the government.

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