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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Combatting Hate Speech at Community Level

Under NPC's Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project, 100,000 face masks were distributed in 25 districts to people facing economic hardship due to the Covid-19 pandemic with the message "No hate speech". The masks served the dual purpose of reducing the chances of infection and carrying the message that hate speech should be prevented. They were distributed to government officers and to children in rural schools in collaboration of District Coordinators of the project and members of the Local Inter Religious Committee and District Inter Religious Committee.

Two campaigns on prevention of hate speech were conducted in the Kegalle and Monaragala Districts. The campaign in Kegalle, which reached more than 500 people, targeted workers in the estate sector who are a marginalised community. The campaign was conducted to educate them on human rights and on the adverse effects of hate speech. As religious leaders and school children play a pivotal role in society, the campaign began from the kovil in the centre of the estate and went on to the schools. Three-wheel drivers pasted stickers on their vehicles. The participants were given bookmarks, cards, stickers and workbooks on the prevention of hate speech.

The Monaragala District campaign targeted 30 government officers in Kataragama. The participants were told about the sociological framework of hate speech, hate speech laws, media literacy and mindful social media engagement. Government officers received 240 face masks.



“Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, children are involved in online education. This does more harm than good as social media and internet spread hatred and fake news. Abuse of children and women is increasing. This campaign is a good initiative to discuss remedies and to learn about the topic,” said Mr. R. M. Thilakarathne, Child Rights Promotion Officer and lecturer of National Youth Services Council.

“To prevent hate speech, from pre-school to tertiary education, a child should be taught to be good mannered and compassionate with activities to encourage the children in good behaviour,” Ms. S. Jayani Wickremasinghe, a Community Service Officer, said.

Eliminating Discrimination in Public Service Delivery

NPC conducted a session with university academics to develop a certificate course to promote the concept of pluralism among government officers through its Freedom House funded project Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery.

Discrimination has been a long standing issue in delivering services from government institutions. NPC had discussions with university academics who agreed that the promoting of pluralistic concepts among government officers would reduce discriminatory practices.

A workshop was arranged to formulate course modules with Dr. J. Kennedy Dean of the Sociology Department Eastern University, Dr. Renuka Priyantha Senior Lecturer Ruhunu University, Dr. Ravindra Palliyaguru Senior Lecturer Sabaragamuwa University and Dr. Jeevasuthan Subramaniam Senior Lecturer Jaffna University. Professor T. Jayasingham, NPC board member and former Vice Chancellor of Eastern University, participated on zoom. NPC Chairman Dr. Joe William, NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera and NPC Programme Adviser Ms. Sumadhu Weerawarne attended to the workshop.

The contents of the course modules on pluralism, peace building, inclusive delivery service and conflict transformation were finalised.

Panel members evaluated the focus group discussions with government officers and members of civil societies in four districts and addressed the issues identified in the course modules.



Learning From the Past and Preparing for the Future

Four orientation meetings were held for the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members in Beruwala, Negombo, Akurana and Weligama under NPC's project Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC).

The project seeks to create and strengthen sub-national platforms in targeted areas and state structures that contribute to pluralism based coexistence. Through the capacitation of religious leaders, community leaders, state administration and community police units, there would be motivation to counter challenges and advocate for pluralism, equity and justice as the foundation for coexistence.

The project is expanding the engagement and the contribution of the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project that has running since 2017 and targets the engagement of multiple sectors including religious leaders, state officials, community policing units and youth to sustain the space for religious freedom within the framework of pluralism and rule of law.

The orientation meetings enabled LIRC members to reflect on the results of the CERF project while planning the future initiatives of the ARC intervention. The reflection tree was created by LIRC members to review the progress of the CERF project and discuss ways to expand the role of LIRCs.

LIRC members pointed out that the commitment and support of NPC and partner organizations contributed to achieving results. They listed the support of the Divisional Secretariat, donor agency, religious institutions, police stations, government officers, resource persons, religious leaders and journalists in carrying out different activities.

It was revealed that religious extremism, violence and misunderstanding among ethnic and religious communities, hate speech, the Easter attacks and the influence of the media and politicians weakened the religious coexistence. Participants identified how they addressed community level disputes through mediation and influence.

Participants discussed how they found solutions to address identified issues while working with the different communities. In terms of mediating, LIRC members said that capacity building training and awareness programmes had enhanced their mediation skills and skills on empathy and how to eradicate mistrust, hate speech and misconceptions among religious communities. Some said the Covid-19 relief assistance had supported people and strengthened LIRC relations with grassroot communities.

Negombo LIRC identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the project. Maulavi M. Iqbal from Beruwala explained the importance of inclusion in establishing religious freedom and how LIRC initiatives have ensured inclusivity in his area. "There is a significant change in our area because of this intervention. Religious freedom is better and as a minority community we feel that we are included in the process. The inclusivity factor has improved," he said. Addition to that B.A. Salman Maulavi from Negombo said, "We have built own identity as Negombo LIRC. Through this activity, we were able to reflect on the journey we have come on."

In the reflection sharing session, each participant was asked to present three things that they learnt by being a member of the LIRC and one unforgettable memory of the past four years. “The LIRC has brought together active people for a sustainable engagement to ensure peace in our area. We have become a powerful group with trust and understanding that we have built among ourselves and in our communities,” Wepathira Indarisri Thero, Secretary of the Buddhist Monks Association in Weligama, said.

“It was only after being a member of the LIRC that I made Sinhalese friends; until then they were strangers to me. Although we worked in the same office, we never spoke but now because of the LIRC I have friends from other religions. I learnt how diverse we are and how to respect diversity. It was only after joining the LIRC that I understood the rituals of different religions. I am ready to take the message to my community,” M.M.F. Mueeza, a Muslim Affairs Officer at the Divisional Secretariat in Weligama, said.

Sepalika Dharmadhasa, a Grama Niladhari Officer from Weligama, revealed an instance where the Muslim community had organized a dansala to celebrate Vesak, adding that it was the first time the Muslim community in Weligama had carried out such an initiative, which was an achievement of LIRC engagement in her area.

M. Ramzy Mohamed, a Muslim community leader from Weligama, appreciated the fact that the ARC project had given priority to youth. He thought that youth engagement was necessary for creating a pluralistic society. “It is good to know that the project works with youth. Cultural and entertainment aspects should be considered when planning interventions with youth,” he said.

Sunil Basnayaka, a Community Coordinating Officer at the Weligama Police Station, emphasised the importance of engaging the state sector in working on strengthening religious freedom. He anticipated that the project would make a change at national level through the links with state institutions.

Under the CERF project, NPC carried out a partner review meeting where the project team reviewed the progress of the project with the coordinators from district partner organizations through several activities.

Participants discussed the results that were achieved through the initiatives that taken so far. Several local and government authorities had been supportive in creating the LIRC platforms including Divisional and District Secretariats, the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, Ministry of National Integration and Office for National Unity and Reconciliation as well as Community Policing Units.

NPC’s Covid-19 relief work had resulted in connections with government institutions and created a strong network with central and local government authorities. Support was also received from religious leaders, the media, resource persons and donors.

Participants were satisfied with the results of the project, which had taken action to ease tensions after the Easter Sunday attacks. They praised the close relations that LIRCs had developed with communities with their contribution and mediation to solve community religious disputes.

“We have made a great contribution and in the future we are ready to give our fullest support to the project. I am happy and satisfied with what we have done so far; let’s do our best to strengthen religious coexistence in the country,” said Fathima Josinka, Negombo District Coordinator.

Providing Equitable Public Services

NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Activity (SCORE) conducted training sessions for government officers and local government authority representatives to eliminate discrimination in the delivery of government services to the public in Batticaloa, Mullaitivu, Jaffna, Kandy and Trincomalee.

The training programme consisted of a three-step approach that included identifying certain perceptions of discrimination, sharing experiences and learning on best practices in providing quality, non-discriminatory customer service and finding ways to rectify discriminatory practices.

"I prefer to have a practical work plan to reduce discrimination. Eliminating discriminatory practices cannot be done in one or two days but these efforts are important to reduce discrimination. Each individual can contribute by improving their skills, knowledge and attitudes," said the Divisional Secretary of Thunukkaai Divisional Secretariat in Mullaitivu.

"Elected members have a lot of pressure as we have to deal with party politics while serving to the people. The training inspired me to balance my stress and to think positively. In future, serving the people without any discrimination will be my primary target," said Mr. Jesithan, a Pradesiya Sabha member from Jaffna.

"I want to share this knowledge with my colleagues and to inspire them to stand against the discriminatory practices in the service delivery sector," said Thimili Dissanayake, a local government authority representative from Kandy, who believed that there should be discussion about existing discriminatory practices in the sector.

In Muttur, government officers said the training programme had changed their attitudes and behaviour. "Different types of activities and games were used to change our thinking patterns while delivering information about the topic," said A.A. Zanofer, a development officer from Muttur Pradeshiya Sabha.

"Group activities are very useful; they changed our attitudes. The training methods are very interactive and using case studies meant we could understand the context of the subject. I learnt a lot," said M.S. Fathima Nasrin a development officer from Muttur Pradeshiya Sabha.



Preventing Violent Extremism at The Grassroots

NPC held six training sessions to capacitate District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) and Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) on Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) using resource people and civil society members. A total 201 DIRC and LIRC members participated in the Mannar, Vavuniya, Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunegala Districts under NPC's project Prevention of Violent Extremism - Capacity Building in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

NPC has worked closely with DIRCs and LIRCs on its activities for advocacy, research, training and dialogue, which are aimed at mobilising people towards peace and conflict transformation.

NPC proposed mobilising and capacitating DIRCs and LIRCs on PVE because faith groups had been involved the spreading the concepts of extremism, radicalisation and exclusion, which were the factors identified as leading to violent extremism.

Training sessions were held in Mannar, Vavuniya, Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunegala to evaluate and monitor the increase in the level of knowledge of participants..

The project was designed to make use of the trained resources pool as facilitators or lead trainers. The initial idea was to establish a national resources team but because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the selection criteria for the pool were amended and five members from each project location were identified and trained by international resources persons.

The trained members were used to capacitate Civil Society Organization (CSO) members. One of the reasons to capacitate CSO members in preventing violent extremism in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was that each country had experience in violent extremism. The project facilitates sharing of knowledge and experience between both countries to prevent violent extremism.

Countering Hate Speech after Pakistan Murder

District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in all districts condemned the brutal killing of Sri Lankan Factory Manager Priyantha Kumara in Pakistan and religious extremism and organized activities to counter hate speech.

In Sri Lanka, there was a rise of hate speech on social media platforms where enraged groups expressed their displeasure about the killing.

Puttalam, Kandy, Batticaloa, Kurunegala and Nuwara Eliya DIRCs displayed banners condemning the killing and the rise of religious extremism. Kandy, Puttalam, Batticaloa and Nuwara Eliya DIRCs organized press conferences with the participation of religious leaders and civil society activists who spoke on the need for solidarity among all religions to counter the rise of extremism as a result of the killing in Pakistan. Muslim religious leaders and civil activists led by example in these shows of solidarity.

Colombo DIRC organized a TV discussion on whether Islam condemns violence and killing, which was telecasted on TNL, and used it to condemn religious extremism.

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.

The Need for Checks and Balances

The importance of strengthening independent institutions has been borne out by recent judgements of the superior courts. In a landmark judgement delivered last week, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of protecting the interests of wild animals over those who had illegitimately obtained them. The court quoting Lord Denning in an English case stated with approval that “It is settled in our constitutional law that in matters that concern the public at large the Attorney General is the guardian of the public interest. Although he is a member of the government of the day, it is his duty to represent the public interest with complete objectivity and detachment. He must act independently of any external pressure for whatever quarter it may come.” The need for such independence was highlighted in yet another case last week when former Governor Azath Salley was released by the High Court, after spending 8 months in remand prison and all charges against him by the Attorney General were dismissed as they lacked merit.

Unfortunately, the government appears to be a house divided against itself with some members seeking to promote reformist and human rights-oriented programmes of work while others act in contradiction. We note that the government is engaging in discussions with civil society members to reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and make it less prone to abuse. One of the salutary features proposed by the government is to have magistrates visit the place of detention of anyone arrested under the PTA to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Even though having detention centres away from prisons is not welcome this move would mitigate the impact on the detainees. At the same time, we note that persons in police custody are being killed on shallow justifications, such as trying to escape or shoot the police while in handcuffs, which have earned them the denunciation of human rights groups and the Bar Association of Sri Lanka.

The National Peace Council sees the government’s pledge of a new draft constitution before the end of the year as providing an opportunity to reform the system of governance and put an end to the multifarious violations and weaknesses in it. In particular, we call for the reintroduction of the salutary scheme of appointment of higher officials of state on the lines of the now-defunct 17th and 19th constitutional amendments. These established a multi-partisan constitutional council consisting of members of government, opposition and civil society to jointly select the most appropriate persons to high offices of state and to insulate them from politically motivated interference. We believe that the present deterioration in the integrity and quality of decision making at multiple levels and in multiple institutions highlights the need for a strong governance system based on checks and balances. This would also include the practice of vetting draft acts by the Supreme Court.

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