



Paths To Peace

Sharing the Lesson of Living Together Peacefully

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NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project conducted a programme to share lessons and values of living peacefully in a small village named Sigram in Batticaloa, which has a multi religious and multi ethnic background. The village was selected considering the unity and harmony among the villagers who are from different ethnic, social and religious communities. The programme was conducted to explore their experiences while sharing their way of living peacefully.

The CERF team and Batticaloa Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) chose participants representing different religious groups and ages including religious leaders, women, children, government officers and village leaders.

The programme was broadcast live on Pirai FM, a SLBC regional radio channel and on Rhythm TV's Facebook page. Creating a safe place for people to speak, it was a friendly discussion where village leaders and the religious leaders recalled their memories and past experiences while explaining the challenges they had encountered.

"Actually, this journey was not easy. We have experienced a lot during the war. Many displaced people from different ethnic and religious groups came to this village. The Muslim villagers warmly welcomed them and helped them to get settled. A lot of people also migrated here after the tsunami and they still live peacefully here with us," one of the villagers said.



“We have established an inter religious committee to solve disputes between two parties in the village before situations escalate,” said a Muslim resident, adding that as a woman, she has contributed to strengthening peace in her village. She explained that there were no limitations on women helping others in Islamic religious teachings. “In my religion, there are no restrictions on women to support others while being productive members of society. My husband is proud of me because I play an active role in my village.”

Adam is one of the leading villagers in Sikram. “The secret is we all try our best to have peaceful lives here so we do not get involved in unnecessary issues with our neighbours. We solve our problems by talking,” he said.

Another woman said that they were always ready to help their neighbours. “If we have a special occasion, we invite our neighbours without considering their ethnicity or religion. We share our food; I look after their babies. My children play with children of other religions. We can strengthen peace through smaller initiatives as individuals,” she pointed out.

Due to the success of the programme, the CERF team has planned similar programmes in villages in the Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Mannar districts.

Pluralism Campaign Through Debating

A series of debating competitions, Yarl Wageesara 2021, was organized by University of Jaffna under NPC's Creative Youth Engagement of Pluralism project. There were first rounds, quarter finals and semi finals. Before the contest, training programmes were conducted on pluralism and debate practices for the participants. There were 23 teams representing different faculties and different years.

The final was held on zoom. The topics were “To build ethnic harmony in future history subject should be completely removed from the curriculum and “Existing Provincial Council system is suitable to resolve the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka”.

The judges included lecturers from the Colombo and Peradeniya universities, lawyers, debaters and researchers. Following the debate between the finalists, the judges shared their insights about the event and on the issues raised at the debates. The Faculty of Technology and the Department of Law won the first prizes.



Understanding and Preventing Hate Speech

Under the project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka funded by Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), eight training programmes on prevention of hate speech were conducted for government officers, religious leaders and local government authorities in Monaragala, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, Kandy, Kurunegala and Kegalle. The resource persons were master trainers who have been trained by NPC.

The training programmes consisted of four sessions. During the first session, participants were given an introduction on hate speech and its sociological background. In the second session, participants were taught about factors that contributed to the spread of hate speech and its social impact.

When hate speech was expressed, it could lead to division among communities and to damage to property and people. Continuous harm, insult, threat and hate speech could create an environment for people to carry out organised crime.

Hate speech leads to degrading people, physical assault, damage to property and places of worship, destruction of livelihoods and disruption of business activities. Modes in which hate speech is spread are through meetings, media, small group discussions, TV, radio, newspapers, posters, gossip, stickers and social media.

The third session was on social media. The participants were taught about the rapid increase of internet users, algorithms and google cookies. The speakers used examples to show instances where expressions of hate speech on social media lead to violence.

One such example was in Myanmar, where military leaders used social media to slander and demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority ahead of and during a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Sri Lanka has similarly seen vigilantism inspired by rumours spread online targeting the Muslim minority. During a spate of violence in March 2018, the government blocked access to Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as the messaging app Viber for a week saying that Facebook had not been sufficiently responsive during the emergency.

Mr. M. Shamsudeen, a Moulavi from Polonnaruwa, said, “We learned that hate speech is a big problem in society. We should talk about hate speech and its adverse effects openly. As religious leaders we should initiate a dialogue about it at our religious places and create awareness by teaching people to prevent hate speech.”

Mangala Wijenayake, a local government official from Badulla, said, “We all have different identities. We all come from unique cultures. Therefore we should be careful not to hurt anyone. The media create a lot of hate speech. There is freedom of speech but we should not take undue advantage of it. We should stop the spread of hate speech by creating a dialogue about this issue around Sri Lanka. We should start by teaching this to our children at schools.”

Promoting Child Rights Through DIRCs

Matara, Galle and Colombo District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) organized activities to commemorate World Children's Day and Elders' Day via zoom under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

In Galle and Matara, a webinar was held with 200 children and adults. The children performed dances and songs. Colombo DIRC had an online seminar with a programme on beauty of diversity with cultural performances projecting messages of peace and coexistence performed by the children with acting skits, group dances and songs. Lawyer Pathum Jayasinghe spoke on the need to strengthen policies and laws to protect the rights of children and elders.

The Galle Reconciliation Committee established under Galle DIRC organized a seminar for 50 female pre-school teachers to create awareness on child protection and preventing child abuse. One session was aimed at educating pre-school teachers on the steps they could take to promote peace and reconciliation among communities.

Also under the PACT project, meetings were held in 17 districts where Steering Committees were selected to strengthen transparency and accountability in DIRCs and to increase the efficiency of their operations. During the meetings two areas of conflict among communities were identified and two people were selected to be links between the DIRC Coordinator, DIRC members and a sub-committee to be appointed in the areas.

Kandy DIRC organized a press conference for print and electronic media that was addressed by NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, Chairman Dr. Joe Williams and Programme Manager Saman Seneviratne along with members of Kandy DIRC. They spoke on issues faced by farmers because of the ongoing fertilizer issue, justice for the victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, teachers' salaries and the current political situation.



Providing Better Government Services to the Public

To address the need for non-discriminatory customer service, NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity conducted a training programme to enable government officers and local government authority representatives to provide better service delivery.

The two day training programme was conducted virtually in Kandy by Mr. Imran Nafeer and consisted of a three-step approach and interactive activities.

SCORE anticipates improving the local and national government institutions and processes promoting social cohesion and reconciliation. It hopes to improve the knowledge of local and national government institutions on concepts relating to social cohesion and reconciliation. This is the primary purpose behind the Non-Discriminatory Customer Service training module, which was developed based on the findings of research study "Everyday Peace Indicators for Strengthening Reconciliation Programs" conducted under the United States Institute for Peace during 2018-2019.

The first step was to identify certain perceptions of discrimination through stories and findings from research studies. The second step was sharing experiences and learnings on best practices to be followed in providing quality, non-discriminatory customer service. It was expected that it would lead participants to acknowledge the discrimination shown on the part of the service provider. As the last step, participants engaged in brainstorming ways to rectify discriminatory practices that had been identified.

Participants provided short term and long term solutions for the discrimination based on their experiences. An officer in charge of Buddhist Affairs said problems arose because of insufficient knowledge of other religions.

Another officer spoke on the importance of equality when providing inclusive service delivery. "There is a lot of discrimination when it comes to the government service delivery. A politician will use his or her power to access services easily, which is unfair. In other countries, everybody gets an equal chance; no matter what your position is, you receive the same service as others. This system is needed for Sri Lanka."

"Government officers should give priority to poor and helpless people not to the powerful and rich," a participant said.

Another officer said that attitudinal change on the part of service providers was needed in delivering inclusive services. "Government officers should give equal service to customers from various social backgrounds because we get our salaries through their taxes. The general public should be our priority. That's why there should be an attitudinal change by government officers."

Some of the officers believed that Sri Lankan society was based on discriminatory practices. "From the day we are born as Sri Lankans until the day we die, we face discrimination; even in our birth certificates we are divided according to our ethnicities so that is why we need to change people's attitudes," one officer said.

Complement Policy Changes with Ground Level Changes

The statements of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the UN General Assembly and more recently at the 72 anniversary of the Sri Lanka Army have indicated that the government is contemplating important policy changes. These have included references to the need to “address the issues that gave rise to terrorism” in the country. At the army anniversary the president also pledged to bring in a new constitution within the next year.

Earlier in the month in New York at the UN the president said, “It is my Government’s firm intention to build a prosperous, stable and secure future for all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. We are ready to engage with all domestic stakeholders, and to obtain the support of our international partners and the United Nations, in this process.” He also spoke about talking to the Diaspora. These sentiments need to find resonance within the country as well as internationally.

Resolving conflicts that have been long lasting and achieving requires the rebuilding of trust. The National Peace Council notes that the government has mandated the committee to revise the PTA to consider the proposals put forward by the previous government in this regard. In the meantime we request the government to halt the use of the PTA until the reforms are finalized. We also call on the government to release those held under the PTA for long periods of time without trial.

Reconciliation has been defined to mean transforming a divided past into a shared future. This is done by rebuilding relationships. Tamil and Muslim parliamentarians and political parties need to achieve consensus on contentious issues rather than sticking to their own polarizing positions. The emphasis of the government needs to be to talk now to the elected Tamil and Muslim leaders in the country. We believe that if a course of action such as this is implemented, the ground will be better prepared for the discussion on a new constitution to take place.

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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.

More Dialogue Needed About One Country, One Law

The principle of one law, one country is upheld by the constitution of the country, which however makes an exception for personal laws. The government has announced its intention to amend the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. This has given rise to the perception that the recently appointed Presidential Task Force and its mandate for one country one law is in pursuit of reform of personal laws and is actually a targeting of the minorities. However, the concept of one country one law is more profound and means that the country's laws are applicable to each and every individual with equal force regardless of rank or position, ethnicity or religion.

In this context, the appointment of the PTF on one country one law is deeply concerning due both to the composition and mandate. Even today no one is above the law if the law is implemented, which calls for strengthening of institutions as was attempted by the 17th and 19th Amendments and effectively dismantled by the 18th and 20th Amendments. The PTF is headed by a person who has been convicted by the courts for contempt, imprisoned and given a presidential pardon. The 13 member PTF does not include a single woman, Tamil or Christian and therefore does not represent the plurality of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and plural society.

The government will need to take these shortcomings into consideration or else it can erode confidence in the government and further marginalize minority communities, and women who are a majority in Sri Lanka when decisions are made regarding laws that affect them without their participation. In addition, in implementing the concept of one country, one law there needs to be provision for plural laws under the 13th Amendment by provincial council which have been provided with devolved powers which they might use differently owing to the different circumstances that prevail in each of the provinces.

We note that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the UN General Assembly in New York and Foreign Minister Prof G L Peiris at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva pledged to energise the national reconciliation process by following principles of accountability and restorative justice, among others, and to work in cooperation with the UN and international community to these ends. The National Peace Council is of the view that the composition of the committee and the mandate given to it is not right for this purpose. Justice must also be seen to be done and thus consultations with all parties would be the best choice at the moment for acceptance by the larger community as a whole.

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National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: www.peace-srilanka.org, Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064