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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

November
2021

Exploring Paths to Reconciliation

Ideally speaking governmental decision making needs to be pluralistic on both symbolic and substantive matters of importance to the minority communities. More often than not this has not been the case due to the structures of the state failing to discourage ethnic majoritarianism whether at the central level or provincial level. There is the need for a new understanding of democracy as being a consultative process with all of the citizenry and not just with the majority who have voted the government to power. It is this unresolved problem that has made the minorities question their status in the country which needs to be resolved early for the progress of the country.

Under its project Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism NPC, with support from the Strengthening Reconciliation Processes programme of the EU and GIZ (Germany), brought together students from the Eastern, Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa universities. More than 160 undergraduates from the four universities obtained awareness and organised their own debate competitions and artistic events on themes that centred around the concept of pluralism.

A conference was organized on the theme of Plural Sri Lanka: Different Paths to Reconciliation at which 30 research papers were presented, written mostly by undergraduate students and a few by faculty members on a variety of topics including peacebuilding and reconciliation, pluralism, conflict and conflict resolution. They provided testimony to the peace formation that takes place at the local level by civic actors who are engaged in pluralist and grounded actions even at a time when the macro political actors may not be prepared for the compromises necessary for reconciliation.



At the conference Foreign Minister Prof. G. L. Peiris, who was invited to deliver the closing address, answered questions from the floor on the concept of one country, one law. He stated that the purpose was not to eliminate personal laws but to ensure that rights were protected in a universal manner applicable to all citizens. The principle of one law prevailed as parliament was the supreme law making body. He also added that the government was committed to a process of reconciliation and did not consider NGOs to be enemies but as organizations that had a wealth of experience in working with people and possessing wide networks of influence. There is a need for this holistic thinking to be taken on by the government as a whole and not only by a section.

“Language is a huge bridge why one person does not know about the other. It is young people who are in universities and schools who should be guided to build peace in Sri Lanka. If we have to make a reality of pluralism, I would suggest that we work in different fields; that we need to work on educational, social and political connectivity,” Prof. Peiris said.

Other speakers at the conference included Mr Thorsten Bargfrede, Chargé d’Affaires of the European Union to Sri Lanka and the Maldives; Dr. Ahilan Kadirgamar, senior lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Jaffna; and Prof. Premakumara De Silva, Representative of the Chairman, University Grant Commission as well as vice chancellors, academics and researchers of University of Jaffna, Eastern University, University of Ruhuna and University of Sabaragamuwa.

Mr. Bargfrede said that the EU was formed as a peacebuilding project after Europe had experienced centuries of warfare and resolved that it should end for all time after the Second World War. He said the EU was committed to working closely with civil society and the government to support greater understanding of each other within the country and by understanding to build a future together.

Nicolas Lamade, who heads the GIZ-Strengthening Reconciliation Processes (SRP) programme, complimented the students on the research they had done and said, “This is courageous work and a bold mindset to have. It is this kind of moral courage and open minded spirit of inquiry that a country seeks from its academic community.”



Strengthening Religious Coexistence at Community Level

In the recent years, tension among religious groups has risen considerably. The lack of knowledge and misconceptions about other faiths have caused mistrust and fractured relations among religious groups. Identifying and addressing existing issues are important in preventing escalation into a deep rooted conflict. Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members have a responsibility to address these issues to strengthen religious harmony. Under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project, Mannar and Rakwana LIRCs took initiatives to mitigate ethnic tension in their communities.

There are two villages in Mannar, one that is mainly Catholic and one that is mainly Tamil; they are fighting over a piece of land each village claims as its own. The issue has led to a dispute between the two religious groups.

After the Easter Sunday attacks, there was a decline in violence. Mannar LIRC decided it was a good opportunity to initiate community level dialogue to mitigate potential religious conflicts. Two separate discussions were carried out for village leaders organized by NPC and Centre for Communication Training (CCT). Facilitators stressed the importance of solving issues through a nonviolent approach to avoid the consequences of violence. They explained that the unity of the villages would ensure a win-win situation for both communities while encouraging them to collectively resolve their problems with empathy and compassion.

Gnasekaram Justin pointed out the importance of negotiations. "I think NPC created a platform for us to discuss these matters and they have shown us the way to peacefully solve them." Ilaiyathambi Siddeeq stated that mutual understanding was necessary to resolve disagreements.

At the end of the discussions, possible solutions were suggested to strengthen unity between the villages. It was proposed to conduct awareness sessions to change the attitudes of the youth and key decisions makers because positive attitudes were important to solve disputes peacefully. The importance of negotiations and mutual understanding were recognised by both communities.



Rakwana LIRC intervened to mitigate tension between Hindus and Buddhists in Pannila village after Hindu community members tried to build a statue at a junction and the Buddhists prevented them. Then a group of Buddhists tried to build a statue of the Buddha at the junction, leading to antagonism between both communities.

Rakwana LIRC facilitated discussions between the two communities to share opinions and find a solution in a non-violent manner, which were productive and created an opportunity to talk about the importance of unity to restore peace in the village. Both groups shared how they had lived peacefully in the past. “We had the chance to discuss the problem. We are living in one village so we need to resolve this peacefully,” said Buddhika Thanampita.

Both groups agreed to solve their issues through negotiations and decided to form a committee at village level to solve their issues.

Identifying Causes of Violent Extremism

A residential workshop for 42 Civil Society Organization (CSOs) members was held in Colombo under NPC’s project Prevention of Violent Extremism - Capacity Building in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Fifteen virtual training sessions have been delivered to 172 CSO members in Mannar, Vavuniya, Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunegala. The plan was to deliver two days of physical training to 25 to 30 CSO members who were identified in each district. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the project team shifted the training to a virtual setting.

Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) team adviser and process facilitator for the training, NPC Programme Adviser Sumadhu Weerawarne, requested participants to pay attention to preventing violence, saying that it was a responsibility of CSOs. She pointed out that accusing Muslims globally as perpetrators of violent extremism was not accurate and must not be accepted. She concluded that exclusion of individuals and groups was the root cause of violence extremism so to prevent it, inclusion should be promoted through state and non-state actors.

Executive Director of NPC, Dr. Jehan Perera, outlined the push and pull factors, putting violent extremism in the context of post-independence politics, the JVP insurrections, Tamil minority alienation and the Easter attacks.

Other topics discussed included how violent extremists recruits followers, why people become extremists and the drivers of violence extremism.



Tackling Hate Speech on the Ground

Under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka funded by Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), Training of Trainers on prevention of hate speech was conducted for district coordinators and master trainers from 12 districts.

The programmes were held for participants from Kalutara, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Rathnapura, Kegalle, Matara, Badulla, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Moneragala and Kurunegala, consisting of seven sessions conducted by resource persons.

Lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi defined hate speech and spoke about the domestic legal frame work and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Sessions on the findings of the survey on conceptions on hate speech were conducted by Shashik De Silva, Senior Researcher at the Social Scientists' Association.

Lawyer Nethmini Medawela from Hashtag Generation spoke on media literacy and mindful social media engagement, explaining the harm created on social media platforms and how users must be vigilant and report abusive and hateful content.

Dr. Anusha Edirisinghe from the University of Kelaniya conducted an interactive session on gender and hate speech. Participants said that many women faced harassment through hate speech in their everyday lives.

Sessions on caste and hate speech in the Tamil community were conducted by Dr. Jeeva Sundaram from the University of Jaffna and sessions on caste and hate speech in the Sinhala community were conducted by Professor Tudor Silva from the University of Peradeniya.

Also under the project, two training programmes were conducted for local government authorities in Kalutara and Anuradhapura. The resource persons were master trainers who had been trained by NPC. Participants were made aware of the sociological framework of hate speech, hate speech laws, media literacy and mindful social media engagement.

At the Kalutara training, a special session was conducted on ethical media reporting by journalist Mr. Sripal Wanniarachchi who emphasised the importance of regulating media and how it should not be used as a tool to spread hate speech for political motives.

"I appreciate the initiative taken by NPC to create dialogue about hate speech. It is a timely subject that needs awareness, especially among politicians. The truth is that the media spreads hate speech. There is a fine line between freedom of expression and hate speech and sometimes freedom of expression creates hate speech. When combatting hatred among communities, ethnicities and religions it is very important that we be united," he said.

Mr. N. Ibrahim, a local politician from Anuradhapura, said, "It is important that we do not create stigma based on religions and ethnicity. I am a Muslim and I condemn the action of Zaharan and my heart goes out to the victims of the Easter attacks. There are 84 villages in Kebithigollewa, out of which only two are Muslim villages. It was mostly the Sinhalese who voted for me. We all live in harmony."

Eliminating Discrimination in Public Service Delivery

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Providing inclusive service delivery is necessary to ensure the quality of the public service sector. Discrimination in the service sector based on gender, ethnicity, language or any other factor can hamper strengthening social cohesion and reconciliation.

Identifying the need to mitigate such discriminatory practices, NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Activity (SCORE) conducted training sessions for government officers and local government authority representatives in Batticaloa, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Anuradhapura and Ampara.

The trainings sessions consisted of a three-step approach including identifying perceptions of discrimination, sharing experiences and learnings on best practices in providing quality, non-discriminatory customer service and brainstorming ways to rectify discriminatory practices.

“This is the first time we participated in this kind of training. I knew the simple meaning of discrimination but now I know it contains many different meanings. My plan is to develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge and values of my staff to provide an inclusive service to recipients,” said Poonakary Pradesiya Sabha Secretary Mr. Ganesan Kamsanathan.

Mr. S. Senthuran, Human Resources Development Officer of the Poonakary Divisional Secretariat, believed discrimination could not be eliminated, but it was possible to mitigate discrimination through changing service providers' values and attitudes. “The training gave us room to discuss discrimination and its unknown forms. The whole system has been politicalised so changing attitudes of service providers is important to ensure the quality of public administration service,” he said.

“Based on different political ideologies, service providers sometimes discriminate against recipients, which is completely unacceptable. Through this training, I learnt to stand against discriminatory practices,” said W.A. Gamini Weerasinghe, a local government authority representative in Padaviya.

In Mullaitivu, participants highlighted the importance of sharing the knowledge with the public service delivery sector. Mrs. Sharmika Sharuban, the Management Service Officer of Maritimpattu Divisional Secretariat, said government officers should be committed to providing a quality service to the public. “As a public servant, I am getting paid through the taxes of the public. Discriminatory practices violate the rights of service recipients so we need a proper mechanism to identify and rectify such discrimination,” she said.

In Ampara, G.G. Chandana Galappathi, a Development Officer in Saddhatissapura, emphasised the importance of conducting training for newly appointed government officers so they could learn the concepts early in their careers.

An officer from the Ampara Municipal Council said, “What I learnt is important not only for my career but also for my personal life. In our society there is a lot of discrimination against girls based on their gender. I am an open-minded person and I condemn such discrimination.”

Preventing Conflict Through Dialogue

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District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) conducted several actualisation activities promoting the message of pluralism to support the peacebuilding and reconciliation process for selected target groups under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

Anuradhapura DIRC organized a Deepavali celebration at a kovil for children to experience the traditions associated with the festival. The Chief Priest explained the practices of Hinduism to the children.

Two sub-committees were established at Navanthurai and Navatkuli in the Jaffna district to counter ethnic and religious tensions that exist due to the lack of infrastructure development, lack of educational resources and the irresponsibility of the local government institutions and their officials.

The Navanthurai sub-committee had a meeting for 24 local leaders to discuss ethnic and religious conflicts affecting peace and coexistence in the area. Issues identified included lack of irrigation facilities and infrastructure.

The sub-committee established in Navathkuli organized a meeting for 29 community leaders, youth, academics from local universities and local government authority members to discuss problems contributing to ethnic and religious disharmony. Community leaders said young people were abusing drugs due to the lack recreational facilities in their schools and in the village, which had resulted in a high school dropout rate. They said local government authorities have not provided a solution to the problem,

The two sub-committees agreed to have a follow up meeting between community members and government officials to solve the issues affecting ethnic and religious peace.

Moneragala DIRC conducted two awareness creation activities for mothers of disabled children and for youth in the Badalkumbura area. The first activity focused on explaining discrimination faced by parents due to the lack of policies to protect the rights of disabled children. The second activity explained pluralism and its concepts to youth and its importance to maintain peace and harmony. They were told how to analyse conflict and how they could contribute to resolving it.



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.

Student Engagement in Pluralism

For close on two years the National Peace Council brought together students from the Eastern, Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa universities to study and discuss themes of national reconciliation. This past weekend a conference was organized on the theme of Plural Sri Lanka: Paths to Reconciliation, at which 30 research papers were presented, written mostly by undergraduate students and a few by faculty members. They provided testimony to the peace formation that takes place at the local level by civic actors who are engaged in pluralist and grounded actions even at a time when macro political actors may still be unprepared for the compromises necessary for reconciliation.

At the conference, Foreign Minister Prof G L Peiris, who was invited to deliver the closing address, answered questions from the floor on the concept of pluralism, including one country, one law. He stated that the purpose was not to eliminate personal laws but to ensure that rights were protected in a universal manner applicable to all citizens. He also added that the government was committed to a process of reconciliation and did not consider NGOs to be enemies but as organisations that had a wealth of experience in working with people and possessing wide networks of influence.

More than 160 undergraduates from the four universities obtained awareness and organised their own debate competitions and artistic events on themes that centered around the concept of pluralism in the context of national reconciliation. The training modules were prepared with a view to foster the exchange on issues of peacebuilding in societies that face religious and ethnic tension. Thematic areas covered in these sessions included Pluralism and Intercommunity relations, Drama, Debate, Research, and Videography.

Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID situation, debating competitions of the Eastern, Jaffna and Ruhuna universities were conducted on virtual platforms with the participation of over 250 participants online. According to the students who were trained in debating and subsequently completed, most of them were new to the subject of pluralism as well as debating. Their keen interest in the subject was evident in the amount of effort they had invested in research on the subject as well as in improving their debating skills throughout the process.

The collection of 30 research papers on pluralism produced by university students was launched at this event. In his message of felicitation for the collection of research papers Nicolas Lamade, who heads the GIZ-Strengthening Reconciliation Processes (SRP) programme, complimented the students on the research they had done and said, "This is courageous work and a bold mindset to have. It is this kind of moral courage and open minded spirit of inquiry that a country seeks from its academic community."

EU Charge d'Affaires, Thorsten Bargfrede, who spoke at the closing session of the conference said that the EU was formed as a peacebuilding project after Europe had experienced centuries of warfare and resolved that it should end for all time after the Second World War. He said the EU was committed to working closely with civil society and the government, to support greater understanding of each other within the country, and by understanding to build a future together. The initiative was supported by Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka (SRP). SRP is jointly funded by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft Für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the British Council, in partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka.

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