



# Paths To Peace

## Learning a Second Language to Promote Peace and Reconciliation

November  
2022

The certificate awarding ceremony for 43 participants who completed a Sinhala language course was held in Batticaloa under NPC's Language to Reconciliation project funded by the Canadian government through the National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP). Ninety hour second language courses have been held in the Batticaloa, Gampaha and Trincomalee districts.

The course was conducted by Mr. S. Jeyaraj and the participants included Local Inter Religious Committee members, District Inter Religious Committee members, religious leaders, government officers, Community Police Officers and community leaders. It was organised in collaboration with NPC's Batticaloa partner, Butterfly Peace Garden. The participants displayed their Sinhala language competence by performing dramas, dances, speeches, songs and storytelling.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said efforts of civil society had resulted in a reduction of distrust and suspicion among different ethnicities and religious groups. However, people were unhappy with government leaders because of severe economic hardships they were undergoing. The government should get a sense of the real needs of people, which could only be achieved by giving power to lower levels of government, Dr. Perera pointed out, adding that NPC would be taking measures to address the issue. The second language classes would be helpful to unite different communities.

Executive Director of Batticaloa Peace Garden, Father Paul Sathgunanayakam, said that to maintain a peaceful and reconciled society, the cultures and ethnic and religious practices of different communities should be understood and learning a second language was the way to do this. The Language to Reconcile project was effective as could be seen by the performances given by the participants, he said.



# Government Officials Learn About Pluralism and Inclusion

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Two residential workshops on pluralism and inclusion were held in Kandy and Galle for senior officials of the Kegalle and Galle District Secretariats and the Divisional Secretaries under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT). The Kegalle and Galle District Secretaries, Additional District Secretaries, Assistant District Secretaries, Divisional Secretaries, Director of Planning, Director of Development and the Chief Accountant participated in the workshops. There were 75 participants at each workshop, which were organised by the Kegalle and Galle District Inter Religious Committees and NGO coordinators of the districts.

Prof. Upul Abeyratne, Dr. Jehan Perera and Saman Seneviratne were the resource persons. Dr. Perera spoke about the current situation of the country and the role of NGOs. Prof. Abeyratne discussed the conceptual ideas of pluralism and inclusion. Mr. Seneviratne, using presentation and games, outlined the practical challenges and opportunities encountered in promoting values towards a pluralistic Sri Lanka.

Several Divisional Secretaries said that they had encountered these issues while they were carrying out their duties but they had not realised how important the problems were. They now understood that special attention should be given to the problems of minority groups, adding that a formal mechanism should be established to address them.

“Every citizen should enjoy equal rights. This is what we understood through the workshop. Necessary mechanisms should be set up to strengthen the practice of pluralistic values in the public service. We ask NPC to assist us to go on an exposure visit to the North to understand the practical problems faced by people living there,” said Kegalle District Secretary Mahinda S. Weerasooriya.

“At a time the country is in an economic crisis, it is essential for everyone to work together. When performing our duties in the Galle district, we try our best to give equal opportunities to everyone,” said Galle District Secretary Shantha Weerasinghe.

Both District Secretaries said that the workshops were well organised and thanked NPC. Many officials had not known about pluralism before the workshops but now they would implement what they had learnt.

*The first photo shows the Kegalle District Secretary and senior officials while the second photo shows the Galle District Secretary and senior officials.*



# Empowering Community Leaders to Sustain Religious Freedom

Religious conflicts in Sri Lanka have seen a steady increase with extremist parties spreading misconceptions to create divisions among communities to gain political advantages. Community leaders, religious leaders and state officials have a greater responsibility in mitigating existing conflict stressors to strengthen unity in their areas. In sustaining religious freedom within the framework of pluralism and the rule of law, it is necessary to empower these community leaders to carry out citizen driven initiatives. Carrying out need assessments for Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) was a crucial effort that was taken by NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) team to identify the needs of areas subjected to recent religious conflicts.

The project carried out 16 activities in the last quarter in 11 locations reaching 419 LIRC members and 221 Youth Wings. Five capacitation programmes were carried out on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and the rule of law targeting youth wings as well as 11 need assessments to determine the needs of communities and set priorities for future action in targeted localities. Through the rule of law training programmes, participants learn about the existing legal framework on religious freedom both domestically and internationally, which will enable these community leaders to drive the local and national discourse on religious freedom.

Mohomed Rikaz, a Youth Wing member in Vavuniya, said the rule of law in the country should be upheld as it was the foundation of development. He thought that regulations and acts that undermined the rights of minorities should be reformed to ensure inclusivity. "Rules, regulations and acts should be drafted to ensure the rights of the communities and not to undermine them. Legal experts should take actions to amend the detrimental laws of the legal system that can weaken the rights of disempowered communities," he said.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) is a crucial subject component included in the training to guide the Youth Wings to tackle violent extremism in their areas. The content was developed to enhance the youth wing members' skills to design and carry out counter action to minimise the impacts of extremist ideologies.



At the training programme for 42 Youth Wing members in Mawanella, the significant role of youth leaders in mitigating religious violence was discussed while enlightening young leaders on how they could contribute to sustaining religious co-existence.

For LIRCs, as broad based community level platforms that enable dialogue, need assessments were carried out for committee members to find holistic solutions for their concerns. Giving priority to research based activity designing and implementation, the ARC team will use the findings of these assessments in designing upcoming actualisation activities and need based training.

Kanthi Gunawardana, former director of the Teaching Advisory Service in the Mawanella Zonal Education Office, is a member of Mawanella LIRC and a community leader who was looking for an intervention to make a change. During the past three months she has participated in ARC programmes and shared how she was inspired to contribute to strengthening co-existence in the country. She believed that a lack of a mechanism to mobilise community leaders discuss religious freedom had led to religious conflict in her area.

M. M. Anwar is a committee member of Panduwasnuwara LIRC. He suggested holding committee meetings at religious places to be close to grassroots communities. He explained the importance of field level interventions in terms of identifying the hidden issues in society. “We are going through the worst economic crisis we have ever experienced. In this time, violence can easily emerge. As LIRC members we should identify the immediate issues that can lead to undermining religious freedom,” he said.

## Facilitating Better Government Service Delivery

NPC signed an agreement with the Sabaragamuwa University to establish an advanced certificate course on sustainable peace through inclusive services delivery. An agreement with the Eastern University has already been signed for the course under the Freedom House project on pluralism and inclusive service delivery.

The agreement was signed by Mr. Dulakith Jayasinghe, Director of Center for Open and Distance Learning of Sabaragamuwa University, and Dr. Jehan Perera, Executive Director of NPC.

NPC will sign a similar agreement with the University of Ruhuna next month to enable the universities to commence the course by mid January. The course focuses on improving efficiency as well as effectiveness of service delivery of government institutions by creating a friendly interface between front line government officers and their service receivers.



*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.*

## Elections are Democratic Way to Ensure Political Stability

President Ranil Wickremesinghe has been stressing the importance of political stability to achieve the common dream of economic restoration. His recent statement that the security forces will be used to negate any unauthorized protest is a sign that the government expects the conditions of economic hardship to escalate. The president also stated that there will no early general elections. Stability in a polity can be ensured either through legitimacy or through force. Political stability cannot be created in a vacuum. Politicians are needed to express provincial and local level issues as well as national level issues in parliament.

Therefore, elections need to be held at different levels of the polity as a democratic process to strengthen political stability. They will enable the people to express their views in a democratic manner to elect their representatives who they deem to be suitable for the present time. This would provide the government with guidance in terms of the decisions it is being called to take to revive the economy and place the burden in a manner that will be acceptable to the people. Local government elections have been postponed for a year and are reaching their legal maximum in terms of postponement. These elections need to be held.

The provincial council elections have been postponed since 2018. Democratically elected provincial councils share in the burdens of governance. The devolution of power through the provincial councils was intended to promote ethnic harmony in the country. Due to postponement of those elections the provinces are being governed by presidentially appointed governors which makes a mockery of the devolution of power. The president has recently stated that the solution to problems affecting the Tamil people would be found by the 75th anniversary of the country's independence.

In the aftermath of the mass protests that led to the resignation of the prime minister, ministers and president in the period of May to July this year, there is a distance that has grown between the government and people. As a first step to healing this divide the National Peace Council calls for both local government and provincial council elections to be held without delay. The president and government could then work with them in a broader alliance to ensure political stability through decisions made that are legitimate and have the acceptance of the people.

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