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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

January  
2023

## Promoting Religious Coexistence Through Dialogue

Mannar and Vavuniya Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members intervened to settle a dispute between two villages in their districts and prevented religious differences from turning into violent conflict while minimising the possibility of conflicts recurring over religious issues. The initiatives were taken under NPC's project Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC).

There is a tendency for violence when multi ethnic communities clash due to a lack of knowledge and mistrust of the other's religion. LIRCs have a responsibility to promote religious freedom and coexistence by addressing prevailing inter-religious and inter-ethnic tension. To eliminate potential conflicts, it is crucial to identify and address existing issues as soon as possible, so mediation and conflict mitigation are crucial skills that committee members need to practice.

Mannar LIRC members identified a dispute between two villages, Naruwalikkulam and Wangalei, in the Nanattan Divisional Secretariat Division. Residents of Nanattan are from different ethno-religious communities. Wangalei is an area where the majority is Roman Catholics while in Naruwalikkulam the majority belongs to non-Roman Catholic denominations. There had been no reports of any major problems in the past.

The conflict arose when non-Roman Catholics in Naruwalikkulam attempted to build a church in their village which Roman Catholics in Wangalei considered a threat to their religion; news of building an arch in Naruwalikkulam further escalated the tension. Relations among communities were tense and there was little or no contact between the people. Mannar LIRC decided to take action to reconcile the two sides before the situation escalated into violence.



When Mannar LIRC met to discuss interventions, committee members decided to visit the communities in both villages. After that, with the participation of villagers, LIRC had a discussion at Nanattan Divisional Secretariat with the participation of Divisional Secretary, Sri Shantha Kumar.

During the meeting committee members said that a lack of knowledge about other religions had led to the conflict situation and discussed how the issue could be solved in a non-violent manner. Both village communities agreed on the importance of resolving issues through negotiations to ensure mutual respect for other religions. The participants agreed on some solutions to appease the communities in both villages while encouraging them to collectively resolve their problems with empathy and compassion.

Palamakal is located in the Nelukkulam Grama Niladhari division in the Vavuniya District. The majority of villagers are Hindu. A preacher from an unknown sect recently rented a house in Palammakkal and started to broadcast loud prayers, even at night, disturbing the villagers, who saw this as an unusual activity since there were no Christians in the village. Following a needs assessment discussion, Vavuniya LIRC engaged in a dialogue with the preacher and the villagers to resolve the issue. A few solutions were put forward by the participants while highlighting the importance of negotiations and mutual understanding among communities for sustainable peace in the area. The preacher agreed to broadcast his prayers without disturbing others while accepting that religious freedom should not harm others' freedom.

LIRC members decided to continue their interventions until solutions were reached for both issues. The villagers were ready for discussions as they did not want to live in a conflict situation. NPC will be provide a common platform through the ARC intervention to solve the problems through community level dialogue.

Through community level initiatives, LIRC members will experience how to use mediation skills and knowledge they obtained through the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom intervention. As a result of these initiatives, the project successfully brought together people of different religions to one platform, creating the opportunity to accept and acknowledge the pluralistic nature of society.



# Improving Public Service Delivery Through Education

NPC crossed a milestone in its peace building efforts with the Eastern University of Sri Lanka (EUSL) when it launched an advanced certificate course, Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery, funded by Freedom House. The inauguration ceremony was held at the Centre for External Degree and Extension Courses (CEDEC) in Batticaloa. The Eastern University has accepted 35 applications from the district and divisional level public service officers and will bring in another seven from the university administrative staff who are front line officers serving a multi-ethnic student body.

The courses will cover inclusive service delivery, nonviolent communication for service delivery, service delivery in a plural society, front line service delivery and field practices.

The inaugural session was addressed by Prof. V. Kanagasingam Vice Chancellor of EUSL, Dr. T. Prabakaran Director of CEDEC, Dr. Joe William NPC Chairperson and Dr. Jehan Perera NPC Executive Director.

Prof. Kanagasingam said that a key aspect of state-citizen engagement lay in service delivery. The state at all levels - central, sub-national and local - provided a multitude of services to citizens. The perception of the state, in the minds of citizens, was determined by how front line service delivery officers provided their service to communities and individuals. Being at the public interface, it was very important that the service delivery officers had the requisite skills, understanding and mindset that enabled them to be fair, equitable and impartial in the manner they delivered their services, he added.

Dr. Prabakaran said that the course was a milestone as it was the first one offered by the university and CEDEC in peace building studies. He added that the course would strengthen an user centred government service.

NPC will offer the course at the Universities of Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa in February.



# NGOs in Discussion with Government on New NGO Law

The dialogue between the government and CSOs on the issue of a new law for NGOs is taking place regularly. NPC is part of the core group of the CSO-NGO Collective that is engaging in negotiations with the government, which is seeking the development of a new and all-encompassing NGO law to replace the present one.

The existing NGO law, the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act (VSSO Act 31 of 1980), is largely limited to the registration of NGOs. The NGO Secretariat and its role in monitoring NGOs is not contained in the present law but is an outcome of a government circular, which has less weight than a law.

The core group of NGOs who form the CSO-NGO Collective have been meeting with the Director General of the NGO Secretariat Sanjeewa Wimalagunaratna and the Minister of Public Security Tiran Alles under whose ministry the NGO Secretariat is now placed. They have sought to bring the larger CSO community on board with regard to the discussions.

A CSO-NGO consultation was organized where more than 400 representatives of organisations from across the country participated. As a member of the core group of NGOs, NPC used its resources to support the travel costs of most participants.

Addressing the gathering, NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera observed that successive governments had tried to control the NGOs. NGOs not only played a complementary role to the government, they also had a watchdog role especially in regard to issues of abuse of power and human rights violations. They also play an advocacy role in areas where the government might hold back due to political considerations.

At the consultation, the NGOs decided to present a set of principles that should guide government-NGO relations together with an updated version of the VSSO Act that they had prepared at a previous consultation in 2018.

## NPC Discusses Local Government Elections

NPC members had a meeting with members of the Puttalam District Inter Religious Committee to discuss the upcoming local government elections.

NPC Executive Director, Dr Jehan Perera, addressing the gathering said that one of the areas of positive development at the present time was the commitment being made by the president to promote the reconciliation process. His willingness to implement the 13th amendment would provide for greater opportunities for power sharing at the local levels. The practice of democracy needed to be supported by institutions that ensured the inclusion of minorities into processes of decision making and that paid heed to minority voices, he added.

They spoke about getting candidates who were contesting in the area to inform the public about their suitability for the positions and how they were planning to fulfil their promises. The public should also be told about the basic qualifications of candidates, who should pledge to be free of fraud and corruption, to build public trust and to work with responsibility and accountability.

It was emphasised that race and religion should not be part of the campaign strategy.

# Empowering Women Leaders to Reform State Structure

NPC will launch a new 15 month project to empower women in the districts of Gampaha, Kandy, Kegalle, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Ratnapura, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

The Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project is intended to capacitate, mentor and strengthen selected groups of women civic leaders as activists contributing to reforming the state structure and introducing system change.

The project aims to amplify the women's voices within the ongoing reform movement, strengthen women's advocacy to include women's issues and minority issues and to garner support and trust for women's leadership.

As the first step, suitable organizations working with women empowerment were being identified to determine key women focused and led Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). This would ascertain women's welfare and engagement focused statutory structures, informal structures and CSO structures in an area as well as identify suitable women leaders. The intention was to support a leadership to sustain the momentum for reform.

Thirteen activities will be implemented including training on democracy, pluralism and inclusion and nonviolent communication; meetings on issues and responses; discussions with women politicians, civic leaders and government officials; local campaigns on pluralistic democracy and accountability; exchange visits; and a documentary capturing women's activism and role in creating a pluralistic and accountable democracy.

## NPC Holds Discussions on Protecting Civic Space

An orientation programme for NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) supported project was held for 84 district partners and master trainers from 12 districts.

Discussions included sharing experiences on the current political situation, the role of civil activists and research about protecting civic space.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke on current political situation and role of civil society representatives in protecting civic space. People had to come forward to challenge corruption and governance related malpractices, he said.

Mr. Sasik de Silva from Social Scientists' Association outlined the findings from research on community level citizenship, which was conducted to understand people's attitudes to freedom of association, pluralism and civic participation and to identify ways to improve of attitudes of village leaders towards member of other communities.

A discussion was held about the objectives of the project, its desired outcome and obstacles.

# Fighting Drug Use Among Youth in Puttalam

Two activities were organized by Puttalam District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) to raise awareness on the effects of drug use and the importance of inter-ethnic harmony. A training session on making palmyra leaf handicrafts was also held under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT).

The Sinhala and Muslim communities in the area were still suspicious of each other because the issues of reconciliation after the war have not been addressed; they stayed away from each other because there were no opportunities to interact.

Drug use was a problem and incidents of child abuse were on the rise. The economic crisis had added to disputes within families while some businesses have collapsed because people from one community would not purchase goods from shops owned by the other community.

In order to bring the two communities together and promote peace and harmony, a rally was organized on the theme of eradicating drugs and creating a drug free society by local government women members and youth who trained under the PACT project, with the participation of religious leaders.

Eighty one participants including religious leaders, government officials, parents and students joined the rally with placards carrying anti-drug slogans. At a meeting after the rally, a statement was handed over to Puttalam District Additional Secretary Mr. Ravindra Wickramasinghe and Puttalam District Assistant Inspector General of Police S. M. Y. Senaviratne.

Another awareness session on risks and effects of drug use and a training programme on palmyra leaf handicrafts were organized in Wanathavilluwa by Puttalam DIRC for 73 participants. A shramadana with the participation of all communities was held to clean temple premises in the area as an opportunity for people to come together and improve understanding and friendship.

“We haven't had a programme like this in our village before. When I went to the temple, a Muslim youth was sweeping inside. It is good to have all communities together, working and learning collectively to get rid of dislike and to build trust and unity,” a participant said.



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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.*

## **Enforcement of Accountability Must Become a National Priority**

The importance of accountability in governance has become manifest both nationally and internationally in the Supreme Court decision with regard to the Easter bombing and the Canadian government's sanctions for human rights violations respectively. The Supreme Court has determined that former president Maithripala Sirisena and four senior members of the security hierarchy are liable for negligence in their responsibilities which led to loss of life and limb to more than five hundred innocent persons. This is a landmark decision in a context in which impunity and lack of accountability has been marked in the public life of the country.

Obtaining high positions in the state has for too long been viewed as a perk and privilege of those who have won elections or been closely associated with those who wield political power. Holding high office in Sri Lanka has come to be seen as an opportunity for self-gain and to dish out patronage rather than to serve the national interest. The National Peace Council welcomes the intervention by the highest national judicial authority to hold accountable some of those who held the highest executive positions in the country for the disastrous failure to protect the civilian population in the face of repeated warnings of an imminent attack.

We note that there are other cases filed before the courts of law in regard to the economic collapse that the country went through last year and in which it continues to be mired. This economic collapse has blighted the lives of the vast majority of people and thrown more than forty percent of the people below the poverty line. We hope that the justice obtained by the several hundreds of victims of the Easter bombing will be obtained by the several millions of victims of the economic collapse. Those who are guilty of economic crimes of deliberate mismanagement and fraud need to be similarly held accountable and made to pay for their crimes.

One of the consequences of the failure to deal with accountability issues in the past has been the opening of the door to international interventions in regard to human rights through both the UN Human Rights Council and action by individual foreign governments. The Canadian government last week noticed former presidents Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa and two military officers as subject to targeted sanctions on account for violation of international human rights. The Canadian government has justified its stance on the basis that Sri Lanka has failed to hold those guilty of such crimes accountable through national judicial processes.

The UN Human Rights Council has highlighted economic crimes in the country. Economic crimes are where political leaders and their associates have stolen the assets of the country and hidden them in the country or abroad. The UN has a Stolen Assets Recovery Program (STAR) to deal with this international menace. The present government needs to bring in a law to persist with stolen asset recovery, which is essential to ensure that ill-gotten gains are used to fill the near empty coffers of the country.

The momentous events of the past week would come as a shock to the Sri Lankan people who have already been subjected to heavy shocks over the past year. The salutary aspect of these cataclysmic events is that the principle of accountability is more likely to become institutionalized in Sri Lankan institutions and in the consciousness of the people. The activation of national accountability mechanisms as demonstrated by the Supreme Court will help to ward off international intervention and usher in national development. The National Peace Council is hopeful that as a result those who obtain positions of power and national leadership will act with a sense of responsibility to all the people of the country rather than with contempt for them and their human rights.

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