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 இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
 National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

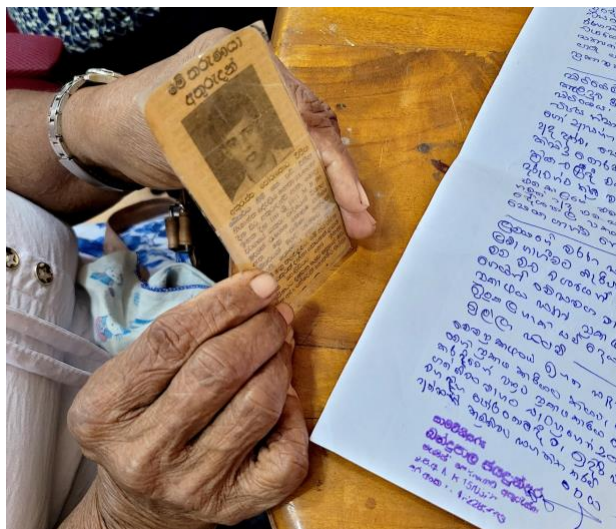
May
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Supporting Families of the Missing Through the OMP

A proper functioning of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) process was established to address long term grievances of the families of the disappeared. Unfortunately, this has been a disappointing process for many even after the establishment of the OMP in 2017 as part of the government’s commitment to the UN Human Rights Council to a transitional justice process for national reconciliation.

Under the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI)/OMP project, NPC commenced review meetings at a regional level to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of OMP services received by the families of victims. During the first set of two review meetings held in Matara, members of victim families and government officers shared their personal stories and commented on their experiences with OMP. According to the information that was gathered, family members showed general frustration about the services they received as well as how slow the progress was.

Relatives of some participants went missing as long ago as 1989. Reliving these memories fills them with sorrow because it is a reminder that the missing relatives will not return. In light of the current economic hardships and the fact that the missing persons were the main source of income and stability, they expect the process of reparation to support them. They said that in the past there was a shortage of documents and access to information as well as no communication from officers when they attempted to engage in the process. First and foremost, they want government officers to understand their hardships. They hope that they will be treated as humans.



The outcomes of the review meeting were submitted to a meeting with government officers, who accepted there are shortcomings in the approaches at their end. They identified the need to prioritise and give a more humane and empathetic service. On an encouraging note, there have been recent experiences of family members where officers have made follow up phone calls to check whether those affected are receiving the appropriate governmental benefits and giving the families the sense that they want to support them. Some government officers expressed sympathy and wanted to assist but there are rules and procedures to be followed. They said there was poor official communication and no clear instructions and directions from their superiors.

The District Secretary of Matara Y. Wickramasiri and High Commissioner of Canada for Sri Lanka and Maldives Eric Welsh attended the second meeting. Mr. Wickramasiri mentioned the importance of the programme and benefits the families would receive. Mr. Welsh spoke to families after the meeting. The exchanges helped to understand the current situation for families of missing persons and their experiences with the OMP process as well as identifying the gaps.

NPC will continue to capacitate OMP staff in the districts to improve their service delivery, strengthen and sustain the OMP process.

Pluralism as a Practice for Peace and Harmony

A workshop on pluralism and inclusion for 35 of senior prison officers from prisons in Sri Lanka was held under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) with the participation of the Commissioner General of Prisons Chandana Ekanayake.

Participants were encouraged to find new ways to build a positive masculinity towards serving and dealing with others respectfully.

Mr. Ekanayake shared part of his own story to motivate participants. He joined the prison as a jailor and worked his way up to become the Commissioner General of Prisons. His message was of encouragement to others to develop their skills. As a leader, he motivates people to build their own skills to become good leaders. He strives to treat people without discrimination, listen to them and be a role model through courage, strength and caring for others.

Prof. Upul Abeyratne, NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera and NPC's Project Manager Saman Seneviratne joined the workshop as resource persons. Dr. Perera spoke about the current political situation and the role of NGOs. Prof. Abeyratne discussed the concept of pluralism and inclusion. Mr. Seneviratne discussed the challenges and opportunities in building a pluralistic society.

Participants discussed what pluralism was, the qualities of a pluralistic person and the structures needed to build a pluralistic Sri Lanka. A pluralistic person should recognise and accept diversity, have knowledge about human rights, be able to work in a diverse group and listen to other people's ideas. There were many cases of wrongful imprisonment because of poor investigative processes.

Some participants said that before the workshop, they had not known what pluralism meant and its importance in establishing reconciliation. They hoped to share the ideas with colleagues and to practice the values they learnt.

Promoting Religious Unity and Leadership Skills

A need-based training on team building and leadership was organized for Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members in Rakwana under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project in collaboration with the District Secretariats in Rakwana and Godakawela. The 40 participants included religious leaders, police officers, Grama Niladari officers and NGO and community leaders.

Rakwana is a multi religious area that has experienced religious and ethnic tensions over the years. In response to these challenges, the LIRC was established in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted its work, hindering progress and straining relationships among committee members. The lack of opportunities for in-person interaction contributed to the limited establishment of inter religious awareness, trust and bonds within the group.

The goal of the training programme was to foster mutual trust and develop leadership skills among the LIRC committee members. By addressing the challenges posed by religious tensions, the programme facilitated positive attitudes, effective problem solving and cohesive teamwork. The participants had the opportunity to refresh their relationships and gained awareness of how to effectively deal with religious conflict.

H. Mansoor Moulavi from the Muhiyaddeen Jumma Mosque in Rakwana said, "This is really a different kind of experience for us. We joined the programme as one group. We were given space to solve some problems between us. I gained an understanding of how to develop leadership and team spirit. In particular, I understood how to manage a problem when it arises."

P.K. Ariyawansa, a member of Rakwana LIRC, said, "The programme brought us some inspiration and change. I learned to look at problems in a new way. Through creative methods, I gained a good understanding of how a problem arises and how to solve it. This is a good opportunity to strengthen the unity of the Rakwana team."



The training in Rakwana promoted religious unity and enhanced leadership skills among LIRC members. Rakwana LIRC has been experiencing communication issues that affected decision making. Some member raised concerns that decisions made by religious leaders were not inclusive. It was recognised that there was a gap in communication and lack of trust, which challenged the decisions made by religious leaders as well as their authority.

To mitigate this team building, leadership and creative communication activities were implemented for participants to interact, solve problems and develop positive attitudes. This ensured a foundation for effective collaboration and understanding in addressing religious tensions. It is crucial to replicate these training programmes in other LIRC locations, tailored to their specific needs, to foster unity and create more inclusive and harmonious communities.

"We constantly use mass media to stay informed. However, not all the information we receive is accurate, making it challenging for people to discern the truth. Through this programme, I have gained insights into understanding media content, realising that there is more beneath the surface than meets the eye. Social media has become an integral part of our lives with its widespread usage but it lacks censorship, leading to the proliferation of anti-social ideas that pose a significant danger. So we have to correctly comprehend and interpret such information and its implications," said M.G.L. Kanchana, a Grama Niladari from Trincomalee.

Establishing Strong Networks Through Training

A training programme on civic space and freedom of association was held in Matara under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project.

Civic space and freedom of association are vital for democratic systems. They allow citizens to express their opinions, participate in decision making processes and hold their governments accountable. Through civic engagement and associations, individuals can collectively address societal issues, advocate for policy changes and contribute to the development of inclusive and representative governance structures.

Building strong networks and developing a platform to discuss protecting civic spaces and active citizenship are essential when addressing issues of freedom of association.

Most participants had not interacted with each other although they lived in the same area. "We are developing our relationships. We didn't know that similar organizations were working in our region. We are all working for wellbeing of the community. This training programme gave us the opportunity to get to know each other so we can collaborate in future," a participant said.

"We will be stronger now because we have connections with other community based organizations and we will be contacting various organisations who are not present here so that we will have more support to make us stronger," added another participant said.

The training programme was facilitated by master trainers from NPC's networks. In one session, a line was drawn on the ground with a "yes" and "no" on either side. Questions such as "do you believe there is democracy in Sri Lanka?" were asked. This encouraged participants to reflect on their perceptions and hopes for the future.

The same programme was held in several other areas to promote sustainable change.

Raising Women's Voices as Key Change Makers

A country that is rich in diverse ethnicities and religions requires a democratic governing system that ensures a plural society, meaning a living in a shared space while respecting each other's diversity.

In Sri Lanka, women consist of 52 percent of the population. Since they play a vital role at the community level, women's voices need to be included in the reform agenda and in decision making. However, their voices are often not heard at the national or sub-national level.

NPC's project, Women Organised for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE), supported by National Endowment for Democracy (NED), aims at capacitating, mentoring and strengthening selected groups of sub-national women civic leaders as super activists. The project selected 42 women based on their experience in community engagement and their commitment to serving society. By giving knowledge on democracy and democratic values, pluralism and inclusion, gender and women's roles while identifying modes of citizenship, it is expected that these women leaders will gain skills to resolve existing issues in their communities.

The first Training of Trainers (TOT) programme on democracy, pluralism, gender and inclusion was held for participants from the districts of Matara, Monaragala, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura, Kegalle and Gampaha. Facilitating the training were Mr. Shashik Silva and Ms. Kaushini Dammalage senior researchers of the Social Scientist Association, Mr. Upul Abeyrathne professor at the University of Peradeniya, Dr. Jehan Perera NPC Executive Director, Mr. V. Weerasinghem trainer on gender and inclusion and Dr. Pavithra Jayawardhena lecturer at the University of Colombo.

The participants were taught the theoretical and conceptual background of democracy and pluralism in order to address the issues related to the violation of democracy by identifying their gender roles as women. With the new understanding, they will be equipped to develop their own ways of solving issues in future.



Looking at women from the plantation sector, for example, they rarely have opportunities to come out of their estates. One reason for this is that they do not have access to proper education about their rights and what can be done when their rights are violated.

Educating both women and men on their rights will improve overall services in the public sector. For instance, some parents do not know how to get a birth certificate or a national identity card for their child.

Manori Thanthrige, Super Group Member in the Nuwara Eliya District said, “During the training programme we identified the importance of mobilising and empowering women’s groups because they face many issues. We learnt about the challenges we face and how to resolve them.”

P.G. Podinona, Super Group Member from Monaragala, said women had little knowledge of democracy and pluralism. “It was not clear what the suitable way forward as a women’s group is. This training programme improved my knowledge and clarified some of the doubts I had. I will be more effective in delivering good services and I will be able to train our women’s groups.”

Insights From the Field

Nurturing Religious Identity

As in 16 other districts throughout the country, the Kandy District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) meets regularly. The committee represents a common voice across all religions. While one channel of communications is media or press statements by religious leaders on provincial level, it is also a meeting platform for collective thought of all committee members including CBO and CSO representatives.

During a meeting earlier this year, it was suggested that a possible root cause for religious conflict lies in history. History in the sense that none of the major religions are the country’s own but have been “imported from outside”, meaning that religious leaders have not been given enough space to develop their own religious identities as Sri Lankans to better address conflict issues and communicate within their respective religions.

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change religion. At the discussion in the DIRC it was pointed out that while Buddhism is given the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths, it has one unique thing in common with Hinduism, Christianity and Islam: they are not native to Sri Lanka and all have a history from different parts of the world. Therefore, one could assume that even the major religions in Sri Lanka continue to develop their own identities. For a country that is in the process of finding ways to heal the wounds of a three decade long ethnic conflict, religion’s penetration into everyday life threatens the diverse fabric of society.

In a country grappling with various social, political and cultural conflicts, pluralism offers a beacon of hope. NPC consistently invites participants and actors in its networks to transcend these divisions and counter polarising narratives that challenge a harmonious coexistence.

Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

May
2023

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.

Unfinished Tasks 14 Years After War's End

The country will be commemorating the 14th anniversary of the end of the war that dragged on for nearly three decades on May 18. The war which ended bloodily on the battlefield continues to exert its baleful influence over the life of the people. Tens of thousands of families will mourn the loss of their loved ones while thousands of others will be hoping that their missing loved ones will reappear soon. Typically, the government has organized events to mark the war victory on May 19, which is reflective of majority sentiment in the country.

The National Peace Council believes that while the war is over the problems that gave rise to it, and new ones that have arisen from it, continue to trouble the country and detract from its ability to reach its full potential. The country continues to be like a family divided, which cannot succeed until it heals its divisions and cannot succeed until it heals its divisions, which requires statesmanlike leadership with a vision for a truly reconciled Sri Lanka.

The most urgent of unfinished tasks is to deal with the issue of missing persons in a manner that satisfies the sentiments of the people that the state has cared for them in their grief and justice is done. Second is to ensure that the provincial council system of devolution of power is implemented fully according to the constitution and adequate financial resources are made available to them. It is also essential that the power of the Governor provided under the provincial council act needs to be revisited to provide more power to the elected councils to ensure that the people's representations are prioritized.

There are other unfinished tasks as well but we believe that if there is genuine willingness to address the two above, the rest will follow. There is urgency in undertaking these tasks for the sake of national reconciliation within the country and to ward off the growing threat of international political and economic sanctions that have begun to bite in the form of travel bans for war crimes and the need to retain the GSP Plus economic concession.

The National Peace Council welcomes the president's direct engagement with the Tamil political parties in discussions, which have been positively received both nationally and internationally. There are media reports that he will expand his engagement to include the Muslim and Malayaha Tamil political parties. We call on the president to inform the people about his intentions in this regard, and the government to engage on the issue with the opposition political parties, so that the agreements reached are inclusive and have a maximum of support from all the ethnic and religious communities in the country.

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