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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

November
2023

Transformative Workshop on Ethics in Communications for NPC Staff

Sharing an enriching experience of our recent workshop on Ethics in Communications, NPC staff enhanced their own capacity for peacebuilding. The two day internal workshop was a significant step in our ongoing commitment to fostering ethical communication within NPC and our work with partners and in the field.

With diverse perspectives and common goals, three distinct sessions provided a comprehensive exploration of ethics in communication, ensuring that our staff gained insights into various dimensions of ethical practices in their roles. During the initial discussions, majority of staff pointed out that there is a disconnect between the idea of ethical behaviour and practicing what you preach in their work and lives as peace builders, which very much echoes the idea of “peace starts at home”.

Coming from a lifelong career of journalistic experience and insights into the field, Lakshman Gunasekara provided the starting point for critical reflection. The session looked at steps in communications, digital media communications, privacy issues, the code of conduct for journalists as well as best practices and norms that may be applicable for NPC communications. Through discussions staff members gained valuable insights into the ethical considerations that should guide their daily communication practices.

Building up on this, Shashik Dhanushka delved into the realm of research ethics, guiding participants through the ethical considerations inherent in the research process. The session provided a framework for ethical decision making in research, ensuring that our work is grounded in integrity and respect for all stakeholders. It also entailed multiple case studies for group work in order to look at what would you do when implementing research and monitoring mechanisms in the field.

The final session, facilitated by Professor Minoli Salgado, highlighted the importance of navigating sensitive narratives with empathy, specifically in the context of trauma. Participants engaged in discussions on the ethical responsibilities inherent in sharing and mediating narratives of those affected by conflict, fostering a deeper understanding of the human aspect of peacebuilding.

NPC was honoured to have these distinguished, expert facilitators and academics leading the sessions that brought a wealth of experience as well as provided valuable insights into the ethical considerations that should underpin our daily work. As we return to our roles, the lessons learned from this workshop will undoubtedly shape our approach to communications. Moreover, the workshop aided in developing NPC’s own ethical guidelines. Recognising that ethical communication is fundamental to the success of our peacebuilding initiatives, NPC remains steadfast in its commitment to upholding the highest ethical standards in all our endeavours.

PACT Project Engages in Problem Solving

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The Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project focuses on different sectors every month. The month of November focused on the estate sector namely Bathalagoda, Kurunegala Badulla and Kegalle.

Job Fair Unveils Tensions and Economic Struggles

The Malaiyaha Tamils who migrated from South India contributed to the nation's economic success. At the same time, their treatment perpetuates inequalities to this day, this year marking 200 years since their arrival in Sri Lanka. Examples of this are no land ownership, no property and house ownership, no address, no respectful work, limited access to education, poor health services, insufficient income and general inaccessibility to government services. On the Bathalagoda estate, a group of Malaiyaga Tamils have been working on a private rubber estate since the 1880s. The Bathalagoda rubber estate in the Ebbagamuwa Divisional Secretariat is located in the middle of a Sinhala village. The owner of the rubber estate wants to sell his property.

The Malaiyaga Tamils on the Bathalagoda estate do not have a dignified life. The management provides line rooms. If there are any repairs necessary, they have no right to renovate them. The line room consist of one bedroom and a small space to cook food. In that single room the father, mother and children live together. Eating, changing clothes, sleeping and studying all take place in that room. Without bathrooms attached, there is no privacy for individuals in the family, which gives rise to many social issues prevailing in the community.

The private land occupied by the youth from Bathalagoda estate is currently at the centre of a court case. The management of the land released a notice saying that the land may only be used for cultivation, not occupation. Building tents, houses or any infrastructure is illegal. The management only allows those above the age of 60 years to work on the estate because they fulfill the requirements with fewer labour costs. Youth, on the other hand, are not given that opportunity. The property sale necessitates the removal of people from the land but they have no land of their own and nowhere to go. As a first step, the management has already sold the cemetery area.



After learning about this issue and in an effort to reduce economic burdens, NPC conducted a job fair in Ebbagamuwa, which was attended by youths from the Bathalagoda estate. One young person said, “Sometimes people from the Sinhala community attack Tamil people during festival times.” Another added, “If any smuggling or theft occurs, the Sinhala people accuse Tamils”.

Getting the participation of government officials from Divisional Office such as Social Integration Officers, Social Welfare Officers and Village Officers as well as the media was a step towards mitigating the problems of the estate sector. Taking these steps is central under the PACT project.

Library of Reconciliation

A library is a platform of knowledge and enrichment. NPC initiated mitigation through expanding knowledge. The District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) in Kotakanda, Kurunegala took the initiative to open a library for reconciliation, which was established by NPC with the support of Kurunegala DIRC at Kotakanda purana viharaya, providing access to Muslim and Tamil communities living near the temple. Religious leaders have provided books related to their religions for the library in an effort to foster inter religious relations. DIRC members discussed a plan for monitoring the use of the library.

Mobile Services

A mobile service was conducted in Ruwanwella Divisional Secretariate for estate workers. DIRC members had realised that there were many barriers to getting essential documents such as birth certificates, marriage certificates and national identity cards. NPC provided the facilities to obtain the documentation through a mobile service at Ruwanwella estate at which more than 275 estate workers were given their documents.

Naming a Village

The name of a village created a conflict between Muslim and Sinhala people in Matara. The Sinhalese wanted to call it Anakariga Dharmapala and the Muslims wanted the name to be Ishzadeen. In order to ease tensions, NPC held a street drama, which carried the message that not hurting people of other ethnicities, religions and cultures was the cornerstone of a pluralistic, harmonious society. The drama was performed in several public places. Many children said they wanted to perform the drama in their schools.



Youth Programme

DIRC youth leaders found that thefts in estates across Badulla led to suspicions about unemployed Tamil youths, resulting in frequent conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamil communities and causing a loss of trust and creating tension. Recognising the root cause as economic challenges faced by youth in the estates due to a lack of income sources, youth leaders arranged a job fair under the PACT project in the Badulla District Secretariat to address the issue and foster positive relationships between the Sinhala and Tamil communities in the estates. More than 200 youth participated and received consultations and job opportunities. Twenty one organisations and educational institutions seeking employees were identified. Government officials, DIRC members and community leaders provided resources for the event.

Religious Conversion

Estate workers in Kegalle have been changing their religion, leading to conflicts between Hindus and Christians. Kegalle DIRC members discussed the problem with the Divisional Reconciliation Committee in the area and decided to hold an awareness programme to promote religious freedom, human rights, peace and reconciliation as well as conflict transformation. DIRC members distributed leaflets and posters on the importance of conflict mitigation and carried the message to the community by pasting stickers about the importance of peace and reconciliation on the vehicles. This initiative marked a significant milestone in fostering harmony with the community.

Women's Participation

There are very few women in Provincial Councils and Local Government Authorities. There are several barriers to increasing the female representation because of male domination. Public representation means public participating in decision making therefore it was crucial that female participation should be 50% in any decision making process. To correct the situation, Kandy DIRC members met the Governor of the Central Province, Lalith Gamage, and discussed ways of increasing the female representatives in the local government. They also sent a letter about the matter to the prime minister.



Overcoming Obstacles to Women's Political Representation

An awareness programme on women's participation in politics was held under NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion Through Community Engagement project (WOICE).

Dr. Indhi Akurugoda, Head of the Department of Government Policy and Politics at the University of Ruhuna, underscored the urgent need for increased female representation since there were only 12 women MPs in a parliament of 225. She pointed out the contradiction between the 92% literacy rate among women and their under representation in political positions.

The Divisional Secretary's Office in Weligama, where the programme was conducted, became the platform for social change. With more than 150 women leaders and local representatives from the Matara District in attendance, WOICE partnered with the Sahana Social Development Alliance Matara to conduct the programme, which gave participants valuable insights into the root causes of women's limited participation in politics.

WOICE Super Group member, Mrs. R.G.A.K. Rajapaksha, pointed out that women faced a societal backlash when attempting to enter politics including discouragement from children and husbands. Similarly Mrs. Fathumma Nihara, coming from a Muslim background, shared the additional restrictions that Muslim women faced.

In response Dr. Akurugoda encouraged the start to a political journey in smaller settings such as the workplace or starting a non profit organization. In her experience, building confidence and gradually asserting one's independence were starting points. It was also important to educate the family about civil rights, she said. Her message was to start small, build confidence and gradually extend influence into rural politics.

The workshop concluded with a call to action: challenge societal norms, overcome obstacles and actively participate in politics. Collective efforts through the WOICE project aimed to reshape the landscape of women's participation in politics, one empowered leader at a time.



Reflecting on Women's Roles in Religious Tradition

In the heart of Weligama, the Shrine of Christ the Healer Church Hall set the scene for taking participants on a reflective journey on past ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka.

Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members collaborated with Voice Our Talent (VOT) in organizing the programme under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project. Engaging in the reflection were 44 LIRC members, religious leaders from Weligama, officers from the Weligama Community Police Division, government officials and members of community based organizations.

Lakmal Pradeep, who facilitated the discussion, observed, "There is no end to the conflicts between people since ancient times due to differences among religions. This is clear from the study of the history of Sri Lanka from 1948, when we gained independence from the British, until now." At the same time, he expressed optimism regarding the creation of a future filled with religious harmony. This could be done by outlining a roadmap for achieving religious harmony, addressing the roots of ethnic conflicts and preventing such conflicts in the future, he said.

Challenges faced by women in religious places were also discussed during the programme. The tooth relic and Sri Maha Bodhi were brought to Sri Lanka by two women. However, Buddhist culture restricted women from entering the bo tree area, so it was necessary to promote the religious empowerment of women.

Having an understanding of historical ethnic challenges from the past to the present was an essential part of forming a harmonious future for Sri Lanka. Initiatives such as the LIRC programme highlight the need to move forward with optimism for positive change.



Tolerance is Needed on Both Sides

Buddhists hear pirith in the early morning. Muslims hear adhan. Pirith means protection. The ceremonial recital of pirith is regarded as warding off all forms of evil and danger. Adhan means calling Muslims to prayer. Both pirith and adhan encourage people to engage in religious activity.

Multi religious communities such as the Welikanda Divisional Secretariat is one example of a region where religious tolerance is the norm. Located in the Polonnaruwa District, the area has a majority of Buddhists, a minority of Muslims and a few Hindus and Christians.

Chanting pirith begins at about 4.30 am. Adhan is prayed five times a day. Because of the frequency of the prayers, Buddhist people have voiced their annoyance.

Participants in a training programme organized under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project on protecting civic space in Sri Lanka opened up on the issue when asked on what basis they made the allegations against the Muslim people.

“Adhan is continuously disturbing us. We can't tolerate it any further. A group of Buddhists from our village went to the mosque and complained many times. No action has been taken. Consequently, the police in Welikanda supported the Buddhist people and resolved the conflict,” a participant said. “Most of us Sinhala Buddhists live in this area. It is not acceptable for them to trouble us like this.”

This is the conversation between the facilitator, Sampath Randuna and a participant, Priyanthi.

Sampath: Everybody has rights. No one should be discriminated. Everybody has the right to follow religious activities. They can be remedied if their right is violated in any instance. Are you Buddhist?

Priyanthi: Yes, I am.

Sampath: Do you hear pirith chanting from a Buddhist temple every morning?

Priyanthi: Yes, we hear it.

Priyanthi: Early morning, 4.30am.



Sampath: Can other people hear the pirith, especially Muslims?
 Priyanthi: Yes, there are possibilities.
 Sampath: Have those Muslim people ever complained that the pirith is disturbing them?
 Priyanthi: No, they have never.
 Sampath: If so, can we assume that the sound of pirith has never disturbed them?
 Priyanthi: No, I don't think we can assume that. Sometimes pirith would have disturbed them but I can't say for sure.
 Sampath: Do you know the sound limitations according to the law?
 Priyanthi: No, I do not know.
 Sampath: Do you get angry when someone criticises your religious activities?
 Priyanthi: Yes, of course.
 Sampath: Is it fair to get angry if you criticise other religious practices?
 Priyanthi: Yes, that should be fair.
 Sampath: Is it right to file a complaint at the police station against adhan?
 Priyanthi: No. It is wrong. I agree and I'm feeling bad about it.
 Sampath: Share your feelings in your village and try make them understand.
 Priyanthi: You know, many of the school children get up in the early morning to study. Unfortunately, they are being disturbed by both pirith and adhan.
 Everybody laughed.

State Officers Improve Delivery of Services

Lectures and course work for the advanced certificate course, Sustainable Peace Through Inclusive Service Delivery, are ongoing in the four state universities of Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa, Eastern and Jaffna.

With the commencement of the lectures and coursework, NPC took a proactive step to assess the impact and progress of the programme focusing on its role in enhancing public service and fostering better delivery of inclusive services. The NPC team included Dr. Jehan Perera, Prof. Mookiah and Dr. Joe William. Students' keen interest during the lectures expressed their motivation to enhance their skills and contribute positively to public service.

Two participants provided concrete examples regarding their academic and professional journey. Ms. Surani Vanthila, Grama Niladari (GN) of Galaboda GN division, said the percentage of Tamils in her division was about 75% and the provision of inclusive services to them was often difficult because of their low level of education and the time it took to work with them in an efficient manner. After the newly gained knowledge of the course, the understanding of going beyond a job description grew.

Ms. Sujani Menaka, who is working with the Department of Agrarian Services in Nivithigala, said implementing the acquired skills in mediation contributed to resolving conflicts between farmers and in fulfilling her professional duties. She revealed that the course provided this dimension to approach her work in a more humane and problem solving manner and, specifically, the possibilities of nonviolent communications in inclusive service delivery.

As a result, the course is making a tangible impact, empowering individuals to overcome challenges, enhance their job functions and contribute to a more rights-oriented and problem solving manner in public service. As the course progresses, so will the examples of positive transformations.

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.

Multi Partisan Consultations Needed for National Unity and Reconciliation

The government is proposing to establish an office for national unity and reconciliation by an Act of Parliament in order to assure to every citizen is provided with equal opportunities in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres as given by the constitution whilst safeguarding the identity and to build an inclusive and equitable society in which diversity will be respected and all communities will coexist in harmony and unity. The draft law has been sent to the Sectoral Oversight Committee on Reconciliation and National Unity for its observations. The National Peace Council appreciates the initiative of the Sectoral Oversight Committee to inform civil society that they are open to proposals for revision to be incorporated into the draft law.

The ONUR bill is a broad one encompassing ethnic, religious and social harmony issues. The office that is set up will be mandated to make necessary recommendations to the government and relevant authorities towards achieving national unity, reconciliation, and durable peace in the country and formulate a national policy and national action plan on reconciliation and coexistence. However, the proposed law has received little or no publicity in the media and its existence is unknown to most of the population. Therefore, we request the government to give more time for public discussion to take place.

The National Peace Council (NPC) expresses concern about certain aspects of the ONUR bill. NPC is concerned about the role given to ONUR to be prescriptive vis a vis civil society by virtue of the power “to guide and facilitate peace and reconciliation programmes conducted by local organisations including community based organisations.” This authority in terms of subjects to monitor and review the work of civil society raises apprehensions about its potential oppressiveness in the context of the national reconciliation policy and action plan. These are genuine fears as even the ICCPR Act that sought to incorporate hate speech provisions prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights into the national law, has been systematically used punitively against those who oppose the government politically.

Another area of concern is the process for appointing the decision-making body of ONUR. As per the current draft, the minister overseeing ONUR will select and the president will appoint the 11 committee members. Already there are many voices to state that the minorities have been ignored in committees of such nature. This process raises the possibility of unilateral decision-making and political bias, contrary to the intentions of the 21st Amendment, which aimed to prevent such occurrences. The NPC emphasizes the importance of appointing non-partisan members in line with the spirit of the 21st Amendment.

The laudable objectives outlined in the ONUR bill, such as promoting national unity and peaceful coexistence, require dialogue and negotiation among representatives of diverse communities in Sri Lanka. The NPC urges the government to engage with opposition political parties, particularly those representing minority ethnic and religious communities, as well as civil society, to establish a multi-partisan consensus, encompassing pluralistic values on the path to make this a true reconciliation process for national unity.

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