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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



# Paths To Peace

November 2024

## A Journey to Document the Stories of the Disappeared

The People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) Project team visited the Badulla district, focusing on the villages of Passara and surrounding areas, to gather stories of enforced disappearances. The visit was part of ongoing effort to document 150 narratives of victims and survivors, shedding light on the devastating impact of Sri Lanka's civil war and enforced disappearances. These stories will be shared on *puja.lk*, a platform dedicated to amplifying the voices of those affected and fostering dialogue on justice and reconciliation.

The team met with families whose loved ones disappeared and heard their stories including those about Sandhanam Selvanadhan, Mariadhas Joseph and Francis Packiyathan. These men, like many from the marginalised Malayaha Tamil community, left their homes in the 1990s seeking better prospects. Poverty and the lack of opportunities in their community led them to travel to conflict zones such as Kalmunai to work in rice mills, hoping to earn enough to support their families. Tragically, they never returned.

The Malayaha Tamil community, historically brought to Sri Lanka during British colonial rule to work on tea plantations, has long faced economic hardship, social exclusion and limited access to education and healthcare. They live on the margins of society, often invisible to the broader national narrative. This systemic neglect deepened during the civil war as many from the community sought work in war zones out of sheer necessity, unaware of the risks they faced.



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Selvanadhan's younger brother, Kurus Pillai, explained the hardship their family faced. "He left in 1990 to support us but we never saw him again. The last word we heard came from a lorry driver who told us to stop waiting." Virginy Joseph spoke of her husband, Mariadhas, who disappeared shortly after their marriage. "He sent me letters from Kalmunai about the dangers of war and then the letters stopped. It's been 34 years and we still don't know what happened." Francil Michael shared the pain of losing his brother, Francis Packiyathan and the family's long search for answers.

The PUJA team ensured that the stories were collected ethically with full consent from the families. The initiative highlights the project's commitment to responsible storytelling, providing a platform for families to share their pain and their hopes for justice.

The project aims to build public support for justice and accountability across ethnic divides. By documenting and sharing these stories, the project seeks to honour the memories of the disappeared and amplify the voices of families who have long been marginalised. As the stories are prepared for publication, PUJA hopes to bring attention to the ongoing plight of these communities, advocating for truth, justice and recognition.

For the families, telling their stories is not just about recounting the past; it is about seeking justice and ensuring their pain is acknowledged. "We may never get them back," said Francil, "but by sharing our stories, we hope for some peace and acknowledgment of our pain."

## Unity in Diversity: Stories of Connection

An experience sharing session was held in Minuwangoda under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project for 23 youth participants from 14 locations who had taken part in the youth placement programme conducted in August.

The youth placement programme involved 28 youth participants and Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members from 14 locations. With the support of coordinators, two youths from each location were paired with one or two LIRC member households for a 14 day immersive cultural and religious exchange. This initiative aimed to foster mutual understanding, respect and coexistence by providing youths with firsthand experiences of diverse cultures and faiths.

The experience sharing session served as a platform for participants to reflect on their journeys and share the transformative impact of the programme.

S.L.M. Rihnas, a youth from Kuliypitiya, was placed in Weligama where he met a Christian priest introduced by the Weligama coordinator. The priest, impressed by Rihnas' qualifications and interests, facilitated a job opportunity for him at a restaurant.



This achievement underscores the broader impact of the programme, not just in fostering cultural understanding but also in creating practical opportunities for personal growth and development. Each participant returned with stories reflecting the profound connections gained through the programme.



# Grassroots Campaign Promotes Women's Political Representation

A grassroots campaign was conducted in seven districts to promote women's political representation in parliamentary elections under the second phase of NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project in Badulla, Kandy, Kegalle, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Polonnaruwa. The campaign aimed to inform voters about the importance of electing female candidates and encourage inclusive political representation. It included the distribution of 7,000 informational leaflets and 3,500 awareness stickers that explained the importance of electing women to support transparent and accountable governance.

Community feedback showed differences in opinions and challenges across districts. In Nuwara Eliya, men from the community supported the campaign. One participant stated that the initiative encouraged him to advocate for women's leadership and he helped to distribute stickers and leaflets. In Badulla, community members already supported female candidates and used the campaign materials to increase awareness. In Matara, participants wanted more representation of women in parliament, pointing to social issues such as domestic violence as key concerns. One woman explained that political representation was necessary to address these issues. In Kegalle, there was limited awareness of female candidates in the district. A female government official revealed that the campaign materials influenced her to support women candidates and spread the message among her colleagues. In Kandy, voters prioritised merit-based selection of candidates, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

The campaign highlighted differences in awareness and attitudes toward women's political participation across districts. Some areas such as Matara showed strong support for women leaders while others such as Kegalle had gaps in awareness. In Nuwara Eliya and Badulla, the active involvement of local women in campaign activities showed potential for these areas to promote women's political leadership. Challenges such as gender biases and the limited visibility of female candidates in some areas remain significant barriers.

By engaging voters during the election period, the campaign aligned with public discussions about politics. It influenced community awareness and voter decisions by addressing gaps in information and creating discussions on women's political representation. It also contributed to efforts to reduce divisions across ethnic and religious lines.



# Promoting Inclusive Governance Through Dialogue on Power

A training session was conducted in the Kandy District for 35 participants from members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) and women's networks as part of NPC's European Union funded Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project to address negative narratives around power devolution and promote provincial elections supporting minority participation in governance.

The session was conducted by Dr. Nadeesh de Silva, a senior lecturer at the Open University. The project focuses on addressing misconceptions about devolution and discussing strategies to ensure elections and representation for minority communities and includes 25 district trainings, meetings, social media campaigns and media outreach to highlight the significance of devolution and inclusive governance.

The training covered Sri Lanka's diverse ethnic composition and explored the historical and cultural influences on perceptions of devolution. Key topics included mindful voting and its role in equitable representation, the relationship between pluralistic governance and inclusion and common false narratives such as concerns about national division and security risks.

Participants discussed the outcomes of power devolution including the rule of law and equity and debated structural approaches for power sharing within a legislative framework. Participants analysed positive and negative narratives about devolution. Historical incidents were identified as a key influence on perceptions. Some participants highlighted the need for structural rather than divisive approaches to power sharing. One participant emphasised structured mechanisms for devolution while another raised concerns about the lasting effects of historical ideologies. A female participant noted devolution's potential to promote equity and the rule of law.



The ACED project will hold similar programmes across 25 districts focusing on promoting diverse representation in governance and addressing misconceptions about devolution. NPC and its networks aim to support efforts toward inclusive governance.



# Fostering Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice in Governance

A workshop was conducted for senior government officers in the Galle District under NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice (PAIRS) project, held in collaboration with the Galle District Inter Religious Committee and the Sahana Social Development Alliance.

The workshop brought together 29 government officials including the District Secretary, Additional District Secretary, Assistant District Secretary, Divisional Secretaries from 22 divisions and the NGO Coordinator, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusion, reconciliation, and social justice in governance.

Dr. Sunil Wijesiriwardena, an expert in inclusion and reconciliation, conducted the sessions. He focused on the principles of social justice and how they can be practically applied in government service delivery. Participants engaged in discussions about embedding inclusivity and reconciliation into public policies and community relations.

W.A. Dharmasiri, the District Secretary of Galle, said, "The topics of inclusion and reconciliation are timely and relevant in today's context. As a society, we must carefully evaluate whether the principles of inclusion are truly present and practiced. When discussing sensitive topics like inclusion, they often spark significant societal debate. These discussions can lead to conflicts of opinion but such conflicts are essential. They challenge us to think critically, address varying perspectives and, ultimately, generate positive outcomes. Constructive disagreement fosters growth and understanding."

Mr. Dharmasiri expressed confidence in the systematic efforts being made by government officials to address these challenges within their operational frameworks.

The workshop provided a space for senior government officials to share experiences, fostering collaboration in addressing social inequalities. Participants discussed case studies, best practices and participated in role playing exercises to explore inclusive decision making.

Conducting the programme in the Southern Province with its predominantly Sinhala population and a history of religious and ethnic tensions sensitive area was an achievement, reflecting the ideas of NPC and its partners to promote reconciliation and harmony.

The workshop is an important step towards promoting inclusive governance. It provided senior officials with the knowledge and tools needed to support inclusion and reconciliation, laying the foundation for a more equitable society. The discussions and strategies developed are expected to positively influence policies and service delivery in the Galle District.



# Empowering Research and Dialogue for Reconciliation

NPC's Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER) project held a training workshop at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka (EUSL) focusing on enhancing research skills and fostering discussions on socio-political issues specifically through the lens of research methodologies and case study development.

The workshop aimed to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct qualitative research and develop case studies. It also sought to encourage students to engage with important socio-political issues relevant to their local communities. The workshop was led by Prof. T. Sathanathan, Dean of the Faculty of Health Care Sciences at EUSL.

Participants were grouped into research pods, each tasked with identifying specific research problems related to the Batticaloa District. The focus of the training was on applying research theories to address localised issues. The customised training structure provided participants with the opportunity to clarify doubts and receive tailored guidance on their research topics. As a result, students were able to deepen their understanding of research processes and strengthen their ability to contribute to public policy discussions through the district level government representatives.

A. Shakiththiyan, a research pod student at EUSL, said, "The workshop allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the project. As a student, it is a good to contribute to the public sector's decision making process and this involvement is both encouraging and motivating. Young people are eager to engage in such processes and having the opportunity to contribute through research is a privilege."

In addition to the training sessions, the MUSTER project hosted a Sri Lanka Barometer (SLB) session that brought together Local Inter Religious Committee members and university students to discuss the latest findings from SLB, a research tool used to track public opinion on key socio-political issues. Participants engaged in discussions on the findings with a particular focus on gathering insights from the Tamil-speaking community in Batticaloa.

S. Gangasuthar, an LIRC member, said, "Working with diverse communities through this programme has been an eye opening experience. Being fluent in Tamil and Sinhala allowed me to bridge gaps and connect with people from different backgrounds. This initiative has given me a deeper, practical understanding of research and its impact on society. Beyond academic insights, it reinforced the importance of addressing disparities in resources and opportunities. I'm hopeful that by collaborating across communities, we can foster trust and create positive change, especially in marginalised regions."

The MUSTER team conducted five more SLB findings sharing sessions in Kalutara, Hambantota, Vavuniya, Nuwara Eliya and Kandy for a total of 183 community members including youth, civil society representatives, religious leaders and government officials. The discussions were engaging and productive, providing valuable insights into the concerns and aspirations of local communities.

The MUSTER project team presented its achievements and findings at the GIZ Partner Day in Colombo. NPC's publications were showcased at the event, attracting the attention of participants and sparking interest in the work of the MUSTER project.

The project is committed to enhancing research capacity, promoting dialogue on important social issues and empowering young people to contribute to the reconciliation process.



# Prioritise Justice and Reconciliation Following Election Victory

The National Peace Council (NPC) extends its congratulations to President Anura Kumara Disanayake and the National People's Power (NPP) on their election victory, which secured a two-thirds majority in parliament. This overwhelming mandate reflects the trust placed in the president and his party to lead the country towards economic development, justice, and reconciliation.

The broad-based support for the government, spanning all regions of the country—including areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities—demonstrates a significant step towards national unity. The NPC recognizes this as an indication that the trust in the president's leadership has bridged ethnic and religious divides. In light of this unprecedented goodwill, the NPC calls on the government to prioritize resolving the country's long standing ethnic conflict.

We believe that a true national perspective has been reached by the NPP and it is essential that this aspect is strengthened by resolving outstanding issues as early as possible. These include issues pertaining to return of land to the people who owned it, the sharing and devolution of powers, demilitarisation of the northern and eastern provinces and missing and imprisoned persons, among others.

As the government embarks on a new chapter in the country's history, the NPC wishes it success in addressing the country's economic challenges and fostering justice, reconciliation, and peace for all its citizens. A sustainable political solution will require the participation of civil society, the consent of all communities and collaboration with opposition parties. Such a solution, with broad-based support, will ensure lasting peace and reconciliation for generations to come.

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**National Peace Council of Sri Lanka**

*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.*

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