



# Paths To Peace

August 2024

## Inauguration of New Project for Reconciliation and Justice

The effective implementation of democracy is vital for the economic, human and social development of any developing country. Ensuring human rights and democratic practices through institutions such as the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka is essential. International communities such as the European Union are keen to support the protection of public rights and freedom. Their involvement in election monitoring, legal reform and development assistance is crucial.

Achieving true inclusion requires addressing the needs of minority communities such as the Tamils, Malaiyaha and Muslims. A critical starting point for fostering peace is reforming the education system. Schools should be integrated rather than segregated by language or ethnicity and all students must be treated equitably to prevent discrimination.

In order to address such concerns, NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice project was inaugurated in Colombo with the participation of representatives from 16 partner organizations with three delegates from each organization. The participants engaged in discussions on the project's objectives, implementation strategies and the challenges in achieving sustainable peace. Valuable insights and feedback were shared for further consideration.

Some of the other issues highlighted during the meeting were that the Tamils have consistently called for a political solution to the ethnic conflict but successive governments have failed to address the conflict's root causes. Therefore international support is needed to resolve these issues. The Malaiyaha community, which has lived in Sri Lanka for 200 years, lacks secure land and formal addresses. Many work as low wage labourers in tea estates. Addressing their issues is essential for sustainable development.



# Women Leaders Rise to Meet the Call for Change

A Training of Trainers programme for 57 supergroup women from the districts of Badulla, Kandy, Kegalle, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Polonnaruwa was held in Colombo under the second phase of NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project.

The first day examined central action plans and governmental processes that empowered marginalised communities. Dr. Pavithra Jayawardhana, Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Colombo, spoke on the United Nations Women's action plan and its relevance to local governance and community engagement. Professor Osantha Nayanapriya, Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Kelaniya, explored the theoretical foundations of democracy and the crucial role women play in sustaining democratic values.

The second day shifted focus to the practical application of democratic principles. Trainer Ms. Kaushalya Dananjani led interactive role playing exercises and group discussions, allowing participants to experience democracy in action. The day concluded with an address by NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, who emphasised the importance of citizens' engagement in promoting peace and stability, encouraging participants to share their own experiences and perspectives.

On the final day skill development trainer Ms. Roshani Azeez delivered a session on communication strategies, group dynamics and conflict resolution. Practical exercises empowered the participants, building their confidence and preparing them to lead community initiatives effectively.

The participants left the programme with a sense of empowerment and a clear vision for the future. Their feedback reflected a commitment to applying the knowledge and skills gained during the sessions to enact meaningful changes within their communities. From advocating for reforms in the political system and revising laws related to women's rights, particularly the Gender Equality Bill, to fostering democratic values and promoting inclusion, the women are ready to challenge the status quo and drive social change.



The Tamil women, who shared their struggles with ethnic and gender-based discrimination, expressed a strong desire to share their knowledge with others in their communities, recognising the power of education in driving social change.

Many were eager to organise local workshops, discussions and training sessions, reflecting the programme's success in fostering a collective commitment to community development.

Several participants had ambitions to run for political office, inspired by the programme's focus on leadership and democratic engagement. They are motivated to challenge the status quo and ensure that women's voices are heard in the highest levels of decision making.



# Empowering Journalists: A Workshop on Mindful Storytelling

A mindful storytelling workshop was held in Minuwangoda under NPC's People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project, aiming to address issues such as enforced disappearances and human rights violations.

The workshop was led by Dr. Madhubashini Ratnayake, an award winning writer, and Ruki Fernando, a human rights activist and a trainer. Dr. Ratnayake revealed the art of storytelling. "Writing is not just about conveying information; it's about getting your readers to turn the pages, eager to discover what happens next. Ethical storytelling combines truth with the art of keeping your audience engaged," she said. Her insights underscored the importance of blending narrative craft with ethical considerations.

"The workshop provided valuable insights that will undoubtedly contribute to my storytelling endeavours. I am eager to apply the knowledge gained," one participant said.

Ruki Fernando gave an introduction to the complex topic of enforced disappearances. His sessions covered definitions, historical context and the personal struggles of affected families. Mr. Fernando's approach equipped journalists with a deeper understanding of the issue, enabling them to report with greater sensitivity and accuracy.

"The sessions clarified how to deeply explore and articulate complex subjects, making it easier for us to connect with our audiences," Tania De Silva from the Daily FT noted.

Namalee Makalandawa from the government media appreciated the practical approach, saying, "The hands on sessions were extremely useful. I believe such practical elements should be a staple in future workshops."

The workshop emphasised the importance of dialogue among journalists from different backgrounds. Vadivel Shakthivel from Eastern Press Club remarked, "The diversity of the participants added great value. The workshop not only provided new storytelling techniques but also fostered valuable connections between journalists from various communities."

Koshala Gunawardena, a freelance journalist, found the legal insights particularly valuable. "Learning about the legal aspects of enforced disappearances was crucial. I look forward to integrating this knowledge into my reporting," he said.

The collaborative nature of the workshop underscored the importance of unity in addressing human rights challenges. By equipping journalists from various backgrounds with the tools to tell powerful stories, NPC aims to inspire a collective movement toward understanding and reconciliation.

As a result of this workshop, journalists will produce stories on enforced disappearances, which will be featured on the PUJA Story website, set to launch soon.



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# Facilitating Inclusive Service Delivery to the Malaiyaha Community

A meeting was held in the Matara District under NPC's Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery project funded by Freedom House where a video documentary, which captured the challenges faced by the Malaiyaha community due to a lack of inclusion, was screened. The meeting was coordinated by Mr. Amarasena Samarathunga from Matara and facilitated by Sabaragamuwa University Senior lecturer Mr. Ravindra Palliyaguru.

The audience comprised 80 stakeholders including government officials, civil society leaders, media representatives, estate leaders, trade union representatives, youth leaders and estate workers. The meeting fostered a dialogue between the Malaiyaha community and stakeholders, providing a platform for community members to directly address their concerns and questions to government officials.

"Throughout my service period, I have had the privilege of working closely with the Malaiyaha community. This experience has been rewarding, allowing me to engage with a group that has been historically marginalised for over two centuries. The challenges they face are deeply rooted in a history of neglect and exclusion and addressing these challenges requires collective responsibility from all of us as citizens, government officials and society at large," said Ganesha Amarasinghe, District Secretary, Matara District.

Mr. Amarasinghe acknowledged the systemic marginalisation of the Malaiyaha community, highlighting its substantial contributions to the economy and society, which have often been overlooked.

He stressed the importance of dialogue and actions to mitigate the disparities, pointing out that particularly in regions such as Deniyaya and Pitabeddera, there was a significant population of the Malaiyaha community who continued to face numerous challenges, remaining on the fringes with limited access to essential services and opportunities for advancement.

"The Malaiyaha community must become more proactive in advocating for their rights. While external support is valuable, true empowerment comes from within," he said, encouraging the community to harness their voices to bring about meaningful change.



"This was the first time I had the opportunity to sit together with marginalised people and engage in discussions about their challenges. Through this programme, I gained a deeper understanding of just how marginalised and disadvantaged this community truly is," said Additional District Secretary of Matara District, Ms. Kanchana Thelpawila.

She suggested facilitating discussions involving estate superintendents and government officials to address the challenges faced by the Malaiyaha community.

"This meeting gave us a chance to talk, which is really valuable to us. Most of the time, we do not get an opportunity to speak to officials about our problems," an estate worker said. "It is also important for us to know that high level government officials are sensitive to our needs."

The worker's feedback highlights the need for continued dialogue, transparency and action to uplift marginalised communities.



# Research for Reconciliation in the North

The University of Jaffna hosted a district facilitation meeting for the research pods involved in the Mobilizing University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER) project. The meeting was attended by key stakeholders including four mentors and the university coordinator as well as the District NGO Coordinator, District Cultural Officer and District Integration Officer who contributed to discussions on the district's pressing issues.

The meeting focused on identifying and selecting research topics within the three thematic areas of dying cultural issues, issues leading to ethnic relations, and ethnic tensions, which will guide the research efforts of the students who will be instrumental in producing actionable findings aimed at addressing the challenges.

The District Integration Officer emphasised the crucial role that university students played in the project, particularly in the implementation of research findings and recommendations in a manner that was sustainable and beneficial to the public. He encouraged the research pods to concentrate on specific, actionable issues that would yield tangible results within the project's timeframe.

Dr. Ahilan Kadirgamar, a research pod mentor, reiterated that the project's primary objective was to conduct effective research with the collaboration of university academics, students and state officials, and to implement these findings at the local level with the support of relevant state bodies.

The project is implemented across the districts of Sabaragamuwa, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Matara and is supported by GIZ. In each district, 15 students from Ruhuna University, Jaffna University, Eastern University and Sabaragamuwa University are conducting research under the three thematic areas.

The project represents a significant collaborative effort between academic institutions, state officials and local communities to address critical socio-cultural issues and promote reconciliation.



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# Bridging Cultures and Building Connections

The Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) team conducted an exchange visit for representatives from Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC), Akurana LIRC and Vavuniya LIRC to foster cultural understanding and collaboration among the diverse communities.

The Additional District Secretary and Assistant Divisional Secretary from Matara also participated.

The visit commenced in Nochchikulam in the Vavuniya district where participants had the opportunity to engage with the Telugu community, providing a deeper understanding of their culture, traditions and the challenges they faced, fostering mutual respect and awareness.

On the second day, the delegation visited several historically significant sites in Mannar such as the Madu Church, Thiruketheeswaram Kovil, Mahathota Rajamaha Vihara and the wind power plant. The participants were able to appreciate the religious harmony that existed in the region.



The final day of the visit was dedicated to an experience sharing session attended by the Vavuniya District Secretary, Additional District Secretary and the Vavuniya South Divisional Secretary. The discussion focused on the insights gained during the visit and the potential for future collaboration between the different LIRCs.

Participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to learn from one another and strengthen the bonds between their communities.

## Enhancing Election Transparency

NPC's Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project conducted a series of training sessions in the Kalutara, Galle and Kandy districts focusing on enhancing election transparency.

Dr. Nadeesh De Silva led a session with 43 participants in the Kalutara District covering election rights, general election laws, campaign finance laws and the practical application of Right to Information (RTI) laws. He also conducted a similar session in the Galle District for 39 participants including media personnel, election monitoring groups, community leaders and youth leaders.

The third session was led by Mr. Manjula Gajanayake, Executive Director of the Institute for Democratic Reforms and Electoral Studies (IRES), with 45 participants in the Kandy District.

Participants said that the training programme was instrumental in enhancing their understanding of election rights, laws and the application of RTI laws and indicated that it would significantly improve their ability to monitor and report on electoral processes, supporting efforts to promote election transparency.



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# Seeking Commitment of Presidential Candidates

**Position Paper by Members of Religious and Civil Society and the Academic Community from all parts of the country to Presidential Candidates seeking their Commitment to Resolving Sri Lanka's Ethnic Problem**

## Background

This document has been compiled by members of religious and civil society and the academic community from all parts of the country after extensive discussion and consultations conducted over a period of several months. It is to be presented to the presidential candidates to include in their manifestos along with the pledge that they will support its implementation regardless of the outcome of the election. Among other initiatives, this document builds on the initiative taken in April 2023 by a group of Buddhist monks and Tamil Diaspora who formulated the "Himalaya Declaration" as a starting point for a national dialogue towards a political solution.

## Objectives

- Broaden the support for the statement to include other groups including political parties, professional organizations and other interest groups.
- Have consultations with the main presidential candidates
- Candidates pledge to give cross party support to the implementation of the policies and actions outlined below.
- Follow up the implementation of the measures by the elected president

## Proposed Policies and Actions:

### 1. Power sharing

- Ensure balanced devolution of power to regions and power-sharing at the centre (Senate – upper chamber), promoting unity while respecting regional autonomy.
- Protection of minority rights: This will apply to regional numerical minorities in all parts of the country.
- Streamline and demarcate administrative districts to ensure greater ethnic and religious cohesion. Operationalize national land policy through a land commission and implement the devolution of land and police powers as specified in the 13th Amendment
- Transfer Concurrent List Powers and Stop Interfering with the Devolved list of powers: Empower provincial councils with all devolved concurrent list powers to enable greater local governance and autonomy.
- Conduct Provincial Council and other local government elections without further delay following the Presidential Election

### 2. Transitional justice

- Resolve issues of the war in accordance with international standards of transitional justice: These include missing persons, prisoners, reparations and accountability for gross human rights violations, including emblematic cases.
- Equitable Military Presence: Normalize Troop Levels and ensure that the presence of armed troops in the North and East is proportionate to other regions, fostering a sense of normalcy and security.
- Standardize Policing Practices: Mandate that police operations in the North and East are conducted with the same standards and respect for human rights as in other parts of the country, and recruiting personnel from the same regions.
- Apply principles of transitional justice to the Malaiyaha Tamil community who were deprived of their citizenship at the time of Independence, remain among the most discriminated against and politically, economically and socially marginalised communities and have not received reparations for this grave human rights violation.



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- Provide land and housing to the Malaiyaha Tamil people: Confer ownership of houses with adequate land to enable lives of safety and dignity.

### 3. Equal Protection

- Safeguard Religious Heritage: Protect religious sites from encroachment and appropriation by adherents of other religions, preserving cultural and religious diversity. Respect the pluralism and diversity of religious communities and local religious traditions in their respective places.
- Reallocate Land to the people: Return land acquired from people during the war including opening of roads to provide access to the public.
- Enforce Language Equality: Ensure the effective implementation of the official languages law, guaranteeing linguistic rights for all communities.
- End Caste Discrimination: Implement measures to eradicate caste-based discrimination throughout the country, ensuring equality and social justice.
- Enhance Employment in State and Private Sectors: Provide equal employment opportunities for ethnic and religious minorities in state and private sector entities, end all discrimination and provide affirmative action to enable economic equity
- Provide Equal Access to State facilities for Economic Wellbeing: Offer financial services to start-up ventures in the North and East on par with other regions, stimulating economic growth and entrepreneurship.
- Malaiyaha Tamils: Ensure that the land rights and other entitlements to government services and support to Malaiyaha Tamils displaced and living in the North and the East are fulfilled without any discrimination.

### 4. Good Governance

- Ensure accountability through strengthening the judiciary and respect for the rule of law; End corruption at all levels and promote transparency at all levels
- Create and promote institutions of trust building between the state and the people, and between political parties and ethnic and religious communities.
- Sustainable development while protecting the economically and socially marginalized
- Creation of independent institutions and provide security of tenure to public officers through the reinstatement of Permanent Secretaries to Ministries
- Fulfill international obligations with respect to human rights covenants and to resolutions of the UN system
- Balanced foreign policy reflecting values and national interests and protect the non-aligned legacy of Sri Lanka

Endorsed by:

Ven Dr. Madampagama Assaji Mahanayake Thero Ven Kalupahana Piyaratana Thero

Fr C.G. Jeyakumar

Bishop (emeritus) Asiri Perera

Mr A.W. Hilmy Ahamed Dr Vinya Ariyaratne

Prof Fazeeha Azmi

Ms Visaka Dharmadasa Mr S.C.C. Elankovan

Prof Savitri Goonesekere Prof P. Iyngaran

Prof T. Jayasingam Dr S. Jeevasuthan

Mr V. Kamaladas Mr Niranjana

Mr M. H. M. Niyas

Dr Dayani Panagoda Dr Jehan Perera

Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu Prof Kalinga Tudor Silva

Prof S. S. Sivakumar

Dr Shanmugarajah Srikanthan Dr Joe William

Mr Javid Yusuf

*Media Release issued on 26.08.2024*



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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.*

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: [www.peace-srilanka.org](http://www.peace-srilanka.org)

Email: [info@peace-srilanka.org](mailto:info@peace-srilanka.org)

Tel: 011 2818344, 011 2854127

Fax: 0112819064