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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



# Paths To Peace

August 2025

## From Dialogue to Action: Listening to Forgotten Voices

NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation, and Social Justice (PAIRS) project, funded by Misereor and co-funded by CAFOD, implemented in collaboration with its partner organizations, marked a transition from community dialogue to tangible action.

Under the project NPC together with the Kurunegala District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC), the Kurunegala Human Rights Organization, the Road Passenger Transport Authority and the Kurunegala District Secretariat office launched an initiative to promote equality and respect for all faiths on public buses.

Stickers with the major religious symbols were placed inside buses, reserving seats for clergy and persons with disabilities with messages in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Earlier, priority seat stickers only displayed a Buddhist symbol, granting seating exclusively to Buddhist clergy. The new stickers represent all major religions to ensure equal recognition and respect for every faith.

The initiative was a result of a meeting between civil society leaders in the Kurunegala District and the project team to address concerns about inclusivity in public transport, which involved coordinating with authorities and designing the new stickers.



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The event was attended by government officials, religious leaders, civil society members and the public. It not only promoted inclusivity but also gave civil society leaders valuable hands on experience in advocacy, coordination and public engagement. They emerged more confident in working collaboratively with government institutions and leading initiatives that reflect equality and respect.

“More than just stickers, this reflects the fairness, unity and respect we are trying to build in the district,” said D.M.K. Chandana Dissanayaka, Kurunegala District Secretary.

Actualisation activities were conducted by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and DIRCs in Colombo, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Monaragala and Kandy for about 600 participants, demonstrating how grassroots efforts can affect social views and governance.

In Colombo the activity brought together religious leaders and participants from CSOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), NGOs and government departments. The discussions addressed issues such as foreign nationals conducting business and establishing religious institutions on tourist visas, concerns over educational reforms, wild elephant killings, the urgent need for a state institution to promote national and religious coexistence and strengthening action against the underworld and illegal drugs.

“The issues we are discussing are challenges faced across the country. As religious leaders, we are closely observing the commitments made by the government and it is clear that these problems are well known at the national level. What is needed now is a united effort to address them for the sake of our country, our people and our society without divisions of caste, religion or party politics. We hope to present these concerns directly to President Anura Kumara Disanayake and work towards real and lasting solutions,” said Galle Piyananda Himi of the Darmashakthi Foundation.

In Dimbulagala NPC organized an event to build a bridge between state officials and the community to collaboratively address local issues. Representing two Divisional Secretariats, more than 75 community members participated in the event, highlighting strong grassroots engagement and a shared commitment to dialogue and problem solving. Issues raised included the lack of civil documentation, school dropouts due to poor transport, the human-elephant conflict, drug abuse, flooding and land disputes.

The Polonnaruwa actualisation activity showcased how community voices and government action can come together to bring immediate results. Urgent issues raised by local people received direct responses from senior officials, resulting in practical solutions such as the introduction of a new bus route starting from the following day to ensure schoolchildren’s access to education, the rehabilitation of irrigation tanks to prevent flooding, the deployment of a special police team to tackle drugs and theft and the initiation of investigations into long standing missing persons cases. What made this initiative remarkable was its bottom up approach where top level officers, including the Polonnaruwa District Secretary and divisional authorities, stepped into the community to listen and respond on the spot. This collaborative model demonstrated the true power of partnership between government officials, civil society organizations and religious leaders in resolving issues faced by communities in Polonnaruwa.

“We all recognise the importance of building both religious and ethnic reconciliation in our district. Through the Polonnaruwa DIRC, many programmes have already been implemented they have all been successful. Today’s programme marks another meaningful step in that ongoing journey. Of course challenges still remain. But if we can identify the root causes of these problems, finding solutions will become much easier. What makes today’s activity special is that it brings all our officials together in one place, creating a real opportunity to share ideas, listen to one another and work collectively as a team,” said Sujantha Ekanayake, Polonnaruwa District Secretary.



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NPC, in collaboration with the Anuradhapura District Civil Society Forum, the DIRC and the Anuradhapura District Citizens' Committee organized a programme on civil society collective for a sustainable society, bringing together about 100 participants including civil society leaders and media representatives. During the event civil society leaders engaged in open discussions on pressing local issues and handed over a statement of concerns to the relevant authorities including difficulties faced by women and children in accessing services at the Women and Children's Bureau offices under the police, reserved priority seating in public transport being allocated almost exclusively to Buddhist monks without equal recognition for leaders of other religions, Tamil speaking citizens often having their complaints recorded in Sinhala at police stations and being asked to sign statements they cannot fully understand and limited accessibility for persons with disabilities in public spaces and services.

The District Secretary acknowledged the importance of such initiatives, noting that these forums are vital in bringing issues to light and creating greater awareness among authorities. The event demonstrated how civil society, religious leaders and government officials can come together to address real challenges faced by citizens. By raising issues collectively and securing a commitment from authorities, CSO leaders strengthened their role as advocates for inclusive governance and sustainable development in Anuradhapura.

"I see this initiative as a practical step for equality and respect among all communities. The participation of multiple stakeholders helped make the programme effective," said Ranjith Wimalasooriya, District Secretary of Anuradhapura.

A number of urgent issues confront communities in the Monaragala district including financial difficulties, water scarcity, drug related problems, barriers to children's education and land disputes.

Although there are many civil organizations in the Monaragala District, little is known about their real operations because the majority are not officially affiliated with NGOs. To address this, an event was held to identify CSOs and CBOs in the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat Division and get information about their functions. This helped to strengthen these organizations, increase their visibility and promote social development by empowering them to provide services of higher quality to the local community. NPC was successful in creating a new consortium that consists of 100 civil society organizations, bringing together nearly 100 community-based groups, NGOs and civil organizations. The initiative provided a strong platform for networking, sharing information and coordinating activities while also increasing public awareness of the services offered by these organizations. As a result, the consortium has strengthened partnerships between civil society and government institutions, improved service delivery and created a foundation for long term positive impact on communities across the district. By uniting CSOs under a common platform, Monaragala has taken an important step toward more inclusive and effective community development. NPC is the pioneer in creating this consortium with a diverse thematic expertise and resources.



“As Sarvodaya, we are a grassroots organization working across various areas of the Monaragala district. We provide services to society and it is meaningful that so many of us were able to gather together that day. We truly value this opportunity. I believed that the Monaragala district has gained an important space to unite as civil society organizations and better serve the people. I express my appreciation to NPC, which took the initiative for this effort and did an excellent job in making it possible,” said R.M Amara Shanthi Kumari, District Deputy Manager of Sarvodaya.

Also in Monaragala, a mobile clinic opened its doors to many in need. Among those who attended in large numbers was the Rathugala Vedda community. Their leader, Danigala Mahabandalage Sudawannila Aththo, spoke about the struggles his people endure. For the community, every attempt to seek government services meant further financial strain and worsening living conditions because people had to travel long distances to access the services, spending Rs 2,000 to 3,000 for every journey. The discussion that followed created tension. Government officials defended their services, insisting they treated all communities equally while the Vedda community felt their lived reality was dismissed. The atmosphere grew heavy, deepening the divide between the people and those meant to serve them. At that critical moment, NPC stepped forward. With patience and compassion, NPC mediated between the two sides, encouraging dialogue instead of division. NPC’s team paid multiple visits to the area, held constructive discussions and continuously followed up until both parties could finally sit together in a spirit of understanding. NPC became the bridge of trust, ensuring the voices of the Rathugala Vedda were not lost. As a result, government officials eventually agreed to travel to Rathugala, meeting the community face to face to better understand their challenges and seek solutions. Twenty government officers attended the meeting, representing both the Monaragala District Secretariat and the Medulla Divisional Secretariat.

This moment was more than problem solving - it was about restoring dignity, rebuilding relationships and proving that dialogue can heal divides. NPC’s commitment has opened a path of hope for the Rathugala Vedda community, showing that even the most forgotten voices can be heard when compassion meets action.

In Kandy, the use of the term minority race in open spaces and in mainstream media has caused resentment among minority communities and created a sense of being treated as second class citizens. To address this, an actualisation activity was held that focused on changing the term minority to fraternal communities. Steps taken included creating social discourse through social media and distributing voice clips of well-known personalities, organizing press conferences and peaceful protests, holding discussions with religious leaders, publishing newspaper advertisements with signatures and messages from scholars and submitting formal requests with necessary information to the Minister of Mass Media, ministers in charge of national integration and other government leaders.



# Building Stronger Communities Through Stronger Social Cohesion

Women and Youth for Civic Engagement (WOICE) project teams from Monaragala, Kandy, Kegalle and Badulla carried out community interventions under the third phase of the project implemented by the NPC. Each district identified pressing local issues and organized meaningful programmes to empower communities and strengthen social cohesion. The event highlighted the importance of bridging gaps between rural communities and essential services.

In Monaragala, the team conducted its second intervention, addressing the challenges faced by villagers with low literacy levels in accessing government services. Government officials provided practical guidance while community members engaged in discussions. “This is just the beginning. We need to bring these people out of isolation, enrich them with experience and empower them to raise their voices,” a local government officer observed.

In Kandy, the team turned its attention to urban needs by surveying the city’s public toilet system. Visiting the public market, clock tower and going on the roads, the team gathered opinions from residents, vendors and foreign tourists on cleanliness, facilities and charges. Many noted the timeliness of the initiative and pledged support for creating a cleaner, more organized environment.

In Kegalle, the team held its first community intervention at the Community Development Centre to support the Tamil community of Ambadeniya Watta. The programme focused on moving away from extremist influences and strengthening organizational capacity. A community society was formed and it was agreed to hold monthly committee meetings with government officials to maintain dialogue and find sustainable solutions.

In Badulla, the team organized a job fair targetting unemployed young women and men. Public and private sector representatives provided information on job opportunities and vocational training pathways.

“After participating in this programme, I realised that professional skills can be developed through proper vocational education. I am now working with a goal and I can lay a strong foundation for my future,” said student Kamleshan Selvakumar.

The programmes demonstrate the impact of youth and women led initiatives in addressing real issues faced by communities. By empowering people with knowledge, resources and opportunities, the project continues to build pathways to peace and reconciliation across Sri Lanka.



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# Inter Country Exchange on Electoral Research and Strategy

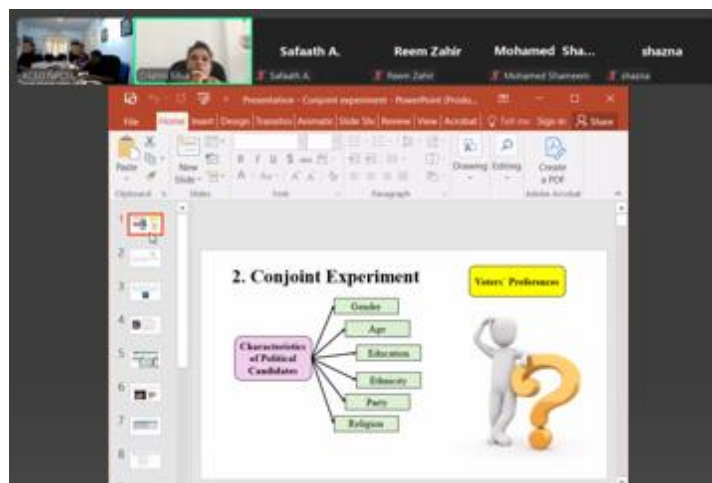
As part of the EU-funded Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project, an online inter country exchange learning meeting was held to share findings from recent research on factors influencing voter preference in elections and to explore strategies with Maldivian partners. The meeting was structured around three key components: the presentation of research findings, reflections on the Sri Lankan context and a joint strategy discussion in light of similar challenges in the Maldives particularly vote buying.

The study, which covered all 25 districts of Sri Lanka, examined shifts in political attitudes and public expectations of democracy. (The full survey is available at <https://peace-srilanka.org/images/publications/Factors%20Guiding%20Voter%20Preference%20in%20Sri%20Lanka%20-%20ACED%202024.pdf>)

Findings were presented by Ms. Chrishni de Silva of the Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Colombo. She highlighted how youth engagement increased after the Aragalaya movement and presented insights on voter priorities, political literacy and decision making, public dissatisfaction with traditional politics and the demand for a third political force, the role of media, the decline of patronage politics and variations in political interest across age groups and gender.

From the Maldives, Dunya Maumoon, Chair of the Advisory Board of Women & Democracy (W&D) and the country's first female Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ms. Safaath Ahamed, Founder and President of W&D, joined the discussions alongside several Maldivian participants. They observed that their country faces comparable challenges including corruption, low youth participation and underrepresentation of women in politics. During question time Maldivian participants raised questions on strategies to strengthen youth involvement. In response, Ms. de Silva drew on Sri Lanka's experience where young people mobilised in reaction to political and economic crises stemming from instability and governance failures.

The meeting concluded with reflections from Maldivian partners and their constituencies who stressed the importance of advancing accountability and transparency mechanisms within the Maldives. They noted that Sri Lanka's experiences illustrate how changing political attitudes, particularly among youth, can drive reform agendas and democratic progress. They also expressed interest in conducting a similar survey in the Maldives and requested NPC's assistance to do so. The session closed with a shared commitment to continue such meaningful engagements in the future.



# A Collaborative Path to Peace

District level closing meetings for the final phase of NPC's Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER) project were held with the participation of the Universities of Ruhuna and Jaffna, bringing together university academics, students and government officials representing the District Secretariat. The discussions highlighted the social outcomes of the project, lessons learned and ideas for the future. Participants emphasised the value of collaboration between universities, government officials and civil society in addressing community issues.

"We often work with non-governmental organizations but this was a new experience for us. The students worked very closely with us and we had the opportunity to build a research-based foundation for our work. The most significant aspect is that the programme allowed students to change their misconceptions about the public sector," a government representative from Matara said.

"As a university, we are truly pleased to have been part of this programme. It has been extremely valuable for our students, who gained both research skills and field experience. We request that similar programmes are held in the future," said a representative from Jaffna University.

"This is our first time collaborating with a university. It was a new and enriching experience that allowed students to engage in addressing real issues within the district. We were able to work closely with NPC and better understand its vision," a government official from Jaffna said.

A final joint meeting was held online connecting the four universities engaged in the project: Universities of Jaffna, Sabaragamuwa, Ruhuna and Eastern University. The session, which was attended by NPC's Executive Director, Dr. Jehan Perera as well as representatives from the donor agency GIZ, focused on the project's strengths, social outcomes of the project, lessons learned and ideas for the future.

"This project can indeed be described as very productive. Research is about creating change in society and we had the opportunity to make that positive change with the involvement of students. By combining universities and the public sector, such research can help us avoid many social problems in the future. Our society will continue to benefit from this work and we will gladly support such efforts in the years ahead," said Ravindra Chandrasiri Palliyaguruge, Senior Lecturer at Sabaragamuwa University.

The project has shown that building bridges between universities, communities and government institutions not only enhances research but also strengthens reconciliation and social development across Sri Lanka.



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# Government Must Share its Plan for National Reconciliation

As Sri Lanka prepares to appear before the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva this September under Resolution 51/2, the government will need to show more than promises. The UN Human Rights High Commissioner's 2025 report recognises that the new government has both a historic opportunity and a clear mandate to deliver results. The continuation of arbitrary arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, custodial deaths, intimidation of civil society and the discovery of mass graves such as at Chemmani the UN report highlights shows the urgency of action.

Earlier this month the Cabinet of Ministers approved the development of a new National Policy and Action Plan on Reconciliation and Co-existence, to be spearheaded by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) under the Ministry of Justice. A credible plan must include clear deadlines to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act, complete mass grave investigations, establish an independent Truth and Reconciliation Commission with international participation, and create a prosecutorial body to pursue emblematic cases from the war and the Easter Sunday bombings. Military involvement in civilian life in the north and east must be scaled back, and land disputes resolved transparently.

Just as critical are steps that improve the daily lives of ethnic and religious minorities. People should not feel threatened by representatives of any faith. They must be free to use their language wherever they choose, yet even today many government documents are not available in Tamil. This must be corrected immediately. Provincial Council elections should not be delayed for delimitation exercises. In the east, appointments to senior government posts must reflect the Tamil-speaking majority, yet there has never been a Tamil Government Agent in Trincomalee or Ampara. The same exclusion is seen across departments, from the police to banks and forest services, where Tamil speakers remain under-represented. Courts in the east accommodate Sinhala but rarely Tamil, although Tamil speakers are often bilingual. This imbalance must end.

Development in the east lags behind the rest of the country. Batticaloa, historically the capital of the east, has lost its centrality since the establishment of the provincial council system and has not recovered. Key services such as telecoms, taxation and provincial administration are located elsewhere, leaving Batticaloa behind while towns like Polonnaruwa and Ampara have grown rapidly. Transport links are also neglected: there is no train from Batticaloa to Trincomalee or Jaffna, and no air-conditioned bus service from Batticaloa to Jaffna. These shortcomings reinforce the sense of exclusion and abandonment which is not limited to Batticaloa but other parts of the north and east.

What is needed for the forthcoming UNHRC session in Geneva is not another statement of intent but a concrete plan that delivers justice, guarantees language and religious rights, ensures fair representation in public service, and restores equality in development. Without this, reconciliation will remain out of reach. The National Peace Council urges the government to engage constructively with the opposition and with civil society in shaping its position at the forthcoming UNHRC session.

*Media release issued on 26.08.25*



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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.*

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