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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



Paths To Peace

August 2026

Building Peace Before Crisis Becomes Conflict

What happens when a country tries to rebuild while still carrying the weight of unresolved grievances, economic hardship, disaster, political uncertainty and social division?

For NPC, the answer cannot be to wait for stability before beginning the work of reconciliation. It is in this challenging context that NPC has launched ACT NOW - Accountability, Cohesion and Trust for Non-discrimination, Ownership and Wellbeing, a new initiative designed to strengthen reconciliation, inclusion and democratic resilience across 12 districts.

The project's two-day orientation brought together 35 participants, including 14 women and 21 men, comprising project staff, district level facilitators and key stakeholders. The orientation represented a collective commitment to ensuring that peacebuilding, justice and inclusion remain part of the recovery process rather than being postponed until a future period of stability.

ACT NOW has emerged from a recognition that peacebuilding challenges are no longer confined to traditional conflict-related tensions. Communities are now navigating overlapping economic, ecological, social and political pressures. The orientation reflected on the devastating impact of Cyclone Ditwah in November 2025 that affected 1.4 million people and caused an estimated \$4.1 billion in damage, equivalent to approximately 4% of the GDP. At the same time, the country is preparing to resume external debt repayments from 2028 under the IMF Extended Fund Facility, placing additional pressure on fiscal space. The project also anticipates that the political environment surrounding future national elections could heighten risks of polarisation and identity-based mobilisation. These pressures can deepen existing inequalities if recovery processes are not inclusive.

ACT NOW begins with a simple but powerful premise that reconciliation cannot wait for stability. When disaster recovery, land administration, livelihood rebuilding and political transitions are managed without sufficient attention to inclusion and dignity everyday grievances can deepen, public trust can weaken and unresolved injustices can be pushed further out of public discussion.

From the success of Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice (PAIRS) to the next generation of peacebuilding, ACT NOW does not begin from zero. It builds on the experience and achievements of the PAIRS project, which demonstrated the potential of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) as networks for advocacy, inclusion and social justice.



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The achievements provided an important foundation for ACT NOW and reinforced a key lesson: when people from different religious and civic backgrounds work together through trusted local structures, they can become a powerful force for peace, social justice and inclusion. ACT NOW seeks to take this experience further from project-supported activities towards peace infrastructure and practices that can endure beyond individual funding cycles.

ACT NOW is built around three interconnected objectives. The first is managing local tensions. The project will strengthen DIRCs and develop youth mediators as first line peace infrastructure capable of responding to tensions connected to disaster recovery, land, livelihoods and political mobilisation. The second is embedding inclusion in state practice. Rather than focusing only on formal policy reform, ACT NOW seeks to encourage more inclusive, transparent and non-discriminatory behaviour among district and sub-district state actors. The ambition is to make consultation, fairness and inclusion part of everyday administrative practice. The third is safeguarding civic memory and public space. Economic recovery and political transitions should not push unresolved questions of justice and governance into silence. ACT NOW will therefore support continued narrative gathering and ethical reflection so that issues such as enforced disappearances and land dispossession remain part of responsible public engagement.

Connecting institutions, communities and the next generation, the scale of ACT NOW is deliberately broad. The project uses a three-tier stakeholder ecosystem. Across the 12 target districts, the project anticipates contributing to outcomes that can ultimately benefit more than 11 million people indirectly. Investing in women and youth has a particularly important role in ACT NOW's vision of sustainable peace. Women community leaders will be supported to strengthen local advocacy while newly elected women local government representatives will engage with questions of democracy and minority inclusion. Young people will be developed not simply as beneficiaries of peacebuilding but as community mediators capable of identifying tensions early and supporting constructive responses. This inter-generational approach is central to the project's sustainability strategy. Mediation skills that are locally relevant and transferable can continue to serve communities beyond the life of the project.

ACT NOW is implemented by NPC with Misereor as the principal funder and complementary support from CAFOD and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The partnership brings together organizations with complementary international commitments to human dignity, social justice, development, democracy and inclusion.

Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops' Organization for Development Cooperation, has worked for more than six decades to address poverty and support people across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) is the official overseas aid agency of the Catholic church in England and Wales and part of the global Caritas Internationalis network. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is an independent, nonprofit foundation dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions around the world.

During the orientation, NPC staff also reviewed administrative, financial and reporting procedures to ensure that project implementation is transparent, accountable and compliant with organizational and donor requirements.



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Accelerating Access to Post-Ditwah Recovery

Nearly nine months after Cyclone Ditwah caused widespread destruction across Sri Lanka, many unresolved issues continue to burden members of the Malaiyaha community. Most critically, affected community members face severe difficulties when applying for compensation and essential documents lost during the disaster, including national identity cards, birth and marriage certificates, student school records and land deeds.

This documentation gap severely restricts their access to state welfare, healthcare, formal education and basic civil rights. Several systemic barriers exacerbate this crisis:

Lack of guidance and awareness - Community members often lack technical knowledge regarding government administrative procedures and receive minimal guidance on where to start. This is being addressed as part of the Carter Centre supported intervention of the NPC through the capacitation of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) on systemic barriers faced by their community and how to proactively address them.

Administrative and political bottlenecks - Delays are further compounded by a lack of cooperation from some state officials, complex administrative procedures and party-political bias. NPC is working with Divisional Secretariats and relevant officials, including Grama Niladhari officers, social services officers and development officers to streamline procedures for replacing lost documentation and processing compensation claims.

Language barriers - Communication is frequently hindered because the majority of state officials are Sinhalese, creating a major barrier for Tamil-speaking Malaiyaha community members. The trained HRDs will intervene and act as community mediators in this process.

Non-estate worker marginalisation - Estate residents who are not directly employed by estate companies face heightened vulnerability as estate management often prioritises current employees when endorsing official documents or providing recommendations. For example, a resident of a Nuwara Eliya estate whose entire family was affected by Cyclone Ditwah sought management's endorsement for a request for school shoes for his children. Although his parents were still employed by the estate, management informed him that he would need to work on the estate for three months before they would validate his request. As a result, he was unable to obtain the endorsement before the submission deadline and could not submit the application to the relevant authority. He was therefore denied assistance simply because he was not employed by the estate at the time of the crisis.



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Institutional gaps - There is a critical shortage of local civil society organizations dedicated to post-Ditwah recovery and advocacy. NPC is addressing this gap in the two districts by bringing together relevant Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and connecting them to the state apparatus as part of this intervention and where necessary, work together to identify gaps and address issues.

Through the Building Safe and Effective Human Rights Defenders in Malaiyaha Communities supported by the Carter Centre, NPC is working in the Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts to address systemic barriers faced by the marginalised Malaiyaha communities. The initiative creates a multi-stakeholder network linking victims, state officials, disaster management officers, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and HRDs to streamline document recovery. As part of this rollout, 30 active HRDs were selected across the Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts who completed project orientation sessions, including the follow up orientation and needs assessment carried out in the Nuwara Eliya district. The participants demonstrated high engagement and commitment to leading grassroots recovery efforts within their communities.

The HRD cadre included social activists, university graduates, school teachers, local business owners and members of community-based organizations and local and international NGOs. Moving forward, these trained HRDs will facilitate and work with relevant divisional secretariat offices to conduct field level documentation clinics, liaise with the state to find long term solutions to persistent issues arising in the post Ditwah context and establish direct referral pathways to accelerate document re-issuance for affected families.

Breaking the Silence on Stalled Provincial Council Elections

NPC's Women Organizing for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project conducted five training sessions in the districts of Monaragala, Matara, Kegalle, Polonnaruwa and Kandy, bringing together about 30 participants per session - totalling over 120 dynamic women leaders - engaging peer groups, senior super groups and vibrant WOICE youth members.

Facilitated by Dr. Crisni Silva, Senior Lecturer at the University of Colombo, the intensive sessions provided an open forum to confront critical democratic issues that have remained in abeyance for years. The first session in Monaragala focused on the eight year delay of Provincial Council elections and its impact on democratic representation, local governance and access to public services. Provincial Council elections have remained pending since 2018, creating a prolonged gap in elected representation at the provincial level. Participants highlighted that this delay has weakened democratic accountability and limited opportunities for citizens, particularly women, to participate in political decision making and leadership at the regional level.



Participants reflected on how the prolonged absence of elected Provincial Councils has affected access to services. With governors exercising significant authority in the absence of elected councils, participants felt that decision making at the provincial level has become more centralised and difficult for ordinary citizens to access. They emphasised that elected representatives are essential for ensuring that people's concerns are communicated, public services are responsive and authorities can be held accountable.

The discussion in Matara took a broader historical and constitutional perspective. Participants were particularly interested in understanding the powers and functions of Provincial Councils in relation to the 13th Amendment introduced in the context of the ethnic conflict and efforts toward devolution of power. The discussion explored whether Provincial Councils provide citizens with meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making and address issues affecting their communities.

One particularly insightful discussion explored the perception that devolution could allow communities to exercise greater authority over matters affecting their own territories. Participants also examined the limits of such authority and the relationship between national, provincial, and local levels of government. The session therefore provided an opportunity to understand how Sri Lanka's system of governance is structured, from the central government to Provincial Councils and Local Authorities, and how political representation and decision making are expected to function at each level.

The discussions ultimately raised an important democratic question: How can citizens reclaim and mainstream democratic rights that have remained in abeyance for years? Participants recognised that restoring regular Provincial Council elections was fundamental to ensuring democratic representation, accountability, responsive governance and greater opportunities for women to enter and influence political leadership at the provincial level.

The session provided an opportunity for an in-depth discussion on the land rights of the Malayaha Tamil community. The discussion highlighted that land rights were not simply about obtaining a legal document or a piece of land on which to live. They were fundamentally about recognition, dignity, belonging and equal citizenship.

“Land rights are not only about getting a proper license for the land where we live. It is about recognition and having a sense of belonging. It is not simply about receiving a piece of land. With land ownership comes recognition and the ability to exercise our rights as citizens,” said a member of the Kegalle Super Group.

These challenges have been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, political instability and the devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah. The project's grassroots women leaders, including members of the peer groups and super groups, emphasised the importance of bringing the land rights of the Malayaha Tamil community into this mainstream discourse. They highlighted that economic recovery and democratic development cannot be fully achieved without addressing historical inequalities and ensuring that marginalised communities have secure access to land, housing, public services and their full rights as citizens.

Transitional justice seeks to promote accountability, truth seeking and institutional reforms aimed at preventing future conflict. Women leaders highlighted that much of the fear surrounding transitional justice stems from a lack of clear and accessible communication. “It is a difficult and far-fetched concept for ordinary people to understand. It has also been politically manipulated year after year and some people perceive it as an approach that focuses only on ethnicity,” said Anoma Kapukotuwa, a Kandy peer group member.

The discussion highlighted the need to demystify transitional justice through simple language, community-level dialogue and transparent communication, enabling women leaders and communities to engage meaningfully in conversations about truth, justice, reconciliation and lasting peace.

The training explored how democratic issues that have remained in abeyance can be brought back into public discussion and placed on the mainstream agenda. Participants discussed the importance of raising awareness, countering misinformation, strengthening women's voices and creating spaces for constructive dialogue.



Dealing with the Past in New Ways

NPC convened a dialogue bringing together Sri Lanka's two principal institutions dealing with the past, the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations (OR) with international human rights lawyer and New York University Professor of Law Vasuki Nesiah. NPC is currently engaged in working with the OMP with support from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI).

The discussion provided an opportunity to reflect on how Sri Lanka's approach to truth, reparations and reconciliation could evolve. Opening the meeting, NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera recalled that following Sri Lanka's co-sponsorship of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 in 2015, the government had pledged to establish four transitional justice mechanisms. Eleven years later, only the OMP and OR have been established. Despite changes in government policy and criticism of transitional justice, both institutions continue to function within their respective mandates.

Professor Nesiah urged a broader understanding of reparations. Drawing on experiences from Kenya, Haiti, Namibia and the French Caribbean, she cautioned against reducing reparations to individual monetary payments. Historical harms can be collective and can continue to shape present inequalities. Reparations, she argued, can therefore include financial compensation, restitution, memorialisation and symbolic measures but can also address the structures of dispossession and exclusion that have allowed past harms to persist.

This broader perspective was reflected in the presentations by the OMP and OR. OR Chairperson Ms Wasantha Perera described an approach extending beyond its initial revival payment of Rs 200,000 to livelihood assistance, psychosocial support, land and housing, administrative assistance and community infrastructure. She noted that the needs of families, particularly the second generation, are changing and require continuing engagement.

OMP Executive Director J. Thatparan highlighted the need for greater consistency in addressing disappearances across communities and periods of history. He noted that there had been no consistency in the past in providing reparations. He advocated a common framework for reparations while recognising the different experiences of affected families. He urged CSOs to engage with OMP in achieving this objective.

The discussion pointed to a significant change in thinking about how Sri Lanka can deal with its past. Reparations are increasingly being understood not simply as compensation for past suffering but as an ongoing process of recognition, redress, recovery and reform. By placing victims and affected communities at the centre, this approach can help address continuing injustices and make dealing with the past part of building a more peaceful and inclusive future.



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Universities Can Strengthen Social Harmony and Reconciliation

NPC's Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera called for universities to play a more active role in addressing social tensions, strengthening reconciliation and helping public institutions respond to problems of exclusion. He made the remarks delivering the keynote address at the Eighth Research Conference organised by the Faculty of Arts and Culture of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The conference had the theme Harmonious Co-Existence in Pluralistic Societies.

The opening ceremony was chaired by Professor K. Suresh, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Culture and organized by Professor N. Pushparajah. The Vice Chancellor of the Eastern University, Professor P. Peratheepan, attended as chief guest. Deans of the university's other faculties also attended. A total of 62 research papers were presented under 10 thematic areas covering geography and environmental studies, sociology and anthropology, identities and social harmony in plural societies, literature and society, education, politics and human rights, artistic performances, religions and ethics, history and oral traditions, mental wellbeing and women's studies.

Dr Perera highlighted the partnership between NPC and the Eastern University along with the universities of Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa through the Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation initiative. The project was based on the principle that reconciliation should not be regarded as the responsibility of governments alone but should involve universities, public institutions and local communities. Faculty members and students from Eastern, Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa universities worked with District Secretariats to investigate problems identified by communities and develop practical responses based on evidence. As an example, Dr Perera referred to tensions between farmers and cattle herders in the Eastern Province over grazing land and water resources.

He also highlighted NPC's collaboration with the Eastern University and the universities of Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa on the Advanced Certificate Course on Inclusive Service Delivery. The initiative recognised that many citizens experience the state not through parliament or central ministries but through frontline officials working in District Secretariats, Divisional Secretariats and local government institutions. The course brought together frontline government officials to study inclusive service delivery, nonviolent communication, public administration in plural societies and field-based practice. Looking ahead, he expressed hope that the partnership would develop into a broader transformation in which universities routinely provide evidence, analysis and practical innovation to help public institutions address exclusion, social tensions and reconciliation.



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22nd A Should Strengthen Judicial Independence and Continuity

The proposed 22nd Amendment to the Constitution seeks to extend the retirement age of judges by two years. The government proposes to raise the retirement age of Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67 and Court of Appeal judges from 63 to 65, with corresponding amendments for the other courts. The government's main justification is to retain experienced judges, address the substantial backlog of cases and ensure continuity in ongoing proceedings. At a time when the courts are dealing with major criminal and corruption cases as well as a significant backlog, the experience and skills of senior judges are important institutional assets.

Continuity can strengthen the effectiveness and public confidence of the judiciary. Life expectancy has increased significantly since the Constitution was adopted in 1978, when the retirement ages of judges were established. Life expectancy is now about 78 years, compared to 67 years in 1978, an increase of 11 years. The government should also consider whether retirement ages in other sectors, including academia and the public service, should be reviewed in light of these demographic changes.

In this context, the National Peace Council proposes that all judges of the superior courts, including the Court of Appeal, should have a common retirement age of 67, given the value of their experience and expertise. The proposed six year limit on the tenure of the Chief Justice should also be reconsidered. A Chief Justice appointed before the age of 61 could otherwise be required to leave the Supreme Court altogether before reaching the retirement age of 67 applicable to other Supreme Court judges, resulting in a premature loss of judicial experience.

Judicial independence rests on constitutional safeguards and impartial rules, not on the assumption that judges will be influenced by a generally applicable extension of their tenure. The 21st Amendment already provides an important safeguard by requiring the Constitutional Council's approval for the appointment of the Chief Justice and other judges of the superior courts. The Constitutional Council is a multi-partisan body comprising government, opposition and civil society members.

If applied uniformly, the 22nd Amendment can therefore preserve judicial independence while strengthening continuity and retaining valuable judicial experience. The National Peace Council welcomes Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara's statement that the government remains open to adjustments following public opinion and parliamentary debate. The proposed amendment should receive rigorous scrutiny to ensure that it strengthens both judicial independence and continuity.

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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

Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 011 2818344, 011 2854127

Fax: 0112819064