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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

March 2016

NPC Makes Three Submissions On Constitutional Reform

NPC made three submissions to the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reforms. The Committee was mandated to seek oral and written submissions from the public on constitutional reforms. The process of public consultations began on January 18 and ended on March 15. The Committee will now prepare a report based on the public submissions and propose recommendations to be considered by the Cabinet Sub Committee on Constitutional Reforms.

NPC's recommendations stressed the need for devolution and the implementation and strengthening of the 13th amendment. It said Provincial Councils were an important part of the process and that the councils should have control over the police and be given land powers to improve their financial viability.

NPC recommended that more resources be allocated to implement the language policy because the public was facing difficulties when government documents and official letters were not distributed in their own languages.

NPC gave a second submission after consultations with civil society that reiterated the need to fully implement the 13th amendment, as well as to have provisions to safeguard the independence of institutions that were now politicised.

A new Constitution must establish minority rights. The Constitution should have a provision to address demographic imbalances that were created artificially to affect the number of a certain ethnic minority in an area through resettlement, which affects their representation in Parliament, the people who were consulted said.

Most Tamil participants in NPC's deliberations were in favour of a Federal system of government over a unitary system while some Sinhalese feared that Federalism could lead to separation. It should be explained that Federalism was not Tamil Eelam but a form of government and that it was possible to have Federal values within a unitary state so people who lived in the provinces could manage their affairs, the Tamil participants said.

Article 126 of the Constitution needed to be amended to make it easier for people to access the courts to vindicate their fundamental rights.

As far as the process of people's participation in the constitutional reform process went, it was pointed out that ordinary people were excluded because they did not have access to email, text or fax and were unable or unwilling to attend public hearings.

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The government should be seen to be more involved in the process of creating public awareness about the issues involved in constitutional reform as well as actively encouraging the public to take part, the participants said.

NPC's third submission was derived from the findings from consultations with over 700 women from nine districts across the island who have taken part in an effort to evolve a Women's Manifesto on Healing.

They felt it was necessary to increase women's participation at all levels of governance to address the issues of sexual abuse, domestic violence and gender based violence. This would also help ease problems of female headed households and plantation women.

Exchange Visits To Share War Experiences

Under its project Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto funded by FOKUS, NPC organised a two day exchange visit for women from Hambantota and Galle to visit others in Trincomalee and Ampara.

The visit was aimed at sharing experiences, exchanging ideas and discussing how the process of healing was progressing.



The participants included military widows, project group members and staff of partner organisations such as Shakthi, True Vision, Ruhunu Rural Women's Organisation and Human Resources Community Development. The programme included group presentations, individual presentations, experience sharing, group discussions and recreational activities.

Every district team was asked to explain the problems that affected women in their district. From Hambantota, military widows said they faced social stigma as war widows while women from Trincomalee and Ampara spoke of difficulties due to displacement and war. They also discussed women's participation in politics.

During the experience sharing session, they told stories of successful healing sessions and spoke of past exchange visits and activities conducted by NPC under the project. The objective was to show how women at grassroots level could take steps to bring about change and to motivate them to have collective efforts to overcome their problems.

A problem that was encountered was the repeated questioning of the organisers by the police and the military in Trincomalee. This cast an intimidating pall over the organisers. NPC has made submissions in this regard to the Minister of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages, who is vested with responsibility for NGOs, and also to the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation, which is encouraging public participation in the process.

Lack of Awareness Main Block To Understanding TJ Process

NPC initiated a discussion with civil society organisations from several districts of the country on strengthening the Transitional Justice (TJ) and reconciliation process, especially at the community and grassroots level focusing on district and community-based organisations.



The consultations were intended to provide inputs to the government as it develops its TJ, peace and reconciliation programme. Partnerships between the government and development stakeholders are vital to the success of the process. The ideas and suggestions of the participants were sent to the Task Force appointed to facilitate people's participation in the reconciliation process.

One of the main issues raised was how to get people involved in the process and put message of TJ across to the grassroots. At district level, provincial level and local level, it was necessary to know what people are saying about TJ, if they know about the government's proposals and what they think about them.

Minister for Minister of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages Mano Ganesan said the government was going ahead with TJ. The work was slow because there were two political parties involved. He added that in the north and east, the police needed to improve their relations with civil society and the people. While the situation had changed at the top, it should go down to the grassroots level.

During the discussions, two key messages were highlighted. The first was the limited information available to the general population regarding TJ issues. There was an absence of strong and systematic messaging by the government. Participants pointed out that the government was composed of two leaders and two parties, and this resulted in an absence of clear messaging.

Second, the message from the Tamil-speaking participants from the North and East was their scepticism about the ultimate outcome of the on going TJ process. This highlighted the need for greater inclusion of such groups into the process and for trust building with them.

The role of civil society in these circumstances in taking the message to the people and in ensuring a sense of participation was extremely important.

"We have promised the international community so we have to solve problems between Sinhalese and Tamils. The government is having consultations with civil society and getting their views. If there is no discussion the government won't have credibility."

Mano Ganesan
Minister of National
Coexistence, Dialogue and Official
Languages

Taking TJ To The Grassroots

Under NPC's project Initiating Multi-level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT), introductory meetings were held in Kalutara, Ratnapura and Kurunegala for religious leaders and civil society leaders to explain the concept of Transitional Justice (TJ).

The meetings, which had 120 participants in total, were organised in collaboration with NPC's partner organisations Sama Shakthi Sahajeewana Foundation in Kalutara, Environment and Community Development Information Centre in Ratnapura, and Human Rights Organisation in Kurunegala.

"This effort of NPC should be appreciated. It is important to raise awareness on these topics so that people can understand how to bring about reconciliation in our country. We need continuous engagement among different people and we hope NPC will keep up its work in this area."

Participant from Gampola

Through the three year IMPACT project, which is funded by Misereor, NPC will establish seven new DIRCs in total and create awareness within communities throughout the country of the requirements to progress from post-war to post-conflict development by explaining the principles of TJ.

Views and suggestions were collected from the participants for proposed reconciliation mechanisms. Workshops were conducted on pluralism, good governance, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and TJ.

A series of training workshops and pocket meetings, funded by the British High Commission, were also held to educate DIRC members and the public on TJ in Batticaloa, Gampola, Mannar, Puttalam and Matara.

The activities were led by trainers who had learnt about TJ from Patrick Burgess, an expert who conducted several training sessions in Sri Lanka recently.

The trainers explained that TJ was designed to take a country that had suffered conflict into a just and united post-conflict situation. Participants discussed each element - truth seeking, prosecution, reparations and institutional reforms - in groups and came up with examples of what civil society could do to support a TJ mechanism in Sri Lanka. Through the sessions, NPC expected to inform a large number of people on what TJ was and to train a set of people to educate larger groups.



Being The Change On Gender

March
2016

By Dr Swarna Rajagopalan

A few months ago, NPC invited me to spend some time in residence with them, helping them to refashion themselves as an organisation committed to gender equality and gender sensitivity, and to bring this new thinking to bear on their programmes. I accepted, knowing that it would be an enriching and educational experience for me as well, and so it has been.



In these two months, we have together worked on two facets of this goal. Gender sensitisation training within the organisation, with some modules engaging the entire staff and some modules being created for the programme staff, took the first month. We went from broader conceptual issues to understanding what the gendered impact of conflict and militarisation were, what peace meant to women, and what it would mean to have a gender sensitive transitional justice process.

Alongside, I observed NPC field programmes and consultations, and listened to programme staff deliberate on what a gender mainstreaming perspective could mean for their work. Through this process, we have begun the journey from learning ideas to using them everyday.

A few programme staff have been trained to carry out gender sensitisation programmes within their projects. In the final week of my time at NPC, we held a training programme for NPC partners from around Sri Lanka. The training brought together the separate sessions held for NPC in a more intensive structure, with the objective of enabling participants to take forward locally the conversation on a gender sensitive transitional justice process and a gender just peace in Sri Lanka.

On March 8, 2016, NPC organised a small event to observe International Women's Day and invited me to share my thoughts on "A Gender-Just Peace". We also screened for the first time a short video on NPC's work with women from around Sri Lanka and the need to enable women's participation in political life.

They say you should be the change you want to see in the world. NPC's twin commitment to internal change - thinking and working in a more consciously gender sensitive way - and programmatic change - creating and implementing projects that promote gender equality along with peace, demonstrates that this is in fact, possible. Rooted within daily practice, ideas about gender-inclusive programming and gender mainstreaming peace work will surely find expression over time.

"After the gender sensitisation programmes, I able to review my family life in the light of being gender sensitive, and to understand my weaknesses as well as strengths so I can improve in the future. I learnt how to protect women's rights and understand the meaning of patriarchy. I realise that improving male participation is the main need for gender sensitisation."

Shantha Pathirana
Project Officer

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.

Better Communication Needed On Transitional Justice

As befits a democratic government that governs with the consent of the people, the government has launched two major public consultation processes. The first of these public consultations organized by the government was with regard to the constitutional reform process and ended on March 15. The second major public consultation process initiated by the government is led by the National Consultation Task Force comprising civil society members. Their endeavour at the present time is to bring in more civil society groups into the consultation process.

The National Peace Council has been conducting discussions on strengthening the transitional justice and reconciliation process especially at the community and grassroots level focusing on district and community-based organizations from Galle, Hambantota, Kalutara, Puttalam, Mannar, Jaffna, Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Ampara, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura, Kurunegala, Kegalle, Trincomalee and Colombo. These consultations with the civil society groups are intended to provide inputs to the government as it develops its Transitional Justice, peace and reconciliation programme.

At the consultations on the transitional justice and reconciliation process conducted with civil society representatives from all parts of the country, two key messages get highlighted. The first is the limited information available to the general population regarding these issues. There is an absence of strong and systematic messaging by the government. Second, the message from the Tamil-speaking participants from the North and East is their scepticism about the ultimate outcome of the on going transitional justice process. This highlights the need for greater inclusion of such groups into the process and for trust building with them.

The experience of NPC in taking this message to the people is that there is little or no awareness of what this government framework is. This is in contrast to the educational campaign in regard to an earlier constitutional reform process took place in the period between 1996 when the “devolution package” made its appearance and 2000. A special government public communications unit was set up for taking this message to the people and was called the National Integration Programme Unit which was staffed by leading academics and activists who operated under the government. As a first step it is necessary for the government to carry out a mass education campaign, so that the people who are going to be consulted have a fair idea of what the issues at stake are.

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