

UNDERSTANDING THE STATUS OF CIVIC SPACE IN SRI LANKA

A Study on Public Participation and Freedom of Association
in 12 Selected Districts in Sri Lanka



NATIONAL PEACE COUNCIL OF SRI LANKA

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December 2022

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Introduction

Conversations regarding civic space¹ is popular in present-day Sri Lanka, which is currently in the grip of an economic crisis. The general public has come forward to challenge corruption and governance-related malpractices, provoking people to demonstrate active public participation. It reached a climax on July 9th, when Gotabhaya Rajapakse was ousted from power. This was seen as a positive development for Sri Lankan democracy by many.² On the other hand, increased participation is fraught with difficulties, such as restrictions on freedom of association. Existing laws, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, as well as other informal, but organised groups, have been used to repress such participation. Despite the fact that this is the most active public participation Sri Lanka has seen in recent memory at the national level, people have also been effectively using the civic space to express their concerns in their own communities at the local level from time to time.

Sri Lankans have traditionally used civic spaces through community-based organisations.³ Funeral societies and religious committees are two examples of widely spread CBOs that can be found throughout the country.⁴ Aside from these traditional CBOs, there have also been instances where people group together as social movements/collectives or CBOs to fight specific injustices that have not escalated into a national-level struggle but have remained largely focused on a particular injustice at the local-level. However, some of these collectives and the injustices they have brought to light, have received national attention as a result of their close association with national level politics. Some examples include the people's movement against the Meethotamula garbage dump⁵, the Rathupaswala movement against water pollution⁶, Uma oya aragalaya⁷, and others. Simultaneously, there are many other movements in civic space that may not receive national level attention. These collectives may fight for land rights, against unequal distribution of state resources, for solutions to the human-elephant conflict, for clean water, and so on. Some of these struggles result in full or partial achievement of their demands. Some collectives also give up without reaching a solution. The success or failure of such organically formed collectives may be largely determined by the nature of the civic space in their respective communities.

¹ “Civic space is the environment that enables people and groups – or ‘civic space actors’ – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies. Vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline. Any restrictions on such a space must comply with international human rights law.” (UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space). Extracted from: <https://fra.europa.eu/nl/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space#:~:text=%E2%80%9CCivic%20space%20is%20the%20environment,cultural%20life%20in%20their%20societies>.

² Uyangoda, J. (2022a, July 19). Taking Aragalaya Ideas Seriously. Groundviews. <https://groundviews.org/2022/07/19/taking-aragalaya-ideas-seriously/>

Uyangoda, J. (2022b, August 16). Bringing Democracy Back Through People’s Power. Groundviews. <https://groundviews.org/2022/08/16/bringing-democracy-back-through-peoples-power/>

³ Uyangoda, J. (2020). *Civil Society: What is it? For whom? For what?* (3rd ed.). Social Scientists’ Association.

⁴ Ibid.

Findings from “Youth as a Catalyst for Political Change”, study conducted by the Social Scientists’ Association between February to April 2022. Report Unpublished.

⁵ *Meethotamulla tragedy: Consequences of negligence and lethargy?* (2017). Daily News. <https://dailynews.lk/2017/04/17/features/113310/meethotamulla-tragedy-consequences-negligence-and-lethargy>

⁶ *Sri Lanka: Investigate “Clean Water” Protest Deaths*. (2013, August 9). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/09/sri-lanka-investigate-clean-water-protest-deaths>

⁷ *Uma Oya boils over with protests*. (2017). Lankainformation.lk. <https://lankainformation.lk/news/latest-news/item/16281-uma-oya-boils-over-with-protests>

Given this context, it is critical to investigate these organically formed collectives in the local civic space, in order to determine their emergence, whether they have met the expected objectives through their formation, and, if not, what the reasons for non-achievement are. This allows us to gain an understanding of how civic space functions in Sri Lanka. Even though examining isolated, local cases may not help achieve broader system change, the presence and lessons from such collectives may provide the necessary confidence, knowledge, and training for people to be active citizens who effectively use the civic space, which is important in the long run for realising citizenship among Sri Lankans. It is also critical that organisations working to strengthen civic space in Sri Lanka begin from the ground up.

Apart from the aforementioned collectives formed for achieving citizen rights at the local level, inter-communal initiatives⁸ take place within the civic space as well. The nature of public participation and freedom of association in such activities, however, may differ from that of the organically formed collectives discussed above. These activities are mostly carried out with the help of governmental⁹ and non-governmental organisations¹⁰. There are two types of importance of such intercommunal initiatives. On one hand, it may be necessary to make the civic space more accommodating to minority groups.¹¹ On the other hand, it may be necessary to make local communities sensitive to injustices that affect minority ethno-religious groups.¹² Thus, intercommunal initiatives should be strengthened to allow for inclusivity, ensure freedom of association, and create a space for ethno-religious minority communities to participate.

⁸ 'Inter-communal initiatives' is the collective term used to refer to programmatic interventions to advance areas of peacebuilding, inter-religious harmony, prevention of hate speech and pluralism.

⁹ For example, the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR). ONUR is an entity under the Ministry of Justice with the goal of promoting harmony and unity among people in Sri Lanka while celebrating diversity. ONUR is committed to creating a society where everyone respects the fundamental rights, freedom, and equality of all communities.

¹⁰ For example, organizations such as the National Peace Council, Search for Common Ground and MinorMatters

¹¹ Prevalence of hate speech at the local level in Sri Lanka: An expert opinion poll with selected religious and community leaders from 12 districts. (2022). National Peace Council.

¹² A Review of the State of Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka. (2022). MinorMatters.

<https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/632/ad8/cad/632ad8cad2ca0916665134.pdf>

Objective of the Study

This research is intended to serve both academic and practical purposes. On one hand, it attempts to understand how people engage in civic spaces, which is academically significant for those interested in studying the function of civic space in the social, political, cultural, and economic context of Sri Lanka. However, the study is primarily designed and focused on a practical goal: to provide an understanding of the factors to be considered when implementing interventions to strengthen the civic space in Sri Lanka. The study examined the civic space available for citizen participation and the freedom of association to conduct intercommunal initiatives in order to make the study more pertinent for the intercommunal initiatives that will be implemented by the National Peace Council in the future.

In order to address the above, the study focused on the four specific research questions listed below.

1. What is the nature of citizen participation in civic spaces in selected Sri Lankan districts?
2. What is the nature of freedom of association in civic spaces in selected Sri Lankan districts?
3. What differences exist between citizen participation and freedom of association in organically formed people's movements and intercommunal activities?
4. What can be done through third-party interventions to increase citizen participation and establish freedom of association at the local level?

Methodology

The methodology of the study consisted of two main components –

1. Case Studies (conducted with organically formed collectives)

- The case studies of this study were carried out in 5 districts, namely, Badulla, Monaragala, Matara, Jaffna, and Batticaloa.
- Case studies were conducted with local CBOs/local groups/collectives working on rights-related issues in their communities.
- Data for the case studies were collected through focus group discussions (10 - 5 male groups and 5 female groups) and participatory observation (1)
- The research team at the Social Scientists' Association carried out the case study component.
- The data for the case studies were collected in late-September to November 2022
- A total of 6 case studies were undertaken for this study

Summaries of the 6 case studies:

➤ Wellawaya land issue

According to community members, an agricultural company has been leased several thousand acres of land in their village. The locals were only given approximately 4.5 acres, with ½ an acre set aside for the residence of the people. Despite the fact that the locals have built houses on this land, they have no rights or title to the land or property. The company controls the settlements, and not having the necessary documents causes problems with accessing state services. A collective has been fighting for their land rights since 2016. As a result of their struggle, 152 families in three settlements have received residency permits, and the collective is currently working to secure their land deeds.

➤ Matara farmers' issue

According to community members, in 2012, it was proposed to build a salinity barrier across the Nilwala river to avoid mixing of sea water with drinking water. In 2017, after the proposed construction, around 5500 acres of paddy cultivating lands are subjected to constant flooding, causing problems in cultivation. A group of farmers from various affected areas has banded together to demand that relevant authorities resolve this issue.

➤ Batticaloa land issue

According to community members, during the 1990s, 72 families in an area in Batticaloa were evacuated and a military camp was built. The army has been giving compensation for occupying this land as a camp to the families that were evacuated. People are dissatisfied with the compensation and want the land returned. They are also requesting for their destroyed houses to be restored.

➤ Jaffna land issue

According to community members, several thousand acres of land in an area in Jaffna were declared a "high security zone" during the war. People who lived in the area were relocated. Parts of the total area has been released on several occasions after the end of the war. However, the army still controls approximately 3000-4000 acres, according to the locals. Locals claim that the army is illegally cultivating and building Buddhist temples on this land. A community has banded together to demand the removal of the high security zone gazette and the release of land.

➤ Mahiyanganaya human-elephant issue

A group of concerned people from Mahiyanganaya banded together to form a collective to demand for a solution to the Human-Elephant Conflict. Elephants had regularly harmed their crops and properties. As a result of not receiving any satisfactory responses from the authorities they decided to stage a protest.

➤ Ettampitiya land issue

A community from Ettampitiya has been using abandoned estate lands to cultivate additional tea. Most of the members in the community are working for the estate. Estate management is said to have reclaimed control of the lands on which they have grown tea. The community claims that estate management is not making productive use of the reclaimed lands. Communities also complain that outsiders are permitted to use the lands but not members of the community. They have now banded together to seek justice for this.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (conducted with persons involved in inter-communal initiatives)

- FGDs for this study were conducted across 12 selected districts (See Table 1 below).
- The FGD component was primarily concerned with organizational work on inter-communal initiatives. The FGDs were held with public who have participated in various inter-communal initiatives which were organized by grassroots partner organization of the NPC in their local areas.
- FGDs in 5 out of the 12 selected districts was conducted by the research team of the Social Scientists’ Association. FGDs were conducted in the remaining 7 districts by Master Trainers affiliated with the National Peace Council at the regional level as part of their community resource pool working on areas of peacebuilding and social cohesion (See Table 1 below for district-wise breakdown).
- Prior to conducting field work, the Master Trainers were given a one-day training by a senior researcher from the research team on how to conduct a qualitative inquiry, key points to remember when conducting FGDs, and ethical considerations. The Master Trainers collaborated closely with the research team to ensure that the FGDs ran smoothly in their respective districts.
- The FGDs were composed with special consideration for inclusivity based on religion and gender.
- The FGDs were conducted in October and November 2022

Table 1: District-wise breakdown of FGDs conducted by the SSA and Master Trainers

Social Scientists’ Association	National Peace Council Master Trainers
1. Badulla	6. Anuradhapura
2. Monaragala	7. Kurunegela
3. Matara	8. Polonnaruwa
4. Jaffna	9. Kandy
5. Batticaloa	10. Kaluthara
	11. Kegalle
	12. Ratnapura

- The research team at SSA conducted 18 FGDs in the 5 selected districts. The Master Trainers conducted 27 FGDs in the 7 remaining districts. A total of 45 FGDs were conducted across the 12 districts.

Apart from the Case Studies and FGDs, the research team also conducted 10 expert interviews.

Analysis

This section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection emphasizes the *organic formation* and nature of CBOs/local groups/collectives fighting for specific issues, mostly rights-related concerns confronting them in their communities or daily lives. The second subsection delves into how, when *people group together through organizations* to advance causes such as pluralism, hate speech, or religious harmony. Both of these subsections discuss the nature of public participation and freedom of association in furthering each of these causes.

Organic Formation of Citizens

In this section, we engage with the questions of why and how organic formation of citizens as groups or collectives happen at the local level, how this has sharpened their citizenship, the freedom of association they enjoy and also the ways in which it has been challenged. When answering these questions, we recognize that citizenship practiced, but with the presence of many other important stakeholders whose presence influences the practices of the citizenship at the local level (Please see Figure 1). Thus, the function of these recognized stakeholders and their interests are also given importance when analysing the organic formation of citizens at the local level. This section also provides specific analysis about the ways in which that women and the minorities face specific challenges when practicing their citizenship at the local level.



Figure 1: Stakeholders influencing public participation in the civic space

1. Citizen participation is based on fulfilment of collective needs

- Citizen participation in a given community is primarily motivated by a specific issue confronting that community. In most cases these issues are rights violations or injustices faced by the community. Throughout the qualitative discussions, it was clearly expressed that their aspiration is to overcome the specific issue at hand, with no indication of intention to uphold the virtues of good governance¹³. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important to recognise, however, that public participation in civic space and realisation of their citizenship are largely determined by the specific issues confronting a given community.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Jaffna said, “Our areas have been made high security zones through a gazette and our lands have been acquired. Only around 3000 acres have been released so far. Even though they have taken these lands for security reasons, the army has built temples and they are using our lands for cultivation. All we want is for them to give us our land back.”
 - A respondent from an FGD conducted in Matara reported that due to the salinity barrier and constructions under the *Nilwala yojana kramaya*, their cultivated lands are now being flooded. “Because of these two issues, it has been difficult for us to harvest even a few acres around here. Now some parts of the land have turned into swamps due to water. The government is trying to avoid addressing our issue altogether by declaring these locations as “unsafe areas”.
 - A respondent that took part in the Mahiyanganaya protests said, “We just want to engage in our farming and mind our own business. Solve the human-elephant conflict for us, that is sufficient for us”.

2. Understanding 'community' at the local level and their issue-based participation

- Interestingly, the concept of "community" is not fixed and is defined by the issues that arise at a given time. For example, in a given village, farmers may fight for something that affects them, people who do not have deeds to their land may fight for their deeds, and people directly affected by human elephant conflict may fight demanding for solutions. (Please see Figure 2 below) As a result, even within the same village, community participation in civic space may occur through various sub-groups within the larger community dealing with specific issues. According to a recent study on the political participation of youth conducted by the Social Scientists' Association, in a given village, only the farmers in the village opposed the chemical fertiliser ban, and these same farmers did not participate to support the *GotaGoGama* protest because they were too busy with their agricultural work during this period. Instead, it was the village's youth who took part, who were frustrated by the lack of fuel supply.

¹³ What is Good Governance? [Review of What is Good Governance?]. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf>

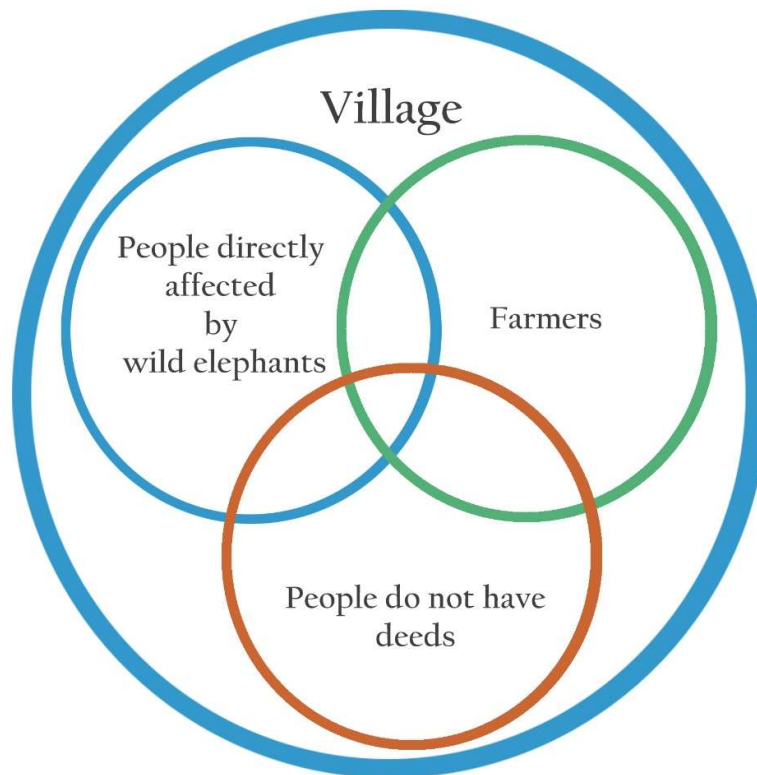


Figure 2: Construction of issue-based communities

- In Ettampitiya it was revealed that only persons in estate communities affected by the land issue participate in their struggles to demand for land rights. “Members from other estates or within our estates who don’t have any land issues do not participate with us or support us in our initiatives. They are worried about ruining the relationship with the estate authorities.”
- Similarly, in Mahiyanganaya, it was revealed that those who participate in protests demanding solutions for the human-elephant issue were only those affected by the issues. The monk, business community farmers who participated in the protest were those that were directly affected by the issue hence had vested interest in achieving a solution for this issue.
- A respondent from an FGD in Matrara revealed, “There are two groups of people in the village, the ones that participate in protests and those who do not. Those who do not participate in it are those who have government jobs or high-level private jobs. That's why they don't come to protests.”

3. Citizen participation could be based on the fulfilment of individual needs

- Citizen participation also could be based on the fulfilment of individual needs. People in society may be discouraged from actively participating in such local groups if they have expectations of such fulfilment of personal needs and do not have the ability to fulfil them through such participation. (Please see Figure 3 below)

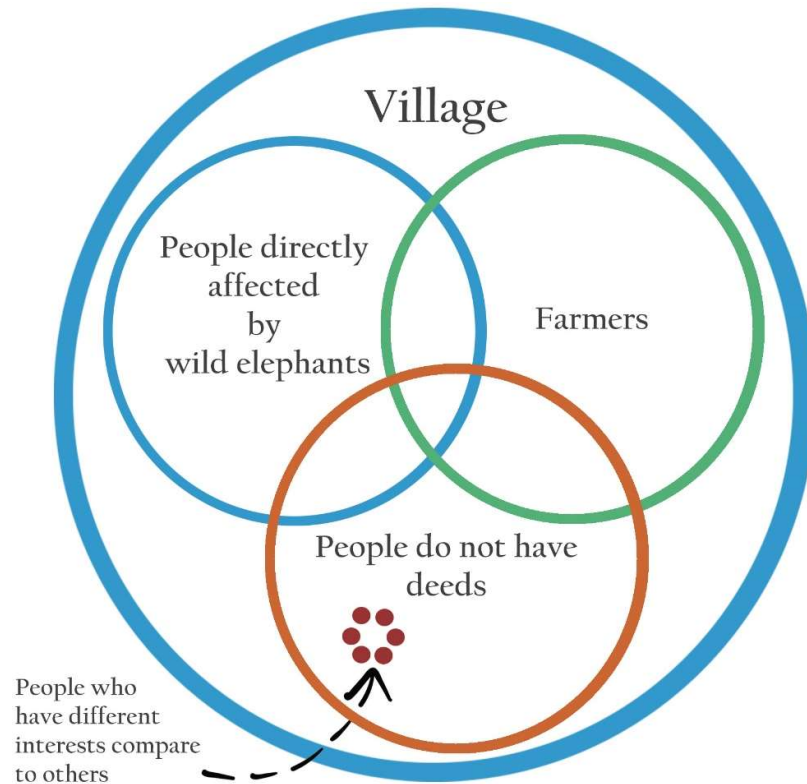


Figure 3: Presence of individual interests within collectives of a community

- Discussions from Wellawaya revealed that when the local group began their struggle, they were told that government officers will not be able to get deeds anyway. Hence, government servants were hesitant to join the struggle since their needs are not fulfilled through this participation. In some cases, they also reveal that such persons who cannot get their needs fulfilled through such participation continue to discourage other members in communities claiming that the efforts of the organization are futile. “At the beginning of our formation, only 20 families out of the 152 families in the village joined with us. This was because there were many people the local level who discouraged families from joining our cause. But now we have a considerable number of families supporting us”.
- A respondent from an FGD in Matara revealed, “The flooding is a huge problem for those that cultivate *Maa Wee*. We want a permanent solution. In most cases, those who own paddy land and work outside in areas like Colombo are happy with receiving compensation. But for us compensation is not a solution.”
- A respondent from an FGD conducted in Batticaloa said, “Although we are demanding our land, many people who used to live in villages but now live in cities are not ready to demand it. They would rather receive compensation than regaining ownership of the land. Also, those who left to foreign countries during the war do not want to file a land case because it would require them to return here. So many people in foreign countries also want to take the compensation and avoid problems.”

4. Belief within the group regarding their ability to obtain solutions

- Participation in CBOs is also very much dependent on how achievable the demands and needs of the citizens are, as well as the belief among citizens that they can win their rights. This belief is sometimes largely dependent on the previous experience with the issue or observations of watching other local groups fighting for their rights. When there is no reference for participation and success stories from the past there is a tendency to have an apathetic attitude to such issues.
 - Respondents from a local group of resettled women with land rights issues in Jaffna revealed that they have watched the protests happen over the Palali land issue and despite it being a very popular issues there has been no constructive solution given to it despite several efforts by locals. “If after so many efforts by the people fighting on the Palali case cannot win their rights, what hope do we have?”

5. Costs of participation

- Public participation in the civic space often comes at a cost. This is revealed to be a deterring reason for public participation, even though the issues affecting them is very important and directly impacting to them. On one hand these costs could be of monetary nature and on the other hand it could be a political cost. This political cost is explained by Silva and Lecamwasam (2021)¹⁴ as such, ‘Furthermore, many locals are afraid of active participation, such as challenging a local politician. Such opposition usually results in acts of vengeance by politicians. As a result, most locals either do not participate or, if they do, tend to follow the politicians' lead’. These costs also have a direct impact on people's ability and willingness to exercise their right to free association. (Please see Figure 4 below)



Figure 4: Costs of participation

- To explain the monetary costs, respondents from the local group fighting for land rights in Wellawaya revealed that they have actively participated in several protests demanding for their land rights. They mentioned that thankfully such costs were handled by the NGO that was involved with them. “We needed a lot of support from outside to win our fight. Not having sufficient money to fight the issues on our own was the main concern. The NGO we are working with covered all our costs during our visits to Colombo for protests. We did not spend any money for transportation, lodging or food”.
- On the other hand, political costs could also take the form of people from opposing political views not participating with the local group.

¹⁴ Silva, S., & Lecamwasam, N. (2021). Ideal vs Practice: Narratives on Clientelism, Democracy and Participation in Local Government Authorities in Sri Lanka. Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College, 4(1). <https://www.rtc.bt/images/rightshoel/Rig-Tshoel-2021-Vol-4-No-I.pdf>

- Respondent from Wellawaya revealed that since the leader of the CBO is a supporter of X national political party, most of the people who are not X national political party supporters do not participate in the CBO. Moreover, a respondent mentioned, “Youth in the village don’t participate in our protests, they are scared that they will lose their jobs if they are found participating in such activities. Moreover, there are many youths in the area who are engaged in government jobs but are not permanent employees. So, they are worried that participating with us will cause problems for their employment status”. Thus, such incidents reveal that participation of individuals is sometimes not determined from the perspective of citizens but rather as voters.
- Moreover, people are also more likely and interested in participating forms of community participation which are hassle free and does not come at the cost of compromising day-to-day/routine activities.
 - Respondents from Mahiyanganaya revealed that they selected Wednesday as the day for organizing protest rather than Monday because they were aware that people were more likely to participate middle of the week rather than on the start date of the work week.
 - A respondent from and FGD in Batticaloa revealed, “For the people here, job commitments and economic difficulties is a major challenge to organize as a collective. They have to go to work every day to earn their daily wage”.

6. Informed Participation

- Informed Participation was found to be another determinant of active or passive participation. The discussions revealed that in most cases many are only aware of part of the issue but not so much about the rights and answers or the process to achieving a solution to the problem at hand. In certain cases, once people receive the knowledge and experience by continuous participation in various right-based activities, they gain confidence and beginning to mobilize and organize other protests against injustices happening at the local level. Eventually, individuals at the local level who have considerable knowledge and understanding also rise to become more prominent figures in the village.
 - Respondents form Wellawaya revealed that by participating in workshops organized by NGOs through local women’s societies they received an avenue to learn about their rights and the legal processes of fighting for their rights. With eventual exposure and knowledge expansion through such awareness, certain individuals in the CBO have also received credibility and recognition within the village. A respondent actively involved in the local group fighting for land rights revealed, “People now come to me to get advice, now I have better recognition in the village also.”. With the acquired confidence from continuous fighting for land rights, a respondent from Wellawaya revealed that by fighting over land concerns they got an idea about rights of citizens in general. As a result, they got the strength to take initiative to look into the inefficient postal service in the village.
 - A respondent from an FGD conducted in Matara revealed, “We have received the support and legal advice for our movement from non-governmental organizations and some professors have also supported us with technical knowledge.”
- On the other hand, discussions also revealed the consequences of not having sufficient knowledge and the effects of that on hampering informed participation.

- When having discussions with the estate community in Ettampitiya it was revealed that their active participation was severely limited due to the lack of knowledge regarding their rights or regarding the necessary legal knowledge. “We don’t know anything about the legal process or the lawyers involved in the process. If we could be directly introduced to lawyers that would be really helpful. Some lawyers ask us to pay them Rs.30,000. But we can’t pay so much at a given time. We don’t even know if there are any organizations that are willing to bear these costs or support us with the case.”
- Similarly, in discussions done in Batticaloa with a local group affected by land issues it was revealed that, they are not aware about their legal rights and what they are entitled to and what they can demand as citizens through the law. In many ways it was revealed that such lack of knowledge affects the ability of the citizens to confidently participate as citizens and demand for their rights in an informed manner.

7. Intra-community challenges

- In some areas it was found that there may be within or intra-community challenges. In certain communities, locals themselves could become spoilers in deterring community participation initiatives. This could happen more often since those participating in the initiatives may not share the same interest as those of other members in the society or the nature of the participation may not be appealing to others or in some cases the participation of certain groups could invariably exclude others. In such a situation, some community members may challenge the freedom of association of other community members.
 - A widowed woman from Wellawaya from the local group fighting for land rights revealed that villagers often make up stories about her (and other women) when they participate in protests. “When we go for protests and events happening in cities or when we have to spend nights outside of our houses, or when we are dropped home by vehicles in the night when we return to the village, locals tend to make up stories”.
 - To help understand the politicization of protests, a respondent from Wellawaya revealed that, “People do not participate in these protests if they are not done through political lines that they identify with. If the participation is coloured by different political interests, then also, they do not participate”.
- In other cases, this politicization can also be visible within the local CBOs themselves. In certain cases, members of the CBO are capable to overlook these issues. However, in other cases the presence of various political supporters could be detrimental for the functioning of the CBO.
 - In the CBOs with which we held discussions in Wellawaya, Matara and Batticaloa had supporters from various political parties. However, they use this to their strength and mention that having various supporters is useful for them in achieving their demands through some party or the other. However, it was observed that despite acknowledging such support, that presence of internal disagreements is still visible, and not resolving such disagreements could have a long-term impact on the smooth functioning of such CBOs. A respondent from the CBO in Wellawaya mentioned, “One main reason as to why people in the village don’t get involved in our work is because they don’t agree with the political background and opinions of those within the CBO. Even though we also may not always agree with the political opinions of members within the CBO, we continue to engage with the CBO to get our land licence”.

8. Role of religious leaders

- Discussions also indicated the powerful role that religious leaders could play in supporting and giving legitimacy to amplifying community issues. More specifically it was revealed that the role of Buddhist monks in the areas focused was very important in citizen participation at the local level. Previous research has also revealed the importance of religious leaders in providing legitimacy to local issues.¹⁵ It is also interesting to observe that in certain cases the same religious leaders that become a strength for the people to fight against injustices are the same religious leaders that who become a part of extremist groups. This contradictory role played by religious leaders on one hand strengthens the ability to practice active citizenship of one community, while on the other hand challenges the equal participation and citizenship of another group.
 - A respondent from Mahiyanganaya revealed that the chief monk from a reputed temple is a very active and powerful monk and it was the monk that organized the protest demanding a solution for the human-elephant conflict in the area recently. The respondent mentioned that the monk was very active at the local level and would often side the people even in the absence of politicians. Previously, this same monk was a member of a controversial Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist organization, and he is also accused of harassing Muslims who were accused of illegally entering the village and taking cattle, before handing them over to the police.
 - In discussions held in Matara, it was revealed that the local CBO is aware of the value of monks and their support to achieving their rights. A respondent from the group mentioned, “Involvement of local monks often give much needed weight and significance to amplifying our issues”.

9. Role of government officials and civil servants

- The role of civil servants is another important aspect of public participation in the civic space at the local level. On one hand, the civil servants' ignorance of the issues that people are concerned about has encouraged people to come out and fight for their rights. In some cases, ignorance is caused not only by a lack of interest, but also by a lack of resources, political influence, and other favors. People lose faith in government services in such cases. In some cases, the inefficiency of government servants and the periodic changes of government servants such as *Grama Sevakas* in localities also often affect the ability of communities to trust state entities with providing an efficient service.
 - For example, respondents from Matara revealed that state authorities such as the water board, irrigation department work hand in hand and often do not function as independent bodies even though by-law they are required to. Such biases and favouritisms often further diminish people's trust with regard to the state bodies and their capacities to execute their duties.
 - Moreover, respondents from Mahiyanganaya revealed that bodies like the wildlife conservation department do not have the necessary tools and resources that they require to handle the human-elephant conflict – which further exacerbates their trust in them. This in turn leads people to lose their faith on government institutions and take initiative at the community level to fight for their rights.

¹⁵ Gunasekara, V., Surenthiraraj, R., & Tilakaratne, P. (2019a). Services And Legitimacy: Exploring the Everyday Experiences of the State in Sri Lanka (pp. 16–17). https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/20190329_SLRC_Sri-Lanka-services-and-legitimacy-report-fina-online-1.pdf

- In discussions held with women from a resettled area in Jaffna, it was revealed that it has become increasingly difficult for them to cope with the constant changing in the Grama Sevaka and having to communicate their land related issues with the ever-changing Grama Sevaka. “At the moment we don’t even know who our Grama Sevaka is. In the past they have changes the Grama Sevaka of our area to many times and every time there is a new one, we have to tell them our issues from the beginning.” The lack of a more permanent Grama Sevaka has affected the communities ability severely to articulate and get a solution for their issues causing further delays.

10. University students as a source of strength

- University students have been identified as a legitimate force for amplifying issues to the wider community. The participation and lead taken by university students can have both positive and negative connotations. In one end the participation of university students strengthens and motivates citizens’ participation however at the other end, they are also accused of disturbing day-to-day life activities of people by engaging in such protests¹⁶. However, discussions reveal that many recognize youth especially University students as an important asset who are capable of giving a voice to the issues of people.
 - Respondents from both Buttala and Mahiyanganaya revealed that it was University students who had organized protests in their areas parallel to *GotaGoGama* protests.
 - In the discussions held in Jaffna, it was revealed that it was Jaffna University students that helped to amplify and bring attention to their land issues through silent protests and other means. “We work closely with the student union at the University. They are very supportive and understanding about our issues”.
 - In Mahiyanganaya it was found that even during the recent protest on the human-elephant conflict, University students had played a valuable role by participating. “We saw several University students at our protests”.

11. Power of politicians

- Politicians play a significant role in determining community participation at the local level. People understand that having politicians on their side makes it easier for them to engage in meaningful ways. However, as previously discussed, party politics is not only a strength, but it may also pose a challenge to freedom of association at the local level, given that participation from one political party or a specific politician may discourage participation in others or antagonize supporters of other parties who may want to join the movement.
 - An example from a respondent in Mahiyanganaya revealed the nature of politicians’ participation in community efforts. They mentioned that politicians in Mahiyanganaya, in areas affected by the human-elephant conflict do not participate in initiatives to find proactive solution to the issue but would much rather participate in drives where they give compensation to affected persons. Further they reveal that many politicians did not participate in a recently held protest by the community merely because there was no special request made to them, encouraging their participation. The same respondents form Mahiyanganaya also acknowledge that there could have been more participants at the protests if there was increased participation of politicians and political

¹⁶Sri Lanka Police fires tear gas on university students protesting outside Parliament - Times of India. (2022). The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sri-lanka-police-fires-tear-gas-on-university-students-protesting-outside-parliament/articleshow/91354810.cms>

involvement at the organized protest. They mention that people are more likely to participate with the blessings of the politicians than against them.

- Respondents from Batticaloa revealed that they recognize the power of the politicians and when asked about which group in society should step up and speak on behalf of them, they mention politicians without hesitating. “Only politicians can help us to fight our cause. They are the ones with power at the end of the day”.
- In terms of the clever handling of politicians, discussions in Ettampitiya reveal that, active members of the community taking the initiative to fight for their rights use politicians as a tactic. They mention that they involve several parties to obtain as much benefit as possible, rather than limiting their interactions and networks with one political party. “It is important for us to solve our land issue. To achieve this, we do not care which party is going to help us. We will work with any political party that is willing to work with us. To achieve this, we don’t mind working with several political parties instead of one”.

12. Surveillance by the military and police as a deterrent

- Increased involvement and surveillance by both the military and police can be perceived as a challenge for the freedom of association. Given that communities have long been subjected to military surveillance and questioning, there is a continuing fear among them to actively and confidently voice their concerns, particularly in locations where there is military presence. At the same time, such concerns have also made people more resilient and made them think more innovatively of how to handle such hurdles. However, at large there is increased doubt. This presence of the military has also created several doubts among individuals in terms of their participation in the civic space and regarding their safety.
 - Respondents from Batticaloa and Jaffna reveal that when organizing events, discussions at the local level with groups and communities, it is used as an opportunity by the CID and military to further intervene in their lives. A respondent from Jaffna revealed the following, “The CID has tried to follow me several times when I leave my home in the morning. They wait outside the gate dressed in civilian clothes. They follow my bike in order to locate the place I go to and the events I attend”.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Batticaloa said, “Young people don’t participate a lot because they have heard of experiences with the army, police, CID. They are worried about their safety.”

13. Importance of having a good leadership

- Association at the local level is also dependant on the presence of good leadership. In certain cases, members of formed CBOs find good leaders who have proven record of been active citizens in their localities. In other cases, locally formed group do not have a leader or anyone willing to take the leadership position. In the absence of leaders, this acts as a sever hurdle in achieving the needs of the collective. On the other hand, having defined leadership is also recognized by groups as a tool of suppression which can be used by authorities and spoilers when attempting to act against the demands of the group. In such cases, the leaders are often easily targeted to suppress groups. In some cases, there could be situations where leaders may receive prominence from their active participation and take advantage out of the recognition that they have. In other cases, leaders could also be connected to political parties which could have spiralling effects on both the functioning and perception of the CBOs at the local level.

- Discussions and observations from Wellawaya reveal that having a good leader makes it easier for groups to win legitimacy and function smoothly. At the same time, the recognition given by the villagers to the leader helps in expanding the support received to the CBO through the leadership. A respondent from Wellawaya revealed, “We are thankful to our *uncle* who has guided us and the CBO for so long. Despite his age he puts in a lot of effort to ensure the functioning of the CBO and the fight for our rights.”
 - In discussions held in Ettampitiya, it was revealed that the leader that they have chosen is the president of the local youth society. They mention that the youth provide protection to the people when they protest on the road. “He has a lot of knowledge for his age and can speak confidently. He also has networks with different people”. The older respondents also note that the youth are better at handling new technology hence best suited to take leadership positions.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Matara revealed, “The president and secretary of our farmers' association have been working with dedication since 2017. They do experiments within their capacity to understand the issue and they know how to talk to public officers by experience. They also represent us at all the meetings. An all-knowing leadership is important to our movement”.
- On the other hand, in certain areas it was also observed that there could be deterring factors causing the lack of leadership.
 - In Batticaloa, it was found that nobody in the group were keen on taking the leadership. This was revealed to be because of the fear associated with being arrested if there is a defined leader for the group.

14. Language as a concern

- Language is found to be a serious concern, especially among Tamil-speaking minorities and communities demanding for their rights. During discussions, it was noted that the inability to converse in Sinhala has become a barrier to communicating their demands and obtaining the necessary attention from state officials. On the other hand, relevant state authority has been reported to have sent the response to demands made in Sinhala language, which impedes effective communication of the response.
 - In Ettampitiya it was revealed that the letter to vacate the lands are often sent to members of the estate community (who predominantly speak in Tamil language) in Sinhala. They mentioned that they usually cannot read these letters and have to get the support from someone who knows the language to understand what is mentioned.
 - In Batticaloa, a woman respondent who knew both Sinhala and Tamil languages mentioned that she would take the initiative to draft the letters in Sinhala language when they have to submit any letter to the state authorities or interacting with Sinhala-speaking entities.
 - A male respondent from Jaffna revealed that often times language becomes a severe issue in cases where they have to obtain services, when communicating their concerns or issues, when demanding for their rights. In day-to-day interactions such as when engaging in businesses, lack of language skills is not seen to be a large issue to them. “Language is not an issue for us when engaging in businesses. We somehow manage to talk with the Sinhala customers who come to our shops. But when it comes to asking for our rights, language becomes a huge problem”.

15. Citizen participation through labour unions

- The freedom of association of the Malaiyaha Tamil Community especially in the estates for their rights has been through their labour unions and membership in them. However, these same labour unions that facilitate their participation in many ways reinforce the identity of the community as ‘labourers’ rather than ‘citizens’. Discussions also reveal that when labour unions are weakened, people are more likely to believe that there is no strong channel for them to fight for their rights. As a result, it is becoming increasingly important for the community to find other avenues for citizen participation rather than through labour unions.
 - In discussions held in Ettampitiya estates, it was found that earlier when there were issues among estate communities, trade unions were present for support. “We had X, Y and several other communist Labour Unions with us as well. We were members of these labour unions and they did all the legal procedures on behalf of us. But now, the company is not paying membership fees to these labour unions on behalf of us. As a result, the Labour Unions are no longer representing us and we are on our own. We are not in a position to bear the costs of fighting for our rights, neither do we have the knowledge on how to go about it.”
 - The respondents from the Ettampitiya estate community also mentioned, “Since we do not have the labour unions to help us anymore, we are thinking about the possibilities to fight for our rights through the youth clubs”. “We have plenty of youth in the estates, who have more exposure and education than us. They are also connected to national level political parties; they might have a better capacity to fight for us if our rights are violated.” The youth can be viewed as an opportunity to encourage the organic formation of collectives in estates in order to secure community rights. In a recent survey, Malaiyaha Tamil youth were identified as being distinct from their adult counterparts. They have been discovered to be more progressive and vocal regarding their rights.¹⁷

16. Concerns of the Malaiyaha Tamil Community

- The perceived identity of the Malaiyaha Tamil Community living in estates among society is also found to be an issue for the community when attempting to exercise their active citizenship and fighting for their rights. The community has historically been discriminated and when their concern within the community is raised, it is not deemed to be an important one.¹⁸ Hence, it is more difficult for the community to exert influence as they are not treated equally as other ethnic communities nor considered powerful.
 - An expert interview with a member from the Malaiyaha Tamil community revealed, “When there is an issue concerning the Sinhala ethnic community and the Malaiyaha Tamil ethnic community, in most instances prominence and value is given to the issues of the Sinhala community. This is because the Malaiyaha Tamil community is not considered to be important in comparison to them.”

¹⁷ Study findings extracted from the Social Scientists’ Association, from the project titled, ‘Youth as a Catalyst for Political Change’. Fieldwork conducted between February to April 2022 [Report Unpublished]

¹⁸ Gunasekara, V., Surethiraraj, R., & Tilakaratne, P. (2019a). Services And Legitimacy: Exploring the Everyday Experiences of the State in Sri Lanka

17. Personal networks as a source of strength

- The success of CBOs at the local level is also dependant on how well personal networks are maintained. These networks can be with NGOs, political networks or government officials. Maintaining such networks could be important for ensuring the success of the CBO, however, at the same time the use of such networks could also be challenging to ensuring the inclusive participation of citizens and in the process exclude certain groups of people based on their political networks or affiliations.¹⁹
 - Discussions in Matara reveal that the local CBO use several networks and experts to ensure they achieve success. “We have worked with the Attorney General office, Governor’s Office for a long time now. We have also worked with the department of irrigation, president of the area’s trade society, the local mobilizer a national political party, and professors from a state University. We try to build networks with people wherever we go. If there is anyone that can help us with achieving success and winning our rights, we will get them involved. That is our strength.”
 - A respondent from an FGD in Wellawaya revealed, “Since 1980, *Maama* worked with a national political party to develop the village. Because of that, he regularly deals with government officials. *Maama* always take the lead to negotiate with government agencies about the land deeds. Also, even when making the *Samurdhi* list, the government officials contact *Maama* to take the necessary information regarding the villagers.”

18. Public participation of women

Female participation in organically formed collectives or groups is an interesting yet sometimes complicated phenomenon that must be carefully understood.

- To a greater extent, female participation is passive, and females themselves believe that males are better suited to demanding and fighting for issues such as land rights and access to land. It was also revealed that some females are also bound by their past experiences, their status as widows, displaced persons, and age factors, which limit their ability to actively participate as citizens. Some females believe that men are better at exercising active citizenship than women.
 - Discussions with the female group in Matara revealed that their understanding of participation is based on a passive idea. Females that we interacted with revealed that they are more invested in activities like planting vegetables and fruits. A respondent mentioned, “They belong to the ‘big societies’ (referring to the farmers’ society led by men in the locality), we are called the ‘female farmers’ society’ (*Kantha Govi Samithiya*). We mostly engage in small activities like planting vegetables. Even though, we don’t directly work with them, we extend our support to the big society”.
 - Similarly, in Kanakasanthurayi, during interactions with resettled females it was revealed that it is the men in the locality who are mostly engaged in going forward and fighting issues related to land rights. According to them, when men take the lead in resolving such issues, it is more likely that solutions for the problems will be achieved.
- It was also discussed during the qualitative discussions how women face discrimination in certain situations when accessing government institutions. This gender-based discrimination restricts women's freedom of association, particularly when it comes to taking action to combat injustices.

¹⁹ <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/12-Chapter-8.pdf>

This active discrimination reinforces the perception that men have a better chance of attracting the attention of government institutions and officials than women.

- A female respondent from Jaffna revealed an incident when she visited the local police station. “They kept me at the police station the entire day. None of the officers wanted to give priority to my issue. I felt very insulted. At one point I felt it would have been better if a male was with me. Things may have gone differently”.
- There have also been instances where we have observed a high physical presence of women in local CBOs and collectives where community rights are discussed. However, their participation is observed to be a rational decision made after assessing the availability of other family members. Men, according to the females who participated in the discussions, are very busy with their daily wage labor work or with cultivation. As a result, participation of women in such groups and collectives has a lower economic impact on the household. Despite the involvement of females in these cases, their presence may not demonstrate active citizen participation, as they may not be demonstrating agency in the civic space in many cases.
 - A CSO leader from Wellawaya revealed, “It is women who mostly go for group meetings. Most of the time their husbands are in the field and cannot participate in such routine meetings. Because of this, instead of the men, the women in households participate”.
- It is also important to note that women have demonstrated active participation in certain instances and contexts. According to previous research conducted by the Social Scientists’ Association²⁰, this is primarily appearing in areas where men are migrating to cities and women are doing the majority of the work in villages. The same study goes on to discuss how certain vulnerabilities, such as poverty and widowhood, make women stronger in terms of participating in efforts to alleviate their suffering. In some cases, the involvement of NGOs and their presence, particularly in economically marginalized districts of Sri Lanka, provides women with much-needed exposure and knowledge.
 - A female respondent from a CBO in Wellawaya revealed, “Now we are going to all the protests. The local NGO who works in our area is also a women led one. They help us a lot”.

²⁰ Extracted from the study on ‘Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis: An Investigation of the Challenges of Community Participation to Inform the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Project’. Conducted in 2019 by the Social Scientists’ Association for the United States Agency for International Development.

Inter-Communal Initiatives by Local Organizations

In this section of the report, we focus on the presence of civic space for citizens to participate, as well as their ability to participate in inter-communal initiatives. In this inquiry, we will discuss the nature of the space is available for these types of inter-communal initiatives, why it is important to work on these issues, what can be done to create a space for such initiatives at the local level, who will be the key stakeholders (Please see Figure 5) in creating such conducive spaces and what kind of challenges can be expected, and so on. It also discusses how and why these initiatives might differ from organically formed citizen struggles.



Figure 5: Relevant Stakeholders at the Local Level (in Organizations working on Inter-communal Initiatives)

1. Creating a space when there is no demand

- There is often no substantial public demand to form groups in order to popularize or raise awareness about inter-communal initiatives. Thus, most initiatives are launched with a push from a well-organized project or program led by organizations. However, the presence of these organizations are beneficial in terms of mediating and intervening during unprecedented events or issues at the local level where communal harmony could be in threat. The spaces that have been established have proven to be beneficial in resolving issues and effectively responding to such challenges to inter-communal harmony, as well as in acquainting communities with one another. Thus, despite the many challenges and passiveness associated with interventions (which will be discussed further in this section), the continuous intervention and presence of

such initiatives is encouraged in order to create and protect the civic space for inter communal initiatives.

- A Muslim respondent from an FGD conducted in Batticaloa revealed, “After the Easter Sunday Attacks, a lot of Fathers (referring to Catholic Priests) that knew us from the inter-communal programmes came searching for us. They were worried about us and wanted to make sure that we are okay. At that point they helped us a lot and protected us”.
- A respondent from an FGD in Batticaloa revealed, “There was a problem regarding a cemetery that happened in our locality. This issue was between members of the Roman Catholic Community and another Church. The DLRC intervened in this problem and resolved the issue”.
- An expert interview revealed an incident where a Buddhist monk and Muslim Maulawi that got to know each other through an inter-communal programme, worked together to resolve a community level issue. “The head monk at the Girithalawa Temple works with us in our programmes. There was an issue in the community over a theft and a Muslim person was accused for it. The head monk got involved with the Maulawi and was able to mediate the issue”.

2. Motivation for participation

- As discussed in the previous point, given that there is no substantial demand from the people, participation in programmes and initiatives occurs due to three factors. The first factor is to show solidarity. People who do the mobilizing of these initiatives frequently have good social capital, hence they can get the local people to participate in such initiatives as a gesture of solidarity, friendship, or as respect for the mobilizer. The second factor is the intangible benefits received through participation, such as recognition, networking opportunities, and exposure. The third factor is monetary assistance received, such as the travel allowance, which encourages people to participate in these initiatives.
 - A respondent from an expert interview revealed that, “Participating in the events is a new experience for some people. They have the opportunity to stay in a good hotel and enjoy leisure time during the programme, which is a rare occurrence in their daily lives.”.
 - A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “For many people that participate in our events, the travelling allowance that we give them is very valuable. Some people come for the events expecting these allowances”.
 - Explaining how participation happens as a form of maintaining social networks and a gesture of solidarity, a respondent from an expert interview revealed, “We work closely with the village Buddhist monk. We go for the *Katina Pinkam*. The monk appreciates it when we take something for him. We also support the monk with any personal requests. Because we maintain a cordial relationship with him, the monk also supports our work in return”.
 - A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “We have to remain on good terms with the people in our community. We have to go to funeral houses. When someone gets ill, we have to visit them. Otherwise, they don’t come for the events that we organize. By chance if we are unable to go for a funeral house, people take it personally and get upset with us”.

3. Public opinion on inter-communal initiatives

- In most instances, these programmes are organized by established local or national agencies as part of their mandate, where local people participate in the initiatives that are organized. These agencies regardless of their organizational background are often instantly labelled as ‘NGOs’ among locals at the local level, leading to having mixed connotations among communities. Many locals perceive these organizations as those working on an international mandate, organizations with heavy funding, with agendas against the state or the majority ethno-religious community of the country, or those helping the poor, and so on. On one hand, having such perceptions encourages participation among some members in communities since they believe that they would get some form of material benefits by taking part in these initiatives. On the other hand, some locals feel discouraged to participate due to the perception that the initiatives are not futile or they are against the state.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Matara revealed that among certain community members such initiatives have a heavy negative connotation. “Some members from the Sinhala community in the area say that these initiatives are a waste of money and time. Others say that these initiatives betray the country. There are also people who immediately label these initiatives as ‘NGO projects’ when they hear about the concepts and intentions of the initiatives”.
 - The negative perception also deters people from participating voluntarily or with genuine interest. “People who come for the events that we organize tell us that they came because they are our friends. If not, they had no intention of coming.” When trying to encourage participation of people beyond the usual circle of participants it was revealed that in most instances, people get their relatives or close friends to take part. A respondent from an expert interview mentioned, “Those outside of the usual circle that participate come for these events only because they are either close friends of these people or because they are relatives”.
 - The perception regarding heavy funding also creates an idea that those participating do so to earn some form of monetary benefits. A respondent from an expert interview mentioned, “When communities see an NGO spending a lot of money, organize events at big hotels and people participate, some people think that it’s because these organizations earn a lot of money”.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Anuradhapura said, “In general, there is no major obstacle to peace and harmony between us. But there are some religious leaders that spread rumours like germs. I remember for a while there was a big problem in Anuradhapura, where people were accusing an international non-government organization focused on relief and developmental projects of spreading Christianity. I remember it was a group of monks from a Sinhala-Buddhist organization in the area that spread this rumour.
 - A non-Muslim respondent from an FGD in Kalutara revealed, “When I went to help the Muslim community, the Buddhists in the area started to call me ‘Mohammed’. Some people told me not to get involved in problems by helping the Muslims.”

4. National level recognition for inter-religious work as a positive factor

- Despite the fact that there is no substantial demand from the majority of the people at the local level for inter-religious initiatives, the steps taken at the national level from time to time have seemingly promoted inter-religious engagement at the local level. The national level efforts have helped enhance recognition for these works at the local level. For example, through the

work and initiatives of the National Integration Officers at the Divisional Secretariat Office, communities have participated in inter-religious events and communities also have been engaging with the NGOs who have provided the necessary resources for such events. Another such positive example is inter-religious engagements and events encouraged at the school level. Schools have been asked to celebrate special festivals and events of different religious groups in an effort to familiarize students with practices, customs and traditions of other communities. This context has set a positive backdrop for organization to work collaboratively with schools to advance such areas.

- A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “We were once asked by one of our local Buddhist schools to send resource persons from our organization to do a session at the school’s Christmas programme”.
- During an expert interview it was revealed by a respondent, that it is easy to work with Divisional Secretariat Officers in their area because they have a space created through National integration Officers to work on such areas and they require support to advance such work.
- A non-Muslim respondent from an FGD in Kalutara revealed, “Once I organized a Hajj celebration at a local Catholic school with the participation of several people. The people who participated in the programme praised it as a very good initiative.”

5. Lack of genuine interest among State officials to advance inter-religious harmony

- Eventhough there is a mandate for state institutions such as Divisional Secretariat Officers to promote inter-religious/inter-ethnic harmony through their work, the question of if there is a genuine interest among government officials to advance such areas remains. According to the respondents with which discussions were held, some government officials are genuinely passionate about these initiatives, whilst there are also some who engage in these initiatives to merely fulfil their obligations. It was also discussed, that there are some government officers who hold a negative perception about these initiatives and try to interrupt them since the programmes do not match with their personal or adopted ideological positions. This form of resistance and negative attitude coming from government officials also has an effect on the freedom of association at the local level communities.

Several respondents revealed the following.

- “There are some government officials that claim that the work that we do are useless once they hear about our projects”. – Respondent form an FGD held in Jaffna
- “When we ask for the support of some of the government officials, the first thing they ask us is how much we will be paying them. They know that a lot of times such initiatives are done as interventions which are part of NGO projects. They expect us to pay them even when they are merely fulfilling duties within their work obligations”. - Respondent from an Expert Interview
- “There are some government officials that despise NGOs. They don’t even want to talk with us”. - Respondent from an Expert Interview
- “There are some government officials who have asked us to distribute material goods or rations instead of doing such programmes. They ask that during times when people don’t have money to eat food what is the point in doing these programmes with them”. - Respondent form an FGD held in Matara
- A respondent revealed that there are also government officials that do not like their initiatives, since they themselves are not interested in fulfilling the roles and

responsibilities of their job. “Our active presence forces them to do their work and be active – which they do not like”. - Respondent from an Expert Interview

- A respondent revealed the following incident. “Once our organization tried to intervene in an issue in our community. The problem was between a Buddhist temple and a Christian (Non-Roman Catholic) church. To intervene in this problem, we went to meet a senior government official. He told us to stop trying to intervene in this problem and to mind our own business”. - Respondent from an Expert Interview
- A respondent from an FGD in Anuradhapura revealed that government officials are only limited to their work role and obligations. They mentioned that there is no intention among them to advance such programmes.

6. Factors determining participation of minority ethno-religious communities

- Members from minority ethno-religious community display interest in these programmes and to work with members from other ethno-religious communities, since participation and networking with them gives them a sense of security. However, it was also revealed that there are instances when members from minority ethno-religious communities do not show interest in such participation unless otherwise they have been confronted with an event or issue that affects their ethno-religious identity.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Batticaloa revealed that they observed that members from minority ethno-religious communities join the initiatives that they organize especially when there is a tension at the national level targeting them. They mentioned, “I think that participating in our programmes helps them feel more secure”.
 - A respondent from an expert interview, attempting to work with Christian and Roman Catholic Communities revealed, “I have been inviting the Christian (Non-Roman Catholic) church to work with us in our initiatives for a long period of time. But they did not join with us. However, when there were some tensions in the community over their church, we saw them showing interest to work with us”.
 - A Muslim respondent from an FGD in Kalutara revealed, “There is a mosque near our houses. I suggested to have the Friday bayaan in Sinhala – because then people living in houses around the mosque can understand what is being said. I also suggested to lower the sound in the loudspeakers. But these did not happen. Some people in the Muslim community have criticized me for suggesting these things. There were rumors being spread at one point that I was betraying the religion by joining hands with the village temple.”

7. Importance of networks

- As it was seen in the case of organically formed local groups and CBOs, similarly in the case of engagement with regard to inter-communal initiatives, networks are found to be a strength. However, a difference was observed with regard to the type of networks used. In the case of solving a community issue, most of the networks used were bottom-up networks. But, in the case of popularizing inter-communal initiatives, networks were mobilized from top-down. This means that when it comes to community level issues, people mobilize at the ground level and use networks to bring the issues to top-level authorities through the networks; however, in the case of intercommunal initiatives, because there is no substantial demand from the people, individuals at the top-level, such as representatives of local NGOs, clergy, or government officials, start the

initiatives and reach out to people through village leaders (Please See Figure 6 below)²¹. It was found that those who mediate inter-religious programmes are those capable of reaching people in communities, especially through networks maintained by local religious and community leaders, such as, Members from the *Dhayaka Sabha*, *Dahampaasal* teachers, Clergy, School Principals and so on. Given this context, it is also evident that freedom of association is also contingent upon how successful organizations are in terms of winning the support of key stakeholders who play a vital role in local social networks. On one hand, the use of such networks gives an indication the importance of using a top-down approach to ensure initiatives are successful, given that there is no substantial demand from the bottom.

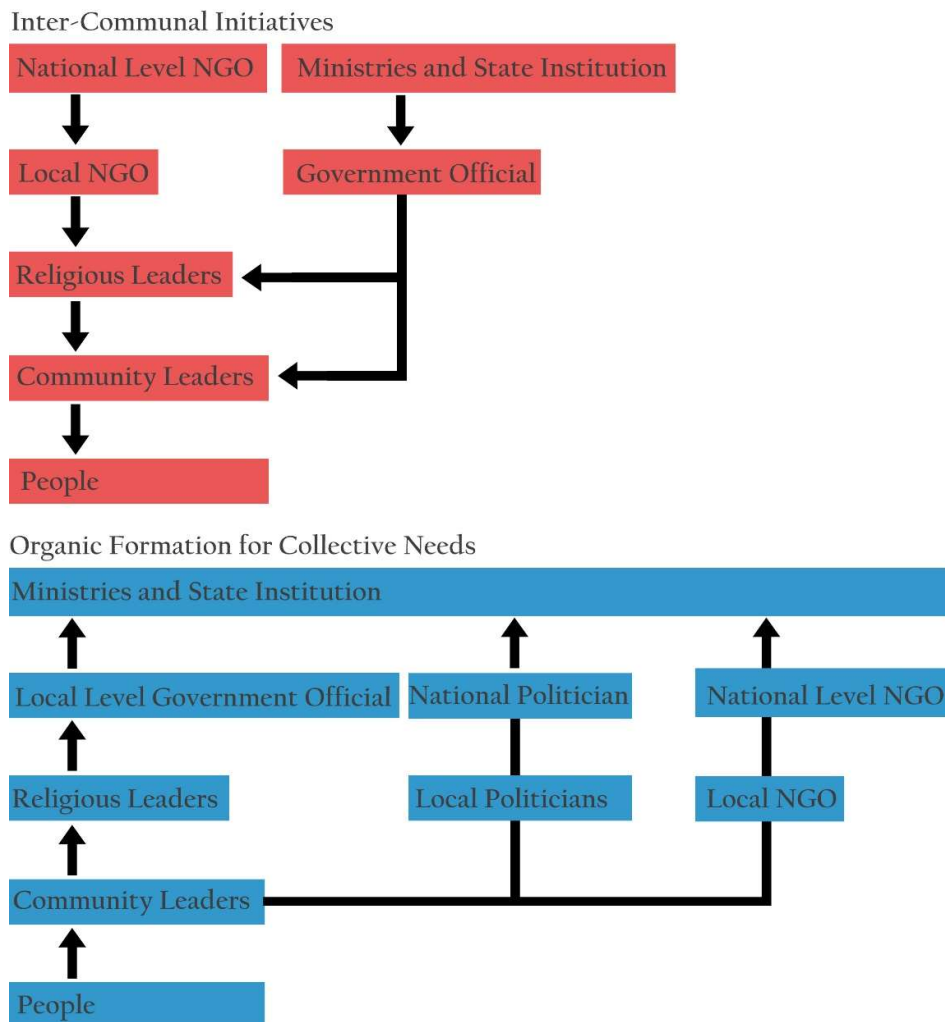


Figure 6: Model approaches to mobilizing networks in inter-communal initiatives and organically formed local groups

²¹ Please note that Figure 6 is not an absolute representation of how networks can be mobilized from the top-down or bottom-up levels. Stakeholders and pathways may differ depending on location, context, community, and issue of concern.

- A respondent from an expert interview revealed that if the religious leaders in the locality are in good terms, then the support and participation of locals can be ensured. “It is important for us to be in close touch with the village *Dhayaka Sabhawa*. Otherwise, it is difficult for us to approach people”.
- A respondent from an expert interview revealed the importance of keeping religious leaders on good terms by narrating an incident. “Once we could not inform the chief Buddhist monk of the district about a programme that we had planned to do. We were only able to invite other young monks to participate and this made him very upset. He called us and blamed us for not inviting for him. At the same time, he also made sure that none of the other monks from the area participated in our event”.
- A respondent from an expert interview mentioned, “There are people from the community who are always at the temple. These are the people who connect the village to the temple. Even though these people do not have a lot of knowledge, they have a lot of acceptance and recognition amongst the village people. It is hence important for us to work with them. Otherwise, it becomes difficult for us to do our work”.
- Regarding the participation of the Muslim community in Batticaloa and Jaffna, respondents from FGDs held in both locations revealed, “To ensure the participation of Muslim people, first of all we have to speak to the local Maulawi”.
- With regard to participation of Malaiyaha Tamil community in estates, a respondent from an FGD in Badulla mentioned, “We have to get the approval and consent of the *Thalaivar*. We have to go through him to get people from the community to participate. Otherwise, they will act as a hurdle to our work and won’t allow us to do our work with the community”.
- A respondent from an FGD in Anuradhapura revealed, “I have been going for all the events organized by the National Peace Council. Even if I am sick, I will not try my best to go because I consider it to be my responsibility. Especially when people like Mr. Perera (pseudonym) call me and ask me to take part, I will find a way to participate even if I am not close to the event location. I really like the type of programmes they organize.”

8. Relationship between local religious leaders as a determining factor

- Potential issues between the religious leaders at the local level also influences the freedom of association at the local level for inter religious initiatives. These issues could be interpersonal issues, ideological clashes or regarding the politics of religious groups at local level. When these issues are present at the local level, religious leaders tend to refuse to participate in inter-religious events. Such refusal also in turn determines and affects the number of followers of these religious leaders from the community participating in these events. As a result, when the cordiality between religious groups or leaders determines citizen participation, such strained relations have an impact on freedom of association of the citizens at the ground level.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Matara revealed an incident where there was an interpersonal issue between a Christian and Roman Catholic priest. This issue was an interpersonal one. However, due to this conflict, both priests now do not participate in events when they know that either of them will be present. This poses as a challenge for them to get the representation of both Christian and Roman Catholic communities at events.
 - A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “The Buddhist Monks don’t know about the different denominations and churches in the Christian community. Once a Buddhist Monk said – ‘The organizers of this event only ask *kalukotkkaarayo* (referring

to non-Roman Catholic pastors in derogatory manner) to attend these events'. The Monks say such things because they are angry about conversions to Christian community”.

- A respondent from an FGD in Polonnaruwa revealed, “There are differences between the religious leaders that are part of the inter-faith committee. Some Fathers (referring to Catholic Priests) do not like it when other Fathers participate in these events. Eventhough they are from the same religion; they have some issues among each other. There are also Buddhist monks that do not like some Fathers.”

9. Differing influence of religious leaders on their followers

- The influence that religious leaders have on their followers also differs by religion. It was found that when it comes to followers of Hinduism, the Kurukkal does not exert the same level of influence on his followers as that of the influence of a Buddhist monk on the Buddhist followers. Thus, initiatives with representation of religious leaders may not guarantee an equal level of influence. Hence, relying on such influence for all religious groups may not ensure opportunities for association at an equal level for all religious groups.
 - A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “Among the Malaiyaha Tamil community, it is the Kovil committee which is more powerful than the Kurukkal. In some areas we do not have a proper Kurukkal”. The respondent further mentioned, “A lot of Kovils are privately built and belong to families. Poosaris and Kurukkals are mostly in Kovils only to do religious offerings. Because of this, most Poosaris and Kurukkals are not interested in engaging in community issues”.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Jaffna mentioned, “The Kovil Societies only take care and manage the Kovil. Most of the time, the Kurukkal only does the religious offering. The Kovil Societies also do things related to their religion and nothing else”.

10. Surveillance of events as a deterrent

- Recent incidents of surveillances happening at the local level at initiatives organized led by NGOs and their local representatives has created a public opinion that these initiatives are against the state. This creates a negative perception among people and causes communities to be extra cautious when considering participating in such initiatives. This in turn challenges the ability to exercise freedom of association at the local level.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Batticaloa revealed, “We see CID presence at our events. This makes people worry a lot and think a lot before participating at our programmes. Because of their presence people think we are doing something illegal”.
 - A respondent from an FGD held in Matara revealed, “The CID and Police come and ask us details about our events. Some of them ask us if they also can attend our events. We tell them to come for our events but we request them to come in civilian clothes and not their official uniforms. Because when they come in their official uniforms people get scared”.

11. Interested religious leaders and government officials as a strong source of support

- However, it is also important to recognize that even though some religious leaders and government officials could serve as spoilers of such initiatives at the local level, this stance is not generalizable. Discussions also reveal that there are religious leaders who are genuinely passionate about advancing such areas, especially inter-religious harmony and extend their sincere support to organizations working on the ground.

- A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “There is a monk who always participates in our programmes. He does not even accept the travelling allowance we provide him with. He continuously works with us”.
- A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “There are some monks who have gone outside of the country and have seen the world. Some of them have studied in foreign countries as well. They are more progressive compared to others. They are more likely to support out initiatives”.
- A respondent from an FGD held in Matara revealed, “There is one Pastor who comes for almost all our events. Whenever there is a community issue, he always works with us to resolve the issue”.
- A respondent from an expert interview mentioned, “The Additional District Secretary has helped a lot in our NPC programmes. He was the one in charge of NGOs. He came for our programmes on preventing hate speech on his own and did not even ask for any money. He did not even take the travel allowance we offered”.
- A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “There is one Buddhist Monk he lives very far away - at the border of the district. The travel allowance that we give the Monk is not enough to cover the cost of the trishaw ride. But he pays the rest of the remaining amount personally and somehow participates in our events”.
- A Muslim religious leader from Kurunegala revealed that there have been times where he has sold his paddy and spent that personal money to participate in programmes.

12. Preconceived ideas and prejudices about other religions

Misunderstandings about other religions, doubts and prejudices ingrained amongst people has been a barrier for local level community efforts. When there are unresolved doubts about other communities, then people are increasingly suspicious about working with one another. Moreover, there have been instances where the behaviours and actions of certain religious groups have caused tensions within communities, leading to challenging the ability to engage in open conversations amongst communities. These tensions cause long-term barriers for people to work together.

- A respondent from an FGD held in Batticaloa revealed, “Even if we go for an event with a Christian person, people ask us why we are going with them. They are scared that if we associate Christians too much, they will convert me to their religion”.
- A respondent from an FGD held in Batticaloa revealed, “Muslims in the area have an issue with the lack of land that belongs to them in this area. Not having enough land is one of their main issues. We have heard of stories that some Muslims change their identity as Hindus and get married to families with cattle in Tamil villages. Apparently, they then take the cattle from these villages and sell them in towns. Some say they marry these families for their land as well”.
- A respondent from an FGD in Kurunegala said, “The Sinhala people in the community have a fear that Muslims will give them *wada peti*. On the other hand, some Muslims are also sceptical about the businesses of Sinhala people – there is a small hesitancy to consume items like biscuits from Sinhala people among them.”
- A respondent from an FGD held in Kurunegala revealed. “Among the community, there is a suspicion about Muslims. There is an idea in the community that Muslims grab land.”
- A Muslim respondent from an FGD in Kurunegala revealed, “Sometimes when I go to *bana* sessions at houses, Buddhist monks call us *harak horu* (cattle thieves). There is a distrust in the community regarding us.”

13. Demographic composition as a determining factor to carry out initiatives

There is a greater chance for initiatives and programmes on advancing pluralism, religious harmony to work in areas with a varied composition of people living in the area. Multi-ethnic areas and localities have better potential at participating in inter-religious initiatives. One reason for this is the already developed or existing contacts between ethnic groups in such an area, another possible explanation is that one ethnic group does not have overwhelming power over the other in such areas, and being an extremist in such a multicultural setting is not normative.

- A respondent from an expert interview revealed that, “The Muslim Community living close to the Kaduruwela town are mostly businessmen. Towards the village areas, you will mostly find Sinhalese people engaged in farming. However, the village Head Monk works cordially with both Muslims and Sinhalese people. The Muslim businessmen respect the Monk and the Monk too supports the Muslim community a lot in resolving issues that they encounter. The Monk is also able to help Sinhala families in the area through the associations with the Muslim community because of his close connection with them. Also, the Muslim businessmen in the area provide financial support to organize the Temple *Perahera*”.
- A respondent from an expert interview revealed, “People who have fights in their own villages, behave well with one another when they go to cities or abroad. All the conflicts are inside the village only”.
- A respondent from an FGD conducted in Jaffna revealed, “Our community customs, traditions, faith matters only within the village where our family lives. These traditions and customs don’t matter when we go to the cities or for higher education. When we go outside of the village and into cities, these divisions or differences among people depending on the communities they come from don’t really matter”.

14. Caste as a barrier for participation

- Caste is found to be a significant barrier affecting participation and freedom of association in initiatives. Caste serves as a more established issue within the social and cultural settings, especially amongst the Hindu community²². This affects the ability to ensure persons are working together. Hence, caste segregation at the societal level is a barrier to ensuring the ability to exercise freedom of association.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Jaffna revealed that caste serves as a strong point for people to base their difference. “People build Kovils based on caste, cemeteries based on caste, they decide their location of residence based on caste”.
 - A respondent from an FGD in Jaffna revealed that at a local GS office, an officer had given a job to a boy from a lower caste, which sparked some conversation at the local level. "People were taken aback, and they were wondering how the officer could give the son of a man who cuts trees for a living a job at the GS office," he said.
 - A youth respondent from an FGD held in Jaffna mentioned, “There was a programme organized at a village in our area. My parents did not want me to go for this programme. They said there are people from a lower caste in that village. This was my parents’ thinking. This did not however matter to me. I still went for the programme”.
 - A respondent from an expert interview (belonging to the Malayaha Tamil Community) revealed, “When leadership positions are given to people in societies within our

²² A Review of the State of Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka. (2022). MinorMatters.

community or when people take the lead in Kovil activities, caste becomes a huge issue. A lot of times, because of the caste issue, people from lower castes are ignored from a lot of things”.

- A respondent from an interview in Kurunegala revealed, “Caste influences things like marriage. When government officers distribute rations, they corner people based on their caste. There is also a bias toward opinions of upper caste members.”
- A respondent from an FGD in Polonnaruwa said, “Most of the people from our community (considered backward in the given locality) are now doing jobs in the Urban Council or Pradeshiya Sabhawa. But people in the area do not treat us with respect or accept us. People from our community have been called sakkili for generations. Sinhalese as well as Muslims in the area are every ready blame us during a small inconvenience. Because of this, we have been humiliated and marginalized in many places.”

Recommendations

For Potential Third-Party Initiatives seeking to Support Cases of Organic Formation of Citizens

This section aims to provide recommendations for a third party who wishes to become involved in a given community in order to increase citizen participation and strengthen freedom of association. It is also important to note that these recommendations are based on the research team's estimation of feasible interventions given a donor-funded project, rather than recommendations that require longer time frames and state-level interventions. Below recommendations are also highly dependent on the time frame of the projects, the availability of financial and human resources, and the goal of the intervening third-party organization.

- Given the current context in which individuals are less willing to participate in protecting the virtues of good governance, it is critical to engage with causes that encourage them to form organically as rights-based groups. This is significant because people perceive the virtues and value of good governance through the lens of injustices they witness. These may be bound by very specific injustices that are present at the local level. Thus, it appears preferable to understand the specific injustices that people have identified at the local level, to collaborate with them to solve the identified problems, and to connect with those communities to protect their rights. More such initiatives would be a better first step toward ensuring greater national-level community participation.
- Any intervention to address local level injustices faced by people is preferable to occur through a well-established CBO or, in the absence of one, by establishing one at the local level. Participation in this manner would be more long-lasting, inclusive, and beneficial to the members. It also strengthens freedom of association because formally established CBOs have a better capacity to face threats to freedom of association much better than informal gatherings or collectives of individuals.
- Ensuring that the chosen CBO has a written constitution, and if they do not, developing one is critical for the smooth functioning of such groups. With the consent of the members, the current constitution or the one that will be developed could be amended and recommendations from this study could be taken into consideration.
- In a given society, proper analysis and mapping of the relevant stakeholders in the area such as community leaders, opinion makers, and party politics is critical. Ignoring the involvement and value of these relevant stakeholders would limit third-party attempts at strengthening public participation at the local level. This is because the people themselves in communities often have selected stakeholders that they continuously engage with in their day to day lives at the local level. Hence, mapping these stakeholders is a critical first step prior to working with these groups/collectives.
- Remaining biased towards one political party may jeopardize the freedom of association by antagonizing other political parties at the local level. Interestingly, remaining non-political could also affect the level of participation of citizens at the local level and limit it in certain ways. Hence, if remaining non-political may reduce the participation of people, it is critical for an intervention to win the support of local level members (does not have to be politicians) of major political parties to ensure participation in initiatives is not jeopardized by certain political affiliations.
- In such groups/collectives, it is preferable to appoint a steering committee to take the lead. It should represent a community's various subgroups, such as people representing political affiliations, social profiles, ages, and genders. This will result in greater participation and less government repression.

- It is preferable to have an intervention that includes supplementary initiatives for the target community, so that people who may not benefit from the initiative against the selected injustices within the target community can benefit from the larger intervention in some other way.
- It is also necessary to increase the optimism amongst people about the possible changes they can make as communities, as some people are pessimistic about change. Visits to the communities that made the changes possible, getting them to speak to the target community, and making people hear/see about successful social movements around the world that would encourage the target community are all important activities which could be carried out. It is also critical for a third-party intervention to focus on specific issues with attainable solutions that are prevalent in a given community. By resolving the chosen issue, people will gain confidence, which is an important first step in increasing public participation in a given community.
- The first priority of people is often their livelihood and other household responsibilities, so they tend to accept injustices rather than question them. This is because questioning injustices also costs time and resources. Hence, any training program or community level meeting for a target community must take place at the local level, making participation simple. The location, date, and time should be chosen with the convenience of the people in mind.
- It is also important to help people understand the scope of the issue they want to fight for, as well as to educate them on the process, dos and don'ts, rights of the affected community, and the relevant legal background. This is critical not only for informed participation, but also for instilling knowledge in the target community that will assist them in becoming informed citizens.
- The ways in which youth and adults participate in fights against injustice is often different. There are ways in which adults have participated at the local level that may not be appealing to the youth. Hence, parties interested in working with these groups must be creative in how they wish to intervene in terms of shaping their citizenship in accordance with how these age groups prefer to participate.
- It is also critical to enlist the participation of relevant civil servants and government officials in any initiatives. Such participation should persuade them that their involvement will make their job easier, not harder. It must also be ensured that they receive appropriate recognition and appreciation for their efforts within the initiative.
- It is critical to include university students in a given area in these interventions because they have gained some recognition in their respective fields and participate actively. It might be possible to develop a separate program for young university students (past or present) who come from the surrounding areas and are knowledgeable enough to advise the locals.
- People frequently use social networks as a tool when they need to accomplish something. This is also relevant when people are fighting injustices at the local level. Hence, it is a wise decision to broaden the social networks of local CBOs. It could extend to other civil society organizations working on human rights, providing legal aid, or strengthening civic space, or it could also be networking with a CSO working on the specific issue that the chosen community is facing. It is also critical to connect the communities that participate in the project so that they can assist one another when and if necessary.
- Interventions with minority communities may necessitate additional steps beyond those described above. For example, civic spaces in certain war-affected and resettled

communities may be weaker and less available. As a result, it may be necessary to encourage societies to participate as CBOs and to assist them in breaking down the barriers that are prevalent for them in organizing in the civic space.

- It is also critical to understand the language barriers that minority communities face when participating in the civic space. People from such communities require both short-term and long-term solutions. In the short-term language support could be provided during initiatives. In the long-term, substantial language training could be introduced to selected youth in a target community, or the consistent involvement of Sinhala-speaking youth in initiatives could be beneficial.
- Increasing female participation is necessary at the societal level, but it must be done carefully and gradually. Getting women to participate in steering committee discussions (as suggested previously) could be a good starting point. In the beginning, female participation in initiatives could be ensured through the involvement of female resource persons, university students, local politicians, or community government servants.

For Inter-Communal Initiatives by Local Organizations

Apart from the recommendations made above, there are a few more specific recommendations that could be considered if any intervention is designed to promote freedom of association and citizen participation in inter-communal initiatives.

- As discussed in the analysis section, there is no significant demand for intercommunal initiatives in comparison to the demand for strengthening civic space in order to combat day-to-day injustices. Engaging in intercommunal initiatives, on the other hand, is equally important because it goes beyond strengthening citizenship to promoting a more inclusive civic space. Thus, the lack of demand for intercommunal issues should be viewed as an opportunity for intervention rather than a source of discouragement.
- Given the context, designing initiatives to bring people from various communal groups together to fight for a common cause would provide a chance to merge both achieving solutions to day-to-day injustices and an opportunity to strengthen more inclusive practices of citizenship at the local level.
- However, people from various communal groups fighting together for their rights may not necessarily promote or indicate inter-communal harmony, and the people fighting together may only be aiming to win their right and nothing more. People may return to their existing social hierarchies and ethno-religious beliefs about one another once justice has been achieved through collectively fighting for their rights with other affected communities. In some cases, people may hold these beliefs even while fighting alongside other communities for a common cause that affects them. Thus, supplementary initiatives within a larger initiative should be implemented to increase trust, awareness, and tolerance toward other communal groups within the larger initiative.
- The main initiatives could encourage people to fight together in the civic space as citizens, while smaller initiatives could create interventions to strengthen relationships such as friendships in the private sphere.

If the main purpose of the initiatives is to foster intercommunal relationships, the following suggestions can be made:

- Since personal networks on the ground were identified as a key tool for the success of inter-communal initiatives on the ground, it is critical to assist the local level mediators in

maintaining these networks. This could happen by providing the necessary financial assistance to maintain such networks, or by assisting mediators in designing programmes to acknowledge and recognize the relevant persons in their networks.

- The design and form of initiatives that promote inter-communal initiatives must also be revised in order to protect and broaden civic spaces for inter-communal events. Interventions should not be limited to workshops, but should instead focus on on-site initiatives that challenge preconceived prejudices of other communal groups and can also aim to deconstruct popular narratives about history, culture, and so on that may be harmful towards ensuring peaceful inter-communal relationships.
- The interventions should target smaller groups and engage participants for a longer period of time. If the projects can reach more people, they should try to increase the number of groups rather than combining more people into a single larger group. This will assist people in getting to know members of the group more closely, fostering closer relationships among group members, and closely monitoring the challenges they face in engaging with their respective societies as agents who promote space for inter-communal relations.
- It is also critical to equip people who participate in inter-communal programmes so that they can become important and needed members of their respective societies. This may not be directly related to inter-communal harmony, but it may assist those who advocate for inter-communal harmony in establishing themselves as more informed individuals on the ground. This could be accomplished by expanding their social networks, providing them with basic training on human rights and the rule of law, training them on the procedures and processes of approach government institutions and so on.
- The programs should also be designed in such a way that potential spoilers within communities can be won over. People who are identified as spoilers have most often become spoilers due to a lack of awareness and exposure in some cases. They must obtain the necessary exposure and training. It is important to note that such direct intervention may not work for all spoilers since some of them are motivated by political ideology, but it might work for some.
- It is also important to understand the status of spoilers, because spoilers when subjected to a different context and when informed about the nature of the issue, could serve as champions of initiatives. For example, an individual who could be deemed a champion in the case of fighting against injustices affecting citizens could at the same time be a spoiler in advancing inter-communal relationships. Therefore, it is critical to invest in them in order to gain their trust, not only for fighting injustices that a specific community may face, but also to teach them to appreciate differences in a diverse society.
- Given the ongoing economic crises that people are facing, people's expectations for material benefits cannot be ignored at the local level. Thus, it is also critical to connect the local level agents who promote local level inter-communal relationships about how they can provide guidance to the respective communities on how to deal with crises. These agents could also be linked to organizations that provide non-monetary and non-tangible forms of assistance or training to communities in order to help them recover from the crisis.
- It is also important to note that intervention strategies to protect civic space and promote intercommunal relationships must be tailor-made according to locality, given the fact that the nature of the issues people face in terms of inter-communal relationships, the influencing players, and communal compositions of a given locality can all be area-specific.

Conclusion

When people are engaged in civic space, it is crucial to promote public participation and guarantee freedom of association, especially when they are using it to defend their rights and freedoms. The current study demonstrates that when people's rights are violated, they are willing to take a stand. This type of civic engagement, particularly at the local level, may differ from instances where citizens engage in more broad demands, like a system change. However, not every demand made through such organized efforts through collectives necessarily results in success. Whichever the outcome, fighting for rights is a test of a community's citizenship in and of itself. In order to increase the chances for the public of becoming engaged citizens, it is crucial to protect civic space and ensure their right to freedom of association.

When the demands of the people clash with the interests of other parties, their freedom of association may be challenged. These parties could include members of the military, law enforcement, politicians, private businesses, and more. Additionally, since all the demands/injustices of a given community may not be addressed or represented by one particular collective, other members of the respective communities themselves may oppose it and hinder the collective's freedom of association. Given the circumstances, the effectiveness of an initiative for fighting against injustice and winning their rights depends on how these obstacles are overcome in reality. People are sometimes incapable of handling these challenges on their own, and in other cases, people lack the capacity to do so. Therefore, it is crucial to involve third parties to safeguard the freedom of association. Sometimes the assistance comes from within the community itself, and other times it comes from external sources. Whichever the circumstance, communities need as much support as they can get, so having both these types of internal and external support is crucial because the parties challenging the right to associate may be in a stronger position of power.

Parties that oppose the freedom of association are not always the public enemies. Many times, a party or parties will oppose the people and their demands because of the nature of the injustices and the demands made. In a given case, politicians may be the party that opposes the right to freedom of association, but they may also be the party that is fighting to protect that right in other situations. Therefore, treating one party as the standard foe of freedom of association is not sensible. In many cases, members of a community may seek assistance from stakeholders they regard as potential supporters who can aid in the fight against injustice. However, the community may only recognise these parties as useful in solving these specific injustices. In other cases, these same parties may share a different relationship with the community.

Most people are not always active and engaged in the civic space. Their involvement in the civic space is most visible when they fight for solutions to the injustices they face. Interestingly, fulfilment of a community's specific need may push them to become passive in the civic space again, because people see no comparative advantage in being active continuously. Since active participation entails political and material costs, they do not see the benefit of being an active citizen unless it addresses one of their immediate needs. Thus, if this is the nature of public participation in everyday life, it may be difficult to expect the same communities to uphold and fight for broader issues such as challenged for good governance. Local communities may struggle to understand or relate to such broad concepts in comparison to their day-to-day circumstances and struggles.

Nonetheless, individuals' isolated struggles against injustices do not diminish their contribution to sharpening citizenship. People learn about their rights, about the process, about the people, and, most importantly, about how they can win certain rights through community participation. These are critical first steps toward a larger social movement that will result in better governing systems. Thus, investing

in freedom of association and participation in the civic space when people come forward on their own against specific injustices is critical to laying the groundwork for long-term system change.

On the other hand, addressing intercommunal relations locally depends on how meaningful a cause it is to defend in the local context. Members of marginalised ethno-religious communities in local areas show interest in such initiatives when the context calls for it, given that their rights and freedom of association could already be limited. However, members of the majority ethno-religious groups in a given area appear to be less inclined to participate in such initiatives because they do not face a threat at the community level because their group is represented in the population of a given locality. Having a demand from an ethno-religious minority group/s and not having a demand from an ethno-religious majority group/s in a given local area also emphasises the importance of creating a conducive civic space at the local level to discuss inter-community relations. It is also important to note that the parties involved, supporters, and opponents for intercommunal initiatives may not be the same as those involved in organically formed collectives fighting for day-to-day injustices at the local level.

Additionally, further action may be required to generate demand for such initiatives among various groups, particularly the majority ethno-religious group/s in given local areas. One option is to combine these intercommunal initiatives with other demands made at the local level - which seek to address injustices in everyday life. However, combining them solely will not merely unite the communities. People can unite for a common cause while still maintaining their negative ideologies, customs, and preconceptions about other ethnic or religious groups.

Finally, it is important to note that while promoting intercommunal harmony and strengthening the civic space to fight against everyday injustices at the local level do not necessarily go hand in hand, yet combining the efforts of these two causes may increase the likelihood of achieving the goals of more inclusive citizenship.