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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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New Project Targets the Use of Language for Reconciliation

A new one year project to promote language equality for the advancement of the reconciliation process will be launched by NPC focussing on Akurana in the Kandy District, Beruwala in the Kalutara District and Trincomalee in the Trincomalee District.

The National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP), funded by Canada, will promote language rights for national integration and reconciliation and assist people to communicate in official languages.

The objectives of the project are to mobilise Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and forums to promote language rights. CSOs will work to resolve language issues in key institutions. The project is aimed at CSOs and state officials such as community police and administrators and communities served by institutions targeted for language equality.

It will also aim to improve inter ethnic engagement through language learning leading to better language skills, engagement and more understanding across ethnicities.

Members of Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) set up by NPC in Akurana in the Kandy District, Beruwala in the Kalutara District and Trincomalee in the Trincomalee District to engage with the Coexistence and Community Police sub committees will also participate. LIRCs seek to strengthen social cohesion and to mitigate inter religious tensions.

The issue of language was a key dividing factor in the early years of Sri Lanka's independence and one of the root causes of the ethnic conflict that escalated into a three decade-long internal war.

The Sri Lankan constitution gives equal place to the Sinhala and Tamil languages, and also ensures that in Tamil will be the language of administration in Tamil majority areas. However, Tamil speaking people continue to suffer from unequal treatment where it concerns language rights. There is a need to promote awareness and sensitivity to language rights.

The activities of the project will focus on mobilising local level society platforms and forums to work towards the implementation of language rights and policy within state sector organizations.

NPC will use available resources in terms of training and engage in refining content in consultation with activists and language trainers. It will engage the larger community on language rights through campaigns and provide language learning support for youth.

Another component of the project is the strengthening of the nation building process. In the past language has been used to divide the communities and to assert the dominance of one over the other. In the project, language will be used as a tool for unifying and reconciliation. It will cater to the need for community language learning and be combined with language camps and exchange visits. The training and language classes will take place in the spaces of each religious community so that it will foster inter community relations.

LIRCs together with the Coexistence and Community Police sub committees will identify three local institutions that serve the public and conduct a language audit of them. After doing the language audit, a workshop will be held with Ministry participation to identify what people want and what they find most helpful in terms of language.

Reconciliation and Integration Workshop for Government Officers

Thirty-six government officials including Kegalle District Divisional Secretaries and District Secretary Mahinda Weerasooriya participated in a workshop on Reconciliation and National Integration Within a Pluralistic Framework under NPC's Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project.

Topics discussed included how to analyse conflict, reconciliation mechanisms and law and order. The workshop was facilitated by Aruna Jayathilaka, a lecturer from the Sabaragamuwa University, who discussed the pluralistic framework and how to analyse conflict. Lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi spoke on reconciliation mechanisms and law and order.

During the workshop participants formulated a workplan to build peace and reconciliation in the Kegalle district, which included activities to promote reconciliation in their areas.

During one session they identified incidents that took place obstructing the existing peace and reconciliation process. The participants found three main incidents and formulated a plan, using learnings from the workshop, to resolve the situations.

There was a musical session by Jayathilaka Bandara, who sang songs projecting the message of peace and reconciliation.

Mr. Weerasooriya said, "During the workshop I realised that pluralistic concepts are important to build and maintain the reconciliation process. We formulated a plan to promote the reconciliation process in the Kegalle district. The participants enjoyed the games and activities. I thank NPC for organizing the workshop after my request and want to wish it all the best in its future endeavours."



Taking Democracy to the Grassroots

A training programme for trainers on Resilient Communities Through Everyday Democracy was conducted to empower village level community platforms under NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity.

The programme was aimed at 22 associates of SCORE's partner organizations in Mullaitivu, Monaragala, Vavuniya, Ampara and Batticaloa. Trainers who participated in the programme were able to train grassroots community members on the values of the democracy, discuss benefits of a values-based democratic society and identify key issues necessary for such a society.

Similar training programmes were held for community members in Monaragala, Mullaitivu Vavuniya and Trincomalee.

During the programmes, interactive tools and techniques were used based on adult learning principles to encourage a productive dialogue among participants on different thematic areas. They included activities and games, group work and discussions, brainstorming on key issues and follow up agreements.

"Before the training, my knowledge of democracy was limited to books. Abraham Lincoln once stated that democracy means ruling the country through a government that is appointed by the people. This is the first time I understood its real meaning. In my opinion, individuals can make a huge contribution to establish democracy. It is freedom that is most essential when governing a state," said S.B. Wathsala.

"We should teach the values of democracy to the younger generation. Rather than teaching these things to elders, it will be better if we can make an attitudinal change within the younger generation. I have been teaching democratic values to the children in my village. I am hoping to share what I have learnt here with the children as well," said R.A.P. Shriyani.

Under the same project, a programme on business leadership through coexistence was conducted in Udagama for 38 members of the Yashoda Women's Organization to enhance the leadership skills of women involved in joint ventures.



Pluralism as a Means for Coexistence

Training programmes on pluralism were conducted for Batticaloa and Kuliyaipitiya Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members including religious leaders, state officials, police officers and civil society members under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Coexistence (CERF) project.

The training programmes were a part of six thematic trainings for each LIRC to capacitate institutional staff and community members with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with localised conflict to promote and protect religious coexistence.

During the workshop, participants were told about pluralism, diversity and the differences of human beings based on geographical, ethnic and religious identities. Group activities were conducted to help the participants to better understand the concepts. The event was coordinated by the CERF regional partner, Butterfly Peace Garden.

“How can a person who owns only five perches of land divide it among his family after five years? It will not be enough. We should work collectively to resolve this issue. We should use this committee to facilitate such dialogue between the two communities,” said Father Rajan Rohan.

“We respect the right of every citizen to live where he or she desires. If people choose to move into a Muslim neighbourhood, we will welcome them with open arms. However, the government's forced settlement of Sinhalese families within predominantly Muslim and Hindu areas still persists. This practice does not foster either pluralism or coexistence. On the contrary such practices are detrimental to the unity and cohesion among religious and ethnic communities.” said Moulavi K.L.M. Anees.

CERF also conducted training programmes on Conflict Transformation for Trincomalee LIRC members and on Rule of Law for Mannar LIRC members with the participation of religious leaders, state officials, local government officers, police officers and civil society members.



The objective of the Rule of Law training was to create awareness on rule of law, and to encourage the community to solve issues and undertake mediation.

The training on Conflict Transformation in Trincomalee was coordinated by the Serving Humanity Foundation, Trincomalee, CERF's regional coordinating partner.

“Sri Lanka is a multi ethnic and multi religious country. As such, it is important that we learn about diversity and the issues that are likely to arise as a result of these differences in order to navigate such issues to reach a mutually acceptable solution,” said Moulavi M. Yaseer.

“My Grama Niladari division has residents belonging to all ethnicities. It is good for me to learn about dealing with conflict while being sensitive to each group's needs. We have been practicing conflict mitigation as well as transformation but with limited theoretical knowledge. In this training programme, I hope to gain more knowledge and skills to improve my capacity to provide a better service to the community,” said Kasun, a Grama Niladhari.

“As state officials, we deal with community level issues on a daily basis. Having the conflict transformation tools which we discussed at our disposal is certainly advantageous in many situations.” said Aruchelvi, a Grama Niladhari.

CERF also carried out a social media campaign on Facebook before the parliamentary elections to motivate citizens to vote for candidates who promoted ethnic and religious harmony. Six voice cuts were taken from members of Negombo LIRC and the videos were posted on Negombo LIRC's and NPC's Facebook pages. These campaigns had a wide outreach.

On the video Jessica Fernando stated that she would not vote for candidates who spread hatred among nationalities, religions and people. Vimalasena Silva urged people to vote for candidates who did not engage in fraud, corruption and religious extremism.



University Collaboration for Peace Building

Visits were undertaken to Ruhuna, Eastern, Jaffna and Sabaragamuwa Universities under the Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project. The project envisages introducing university students to concepts of pluralism and how to live in a multi ethnic and multi religious society.

NPC staff members including Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera discussed expected project outcomes with the university administrators and university coordinators for the project. Other interested faculty members also participated. Among the ideas proposed was to work collaboratively on a research project concerning the meaning of words, misunderstandings and their impacts on peace building initiatives carried out on grassroot level.

The team also had a reflective discussion with the academics who had participated in the online training on Peacebuilding and Pluralism that took place on June 2020 with international resource persons of the calibre of Professor Oliver Richmond of Manchester University and Professor Donald Horowitz of Duke University.

To benefit the community with pluralistic values, the university academics proposed to develop a certificate course with the four universities collaborating on pluralism for government officers such as Grama Niladaris and Development Officers who could play a key role in transferring the values of pluralism to bridge diverse communities.

Conflict Analysis Training for the Community

Four training programmes on conflict analysis and management for religious leaders, women community leaders and youth were conducted by master trainers under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka in Kandy, Matara and Badulla.

The first part of the training focused on basic human needs and identity, which is an important concept when learning to respect and accept other cultures. The second part explained conflict analysis and management, showing how that in order to resolve or manage a conflict, it was essential to understand the conflict. Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools - the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline.

The next stage of the training was to identify the pluralism process to understand the importance of living and interacting with all religions and cultures. There was a discussion on the role and responsibilities of youth in building a pluralistic and peaceful society.

The training sparked insightful and engaging discussions among participants that helped to bring them to a common understanding on the issues.

Among the other topics discussed were minority religious rights, overcoming prejudice, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.

Improving Ethnic Relations With Cultural Understanding

Matara, Galle, Monaragala and Hambantota District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) held needs assessment meetings to collect ideas and suggestions for the next phase of NPC's Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project funded by Misereor.

Participants discussed new interventions and activities to be implemented such as organizing trips and visits to improve coexistence and solidarity among different communities, improving ethnic relations by having sports activities and organizing cultural and religious festivals and youth camps that allowed different communities to come together in order to understand different cultures.

They agreed that it was important to create awareness among the public about democratic rights and how to be a responsible citizen and that bonds between women local government officials and women community leaders should be strengthened in order to resolve conflicts within communities. While focussing on the core purpose of building peace and reconciliation, the DIRCs also agreed to implement activities to resolve the economic hardships facing the community.

In the second session, the DIRC members were divided into groups where they discussed the gaps existing to promote peace and reconciliation as well as economic development. Activities that were proposed included a common market place for all communities, cultivating local produce and exchanging products between the South and the North.

DIRC members discussed the current political situation and the Civil Society Platform meeting held to counter hate speech and fake news during the election.

A DIRC member from Hambantota said, "The 19th Amendment is necessary for a democratic country but many people are not aware of the benefits they receive from it and what they will lose by its abolition. The handout distributed by NPC on the 19th Amendment was extremely informative and I have distributed it among my friends, families and neighbours."



Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

Our Mission: To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.

Election Verdict is Opportunity for Inclusive Governance

The recently concluded general election has given the ruling party and its allies the 2/3 majority they sought in parliament. The hopes of the general population are high. The National Peace Council congratulates the government on achieving a victory never achieved before in Sri Lanka under the proportional electoral system and even considered impossible. With great power comes great responsibility and we hope that the duo of president and parliament will deliver this to the people so that this victory sets the stage for an era of magnanimous politics. It is our hope that the opposition works in cooperation with the government but also be a check and balance and be outspoken when necessary. In particular we want to see that the rights of all people are respected through good governance measures that are implemented rather than being misinterpreted for partisan purposes.

We note that one of the government's key campaign pledges was to make changes to the 19th Amendment. This is a task that needs to be taken up carefully. The 19th Amendment shared power away from the president and to the parliament when it was passed in parliament with 215 votes, far more than a 2/3 majority and with only one dissenting vote. In addition, it set up independent commissions to safeguard public servants and institutions from undue political interference, the need for which has been highlighted by the president himself. Thus, these important power-sharing methods may need to be safeguarded rather than discarded.

There are long standing divides in our society that need to be bridged and which the competing politicians did not discuss in the course of their election campaigns. Even a strong government cannot win hearts and minds without justice. We believe that the power-sharing mechanism of provincial councils in the 13th Amendment to the constitution may be a vent to permit local majorities to manage their affairs and to accommodate particular ethnic and religious needs. It is significant the ruling party and its allies performed better than in the past in several areas in which the ethnic and religious minorities predominate. This gives rise to the possibility that the provincial council system can be revived in partnership with them in delivering economic development and new hope to the people.

This is not the first time we have had the President and Prime Minister from the same party and enjoyed unchallenged supremacy in parliament. A similar situation existed during 2005-2015, yet there was a change in 2015 as people found it unsatisfactory. Thus, power alone may not provide the best to the people, who have been awaiting since Independence in 1948 for a system of governance and development that matches the world. Even though Sri Lanka is a middle income country a substantial proportion of the people do not enjoy its benefits as the distribution of income is so skewed that around 40 percent of the population are on Samurdhi welfare. Now the power of the people have been vested through the democratic process in the government. We believe that through inclusive processes in which the hopes and aspirations of all sections of the population are met, Sri Lanka will be on the fast track not only to economic development but also to sustainable peace.

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