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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

## Strengthening NPC's Partner Organizations

April  
2021

A progress review meeting to discuss the results of a capacity assessment of NPC's 17 district partner organizations was held in Colombo under the Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, which is funded by Misereor and Cafod. Participants discussed their ideas for the way forward as civil society organizations amid new challenges.

In 2021 NPC has been carrying out capacity assessments of its district partner organizations that coordinate the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs). A checklist was created to assess the strengths and weaknesses of partner organizations and their relationships with DIRCs to identify the gaps and issues that exist and to help them overcome any deficiencies.

After capacity assessments were conducted in the 17 districts NPC, with the help of data analyst and researcher Shashik Silva from the Social Scientists Association, analysed the data to determine where each partner organization was placed in terms of their relationships with DIRCs, the NGO Secretariat, government organizations and NPC and other relevant aspects. This helped to determine areas that they had to improve in order to strengthen and sustain the DIRCs in a more effective manner.



At the meeting NPC's Executive Director, Dr. Jehan Perera, spoke on the increasing challenges to civil society organization in a pandemic-driven society. He spoke about the need to keep the people unified across deepening ethnic and religious divides and the need to work with government officials to build peace and harmony. Fostering a pluralist ethos, he said, was the best antidote to majoritarian thinking which was a worldwide phenomenon that had taken a strong grip in Sri Lankan political thinking.

Partner organizations were given the opportunity to create a SWOT analysis identifying their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their organizations and the communities they worked in.

Also under PACT, orientation meetings for DIRC members were held in Anuradhapura and Vavuniya attended by religious leaders, civil society activists and government officials.

They discussed the current situation in their local communities and the issues DIRCs needed to know about to carry out their work in transforming conflict and building peace.

Vavuniya DIRC decided to organize a workshop on early warning and early responses and an awareness session on civil law and the constitution. Anuradhapura DIRC will have an awareness workshops on how to use social media in a positive way and to improve their knowledge on conflict analysis and conflict resolution.

NPC provided laptops to the DIRCs to help in administrative and financial work.

"There are various problems in the interior villages of Anuradhapura. There are children who are getting married at an early age due to ignorance. There are child mothers and several children involved in prostitution. Please conduct programmes to educate parents and children," said a member of the Kahatagasdigiliya Pradeshiya Sabha.

"I had no idea about conflict transformation. Now I realise that there are both positive and negative consequences of conflict," said a student from Rajarata University.

## Strengthening Community Relations Through Research

NPC conducted out a training programme on research for 31 students from the Eastern, Sabaragamuwa and Jaffna universities under its Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project.

Participants chose research as the tool to raise awareness and influence the public discourse on pluralism and inter community relations.

Dr. S. Jeevasuthan, a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Jaffna and Mr. Shashik Silva, a survey researcher and quantitative analyst, facilitated the session via zoom. Participants learnt about the basics of research through practical exercises. Topics covered included qualitative and quantitative research, sample selection, questionnaire development, data collection, field data collection and survey data processing.

Participants discussed possible research topics under the theme of pluralism and inter community relations and methods of implementing their ideas. Many of the participants said that the programme had increased their confidence to conduct their own research.

# Filling the Vacuum of Women in Politics

In Sri Lanka, sectarian politics has polarised communities so much that politics has become a frustrating practice. However, democracy will not endure and flourish unless people can overcome these frustrations and keep believing in the concept.

Sumadhi Wasanthan, a Women's Federation member from Jaffna, was not interested in politics but still believed that she had a responsibility to strengthen democratic practices - such grassroots beliefs reinforce democracy and help the fight against tyranny.

The road to resilience in democracy is not easy. Sumadhi, one of 40 women who participated in a training programme on everyday democracy, spoke of how she and her colleagues had to face many issues in fighting for democracy. Her greatest challenge was disputing conservative thinking patterns and misunderstandings in a context where sceptical voices were on the rise, which is why the resilience of regional communities to uphold democracy needs to be strengthened. Solidarity begins in partnerships between the cities and the regions that vouch for democracy.

One such strong partnership that strives to build a cohesive national identity is NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity. Among many of its community interventions are training programmes on Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy where strong community leaders such as Sumadhi are put through simulation activities including games and knowledge mobilisation sessions. The programmes are conducted in Ampara, Anuradhapura, Jaffna, Kandy, Kilinochchi, Monaragala, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee and Vavuniya districts.

Multi stakeholder engagement is key to building resilient democratic practices in communities. The community organizations and their leaders and the relevant local or national government representatives are brought together to seek solutions to issues that threaten community harmony and unity.

Sujeewa Jayaramashrama, a member of the local government authority in Jaffna who participated in a recent training programme, said that she has gained a deeper meaning of the concept of democracy. Sujeewa, who is keen to integrate the knowledge gained at the training programme in the conduct of her public duties, is committed to uphold democracy at the grassroots.



Chandrawadani Kandrarasa believes that a mother can make a huge change within her family. She feels that she can teach her children the values of being a citizen in a multi ethnic, multi religious and multi cultural country. Chandrawadani thinks that without including women in the democratic process, it will soon perish.

In a country where women in politics come from family dynasties, women like Chandrawadani aim at creating spaces for women from non-political families. Everyday democracy begins and sustains in practices of ordinary women like Chandrawadani, Sujeewa and Sumadhi who are the hope for democracy in countries where populist voices dominate. SCORE helps them.

## Fighting Hate Speech Through Awareness

A campaign to spread awareness about hate speech among university students, lecturers and professors at Peradeniya University was conducted by NPC's Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project.

The first stage of the campaign was a press conference on society's role in preventing hate speech. Books and leaflets on the prevention of hate speech were handed to students and lecturers in the seven faculties as well as a book on the subject that was presented to Vice Chancellor Professor Upul Dissanayake.

Two training programmes on prevention of hate speech were conducted by master trainers for youth leaders in Kalutara and Matara.

Also under the same project two training programmes on conflict management and analysis were conducted by master trainers for religious Leaders and youth leaders in Kebithigollawa and Matara, focussing on basic human needs and identity. Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools of the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline. They were made aware of their roles and responsibilities in building a pluralistic and peaceful society. Other topics discussed included minority religious rights, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.



# Executive Director Delivers Thanthai Chelva Lecture

NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera delivered the annual memorial lecture organized by the Thanthai Chelva Memorial Trust in Jaffna on the topic of "Moderating Peace - Unifying the Paths to Reconciliation." The lecture commemorates the late leader of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (IITAK) S.J.V. Chelvanayakam who was the dominant Tamil leader of his era. Among his notable contributions was negotiating the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957 with Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike.

Recent speakers at the lecture have included former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and parliamentarians M.A. Sumanthiran and Dr. Rajitha Senaratne. The Chairman of the Trust, Bishop S. Jebanesan, said that committee members had decided to invite a civil society representative this year who had demonstrated long term commitment to inter ethnic justice and peace.

At the commencement of his presentation Dr. Perera thanked the organizers having recognized the role that civil society played in the reconciliation process. He added, "We are supported by Sri Lankans at the community level and by the international community. This is in keeping with the wisdom contained in the Hindu scriptures that the whole world is one family to the wise. Our goal in reconciliation is to unite the people of our country to be a family."

## Excerpts from Speech at Memorial Lecture

"...A policy of reparation can be implemented by reviving the working of two Transitional Justice mechanisms that were established by the previous government. These are the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations (OR). The OMP has been issuing certificates of absence to those whose family members went missing and continue to be missing. These Certificates of Absence entitle families of the missing to claim a monthly payment of Rs 6,000 that can be increased and systematised by the OR. To the extent that the government or any entity provides more compensation or engages in more reform, the less will be the pressure for accountability.



“Truth is perhaps the most important element of the Transitional Justice process because finding the truth is important to all the other elements of the model. It is like in a personal dispute. The truth is necessary to be known for a solution to the problem to be found.

“At the level of individuals, there are thousands of families who have members of their families still missing and whom they feel they cannot abandon. They need an acknowledgment of what happened to them which has not yet happened, though the war is over more than eleven years. They need to be able to mourn and remember and not be refused access to cemeteries and to memorials.

“The most important pillar from the perspective of the future and of the long term is institutional reform that will address the roots of the conflict. The new constitution being drafted by the constitutional committee provides an important opportunity for institutional reform. The draft law that is intended to govern the Port City is presently before the Supreme Court. In its current formulation the law significantly reduces the powers of parliamentarians over the Port City.

“The governing body of Port City will comprise appointees of the president who need not be citizens of Sri Lanka. The Port City Economic Commission will not be subject to the supervisory powers of parliament. It therefore appears that the Port City is meant to be an entity with full financial and administrative autonomy from the rest of the country.

“The government is prepared to consider new concepts of national sovereignty in the interests of economic development through the Port City. It is prepared to share governance of the Port City with foreign entities. In the same way it needs to be willing to consider new concepts of power sharing between the communities living in Sri Lanka.

“This new thinking of the government can be utilised to upgrade the power sharing arrangements in the provincial council system too. If there is a negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict the economic benefits can be enormous due to internal cohesion and the goodwill of the international community...”

## Remembering Victims of Easter Sunday Attacks

Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) organized a commemoration event on April 21 to remember the victims of Easter Sunday attacks at the Shrine of Christ the Healer. Buddhist, Muslim and Catholic religious leaders of the LIRC attended in a vigil to commemorate those who died and those who were injured.

Negombo LIRC conducted a silent protest and vigil calling for justice for the victims. In the afternoon the Catholic church held a silent walk demanding justice for the victims, which was attended by several religious leaders including Father Ciswan De Croose and Abdul Rahuman representing Negombo LIRC.

Addalaichenai LIRC joined the Assembly of God church in its vigil to remember those who died and were wounded in the attack. Boys and girls from Muslim community joined the vigil in solidarity with the families of the victims.

## Training on Rule of Law For Government Officials

Two training programmes on the rule of law were conducted for the Trincomalee and Batticaloa Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs), including religious leaders and police officers, aimed at helping participants to understand rule of law and religious freedom while explaining domestic and international legal framework and legal provisions available to protect a citizen's religious rights.

The programmes were part of the seven thematic trainings offered to each LIRC to promote rule of law and religious freedom at the local level to foster a culture of coexistence and tolerance. Being multi ethnic and multi religious localities, the areas chosen for the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project were identified as hotspots for religious tension. The training programmes assisted committee members to prevent and address potential conflicts.

“As government officers, knowledge on the rule of law is important. I learnt about the existing laws on religious freedom. Improving knowledge is helpful in organizing community level interventions and advocacy activities through which the discourse on religious freedom can be strengthened,” said A. Aruchchelvi, a Grama Niladhari from Trincomalee LIRC.

## Promoting Efficient Public Service Delivery

Four focus group discussions were conducted with the public and state officials in Matara and Batticaloa under NPC's project Sustaining Peace Through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery.

The project, conducted in partnership with the Jaffna, Sabaragamuwa, Ruhuna and Eastern Universities, is to set up certificate courses on pluralism and inclusive service delivery for local level state officials.

The needs in the four districts in which the universities are located will be identified for course content development by consulting with District and Divisional Secretariat officers, Grama Niladhari officials and local government authorities.

The discussions are being used to gather data and find gaps in the inclusive service delivery process. Government officials gave their feedback on a curriculum for the certificate course.



April  
2021

*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.*

## The Demand for Truth and Justice is Perennial

The second year anniversary of the Easter bombings that primarily targeted Christian churches took place last month with the motivations and masterminds of the bombing still shrouded in mystery. Despite many inquiries that have been held during the terms of the previous and present governments, there continues to exist a dark cloud of unknowing which is leading to various speculations gaining ground, which add to the considerable mistrust in society. The government, religious organisations and donors have given considerable material support to the victims that has sustained them in different ways. However, their quest for truth and justice still remains unfulfilled.

The Catholic Church in particular, its clergy and laity, in the areas where the churches were bombed, have mobilized on repeated occasions in public to demand the truth and to seek justice for the victims while in churches elsewhere there is routine remembrance and praying for the victims and their families. The search for truth and justice for loved ones will continue as it is a perennial part of the human condition which cannot be suppressed. This is evident also in the ongoing demands for truth and justice in the North and East of the country where the three decade long war took place and thousands still remain missing and unaccounted for. There will be no closure to the victims and the thousands left behind by them until their cries are heard and responded to in a meaningful manner.

With the passing of the second year since the Easter bombing, the government has come under pressure to show results in throwing light or in apprehending those responsible for the attack. In recent weeks there have been a flurry of arrests, including Muslim civil society and political leaders who appear to have had peripheral engagements with the suicide bombers and who have not been previously accused of being engaged in terrorist activities themselves. In this context while the arrests demonstrate considerable activity on the part of the government, they appear ad hoc and do not address the question of motivations and direct culpability in the crime.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to take actions that win back the confidence of those who have been victims of violence and untruth in all parts of the country down the decades and thereby preserve the moral fabric that can unify the country. A truth commission, as committed at the UNHRC session in October 2015, could be an effective mechanism in this regard. Such additions to the country's social capital, of which trust is a most important component, will enable countries that voted for the UN Human Rights Council resolution to engage more meaningfully with the development initiatives of the government.

*Media Release issued on 29.04.2021*

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