



ශ්‍රී ලංකා ජාතික සාම මණ්ඩලය
தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

March
2021

Exchange Visits Build Religious Understanding and Tolerance

Members of Kuliypitiya, Panduwasnuwara, Batticaloa and Addalachenai Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs), including 50 religious leaders of different faiths, participated in a three day exchange visit conducted to facilitate empathy through experience sharing and interaction under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The religious leaders visited Batticaloa and Addalachenai to share learnings, recommend good practices and facilitate dialogue on religious teachings and interfaith coexistence. They went to places of religious worship including mosques, temples and churches, and discussed pluralism and coexistence through reflections of historical incidents to create broader understanding.

A seminar was held in Kattankudy with the participation of religious leaders, state officials, police officers and community leaders of the Addalachenai and Batticaloa LIRCs where participants shared their experiences in planning, designing and implementing committee interventions to promote interfaith coexistence and religious freedom. Religious leaders said that it was the first time they had participated in an event where leaders of all faiths interacted with each, which helped them understand that at the core of every religion there is peace and harmony.



“This was a novel experience for me. I have never participated in an event where religious leaders of all faiths interact with each other, learning about each other’s religious teachings and cultural practices. We, as religious leaders, have a duty to promote coexistence and harmony and if we adhere to our religious teachings and treat all beings with respect, our followers will do the same. This was a good opportunity to build unity among religious communities,” said Dhamma Pradeepa Sil Maeniyo, a female Buddhist religious leader.

Also under the CERF project, training programmes on gender were conducted for the members of the Akurana and Weligama LIRCs conducted by Mr. Velusamy Weerasingham, aimed at improving gender consciousness and sensitization among LIRC members to create the space for inclusive participation and decision making, both within and outside the committee. The training covered concepts including the differentiation between gender and sex, the concept of masculinity and femininity, gender mainstreaming and gender in peacebuilding and decision making.

“We need to take a long, hard look at the situation pertaining to gender equality and inclusivity. It is unfortunate that we have become insensitive towards equal treatment of all genders. We must take action to create the inclusive future we seek where all are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve,” said Mohammed Munzir Moulavi.

Sustaining Peace Through Pluralism

NPC has undertaken a new project funded by Freedom House in partnership with four universities to set up certificate courses for local officials on pluralism and inclusive service delivery.

The project, Sustaining Peace Through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery, will enhance the capacity of government officials to deliver public services and to increase their participation in sustaining peace by providing a course under the guidance of the Universities of Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa, Eastern and Jaffna.

Course content development has a structured process to identify the needs in the four districts in which the universities are located by consulting with officials from the District and Divisional Secretariats, Grama Niladhari officials and local government authorities.

Faculty members of the four universities will develop a basic course module based on the needs of their specific areas that will be identified by following a process of consultation with the relevant stakeholders and focus group discussions. Then they will develop components that are uniform while also being specific for the different districts.

Twelve preliminary meetings were held with officials in Matara, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Ratnapura, who responded positively and said they appreciated getting practical knowledge to frontline public officers. “We are living in a society with unresolved conflicts so we need officers who are similar to the counsellors,” said Jaffna District Secretary, Mr. K. Mahesan.

The meetings discussed the challenges faced by government officers in providing non-discriminatory public services and the steps to be taken to overcome them.

Second Round of Food Bazaars Showcases Pluralistic Food

The second round of Food Bazaars to improve coexistence among different ethnic communities by showcasing diverse food culture was held in Matara, Batticaloa, Kegalle and Negombo.

The Food Bazaars were a success with more than 100 youth of different ethnic and religious backgrounds taking part as well as government officials and community leaders.

The highlight was cooking demonstrations of food representing different cultures prepared by local culinary experts representing their ethnic communities. The food was to be sampled and enjoyed by the people.

There were cultural performances by youth from different ethnic communities, giving the participants the opportunity to experience Sri Lanka's diverse culture. Sessions were conducted on how different communities had been living in harmony since ancient times.

An NGO Coordinator from Kegalle said "Our country is a multi ethnic country. We have seen what happens when a minority is suppressed and their cultural and religious values are not respected by other communities. Therefore it is of importance to understand the customs, clothing and food of different cultures and religions in our country."

"In the past, we had a lot of opportunities to work with different ethnic groups, which paved the way to understand different cultural values. Today's youth are an isolated generation, which is why this programme is very important," said a Batticaloa government official.

Under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT), funded by Miseroer and Cafod, orientation meetings for District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members were held in Hambantota and Nuwara Eliya.

Hambantota DIRC members identified two areas in Tangalle and Kirinda as hot spots of ethnic and religious tensions. They decided to conduct a workshop on pluralism. In Nuwara Eliya, NPC donated a laptop to the DIRC for administrative and financial work.



Preventing Violent Extremism

March
2021

NPC carried out a Training of Trainers workshop in Colombo on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) through a practical community based approach. This is part of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) PVE Capacity Building in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh project implemented with project partner Helvetas Sri Lanka and with financial support from the European Union.

A group of 30 members from six project districts – Ampara, Batticaloa, Mannar, Vavuniya, Kandy and Kurunegala - and 16 staff members from NPC and Helvetas took part in the activity carried out as a hybrid training with an international trainer and inputs from local and international resource persons. Participants also joined in virtually from NPC and from the project implementing team in Bangladesh.

Appearing on Zoom Patrick Burgess, the international trainer, used six sessions to educate and update the participants on practical PVE knowledge that can be used as a training tool at the district level. Mr. Burgess is an international human rights, transitional justice and preventing violent extremism (PVE) expert and co-founder and President of Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR.)

Participants for the training were selected after an application process and interviews to verify their ability to understand violent extremism and its processes and their interest in taking the knowledge gained to the district level as trainers. They included religious leaders, government officials, youth members and partners.

The training programmes included such topics as increasing understanding of violent extremism, how violent extremists recruits followers, preventing violent extremism and creating a plan for preventing violent extremism in communities.

“As a person working in the prison system, the training was a great help to gain both theoretical and practical understanding of violent extremism. It added depth to my rudimentary knowledge on violent extremism. I hope to use this knowledge not only as a training tool but also to better understand how extremism is enabled within prison systems,” said A. W. Sarath Athukorala, a prison officer in Kurunegala.

“Through the training, we were able to enhance our knowledge on violent extremism. My team from Vavuniya gained a good understanding on practical training methods to address violent extremism. We can use this knowledge and methods to address issues in our localities,” said Sutharshani Sugiharan from Vauniya.



Practising Democracy at Community Level

Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, NPC organized six training programmes on Resilient Communities Through Everyday Democracy Module in Kandy, Mullaitivu, Ampara, Kilinochchi and Batticaloa for 159 participants including coexistence society members, Local Inter Religious Committee members, District Inter Religious Committee members and 59 community leaders.

Imran Nafeer conducted the training programme to enhance the participants' basic understanding of a democratic society and its values, to brainstorm and recall learnings from participants' past on a value-based democratic society and to identify key issues and areas to be focused on.

The intention of the programme was to create a dialogue among participants on lessons learnt and the role of community members based on their past experience. It was expected to create an open space for participants to recall their own memories and experiences in relation to the role of community members for a value-based democratic society. Participants were trained to identify key issues and areas to be focused on while empowering them to address those issues as community leaders.

Interactive tools and techniques such as activities, group activities, plenary discussions, group brainstorming and follow-up agreements were used to encourage a productive dialogue on different thematic areas.

During the first session, participants defined democracy through various images, keywords or paper cuttings, inspiring them to respect their uniqueness and differences.

The second session explained the concept of democracy while allowing participants to discuss their opinions, perceptions and reflections on their version of democracy with practical examples.

The third session explained the presence of multiple opinions in society and inspired participants to participate through discussions.

The fourth session had role play to reflect the challenges in collective decision making and action to give participants the chance to use their aesthetic talents while reflecting on the practical challenges they faced at the community level in collective decision making efforts.

“One of the basic problems is discriminatory practices in government institutions; we can’t see democratic values in their service delivery. We are voiceless. The only thing we can do is to share this knowledge with the others in our communities. It will empower the younger generations,” said N. Dilshan, a Youth Club member from Mullaitivu.

“We identified democracy as a politically related word. Today I realised the broader meaning of the term. As individuals we should practice democratic values in our day to day life. Most people do not have sufficient knowledge about democracy, so spreading this knowledge will be a challenge,” said Ravikumar Rajini, a Moral Education teacher from Kilinochchi.

March
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.

Reconsider Overbroad Laws Targeting Democracy

The country is facing difficult challenges due to internal and external pressures which is increasing the level of frustration within society. The Covid-generated economic downturn, fallout of the Easter bombing investigation, sugar tax scam and impending UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka need to be dealt with sagaciously. These challenges can best be met if the government is able to mobilise a consensus within the country that unites the people of all ethnic and religious communities in a common stance behind the government. While the government came to power during a time of high ethnic and religious polarization in which the further polarizing of the ethnic and religious communities took place, the need now is for unity and togetherness for the common purpose of upgrading the life of all sections of the people.

In this context, the National Peace Council is relieved that the government has announced that proposed laws to ban the wearing of the burqa and closure of a thousand Muslim madrasas on the grounds of national security are being reconsidered. We are concerned that the previously envisaged course of action would have polarized the country further rather than unite the people. These proposed laws are overbroad and severely impact upon cultural and religious rights. The wearing of the burqa for instance can be regulated so that the identity of the wearer can be ascertained at security checkpoints and the madrasas can be required to register with the education authorities and undergo necessary supervision instead of being shut down. There should be equivalent provisions for the non-discriminatory registration of Sunday schools of other religions as well.

The National Peace Council is also perturbed by the government's proposed de-radicalisation law that will enable public officials to detain persons they suspect of preparing for violence or spreading of disaffection between communities and have them sent off to rehabilitation centres. We are apprehensive that such a law could be misused heavily. This would be akin to an arbitrary weapon given to public authorities which could undermine democracy and freedom of speech in the country. We call on the government to reconsider all three proposed laws as overbroad and not in keeping with the ethos of a multi ethnic, multi religious and plural society that Sri Lanka truly is, or for that matter any democratic country. We call on government spokespersons proposing legislative changes or making public statements to take care not to add to the polarization of communities at political and religious levels and to empathise with the feelings and aspirations of minority communities in addition to that of the majority.

Media Release issued on 18.03.2021

National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: www.peace-srilanka.org, Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064