



# Paths To Peace

## Language for Reconciliation

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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 30 year internal war, and continues to be a great divider.

The problems began with language legislation in 1956 that made Sinhala the only official language. This had a practical consequence because it took the right to equal opportunity to state services away from Tamil speakers. More than six decades later, this injustice to Tamil speakers has been corrected both politically and technically with Tamil being made an official language in the constitution in terms of the 13th and 16th Amendments. The constitution gives equal place to the Sinhala and Tamil languages and ensures that Tamil will be the language of administration in Tamil majority areas. However, in practical terms Tamil speaking people continue to suffer from unequal treatment where language rights are concerned, therefore there is a need to promote awareness and sensitivity about language rights.

Based on the need for language bridging, the Language to Reconciliation (L2R) project is being implemented with funding from the Canadian government.

Four focus group discussions and a capacitation workshop were conducted for 35 participants in the Batticaloa District and 34 participants in the Gampaha District under the project. The focus groups included government officials, religious leaders, Community Police officers, community business leaders and Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members.

There were 30 participants at the capacitation workshop in Batticaloa who were made aware of the language rights and language policies in the country. They were told about the institutions and bodies they could reach out for assistance on language right violations.



During the focus group discussions and the workshop, participants highlighted these issues:

- Grama Niladhari officers lacked knowledge of English. Circulars in the second language are not shared or are being delayed.
- Leasing companies provide documents in English and explain them in Tamil but it is the people's right to have the document in the language they prefer before signing the agreement.
- In the district courts, English is used in communicating and issuing judgments so people cannot present and understand the complaints and judgments.
- The main airport does not have documents in three languages.

To bridge the language gap in selected districts, Sinhala language classes were held for 40 participants in the Batticaloa District and 31 participants in the Gampaha District. Both the language classes were conducted by the National Institute for Language Education and Training.

## Government Officers Study Pluralism

NPC is collaborating with the Eastern University of Sri Lanka (EUSL) to hold a certificate course on sustainable peace through inclusive services delivery. NPC will offer the same course with the universities of Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa and Jaffna under the Freedom House funded project, Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery.

NPC facilitated the development of the course and coordinated with university academics as well as other scholars during the process.

The six month course, which includes field studies and assignments, is the outcome of a survey done in 2019 where gaps in service delivery were identified. The course targets front line government officers and it is expected that, after learning about the concepts of pluralism and peace building, they will advocate for a pluralistic society in the long term. In the short to medium term, various ethnic and religious communities will receive the services and benefits available through government bodies without discrimination.

Government front line officers will learn concepts behind the effective delivery of inclusive services as well as methodologies to provide user friendly services that will result in improving effectiveness and efficiency of the services they deliver.

The event marks a milestone in expanding the mandate of NPC in promoting sustainable peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.



# Dialogue for a Diverse Society

A series of training programmes were held under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project for 259 administrative officers, planning unit officers, development officers and field officers from different government institutions to increase knowledge on right to information, pluralism, mediation, fundamental rights, conflict resolution and the duties and responsibilities of government officials.

These programmes, conducted in the Matara, Kegalle, Kandy, Badulla, Nuwara Eliya, Colombo and Polonnaruwa districts, were organized by District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) together with NPC's partner organizations.

The objectives were to build a dialogue among high level government officials about importance of understanding the value of building a diverse society. They were encouraged to focus on performing their duties to serve people equally and to support building reconciliation.

Kegalle District Secretary Mr. Mahinda S. Weerasuriya attended the Kegalle workshop while Matara District Secretary Mr. Y. Wickramasiri and Additional District Secretary Mr. Kasun Wellaheva participated in the Matara workshop.

"Every citizen should have a substantial understanding about reconciliation. Our country is facing many problems due to ethnic and religious conflicts. The participants learnt how to minimise conflicts and why we need to treat people equally," said Mr. Wickramasiri.

"When listening to the speakers, we understand that we have a great responsibility as public servants. Every person has the right to receive government services without being discriminated against. Before the programme, I did not take much notice about discrimination but now I feel that the way I thought before was wrong," said a participant at the Kegalle workshop.



# Pluralism Training to Promote Inclusivity

Two training programmes on pluralism for 50 Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRCs) members and 70 youth wing members in Mawanella were held under NPC's project Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC), which is aimed at promoting the attitudes of respect and acceptance for a multi religious society.

Community leaders' skills, knowledge and attitudes will be enhanced to promote cultural, behavioural and attitudinal diversity among ethnic and religious groups. LIRCs and youth wings consist of members belonging to different ethnic and religious communities. They interact with diverse groups and communities through their work therefore their understanding of pluralistic values will help the community leaders to be more effective when they address localised conflicts.

Giving priority to raising awareness on the importance of eliminating prejudice and stereotypes and the importance of creating a pluralistic society, the training content was designed to broaden the discourse and practice of pluralism through inclusive platforms. Participants engaged in group activities to ensure effective engagement and understanding to reduce communal violence. Recognising and respecting the other's space was emphasised through the framework of pluralism and diversity.

Participants were educated and capacitated on the concept of pluralism, diversity and the innate differences of human beings based on geographical, ethnic and religious identities. Group activities were conducted to help them to understand the concept and how to use the theories taught during the session. It focused on how pluralism and diversity play a significant role in a multi cultural society. During the group sessions, participants identified several challenges that they faced when working in a multi cultural society that would need to be considered in future interventions.

Vibudda Sulochana, a member of the Mawanella youth wing, explained the need of creating opportunities for youth to be a part of the reconciliation process. "We have a basic knowledge of pluralism but we do not know how to practice these pluralistic values in our daily lives. I learnt that it is important to acknowledge the diversity of society in terms of strengthening inter religious relations. We should include these subjects in school curriculums."

Thakshila Somaratne explained how the training encouraged her to be part of the local reconciliation efforts. "The training inspired me to accept the pluralistic nature of the society. By respecting and acknowledging diverse opinions and values we can rebuild relations among the different communities".

Kanchana Amarasinghe, a member of Mawanella LIRC, emphasised the need to train state officials to improve the quality of their service. "These community platforms have given us the opportunity to contribute to this process. The state officials can share this knowledge with other officers in their institutions. I believe state institutions should follow pluralistic values."

Wijani Rathnasekara, Divisional Secretary in Mawanella, pledged to extend her support as she believed that the programme would have an impact in Mawanella.

# Teaching Youth to Prevent Violent Extremism

NPC held six training programmes for 286 youth from the Mannar, Batticaloa, Kandy, Kurunegala, Vavuniya and Ampara Districts under its Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) project. Participants included National Youth Council members, university students, youth parliamentarians and youth club members.

They learnt about the actors and drivers and the push and pull factors of extremism, post-independence politics, the JVP insurrections, Tamil minority alienation and the Easter Sunday attacks as well as planning for PVE intervention activity.

During the group activities, participants identified the issues polarising different religious and ethnic communities such as drugs use, unemployment, social media, child abuse, land encroachment and the economic crisis. They recommended intervention activities including video campaigns on social media and information sessions.

“After participating in this workshop, I learned more about PVE, especially the difference between terrorism and violent extremism and the work that young people have to do to prevent violent extremism in our region. Young people and the business community should cooperate on this,” said B. M. Riyath from the Ampara District.

“In our region, civil society faces many challenges in preventing violent extremism. Political intervention is one of the main ones. Civil society, youth and other activists will be able to face the challenges ahead only if they continue to act together,” said Supun Rathnayaka, Kandy District Youth committee.

“I learnt about PVE related ideology and why people become extremists. If we, the youth, respect other people's views and act with understanding and social unity, we can prevent violent extremism based on ethnic, religious, regional and cultural differences. The difference in status given to men and women in society is also a problem. Providing leadership training to young women can prevent violent extremism from growing,” said Fathima from the University of Colombo.



# Right to Peaceful Protest is at the Heart of Democracy

The swearing in of the new cabinet of ministers by the new president took place in the midst of chaos earlier in the day. Shortly past midnight the protest site that was instrumental in forcing a change of government and was peaceful at the dead of night was forcefully cleared by the military and police perhaps for that event. By this action the new government has risked alienating itself from significant sections of the local and international communities. The past 104 days in which the protest site was in existence saw tens of thousands of people visit it from all parts of the country and all walks of life to demonstrate their solidarity and take part in direct protest as and when they felt it warranted.

The National Peace Council expresses its anguish and disappointment at this turn of events. The brutal attack on the peaceful and helpless protestors are a negation of the ideals and aspirations that the protest movement has been standing for, and which led to the resignation of the former president, prime minister and cabinet of ministers and paved the way to a new president, prime minister and cabinet of ministers. We condemn the manner in which the security forces dealt with the protestors, cordoning off the area prior to moving in, even going to the extent of blocking the entry of medical personnel and ambulances into the site where protestors, media and lawyers alike were being subjected to physical assault.

We believe that the present government that has come to power due to this protest movement should have negotiated with the protestors rather than clear them out with batons. It was known that the protestors were to leave the Presidential premises at around 2 pm in any event. In addition, they had stated that they have made arrangements to hand over the occupied premises by afternoon. It is in such time the government led forces acted to clear the protest site in the early hours of the morning.

NPC calls on the government to protect the democratic right of protest of the people which is at the heart of democracy. Failure to do so could lead to the beginning of a new wave, (another meaning of the word Aragalaya), of protests with an uncertain conclusion. In order to access financial support from the IMF and the international community, the government has to show evidence of good governance and political stability. These include, most importantly, winning the trust and confidence of the people by being consensus oriented, equitable and inclusive, being accountable and respecting the Rule of Law.

It is the responsibility of the new government to lead by its example at this time of economic collapse. NPC renews our call for the appointment of an all-party government alluded to by the new president in his victory speech when he invited the opposition leaders to join the government, actions to resolve the economic crisis, bringing in the 21st Amendment to strengthen institutions of governance and accountability, elections in six months for parliament and provincial councils and a referendum on the abolition of the executive presidency as previously agreed to. It is this change of culture we seek in the larger interest of the country.

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*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.*

## People's Voices Need Hearing Not Suppression

Sri Lanka has witnessed a political upheaval of a kind rarely seen in the world. An unarmed protest movement of the people, for the people and by the people forced the resignation of a president, prime minister and cabinet of ministers. This protest movement captured the imagination of the international community due to its size, effectiveness and non-violent nature. The success of the protest movement was due to its spontaneous and peaceful nature.

The protest movement evolved out of the real grievances of the people which made it a mass movement. The former government denied its responsibility for the catastrophic conditions in the country and also failed to take the necessary steps to resolve the crisis. The violence that was perpetrated was initiated by that government. The new government now in place with a new president but is composed largely of the cabinet of ministers who had resigned in May 2022. This has added to the continued frustrations of the protesters.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to investigate the causes of the economic collapse and take action against those who are responsible. We also call on the government to declare early elections to renew the mandate of parliament which had been lost in the hearts and minds of the people due to the many debacles that the country has suffered on account of mis-governance and corruption.

We regret that instead of addressing the underlying causes of the protests, the government is targeting prominent and key members of the protest movement with flimsy charges and under conditions of Emergency Law in which the regular law and its protections can be suspended in their operation. The Fitch Rating of Sri Lanka dated July 28, 2022, states that the government's parliamentary position appears strong, but public support for the government is weaker. It is therefore important for the government to hear the legitimate voices of the protesters and find ways and means of engaging with them in a meaningful manner rather than ostracizing them.

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

**Website: [www.peace-srilanka.org](http://www.peace-srilanka.org), Email: [info@peace-srilanka.org](mailto:info@peace-srilanka.org)**

***Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064***