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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

December
2023

Empowering Women Politicians Through Community Engagement

A three day campaign to improve women's political participation was held in the Matara District under NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) Project in partnership with the Sahana Social Development Alliance.

As part of the campaign, WOICE members distributed informative leaflets designed to appeal to the local community, aiming at mobilising women and emerging female grassroots leaders.

The campaign received support and positive feedback from political figures such as Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena and MPs Weerasumana Weerasinghe and Dullas Alahapperuma. Mr. Abeywardena acknowledged the challenges that women encountered in political participation and stressed the need for collective action. In light of the current under representation of women in parliament, he appreciated the commitment of female leaders while underscoring the urgency of rectifying the gender imbalance.

"We know that women encounter challenges when getting into politics and it's important to actively address and reduce these issues. Although women make up the majority of the population, only 12 of them are currently represented in parliament, which is a significant concern. It is crucial to prioritise making principled decisions to tackle this problem. Your involvement and interest in this matter, as women, is truly appreciated," said Mr. Abeywardena said.

The WOICE project's campaign in the Matara District stands as evidence of the collective effort to break barriers and create an inclusive political landscape. Similar campaigns were conducted in Gampaha, Kandy, Kegalle, Monaragala and Ratnapura where community engagement and securing support from leaders lay the foundation for transformation in Sri Lanka's political landscape.



Religious Leaders Urged to Provide Leadership to Younger Generations

A high level forum on Increased Advocacy, Community Engagement and Learning on Positive Behaviour Outcomes for Children, Families and Communities organized by Religions for Peace International in partnership with the Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace (SLCRP) took place with logistical support provided by NPC. The forum was chaired by Associate Secretary General of Religions for Peace International, Deepika Singh, with the participation of Secretary General of Religions for Peace Asia, Rev. Dr Yoshinori Shinohara.

The office bearers explained that they had convened the meeting in Sri Lanka to strengthen the Sri Lanka branch of Religions for Peace for increased collaboration and common action with the government and other stakeholders under the Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC) initiative. The activities and methodologies under this initiative were spelt out by Jimmy Obuya, FPCC Global Coordinator, Religions for Peace International and Prof. Pablito Baybado, Jr, FPCC Regional Coordinator, Religions for Peace Asia.

After being welcomed by Ms Christobel Saverimuttu, Treasurer of SLCRP, a panel discussion took place in which religious leaders representing the four main religions were speakers. Ven. Dr. Madampagama Assaji Thero, Head of the Interfaith Section, International Buddhist Confederation spoke on the recent breakthrough in dialogue between members of the Buddhist clergy and Tamil diaspora. This was followed by interventions by Swami Gunatitananda Saraswati, Head of Chinmaya Mission, Ash Sheikh Arkam Nooramith Moulavi, General Secretary, All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ullama and Rev. Fr Rohan Silva, Executive Director, Center for Society and Religion.

A highlight of the event was the keynote speech by former president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. She said “The majority of people don’t want to have another conflict. But politicians can’t resist using the ethnic card,” insisting that the Sri Lankan people were not racist except for a few who were provoked by politicians. She recalled how public opinion with regard to a political solution changed during the time of her presidency from 23 percent in favour to 68 percent in a matter of two years due to a combination of leadership and education, which she urged at the present time especially for the younger generations.



Raising Awareness on Reconciliation

The Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) team, in collaboration with the Kurunegala Human Right Organization (KHRO), organized an event in Kurunegala to raise public awareness about the critical need for reconciliation processes and human rights. The event garnered support from religious leaders, state officials, local government authorities, civil society leaders, estate community leaders and youth.

The PACT team highlighted the rising threats against individuals and the loss of freedom of association in several districts. Drawing attention to the struggles of estate communities, the team emphasised the limited access these communities had to human rights and reconciliation processes. Recognising the urgent need for heightened awareness, the PACT team believed that informed decision making was pivotal in safeguarding human rights.

Palestinian Ambassador of Sri Lanka, Dr. Zuhair Zaid, participated in the event, which also featured a panel discussion that included lawyer Dharama Vijay, NPC board member Professor M. Mookiah, Director of the Human Rights Commission Nihal Chandrasiri and Safe Foundation Unit Head Champika Dirakbura.

This collaborative effort creates a platform for dialogue, fostering informed decisions and promoting a collective commitment to human rights and reconciliation.

Cluster Training For DIRC Members

The PACT team organized a cluster training programme for District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members in the Kegalle, Ratnapura, Colombo, Matara, Galle, Hambantota, Badulla, Monaragala, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Anuradhapura, Batticaloa and Polonnaruwa districts. The initiative aimed to enhance the capacity of DIRC members, fostering community connections through economic opportunities.

Twenty DIRC members participated in the training programme from each district, eager to contribute to community building and inter religious harmony. The training programme was conducted by Prof. Chaminda Abeysinghe from the Department of International Relations at the University of Kelaniya.

The sessions focused on equipping DIRC members with the skills and knowledge necessary for establishing meaningful linkages among diverse communities. With an emphasis on economic outlook opportunities, the programme sought to empower DIRC members to play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration and understanding. The initiative aligns with NPC's commitment to promoting unity and cooperation among communities, contributing to a more interconnected and harmonious society.



Problem Solving Training for Community Based Organizations

Two needs based training programmes organized by NPC's Protecting Civic Space in Sri Lanka project and Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) were held in Anuradhapura and Colombo.

The programme in Anuradhapura was attended by 36 people from the Jaffna, Batticaloa, Kandy, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura districts.

The second programme was held in Colombo with the participation of 36 members from the districts of Matara, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Kegalle, Badulla and Monaragala.

The objective of the programme was to empower community based organizations to identify problems, analyse problems and intervene to solve problems within the framework of pluralism, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association.

The training consisted of three sessions with one on problem identification, problem analysis, and problem solving methods conducted by Dr. Pavithra Jayawardena, Senior Lecturer at Colombo University. Lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachichi spoke on freedom of assembly, freedom of association freedom of expression and the importance of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. He also outlined the Online Safety Bill and gave an introduction on how to prepare an RTI information request form.

A special session on how to use effective communication as leaders of community based organizations and how to maintain proper public relations with government institutions and non-governmental organizations was conducted by Shelton Indika Bandara, an external lecturer and radio presenter.



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

December
2023

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.

A Political Solution in the New Year

Addressing a gathering of religious leaders by Religions for Peace International and its Sri Lankan chapter on December 19, former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga said that the majority of people do not want another conflict even though politicians cannot resist using the ethnic card. She insisted the Sri Lankan people were not racist but were provoked by politicians. She said that public opinion had turned favourable for a political solution based on inter-ethnic power sharing and devolution of power to the provincial level from 23 percent to 68 percent in a matter of two years. The National Peace Council believes that the present time is opportune for a breakthrough to a political solution. We recall President Ranil Wickremesinghe's pledge a year ago that he would ensure a political solution in Sri Lanka's 75th year of Independence, which is now in its 11th month. We are pleased that the cabinet has approved two major pieces of legislation to establish a Commission for Truth, Harmony and Reconciliation of Sri Lanka and also to legally establish an Office for National Unity and Reconciliation. These are to be published as government gazette notifications to enable the general public and all interested parties to further submit opinions and proposals in this regard.

The civil society initiative undertaken by the Association of War Affected Women in bringing together an active section of the Tamil Diaspora along with a section of senior Buddhist monks is another positive development that can lay the groundwork for a political solution. NPC sees this civil society initiative as a first step in bridging the divide between its extremes which can give rise to wider dialogue and deeper understanding. We are pleased that the Diaspora members and Buddhist monks were able to agree on a joint set of principles necessary to resolve the conflict in an equitable and sustainable manner. This set of principles was also shared with politicians in parliament and with all major religious clergy and met with their general consent which was also welcomed by members of the diplomatic community as they are universal values demonstrating equality and equity among communities. There are some who oppose this initiative. The National Peace Council calls on those holding opposing viewpoints to find ways and means of consolidating it for the common good of the country rather than focusing on their parochial and narrow political interests.

However, we note that on the ground, the large military presence in the North and East even nearly 15 years after the end of the war, and associated surveillance of the security arms of the state, cause unease among the people. We also note issues of land being claimed for religious and farming reasons by those from outside the Northern and Eastern provinces, which is to the detriment of the people at the ground level. As a priority the people need a government they can trust, one that will safeguard their land and ensure their personal safety and provide for them a government administration where they could use their language, freely. The provincial councils were meant to do this, and we call on the government to hold those elections without further delay so that people at the provincial level will be governed by those they voted for. As another year ends, a new one begins, we call on the government to address these problems on the ground and instill confidence in the people of the north and east that their economic and justice concerns will be met as an equal people of Sri Lanka.

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