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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

July
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Non-Violent Communication to Sustain a Democratic Society

Training programmes on non-violent communication, non-violent movements and citizen activism were held under NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project.

The role of women in leadership positions has gained significant recognition across various sectors. As women continue to break barriers and assume positions of power and influence, it becomes crucial to equip them with the necessary tools and skills to promote peace and harmony in their communities. One way to achieve this is through specialised training programmes that focus on non-violent principles and strategies to empower them to become catalysts of positive change.

The training programmes connected 42 supergroup members from the Gampaha, Matara, Monaragala, Kegalle, Kandy, Ratnapura and Nuwara Eliya districts with inclusive ethnic and religious composition. It provided access to skills and tools required for non-violent communication and non-violent movements in order to harmonise a democratic society to foster sustainable change.



Supergroup members had the opportunity to share their experiences in communication, focusing on both negative and positive ways of communication and therefore being able to differentiate them. The discussions led them to actively consider best practices in communication, which play an instrumental role in creating a safer platform for women to share their stories and problems. The programmes are intended to create better networks among participants.

“My goal is to create a platform for community women leaders seeking social change in Kegalle district. This platform will enable us to create a non-violent social movement with expansion in other districts, which will be led by leaders from seven districts. Once we become a strong movement, we can expand in all 25 districts. This training gave us an opportunity to think beyond our boundaries,” said Ms. Damayanthi Godamulla, Director of the Community Development Centre in Kegalle.

Digital Safeguarding in Sri Lanka

Do you secure your digital devices like your door at home? Do you use either a laptop, computer, mobile phone or portable storage devices? If yes, you are well protected. If not, this opens up avenues for potential threats, loss of sensitive and confidential data affecting both you as individuals and as an organisation.

NPC staff members attended in a training programme on digital security to curb some of these threats internally and as part of project implementation. In order to safeguard sensitive information best practices were introduced to combat threats. One such measure was the adoption of open-source applications and platforms when handling sensitive data and confidential information. Open-source software is continuously scrutinised and improved by a community of developers, making it less susceptible to vulnerabilities and ensuring a higher level of trustworthiness. Open-source emails are also gaining popularity.

The use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) is encouraged to protect data during transmission. Employing password protection with password vaults adds another layer of defense. By using such services, users can mitigate the risks associated with proprietary email platforms and ensure that their communications remain confidential. Similarly, clearing these files and applications regularly prevents potential data breaches and ensures that sensitive information does not fall into the wrong hands.

It is encouraged that organizations create and adhere to a comprehensive digital security plan. NPC will pass on the knowledge on digital security by providing training programmes to partner organizations and key individuals to strengthen defense and reduce the chances of falling victim to cyber attacks.

Developing Strategic and Communication Plans for DIRCs

Strengthening DIRCs through developing their strategic and communications plans was the focus for meetings held in Hambantota, Kurunegala, Kegalle, Kandy, Puttalam, Galle, Matara, Ratnapura, Badulla, Nuwara Eliya, Vavuniya, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Monaragala under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

“As a manager for *Sanasa*, I have received training on preparing strategic plans but today I was able to get a clear understanding of the process. I think we can follow this method for any activity we do. We can follow different strategies to achieve the goal of our DIRC. We are doing a lot of work as an inter religious committee but we are not identifying our resources and using them strategically. This will be helpful to bring more success to Kurunegala DIRC and I will try to do it for my institution too,” said a participant.

The sessions have shown that by conducting sessions on analysis, understanding the importance of doing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) and strategy planning, DIRCs are given crucial support to achieve more success on their paths to peace. DIRCs identified themselves as a strength. They see themselves as a diverse group with different types knowledge and skills for promoting peace and reconciliation. They network with different organizations, institutions and people. They possess the ability to mobilise different groups for common causes and the commitment towards for peace building and social harmony.

Some of the identified opportunities were social recognition of the DIRC, having government officials on different levels who extend support to DIRC's work and having community based organizations in the districts as well as having youth, adults, women and religious leaders with knowledge on human rights and peace related subjects.

The PACT project complemented the learnings sessions with progress review meetings for 13 DIRC coordinators, five officers from partner organizations and 17 DIRC members. While planning the way forward, it is also essential to remain up to date on current issues such as the political and economic situation in the country, which impact and explain behavioural changes of social actors. They also help the implementation team gather ideas for the next phase of the project.



Networking with District NGOs for Promoting Coexistence

NPC, with the assistance of its partner organizations, held five district level NGO networking meetings in the districts of Kurunegala, Batticaloa, Mannar, Monaragala and Beruwala, attended by 150 NGOs working on social and development issues.

The meetings provided an opportunity for NPC to introduce the work it carries out under the Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project funded by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The project emphasises the importance of religious coexistence and harmony. The NGOs were given the opportunity to speak about religious coexistence and harmony and how they would be able to contribute towards religious harmony and coexistence in their respective districts.

During the networking meetings, the NGOs expressed their willingness to accommodate Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) under their respective projects. They see them as an integral part of religious coexistence and harmony. NPC will hold a national level training programme on pluralism, rule of law and nonviolent communication for NGOs whose mission statements align with religious coexistence. The training will enable NGOs to develop their existing capacities and engage with LIRCs in their districts.

Under the ARC project, NPC is currently engaging in policy discussions with a number of stakeholders that are able to influence policy at both the national and sub-national level. At the national level, stakeholders consist of members of parliament from the government and opposition, religious leaders and media representatives. At the sub-national level, stakeholders are local government representatives, media representatives, community leaders, state official and frontline state service delivery providers. These discussions among stakeholders enable them to contribute to what policy changes should be made in the interest of preserving and promoting religious harmony and coexistence.

One example is in relation to reforming the school system. Through the policy discussion, a recommendation was made to desegregate students rather than assigning schools based on religion and race. Another recommendation was that religious education in schools needed to be holistic in that students should not be limited to learning only their own religion. It was believed that constitutional reforms should be made to given all religions an equal statue under the constitution.



Improved Services for Families of Missing Persons

On the final phase of the project for government officers of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI), four training programmes were held in Matara, Jaffna, Mannar and Batticaloa.

Understanding the theoretical and practical concepts of pluralism and inclusivity, transitional justice, non-violent-communication and empathy aimed at bridging the gaps identified in earlier activities. Looking at the example of participants who have lost confidence in the process, been continually frustrated and dissatisfied and even felt mistreated as humans, the training programmes hoped to change this perception of the OMP service delivery cycle.

For ground level government officers, the path for serving victim families better is a long one; conducting both review meetings and training programmes can be seen as the first step for improvement. Rebuilding trust, faith and confidence requires re-connecting members of missing families with the OMP service delivery cycle carried out by government officers. Engaging with both sides has shown that areas such as commitment by top leadership, psychosocial support, improved coordination with other directly connected departments, uniform procedures and practices and building trust have the potential for positive change.

During the concluding session in Mannar, a government official said that too many workshops and trainings were being conducted and it would be better to do something else. She said her brother and sister had been taken away during the war and she never saw them again. Every time there was a workshop on missing persons she remembered the past.

Advocating for the Right to Information

A key feature in any democracy is the right to information. In Sri Lanka, the right to information is ensured through Article 14(1)(A) of the Constitution to all the citizens. It is subject to certain limitations prescribed in the legislation such as unwanted intrusion into the privacy and national security.

During the training programmes on protecting civic space under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project, participants in Batticaloa revealed a gap in their right to information. "When we requested information from government officers in writing, we receive phone calls from the officers requesting us to come in person to get the information orally."

Despite the constitutional guarantee of the right to information marginalised communities, particularly ethnic minorities in the North and East, faced numerous challenges when exercising this right. The project team observed that the number of people who accessed the right to information in Batticaloa was far lower than in Polonnaruwa. One reason was the lack of awareness among public and the government authorities. Government authorities were often reluctant to abide by the procedures and timelines prescribed in the legislation in providing the information to citizens. In some cases applicants who requested information from government organizations faced threats from different authorities such as the police, intelligence officers and CID.

The right to information has the potential to fight and eliminate corruption and discrimination that endangers any democracy. If implemented properly, the right to information can bridge the equality gaps in Sri Lanka.

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

July
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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.

President's visit to India brings hope

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is visiting India and meeting its top leadership including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and billionaire Gautam Adani. This visit takes place in the shadow of the 40th anniversary of Black July. During the week of July 23 in 1983 an anti-Tamil pogrom with sections of the government conniving took place in Colombo primarily, but also in several other parts of the country. The destruction of life and property and physical violence that followed constitutes a period of shame and sorrow that has haunted the country ever since.

So far the Sri Lankan state has failed to reassure the ethnic and religious minorities that they are safe and secure in the country. On several occasions there have been localized anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim riots in which the security forces have not been able to stop the rampaging mobs. The National Peace Council urges the government, opposition and civil society to recall those days and strengthen their resolve that such terrible and evil deeds will never again occur in Sri Lanka.

We also urge the government, opposition and civil society to collectively strive to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict to the ethnic conflict that will strengthen and unify the country and our people to face the economic and social challenges it faces. We believe the 13th Amendment which is an outcome of the Indo Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 provides the basis of a solution based on the devolution of power. The 13th Amendment needs to be implemented in full, including the devolution of police and land powers as specified in the constitution, together with the re-establishment of elected provincial councils which have been defunct for over five years due to the failure to hold democratic elections.

We hope that the visit of President Wickremesinghe to India leads to increased support from India to resolve the ethnic conflict through political reform and bring relief to the long suffering people of Sri Lanka. The Indo-Lanka Peace Accord is an international treaty and the 13th Amendment to the constitution that was formulated under it can be considered to be an international obligation. We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the people and government of India for having provided economic and political sustenance to the country and people at our time of greatest need.

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