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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

January 2017

Religions To Reconcile Completes Orientation and TJ Training

NPC's Religions to Reconcile project supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) completed project orientation meetings for eight District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs). Two-day Transitional Justice (TJ) training programmes for new members of the DIRCs were also completed.



The 26-month project, which began implementation in October 2016, targets the districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Matara and Ampara.

The project focuses on strengthening community networks mentored by religious leaders and engaging them in building consensus for a TJ process and helping communities evolve a pluralistic national identity. The project is based on strengthening inter religious people-to-people community engagement for reconciliation and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

A total of 294 people attended the eight project orientation meetings including religious leaders, local NGO/CBO representatives and government officials as well as young people and media personnel. The participants were Tamil, Sinhalese and Buddhists with 29 percent being women.

The orientation meetings included an introduction to the current socio political climate which covered the ethnic conflict, the rise of ethno-religious tension in the post war era, the need for empathy building among communities, building positive peace and embracing a TJ mechanism.

An introduction to the project including its objectives, activities and implementation methods was presented and participants were given a chance to ask questions and engage with the project team. They also discussed the current political situation.

Some of the issues identified by participants during orientation meetings included increasing religious disharmony fueled by racist rhetoric of some religious groups, lack of publicly accessible information regarding the government's current work programme, rising cost of living, a sense of alienation felt by ethnic minorities, security of people in some northern areas and issues surrounding access to land.

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In 2010, NPC set up eight DIRCs to address an increase in inter religious and inter ethnic disharmony at the end of the war. Through the Religions to Reconcile project, NPC is continuing its work with new members of six existing DIRCs and two DIRCs established specifically through the project in the Northern Province.



It is envisaged that grass roots communities in these districts will be mentored by multi faith religious leaders and as a result begin to understand, appreciate and finally support the TJ process in the country and work together to evolve a pluralistic national identity.

As part of understanding the current TJ process and its important facets, NPC held two-day TJ trainings in the eight districts carried out by internal and external resource persons and supported by the project team. The TJ trainings had a total of 298 participants including Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Thirty four per cent were women. There were religious leaders, members of NGOs, media personnel, government officials, members of mediation boards and youth.

During the TJ trainings, many participants pointed out the lack of credible publicly accessible information regarding TJ mechanisms being implemented by the government. Some participants, especially from the North, felt that they were not being consulted when decisions regarding their future were being made and some questioned how the Sri Lankan TJ process was going to help address their grievances, especially with regards to missing persons. In the South, many participants showed interest in the process and said that it was the first time that they had understood what a TJ process meant for the future of the country.

The Religions to Reconcile project is being implemented in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace building organization based in Amman, Jordan. GFP specializes in peace building/conflict transformation training and will assist NPC in building and establishing a cadre of peace delegates to support future project activities.



Women Brought To Forefront Of Reconciliation Process

NPC's project, Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto, was implemented with the support of FOKUS from April 2014 to December 2016 in nine districts across the country that were both directly and indirectly affected by the war: Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee, Ampara, Galle, Hambantota, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Puttalam.



The findings of the project were summarised in policy briefing papers, a manifesto and a video, the outcomes of the objective to bring women's voices at the grass roots to the forefront of the reconciliation process.

The project mobilized women to take an active part in community healing, to establish lasting peace and to increase the participation of women in the process of post conflict transition.

It also trained participants on Transitional Justice (TJ), women's rights, role of women in post conflict society, reconciliation, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and its recommendations and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that deals with women and security.

The briefing papers, which covered the topics of restitution of land and property and economic reintegration, physical security, psychological recovery, democratisation and governance and justice, were presented to decision makers with the aim that the affected women's concerns and recommendations will be considered in the future reconciliation process to ensure it is more gender sensitive.

During the project, NPC worked with nine partner organizations, providing training on gender dimensions on TJ, healing activities for war-affected communities and exchange visits.

Some impacts of the project include:

- Following the healing activity in Puttalam, over 75 women from across the district came to one platform to sign a petition to effectively implement the national languages policy to be given to the Government Agent of the district. Within a week government officers were sent for language training and the Rural Women's Mandate was translated and posted to all women's networks. A year after the petition was given, government officers now have trained staff in both languages.
- Trainers now assist resource persons in trainings and community activities in other projects conducted by NPC.

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- Military widows in Hambantota, who did not initially want to partake in this project due to the sensitive nature of its context, are now encouraging other military wives to take part in projects that work on women’s rights and transitional justice. They are acting as consultative bodies to help rural women’s organizations in their advocacy work and promoting military widows to actively partake in peace building activities.
- Partner organizations and District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) now ensure that in all their activities there is at least 30% representation of women.
- Women’s groups created by the project in Vavuniya now act as support networks for women with disappeared family members. These support networks accompany other women when they want to go to government offices or police stations, for moral support.

Inter Religious Work Expands In Galle

The Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project commenced in Galle district and was introduced to the Galle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC). Nine inter religious leaders including Buddhist monks, Christian priests and a Moulavi attended the meeting along with 39 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim members.



The project builds on the SPICE/USAID supported project Reconciling Inter Religious Differences (RIID), which has been conducted since 2010.

The new project seeks to expand the target groups beyond the religious clergy and reach out to influential civil society groups such as provincial media.

Dr. Jehan Perera, Executive Director of NPC, discussed the current political situation and role of civil society in contributing to the peace process. Saman Seneviratne, Project Manager, spoke about networking and advocacy by DIRC to make a success of the project and building reconciliation. Executive Director of People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Rohana Hettiarachchi, emphasized the need for educating people on how to select a good candidate to be elected to parliament and local government.

“Normally we don’t get opportunities to sit and discuss and to work together with Christian and Buddhist leaders. What you have done through this programme is very important. We should thank you for giving this opportunity for different religious leaders to come together and share our ideas with each other. We should continuously work together towards peace and reconciliation,” said Moulavi Nasmi Hasan.

Monthly meetings under the project were also held in Anuradhapura, Badulla, Hambantota, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa and Ratnapura.

Religious Leaders Support Polonnaruwa DIRC Work

NPC staff members met several Buddhist monks in the Polonnaruwa district to get their support for the reorganization of the Polonnaruwa District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC). They first visited the Talpotha temple in the Lankapura Divisional Secretariat division and spoke to the chief incumbent of the temple Ven. Mahadivulweva Pangnarama, Deputy Principal of Sri Perakumbha Maha Pirivena, who is an active DIRC member.

They then visited the Sri Perakumbha Maha Pirivena at Pulasthigama to meet the principal of the pirivena, Ven. Habarana Ratanadhamma, who initially participated in DIRC meetings but later stopped coming for activities. They discussed the current political situation and need to promote activities on inter religious and inter ethnic harmony.

Ven. Habarana Ratanadhamma emphasized the need for to heal divisions among communities and to provide an environment for all people to live in harmony as Sri Lankans. He said a campaign was needed against extremism and added that he was happy to work with NPC. He appreciated the government's peace process and was ready to come to NPC's programmes when he could. He also agreed to support a workshop on Transitional Justice (TJ) at his temple.

The team then went to the Somawathie Viharaya to meet Ven. Somawathiye Medhananda, who said he had no problems with working or living among other communities and that many people in the area were Muslims, with whom the temple has had a relationship for a long time. He was willing to come to the workshop on TJ and the DIRC meeting in Polonnaruwa.

At the seventh monthly meeting of Polonnaruwa DIRC under the Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project, the reorganization of the DIRC was discussed and participants promised to extend their support to make it a success. Thirty-two people, including Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, participated. The monks stressed the importance of building harmony among all communities to bring about a society with security for the future generations.

Monthly meetings under the RIID project were also held in Ampara, Batticaloa, Galle, Jaffna, Kandy, Mannar, Matara, Nuwara Eliya and Puttalam.



DIRCS' Progress Reviewed at NIRC Meeting

A meeting of National Inter Religious Committee (NIRC) was held in Colombo under the project Reconciling Inter ethnic and Inter religious Differences (RIID), which is funded by USAID through the SPICE project. Sixteen religious leaders and 15 district coordinators representing 15 DIRCs participated.



Shakya Nanayakkara, Director General of National Secretariat for NGOs, spoke on role of civil society in the government's reconciliation process. He emphasized need for activities and programs to change the people's attitude towards understanding other communities, maintaining relationships and respecting each other.

District Coordinators made presentations on the successful achievements of the DIRCs so far.

Participants divided into groups to select most significant stories of DIRCs and understand how to identify and address issues. A progress review of the intervention by DIRCs was carried out.

IMPACT Introduced To Puttalam DIRC

An orientation meeting was held to introduce the Initiating Multi Level Partnership for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project to Puttalam DIRC members and get their support for its implementation.



Twenty-three DIRC members, including seven religious leaders and staff from NPC's partner WODEPT, attended the meeting, which also discussed advocacy and social networking.

Rasika Seneviratne, Assistant Project Manager, helped the participants to understand the objectives of the project, its outputs and impacts. Participants were able to identify the roles and responsibilities of DIRC members in carrying out project activities.

Action Needed To Eradicate Inter Community Violence

There is growing skepticism both locally and internationally about the government's commitment to deliver on the promises regarding the reconciliation process that it made during the last elections. These concerns have surfaced with the initial governmental response to the report of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms appointed by the Prime Minister. Some government members have publicly criticized the report. The Task Force report is one that is victim-centered and would also go a considerable part of the distance to meet the expectations of the international community and those who believe in international standards when it comes to matters of human rights.

The Task Force recommendations have met with the support and appreciation of the international human rights community and the ethnic minorities. The report itself provides material that is invaluable in terms of concepts and cases that could be used for a public education campaign.

However, the lukewarm if not negative response from those in the government is clearly visible. The problem that the government seems to be having is that some of the Task Force recommendations do not correspond to the general sentiment in the ethnic majority Sinhalese population.

While the report appears to have taken many of the issues highlighted by participants in different consultations, at least two members of our own partner organizations who were members of the district level task forces were disappointed with the recommendation on the proposed accountability mechanism that calls for international judges, prosecutors and investigators. They highlighted that their recommendation to seek technical assistance rather than a hybrid court for the transitional justice process from the international community had not been included.

The challenge for the government will be to take the recommendations of the Task Force and implement them as it will be a crucial step on a journey towards lasting peace and meet its local and international obligations.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to undertake a national education and outreach campaign with the support of civil society organizations that are active in the reconciliation process. It is necessary to persuade the general population that the recommendations of the Consultation Task Force on reconciliation mechanisms are in accordance with the government's commitments and these commitments are in the best interests of the country. Failure to do so can pave the way for the breakdown of trust between the government, the war-affected people and the international community.

The National Peace Council holds that a failure to grapple seriously and sincerely with the recommendations of the Task Force would also be a betrayal of the hopes and aspirations of those who were victims of the war.

It must be recognized that lasting peace in Sri Lanka can be achieved only if all communities living in the country are brought on board irrespective of political affiliations and manipulations. We call on the government and opposition leaderships to rise above partisan petty political and electoral considerations and ensure that CTF recommendations are also not squandered.

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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.

Rights Of Sexual Minorities Must Be Protected

As an organization that believes in equality for all and non-discrimination, the National Peace Council views the recent decision of the government not to proceed with legal reform that decriminalizes homosexuality as both disappointing and a setback to a culture of protecting minority rights in general. The presence of archaic laws does not reflect positively on either the Sri Lankan legislature or on the cultural enlightenment and tolerance of the population at large.

We reject the notion that same sex relations are criminal in nature or should be construed as such. Same sex relations are not due to modern decadence, or Western decadence as argued by some, but have been part and parcel of history from its very beginnings in all parts of the world, including Asia. There is a need for education campaigns to ensure that the thinking of society at large becomes more rational and less emotional on these issues.

According to the UN Human Rights Council, the legal obligations of States to safeguard the human rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people are well established in international human rights law on the basis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequently agreed international human rights treaties ratified by Sri Lanka.

We note that same sex relations are rarely if ever prosecuted in the Sri Lankan courts. However, a recent report on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender issues by Human Rights Watch details examples of discrimination and abuse experienced by those of a different sexual orientation.

We call on the government to take steps to repeal those sections of the Penal Code and Vagrants Ordinance that can be used by those vested with state authority to harass people of a different sexual orientation and who are thereby denied their rights to equality and non-discrimination. We also call for the eliminating of discrimination against people on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identities through legal reform. Civil society at all levels needs to publicly manifest support with regard to the protection and upholding of rights of sexual minorities in particular and minority rights in general.

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