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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

DIRCs and Other Local Groups Formulate Draft Pluralism Charter

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Eighty members of DIRCs, sub groups and local partner organizations have formulated a draft Charter on Pluralism based on their understanding of pluralism and building a Sri Lankan identity.



Sub groups consist of women, youth, media, People With a Disability (PWDs), local politicians and community leaders. The group included 28 female participants and seven PWDs as well as six Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic religious leaders.

The charter is being formulated under NPC's Religions to Reconcile project that is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented with a Jordan-based partner organization, Generations For Peace (GFP). The 26-month project, which began in October 2016, is supported by the U.S. Government's development agency and 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 Transitional Justice (TJ) process and helping communities evolve a pluralistic national identity. It is based on strengthening inter religious people-to-people community engagement for reconciliation and social cohesion.



DIRC members and sub group members were part of a series of district training programmes on building people’s understanding of a pluralistic identity. After the training programmes, the groups have been working in their areas to build inter and intra community understanding through community cohesion activities.

Each district revisited their district findings on pluralism formulated during the training programmes. Mr. J. Benedict, a specialist on pluralism, assisted group work sessions where each district first worked as a district group and then as mixed groups, formulating what citizens expect in a pluralistic society. Each of the groups presented their different views and then the whole group discussed the main points and their merits.

The draft Pluralism Charter will be circulated within the group and a finalised Charter will be made public during a National Symposium scheduled for September.

Ms. Danielle Reiff, Director, Governance and Vulnerable Populations Office of USAID/Sri Lanka and the Maldives and NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera addressed the meeting.

Local Leaders Trained on Non-Violent Communication

A training workshop on Non-Violent Communication (NVC) was conducted for 26 members of Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) in Vavuniya to provide a conceptual overview of NVC, as well as hands on skills.

Participants were religious leaders, government officers, police officers and civil society leaders.

The workshop included analysis of case studies, presentations, group work and reflections with an emphasis on the skills and processes necessary for creative non-violent strategies.

“My participation in the workshop was a most enlightening and transformative experiences. I was able to learn how to communicate with others in a non-violent way.”

**Government officer
Divisional Secretariat
Vavuniya**

The workshop shared the methods of communication that encourage compassionate responses to emotions and foster empathy instead of blaming and judging one’s self and others. The training was facilitated by a resource person from Center for Non-Violent Communication.

The participants learnt about universal needs and that when those needs were met, people experienced peace, joy, and love. When needs were not being met, they were frustrated, angry and fearful.

The participants were introduced the four step process to enable effective empathetic communication to manage conflicts.

“This workshop created a space to share our life experiences of violence. I now understand how I have made others feel uncomfortable, angry and sad,” A civil society activist from Vavuniya said.

Religious Leaders Learn About Transitional Justice

A training workshop on Transitional Justice (TJ) for 40 religious leaders from all faiths from the Kandy, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura districts was held in Kandy.

The workshop was facilitated by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi and conducted under NPC's IMPACT project.

Mr Liyana Arachchi introduced TJ perspectives on religious issues and emphasised the importance of the role of religious leaders in bringing the message to people as well as the importance of religious leaders' participation in reconciliation and helping victims to heal.

The participants discussed Constitutional reform and government progress towards reconciliation with mechanisms such as the Office of Missing Persons and the Witness Protection Act.

One Moulavi said he used Buddhist teachings to motivate from Muslims while a Buddhist monk from Anuradhapura said he used teachings from the Koran.

Also under the IMPACT project, Polonnaruwa DIRC conducted English classes for low income students for schools children and school leavers. English classes conducted by private teachers were too expensive for most people in the district, so DIRC members had decided to hold free classes for disadvantaged children so that they could improve their English and become more competitive in the job market. Some DIRC members taught the classes on a voluntary basis.

A ceremony to distribute certificates was held at the monthly meeting of the DIRC, which was attended by the Polonnaruwa Government Agent (GA), Education Director and school principals. The GA expressed his appreciation of DIRC's intervention in educating people on how to reduce ethnic tension.

Members of the Kandy DIRC, who also attended the meeting, shared their activities to mitigate recent anti-Muslim violence in the Kandy district.



Lacuna in Youth Awareness About Reconciliation Process

The first workshop for community youth leaders under the UN Peace Building Fund supported “Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka” was held in Kalutara.

Through this project NPC seeks to engage with young men and women throughout the country through a three-fold strategy in which law students will be trained and mentored to be able to utilise the Transitional Justice (TJ) mechanisms as an effective and non-violent way to address past abuses; university students will be empowered and capacity built to become engaged in positive dialogue, including with policy-makers on TJ and reconciliation activities; and young grassroots activists will be supported to understand and address key youth concerns and transmit them to policy-makers.

A total of 44 youth leaders drawn from youth groups, the National Youth Services Council and from local government authorities participated in the workshop. Most of the participants said that they knew little or nothing about the country’s post-war TJ process prior to the workshop, which reflected a serious lacuna in the government’s communication strategy.

They appreciated the inputs given by Sanjeewa Wimalagunaratna, Director of the Local Activities Coordination Unit of the government’s Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM), and the facilitation of the workshop by Shivantha Ratnayake of the Centre for Communication Training who also introduced them to the topic of TJ and its four main pillars. NPC’s Executive Director, Dr Jehan Perera, explained the objectives and mission of NPC in the context of the still unresolved ethnic conflict.

One of the issues on which there was animated discussion was on the rehabilitation of former LTTE cadre. Several who spoke said that they needed to be brought into the mainstream of life and provided with education and employment, as they were young people just like others. However, concern was also expressed that this build up of their capacities should not pave the way for a return to militancy



Local Politicians Trained on Laws And the Reconciliation Process

A workshop on the Local Authorities Act and the Transitional Justice process was held for 38 local politicians in Matara. Thirty eight local level politicians, including opposition leaders and members of local authorities, attended the workshop.

The Pradeshiya Sabha is responsible for drafting by-laws within the area of its jurisdiction. The members create an annual development plan for their area based on common needs and methods of generating income, therefore knowledge of the Act was important to make sure people got the proper service from local government authorities.

Rohana Hettiarachchi, Executive Director of PAFFREL, explained the Local Authorities Act and highlighted the new criteria for election of members to local authorities that came into effect at the last local government elections. He also emphasised the role of women members in improving the standards of governance.

Saman Seneviratne, NPC Project Manager, spoke about Transitional Justice mechanisms and their relevance to the reconciliation process.

Participants said they had learnt about the current political situation, law and Acts, which was valuable for their work as well as about the reconciliation process. Women members said that what they had learnt at the workshop would make them more effective members of local government.

Colombo Mayor Rosy Senanayake has asked NPC to conduct similar training for members of the Colombo Municipal Council.

Two DIRCs Share Experiences

A joint three day meeting was held in Habarana between the Trincomalee and Batticaloa DIRCs under NPC's project Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka, facilitated by the Asia Foundation (TAF) and NPC. The meeting gave an opportunity for the two DIRCs to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

The meeting, which was attended by 77 DIRC members, led to meaningful discussions, stronger bonds and close relationships among members.

The project, which commenced in 2016, will run for two and a half years supported by the British High commission as well as TAF, and is aiming at promoting inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue at the local level to mitigate ethno-religious tension in the selected locations, Trincomalee and Batticaloa, where the three major ethnic groups, Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, live in close proximity and there can be a high risk of communal conflicts.

Activities during the meeting included watching a film, a panel discussion, a lecture and leadership training. The film generated animated discussion about the peace process in the country. A Moulavi said the feeling of humanity and sympathy from a character in the film was the same feeling people had in their hearts towards other communities. He got the message that personal trauma caused by the war could be healed in time, so people should not be stuck in the past but should keep moving forward.

DIRC members emerged more united as a result of the meeting. They focused on the problems and challenges they currently faced, which enabled them to recognise their vision and future actions.

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.

Need to Expedite Operationalising of the Office Of Missing Persons

The inaction of government due to the ongoing political crisis involving the coalition partners in the national unity government continues to erode public confidence in its problem solving capacities. This concern is especially marked in regard to the transitional justice process. So far only the Office of Missing Persons (OMP), which is one of the four transitional justice mechanisms promised in October 2015 has been established.

The Chairman of the Office of Missing Persons, Saliya Peiris PC, has announced that beginning from May 12, 2018, the OMP will meet the public including family members of the disappeared. He said arrangements had been made to hold public meetings countrywide till early July. He also said they were still in the process of recruiting staff and setting up procedures.

The National Peace Council notes that progress in operationalising the OMP has been slow even though it was constituted by the appointment of commissioners in February this year. The commissioners need to be supported by investigators, report writers and administrative staff. The government needs to take a genuinely victim-centered approach to prioritize these issues that will make a real difference to victim families in the short to medium term. This means expediting procedures that will enable the OMP to become fully operational. Failure to do so would not only frustrate the victims but also the Commissioners who have been appointed to serve in the OMP. War victims are more likely to put their trust in the government if they recognize that a difference is being made in their lives.

NPC is concerned that the continued delay in operationalising the OMP, and establishing the other transitional justice mechanisms, will erode the confidence of war victims, the larger Sri Lankan public and international community in the government's seriousness of purpose with regard to the transitional justice process. NPC also believes that the bureaucratic impediments to expediting the full functioning of the OMP serves as a learning point for the other envisaged transitional justice mechanisms. This will be particularly relevant to the envisaged Office of Reparations, where the need to provide compensation to victims will always be very urgent.

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