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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

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## Preventing Violent Extremism With Community Help

Capacity building for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh is an initiative implemented in Sri Lanka by NPC with support from Helvetas Sri Lanka and funded by the European Union (EU). The intervention is part of EU's support to civil society actors in promoting confidence building and preventing radicalisation in South Asia. The project is being implemented across six districts in Vavuniya, Mannar, Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunagala.

To identify issues in relation to Violent Extremism (VE) in the districts, project staff visited the different districts and held planning meetings and consultations with state institutions including District Secretaries and Divisional Secretaries as well as NGO coordinators.

A primary purpose of the project is to capacitate at least 22 district-based CSOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) with knowledge and practical skills to address VE in their localities. NPC works with one partner CSO in each of the districts and at least five identified CSOs and CBOs with the skills and knowledge to receive training in VE and share the knowledge with other community members. A team of NPC project staff and Helvetas Sri Lanka staff carried out the meetings.

In Ampara, some of the issues identified included segregation at public events including sports festivals, lack of interest among youth to make friends with members of other communities, and the high use of social media to misinterpret and present wrong information leading to ethnic and religious tension.



It was also mentioned that after the Easter Sunday attacks, acts of racism and extremism escalating to violence have significantly reduced in the Ampara District. Programmes for youth including language and culture-based exchanges and sports events were identified as possible future activities to be included in the intervention.

In Batticaloa, officials pointed out that mono ethnic communities lived in segregation with little or no connection with other communities. With an ethnic composition of 73% Tamil and 25% Muslim (and 2% Sinhalese) the two major communities live as separate groups with the exception of the Batticaloa town where all ethnic groups coexist. Youth were identified as the most vulnerable group ripe for recruitment by extremists. A request was made for PVE interventions to target youth groups and work with them to reach a larger community of vulnerable multi ethnic youth. Interventions focused on fostering religious and cultural understanding.

In Vavuniya, civil society representatives and religious leaders emphasised the important role that religious leaders have in leading communities, especially youth, away from extremism. They said that language was a barrier when promoting peace and reconciliation in the district.

In Mannar, discussion centred around the role of social media in facilitating the spread of misinformation, generating hate speech and instigating violence and extremism in communities. It was noted that the intervention should be sustained beyond the project period because PVE was part of everyday life.

In Kandy, it was noted that the population in Akurana was made up of nearly 80 per cent Muslims but only 20 per cent of the staff at the Divisional Secretariat could speak Tamil. Some of the key points discussed at the meeting included the role of religious leaders in preventing VE, designing activities to address organized racism, and the destructive forces of social media including the spread of false narratives giving rise to violence.

In Kurunagala, it was revealed that youth were susceptible to many vices due to the lack of education and employment opportunities. The group pointed out that there should be PVE activities targeting religious leaders as they had the moral authority within their constituencies.

In all six project districts, youth were seen as a possible target susceptible to influences by extremist groups and social media as a tool used to incite violence and spread false narratives among communities.



# Religious Leaders Promote Pluralism at Community Level

An inter faith dialogue was conducted between Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders in Ampara to create a consensus on value of a pluralistic in Sri Lanka under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Coexistence (CERF) project, organized by the Addalaichchenai Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC). The dialogue was supported by NPC's local partner, Addalaichchenai Development Society, and the District Secretariat of Ampara.

Thoughts which were derived from the dialogue emphasised the intricacies of ethnic and religious diversity and the importance of awareness raising on cross cultural and religious teachings, rituals and core values. Religious leaders expressed their views on the root causes of religious tension.

“Buddhist monks can visit our Arabic schools and teach them Sinhala and our Moulavis can go to temples to teach Tamil to the monks because language is the biggest constraint that limits our engagement. In fostering the trust and connection, this dialogue has built a bridge between the two religious communities,” said Moulavi M. M. Kamardeen.

“The dialogue gave us an understanding on the values of Buddhism and Islam. We learnt that the lack of clarity and awareness on religious teachings among the followers and religious leaders hinders religious coexistence. We discussed our differences and similarities both in practical and conceptual terms. Increased cross cultural and religious learning through fostering continuous engagement with students and religious leaders will restore religious coexistence in our communities,” said Ven. M. Daminda Thero.

Also under the CERF project, the International Day of Peace was commemorated by the Addalaichchenai and Trincomalee LIRCs with peace walks to raise awareness on peace and culture and the importance of individuals in influencing religious cooperation. The walk in Trincomalee town drew 550 people including religious leaders, government officials, police officers, civil society leaders and students from religious institutions, who carried slogans and banners with the messages about the importance of religious cooperation.



Mr. J.S. Arulraj, Divisional Secretary of Trincomalee, said, “It is our collective responsibility and engagement that will enable the creation of a peaceful society, not only our individual contributions.”

Also under the CERF project, Akurana LIRC organized two training workshops on pluralism targeting the Village Community Policing Committees and the youth leaders.

Mr. R. Ashok, a member of the Akurana Village Community Police Committee, said, “As a multi ethnic, multi religious country, Sri Lanka should promote peace. Conducting training programmes to build understanding among the religious groups is important for lasting peace.”

Capacity building training programmes on pluralism, gender, conflict transformation and trust building were conducted for Beruwala, Panduwasnuwara, Weligama and Rakwana LIRC members while awareness raising programmes on rule of law and pluralism were conducted in Beruwala and Negombo.

Meetings with newly appointed parliamentarians to advocate for religious pluralism and a training programme on combatting hate speech for journalists were held in Vavuniya. Negombo, Trincomalee and Weligama LIRCs held their bimonthly meetings to identify problems in their areas and designed interventions to solve them.

These initiatives reached about 1,390 community representatives of state and law enforcement sectors, media, political entities, community youth, religious leaders and civil society organizations.

## Academics Discuss Fostering Pluralism Among Students

The Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project held a project planning meeting with the participation of 12 academics from the Jaffna, Eastern, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa Universities.

C-YEP is an initiative that capacitates selected university students and academics to raise awareness and positively influence the public discourse about pluralism and inter community relations to strengthen the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. It is funded by GIZ.

To make the project implementation process more effective, the discussion at the meeting was based on NPC’s previous UNPBF funded Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka project’s survey findings on whether youth could be a catalyst for reconciliation and how the findings could be linked to design activities for the C-YEP project.

Participating academics contributed to the discussion on how to formulate a design for the collaborative research on terminologies and their impacts on peacebuilding initiatives at ground level.

Academics from the four universities assisted the project team to finalise the plan and to appoint focal points for tasks for the National Level Research Symposium, which will be conducted at the end of the project. The symposium is an opportunity for academics and students to present their research work on a national level platform.

# Focus on Youth for Peace Building and Reconciliation

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Need Assessment meetings were held Kurunegala, Kegalle, Kandy, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Ratnapura, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, Jaffna, Vavuniya and Badulla for members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) to collect suggestions for the next phase of NPC's Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project.

The participants acknowledged the need for an integrated school system where school children were given opportunities to interact with each other to familiarise themselves with other cultural and religious practices. This would help to diminish misunderstandings among the children, which they could use to educate their families and neighbours.

The importance of capacitating the youth by organizing capacity building workshops and training programmes to acquire skills for employment and self-employed was discussed.

Members from the Jaffna and Vavuniya districts revealed the escalating drug problem among adults, youth and school children, which has resulted in ethnic conflicts among the communities.

While focusing on the core purpose of building peace and reconciliation, DIRCs also agreed on the need to resolve the economic hardships of the community. Among the proposals were trade fairs, market places for traders and businessmen from different communities and farms to cultivate the land.

"Terms like reconciliation, pluralism and cohesion are new to the Sinhala vocabulary. Instead of trying to create awareness through workshops and seminars, we must adopt practical approaches so initiating projects like community farming and markets is a good ideas to improve the economy while promoting the peace and reconciliation process," said Janaka Ihalagoda, a Kegalle DIRC member.

"Most youth in Batticaloa have no money because they don't have a stable income or employment. If we can organize skills workshops and capacitate youth from different communities to become entrepreneurs and be self-employed, we can get them interested in other important topics such as peace and reconciliation," said A.S. Sharon from Batticaloa DIRC.



# Skills Training for Marginalised Groups

NPC conducted a training programme on leadership, skill building and information on available state mechanisms for 38 marginalised community members in Galle as part of the European Union supported intervention, Accountability through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) implemented by NPC and Right to Life (R2L).

Marginalised groups have been defined as different groups of people within a given culture, context and history at risk of being subjected to discrimination due to the interplay of different personal characteristics or grounds such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or belief, health status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, education or income, or living in various geographic localities.

As a result of the training programme, NPC has identified specific issues with relation to People With Disabilities (PWDs) and women headed households. There is only one school for children with special needs in Galle. An additional school was necessary and a request was made to the government. Accessibility to public places such as government offices, hospitals and police stations was inadequate and PWDs pointed out that they felt left out because the facilities were not available for them. Government assistance - the social service payments for the marginalised persons - was not distributed in time so often people who needed assistance had not been able to apply and receive the payments. The participants also requested skill development centres for the marginalised people.

NPC and partner R2L will work with the 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRAFCs) to document, process and submit applications to the relevant state authorities for them to receive the social service payments.

## Analysing Conflict at Ground Level

Eight training programmes on conflict analysis and management for government officers, religious leaders, media personnel, women community leaders and youth were conducted by master trainers under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka in Kalutara, Monaragala, Ratnapura, Matara, Polonnaruwa, Kebithigollewa and Kegalle.

The first part of the training focused on basic human needs and identity, which is an important concept when learning to respect and accept other cultures. The second part explained conflict analysis and management, showing how that in order to resolve or manage a conflict, it was essential to understand the conflict. Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools - the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline.

The next stage of the training was to identify the pluralism process to understand the importance of living and interacting with all religions and cultures. There was a discussion on the role and responsibilities of youth in building a pluralistic and peaceful society.

The training sparked discussions among participants that helped to bring them to a common understanding on the issues. Among the other topics discussed were minority religious rights, overcoming prejudice, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.

*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.*

## Consider Deferment of 20th Amendment

The proposed 20th Amendment to the constitution has been approved by the cabinet of ministers and put before the general public prior to being debated in parliament. This far reaching constitutional change seeks to centralize power in the institution of the Executive Presidency with the justification of ensuring stability in the country and safeguarding national sovereignty. In terms of the amendment, the President can remove the Prime Minister, a member of the cabinet, any other minister or a Deputy Minister and authority to dissolve Parliament after completion of sittings for a period of one year. This massive transfer of power to the Presidency has been justified to the electorate as stemming from the inability of the previous government to govern effectively under the 19th Amendment to the constitution.

The 20th Amendment also empowers the President to make appointments to top positions of the state having obtained observations of the Parliamentary Council, which is made of members from Parliament. The President will accordingly be empowered to appoint the Chief Justice and judges of the Supreme Court, the President and the judges of the Court of Appeal, the Attorney General, the Auditor General and also to make appointments to the Election Commission, the Public Service Commission, Judicial Service Commission, the National Police Commission, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption, the Finance Commission and the Delimitation Commission. Unfortunately the proposed Parliamentary Council will have no civil society representation and can only advise the President. The previous 10 member Constitutional Council, which included 3 members of civil society, made these appointments.

The time frame for Bills to be challenged in the courts has been reduced from the previous two weeks to one. The Urgent Bills, a concept which was introduced by the 1972 Constitution had been misused by the successive governments in the past to pass various Bills. The extremely short time frame will compromise people's right to know and constrain public discourse to challenge a Bill in a court of law. The sweeping powers given to the Presidency takes away the checks and balances on the powers of the President brought in by the 19th Amendment which it supersedes. The National Peace Council is particularly regretful that a constitutional provision eliminated that is relevant for our work is article 33 (1) (b) which said that the President shall "promote national reconciliation and integration." It was the President's office that was warranted by the 19th Amendment to be the driver of reconciliation.

We therefore request the government to reconsider the need to proceed with the 20th Amendment in its present formulation as it is excessively centralizing and not reflective of the plural nature of our society. There is no urgency for the 20th amendment at present, which is an interim measure until the formulation of a new constitution, and we fear this may undermine the good work done by the office of the President to date, including providing entry to educated professionals to parliament through the national list, providing employment to many thousands of people and relief to those affected by the Covid induced economic downturn in terms of delayed loan payments and other development measures.

The 20th Amendment is by and large a return to the 18th Amendment which was passed in 2010 and made the Parliament subservient to the Presidency. We note that the governance practices of the pre-2015 period, and their negative consequences, contributed to the change of government at that time. The entire basis of the 19th Amendment of 2015 was the need to ensure that the Rule of Law prevailed over the rule of men and that misuse and abuse of power should be prevented through a system of checks and balances in which the independence of institutions such as the judiciary was safeguarded to the maximum.

The main negative outcome of the 19th Amendment was the inability of the former President and Prime Minister, and other government leaders, who came from two opposing political parties to work together. This led to a paralysis in the government which prevented it from governing in a problem solving manner. The current government does not suffer from the same constraint as they come from not only the same party and enjoy a 2/3 majority in Parliament, but also the President and Prime Minister are from the same family. An option for the government would be to focus on formulating a new constitution in which the weaknesses of the 19th Amendment can be addressed along with a reform of the electoral system. This could be a through a well thought out consultative process in which the opposition parties and civil society are also included that will enable the new constitution to be passed consensually by Parliament and the people.

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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**