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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

## University Students Debate Pluralism Online

May  
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The global spread of the COVID-19 has been affecting and challenging the lives of millions of people around the world. While the focus of nations is on the economy and healthcare, NPC has been engaging communities at the grassroots level through online platforms.

Under the Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project, a team of eight undergraduates from the University of Ruhuna initiated an online debate competition on topics such as pluralism and inter community relations.

The team was earlier given the necessary skills and training to use debate as a platform to create awareness on pluralism and positive inter ethnic relations at community level by lawyer Mr. Amal Rajapaksha.

The team then selected and trained the new students using social media platforms and held the debating competition among four teams.

A member of the judging panel, University of Ruhuna lecturer Dr. D.L.A.H. Shammika, thanked the students for initiating competition and highlighted the importance of events that offer insights into students' perspectives. Mr. Rajapaksha asked students to continue the dialogue not only in their heads but also in their communities.

The online debating competition was well received by the audience; it is created a space for hope, change and a promise of a better future with the participation of youth.



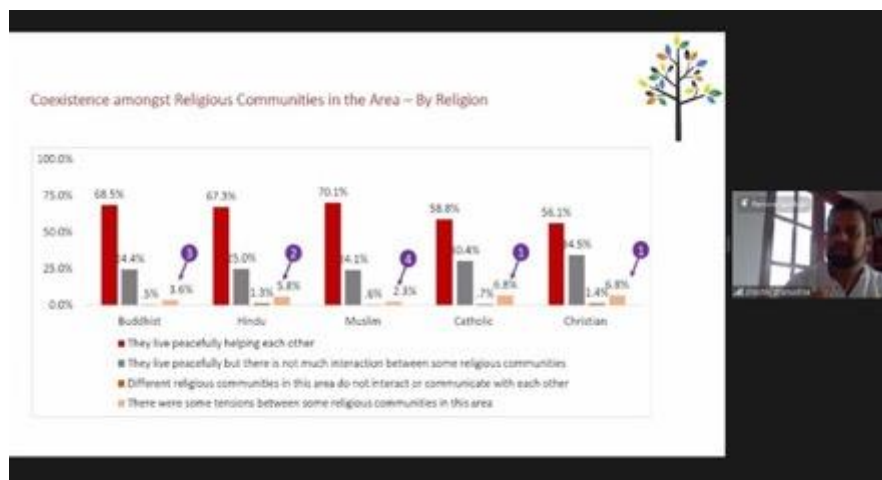
# Assessing Findings of Survey on Religious Freedom

Two online sessions on the findings of the survey on religious freedom were conducted under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project for the Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Panduwasnuwara and Kuliyaipitiya Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) with the participation of more than 50 members.

The sessions were used to interpret and share the significance of the research findings and to explain any new understanding and insights about the religious freedom and national and local level status of religious freedom as well as communities' assessment of religious freedom and how the religious freedom varies in different areas.

The survey was conducted across 25 districts among religious clergy, state officials, police and community leaders. It examined how the participants who belonged to different religious communities felt about freedom of religion in the country and how their own religion was practiced. Mr. Shashik Silva, who facilitated the two discussions, explained the scientific basis of the research and shared the key findings of the survey that included:

- An overwhelming majority in the five religious communities live peacefully. However, a considerable proportion of the respondents also say that there is not much interaction among the various religious groups.
- If the majority in the different communities live peacefully with each other, it is clear that spoilers of religious coexistence constitute a very small minority. Therefore, in order to encourage interfaith harmony, the government and civil society should pay more attention to those small groups of spoilers and address their issues and concerns. The concerns of politicians, community leaders and business communities should be addressed, and they should be convinced that they are to be benefited from longer term community coexistence.
- The concerns of Muslims, Christians, and Hindus about the level of freedom their community enjoys in the country should be discussed at national level fora. Serious reflection not only on government policies but also on the practices and policies of each religious community should be encouraged to strengthen the pluralist values of the country.



- In all reconciliation and peacebuilding programmes, effort should be made to address the prejudices of the communities. There should be systematic engagement with the media to sensitize them on various ethnic and religious prejudices.
- There should be a mechanism to counter fake news distributed through mainstream media as well as social media. Members of interfaith committees should come forward to challenge fake news about their area.
- As some districts continue to emerge as sites of tension, it is important for interfaith programmes to pay special attention to these districts. It is recommended that NPC commissions research to inquire as to why there is comparatively less religious freedom in these districts.
- Religious freedom and interfaith tolerance should emerge from the community and cannot be enforced or imposed from outside. It also suggests the importance of proactive activism rather than reactive interventions. Interfaith dialogues and initiatives aimed at improving trust and cooperation between different religious groups are essential for building a society with tolerance and religious freedom.

“Integration must happen organically. It should not be done to pursue political motives and achieve partisan agendas. Unfortunately, the latter is prevalent in the Eastern province, which is corroborated by the findings of the survey. Political actors use forced settlement of Muslim families in predominantly Tamil areas to increase land ownership. This has created friction among ethno-religious communities,” said Father Rohan from Batticaloa LIRC.

“Ownership of land belonging to religious places has created tension among Buddhist and Muslim communities. Some residential areas where Muslims reside are now claimed as property of temples upon the argument that they hold archaeological value. The state must intervene to solve this issue as failure to do so will result in the escalation of the issue and could even lead to violence,” said Moulavi Rafil from Trincomalee LIRC.

“May 19 is considered as a victory day in the South while in the North May 18 is considered as a day of mourning. Until we find the will to come together, our differences will be the excuse for us to distance ourselves. The LIRCs provide a solid platform where we can interact, empathise and learn from each other. Hence, I encourage you to make the most out of this valuable opportunity and contribute your utmost towards creating the shared future that we all desire,” said NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera.

## Combating Hate Speech

NPC’s Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project held an online training programme on researching perceptions of hate speech for district coordinators and master trainers from 12 districts.

Participants were equipped with knowledge that would help them to conduct a survey on perceptions of hate speech this year with 240 samples in 12 districts. The objective of the survey is for the person to collect data on hate speech at the ground level using the person’s expert view.

The training programme began with an introduction from NPC Programme Advisor Sumadhu Weerawarne, who spoke on the social and legal background of hate speech and the purpose of the survey. She explained that hate speech was often used as a precursor to violent action. It created a narrative against the targeted community to justify violence.

Mr. Shashik Silva, a survey researcher and quantitative analyst, conducted sessions on research, survey and questionnaire development. He emphasised that the research should be conducted independently and that enumerators should be unbiased and not be advocates. He mentioned that the objective of social science surveys was to check the behaviour, expectations, knowledge and attitudes of people.

On the second day Mr. Mark Schubert, a survey researcher and quantitative analyst, explained the methods of implementing a questionnaire in the field, differences between advocacy and research and guidelines for conducting research.

During the training programme, participants had discussions with the resource persons. Many participants asked NPC to conduct similar training programmes in future.

Also under the project, an online training programme on the prevention of hate speech was held for participants from Batticaloa and Jaffna. Professor Kalinga Tudor Silva, former Dean and Senior Professor of the University of Peradeniya, explained the sociological background of hate speech. It was followed by a session on defining hate speech and the application of international standards in Sri Lanka. On the second day, a session was conducted on media literacy and mindful social media engagement on hate speech by Mr. Benislos Thushan from Hashtag Generation.

Two training programmes on prevention of hate speech were also conducted by master trainers for youth leaders in Kegalle and Kurunegala. Participants were made aware of the sociological framework of hate speech, hate speech laws, media literacy and mindful social media engagement.

Also under the same project, a training programme on conflict management and analysis was conducted by master trainers for religious leaders in Kurunegala, focussing on basic human needs and identity.

Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools of the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline. They were made aware of their roles and responsibilities in building a pluralistic and peaceful society. Other topics discussed included minority religious rights, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.

A Public Health Inspector from Kurunegala attended the Kurunegala trainings and spoke on the guidelines that ought to be followed in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19.



# Meeting Community Needs

In order to engage communities with the reconciliation process in the country, NPC carried out assessments to determine the needs of the communities that the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) activity has already worked with. Coexistence Society (CES) members, District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members and Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members are assisting SCORE at the grassroots level.

The needs-based assessments were conducted through virtual consultative discussions in Mullaitivu, Monaragala, Ampara, Jaffna and Kandy. The most important needs of the area were identified during the discussions.

People who live in remote areas are not familiar with virtual discussions but team obtained the participation of the CES, LIRC and DIRC members using various strategies. Mrs. R. Sumitra, an active CES member in Mullaitivu, said, "As CES members we are trying our best to utilise our resources and manpower to enhance the living conditions of marginalised communities. Although we are not familiar with new digital platforms, through this discussion we can do some good for our communities."

The participants shared the details of the needs in Mullaitivu. They suggested providing furniture for the village common hall, furniture and books for the public library and drinking water facilities. Mrs. Sivagnanam Sharmiladarshini, a member of the Mullaitivu partner organization, stated that during previous activities they had encouraged community members to find common needs that should be met in their area. "As a result, now it is easy to list down and discuss these needs since we already know what they are," she said.

Participants in the Kandy discussion suggested providing non-medical equipment to the hospitals because of the Covid-19 pandemic. They discussed the possible solutions while focusing on the factors that had to be considered when addressing the issues.

In Ampara, participants explained that students were unable to pursue their studies because they did not have online facilities. They discussed how to increase the opportunities for education. They also suggested providing information on living with Covid-19, disinfecting risky areas, vocational training, self-employment opportunities, supporting disabled people and assisting hospitals in the area.

Mr. Suleiman Lebbe, President of the Irakkamam CES, expressed his gratitude for organizing meetings to assist people, especially when they were not familiar with the technology.

Mrs. Inoka, a CES member from Ampara, said, "There are lots of needs to be identified. There are young women who need livelihood support to earn money. This discussion will help the people who need support."

Based on the discussions, the project team will conduct initiatives to meet the needs of communities.

# Training for DIRC Members Under PACT Project

With the rising Covid-19 cases and the government imposing travel restrictions to control the pandemic, NPC has halted field activities and has shifted events online via Zoom.

The Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project organized six project orientation meetings via Zoom in Polonnaruwa, Galle, Matara, Kandy, Puttalam and Kegalle.

For each meeting 25 District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members, including religious leaders, participated from their respective homes. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the PACT project and explain its concept and future activities, which was done by NPC Programme Advisor Sumadhu Weerawarne and Assistant Project Manager Rasika Seneviratne.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke on the current political situation of the country and Project Manager Saman Seneviratne presented the timeline of the project so far and some of its success stories.

DIRC members were asked about the subjects they would like to receive trainings on. These included learning about Non-Violent Communication; religious freedom and pluralistic society; democracy, good governance and human rights; ethical use of social media; and how to counter fake news and hate speech on social media. Members voted for their preferred subjects and two were chosen during each orientation meeting.

The training programmes will be conducted at a later date for DIRC members and civil activists in the districts who were interested in expanding their knowledge.

DIRC members also identified two local areas as hotspots of ethnic and cultural conflict in order to form two satellite committees in these areas.

“We need to add more people to these programmes who are committed, efficient and who interact with people of all religions and races; then it will be easy for us to build peace. If we do not have the ability to communicate with other communities then we look at them in a different light. When we work closely with people, we can understand whether they are in a conflict situation or not, and try to help them,” said Ven. Bodhilankara Thero from Polonnaruwa DIRC.

“Youth need to play a vital part in building a pluralistic society in Sri Lanka. They are vital in making the peace and reconciliation process a success. These programmes need to reach as many youth participants as possible. Youth groups that are moderate and welcome diversity exist in our communities; they should have a voice so that they can make an impact to help sustain peace and harmony in the country,” said Hasith Sandaruwan from Colombo DIRC.

A meeting of the Colombo DIRC was also held via zoom with 25 participants, including religious leaders, where members decided that they needed educational training on religious freedom, differences between religions and the role of religious leaders; how to identify conflicts and react to them; and social media and its ethical usage.

*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.*

## Display Magnanimity to Stop the Vicious Cycle

The 12th year of the end of the war will fall on May 18 and 19. May 18 is the day that the Tamil people in the North and East have selected to remember those who died in the course of the war, particularly in its last phase. May 19 is the day that the government celebrates its war victory. These two days have become symbolic of the continuing ethnic polarization within the country. The National Peace Council regrets that 12 years after the fighting ended on the battlefields of the North, the war continues in the minds of the people. Until there is collective remembrance of loss, there will continue to be a reinforcement of the separation through separate memorialisations.

In this time of the Covid pandemic that affects us all in equal measure, regardless of race or creed, need to recognize that there are ties that bind us as Sri Lankans, which should not be ignored as there have been victims on all sides of the conflict. They all have their right to remember. In this context last week's destruction of the memorial erected in Mullivaikkal for the people who lost their lives where the last battles were fought and also the disappearance of a new memorial plaque that was to be erected and taken to the site a few days previously sets a vicious cycle in motion. The thwarting of the people's desire to mourn together is a manifestation of continuing enmities that will be exacerbated until a new path of reconciliation is taken. If democratic spaces are blocked then the tendency is to seek non-democratic spaces. The National Peace Council appeals to the government to bring healing to the minds of the people by its actions to facilitate the commemoration of their loved ones.

In the aftermath of World War 2, when the UN was being established, its architects noted that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission established by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2010 recommended that a separate event be set apart on National Day in which all those who lost their lives in the war would be remembered. The National Peace Council regrets that this very important recommendation of the LLRC to heal wounds of war and win hearts and minds has not been followed even ten years after the publication of the LLRC report. The victory celebration for an internal conflict is never going to heal any wounds unlike a war between two countries. We never celebrate the day that the JVP insurrection was over.

We recall that in January of this year a similar memorial to those who lost their lives in the war at the University of Jaffna was also destroyed. The university authorities responded positively to the pressure from the students and ensured that the monument was rebuilt with the participation of students. While we advocate the collective memorialization of all who lost their lives in the war, we affirm the need for the government to erect a suitable monument in Mullivaikkal with the people's participation to enable the people of the North and East to remember and mourn their loved ones who lost their lives at the end of the war. Sri Lanka must demonstrate its capacity to move beyond the thoughts and actions of the past not only out of magnanimity, but out of necessity as a functioning democracy.

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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***