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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

June
2021

NPC Staff Member Wins Prestigious International Prize

Anojitha Sivaskaran, who works as a project officer at NPC, was one of the winners of the prestigious Diana Award for 2021 that honours young people for their social action or humanitarian work. The award commemorates the life of Britain's Princess Diana who dedicated her time to improve the lives of others. Congratulating Anojitha on her achievement, NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said that he was glad that NPC had provided a platform for her success. He said that Anojitha had shown herself as a good team player and contributed to the NPC's outreach along with other committed staff members in difficult circumstances.

Anojitha spoke about her life and peace work.

What was your early life like?

I was born and brought up in Mallavi in the Mullaitivu District. My mother is a teacher, working at a primary school in Jaffna. My father is a lab assistant in Mullaitivu. I have two sisters. We have always had the freedom to follow our passions and explore new things; my family has been a big support to me. Between 2008 and 2009, I attended six different schools and couldn't get a proper education because of the war. Sometimes I went a school only for two days. The next day we had to move because of the shelling. We spent few months in a welfare camp. We later moved to my grandmother's house in Jaffna because our house was destroyed.

How do you feel about winning the prize?

I am truly honored and happy because I have received international recognition for what I am doing. It gives me confidence that I am going on the right path. I also realised the responsibilities I have to improve my work.



Do you feel your work is making a difference?

Yes. The work I do is changing the way young people think. Many young people in Sri Lanka are not aware of facts. They believe what they hear. As someone who interacts with diverse communities, I am trying bridge the gap among different communities through sharing my experiences. Through Interfaith Colombo and the National Peace Council, we create spaces for young people to speak about several critical issues related to reconciliation. Young people are given the opportunity make friends with others from different faiths and to understand their cultural practices and traditions.

Do you sometimes lose hope and feel your work is not achieving any results?

No but I feel that we, as country, are lacking in state policies and spaces for young people to engage in decision making and lead change. It sometimes affects our work. There's also concern about the security of people who are involved in humanitarian work and social action. My mother tells me, "Do whatever you want but make sure that not only you but also people around you are safe".

What motivates you to do the work that you do?

At a leadership session I facilitated, a young lady who had a stammer said, "I don't normally speak since I have a complex because of my speech problem. Your speech and training have given me the confidence and motivation to speak out." Such feedback motivates me to continue my work. My experiences and passion drive me to put more effort to give back to my community. I really don't want others to experience what I have gone through.

How has living through the last days of the war affected you?

I lost my education for several months. At university, I sensed the difference in terms of the ability to speak English, record of achievements and other aspects where I was lacking. Fortunately, we as a family came through the war without physical injuries and overcame our financial struggles but many relatives and friends suffered. I have relatives who are living with disabilities, shrapnel inside their bodies and with heavy loans.

How have you managed not to feel hatred and bitterness for what you have suffered?

One major factor is my parents and family. My grandfather used to tell stories about his Muslim friend with whom he celebrated Ramazan and a Sinhala principal who saved his job. I never felt differences with other communities. My mentors are from the Sinhala community and they have always been supportive and inspired me with their examples.

What was it like, coming from the north, to study at a southern university?

At first, my family didn't want to send me so far away. I couldn't speak a single sentence in Sinhala so I struggled at the beginning. However, I made friends with people from different communities and learnt to communicate in Sinhala within six months. Now they are like my family. After the Easter attacks, our hostel was closed and I couldn't find a place to stay. One of my friends from Kalutara invited me to stay at her house and her mother used to wake up early to cook for me. There are many examples like that.

How can young people influence the peace process? Are they an important contributor?

In our country, youth have been misled and misguided to take part in insurrections, the civil war and religious riots. Therefore it's crucial to empower and transform young people as peace agents. This can be done through quality education and through creating opportunities for engagement. I believe that if young people work together, there's nothing that cannot be achieved.

Colombo DIRC Discusses Burning National Issues

Colombo District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) is holding a series of online meetings to educate the public and create awareness on issues facing the country under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT). Various experts are delivering lectures and facilitating discussions and debates that encourage community engagement meetings. Three meetings have been held so far with about 60 participants for each.

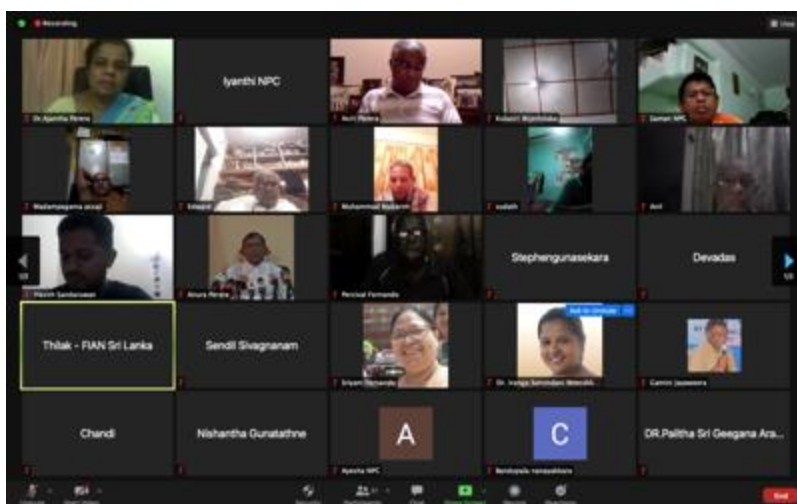
At the first meeting Dr. Ajantha Perera, a leading environmental activist, spoke about the X-Press Pearl ship calamity and its environmental impacts. She delivered a comprehensive analysis on how the accident escalated into an environmental disaster due to poor, delayed decisions taken by the authorities. She pointed out that the Colombo harbour did not have the proper equipment and knowledge to deal with the chemical spill from the ship that was carrying dangerous cargo. She said proper mechanisms must be in place to deal with any future incidents.

Mr. Thilak Kariyawasam spoke on the important role of the civil society activists who could pressure the authorities to ensure that justice was done to affected people and to protect the country and its environment from future disasters.

At the second meeting Mr. Ravi Kumundes, President of the College of Medical Laboratory Science and the Academy of Health Professionals, discussed COVID-19 and its social impact on Sri Lanka. He said the health sector was under developed and that people did not demand a quality health service, which was their right.

He pointed out that there was a large gap in information management in the health sector. Despite the government imposing travel restrictions to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the authorities did not have a proper tool to analyse whether Covid-19 infections and deaths have decreased as a result.

At the third meeting, veteran journalist and newspaper editor Victor Ivan spoke on the economic crisis facing the country. He said that short sighted decisions by leaders had led to a downward spiral especially because of discrimination against minority communities, which led to communal uprisings and a 30 year ethnic war.



He said the nation should ask for forgiveness from the minority communities that have suffered at the hands of the majority. This could be a starting point for Sri Lanka to overcome its economic, social and political crises and go forward. A dialogue should be created among the people to identify a solution.

He encouraged women to engage in civil activist movements and leadership roles because they were stronger and more versatile than men.

Also under PACT, the team has been discussing the distribution of relief items funded by Misereor and the German Embassy to COVID-19 victims with DIRC members and government officials. The items include PPE kits for frontline workers, sinks, disinfectant spray machines and dry ration packs for low income families and orphanages, elders' homes and disabled care homes.

The PACT project orientation meetings were concluded with online meetings for Ratnapura, Kurunegala, Jaffna and Batticaloa districts. DIRC members discussed the implementation of COVID-19 relief programmes. Resource persons gave lectures on topics that DIRC members had chosen to enhance their knowledge on such as the Right to Information Act, the Constitution, governance, the ethical usage of mainstream media and social media and how to develop a pluralistic society.

Learning from International Experience How to Prevent Violent Extremism

Thirty participants attended two online training sessions held under NPC's Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) project from the districts of Kandy, Kurunegala, Mannar, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Ampara where the project is being implemented jointly with Helvitas Sri Lanka and funded by the EU.

NPC's Programme Advisor Sumadhu Weerawarne identified the importance of push and pull factors and making an accurate contextual analysis. Many issues related to PVE were discussed including the definition of violent extremism, how it is created, how to identify it and how to prevent it. Existing national and international definitions of violent extremism and examples of violent extremism were explored.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera briefed participants on violent extremism in Cyprus, Bangladesh and Northern Ireland. He mentioned that in the late 1990s, NPC had provided parliamentarians from both the government and opposition with an opportunity to study those countries and their peace processes by visiting them.

Several participants gave presentations on the push and pull factors of violent incidents in their districts.

"The training programme was a very useful one because violent extremism is a new topic for us, which should be studied in depth. We need to have a good understanding of the issue before we educate others," said Gamini Jayaweera from Kandy.

"We learn about new issues from different angles. This is important for our knowledge and future awareness programmes," said Peter Sinclair from the Mannar District.

Online Consultations to Meet Needs of Communities

Four online discussions were conducted Trincomalee, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya under NPC’s Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) activity with the participation of Co-Existence Society (CES) members, District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members and Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members.

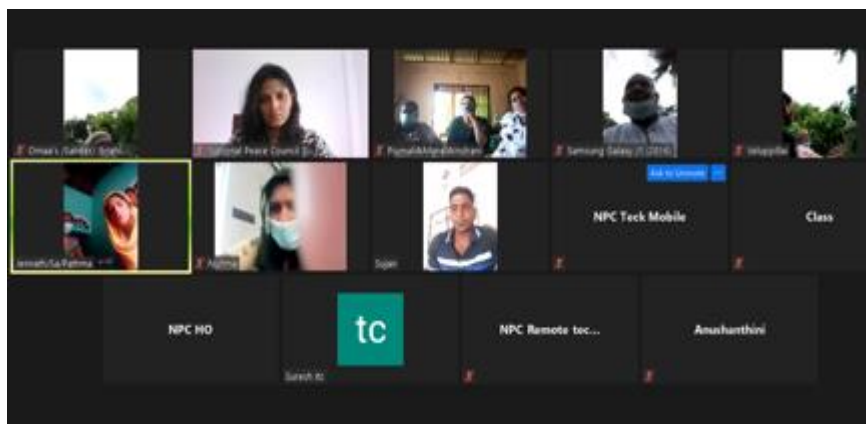
In order to engage communities with the reconciliation process in the country, SCORE is carrying out assessments to determine the needs of the communities at the grassroots level. The most important needs of the area were identified during the consultative discussions.

Education is one of the most important key factors for shaping a better society that respects values, rights and laws. Mrs. Sharmila Susikumar, a CES member from Killinochchi, explained the importance of enhancing education facilities in her area. She suggested providing study materials and furniture, conducting capacity building programmes for teachers, developing the study rooms and basic library facilities. She stressed the importance of moral education. "Moral education teachers can make an impact in strengthening the values of the country. We should enhance the Sunday school system." Participants pointed out the need to develop common facilities that could be used by all communities in the area.

At the Mullaitivu discussion participants emphasised the importance of education in empowering marginalised communities. As a human rights activist and a parish priest in Kokkilai, Father Rene Beshman said "Education is one of our basic rights and an asset that can’t be stolen by anyone. Kokkilai people are voiceless and marginalised. They have faced many calamities since the war ended in 2009. Apart from economic needs, educating these people is vital. There are no libraries in Kokkilai or even a book shop. We have to travel 75 km if we want to find a book.”

In Trincomalee, participants discussed the need for a common market, developing the library and providing vocational training. A CES member, Mrs. A.V.S Piumali, said many educated youth were addicted to gambling and drugs. “It is necessary to direct youth in the right direction. We hope this SCORE intervention will assist us to create a peaceful society,” she said.

In Vavuniya, the lack of drinking water facilities faced by villagers was a urgent issue because 800 families in the area did not have access to it. People have been affected by kidney disease.



Developing Facilitation Skills for Better Communication

An online training programme on facilitation skills development was held under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project for 61 representatives of 12 regional partners. An online poll identified facilitation as the primary requirement for training as it would benefit them as community level change agents.

The training included sessions on identifying the role of a facilitator and how it differs from the roles of teachers, moderators and trainers; skills and qualities of a good facilitator; session planning and designing; identifying, managing and responding to different types of contextual and situation issues; and applying the knowledge to manage gatherings of individuals from different educational, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants were divided into groups and asked to identify the role of a moderator, trainer, teacher and a facilitator. Each group developed a plan for a facilitation session of two hours that included identifying the subject/topic, target group, particular knowledge, skills and attitudes, group exercises and evaluation methods.

“A good facilitator should be able to identify the most suitable role in conducting field level events for different causes and groups. Each of us as civil society members should be able to play the role of a moderator, teacher or facilitator depending on the situation and needs,” said Jayapathma from Rakwana LIRC.

Two similar facilitation training programmes were held for Mannar and Addalachenai LIRCs.

Two online training programmes on gender were conducted by Mr. Velusamy Weerasingham for 54 members of Trincomalee and Batticaloa LIRCs and 40 members of Panduwasnuwara and Kuliypitiya LIRCs. Participants included religious leaders, government officials and community members. The topics discussed were conceptualising gender and sex, gender roles, Gender-Based Violence, the concepts of equity and equality and the role of LIRCs in promoting and protecting gender equity and gender mainstreaming at the committee and community levels.

“I haven't participated in a gender training before so it was informative and interesting for me. I thank both the facilitator and NPC for giving us this opportunity. It is a very pertinent subject especially considering what is happening in our country,” said Shamalee from Panduwasnuwara LIRC.

Two sessions on sharing the findings of the Religious Freedom Survey findings were conducted for the members of the Rakwana, Kuliypitiya and Panduwasnuwara LIRCs.

“The survey findings imply that there is relatively less interaction and unity among ethnic and religious communities in our province. The acquisition of land by the Department of Archaeology and related ministries is an issue in the Eastern province that is a reason for mistrust and friction,” said Moulavi Mansoor from Batticaloa LIRC.

Countering Hate Speech in All its Forms

An online workshop on countering hate speech for youth in Polonnaruwa was conducted by NPC’s Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project.

Project coordinator Nirosha Anthony spoke on the social background of hate speech and the objectives of the workshop. She explained that hate speech is often used in society to create an enemy of the other while consolidating one’s own group. Modern technology and social media made this task easier and more harmful.

“Expressions of hate speech do not occur in only in instances of ethnic and religious conflicts. When people are demeaned and labelled with names for being short (‘kota’) and wearing glasses (‘pottaya’), that is hate speech as well,” she pointed out.

A master trainer from Polonnaruwa explained the sociological frame work. “Nowadays there is a rapid spread of hate speech in society due to prejudice, ignorance, misconceptions, fear, suspicion and selfish motives,” he said.

He spoke about the Rwandan genocide, saying how on the radio and in newspapers the majority Hutus urged people to "weed out the cockroaches" meaning kill the minority Tutsis. Some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed as a result. This was an example of creating a false and hateful narrative that would justify violence.

Another master trainer from Polonnaruwa spoke on the legal framework of hate speech, application of international standards, media literacy and mindful social media engagement on hate speech.

She observed that during the past few days, there were Sri Lankan memes on the Israel-Palestine conflict. She explained that this was an expression of hate speech against Muslims and Christians in Sri Lanka.

“Most people spread hate speech because they do not know that people can take legal action against them. Creating awareness of the legal framework on hate speech would be an effective measure to counter hate speech,” a participant observed. Another participant added that infographics on hate speech laws should be shared on social media to create awareness.



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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.

Dialogue with Ethnic Minority Parties Necessary to Handle International Pressures

There is increased international scrutiny of Sri Lanka that is critical in nature and foretells sanctions to come. A country that was ahead of almost all others in Asia at the time of independence is almost at the bottom today in terms of economic prospects. All those who governed the country to date share the responsibility for this failure. Unless there is a strong will and genuine commitment to have a unified country with law that applies to all in equal measure to all we may not see positive development in the country.

The sanctions being planned by sections of the international community cannot be overcome by non-existent strategies as the country moves from one crisis to another. The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva has set up a special monitoring unit to document past and ongoing human rights violations in Sri Lanka. The most recent manifestation of international scrutiny by the EU. Its parliament last week passed a resolution by the margin of 628 votes to 15 to hold Sri Lanka to account on a number of issues. The consequences of not heeding this EU resolution is the possible withdrawal of the GSP Plus tariff concession which would be a severe blow to Sri Lanka's struggling economy.

The resolution that is currently before the US Congress is another indication of the unfavorable attention on Sri Lanka. The US resolution does not have any sanction mentioned in it at the moment, unlike its EU counterpart which calls for the withdrawal of GSP Plus as a last resort, but calls on the Sri Lankan government to reopen the negotiation process aimed at reaching a political solution that led to the war. It also refers to issues of missing persons, detained persons and the continuing militarization of the country. At the root of the resolutions against Sri Lanka in international forums, be they the UNHRC, the Ontario parliament, the EU parliament and the US Congress is the long unresolved issue of the ethnic conflict and its resolution by political means.

The National Peace Council believes that resolving these root causes calls for dialogue with the representatives of the ethnic and religious minorities and their political parties. We welcome the meeting between President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the TNA as a first step in that direction which needs to be expanded to include other minority parties. The constitutional reform proposals made by the TNA to the Expert Committee on Constitutional Reform appointed by the President, the holding of provincial elections, which will enable the minority parties to have a share of governance in the country, and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to give a definitive account of the war, end the speculations and divisive interpretations and correct the human rights violations of the past may be matters for discussion that can lead to a unified national approach in dealing with the international community to ensure the development of the country.

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