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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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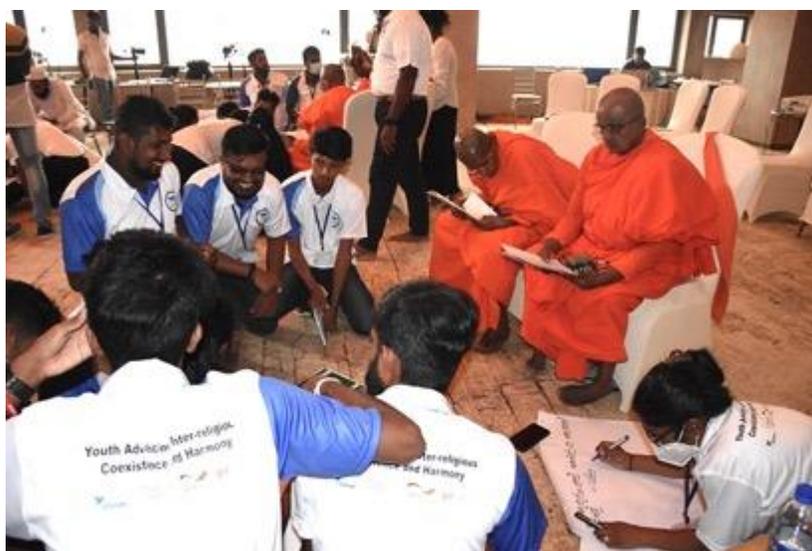
Mobilising Youth for Preventing Violent Extremism

Since the end of the civil war, hate narratives and extremist ideologies spread by nationalistic groups and politicians have gradually changed the mindset of citizens to suspect other ethno religious groups. Trust among communities had been lost and further eroded by the Easter Sunday attacks, undermining religious coexistence. The tendency of youth to accept hate narratives has grown in recent years as a result of social media.

Identifying the need of strengthening multi religious cooperation, the iDove approach was launched by the African Union Commission and GIZ to foster innovative youth based interventions using dialogue and soft skills to create agents of change for inter religious coexistence and harmony. NPC collaborated with GIZ to empower youth driven networks to strengthen inter religious understanding and multi religious cooperation.

Eight NPC staff members were trained as trainers and, in turn, trained 42 youth representatives from 24 districts who were selected from District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs), universities and other youth platforms, taking into consideration their leadership skills to make a change in their localities.

The first phase of the training was designed to teach participants practical skills and knowledge on identity and community, understanding conflict, understanding and responding to violent extremism and the role of youth in preventing violent extremism.



The second phase taught participants on how communication and religious and cultural resources should be used in preventing violent extremism. A power play, puppet show and cultural show were included to encourage participants to use different strategies to convey their message of preventing violent extremism to communities.

M.R. Nusra, who participated in the training in Nuwara Eliya, believed she had a special role in working against the extremist ideologies. “I realised how impactful my role is. As young leaders, we should take the lead in changing the attitudes of the people. It is not easy to fight against extremist ideologies but through the practical sessions in this training, I learnt that we could use different tactics and strategies to convey our message. I will share this knowledge with others,” she said.

M. R. Rifadh Ahmed is an active member of the Weligama Youth Wing. “This training enhanced our leadership skills as well as conceptual knowledge. Youth are the next generation who will make a change in society. We do not have many opportunities to learn new things or to share our opinions, so this training addressed that gap,” he said.

“Youth do not get many opportunities to participate in these types of trainings. As a youth leader, I am ready to share this knowledge with others and to be a part of the process of eliminating extremist ideologies in our localities.” Kosala Gunawardhane from Hambantota DIRC said.

Ashvini Selvaraja, a participant from Nuwara Eliya district, said, “Because of trainings like these, thinking patterns of my community have gradually changed. Earlier women were disempowered and helpless but now many women participate in these initiatives. I learnt how to take measures against violent extremism and I want to help other girls in my community by empowering them with knowledge,” she said.

As the last session of the programme, an inter faith dialogue was carried out with the religious leaders who shared their religious beliefs and values with participants, developing a discourse to understand how their religions have ensured inclusivity.

Father Sumith Weeramunda from Negombo Methodist Church stated that love and forgiveness were the fundamentals of his religion. “The whole world is suffering from various types of extremist actions. Violent extremism is the major reason for the poverty of most developing countries,” he said.

Kurukkal Dakshana Sharma said, “The whole world is one family. We should learn how to love and forgive others.”

Ven. Kandegama Sumanasiri Thero from Weligama said, “We should learn to accept different cultural and religious practices. Without knowing of the teaching of other religions, we cannot make assumptions. Religious leaders should encourage their followers to learn about other religions. With the proper understanding, most disputes can be resolved.”

Muslim Mavulavi, Z.A.M. Faris condemned extremist parties involved in violence in the name of religion. He explained that Islam was a religion that appreciated peaceful coexistence.

At the end of the session, the participants presented rituals, practices and activities in their religions that empower followers to tackle violent extremism and build cohesive communities.

Initiatives to Strengthen Commitment to Religious Coexistence

NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project conducted 17 activities reaching 569 youth wing members and 123 Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members in 11 locations. These activities, which include capacitation and engagement interventions, were successful in terms of participation and impact. The feedback received from participants proves that ARC managed to ensure the quality of activities encouraging them to take the initiative to strengthen rule of law in the country.

The project is able to achieve significant progress in creating local environments conducive to religious freedom, rule of law and coexistence. Providing a specific focus on capacitating newly established youth wings and LIRCs, 16 programmes were carried out on pluralism, preventing violent extremism and the rule of law providing them the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to engage, capacitate and empower members of their communities that will, in turn, absorb them into the discourse on religious freedom and coexistence making it more inclusive.

One needs assessment was carried out targeting Weligama LIRC to determine needs, examine their nature and causes and set priorities for future action. The intervention focused on community driven events as the project envisages that the community leaders should practice the skills to take the ownership of local reconciliation process. Considering this need, upcoming activities and training will be planned.

The project team modified some training modules on the rule of law and preventing violent extremism to suit the current context and new youth target group. The rule of law module included more innovative activities to ensure the participation of youth members. Components were revised to create a dialogue among the youth groups to sustain the discourse on religious freedom while empowering them as community intermediaries in their areas.

The objective of the rule of law trainings was to improve participants' knowledge of the existing legal framework on religious freedom both domestically and internationally, which will enable community leaders to drive the local and national discourse on the rule of law and religious freedom. Participants were educated on the domestic and international legal instruments in place to safeguard religious freedom, which includes domestic constitutional provisions, the penal code, acts and international conventions and the concept of the rule of law and how it links with religious freedom. Discussions and group activities were conducted to broaden the understanding of participants on the concepts.



Ilmullah Alam from the youth wing in Panduwasnuwara emphasised the need for enlightening the general public on their rights and available legal provisions to ensure equality before the law. “I am inspired to learn about this subject because I believe knowledgeable citizens can contribute to strengthening the rule of law in the country.”

Harshani Jayasinghe from the Kuliyaipitiya youth wing said, “I think we should know the existing legal provisions for the protection of our rights. As youth leaders we need this knowledge to make change in our society for the better.”

R.M.K. Wickramasinghe, a member of the LIRC in Mawanella, emphasised the importance of learning about rights for empowering different ethno religious groups. “Mawanella is a multi ethnic area, where there have been some disputes. Learning about rights is important. As a community representative, I believe I can make a greater impact on society with the knowledge I am gaining,” she said.

Pluralism training programmes were carried to enhance community leaders’ skills, knowledge and attitudes to promote cultural, behavioural and attitudinal diversity.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) training was designed for the newly established community platforms to guide them to take initiatives to tackle violent extremism in their areas. It will enhance youth wing members’ skills to design and carry out counter action to minimise the impact of extremist ideologies.

A member of Negombo youth wing M.F.M. Umar Moulavi thought it required collective efforts to fight against extremist ideologies. “It is challenging to change the mindsets of some of the communities. That is why, as youth, we need to create more constructive initiatives to strategically address prevailing extremist ideologies,” he said.

LIRCs are tasked with providing an open space where ethnic and religious groups can bring forth their issues and concerns in search of holistic solutions. During the need assessment, Weligama LIRC discussed future initiatives that could be taken to address immediate needs of their communities.

T.L.N.S. Mendis, Divisional Secretary in Weligama, praised NPC’s efforts in building relations among different ethno religious groups. “We had a productive discussion on tensions in the area while discussing possible solutions. As LIRC members, you have a responsibility to take action to sustain peaceful coexistence among the communities in Weligama,” she said.

Training for Staff of Office on Missing Persons

NPC will begin a new project to improve the knowledge and capacities of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) staff funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI) with a goal to improving accountability in Sri Lanka.

An agreement was signed by OMP Executive Director Mr. D.C. Dissanayaka and NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera. The project will be conducted in Jaffna, Mannar, Batticaloa and Matara District and the OMP office in Colombo.

The long term goals are to support staff to enable families to find closure in their search for missing loved ones, granting families interim compensation until a final solution is determined and ensuring that they are included in the post war transition process.

Specific activities during the 11 month project include a workshop to discuss pluralism and Transitional Justice for 40 OMP staff, training for 200 central government administrators and empathy building engagements.

Exploring the Concepts of Pluralism

A workshop on pluralism and conflict transformation was held in Jaffna for 27 members of the sub committees of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Jaffna, Vavuniya and Batticaloa under NPC's project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation project (PACT). The sub committees were set up in areas prone to religious and ethnic tension so that conflict could be avoided and handled through dialogue and cooperation.

Dr S. Jeevasuthan, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Sociology at the Jaffna University, made presentation on pluralism. Ms. Sharanya Samiththamby, Assistant Lecturer at the Law Faculty of Jaffna University, talked about laws relating to pluralism, the means by which they may be implemented and necessary reforms. Dr. Jehan Perera, NPC's Executive Director, spoke on zoom from Colombo on the value found in a pluralistic society and the current political and economic situation.

During the discussions, participants raised several issues about the future situation, how the public could change the government, what steps the government could take to overcome inflation, possibility of changing the 1978 Constitution, getting power sharing in the North Province, finding foreign assistance to overcome the economic crisis and suggestions by academics to the government to solve economic problems.

"It was a learning experience. I will use what I have learnt at this training programme to understand pluralism and law. I will apply these principles at the social centres and sports clubs where I work. I will strive for social harmony in our area by keeping all religions together," said Mr. Thayalan.

"It was a very good and useful training programme. It will support peace and harmony. I will use it during my public activities. Good changes will be seen by imparting this information to more youth" said Ms. Dilaxshiya.



Statesmanship in Governance Not Denial to Buy Time

Once again Sri Lanka has received unfavourable exposure internationally when the UN Human Rights Council voted by 20 votes to 7 to pass resolution No 51/1 titled “Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka,” against the wishes of the government. Many of the countries that spearheaded and supported the resolution are those on whom we depend on to extricate us from the current financial and economic crisis the country has fallen into. Countries that voted for the resolution and those who abstained, such as India and Japan, essentially have the welfare of all Sri Lankans and the country to live up to its inherent resilience. We can only hope that the confrontational attitude taken by the government in Geneva will not affect their continued support for Sri Lanka.

This was the 9th UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka that different governments, including the present one, have refused to accept. Each resolution has made new demands. The list of demands in them grows longer including on economic corruption which has national implications. The international community may not wish to impose punitive sanctions on Sri Lanka so as not to cause harm to the innocent Sri Lankan people who are suffering from the economic downturn. However, there can be international law and punitive sanctions directed against individuals against whom there are allegations of violations of international law. The government has a duty to protect all its citizens from both the economic crisis and the growing reach of international law. There is a need to consider the reputational damage and the impact on economic flows to the country.

The moral of the Aragalaya is that the sufferings and unmet needs of the general public should not be ignored as it awaits ignition by the events of the day and the hardships faced by them. Sri Lanka requires statesmanship in governance to be displayed in Parliament and by the President at this time and not denial of truths to buy time. The National Peace Council believes that the most important issues to be taken up are those of missing persons, finding the truth of what happened during the war through a truth commission, the misuse of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the enactment of other laws that can violate human rights of people, addressing the political grievances of ethnic minorities through power devolution, holding of local government and provincial council elections and overcoming the economic grievances of general population.

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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.

Need for Reparations to Those Pardoned But Kept Illegally Imprisoned

The release of eight long term LTTE prisoners held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act by the government through a presidential pardon is a goodwill gesture that can contribute to the national reconciliation process. This presidential pardon needs to be commended as some of the prisoners have spent more than two decades in imprisonment. At least four previous governments have balked from doing this despite protests and pleadings from their families and national and international human rights organisations even from Geneva.

Three of those released had been convicted of trying to assassinate former President Chandrika Kumaratunga who was blinded in an eye by the bomb attack. Prior to releasing them through a presidential pardon signed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe, the government has ascertained the sentiments of the former president and obtained her consent. Former president Kumaratunga has demonstrated the magnanimity that is required to bring healing to our tortured and divided country and people.

In a shocking admission the presidential secretariat has stated that four of the eight prisoners had served longer prison terms than their court-ordered sentences. “Three prisoners had been sentenced to 30 years in prison and had served 22 years, one prisoner who had been sentenced to 11 years and had served 14 years, one who has been sentenced to 10 years and had also served 14 years, two prisoners who were sentenced to five years but had served for 14 years, were among those who received a presidential pardon.”

This would appear to be a serious violation of human rights in terms of international human rights covenants and an intolerable abuse of power by those who kept them incarcerated in this manner for a long period of time. It is unfortunate that for some prisoners, completing their sentences does not mean that they are free. Denying prisoners’ freedom for years past their completed sentences demonstrates contempt of the rule of law and the powerlessness of the victims. These are human beings who have lives and families to go back to and should not face the cruel and unlawful prospect of incarceration beyond their court-ordered terms.

The weakness of the justice system in Sri Lanka with the police, prison and probation departments working separately and with very little coordination though they work for the same objectives is highlighted by this revelation. Regardless of how this happened, the National Peace Council requests the government to release them as soon as possible, as it is known that a large number of victims of this type are being held in prisons without prosecution. By keeping them in prison, there will be a need to pay compensation considering the number of years lost to the victims. If the government is willing to take such positive action, we are also willing to support the resolution of such problems.

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