



Paths To Peace

DIRCs Join Walk in Support of Malaiyaha Community

August
2023

One hundred and eighty District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members, including religious leaders, government officials, youth leaders, university students and plantation sector communities, joined the walk of men and women working in the plantation sector organized by Collective for Maanbumigu Malaiyaha Makkal from Thalaimannar to Matale from July 28 to August 12. The walk, retracing the journey of the first group of Tamils brought to Sri Lanka to work on the plantations in the hill country, aimed at focusing attention on taking actions to address the pressing problems of the Malaiyaha community.

DIRC members from the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Kegalle and Kurunegala districts working with NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project participated in the walk. In Anuradhapura, the DIRC welcomed the group with betel leaves along with giving blessings of religious leaders.

By joining the walk, DIRC members gained an understanding of the history of the Malaiyaha community and the hardships they have undergone as well as the critical problems that persist even after 200 years since their ancestors' arrival.

Religious leaders, youth and DIRC members will be taking steps to strengthen the process of reconciliation based on experiences from the walk. They will mobilise people from their areas to promote the rights of Malaiyaha community. The DIRCs will plan activities to influence the government to take immediate action.



“As a DIRC member, I always dedicate my time to protect Malaiyaha community rights. Today I came here to be part of this walk. I thank the DIRC for giving me the opportunity to support equal rights for all ethnicities,” said Ven. Chandananda Thero from Kurunegala DIRC.

DIRC members had the opportunity to make contact with different civil society organizations and people who worked for the rights of different communities in the country. As a result, they will be able to make DIRC activities more successful in building a pluralistic society.

Religious Coexistence Enhanced by Community Policing

The concept of police brutality is not foreign to Sri Lanka and many commentators have accused the police of employing violence and abusing the law in the name of maintaining public order and national security. Due to the three decade war, the police has had to transform itself into a battle ready force; it is common for police officers to carry assault rifles.

NPC through the Action for Religious Reconciliation (ARC) project has engaged in the creation of Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) nationwide with the purpose of preventing, mitigating and fostering better relations between different religious communities. The LIRCs work with a wide range of stakeholders in their respective communities with the purpose of fostering an environment in which pluralism thrives, enabling religious coexistence and religious harmony. LIRCs have identified the police as key stakeholders in fostering religious coexistence and religious harmony. Still, it was identified that the community lack confidence in the police as public interaction with the police has been a vertical partnership as opposed to a horizontal partnership in combating crime.

The police have often failed to gain public trust and confidence as it has operated on the basis that the citizen is subservient to the police in fighting crime. Therefore police engagement with society has been minimal. However, this position is futile in combating religious and communal violence as opposed to general forms of criminal deviance. The police have recognised that it is necessary to foster good relations with the public in combating and preventing religious violence and tension, which has seen an upsurge in post conflict Sri Lanka.

COPS stands for Citizens Oriented Policing Services, meaning that citizens play an important role in maintaining public security in their areas. This is because citizens protect their society from issues that infringe on the rights and liberties of others in society.

In Bandarawela and Mawanella NPC, with the support of its partner organizations, held a community policing training workshop to improve public confidence and trust in the police. Targeting around 200 officers in the police, frontline service providers and high ranking members of the public, the training introduced the importance of community policing and how community policing has been employed in different countries in the region to tackle crime and prevent religious violence. Beneficiaries were introduced to the concept of how having good relations with the public would allow the police to combat crime more effectively as the community would assist the police in carrying out their duties.

“The training revolutionised the concept of policing,” according to participants. They said that it allowed them to break away from the notion that the public was subservient to the police. They believed that such an approach to policing would enable the public to participate in maintaining the security of their communities. This would allow the police to become more inclusive as the public would cooperate with the police in preventing and mitigating crime in their communities.

Empathy Building Advances the OMP Process

Connecting emotions, experiences and expectations have been central in the project aimed at improving the capacity of staff of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP). Funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI), NPC concluded the OMP project with nine sessions of outreach on empathy building. Held in Colombo, Matara, Mannar, Jaffna and Batticaloa, the sessions were delivered to the members of victim families as well as government officers with the objective of reconciling the issues and conflicts identified in the service delivery process.

At its core, the project set out to build bridges. In this regard, implementors said the project covered wider areas than expected. It addressed many stakeholders of OMP service cycle through various activities. The wants and needs of victim families were identified, ground level government officers directly connected to the OMP delivery cycle were educated about the issues and senior government officials at regional decision making levels were informed about what needed to be done.

During the informal empathy building engagement exercises in Batticaloa, Jaffna and Mannar, the facilitator introduced the theme and plot of the film Paangshu (The Soil) set in a rural courthouse. The film tells the story about a mother seeking justice for her son who was abducted by paramilitary men during the 1988-89 insurgency. Baba Nona goes to countless places in search for her missing son: army camps, hospitals, the missing person's commission and the village temple. She cannot find him. Later, she goes to trial and identifies an officer responsible for kidnapping her son and directs her anger to him and his family.

Remarkably, in the end, she forgives the criminal and arranges for her case to be dismissed. Paangshu's director has been widely criticised by audiences for the end of the scene, which does not give justice to the victim's mother.

During the sessions the facilitator asked whether criticism against the film director was right or wrong. Victims' family members said "wrong", meaning that the mother's decision of forgiveness was the correct one. When asking a similar question to government officers, half said the criticism was justified. The final sessions showed the essential need of connecting people and building bridges in order to improve a formal process.



Solving The Human-Elephant Conflict

Elephants, associated with cultural and religious values, are seen as sacred animals and cultural symbols; they are also used for economic activities and tourism development.

At a meeting to prepare activities under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project, participants from Chenkalady and Kebethikollawa expressed serious concerns about increasing loss of human lives because of the human-elephant conflict. "We don't want any more lives to be lost in vain. We want to protect both humans and elephants," one participant said.

According to the data in the 2021 Annual Report of the Wildlife & Natural Protection Society in the last 12 years (2021-2010), 1,061 human deaths and 3,298 elephant deaths have been recorded. As a preventative measure for the loss of lives of humans and elephants and property damage, electric fences have been constructed near elephant habitats. However, they are not efficient; elephants break them regularly and intrude on residences and cultivation fields.

Dr. S. Wijeyamohan, a scientist and a senior lecturer at the University of Vavuniya, has introduced new technology for electric fences that is more efficient and cost effective. He was invited to be a resource person at the meeting. Four regional states in India have adopted this technology to deal effectively with the human elephant conflict but Sri Lanka has not yet done so.

"The problem is our mentality. Humans are against elephants' activities because they are scared by the size of the animals. If we understand the elephants, then there is no conflict between humans and elephants," Dr. Wijeyamohan said.

The mutual understanding between humans and elephants is important to build a peaceful environment for both without losing the lives of humans or elephants. The discussion showed that the scope of peace was not limited to the absence of war or violence. An environment of peace applied to humans and animals and required nurturing.



Problem Mapping to Identify Community Issues

Problem mapping is a technique used to analyse and understand complex problems by breaking them down into smaller components, figuring out the relation between these components, visualising and choosing what component to prioritise first. Mapping community problems is important to identify root causes and actual issues that are related to democracy and the vulnerability of women. Under NPC’s Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project, problem mapping discussions were held in the Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Ratnapura, Gampaha and Kegalle districts with the participation of 35 female supergroup members and 140 female peer group members in each district.

The sessions showed that through conducting a problem analysis, understanding the root causes using the problem tree analysis and looking at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), supergroup and peer group members are able to plan their responses strategically. Supergroup members identified their formation as the main strength. They see themselves as a strong group with different types of knowledge, skills and capacities with a commitment to promote democracy and find solutions for their problems. They have strong networks with government officials, civil society organizations, community organizations and local level politicians that are a strength for them when it comes to resolving problems.

“As a women leader, it is important to identify our problems in order to plan solutions. Women are facing different kinds of problems starting from the economy and finance to psychosocial wellbeing. Sometimes we address issues without having a proper reading of the root causes and consequences. This discussion provided a clear understanding of our problems and how to prioritise the most relevant and important issues. Violence against women was identified as an important issue that needs to be considered,” said a peer group member from the Ratnapura District.

Receiving support from government institutions for partner organizations and having government officials and local level female political leaders in the peer group who could extend support for women's groups were identified as key opportunities. The group realised that weaknesses and threats could transform into strengths once they used methods to overcome them during solution planning and implementation.



Victim, Affected by Violence or Bystander?

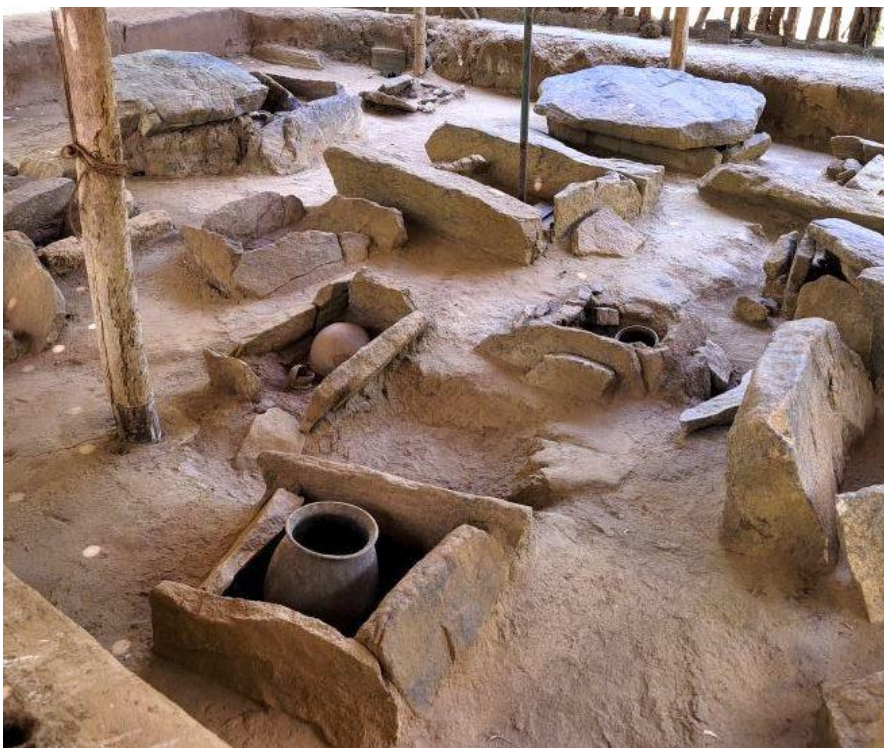
When it comes to wounds, injuries or injustices of the past, different words carry similar meanings; the commonalities lie in what experiences change in individuals, groups or organizations in the future. Therefore, the past has to be dealt with before looking to the future.

During an exchange programme for Civil Peace Service (CPS) coordinators, participants from Guatemala, Colombia and Liberia visited Sri Lanka. Coming from countries where truth, reconciliation and peace processes have been initiated, attempted and implemented, a mutual learning took place looking at what might be possible in the Sri Lankan context.

NPC staff attended the exchange programme in Sigiriya. During a visit to Ibbankatuwa, an ancient burial site, questions of remembrance were raised. While Ibbankatuwa is considered one of the several ancient burial sites that have been found in the country, not all burial sites are treated with the same level of acknowledgment. The government continues to refuse investigations into mass graves, which many believe contain the remains of the forcibly disappeared in several conflicts.

Remembrance, justice and acknowledging past conflicts affect people and countries in many ways. In Colombia, the death toll of human rights activists in 2023 was 111 and counting.

Participants were asked to write down one word for what made them think and what made them happy. Words that came up most frequently were solidarity, exchange and hope, indicating a positive outlook of peacebuilders towards the future developments in Sri Lanka.



CSO Collective Voices its Concerns

The CSO Collective held a meeting to discuss the deteriorating conditions in the country in which hardships of the people continue to grow along with governmental suppression of dissent. NPC was one of the core group of organizers. More than 500 leading civic activists from across the country attended the meeting. NPC took on the task of ensuring participation by clergy from all religions by facilitating the attendance of 68 religious clergy from its 17 District Inter Religious Committees as well as 25 youth and seven coordinators from its Local Inter Religious Committees. In addition, 24 representatives from NPC's partner CSOs at the district and divisional levels also attended.

The statement that was issued highlighted the key concerns of CSOs at the present time. It noted that “The recent attempts to introduce extremely oppressive versions of laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act, Broadcasting Commission Act and the NGO Act are examples of the Government's attempt to threaten and control democratic space.”

The Collective called upon the political establishment to take immediate steps to uphold and defend the foundational principles of democracy by:

- Ensuring that free and fair elections essential for inclusion are held on time, starting immediately with the Local Government and Provincial Council elections.
- Uphold the fundamental rights of citizens, including freedom of expression and association and right to information.
- Protect civic space and create an enabling environment for civil society activism.
- Ensure citizen consultation and participation in steering economic recovery.
- Govern with transparency and accountability, ensuring full public scrutiny.
- Empower the independent commissions to fulfill their roles effectively.
- Take a genuine effort to implement essential anti-corruption reforms.
- Take action to prosecute past and present acts of corruption to end the climate of impunity.



Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

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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.

Justice with Reparations for Malaiyaha Tamil People Cannot Wait

During the past month several events took place to mark the 200th Anniversary of the Malaiyaha Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Of symbolic significance was the march from Talaimannar to Matale that retraced the arduous trek of the original migrants. The National Peace Council and likeminded civil society organizations participated in these events that have sought to give recognition to the Malaiyaha Tamil people and their place in the country as an integral part of a plural society and with equal rights as Sri Lankan citizens.

The National Peace Council believes there is a special need for reparations to be given to this community for the deprivations they have suffered ever since being denied citizenship by the newly independent government in 1948. NPC notes that the Malaiyaha Tamil community living within the plantations continue to suffer from the debilities unjustly imposed on them at the dawn of Independence. Even today they live in abysmal conditions and are paid a grossly inadequate wage. They suffer from the highest levels of poverty of any community.

This community want integration and not separation either geographically or politically. They need to be treated as equals to other communities in terms of their political and economic rights and dignity, and the denial of ensuring this equality by the state in particular is unacceptable. Given the contribution they and their forebears have made to the national economy with their sweat and their toil, they deserve the identity they demand as free and equal citizens on par with other communities having been in this country now for two centuries.

NPC urges the government to take steps to increase the wage levels of the plantation workers as a priority. This would require restructuring the plantation sector on modern lines as in other tea growing countries. There is also a need to permit the people on the plantations to purchase their land and own their homes. The ugly breaking of a house on the plantations which recently got nationwide attention must be remedied in a spirit of justice and reparation for decades of injustice.

The government's policy commitment in 2016 to give seven perches of land for housing in the plantation estates to their workers needs to be implemented without delay and made applicable to all state owned plantations regardless of their management. The budget proposals for 2017 referred to the transfer of 'public housing to dwellers who have lived in such houses for more than 15 years' and giving each plantation family seven perches of land 'with clear title deed' in order to 'alleviate their conditions from the line rooms.' We call on the Human Rights Commission, Labour Ministry or any other institutions relevant to, or responsible for, looking after workers' welfare to go to courts to get justice and other services provided to other workers in this country to this community also as another remedy.

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