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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

September  
2023

## Painting for Peace on International Peace Day

Over 50 children representing Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim schools put peace into practice on International Peace Day under the theme of Actions for Peace in Kandy by creating works of art depicting peace during an event organised by Kandy DIRC and supported by the Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

“We need to teach our children about peace for the next generation,” a parent said. “They like to draw. That’s when freedom of expression comes out,” another parent added. One mother had allowed her daughter to attend despite being ill because of her passion for drawing. “Peace is important because then we are all equal,” a school girl said.

The school children were given two hours to complete their visions of peace. However, the messages of the day extended beyond the canvas. Art teachers from Tamil and Sinhala classes, parents of participants and children of all ages came together to celebrate peace day.

Some drawings depicted all religions while others highlighted specific ones. One had a yin/yang symbol, which showed the diversity of a plural society and people’s experiences related to peace. Certificates were awarded to all participants. Through art and images, the artists of today and tomorrow fostered a more peaceful world on International Peace Day.



# “Postal Rights” in the Plantation Sector

According to the International Convention to Civic and Political Rights Article 25(c) “Every citizen has all the rights and opportunities without any of the distinction and without unreasonable restriction to have access, on general terms of equality to public service in his country”. One particular service accessed by “all” citizens in Sri Lanka is the state postal service. However, people living in the plantation sector do not fall under “all”.

During a workshop under the Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project, people from the Monaragala district raised serious concerns. “We don’t receive letters or any postal service directly from the state service. We receive postal services from the estate office. There is an appointed person called thabal kooli, who is also an estate labourer, and has to deliver the letters to homes,” one man said.

This was a problem because some of the letters were received only after they had been opened by others who had the same name on the estate.

“Many times we receive letters that are very delayed. Some students did not get their university entrance letters and some lost government jobs due to the delay in receiving interview and appointment letters,” participants said. Letters were not received by people in the plantation sector who had no addresses with door numbers and street names. “Because there is no post office close by, the letters are not being delivered by the postal service. There is no accountability taken by government on behalf of misconduct by the estate management,” they added.

According to ICCPR Article 27 (1), “No one shall be subject to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation”. Article 27 (2), states that everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks. It is an offense under the penal code Section 165 and 167. However, the people living in the plantation sector were not entitled to take legal action against the estate management because legal action could only be taken against a public servant.

Due to the lack of postal service implementation, people living in the plantation sector continued to face challenges to access the public services and to enjoy the right to privacy. The issues addressed during the workshop will be taken up through the LAW project.



# Engaging the National Level for Religious Coexistence

The Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project implemented by NPC conducted a residential training programme for 43 CBOs and NGOs from 13 districts focused on developing the capacity and the understanding of the participants on the importance of establishing pluralism and the rule of law to bring about religious coexistence.

Participants were introduced post-independence political development that acted as a catalyst for creating an environment that fostered impunity and corruption and eroded values of good governance, rule of law and pluralism for a narrow political agenda that was founded on religion and nationalism.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke about the fundamental problems that existed from post-independence because of the lack of accountability and inclusiveness. He pointed out that the national issues, the leftist insurrections and injustices suffered by the Malayaha community all stemmed from a lack of accountability and due to impunity, adding that if the rule of law had prevailed, the economic crisis could have been avoided because decisions would have been made in the interest of the whole country.

Mr. D.M. Dissanayake from the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence introduced the concept of the rule of law and its relation to pluralism. He mentioned the non-implementation of 13 amendment and the postponement of elections as instances of flouting the law.

Professor Upul Abeyrathna spoke on ethnicity and religion.

The issue of giving Buddhism a special place in the Constitution was discussed, with some of the participants saying it has not been favourable for reconciliation. They also said that there should a policy saying all religious must be included in any state event. The state and politicians and civil society have an obligation to not use religion for political or personal advantage, they said.

Participants said that with the introduction to concepts of rule of law and pluralism, they would be better able to promote the rule of law and pluralism. They wanted to work with NPC on the issue of religious coexistence for a better Sri Lanka.





# Empowering Women Through WOICE

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In the spirit of fostering inclusion and promoting women's empowerment, the Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project organized a series of meetings to bring together women leaders, state officials, former women Local Government Authority (LGA) members and women political leaders from the seven districts of Matara, Gampaha, Kegalle, Ratnapura, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Monaragala.

One of objectives was engaging with state officials and former women LGA members to address the challenges faced by each district. The meetings were a microcosm of the communities they aimed to empower, from Ministry of Health officers and midwives to agricultural officers, development officers, Grama Niladaris, doctors, police officers, teachers, principals and zonal educational officers.

Ms. Disna Senanayake, a school principal from Matara, said that parents in her area were struggling to send their children to schools that were located far from their homes, resulting in financial strain and children dropping out. When she took over as principal, the school had only a handful of students and was on the brink of closure. Ms. Senanayake motivated parents to enroll their children in the local school and went on home visits to support children who had dropped out.

WOICE hosted sessions with women state officials and former women LGA members. Ms. Vimali Karunarathne from Nuwara Eliya, said, "Democracy will only be achieved when policies and laws are decided by both men and women with equal regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the population."

Ms. Karunarathne stressed that women's involvement in government decision making went beyond advocating for women's rights and extended to other issues such as addressing violence against women. Her advocacy for gender equality in politics demonstrated that women's leadership can drive real change.



# Improving Public Service Delivery Through Engagement

The course participants of the Advanced Certificate Course, Inclusive Service Delivery for Sustainable Peace, which is funded by Freedom House and facilitated by NPC with Sabaragamuwa University, held a language camp and fact finding mission. The participants comprised government officials, most of whom engage in front line activities with the people. This activity was focused on school children and the estate community living in the Nonperiel Estate, one of the oldest tea plantations in the country. The language camp was held at Vivagananda Tamil School located outside the estate, which has classes only up to Grade 8. The children study under tremendous hardships. Some students walk 12 kilometres up and down daily.

During the activities of the language camp, the government officers who follow the certificate course engaged in dialogue with school children in Tamil, a language that course participants were not conversant in. They got details about the background, difficulties and studies experienced by people of the estate from the viewpoint of the children. The session ended with the handing over of rain coats, exercise books, instrument boxes and school bags to the children as donations by well-wishers and by NPC.

In the afternoon the participants met members of the Malaiyaha (up country Tamil) community living inside the estate to get an idea about the reach of inclusive services and make an assessment of their needs and wants. The research showed that even basic services, such as the free ambulance service, were not accessible to them. The economic crisis of 2021-2022 had impacted negatively on their ability to buy for food. The threefold increase in food prices had not been supported by any increase in their wages and now they had no alternative but to skip meals.

It was regrettable that the estate management has ignored their welfare. The students of the certificate course - the grassroot level government officers who are involved in providing inclusive services - got the full picture of the situation. The course students said they would pay more attention to those underprivileged communities when delivering inclusive services in future. The most important takeaway of this visit was the value of the certificate course in improving delivery of public services to the disempowered. The more government officers following this course means improvement in delivery of inclusive services to the recipients with customised attention to underprivileged communities.



# A Real Life Story on Peacemaking

Working on finding ways to restore trust between people since 2002, my life experience has contributed greatly to my actions towards social inclusion and promoting sustainable peace.

In my experience, I feel practicing the values of dignity, respect and trust motivate peace and an inclusive society. It strikes me that the two key words in designing and thinking about social inclusion and coexistence are dignity and respect; dignity about our own existence and values and respect for the differences that define another person's existence. A third component plays a central role: trust.

In 2009, without consent, I married a Hindu woman who converted to Islam after marriage. We were excluded from both families because of our marriage. After one year, my parents accepted us but my spouse's parents did not.

In 2013, my spouse's parents also reconciled with us due to illness but her siblings avoided us and did not talk to me until her father passed away in 2020 during Covid-19. During that time we had an issue with the cremation of her father's body according to the Hindu ritual because no relative lived in Sri Lanka. I came forward to perform the ritual although it is prohibited in Islam. This was a turning point for our family life.

When my mother-in-law passed away in August 2023, my sisters and brothers-in-law came for the funeral and cremation. After having been excluded for so long, by practicing dignity, trust and openness, the other relatives accepted us. We started to rebuild the relationships that had been broken. Through practicing the elements of dignity, respect and trust, I recall how valuable they were and how they affect inner peace and a peaceful life with others. This is something that I try to practice in my daily life and work at NPC.

*S.S. Nayaj*  
*NPC staff member*



# Provide Justice for Victims of Easter Bombing

The UK Channel 4 television documentary that details the alleged perpetrators of the Easter 2019 mass bombings in Sri Lanka, and their motivations, has reignited the debate and negative emotions over the issue of investigations done so far. A total of 269 people were killed on April 21, 2019 most of them being ordinary citizens worshipping in churches along with 45 foreign nationals from 13 countries in hotels, and over 500 others were wounded in six simultaneous suicide bombings. The savagery of the bombings and uncertainty it generated in the entire population virtually shut down the country for two months and dealt a crippling blow to the national economy, the consequences of which are still being experienced today.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe has announced his intention to appoint a committee of investigation to be headed by a retired supreme court judge and to appoint a parliamentary select committee to investigate the allegation by the former Attorney General that there was a mastermind behind the attacks. The president has also said that upon completion of these two investigations the reports will be presented to parliament for a final decision regarding how to proceed from there on. President Wickremesinghe's proposals appear to be similar to those already implemented without success. On May 22, 2019, the Speaker appointed a Select Committee of Parliament which presented its report on 23 October 2019. On 22 September 2019, President Maithripala Sirisena appointed a Commission of Inquiry headed by a Supreme Court judge which handed in its report on 01 February 2021. But to no avail as those who plotted the bombings remain unidentified.

It is the failure to identify those who were behind the attack, take them before the law and hold them accountable through the previous national inquiries that has given rise to the continuing demands, mainly by the Catholic Church and also by the families of victims, for an international inquiry to obtain truth and justice. Following the Channel 4 disclosures Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa has also called for an international investigation. Likewise, the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights has urged the Government of Sri Lanka to conduct a comprehensive follow-up investigation that is independent, transparent, and inclusive, with international support and active involvement of the victims and their representatives, such as the Catholic church. The National Peace Council believes that such an investigation with international participation could help to convince the Sri Lankan people, victims and the international community about the government's genuine intentions to ensure accountability and justice for the victims. As an additional benefit it could also minimize international condemnations and sanctions that will be detrimental to the country at a time it requires maximum international assistance.

*Media Release issued on 13.09.23*



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

September  
2023

*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.*

## Focus on Economic and Governance Reforms

The government's failure to obtain the second tranche of IMF support is a wakeup call regarding the precarious condition of the economy. The IMF has said that Sri Lanka's economic recovery is still not assured. It has also said that the government has not met the economic targets set for it, particularly with regard to reducing the budget deficit due to a potential shortfall in government revenue generation. The IMF's refusal to grant the second tranche of USD 330 million at this time will erode the confidence of prospective investors in the economy. The IMF has said the second tranche under its lending programme would only be released after it reaches a staff-level agreement, and there was no fixed timeline on when that would take place.

The failure of the government to fulfil many of the IMF's transparency requirements, such as posting its contracts and procurements on the website, and explain its rationale for tax holidays and those who benefit, have contributed to the loss of confidence in the government's commitment to the economic reform process. In view of the seriousness of the economic challenge to the country and its people we call on the government to address issues of governance in consultation with the opposition. The National Peace Council urges the government to invite the opposition parties and the latter to respond positively to discuss the IMF programme and find ways to amend and implement it as necessary in a bipartisan spirit keeping in mind the interests of vulnerable sections of the population.

The National Peace Council believes that the core issues the government needs to address if it is to get the economy on the correct track is that of governance, and its lack which has led to corruption and impunity. The mounting difficulties faced by people in coping with their economic circumstances can lead to protests and agitation campaigns. The logic of competitive electoral politics can also come into play with different political parties making their own promises to alleviate the economic hardships on the people even at the cost of the economic reform programme agreed with the IMF. We are concerned that the government's efforts to silence public protest and criticism by means of the proposed Anti-Terrorist Act and the Online Safety Act which are to be placed before parliament next week will make a bad situation worse.

The draft Anti-Terrorist Act which seeks to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act is wider in scope and gives the government the power to arrest persons who are engaging in public protest or trade union action. Those who are charged as "intimidating the public or a section of the public" can be arrested under this law. The Online Safety Act seeks, among others, to "protect persons against damage caused by false statements or threatening, alarming, or distressing statements." It will establish a five-member commission appointed by the President which will be able to proscribe or suspend any social media account or online publication, and also recommend jail time for alleged offenses which can be highly subjective. We call on the government to withdraw these proposed anti-democratic legislations forthwith and instead deal with urgent economic issues, particularly concerns raised by the IMF.

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