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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



# Paths To Peace

JANUARY 2024

## Advancing Accountability: PUJA's Pioneering Journey in Sri Lanka

NPC has launched a three year project, People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA), aimed at building public support for justice and accountability processes across ethnic divides. Supported by funding from the US State Department, the project will facilitate collaboration between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) with international support to build pressure upon the state to ensure justice and accountability.

PUJA aims at contributing to long term reconciliation and peace through independent, credible, transparent, effective and victim-centric transitional justice processes.

NPC is collaborating with the Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), Right to Life (R2L), Peace & Community Action (PCA) and Verité. Known for its network of grassroots human rights defenders, CHRD will enhance current initiatives to address human rights violations. By supporting victim accountability efforts, the organization will strengthen the basis of legal procedures.

Creating visibility for the initiative, R2L will document a wide range of human rights issues. Through the documentation of victim stories it will contribute to the PUJA project by highlighting the human component. PCA, which is well known for promoting nonviolence and community empowerment, will raise awareness of victims and survivors experiences in communities. Verité, an independent think tank, will develop training materials for CSOs and conducting workshops, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of key findings and monitoring progress.

NPC will concentrate on raising awareness, advocacy and mobilising community groups for inter ethnic and inter religious peacebuilding. NPC remains committed to ongoing advocacy on Transitional Justice and engages with and supports the Office on Missing Persons. NPC operates through 17 district-based committees known as District Inter Religious Committees and 14 division-based committees called Local Inter Religious Committees, and has organic formations in 12 districts.

January 2024

# Project MUSTER Takes Shape

The decision taken by the Government in 2021 under Ex-President Goatabhaya Rajapakse, to ban organic fertilizer saw how it directly brought about a crisis in our agricultural sector, that adversely affected the entire country, the effects of which still lingers today. This decision is but one of many taken by the government that has paved the way to the crisis that we are confronted with today.

The Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, in a symbolic ruling, held the Rajapakse brothers responsible for the dire straits that our country today is clawing desperately to escape from, and it is clear that the decisions they had taken as ruling entities has led us here. Directing our attention to a more micro level of state governance and local decision-making bodies, the same situation persists. We see a culture where arbitrary decisions are being taken, divorced from proper research of the implications or consequences that might arise from these decisions. It is of grave importance that this culture is countered, and a culture where decisions are taken based on research is brought about.

This is one of the Outcomes of Project MUSTER (Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation), which seeks to bring about this culture at a local level first, as well as to ensure that the university students capacity to do research is enhanced a culture of applied research is established. This project will look to facilitate cooperation between state entities and university students and academics, whose research on a local social issue, will benefit the community as a whole.

MUSTER is implemented in partnership with the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka programme (SCOPE) co-financed by the European Union and German Federal Foreign Office. SCOPE is implemented by The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, Prisons Affairs and Constitutional Reforms (MoJ).

The event is part of the SCOPE programme's aims to advance social cohesion in order to contribute towards an inclusive, peaceful and prosperous society in Sri Lanka. The programme does so by strengthening resilience and capacities of communities and institutions to prevent and counter violence and exclusion; promoting pluralistic, inclusive, and fact-based public discourse; and increasing incentives and opportunities for interethnic cooperation and equal access to resources.

The National Peace Council had a meeting with GIZ on the 11th of January where an introduction to the project was presented while the specifics were subjected to discussion. Looking to work with universities, the wheels for obtaining the approval processes have begun to roll. Most of the planning and the groundwork is being laid out spanning the month of January, and the team is looking forward to implementing the planning in the field come February.



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# Raising Women's Voices: A Culture of Change

In a bid to bring women together, NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project organized a cultural exchange aimed at empowering women to advocate for policy changes and establishing a network of national women leaders committed to reshaping the state structure.

The exchange marked the final chapter of the WOICE project. Fifty supergroup women leaders from seven districts participated in building bridges across communities. The choice of Nuwara Eliya as a meeting place intended to build empathy and show solidarity on issues that continue to persist for the Malaiyaha community there while fostering cultural engagement.

Voices of women can be raised in many ways: through women's political participation, recognising their roles in social change, advocating for women's rights and focusing on the often overlooked struggles of Malaiyaha Tamil women. A silent march which was held became a powerful symbol of collective, civic action for women's rights and political participation. Supergroup women leaders, joined by 50 Malaiyaha estate women, marched through Nuwara Eliya town, engaging with the community through posters, street dramas and leaflet distribution.

After the march, an information session was held by Mrs. Sobana Rajendran, Senior Lecturer from University Peradeniya, on the understanding of the history and rights of the Malaiyaha Tamil people where supergroup women leaders had an opportunity to exchange possible ways to improve these injustices.

Concluding the exchange visit, supergroup women leaders suggested uniting the seven districts to influence society and safeguard women's rights. They committed to advocating for changes in political agendas and to reduce barriers to political participation of women. As a result, the series of cultural exchanges under the WOICE project resulted in empowerment, understanding and unity.



# Puttalam Learning Conference Sparks Change

The Puttalam Learning Conference organized by the Women Organization for Development, Equality, Peace, and Temperance (WODEPT) brought together 15 NGOs who are establishing peace and reconciliation in their district. The meeting aimed to provide a collaborative platform for NGOs to exchange on their experiences, address challenges and share lessons related to peace and reconciliation efforts.

Participants, including directors, administrative staff and field staff, engaged in discussions exploring both successes and challenges across organizational levels.

Highlights included the positive impact of activities promoting peace in the Puttalam District as well as the support from the Sinhala community and Sinhala government officials to the Muslim community after the Easter Sunday attacks. It emphasised the continuous need for collaboration among organizations, fostering an united front in peace and reconciliation.



Discussions covered topics such as language learning, women's rights and political participation. The group emphasised the need for NPC to support them in future activities.

## Workshop Shares Knowledge on Peace, Rights and Unity

The Sri Lanka Human Rights Foundation collaborated on a workshop under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, which featured sessions designed to educate participants on the country's political landscape and on their human rights.

NPC's Executive Director, Dr. Jehan Perera, spoke on peace and reconciliation while Dr. Chandima Wijegunawardhane provided insights into the current political situation. Mr. Ruki Fernando addressed the practical aspects of human rights and the reality on the ground and Ms. Chithrupa Vidanapathirana and Mr. Robinson Thewasagam focused on organizational development.

Participants included businessmen and people from diverse social and educational backgrounds who gained insights into human rights and effective organizational management.



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# Nurturing Pluralism in Sri Lanka



The Global Center for Pluralism Canada (GCP) and NPC conducted workshops for NPC staff, Divisional Secretaries (DS) officers and NPC Master Trainers on the Global Pluralism Monitor (GPM) – Sri Lanka. GPM recognizes the need to better understand the movement towards, and away from, pluralism in a society through a multidimensional, holistic framework of analysis.

GPM is a tool that assesses the state of pluralism in countries around the world. It uses a framework to measure inclusion and exclusion across political, economic and social dimensions through 20 indicators.

The first workshop for 27 DS officers explored the Global Pluralism Monitor Framework specific to Sri Lanka and concluded with a panel discussion featuring Dr. Chandima Abeyasinghe, Dr. Kalpa Rajapaksha, Prof. Fazeeha Azmi and Prof. Neil DeVotta.

“I work in the Dickwella Divisional Secretariat where Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil people live. We work with all the communities. There are no issues now but we have wounds caused by what has been said previously. But we are moving forward. People are united. The politicians want to divide the community for their political gains. I don't see any divisions in our community; we even have mixed marriages in our communities,” said Dickwella Divisional Secretary, Mr. Susantha Attanayke.

Beruwala Divisional Secretary, Mr. R.P. Perera, stressed the critical role of legislation and a common legal framework in providing basic needs essential for equality and inclusivity.

Both workshops resulted in a deeper understanding of pluralism necessary for an inclusive society and underscored the importance of nurturing a collective identity that transcends religious, regional and political affiliations.

A second meeting with Master Trainers on the Global Pluralism Monitor Framework brought together 32 trainers from 11 districts. The discussion highlighted the challenges regional divisions posed to forming a collective national identity.

Both workshops resulted in a deeper understanding of pluralism necessary for an inclusive society and underscored the importance of nurturing a collective Sri Lankan identity that transcends religious, regional and political affiliations.

## Reclaiming Civic Space

Teldeniya, a town located less than an hour from Kandy, has been facing a lack of water distribution. Although the people pay their bills and taxes, the state has failed to solve the problem. The role of the civil society is to ensure that government carries out its duties responsibly.

To address this issue, NPC organized an activity in Teldeniya under its Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project to highlight the right of citizens to access public services. Participants came together as a group to find a solution and demand their rights by forming a team consisting of state officials and members of civil society.

The team identified a temple in the vicinity with access to a fountain. With permission from the head monk, they are now able to use the fountain as a water supply. Learning about their rights provided them with the authority to solve the problem.



# A Journey of Discovery and Connection

An exchange visit to connect the communities of Mawanella and Mannar and promote cultural understanding was organized under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project.

The objectives of this exchange visit were to facilitate the exchange of cultural values between the Mannar and Mawanella Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs); provide a platform for both LIRCs to share the challenges they face, fostering understanding and appreciation of different approaches to addressing these issues; and identify the cultural differences between Mannar and Mawanella, promoting peace and harmony among different ethnicities.

The 50 participants visited cultural and religious places in Mannar and Anuradhapura.

Mr. Sampath Weerasuriya, a Skills Development Officer in Mawanella said, "Mannar is a multicultural location like Mawanella. This visit provided an opportunity to gain insights into the cultural, economic and political issues in the Mannar district."



K.M. Aminulla, President of the Business Forum of Mawanella said, "It gave an opportunity to understand other religious individuals who are also members of the Mawanella LIRC team. Such dialogues contributed to building strong relationships within the team."



# International Recognition for Two Peace Building Monks

NPC was pleased to congratulate Ven Prof Pallekanda Ratanasara Thero and Ven Dr Madampagama Assaji Thero on the international recognition they received for their contributions to peace and justice in the world. Both of these reverend monks are sources of strength to the peace movement in Sri Lanka. Their presence at any civil society meeting adds stature to it. Ven Prof Ratanasara was a member of the presidium of NPC at its inception in 1995. Ven Dr Assaji is chair of the Colombo District Inter Religious Committee that is supported by NPC.



Both of these religious leaders have stood for justice for the ethnic and religious minorities and for a just political solution to the ethnic conflict in the country for over three decades. We are proud that their good work has been recognized by the Government of India which has given them positions of leadership in the International Buddhist Confederation in New Delhi, India.

Lord Buddha's teaching is that all beings should be well and happy. Accordingly, they seek to unite people and not to divide them. During the time of war, in 1987, they undertook the mission of going to the war zones to meet with the LTTE and persuade them to take the path of peace. During the Covid epidemic of 2020, they stood for the right of the Muslims to bury their dead rather than have them forcibly cremated as ordered by the government. At present, they are once again involved in a peace mission with members of the Tamil Diaspora with whom they have signed the "Himalaya Declaration" for lasting peace and reconciliation.

When acting on behalf of members of minority ethnic and religious communities both Ven Ratanasara and Ven Assaji have remained in the mainstream tradition of Buddhist monks and been respectful of the established order. They have risen high in the Nikayas to which they belong and achieved high office. They have also held office in the Amarapura-Ramanya Samagi Maha Sangha Sabhawa (Grand alliance of Buddhist monks) which was formed in 2019 to be the social movement of an alliance of two Buddhist Nikayas. They have achieved these positions as they are seen as effective organizers and hard workers whose interest is the wellbeing of all people.

As members of civil society, we admire them for the example of their lives which are mindful of others, respectful of differences and living simply. Their frugal life style is accompanied by personal discipline. They are also kind and forgiving to those who make mistakes. We are confident they will stand by their principles and give their support to right causes and oppose wrong ones. Guided by principles from the Buddhist teachings, Venerable Ratanasara and Venerable Assaji have no fear or favour in their heart when they reach out to all sections of the people to improve their welfare. We are inspired by them.



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# Thai Pongal Message of Unity at NPC

As we usher in the new year, we share a glimpse of our recent office celebration for the Thai Pongal festival, a Hindu festival of thanksgiving for the bountiful harvest, that was organised by NPC's Staff Welfare Society.

We celebrated this festival to not only honour cultural traditions but also to strengthen the bond within our team. "If I had not joined NPC, I would not be getting the opportunity to learn about and celebrate Pongal," a new staff member said. It was organized and led by our Hindu staff members who prepared the traditional Pongal dish and enlightened staff with the cultural significance and rituals associated with the festival.

Staff and board members highlighted the significance of remembering the practices of our ancestors and why they were relevant today. Celebrating the diverse holidays in Sri Lanka encourages thinking about how cultural practices developed over time. It is also an expression of our unity and shared values and sets an example of practicing peace and unity.



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# Reconciliation Cannot Be Achieved Through a Majority Vote

The manner in which the Online Safety Bill was passed in parliament is a matter of grave concern. The bill was passed without taking a vote at the third reading even though the opposition called for a vote. In addition, the opposition has alleged that a number of amendments to the original bill required by the Supreme Court had not been included.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to heed the opposition which has called for the Online Safety bill not to be signed into law by the Speaker of Parliament due to these infirmities. The proroguing of parliament by the president provides an opportunity to ensure that all amendments are included in the law.

We welcome Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena's announcement that the Attorney General's Department will investigate whether all amendments inserted during the legislative process were properly implemented in accordance with the Supreme Court directives. The right to free expression is a fundamental democratic right that if vitiated would place the democratic process in jeopardy.

In this context, NPC wishes to address the Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation (CTUR) bill which was gazetted on January 1 this year. We call on the government not to rush through with this bill in the manner of the Online Safety bill or the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) bill which was similarly pushed through parliament on January 9 this year without heeding the views of the opposition or civil society.

It is a matter for concern that the draft law with respect to the CTUR has been prepared and gazetted even before the submission of the report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry to investigate the findings of preceding Commissions and Committees headed by Justice A H M D Nawaz.

In the synopsis of the Nawaz Commission report issued in February last year, the Commissioners referred to a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sri Lanka and stated that the contours of the commission would be set out in due course when the Final Report was submitted. The government's urgency in rushing through with the law pertaining to the TURC, without even waiting for the Nawaz Commission to submit its report, and with only minimal consultation with opposition political parties and civil society suggests a motivation that goes beyond reconciliation.

There seems to be a desire to obtain the support of the international community by producing the TURC law, even though it may not have the support from the aggrieved ethnic and religious minorities for whom it is meant.

Like ONUR, the purpose of the proposed truth commission (CTUR) is to strengthen the national reconciliation process. Therefore, it needs to be based on consensus of the government and parties representing the opposition and ethnic and religious minorities rather than being steamrolled by a majority vote in parliament. NPC calls on the government to discuss the proposed CTUR law with the opposition and civil society and obtain their consensus before proceeding to pass it through a vote in parliament.



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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.*

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