



Paths To Peace

December 2024

Easing the Pain of Families of the Disappeared

Enforced disappearance remains a deeply painful issue. The People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project is dedicated to sharing the stories of victims, survivors, families and communities across ethnic divides. Through these narratives, the project aims to foster empathy and solidarity among the broader public. The PUJA team conducted field visits in the districts of Ratnapura and Puttalam, gathering 10 stories - seven from Sinhala families and three from Muslim families.

Mr. Sudath Wijekoon was a well-known farmer and businessman in the village of Aluth Eluwankulama in Puttalam. Known for his hard work and dedication to his family, Sudath provided for his wife Suneetha and their children through farming and running his business. However, their lives took a devastating turn on February 20, 2009 during the final stages of Sri Lanka's civil war.

On that day, Sudath was transporting paddy to a grinding mill in his lorry when his journey was interrupted by a white van. The vehicle, a symbol of fear during the civil war, carried six armed men in military attire. According to witnesses these men forcibly abducted Sudath, leaving behind no trace of his whereabouts. Suneetha recalls the moment she learned of her husband's disappearance, a day that marked the beginning of an unending nightmare for their family.

Desperate to find her husband, Suneetha began an exhaustive search. She visited numerous detention camps hoping to catch a glimpse of Sudath or hear news of his fate. She filed complaints with the Puttalam police station and reached out to the ICRC, pleading for assistance. She even sought help from local politicians, hoping their influence could provide answers. Despite her relentless efforts, there was no information about her husband's whereabouts.

The disappearance of Sudath Wijekoon plunged his family into economic and emotional despair. Suneetha struggled to provide for her children, their once stable life crumbling under the weight of uncertainty and loss. The absence of their father left an indelible mark on the children, particularly their eldest son, Buddika. Even after all these years, Buddika holds onto the hope that his father is alive somewhere and dreams of the day he will return home.

The story of Sudath Wijekoon is one of many tales of enforced disappearances that have scarred the fabric of society. It is a stark reminder of the human cost of conflict and the enduring pain of those left behind. For the Wijekoon family the search for truth and justice continues, fuelled by hope and the memories of a beloved father and husband.



Strengthening Understanding of Pluralism and Gender Equality

Under the Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER-GIZ) initiative, two district based training workshops were conducted to equip university students with practical understanding and tools to address key societal issues. The workshops, attended by research pod students from the University of Jaffna (UOJ) and the University of Ruhuna (UOR), focused on pluralism, gender equality, inclusiveness and the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE). Each workshop sought to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the participants' respective research fields and communities.



The workshop for UOJ research pod students was facilitated by Dr. Ramesh Ramasamy, a senior lecturer in Political Science from the University of Peradeniya. While the themes of the workshop were not unfamiliar to the participants, many expressed uncertainties about their practical implementation and real world impact.



Dr. Ramasamy structured the workshop to address these concerns by combining theoretical clarifications with practical guidance, emphasising their relevance to field research and societal applications. The discussions provided a platform for participants to reflect on the real world challenges in achieving these ideals and share their personal insights and experiences.

“This workshop was really useful for me. I learned a lot about gender equality and diversity. Gender equality was my favorite topic; it really caught my attention. Something the trainer said really struck me. ‘Gender equality should start from our homes first.’ Also, when people say our country is diverse, I can't fully agree. It's just not what we see in practice. These two days were a great learning experience. The lessons were explained clearly and effectively. The trainer did a great job and the discussions were really helpful,” said L. Ahishan, a research pod student from UOJ.



“The four topics we covered are exactly what our country needs right now. As a woman, I was drawn to the discussions about gender equality and inclusivity. I've faced gender discrimination in different situations before but I never felt brave enough to speak up against it. It wasn't until I started university that I began to understand these issues better. Coming to this workshop has taught me even more. This feels like exactly the right place for me to be learning about these things,” said I. Shabthika.

The Jaffna workshop provided an important opportunity for students to explore pressing issues in depth, fostering a sense of empowerment and critical thinking that will influence their research and community engagement.



After the Jaffna workshop, the UOR research pod students attended their district based training in Matara. Led by Dr. Upali Weerakoon, a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, the session emphasised experiential learning. Through practical activities and group discussions, students were encouraged to engage with the themes of pluralism, gender equality, inclusiveness and PVE.

Dr. Weerakoon's approach to facilitation emphasised the application of theoretical knowledge in realistic contexts. Participants worked in groups, sharing personal stories and collaboratively brainstorming solutions to common challenges. This interactive format not only deepened their understanding of the topics but also promoted teamwork and communication skills.

"The workshop has helped me a lot. I've learned so much new material about gender equality and diversity and these two days opened my eyes about why equality matters so much in our country. I got a lot out of the group activities when we had to share our own experiences and work together to solve problems. The way everything was taught made it easy to understand. The trainer did a great job explaining things and I found our discussions and group work really helpful," said H.K. Dilhani, a research pod student from UOR.

Both workshops underscored the critical need for integrating pluralism, gender equality, inclusiveness and PVE into research and everyday life. While the theoretical foundations of these concepts are covered in university curricula, students lack exposure to their practical implications. By addressing this gap, the workshops contributed to building a generation of informed and proactive individuals ready to tackle societal challenges.

A recurring theme across both sessions was the importance of localising these global concepts to suit the unique cultural and social contexts of Sri Lanka. Participants' reflections revealed an acute awareness of the disconnect between the theoretical ideals of diversity, equality and inclusion and their implementation in practice. The trainers navigated this complexity, fostering open dialogue and providing actionable insights.

The MUSTER-GIZ initiative continues to serve as a critical platform for empowering university students, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote reconciliation and social cohesion. By holding the workshops, the programme has reaffirmed its commitment to fostering a generation capable of driving positive change.

Transformative Training for State Officers

A training programme for state officers aimed at fostering inclusive governance was held under NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice (PAIRS) in collaboration with district secretariats and partner organizations.

The first programme, held partnership with the People's Development Foundation (PDF) and the Kegalle District Secretariat, brought together 40 state officers from diverse divisions and disciplines. The interactive workshop served as a platform for knowledge sharing on pluralism and inclusion and associated state policies and provisions in the Government Establishment Code, existing gaps and responses for state administrators.

A second training session was organized with the Women Organization for Development Equality, Peace, and Inclusion (WODEPT) and the Puttalam District Secretariat. Forty-five state officers participated including the District Secretary and Additional District Secretary, who added depth to the discussions.

Guided by Professor Nirmal Ranjith from the University of Colombo's Faculty of History, both programmes explored the concepts of pluralism, inclusion, and policy frameworks tailored for state administrators. They were designed to inspire participants to champion equitable governance and progressive policymaking.

The state officers were provided with the tools and knowledge needed to build a more inclusive and harmonious society. By focusing on practical solutions and meaningful dialogue, the sessions inspired participants to become leaders of positive change in governance.



Promoting Inclusive Governance: A Dialogue on Power Devolution

NPC, under the Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project, has taken significant steps towards promoting inclusive governance by addressing negative perceptions of power devolution and encouraging broader participation in provincial elections. As part of this initiative, NPC conducted a series of district level training sessions focusing on power devolution and its potential to create a more inclusive governance system.

The meetings, which were held in Kandy, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Matara and Hambantota, reached out to local communities involving 35 participants from each district from NPC networks including District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) and women's networks. The participation of women and youth interested in politics enriched the discussions and group activities. The meetings were led by Dr. Nadeesh de Silva, a senior lecturer at the Open University and educated participants about the significance of devolution, addressing misconceptions, and discussing strategies for ensuring fair representation for all ethnic communities.

The training sessions explored the country's diverse ethnic composition and examined how historical and cultural factors shaped perceptions about power devolution. Key topics discussed included the role of mindful voting in ensuring equitable representation for all communities and the need for inclusive governance that reflects a multi-ethnic society. Participants challenged common misconceptions about devolution such as fears about national division or security risks.

Participants also engaged in discussions about the potential outcomes of power devolution including the promotion of the rule of law, equity and fair governance. While some participants emphasised the need for structural rather than divisive approaches to power sharing, others highlighted the importance of ensuring that minority communities, particularly Tamils and Muslims, had a meaningful voice in the governance process. Dr. de Silva emphasised the importance of the principle of power to the people, urging participants to view devolution as an opportunity for greater fairness and inclusion. He also highlighted the expectations of the communities for devolution in different tiers to address the issues of the people.

There were regional differences in attitudes towards power devolution.



In Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa participants emphasised the importance of power sharing to address the needs of Tamil and Muslim communities who are minorities in these predominantly Sinhala areas. Many expressed concern that without power sharing, Sinhala candidates would continue to dominate elections, often overlooking the rights and needs of these minority groups. Participants from these districts voiced strong support for a more inclusive approach, believing that power sharing could foster greater equity and ensure that the rights of all communities are respected.

In Matara and Hambantota there were concerns raised about sharing power with northern districts, reflecting the complex and sometimes divisive perceptions surrounding devolution. Some participants questioned whether devolution should extend to the northern regions while others were more open to exploring ways in which power sharing could work to benefit all communities.

In Trincomalee some participants echoed concerns about power sharing with northern districts, suggesting that the government should reconsider power sharing arrangements. Despite these challenges, the overall goal remained clear: fostering a dialogue that encourages understanding and cooperation among diverse communities.

The European Union funded ACED project is committed to continuing its efforts to promote inclusive governance and representation across Sri Lanka. With 25 district level meetings planned, the NPC aims to continue fostering discussions that address misconceptions about devolution and explore solutions that can enhance governance for all ethnic communities and groups. The project will also utilize media outreach and social media campaigns to further highlight the importance of inclusive governance and the positive impacts of power-sharing. By fostering a broader understanding of devolution and its potential benefits, NPC and its networks are working toward a future where power is shared more equitably, ensuring that the voices of all communities, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, are heard in the governance process.

Through these efforts, the ACED project hopes to build a more democratic, just, and peaceful Sri Lanka, where power truly belongs to the people, and governance reflects the diversity and unity of the nation.



Identifying Local Challenges for Targeted Actions

NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project conducted issue mapping programmes in the districts of Kandy, Kegalle, and Polonnaruwa. The programmes identified key community challenges from a grassroots perspective while fostering trust and recognition for Super Group leaders as empowered advocates for local concerns. Three critical issues were prioritized in each district, laying the groundwork for meaningful action.

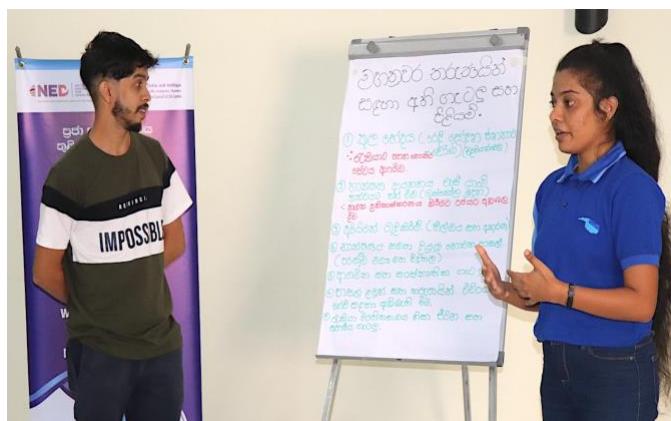
The issue mapping process spanned two days in each district. On the first day youth groups were engaged to explore and discuss community issues from their perspective. The second day was dedicated to women's groups, allowing them to identify challenges that resonated with their lived experiences.

The youth groups highlighted concerns related to education, employment and health, reflecting the hurdles faced by younger generations. Women's groups focused on women's rights and financial insecurity. Both groups identified at least one issue impacting marginalised communities in their districts. This inclusivity demonstrated the project's success in cultivating a sense of collective responsibility and fostering a pluralistic perspective among participants. Each district identified one issue affecting an excluded community, along with two broader social concerns.

“Now that we have identified the issues, we understand it will take time to address them. In the meantime we can build strong connections with affected villages and create a foundation to address these issues more effectively. We have developed good relationships with government officials, who can support our efforts,” said a participant from Kegalle. This sentiment highlights the participants' empowerment and readiness to act as change makers in their communities.

One significant challenge encountered during the programmes was the overwhelming number of issues identified with only a few being selected for immediate action. Some participants expressed concern about whether the unaddressed challenges could also be prioritised. In response WOICE plans to incorporate these issues into future proposals, ensuring broader impact and sustained community engagement.

WOICE has reaffirmed its commitment to empowering women and youth as agents of change. The issue mapping initiative not only identified critical challenges but also fostered a culture of resilience, inclusivity and proactive problem solving within local communities.



Freedom in Diversity, Unity in Action

NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project held a partner meeting in Minuwangoda for 25 participants from 14 locations across 13 districts, marking a significant milestone in fostering collaboration and sharing insights. The meeting focused on planning for the upcoming year, addressing programmatic and financial aspects and sharing impactful stories from various communities. The exchange highlighted the ongoing efforts to promote religious freedom in diverse communities of Sri Lanka.

The villages of Navatkuda and Poonochimunai are in the Batticaloa District. Navatkuda is predominantly Hindu and Poonochimunai is predominantly Muslim. A conflict arose that could have escalated into a broader religious divide when a youth group from Navatkuda visited Poonochimunai beach and consumed alcohol. A Muslim resident from Poonochimunai asked them to refrain from such behaviour in a public space frequented by women and children. This led to a heated exchange, resulting in the youth group attacking the resident. The situation worsened when members of the Muslim community retaliated and the youth group burnt a fishing boat belonging to the Muslim community.

What started as a minor altercation spiralled into a tense religious conflict. Recognising the potential for further escalation, the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) stepped in and through dialogue and mediation, LIRC members worked to dispel misunderstandings, explain the reality of the situation and promote peace. Their efforts successfully defused tensions, preventing the conflict from spreading further.

Stories such as these illustrate the critical role of interfaith collaboration in maintaining peace and harmony. The ARC project continues to serve as a platform for empowering communities to address challenges and foster mutual understanding.

As the partner meeting concluded, participants expressed their commitment to carrying forward these initiatives, sharing lessons learned and working together to strengthen coexistence across the nation. The stories shared at the meeting not only highlighted the challenges faced by different communities but also underscored the transformative power of dialogue and collective action.



Need for Inclusive Governance for Lasting Reconciliation

The government's success at the presidential and general elections, which saw significant support from ethnic and religious minorities, highlights its mandate to address long-standing grievances. The predominantly Tamil and Muslim electorate in the north and east entrusted the government with resolving their issues directly. This trust needs to be met with tangible action.

The recent participation of Deputy Minister of National Integration, Muneer Mulaffar, at a conference on "Building a Peaceful Pluralistic Sri Lanka through Social Cohesion and Coexistence" emphasised the urgent need for inclusive governance in Sri Lanka. The event brought together over 150 participants, including clergy of all religions, civil society representatives, academics, and diplomats. Minister Mulaffar's speech reaffirmed the government's commitment to national integration and highlighted the importance of civil society in fostering reconciliation.

The conference organized by the Association of War Affected Women in collaboration with other civic organisations, including the Sangha for a Better Sri Lanka and the National Peace Council demonstrated the role that civil society can play to bridge gaps and foster understanding at the grassroots level. The statement developed for the conference addressed crucial areas: political reforms, transitional justice, equal rights, historical injustices faced by the Malaiyaha Tamils, and good governance. This comprehensive framework reflects the aspirations of all communities for a just and united Sri Lanka.

In a multiethnic and multireligious society like Sri Lanka, inclusivity is not merely symbolic; it is essential for addressing diverse perspectives and fostering mutual understanding. The National Peace Council believes it is important to have members of the Tamil, Muslim and other minority communities appointed to important decision-making bodies, such as the newly appointed Presidential Task Force for a Clean Sri Lanka. Without such representation, from within the government or outside, the task force risks neglecting the very communities whose grievances need to be resolved equitably.

The challenges faced by these communities are many. Tamil families in the north and east continue to seek justice for lost lands, missing loved ones, and their right to communicate with the state in their own language. Malaiyaha Tamils, on whom the legacy of post-independence discrimination still weighs heavily, await the implementation of policies to grant them land and homes. Sri Lanka has a long history of providing remedies for landlessness, using different strategies such as colonisation schemes, land reform measures, and massive housing programs such as million houses programmes. Addressing these issues, starting with small, meaningful steps, can rebuild trust and pave the way for larger reforms.

Through further consultations and efforts to build bipartisan support, civil society aims to ensure that national reconciliation becomes a shared priority, unimpeded by political rivalries. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's commitment to conduct provincial council elections and take other progressive measures provides hope. For these efforts to translate into lasting reconciliation, the government must embrace the participation of all communities in governance and a governance model that reflects Sri Lanka's plural identity.

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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

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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