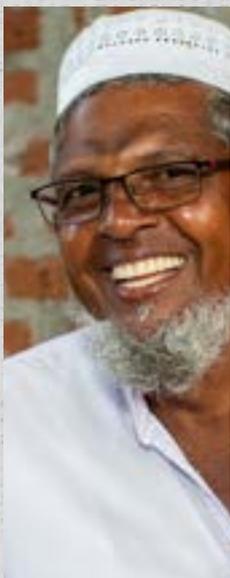


# ENABLING DIALOGUE AND ACTION FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND RECONCILIATION 2022 Case Study



# **ENABLING DIALOGUE AND ACTION FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND RECONCILIATION**

## **CASE STUDY**

**National Peace Council of Sri Lanka**

**2022**

**For Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity**

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**ENABLING DIALOGUE AND ACTION FOR  
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## PREFACE

The case studies featured in this publication constitute an important part of the three-year engagement of the National Peace Council with the SCORE project supported by USAID under the award number (720-383-18-CA-400003) and carried out in 10 districts. NPC's interventions ranged from conducting trainings for state officials to building the capacity of community leaders and guided interventions in support of community cohesion.

In the course of this intervention, NPC empowered community groups to carry out cohesion activities to strengthen the reconciliation in the country. These activities ranged from training women in livelihood skills to donating books for a library in a remote area. The case studies are drawn from the Ampara, Jaffna, Moneragala, Trincomalee, and Vavuniya districts in which the project was implemented and focus on their impact from multiple perspectives—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, civil society and state—and activity strands—interventions, trainings and capacity building.

The training in non-discriminatory customer service undertaken in this project for state officials and elected local government representatives originated out of a needs assessment done by the US Institute for Peace and was successful in providing the space for introspection and self-assessment and also in changing attitudes and behaviours to improve state engagement with its citizenry.

As a SCORE partner from the conceptualization phase of the project, NPC brought to bear its experience, knowledge and expertise to promote constructive inter-ethnic relations and post-war cohesion. NPC is grateful to USAID and the American People for the funding provided which enabled these necessary community-building exercises.

**Jehan Perera**  
Executive Director  
National Peace Council  
February 2022



## **ENABLING DIALOGUE AND ACTION FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND RECONCILIATION**

Social cohesion implies not just an absence of underlying social conflict but also the presence of active social relationships. It is, in fact, about building shared values and engaging in common enterprises – a prerequisite to achieving reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka. Building social cohesion and strengthening reconciliation processes have been, and continue to be, two important objectives of the National Peace Council's work.

In 2018, NPC collaborated with USAID and Global Communities to implement the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity project to promote a shared and inclusive Sri Lankan identity and strengthen cohesion and resilience among the country's diverse ethnic and religious communities. Over the course of three years, NPC activities strengthened citizen-driven initiatives to promote social cohesion across divided communities; facilitated constructive community engagement in reconciliation processes; and improved local and national government institutions and processes to promote social cohesion and reconciliation.

NPC worked in the Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Kilinochchi, Jaffna and Moneragala, Kandy, Batticaloa, Ampara, Anuradhapura, Mullaitivu districts – training, mentoring, and facilitating community members, civil society organizations, and local authorities to engage in dialogue with different communities and to identify and address issues that caused conflict or has the potential to cause conflict. Thus, to achieve SCORE's mandate, NPC worked through both governmental and non-governmental initiatives. The project worked with communities at the Grama Niladhari division level and improved capacities for inclusive community decision-making platforms while building people's conflict mitigation and leadership skills. Community-based activities supported conflict-affected populations to work towards sustainable peace.

The first phase of the project was implemented in Jaffna, Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Monaragala districts. In Jaffna, the project worked in five Grama Niladhari Divisions: Illawalei North West, Palali North, Kollankaladdi, Palai Veeman Kamam, Vasavilan East in the Thellippalai Divisional Secretariat. In Monaragala, the project worked in Mahagodayaya, Mahasenpura, Udagama Grama Niladhari Divisions in the Buttala Divisional Secretariat and Madurakatiya, Kumbukkana Grama Niladhari Divisions in the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat. In Trincomalee, SCORE carried out its activities in Samagipura, Ariyamankeni, Lingapuram, Sumedankarapura, and Navakkenikadu Grama Niladhari Divisions in the Seruwila Divisional Secretariat. In Vavuniya, SCORE carried out activities in Paddikudiyiruppu in the Vavuniya North Divisional Secretariat, Agbopura, Marudhamadu in the Vavuniya South Divisional Secretariat and Neriyaikulam, udaliyarkulam in the Seddikulam Divisional Secretariat.

## **HOW THE PROJECT WORKED**

### **Community Connectors**

To create a bridge between communities and SCORE, NPC selected Community Connectors from the respective GNs from the state sector, civil society or grassroots-level communities. They assisted SCORE in mobilizing grassroots communities for social cohesion activities. To orient the newly selected community connectors for field work, a Training of Trainers workshop was held with 34 participants in January 2019. A new training module was developed for the workshop with the facilitation of Partners in Alternative Training (PALTRA) a consultancy group specializing in interactive participatory approaches to capacity building.

### **Community Assessments**

SCORE conducted community assessments in all the project districts in 2019. Through the assessments, the NPC team collected valuable data pertaining to historical information of the village; its geographical

setting and demographic profile; religious, social and cultural background; livelihoods and sources of income; environmental conditions, climate change and its impacts; social institutions and social networks; inter-ethnic group interactions, gender dimensions and female participation; the treatment of marginalized groups within the social structure; youth and child participation; and levels of education and availability of employment opportunities. These findings were reported in consequent reports.

In Jaffna, the assessments were carried out in five functional Grama Niladhari Divisions: Illawalei North West, Palali North, Kollankaladdi, Palai Veeman Kamam, and Vasavilan East in Thellippalai Divisional Secretariat. In Monaragala, assessments were carried out in Mahagodayaya, Mahasenpura, and Udagama Grama Niladhari Divisions in the Buttala Divisional Secretariat. In Trincomalee, three community assessments were carried out in Samagipura, Ariyamankeni, Navakkenikadu Grama Niladhari Divisions in the Seruwila Divisional Secretariat. In Vavuniya, an assessment was carried out in Paddikudiyiruppu in the Vavuniya North Divisional Secretariat.

## **Training, Mentoring and Facilitating**

SCORE applied people-to-people (P2P) methodologies for training and mentoring local authorities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and community members at the village level to bring grassroots communities and local and central government actors together across lines of division to build coalitions for positive change.

The project made efforts to increase constructive community engagement in the reconciliation process by conducting programmes such as Grama Niladhari level trainings and clustered community cohesion activities. Furthermore, the project carried out trainings to improve the knowledge of local and national government actors on social cohesion and reconciliation and rule of law.

In Jaffna, activities included Non-Violent Communication trainings; school awareness creation on peacebuilding, and effective communication, with the participation of teachers, parents and students; building a fence with the participation of the youth club members and Coexistence Society members (Members of community platforms that works with this project to carry out community level activities); an exchange visit of selected Jaffna-based SCORE beneficiaries to their Monaragala counterparts.

In Monaragala, NPC's SCORE team conducted two clustered activities and fifteen GN-level activities to address the identified needs in the area to strengthen the reconciliation. There were training workshops for different communities on peace related concepts; commemorated World Book Day with a book donation programme to strengthen reconciliation through reading; carried out 'Use of Memory' programme – a chain of community dialogues – to address areas of imminent conflict in the identified areas. Through these dialogues, SCORE made a significant impact at the community level to maintain peaceful relations between different communities. It is noteworthy that this module was later adopted as a comprehensive training module: "Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy". The module was created to stimulate dialogue among participants on lessons learnt in strengthening the democracy in the society and the role of community members for a value-based democratic society based on their past experiences. Moreover, community exchange programmes were carried out with the community representatives to share their experiences with communities in the North and a workshop on 'Non-violent Communication' was conducted at the Maduraketiya GN division.

In Trincomalee, SCORE carried out two clustered activities and 14 GN level activities such as a cultural exchange programme for 50 women in Samagipura and Ariyamankeni; Non-Violent Communication (NVC) trainings; a programme on 'Reconciliation' for school children; Participatory Action for Community Enhancement (PACE); training for Coexistence Society members in Samagipura; and trainings on the 'Use of Memory' for Community members of Navakkenikadu GN Division & Sumedankarapura GN Divisions.

In Vavuniya, one clustered activity and three GN-level activities including a street drama on social cohesion and reconciliation were carried out.

To enhance the capacities of the central government and local government bodies for reconciliation and social cohesion, SCORE ventured to conduct a series of trainings on 'Rule of Law' and 'Social Cohesion and Reconciliation' for selected government officers and local government representative in all its Phase I functional districts. Accordingly, approximately 135 Government Officers and 90 Local Government

Authority Representatives were trained in this initiative to engage them in the reconciliation process of their respective regions and aid their regional community platforms for such purposes.

Initiating Phase II, in October 2020, SCORE started working with co-existence societies to empower these community platforms to work towards strengthening reconciliation in the country. Sixteen training groups were created by amalgamating two or three GN divisions. The project worked in 10 districts: Kandy, Batticaloa, Monaragala, Trincomalee, Ampara, Anuradhapura, Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Jaffna and Mullaitivu. In this phase, to enhance the knowledge of democratic values of grassroots-level communities, training workshops on 'Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy' were carried out for all the co-existence societies.

Furthermore, the project team carried out trainings for government officers and local government authority representatives on 'Non-discriminatory Customer Service'. These trainings were carried out in two steps.:

- a) Imparting the required knowledge and attitudes on Non-Discriminatory Customer Service (NDCS) to selected Govt. Officers and Local Govt. Representatives. This component includes gender and disability inclusion aspects.
- b) Identifying and remedying discriminatory customer service practices in the concerned institutions with the support of the institutional heads.

The lessons learnt from the SCORE project activities will feed into NPC's current and future work. NPC will also keep in touch with local partners – both governmental and non-governmental – to facilitate the continuation and expansion of their work on social cohesion and reconciliation.

This booklet is compilation of a selection of NPC's SCORE activities from 2018 to 2021. We wish to acknowledge with thanks the contributions of the following organizations and individuals who worked in partnership with us towards a shared objective:

Sarvodaya - Kandy

Centre for Accessibility, Monitoring and Information on Disability (CAMID) - Batticaloa

Women's Development Federation - Monaragala

Social Organizations Networking for Development – Ampara, Jaffna

People's Development Forum - Trincomalee

Centre for Humanity and Integrated Development (CHID) - Mullaitivu

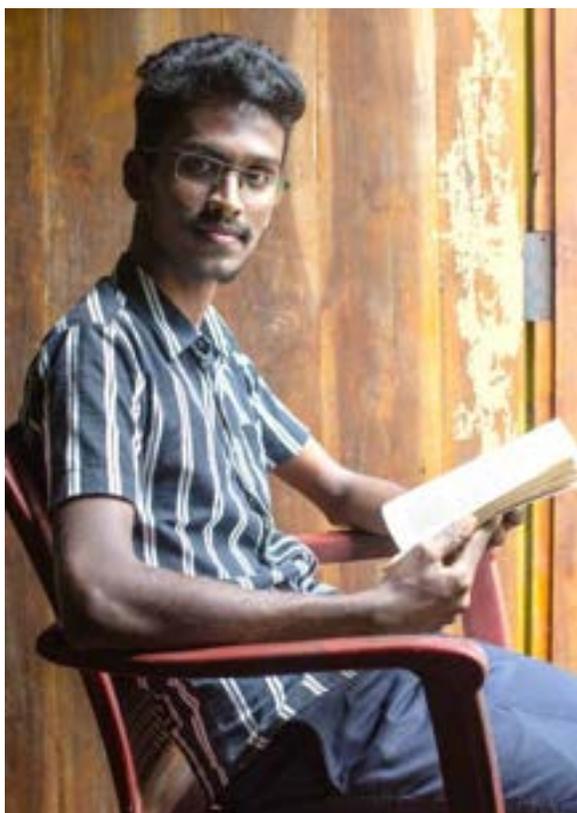
Sri Lanka Red Cross Committee (SLRC) – Vavuniya



## LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND

### Why Social Cohesion Matters?

“The library is a wonderful place where everyone is equal. No one stops anyone from entering – everyone is welcome,” says Udara Wickramasinghe, a 19-year-old student from Mahasenpura, who has been a library user since he was five. “The books are divided into categories, but the people who visit – from different ethnicities, religions, or castes – are not separated into sections. Because we need to be quiet, we don’t speak to each other, but we are all reading and learning together.”



Udara values the library for bringing different people under the same roof



Fathima sees the library as a place that sets her free

Mahasenpura, is located in the Buttala divisional secretariat area of Monaragala, considered one of Sri Lanka’s most disadvantaged districts. The village does not have a library, but Udara is especially happy that in March 2020, the library located right next to his school in Pelwatte benefited from a donation of books in Sinhala, Tamil and English – ranging from different genres of fiction to biographies and texts on culture and society. This was an initiative of the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme implemented by the National Peace Council in Monaragala. “Giving people books is such a special thing to do,” he reflects, “Libraries are scarce in remote areas, and people gravitate towards those that exist.”

“Overnight, the number of books in our modest library increased by almost 200. We received new books after a long time. You can imagine how much the gift was appreciated, mostly by our student members,” says Dilani Dissanayake, the Assistant Librarian of the Pelwatte Public Library. “The Pelwatte Maha Vidyalaya is our neighbour and many of the students must wait one hour after school closes until their bus arrives. The library fills up when the bell rings at the end of the school day.”



■ The gift of books to the library is celebrated with an event to motivate children to read more

This was a significant piece of information taken note of at the community assessment carried out by SCORE, which was the basis of identifying priorities – a joint exercise that included community members and leaders of all ethnicities and religions; female and male children, adults, and elders; community facilitators also known as ‘community connectors’; and local government officers.

“We noted that Mahasenpura did not have a public library. The Pelwatte Public Library was the closest. Children from both Pelwatte and Mahasenpura – Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil – use the library,” says S.V.P. Sepalika, NPC’s Programme Officer. “We decided that by providing resources to the library, people from both Mahasenpura and Pelwatte, particularly the children, will benefit.” Focus group sessions with children had also indicated that a considerable number of households could not afford smartphones and internet connections to access information online.

Moreover, the programme held interactive sessions to motivate children to read and to learn more about the diverse cultures of people in their locality, country, as well as globally. Participants also explored the themes of coexistence and reconciliation. “The activities were different, they were new to us,” says Udara. “We began to realize that we had to break free from the limited space we had created for ourselves. We had so much more to understand, to see.”



■ Interactive sessions prompted children to reflect on coexistence and reconciliation

Fathima Hasna, 17, from Pelwatte, is also a regular library user: “I see the library as a special place for children and young people. We may be from different communities but we feel at home. When I am in the library, I feel relaxed, no longer stressed. There are no boundaries. We have to follow the library rules, but I feel free.”

When Fathima was in primary school, her mother would pick her from the library after school. But even when she grew older, and could return home by bus on her own, she and her friends continued to spend time at the library. “My daughter makes me happy,” says Siththy Hatheeja, 45. “Since she was a child, she wanted books, not toys. I see the library as a good place – for children, for parents, for the general public. Fathima wants to become a doctor and I know she will achieve that.”

Although Udara studied commerce-related subjects for his A-levels, his ‘calling’ is surprisingly different: “I want to become a pastor at our Methodist Church. Peace and reconciliation are within us, they need to be nurtured and protected. I realize that the National Peace Council and similar organizations exist because people don’t value co-existence. It is like salt, it preserves life, we can’t do without it. I think the more distant we are from books, the less we understand, the less we are able to live in peace.”

Significantly, Udara’s household could be considered a microcosm of the larger society. “My mother and I are Christians. My father and my two brothers are Buddhists,” he remarks. “We are a multi-religious family and my siblings and I were never forced to choose a particular religion. My father is an Ayurveda physician and my mother owns a small shop. They allowed us to follow any religion of our choice.” He is, however,

concerned that Christians, particularly those close to the church, are viewed with a certain degree of mistrust: “We are accused of proselytization and treating other religions with disrespect. We want to make people understand that this is not the case.”

Since completing her O-level examinations recently, Fathima decided to devote part of her spare time to helping children with their studies: “They come to me when they want to learn something. Not just Muslim children, I help Sinhala and Tamil children as well, and I give away the books that I no longer need, without hoarding them. I encourage children to read. During the pandemic, the importance of reading became even more evident. I agree with the saying that reading completes us.”

Udara takes it one step further. He points out that “Reading can also bring people together.” He would like to continue the discussions on how important social cohesion is for peace: “When you look at Sri Lankan society today, we can see that peace is still rather uncertain, somewhat temporary... we can start small, but our work must gain momentum.”

## “WE SAW THE POSSIBILITIES”

### The Yashoda Women’s Society Strengthens the Community by Transforming Itself

On the 29th of June 2019, an extraordinary meeting of a group of women took place at the auditorium of the Buttala Divisional Secretariat. The Yashoda Women's Society, comprising entirely of Sinhala women from the village of Udagama, had decided to reinvigorate their flagging group by inviting Muslim women from their neighbourhood to join them.

What makes this especially significant is that just over two months earlier, on April 21, a series of suicide bombings by a Muslim extremist group, targeting three churches and five hotels, killed 258 people in three districts in Sri Lanka. The consequences of the bombings were felt across the country, with the Muslim community becoming targets of violence and hate.

“Yes, there was anger and mistrust that people were trying to deal with,” says Premalatha Udagama, 66, who formed the Yashodha Women’s Society in 2002. “Muslim families live less than a kilometer from our homes but we had little connections with them and we did not have any conflicts either. We began to understand that we should prevent the confrontations happening in other parts of the country from reaching us. We needed to build trust.”



■ Inviting Muslim women to join the group proved to be a game changer

S. Sarifa, 34, is a new member of the society: “We did feel some anger from people after the bombings and I must confess we also felt hurt that Muslims were being targeted in many parts of the country. There was no violent backlash in our village even though we are less in number. I am happy that we are building strong friendships with our Sinhala sisters through this group.”

The initiative was facilitated by the SCORE programme, implemented by NPC, following a community assessment to identify issues that people were most concerned about. But first, local government officers, as well as local partners, participated in a comprehensive seven-day training programme on different aspects of building social cohesion. Shanthi Kusum, who coordinated SCORE activities in Buttala, also participated: “I felt that the most important part of the training was on conflict resolution. I learnt that although on the surface things may appear to be conflict-free, this is not always the case. We also understood how economic and social inequality, as well as gender inequality, can cause conflict and threaten coexistence. I have been working as a community development officer for 13 years, but this is the first time I understood the complex nature of conflict.”



■ Shanthi Kusum followed a training programme on coexistence and conflict resolution before she began working with communities in Buttala

The community assessment in Udagama revealed that most of the Muslim women in the village were confined to their homes. They didn't go out to work, and rarely stepped out for social or recreational activities beyond their community. And even when the assessment took place, it was mostly the Muslim men who attended. The programme prioritized the need to encourage Muslim women to more actively engage with the wider village community. “The movement of Muslim women were somewhat restricted to their environment. They didn't get out of their homes like we do,” says Premalatha. “We went to their homes and explained what we wanted to achieve as a women's society. We wanted to get to know them and together we wanted to improve our livelihoods. We convinced them to join us.”

Combining the two objectives – social and economic empowerment of women and strengthening relationships at grassroots level -SCORE organized a training workshop for the women's group on 'Business Leadership through Coexistence', 'to build a team with mutual respect and understanding to achieve a common goal in a multi-cultural context'. Participants discussed the importance of a leader as a communicator, negotiator, networker and coordinator. The workshop also highlighted the value of taking into account multiple perspectives and working as a collective for both economic progress and social cohesion.



“We participated in the workshop and we saw the possibilities,” says Sarifa. “I have never been involved in a small business. I began to have conversations with the Sinhala community even outside the group. I decided to make string-hoppers for sale twice a week. I buy the flour from a Sinhala shop; they give me a discount. And I sell the string-hoppers at a Muslim shop.” Sarifa sees her membership in the Yashoda Society as transformative: “It has changed my life. I never miss a meeting. But sometimes when I have to, like when my child falls ill, I feel very sad. When I am at home, I feel a bit stressed. When the group meets, it’s as if those problems don’t exist. This is good for women.”

■ Sarifa started a small food enterprise, which she will gradually expand

When the Muslim women joined the society, members discussed the lack of mutual trust and confidence between the Sinhala and Muslim communities in the wider Sri Lankan context, gradually building understanding, friendship – and respect. “There are several Muslim women in our group who are educated and help us plan our activities,” says Premalatha. “And my Muslim sisters are helping me raise the sales of my plant business. Recently I had a group of people who arrived all the way from Amparai to buy anthuriums.”



■ Premalatha tending her new vanilla plants, which will increase her profits

The Sinhala members of the Yashoda Women’s Society decided to invite their Muslim counterparts to visit the village temple. “Muslims hardly ever visit our temples. They were most keen to be there, they helped us clean the temple grounds, donated brooms and carpets. The head monk welcomed them. Then, we visited the mosque and cleaned the mosque compound and spoke with the Maulavi. On yet another occasion we sang Buddhist devotional songs of the Muslim singer Mohideen Baig. We have built a strong sense of sisterhood. It’s difficult to explain it, but it gives us a lot of joy.”

## YOUNG PEOPLE

### Transforming Conflict

“Maduruketiya is made up of over a dozen small villages. Ours is a Sinhala village, just beyond it is a Tamil village, and the one beyond is occupied entirely by Muslims. The villages are separated by less than a kilometer, but we barely knew each other,” says Hasitha Chathurage, 28, making the point that people can be distanced more by ethnicity, religion, and language, than by geography.

Almost three decades of war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, but many of its causes and impacts remain. The country’s youth continue to experience insecurity and vulnerability linked to inequity and divisive politics. They are suspicious, mistrustful, and fearful of people considered to be different – and therefore dangerous.

‘Young Leaders for Peacebuilding’ was an interactive workshop held in February 2020 by the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme implemented by the National Peace Council in the Maduruketiya Grama Niladhari Division of the Monaragala district. It recognized the role youth must play in the transition from violent conflict to sustainable peacebuilding.



■ For most of the participants, the workshop was an entirely new experience

Hasitha Chathurage was one of the three-dozen workshop participants: “Straightaway, what struck me was that the facilitator, who seemed as young as me, spoke in all three languages – Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Not just that, a translator was always at hand to make communication easier. We were given the space to speak about our concerns and motivations. The Tamil sisters and brothers also spoke at length. We listened keenly to what they said and began to understand that we should not make our differences a problem. I blame the politicians for separating us by what they say and do.”

Twenty-three-year-old Nishamali is awaiting admission to the Vidyapeeta National College of Education to qualify as a teacher. “This was the first time I took part in conversations on the subject of co-existence. We used to be a little scared of Sinhala people. At the beginning, there was a bit of tension, but by the end of the day, things were different. We were comfortable with each other and listened to their points of view. The workshop was carried out in a most unusual way – we were learning mostly through a variety of activities and games. We were not bored, we engaged in the activities with enthusiasm.”



■ Understanding coexistence and conflict resolution were two important objectives of the workshop

“The participants formed teams, and teamwork was key to achieving our objective,” says Thusandra Vijayanathan, the facilitator. “They shared each other’s perspectives and motivations – it was an exercise in understanding each other. Then, through a game, we encountered a disagreement and were able to connect it with our national conflict by simply raising the question: “Do you see a connection ...?”

Through the years, the families of both Nishamali and Hasitha have struggled to make ends meet – their vulnerabilities made worse by the war and continuing beyond it. Nishamali’s father is a labourer and her mother is a garment factory worker. Hasitha’s father is a three-wheeler driver and his mother a sweets vendor. Hasitha has been a bus conductor for the past few years, driving a three-wheeler on the side. He believes that poverty is a factor that contributes to conflict and also a consequence of it. “Our village is poor. We experience inequality and injustice and that creates conflict. It is the poor – not just in Monaragala but also the rest of the country – who are hurt the most. We know first-hand what poverty is – and what violent conflict is. I remember a fight between Sinhala and Tamil people that took place in our neighbourhood during the war. I remember many such things.”

The ‘Young Leaders for Peacebuilding’ workshop included discussions on conflict prevention and resolution; working towards social cohesion and peace; and facing up to the challenges that youth are likely to face in the process of peacebuilding. No less importantly, the workshop facilitated the formation of friendships.



■  
Nishamali believes that understanding each other's languages is important for coexistence

"Today, I have more Sinhala and Muslim friends than Tamil friends," says Nishamali. "I studied Sinhalese up to my O-levels and can speak the language fluently. It is important that we understand each other's languages. It would be good if more Sinhalese people learn to speak Tamil. When Tamil people go to government offices, I know they don't have enough people who speak Tamil to help them. After getting my teaching qualifications, I want to return to my village, because I know how much our children need a proper education."

I would like to bring people together through sports," says Hasitha. "That's the best way I know how to. I am also concerned about young people who are younger than me. I am afraid that they will get into trouble. My wish is to include them in sports activities. We have already started to clear an overgrown piece of land for a playground, but we need to move some large rocks as well, and for that, we are seeking help. I feel creating this space for sports and getting together will make a difference. This way we will be occupied in a good way – talking about issues that matter."

■  
Hasitha is acutely aware of the role politics plays in distancing people.



## CROSSING BORDERS

### Sinhala and Muslim Communities in Seruvila Choose Collaboration over Conflict

The term 'border village' began to be commonly used in Sri Lanka, with the ethnic conflict intensifying in the 1980s. Border villages are located close to the boundaries of the northern and eastern provinces or, to put it differently, what was once the dividing lines between military- and LTTE-controlled areas.

The Seruvila division of the Trincomalee district comprises 16 border villages that could be ethnically differentiated. Navakkenikadu, for example, is an entirely Muslim village, and Sumedhankarapura, is a Sinhala village. In recent years, the two neighbouring villages grew increasingly conflicted.



■ People are mainly livestock farmers in Navakkenikadu



■ Sumedhankarapura residents mainly farm their land

“Today, about 60% of the population of the Seruvila division are Sinhalese, but Navakkenikadu has close to 1,000 households and Sumedhankarapura, less than 200,” says P. Nirosha, the Community Connector of the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme implemented by the National Peace Council. “Navakkenikadu residents rear cattle and the Sumedhankarapura residents cultivate their land. When cattle from the Muslim village, densely populated with hardly any land to grow fodder, began to stray onto the land of the sparsely populated Sinhala village for food, we knew there was trouble brewing.”

Since Sri Lanka’s independence from British rule in 1948, the Trincomalee District has been subject to government colonization efforts linked to huge irrigation projects. Historically, Trincomalee was once a Tamil-speaking region, with Tamil and Muslim populations outnumbering the Sinhalese. But the demography of the province began to change with the land settlement policies of successive governments, who also militarized these areas as ‘buffer zones’ during the war. Most of the Sinhalese in the region, therefore, are relatively recent arrivals.

The Sumedhankarapura settlement was created in 1984. Two years later, each household received an acre of paddy land and a hectare of dry land from the government. But people began to leave their homes in large numbers with the intensifying of the war, and only some of them returned when the war ended. “I have been a resident of the village since 2009. The cattle destroying our crops was a big problem. Most of us earn very little and can’t make up for lost income,” says Nayomi Nisansala, 30, a mother of two girls, whose husband works for the army. “We do know that not all the people in Navakkenikadu were responsible. But we don’t speak their language, we don’t know their culture, and we don’t see them as individuals but as a group. So we accused the whole village of being responsible.”



■ Nayomi Nisansala acknowledges that conflicts occur due to lack of understanding

“The straying of cattle from our area to theirs did happen,” says M.S. Ubaitulla, from Navakkenikadu – the former grama niladhari of the village. “On the one hand, people need to feed their cattle, on the other hand, people need to protect their cultivations. There is very little grazing land we have access to, but I also know that the residents of Sumedhankarapura are struggling to make a living and if their crops are destroyed it could be devastating for them. We wanted to find a solution to the problem and were happy to start discussions about it.”

In August and September 2019, SCORE facilitated separate one-day dialogues and exercises in introspection for the residents of Navakkenikadu and Sumedhankarapura ‘to learn lessons from the past and to collectively resolve their problems in a non-violent manner with empathy and compassion’. Community members – women and men of different ages and occupations, as well as village leaders – participated in the meetings. Government officers, including the Divisional Secretary, were kept informed of the discussions, the decisions, and the developments.

At the outset, participants reflected on memories of war-related violence. Breaking up into groups, people discussed their individual and collective experiences and presented the findings to the meeting. This was followed by a discussion facilitated by the resource person. Then, several videos that revealed the violence and loss experienced by other communities were shown, followed by the participants sharing their emotional responses to the stories of others. This led to a conversation on the need to ensure the non-recurrence of violent conflict, the negative consequences of resorting to violence to solve problems, and the importance of adopting non-violent approaches to resolve disputes.

In the next session, participants once again broke up into groups and were given a set of cards representing a story of a conflict. They were asked to place them in sequence and caption each card with a single word. This resulted in a discussion on how a conflict can turn violent and how it could have a different outcome if approached differently.

Each community then went on to focus on the issue at hand. The Navakkenikadu participants considered the many factors that contributed to the current discord between the two communities. They recollected that large extents of land belonging to the village had been taken over by the two main temples in the area – the Velgam Vehera and the Seruwavila Raja Maha Viharaya – making it difficult for people to grow or find adequate food for their animals. Moreover, because Sumedankarapura had a lot of lands not used for cultivation, it made sense that the animals made use of the vegetation. But they did recognize the reality that the straying of animals to Sumedankarapura had destroyed crops, which in turn provoked harsh words and threats from the Sinhala farmers.

People also spoke about poor communication between the two villagers, pointing out that the inability of the younger residents to speak in Tamil had created a gap between them. “Previously, the people could speak our language. And even though they were Sinhala-Buddhists, they understood our culture and beliefs,” remarked Seibadhu Mohamadu Hafeez.

In Sumedankarapura, people spoke about Muslim extremist groups and a growing sense of suspicion and unease about the Muslim community after the Easter Sunday attacks earlier in the year. Yet, some participants spoke about friendships formed and trust built with Navakkenikadu residents. “Mr. Faizal and I are good friends. I can count on him,” says Senarath Bandara, “He is also a member of the Divisional Council. If I have any problem, I always go to him.”

The meeting also discussed the lack of unity and internal conflicts within Sumedankarapura, which made it difficult to negotiate with them, also noting that several residents rented out their disused land for cattle grazing to make ends meet. These cattle too tended to stray from these unfenced plots, towards cultivated land in the area.

People also saw the importance of the government’s involvement in the issue of straying cattle. Significantly, Nayomi Nisansala did not suggest a confrontational solution: “If the government gave the people of Navakkenikadu some land for feeding their animals, our cultivations would be safe. I must say that these people know the meaning of tolerance more than we do. We should admire and value that. Otherwise, the situation could have been terrible.”

At the end of the dialogues in Navakkenikadu and Sumedankarapura, both communities were ready for a joint discussion, which took place in December 2019. The participants decided to identify land that could be allocated for cattle forage and discuss the matter with government officials. They also came to an agreement that if cattle still strayed and consumed crops, the cattle owners would compensate for the losses.



■ SCORE helped bring the two communities together through a process that was based on discussion and not defiance

“After this discussion, we realized that this is not a huge problem,” says S.M. Ubaithulla. “There are some issues we should solve with the neighbouring village, and there are some problems we should solve with government officials, such as land issues. Ultimately, what we want is to live a peaceful life. We also decided to designate paths for the movement of cattle. Our two villages started having monthly meetings – alternating the location between Navakkenikadu and Sumedankarapura. But we haven’t been able to continue them regularly.”

■ M.S. Ubaithulla says that problems can be exaggerated or aggravated when there is no dialogue



However, Seibadhu Mohamadu Hafeez is confident they are moving in the right direction. "Even though the Grama Niladhari, the Samurdhi officer and administration committee of the mosque had previously tried to mediate to solve the problem, all their efforts failed. This programme was a turning point. We created a shared platform to discuss our common issues."

Senarath Bandara from Sumedan karapura agrees. He sees an opportunity to address misconceptions that distance people. "There are both Muslim and Sinhala leaders who try to turn any issue into an ethnic dispute by misleading people. They force people to see their neighbours as enemies. I want to work together with people like myself, people without power, to defeat this mistrust and hatred. Humanity is a powerful thing. It's the best way to fight racism."

P. Nirosha, the Community Connector, agrees. "People are impressionable and they can be manipulated. Many of the young people who moved to this area after the war hold a lot of anger within them. They have come here because they weren't able to find employment elsewhere. They don't understand coexistence the way older generations do. They don't know, for example, that when terrorists attacked the Seruwavila Raja Maha Viharaya, the people who protected the chief monk were Tamils and Muslims."



The project's Community Connector P. Niroshani believes that people need to be better informed about past experiences to understand the value of coexistence

## CONVERSATION, NOT CONFRONTATION

“An important element of coexistence is non-violent communication,” remarks Mr T. Thayanathan, Principal of the Keerimalai Naguleswara Maha Vidyalaya in Valikamam, located at the very north of Sri Lanka’s Northern Province. He admits, however, that the concept is new to him, that he had not thought or heard about it until recently. “When we held the workshops on the subject, the students, the teachers, and I began to understand what it meant. At the end of the day, we could see the importance of improving our ability to empathize and communicate with people. I think this is a good foundation for a society free from violent conflict.”



Students and teachers of the Keerimalai Naguleswara Maha Vidyalaya discussed the importance of communicating with empathy

Violent conflict was an everyday occurrence for the people of Jaffna district’s historic Valikamam region, since the 1980s. The impact of the war became even more severe when a large extent of its land was demarcated as a ‘high-security zone’ to protect military camps and the lifelines of security forces – displacing thousands of its residents.

Since the early 1990s, over a hundred thousand people in Sri Lanka’s northern and eastern provinces were forced to leave their homes due to the military occupation of public and private property. People lived in refugee camps, temporary shelters, or with relatives in distant locations – in a state of uncertainty and indecision.



People returned to their villages after years of displacement

When the war ended in 2009, the government began to release parts of the over 6,000 acres contained within the high-security zone in Valikamam for civilian use. People gradually began moving back to their ancestral lands, which had been, for decades, out of bounds to them. "Those who left as children were returning as adults with children of their own," says Perimbanayagam Ronibus, a development worker based in Jaffna. "It was a complicated situation."

Some families repaired their original homes or rebuilt them from scratch. Others were relocated on state land, elsewhere in the area, by the government – creating unfamiliar neighbourhoods and compounding the typical problems related to resettlement. The beginning of this new phase in the lives of these families was a particularly uneasy one.



"People who returned to the village of Nakuleshwaram in Valikamam may now be neighbours, but they keep their distance from each other," says Dharsha Krishnamenon, a development officer at the Divisional Secretariat. "They are divided on the basis of caste. It's an issue that is just below the surface. People from different castes worship at different kovils. They don't mix, they don't get along, they don't communicate – misunderstandings and conflicts are inevitable. We knew that Non-Violent Communication would be a good subject to introduce to them."

Development officer Dharsha Krishnamenon is concerned that the nature of the process of resettlement holds the potential for conflict between people



The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme implemented by the National Peace Council (NPC) decided to hold awareness-raising workshops on Non-Violent Communication (NVC) for Peacebuilding in three schools in Valikamam – with separate workshops for students and teachers. "NVC is a new language. It helps build healthy relationships between people. It is about listening and speaking without resorting to criticism and blame. It is also about realizing our needs without aggravating disagreements. Essentially, it is something that the people need to learn," says Perimbanayagam Ronibus, who coordinated the activities. "We know it can help create a better space to enable coexistence within communities as well as reconciliation with people outside."

Perimbanayagam Ronibus coordinated the school workshops on Non-violent Communication

Peacebuilding becomes a challenge in situations where the lack of communication, miscommunication, and misunderstanding perpetuates and intensifies disagreement and conflict. Non-violent Communication was developed by psychologist and mediator Marshall Rosenberg as a tool for fostering empathy and connecting with people across differences. It can facilitate mediation efforts to help conflicting people understand the perspectives, feelings, needs and requests of others – resolving their differences without resorting to violence and creating hostile relationships.



Workshops were held for both students and teachers

“It was good that the workshop on NVC was not only for children. The teachers were also involved,” says Priya Jacob, a secondary school student. “Now we are always aware of how we communicate, whether in school or at home, or in a public place. At assembly every Friday, we reflect on the importance of non-violence as well as on the need to communicate. An unexpected outcome of the workshop is that teachers and students understand each other better.”

Priya Jacob is happy that non-violent communication is something that the entire school community is talking and thinking about



"We are a society that continues to face different kinds of violence. We used the workshop as an opportunity to talk about these issues which we had never really discussed in quite this way before," says Sivaraja Gauridharan, head of the primary school. "It is important that this generation doesn't turn to violence to resolve conflict. We need to coexist. When school was closed for a long time because of the Covid-19, the children were forced to be confined to their homes. I believe that they would have practiced non-violent communication in their homes during these difficult times."

Vasantha Kumari Ramachandran, a teacher, confirms that this actually happened: "Children, as well as the adults, ourselves, were able to apply the concept of non-violent communication within our homes as well. We didn't stop discussing the subject with the workshop. We continually discuss it. Whenever there are hurtful words expressed, whether at school or at home, I bring them up. I know I am not the only teacher who discusses the importance of NVC. The students celebrated Peace Week in 2019 by creating and exhibiting posters on non-violent communication."



Teacher Vasantha Kumari Ramachandran discussed non-violent communication with her family as well



'Conversation, Not Confrontation' says a poster put up in a classroom. "This is a clear display of what the students have learnt," remarks the principal, Mr. Thayanathan.

T. Thayanathan, Principal, would like to hold more workshops on the subject at school



■ Posters on the subject of non-violent communication have become permanent features in the classrooms

## “A REJECTION OF VIOLENCE”

A loudspeaker mounted on a three-wheeler announces a street drama performance in the neighbourhood. Children are particularly encouraged to attend – they will participate in ‘peace-building’ games with the performance group before the drama begins. All members of the audience are invited to engage in the drama that follows, which will conclude with a short discussion on the performance and its message.



■ SCORE used street theatre as a social communication process focusing on the crucial need for divided communities to unite

A series of street drama performances on the subject of social cohesion and reconciliation was held in the districts of Jaffna and Vavuniya in 2019 by the Semmugam Performance Group. It was an initiative of the SCORE programme implemented by the National Peace Council. “For me, drama has been a way of raising our voice on behalf of people who aren’t able to,” says Sathyaseelan, 41, the leader of the group. “Every single drama revolves around some kind of conflict.”



Sathyaseelan has been studying drama under experienced dramatists in Jaffna since 2004. But his interest in the subject goes back even further: “From the time I was a child in primary school I was interested in the arts – dancing, drawing, music, drama. I was also an avid reader. My father who is a musician – a flutist – also influenced me. When I was 16 or so and the war was intense – it was the LTTE who used drama to rally people around them. Now we are carrying a different kind of message. Through drama, you can carry messages that are clearly recognizable.”

Yet, Sathyaseelan concedes that it is not an easy process. “Creating a drama about peace is always a challenge. It is such a complex issue. The problem is, many people in these areas still don’t have much confidence in achieving peace. They believe that the conflict will remain and the fighting will recur. It is difficult to talk about peace in a context like that.”

■ Dramatizing the themes of coexistence and peace in a post-conflict situation where so many issues still remain unresolved, can be problematic, says Sathyaseelan

However, he continues to prevail, supporting peacebuilding efforts through drama – drawing on contemporary life experiences. “Meeting the National Peace Council was part of this journey. We have long conversations before writing a script. In one of them, we decided to make our point somewhat indirectly. It is about children at play, an innocent and harmless game that turns violent with the interference of adults. It’s a story about a clash over access to land – how a disagreement turns into a conflict and then turns violent – quite similar to the one we experienced as a nation not too long ago. I believe we leave the audience wondering, ‘Why exactly did we start fighting?’ It is a rejection of violence.”



■ The Semmugam Performance Group at rehearsals

But not all the dramas he has written turn to allegory and symbolism to convey a reality, a truth, a lesson. “We recently performed a drama called *Manachchirai* or *Imprisoned Hearts*,” says Sathyaseelan. “It’s a story about a female LTTE fighter. She is living alone in Vavuniya today. A lot of people treated her with respect during the war. She no longer has that affirmation. She is no longer armed and no one pays any attention to her. We talked about her. We were very direct.”

Shanthini Arugnavarasa, a member of the Semmugam Performance Group, is from Vavuniya. She is studying drama and theatre at the Eastern University and considers herself fortunate to have been able to get to know people from different parts of the country: “I have participated in workshops on peace and reconciliation and in drama performances with our Sinhala brothers and sisters. I have enjoyed it immensely.” However, her priority is to become a teacher. “Once I am a teacher, I will share my experiences and learning with my students. They are the next generation; we need to carry these messages to them. We need to instill acceptance of other cultures, respect for different points of view. When you are a small child, you will hold the hand of a child from another community perfectly naturally, even though you may not understand each other’s languages. We need to nurture that closeness as we grow older.”

■  
Shanthini Arugnavarasa  
sees a particular role for  
herself as a teacher.



Sathyaseelan believes that the Semmugam Performance Group is, in effect, a movement, not a regular non-governmental organisation. “We continue to work for a cause – peace, coexistence, gender, equality, social justice. The most recent script I wrote, called Thirst, is on an environmental issue. It is based on the scarcity of water – about waste, inequality, and people being victimized.”

Although audience participation in the performances has generally been enthusiastic, the responses from people, however, have not always been positive. “Sometimes we have felt a little uneasy when performing a drama,” Sathyaseelan remarks, “Some people simply acknowledge it politely and move on. But we do feel certain people in the audience have questions they would like to ask, but hold back. Then, there are others who are a little confrontational: ‘You want us to live in peace, but they have still not given us our land. So how can we have peace?’”

But Sathyaseelan himself is more positive: “I have built certain confidence in the realization of peace. I think the people in the North and East don’t really understand the people in the South, and the other way around. But I am beginning to understand. And so are others. Our views were always influenced by politics and power. That is changing.”

## UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

“People generally think democracy is something that’s located mainly in the sphere of politics. They couldn’t be more wrong. Democracy is a concept that is relevant in our homes and community, in our schools, in our working environment,” says Dr Abirami Sivagnanam, 30, an ayurvedic physician and counselor from Vavuniya. “I, too, gained this insight just recently through the training of trainers workshop I was selected to participate in because I like working with people to make a difference.”

A three-day workshop on ‘Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy’, was held in August 2020 for twenty-two members of the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme’s partner organizations from the districts of Mullaitivu, Monaragala, Vavuniya, Ampara and Batticaloa. The training used interactive tools and techniques based on adult learning principles – drawing on life experience to assist with learning, facilitating productive dialogue on different aspects of democracy, and focusing on applying new knowledge to real-life situations.



Participants from five districts took part in the three-day TOT workshop on ‘Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy’



“I would like to say that the workshop used a wonderful training module, written up in English, Tamil and Sinhala, which made the learning experience memorable. I think it should be published,” says Balraj Tharshan, 24, a volunteer coordinator for the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society and a branch manager in an insurance company. “We discussed how the principles of democracy are flouted regularly, and how, as a consequence, inequality is so prevalent in our country. Democracy should not continue to be something that most people don’t understand – I was impatient to share what I learnt with others.”

The more people understand democracy, the more they are able to create a more equal society, says Balraj Tharshan

“We realized the importance of generating healthy discussions on current topics. We brainstormed the factors that divide us and those make us unequal,” remarks Dr Sivagnanam. “The workshop prompted a lot of reflection as well. I understood that democracy and equality are lacking in our homes. I saw that clearly when we examined gender roles. I want to be fair. My children can be whatever they want to be. I am not going to limit their choices. If they want to become dancers or musicians, that’s fine too. Every field is valuable.”

Dr Abirami Sivagnanam wants to ensure that democracy begins at home



Respect for the choices and rights of individuals is part of a democratic system. Everyday democracy means increasing people’s participation in the informal and formal groups and institutions that shape their daily lives. It’s about the ability of people to make individual choices in ways that contribute to the common good – as well as about people’s collective capacity to deal with the growing problems facing society today.

The workshop was not only about understanding democracy but also about learning how to facilitate discussions on the subject. “When we are facilitators, we have to deal with some challenges. You may have the knowledge, but sharing it is not always easy,” says S.M. Ifam from Ampara. “The teaching methods used were so good, everyone was enthusiastic and engaged. We learnt how to capture the attention and imagination of the participants. For us, it was a lifetime opportunity.” The workshop focused on enabling the participants to gain the knowledge and skills needed to conduct grassroots-level training in a situation where the main facilitators could not travel across the districts due to the pandemic-related lockdowns.

Next, in April 2021, SCORE held a workshop on ‘Resilient Communities through Everyday Democracy’ for 40 members of the Women’s Federation in Jaffna, representing 16 Divisional Secretariat Divisions in the district. The objective was to enhance the participants’ understanding of the key values of democracy, so that they could, in turn, engage with the community to discuss these values – in a process that would involve listening, being heard, engaging productively in disagreement, and setting priorities for action.

Significantly, many women local government members from different political parties, also members of the Women’s Federation participated in the training. Just a few years earlier, in 2018, after years of activism by women’s groups, the government of Sri Lanka held local government elections with a mandatory 25% quota for women in place – increasing the number of women in local councils from less than 100 to almost 2000. This was a clear admission that politics in the country is not a level playing field – it is dominated by men. However, there was also a lack of understanding that the quota is a temporary measure to proactively address the reality of women’s disadvantage in politics and their marginalisation in democratic processes – creating antagonism among current and potential male councilors.



Women discussed how women’s representation in politics is an important aspect of democracy



Sivarasa Maria Rosary is a local councilor representing the Tamil National Alliance. "I believe that it is important for women to be in politics. There is a 25% quota for women in local government, but women make up more than 50% of the population of this country," she states. "I believe what we learnt through the training is essential to our society. So many people don't understand what democracy means and how we could coexist through the proper application of democracy. We learnt how our group could interact with our community, based on the principles of democracy. We also discussed how we, as community members, should raise our voices when we see the flouting of democratic principles. It was a creative workshop of great value also to women political representatives. I want to progress in politics, moving on to the provincial level and then to the national level. This was a good foundation, a good preparation, for that."

■ A good understanding of democracy and democratic principles is essential for women who want to progress in politics, says Sivarasa Maria Rosary

"I am not that much interested in politics," says Sumadhi Wasanthan, "But as people who live in this society, we have a responsibility to strengthen democratic practices and address inequality. I know we would have to face a lot of issues in the process, like fighting conservative thinking. But it is a challenge we must take on."



Sujeewa Jayaramasharma, recently elected to the local council, can relate better to politics: "I have always known democracy as a governing process based on the will of the people," she says. "It is only now I know that democracy has a broader, deeper meaning. I also know that there is so much more to achieve, and it is only possible if we are united. People don't have enough confidence in women politicians at the moment. But we are building confidence in ourselves, so I know this will change."

Although a politician herself, Ms Jayaramasharma acknowledges that, "The political party system and politicians are the biggest obstacles to achieving true democracy. We try to do something important for the village, they just turn up to gain the credit. They create divisions, their behaviour, and the way they exert their influence and wield their power leads society into chaos. That must change."

■ Sujeewa Jayaramasharma believes that women need to assert themselves to address obstacles to democracy

Workshop participants speak about how existing social attitudes and discrimination hamper the strengthening of democracy. Nevertheless, they plan to overcome the challenges. "The inclusion of women in politics is important to establish a democratic society," says Chandrawadani Kandrarasa. "Democratic values should be practiced at different levels of society, including in small community organizations. I am a mother, and I realize how important it is to share these values with our children, from a very young age, to make our society truly democratic."

## EQUALITY IN SERVICE AT WORK

If you confront a government official with accusations of discrimination in service provision, it is likely that the reaction too would be confrontational – and non-productive. But if you spend some time in the company of government officials having a fully-interactive ‘conversation’ on non-discriminatory customer service provision, the result could be entirely different.

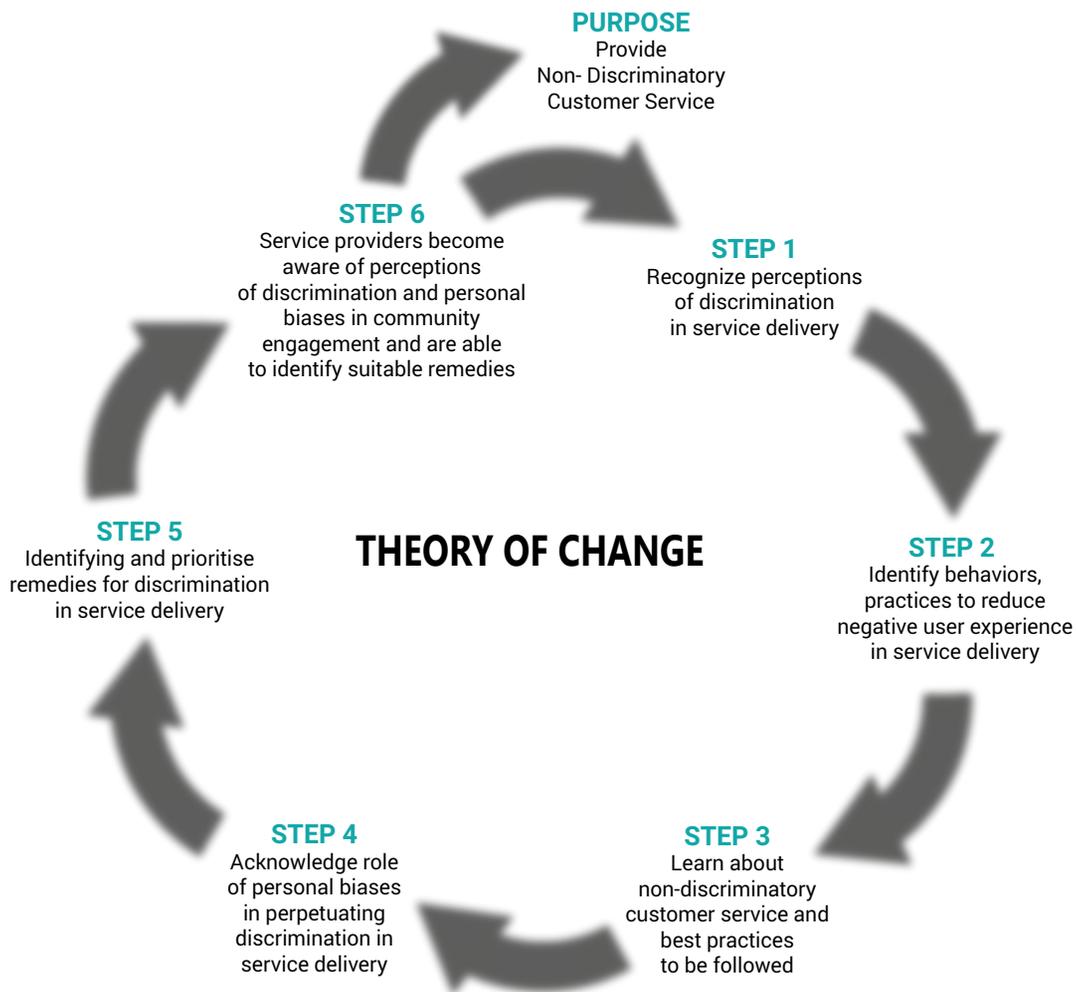
This is precisely what the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) programme sought to achieve through seventeen workshops on ‘non-discriminatory customer service’ for government officials in eight districts. The training module, developed by the National Peace Council (NPC), was based on research findings that revealed grounded narratives of discrimination in service delivery from the point of view of recipients. The study – “Everyday Peace Indicators for Strengthening Reconciliation Programs” – was carried out by the United States Institute for Peace and implemented by the Social Scientists’ Association in Sri Lanka. It guided the setting of objectives for many other SCORE activities as well.

“We think we generally serve our customers well, but it’s not something we regularly think about,” says Ms Chithralatha, 46, a development officer working at the Ampara Divisional Secretariat. She is a mother of three, who joined the government service in 2003 after obtaining a bachelor’s degree at the University of Colombo. “We have never had a programme that focused on the subject and never felt the need to. But now I can see that this is relevant to all public servants, we should be regularly reminded of serving people better.”



■ Ms. Chithralatha says that the workshop prompted participants to be more self-critical

The theory of change developed to achieve the objective of non-discriminatory service provision maps the transformation that is expected through the workshops. It indicates the continuous engagement that is required in addressing discrimination in service delivery.



The training module uses a three-step approach over two days. The first step guides participants to identify perceptions of discrimination through stories and findings from research studies. It examines the different ways in which discrimination can occur – focusing on perceptions of ethnic and religious discrimination in service provision and examining the inter-connected discriminatory practices related to gender and disability. Participants are introduced to five sectors where discrimination could be perceived in Sri Lanka, and real-life stories relevant to each area: justice, police, health, public administration, and local government. This is followed by a conversation engaging the participants on how discrimination affects service delivery in Sri Lanka. Several key policies that underscore the need for more equal service provision, for example, the Official Language Act and the Right to Information Act, are briefly discussed.

The second step is the sharing of experiences and learnings on best practices in providing a quality service that is sensitive to the needs and circumstances of the public and does not discriminate among them. It is a process that prompts participants to acknowledge the different kinds of discrimination that they are inclined to practice. The focus is two-fold – examining both the institutional biases introduced through the organisational hierarchy and incorporated into the functions of each institution and the personal biases that are expressed in one-on-one interactions with recipients. Participants spend some time on individual reflection and describe an incident where they, as service providers, may have acted in a biased manner. This step opens up a space for participants to help each other discuss alternative responses to incidents they have experienced in their roles as service providers.

“I liked the different types of activities that were used to deliver the knowledge and influence our thinking patterns. I consider this as a very impressive effort,” says A. A. Zanofer, a Development Officer in the Muttur Divisional Secretariat in the Trincomalee district. “I found much value in the case studies, they were relatable and helped me understand the wider picture. The workshop did change attitudes within the short period of two days” adds M.S. Fathima, another staff member of the divisional secretariat.

In the third step, participants brainstorm ways to set right the discriminatory practices identified through the previous sessions. They discuss how these remedies could be categorized based on cultural factors (treatment based on gender/caste/class) and administrative shortcomings (language and communication issues, lack of simple and easy pathways to access services, hierarchies within the workplace). The problems and biases are detected – and the solutions are categorized as short-, mid- and long-term remedies. Participants are encouraged to define specific visions for themselves as service providers and draw up achievable targets for non-discrimination in their careers.

“People of all three ethnicities live in the area I work. Coexistence and reconciliation are important for everyone’s wellbeing,” says Degunarasa Dayalaraj, 39, of the Navithanaveli Divisional Secretariat in Ampara, “I realised that a lot of the discriminatory practices were being done almost without us being aware that this was happening. The important thing about the training was that we became aware of what we were doing and that it was wrong. This has been a good exercise in understanding what discrimination is.”

“My most important learning, I think, is that we shouldn’t treat the more privileged and powerful people who come to us, better than those who don’t have money or influence,” says S.M. Wahab, 36, Child Protection Officer attached to the Eragama Divisional Secretariat, Ampara. “This is the first time we seriously started thinking about the work we do. After we completed the workshop some of us formed into a group and started working as a team to address the issue.”



S.M. Wahab want to continue working in the area of non-discriminatory service provision

The training module we used was a productive one, that took a rights-based approach to addressing a serious problem. I had officers telling me that at first, they didn’t like to accept the fact that there was discrimination. But the training was humbling in a way we willingly acknowledged our shortcomings,” says Gnanavallichcham Watkinson, senior project officer, NPC. “Divisional secretariats from Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu wanted more training workshops, so we have scheduled five more.”

At the end of the training, what I feel is a sense of joy,” says Degurasa Dayalaraj”. If I share my knowledge, my understanding, with one person, and then he shares it with someone else and so on...we will be able to deliver a service to the public that is free from discrimination. I realize we not only have to treat everyone equally, but we also need to treat everyone well, so that they don’t feel stressed out when they approach us for our services.”

“Every month, we have a day for discussion at the secretariat, says Ms Chithralatha. “We will use that time to share the knowledge and understanding we have gained. I think officials need to know that they must treat the public better and the public need to know that the officers are meant to serve them. This is also very important for village-level officials. I think a workshop should be held exclusively for them.”

“We could see the attitudinal change that we wanted to create happening before our eyes,” remarks Nuwani Vishaka, Assistant Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator of NPC’s SCORE activities. “But this is a process that we must continue and extend to local government authorities, some of whom did acknowledge to us that discrimination based on political ideology and party affiliation does take place. Discrimination in public service, based on gender, ethnicity, or any other factor, will hinder social cohesion and reconciliation in the country. That is what we must fight.”

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