

# IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: SOCIAL COHESION AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



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This report presents case study findings from a two-year research and policy-dialogue initiative that explores how international peacemakers and development aid providers affect social cohesion in conflict-affected countries. Field research conducted by leading international scholars and global South researchers yields in-depth analyses of social cohesion and related peacebuilding efforts in Guatemala, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. Principal case study specialists for Sri-Lanka include Susan Hayward and Mirak Raheem. The project was coordinated by the Sié Chéou Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver from 2012 - 2014, and supported by a generous grant from Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion and International Affairs.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In May of 2009, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse declared an end to the brutal civil war that had plagued the island nation for roughly twenty-six years. The end of the war was not achieved through negotiations—many attempts at mediated and direct negotiations between the Government and Tamil militant groups, principally the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were undertaken throughout the years. Rather, the end of the violent civil war was achieved through a strategic military onslaught by the Government that culminated in the assassination of the LTTE leadership and the reclamation of lands previously under its control. With the LTTE decimated, the war was undoubtedly over. But whether the underlying ethno-political conflict has come to an end is contested.

Those who contend the conflict continues argue that the root drivers that led to the outbreak of civil war – namely, minority rights, majoritarian nationalism, and the centralization of power – remain unresolved and have even been exacerbated since 2009. Therefore, Sri Lanka finds itself, in 2013, in a post-war but not yet post-conflict situation. Efforts to foster social cohesion, therefore, are shaped by the conflict context:

- Initiatives seeking to promote social cohesion in Sri Lanka at present find themselves indelibly constrained by narrow political realities. Policies and projects seeking to bridge divides between ethnic and religious communities and so to advance social cohesion in Sri Lanka operate in essence from the same calculations as those in the past about how to achieve a truly “post-conflict” Sri Lanka.
- The evolution of project design, framing, and operationalization of projects over time appears to have been based less on impact of previous programming and more on assessments of what will be politically neutral or viable in Sri Lanka’s contested political space.
- The overall context has had a corrosive effect on civil society activism resulting in self-censorship and distrust between groups, making public dialogue and mobilization all the more difficult; additionally, the prejudices and tensions in the larger society are often replicated within the civil society sector.

## 2. POLITICAL SPACE FOR SOCIAL COHESION WORK

Post-war Sri Lanka offers a challenging context to carry out social cohesion work. Although the end of the war provided a significant opportunity to address both the vertical and horizontal axes of social cohesion, the dominant trends outlined above have made it difficult for some social cohesion projects to be implemented. While the Government has proved willing to support and facilitate projects involving service delivery and improving the capacity of the state, it has been less encouraging of activities seeking to strengthen democracy and ethnic reconciliation.

Although there are both international actors, be they donors or humanitarian/ development agencies, and national organizations interested and committed to engaging in peace building or human rights work, the Government has discouraged work in both areas. This is due to a number of reasons, including the Government’s objections that the situation has normalized and the very suggestion that there is a need to engage in such activities implies otherwise. These types of activities may take positions critical of the Government’s policies and failings, or maybe adverse to the Government’s position and thus may be viewed by the Government as subversive. These activities may be perceived by key actors within the Government as means for western states to carry out their own agendas in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, there are vocal and politically strong actors within the Government who argue that activities of this nature should only be carried out by the Government, if at all. The refusal of the Presidential

Task Force (PTF), which in the immediate years after the end of the war was the primary body for approving projects in the Northern Province, to grant approval for 'software' projects involving empowerment, community relations or psycho-social is just one of the indicators of the Government's stance.

While there are significant differences in the local dynamics in regions such as the East between the post-CFA and post-war periods, as the situation seemed more volatile in the past with a higher frequency of inter-community violence particularly between the Tamil and Muslim communities, it is difficult to argue that underlying grievances and the relations have significantly improved or been addressed. Instead, it appears that the problems are merely contained and there continues to be a risk of local level issues serving as triggers for larger crises and violence. The emerging tensions in the South around issues of religious sites, particularly between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims, highlights the need for such mechanisms, or at least the need to think through alternate confidence and trust building measures and early warning/response mechanisms. Thus, it appears that the context demands initiatives promoting inter-ethnic social cohesion, given that post-war context has seen a number of incidents of inter-ethnic/religious tensions, some of which have resulted in violence.

With regards to some initiatives, actors other than the Government, including political parties, religious leaders, members of the business community, academics, prominent personalities and civil society organizations have a vital role to play in both addressing disputes and underlying problems. However it appears that such initiatives are limited in nature. The failure of the Central Government to directly resolve disputes or to provide a facilitating environment for others to do so is perceived by some actors as not being merely neglect but is seen to be strategic, as contestations for power between less powerful actors proves advantageous for the Central Government.

Given the variety of challenges faced by civil society actors during the war and the variety of initiatives to address issues such as human rights and coexistence which did not always take place with explicit Government approval, there are questions as to why the level of activism and activities by these actors is so subdued.

- In the post-war period there is continuing apprehension among civil society organizations about engaging in activities that may be deemed controversial.
- Civil society organizations and activists face a variety of challenges in post-war Sri Lanka including harassment, surveillance, investigations by the authorities of their activities and even violence.

The Government, extreme Sinhala nationalists and some sections of the media have maintained an unrelenting campaign against NGOs accusing them of being dollar kakkas ("dollar crows," i.e. living off aid), agents of Western powers, LTTE fronts and traitors. Thus, there is a climate of self-regulation in the post-war context. Organizations and individuals who are active in the fields of peace and reconciliation have taken to self-censorship, avoiding speaking out and engaging in actions that could be seen as critical by the Government.

### 3. MAPPING OF SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMS INVOLVING RELIGIOUS ACTORS

In recognition of the need to engage religious actors in peace and reconciliation work in Sri Lanka, and notwithstanding the challenges described above, there are a variety of social cohesion programs involving religious actors. Projects seeking to advance social cohesion primarily fall into three categories: 1) independent local inter-ethnic and inter-religious committees/councils that arose (largely) indigenously within communities in response to particular needs and which are led by local community leaders, 2) projects designed, initiated, and supported by larger national and international NGOs with Colombo-based offices, often funded by the international donor community, and 3) Government-led programs, some of which are also

supported and funded by the international community. These three categories of social cohesion programming can be porous. Notably, some of the indigenous peace or inter-religious committees have been at times integrated into NGO or Government-led work, if not entirely absorbed by larger projects.

## **LOCAL INDEPENDENT EFFORTS**

Throughout the course of the war, many local peace or inter-religious committees and councils arose throughout the island in order to help mediate local-disputes, often those related to the wider conflict. One such example is the Batticaloa Inter-Religious Council, which was established following the 2004 tsunami when communities were at conflict with one another over the dissemination of rehabilitation funds. The Catholic Bishop in Batticaloa took the initiative to bring together religious representatives from each of the four traditions, with the objective of developing appreciation across lines of difference, mechanisms for communication to resolve local conflict, and to initiate inter-religious responses to those conflicts. Similar local inter-religious councils, operating independently from NGOs or government initiatives, exist in other parts of the country as well, including Puttalam in the West and Galle in the South.

Other parts of the North and East also saw the establishment of peace committees, including in Mannar and Akkaraipattu where local level community leaders, including religious actors, attempted to create a mechanism that would represent and relay civilian concerns to armed actors. These locally-initiated inter-religious councils established and led by religious leaders, as well as the peace and citizen committees, have arisen and dissolved throughout the life of the conflict in response to community needs and at the initiative of committed and visionary local leaders. They have tended to operate in a reactive way to conflict – seeking to monitor and respond to local tensions – rather than to strategically and proactively address some of the root causes of the wider conflict, which sometimes may be well beyond their scope and capacity.

While some of these committees also attempted to document human rights violations, others were more focused on the mediation/crisis management with state actors, militant groups, political groups and radical factions within these communities. They are often personality-based, initiated and led by key actors, and the amount of work they can do is always dependent on financial support, while the nature of the work depends some on pressure from government or armed actors. Despite this, these indigenous initiatives display relative resilience to funding cycles, based as they are on volunteer participation and being almost entirely community-owned.

## **NGO-LED EFFORTS**

Many of the large national peace organizations headquartered in the capital of Colombo have designed and initiated projects seeking to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony at the local level throughout the country, and at the national level. The period following the 2001 ceasefire agreement was a particularly robust time for the launch of projects along these lines. Many of the projects sought to promote dialogue and peacebuilding skills training in mixed-ethnic groups, and/or promoted inter-group problem-solving mechanisms. For example, from 2003 onwards the national organization the Foundation for Co-existence (FCE) created multiple local level mechanisms including peace committees, youth groups and women's groups all with the purpose of strengthening peace at the community level. While there were a number of high profile interventions by the FCE, the cut back in funding severely affected the network and most of the local level mechanisms did not survive.

One large project, funded by USAID, worked with four of the major national peace NGOs (National Peace Council, Sarvodaya, Anti-War Front, and FCE) to establish People's Forums (PF) throughout the country. This program, launched in 2004 and coordinated by the U.S.-based Academy for Educational Development, established mixed-ethnic committees in sixty-four divisions throughout the country, trained to identify local community peace and development needs and to promote inter-ethnic collaboration to address those needs

through concrete activities and engagement with local authorities. In other words, they sought both to promote inter-group linkages (horizontal connections) and to strengthen civic participation and thereby local government accountability to communities (vertical state/society connections, though an effort to connect the committees with national-level decision-makers and policies fell short). Religious leaders were included in these local efforts, to the extent that they were identified by the local community as key leaders to include in the efforts. The intention was for the myriad local-level forums to be connected into a national-level network through the established of a Federation. However, USAID stopped funding this initiative in 2008 and new sources of funds were not secured and so the wider initiative never came to fruition. With the halt in funding, most of the local level People's Forums did not survive.

Recent years have seen a spike in efforts to engage religious leaders in reconciliation and peace efforts, in part as a response to escalating inter-religious conflict across the country. More recently, two of the major national peace NGOs, Sarvodaya and National Peace Council, conducted short-term projects to develop inter-religious councils comprising religious leaders as a mechanism to promote religious harmony and reconciliation. Again, with the end in project funding these councils seem to have dissipated, although relationships and communication between some of the religious leaders involved may endure. Beginning in 2008, the small Colombo-based organization Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR) began working to establish a network of religious leaders throughout the country engaged in peace and reconciliation. Additionally, the U.S. based organization Religions for Peace helped to establish a national-level inter-religious council which was initiated with assistance from National Peace Council but soon broke away from it so as to be perceived as independent. This Council has sought affiliation with pre-existing local-level inter-religious councils, including the aforementioned one in Batticaloa. Several people interviewed expressed beliefs that this group had been usurped by the Government as a means to advance its nationalist interests and this affiliation rendered it inappropriate as a vehicle for improving inter-religious cohesion.

These latter efforts in particular emphasize horizontal linkages between communities – relationship building through dialogue and collaboration on small, concrete activities. Rarely do they focus on national-level issues related to state structure that are considered sensitive or contentious. Religious leaders from minority communities feel particularly frustrated by the lack of attention to governance issues, and by the lukewarm participation of Buddhist monks in their initiatives, which they believe weakens their ability to effect change in social or political norms. When monks do become involved, it can constrain the range of discussion topics or viable activities. In referring specifically to the Colombo-based Religions for Peace Council, which is led by the prominent monk Venerable Bellanwila Wimalaratne, this Tamil leader said the group “is not about politics. If you go into politics, you will have no cohesion [among participants].” This seems to reflect the mentality of many of these inter-religious committees. The biggest challenge obstructing the time needed to develop personal relationships based on trust that can withstand the strain potentially caused by addressing these “contentious” issues is often sustained funding.

## **GOVERNMENT EFFORTS**

The Ministry of Social Integration engages religious actors as part of their ongoing efforts – both through local-level community forums and in special initiatives. For example, the Ministry hosted a forum to gather input on recent instances of hate speech that have fostered inter-religious conflict, and invited members of various inter-religious committees, including the Religions for Peace committee based in Colombo. The Ministry is supported in its efforts by several international donors, including the UNDP, and the German and Canadian governments. Staff of those international organizations working with the Ministry note several challenges. The Ministry is considered weak financially and politically. In this respect, those working with the Ministry are uncertain to what degree there is enough political will behind the Ministry to effect real change. Still, as mentioned earlier, many donor communities who had previously been working directly with civil society shifted in the post-war context to engaging with and through the Government, in large part in response to pressure

from the Government, but also out of recognition of the need to work with state structures to get at the wider transformations of conflict drivers, even if this does not seem likely or possible in the current context.

The Government proposed a National Plan of Action (NPA) to implement the LLRC but progress has been slow. Even though there have been repeated calls to establish a mechanism to address the spate of religious attacks and a climate of hate speech, the Government has not moved forward to do so. Interestingly, the Buddhist hierarchy announced in late 2013 its own plans to establish a religious council of Buddhist leaders to “formulate a national plan to end religious tension in the country in a manner that was favorable to all religious groups.”<sup>1</sup> The Government’s approach has been more ad hoc and reactive. In terms of the Eastern Province, the main post-war mechanism have been civil defense committees established at the community, divisional and district levels. Individuals who are members of these committees, however noted that these structures seem to be aimed more at gathering information for the police than in resolving issues raised by community and religious leaders.

#### 4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: IMPACT OF DONOR-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS ON SOCIAL COHESION

- Donor assistance, in terms of financial, capacity building, diplomatic, and other forms of support has proved crucial in strengthening social cohesion initiatives in Sri Lanka. These initiatives have been successful in strengthening service delivery to areas impacted by natural and conflict-related disaster and in improving infrastructure in less developed regions, which has strengthened the vertical axis of social cohesion.
- Horizontally, local communities remark that the initiatives supported by the donor community have helped create linkages between individuals and groups, increased inter-ethnic understanding and empathy, and created vehicles to address local manifestations of conflict. They have also strengthened overall awareness of rights and democratic processes throughout the country, which have empowered citizenry.
- At the same time, donor-funded development and peacebuilding support to Sri Lanka has had unintentional consequences that have harmed social cohesion.

For example, the failure by the international community and the Sinhala and Tamil communities to include a place for the Muslims at the table in the peace process drove the strengthening of a Muslim ethnic and political identity and a unique sense of grievance during the CFA period in particular, fueled as well by the insecurity and incidents faced by the community on the ground. Some analysts draw a line between Muslims’ exclusion from peace talks, growing Muslim political and ethnic identity and violent conflict between Muslims and Tamils in the East, particularly during the CFA period.

Even those programs which were specifically seeking to foster social cohesion seemed unable to meet their lofty objectives. In the period following the 2002 ceasefire, many organizations sought to foster inter-ethnic social linkages with the hope that these would create resistance to identity manipulation and mobilization by elites (i.e. community resilience), and would create a broader platform to challenge them (i.e. strengthen democratic processes by empowering a civil society movement holding leaders accountable). However, when large-scale violence resumed in 2006 many of these efforts fell apart. Efforts to mobilize various peace forums and networks established during this period into a nation-wide resistance to warfare proved impotent against increasingly polarized polities and crumbled due to internal disagreements.

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<sup>1</sup> “Dhammadeepa Council to nurture religious amity.” September 2013. <http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2013/9/84694.html>



## IMPACT OF SOCIAL COHESION WORK ENGAGING THE RELIGIOUS SECTOR

The international community by and large has not engaged the religious sector as a sustained strategy for building peace. As noted, this engagement has been both limited and project-oriented, thus short-term and not often sustainable beyond the duration of the project life cycle. The fact that religious communities have been marginalized from these efforts has been, in some instances, itself a driver of inter-ethnic discord.

- The lack of attention to religious dynamics by outsiders seeking to strengthen peace in Sri Lanka – both as part of national peacemaking and local-level peacebuilding—meant that religious leaders felt threatened by the peace processes, and so became more strident in opposition to it over time.

As the religious sectors – primarily Buddhist monks – became oppositional towards the peace process, they elevated narratives about a Buddhist state, about threats to Buddhist territory and integrity, about the neo-colonial agendas of outside facilitators (and particularly a Christian agenda from Norway), that raised fears among the majority community and alienated minority communities.

There are a few on-going efforts to address religious actors with the purpose of increasing social cohesion. While these initiatives attempt to connect religious actors at multiple levels and there is some variation in the approaches followed by the organizations and individuals implementing these projects, there are some basic problems, as the superficial nature of much of the inter-religious work limits its impact. The focus has been to emphasize the peaceful teachings of all religions and that which is shared in common between them, without necessarily attempting to deepen the discussion and address contentious issues, including inter-religious tensions and clashes, the political solution, and threats to democracy. It is also not clear that the dialogue goes beyond cultivating very rudimentary understandings of other religions; the focus tends to be on creating bonds between individuals. At the most basic level these initiatives are meant to have a positive impact on the perceptions, attitudes and knowledge of the participating religious actors.

In addition, it is expected that they will form relationships with clergy from other faiths that will have a personal impact while creating conduits for communication across religious tensions and divides. Clergy involved in these initiatives did cite their lasting friendships with clergy from other faith traditions, and times when those relationships have been crucial to addressing local disputes. However, the impacts on community level change in perceptions and understanding were mixed and very rarely served as a forum for macro level change, as they do little to connect to the root drivers of conflict. Additionally, projects at times reinforce the power dynamics within society, bolstering majoritarianism, patriarchy, and Buddhist supremacy. They are fraught with issues of duplication and lack of sustainability, and thus while efforts to engage religious communities in social integration work have had certain positive impacts, there are many other challenges that must be addressed for these initiatives to have real lasting impact.

## 5, CONCLUSION

Peacebuilding and development programs seeking to foster social cohesion in Sri Lanka have had mixed results, with the larger objectives of programs not often translating into reality. In some circumstances they have even had unintended negative consequences that have bolstered power imbalances between ethnic groups. But that is not to say these programs and projects have been ineffectual and these endeavors should be abandoned.

Indeed, we found many positive anecdotes about inter-personal and inter-communal relationships forged through these initiatives that led to changes in attitudes across lines of difference and created vehicles for addressing disputes and de-escalating tensions when they arose. These initiatives have been particularly



successful in forging horizontal relationships that foster social cohesion at the local level. When religious leaders have been engaged in these initiatives, they have been able to translate the lessons they have learned and their experiences into their preaching and engagement within their own communities, even intervening with more extremist elements in their community who are fostering discord. Local community members cite the positive impact it has on them when they see religious leaders working together across lines of difference to foster coexistence and to address community needs. Minority religious leaders offer appreciation for when Buddhist monks have advocated on their behalf with local authorities.

Not surprisingly, the markers of programs that have had greater success in achieving their objectives have been: 1) those that were initiated and owned by local communities (even if later supported by external actors and donors), 2) those that were sustained over long periods of time, and 3) those that took measures to ensure the power dynamics within the wider society were not replicated in the project. Moreover, participants gave more buy in to projects that were linked to tangible activities benefiting the community, rather than mere forums for dialogue. Those projects that were seen to benefit individual members financially – through the offering of per diems to participants, for example – were criticized by many as rarely eliciting long-term or genuine commitment. Religious leaders involved in projects that bring personal financial benefit were particularly vulnerable to criticism from community members and other clergy. Given the nature of pessimism about NGO-led work in Sri Lanka's current environment, religious leaders involved in projects that were not sponsored by NGOs (or at least that appeared independent) were less vulnerable to criticism that could negatively impact their legitimacy to be agents effecting social cohesion.