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SAPRI'S Projects on Reconciliation, Women's Empowerment and Religious Harmony

Within the restricted environment caused by Covid-19 and an unstable ground situation, SAPRI was able to conduct projects focusing on 'Reconciliation at Grassroots led by Women Local Government Members' and 'The Freedom of Religion and Belief towards Healing the Past & Building the Future in Sri Lanka'. The projects were implemented during the period 2021 to 2022 in five districts.

Reconciliation at Grassroots led by Women Local Government Members



Following on SAPRI's Grassroots Women Political Leaders' Empowerment Project in 2018-2019, SAPRI went a step further and designed a project for the Women Leaders to play an effective role to build reconciliation at grassroot level. The project was supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands.

Ampara, Galle, Kurunegala and Vavuniya were identified as project districts, Galle and Kurunegala being new additions to accommodate predominantly Buddhist areas away from the capital city. Besides the incumbent women local government members, community members from the districts were also included in the project.

To commence the project, a survey was conducted online to obtain the views of the participants on the project objectives as well as to serve as a baseline evaluation. Incorporating the views expressed in the survey, the module of the first project activity, the Roundtable with Beneficiaries was prepared.

Participants from the four districts; project resource persons; and experts proficient in the subject of reconciliation; and the SAPRI staff; participated in the virtual roundtable and discussed the basic concepts and the designing and implementation of the one-year long project, taking place in four districts having much diversities. The actual needs of the participants were recognized and they were fed into the project planning.

The virtual awareness raising workshops initiated next in the four districts targeted the enhancing of awareness of the project participants on consolidating communal unity. The workshops enabled the participants to focus on the prevention of possible future conflicts and developed a better understanding to address potential conflicts.

The capacity building workshops conducted in the districts thereafter, also as virtual activities, introduced the necessary skills to build on the aspirations of the awareness raising workshops. Capacity building efforts targeted the mindset changes of the participants and recognized each other's value on the basis of their capacities.

Next, the project participants embarked on field activities and celebrated days of religious significance of the main religions. Accordingly, Christmas, Thai Pongal, Ramazan and Poson were marked in the four districts with children in the community too joining in. A significant feature was religious leaders of the four religions attending all the celebrations in the districts and offering their blessings. The events were held onsite as well as on zoom.

Field activities commenced next with workshops targeting reconciliation through art and drama. The objective of this initiative was to introduce drama as a tool for building reconciliation. Eminent award-winning playwright and Director Rajitha Dissanayake and his team conducted these workshops. On the conclusion of the sessions, two dramas emerged in each district and were performed by the project participants.

With the objective of raising the awareness of the project participants to all different religions in the country, SAPRI arranged for them to visit a Buddhist Temple, Christian/ Catholic Church, Hindu Kovil and Mosque. It was discovered during the visits that they were in fact the 'first time' for the project participants to be in the precincts of a different religion and the visits proved to be a learning process to most of them. The visiting women political leaders and community members had discussions with the clergy of the places of worship; observed the conduct of religious traditions; and discussed future connectivity; with the clergy in each of the venues.

Next on the programme was the 'Introduction of My District', a Zoom session with the attendance of all project participants from the four project districts. The women political leaders and community members from each district presented the main features and attractions of their respective districts in the form of a tour of the district, supported by colourful video presentations. (<https://youtu.be/RFlvfiU3RNq>). The activity resulted in the diversities of the districts being grasped and linkages formed among the participants, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers.

The project ended with a well-attended ceremony, involving the project beneficiaries, Chair/SAPRI Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Bonnie Horbach. Women Local Government Members from the four districts spoke on this occasion elaborating on the impact the project had, on the participants and their communities. Addresses were delivered by Chair/SAPRI and the Netherlands Ambassador emphasizing the role women political leaders should play for the development of the society.

Enhancing the Freedom of Religion and Belief in Sri Lanka

SAPRI entered into a project with the International Organization for Migration (National Programme for Social Cohesion, Reconciliation and Climate Change), focusing on Enhancing the Freedom of Religion and Belief in Sri Lanka, leading to an effective reconciliation process. The project was implemented from January to July 2022 with clergy from the four main religions as target groups for an intra-faith dialogue initially, to be followed by an interfaith dialogue among the same participant clergy.



A district facilitators' workshop and a resource persons' workshop for developing the curriculum of the project were the commencing activities of the initiative. The major stakeholders of the project who were to play a leadership role were introduced to the project requirements, its curriculum, and, the implementation methodology, in order to achieve the project targets.

Beneficiary roundtables were convened initially in the project districts of Gampaha, Galle and Kurunegala. The views, suggestions and needs of the beneficiaries were then incorporated to the agenda of the project.

The series of workshops commenced next, beginning with intra-faith dialogue workshops among Buddhist Monks, Hindu Kurukkals, Christian/Catholic Priests, and Islamic Moulavis, in the three districts. 12 clerics from each religion, met twice in intra-faith dialogue and were pleased with the awareness they gained.

Next will be interfaith workshops when the clergy who went through the process of intra-faith dialogue will break into groups, enabling a mix of multi-religious clerics to conduct interfaith dialogue.

Following the interfaith dialogue, the clergy of the project would be ready to form multi-religious groups of clerics and they will initiate a dialogue with the people in the community, to convey the message of religious harmony. The society very likely will be receptive to this message emanating from clerics of different religions who have merged together.

** Celebrating Days of Religious Significance at Community Level **

Grassroots leaders in Ampara, Galle, Kurunegala, and Vavuniya districts enthusiastically congregated at district level to celebrate Christmas, Thai Pongal, Ramazan and Poson, during the period December 2021 to June 2022, as an important segment of the project, “Reconciliation at Grassroots led by Women Local Government Members”. These celebrations were conducted as on-site activities as well as on the zoom platform, due to restrictions imposed by Covid-19 at that time.

The attendance of the clergy from all main religions, i.e., Buddhist, Christian/ Catholic, Hindu and Islam at almost all the religious celebrations, was strikingly unique while their blessings at the functions, extolling the virtues of other religions was a significant attempt at conveying a strong message of respect towards other religions. The project participants received their message ‘loudly and clearly’ and were overwhelmed by the views emanating from the multi-religious leaders.

As a means of exposing to the “future generation,” in the respective districts, the concept of “Reconciliation”, a number of children from multiple religions were invited to these events. Each event commenced with greetings/blessings of the multi-religious clergy; remarks from the Women Leaders present; religious/cultural manifestations such as offerings to the “Sun God”; Iftar, breaking of fast by Muslims; Christmas carols, Christmas tree, Santa Claus and gifts; Poson Bakthi Gee (Poson devotional songs); Thai Pongal singing and dancing etc. For the children there was always a “quiz” to jog their memory on the day’s programme which entertained the children and the adults alike.



At the Galle Christmas event, in December 2021, Ven. Kehelulle Sumedha Thero from Mahawatta Sri Vivekaramaya Buddhist Temple; Rev. Father Kasun Kaluarachchi from AOG Church, Baddegama; Vignesh Sharma Kurukkal, from the Hindu Kovil in the Galle Fort; and Alhaj MZ. Mohamad Moulavi attended and blessed the occasion. A striking feature at this function, was the singing of Christmas carols by multiple religious children and the most fascinating was a carol sung by a young Muslim girl. The happiest moment of the event for the children was the arrival of Santa Claus and distribution of gifts.

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The Thai Pongal celebrations to pay homage to the ‘Sun God’ for a bountiful harvest were held in January 2022. The Kurunegala event held on Zoom had Ven. Sumanalankara Thero from Kobeigane Sumanodha Viharaya; Kurukkal V. Vignesh Sharma; Rev. Brother Chirantha Piyumal from Mahawa, and Moulavi S.M. Irshad offered blessings. The event was augmented through the use of digital communication means and colourful videos of children drawing Kolam arts: women cooking Pongal rice; offering of “Pujawa” and worshipping of Sun God; and Thai Pongal dancing and singing, were shown, raising the level of interest among the participants. Those attending the event were able to get a grasp of the significance of Thai Pongal, its association with the “Sun” and the traditions related to its celebration.

Ramazan, celebrated in April 2022 also witnessed ‘onsite’ and Zoom events. The focus of the Ramazan celebration was on Iftar, the traditional fast- breaking ceremony.

Ven. Walagampura Wimalavansa Thero from Mandala Maha Viharaya, Ampara; Moulavi A.M. Sirajudeen from Samanthurai; Madhan Kurukkal from Samanthurai; were present at the event in Ampara district. They offered blessings and appreciated the multireligious theme of the event. They also expressed the hope that such activities would continue in the future.

The participants who gathered at the assembly hall were able to witness the call to prayer and Iftar rituals which were a new experience to the non-Islamic participants. They joined the Islamic men and women present for the partaking of food to end the fast, demonstrating friendship and affinity transcending religious differences.

As the last religious day commemoration, Posen was celebrated via Zoom in all four project districts. The Vavuniya district celebration had Ven. Bedigamuwe Abhayathissa Thero; Kurukkal Shiva Shankar; Moulavi A. C. Sajahan; and Rev. Father Thusitha Priyanga joining the celebration and adding their blessings to the Posen celebration. They spoke on the importance of Posen marked by the arrival in Sri Lanka of Venerable Mihindu Maha Thero and the introduction of Buddhism to the people in Sri Lanka. Posen Bhakthi Gee sung by Muslim, Christian and Hindu girls from the district, who were trained by a Hindu teacher was a significant feature on this occasion. A number of videos related to the event were shown to provide further details of this historic occasion.

Besides creating an awareness of the days of significance of the main religions in Sri Lanka and how they are celebrated, through these events, SAPRI attempted to give a basic training to the project participants on organizing religious activities at community level, targeting the promotion of friendship among persons of different religions, and building respect towards other religions.

Building Reconciliation at Grassroots through Drama

Continuing its initiative to utilize innovative measures for enhancing reconciliation at grassroot level, SAPRI made an attempt to introduce drama for the purpose of building *Reconciliation at Grassroots led by Women Local Government Members*.

The women political leaders and community leaders participating in the project were fervently enthusiastic at the prospect of using drama as a project activity and turned up in large numbers for active participation in the two-day residential drama workshops held in the four project districts, in August 2022.

Renowned playwright and director Rajitha Dissanayake, together with his team of dramatists visited the four districts and conducted the workshops with emphasis on reconciliation.

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The participants were introduced to basic concepts of drama and guided through preliminarily practical exercises as an initial step before embarking on actual drama related work.



Considering that project participants were multi ethnic and multi religious, the first activity in the process was to break into groups comprising participants from multiple religions and encourage them to talk about issues that they had experienced due to their religion and ethnicity, as well as due to developments in their respective communities. The experiences articulated by the participants and the related discussions within the respective groups formed the basis for the script of the drama to be presented by each group.

The scripts that emerged were woven around themes such as misunderstandings due to lack of language fluency; suspicion due to cultural differences; religious disputes leading to violence; practical situations where mishaps occur due to absence of language proficiency; etc. and the dramas revolved around these issues while drawing attention to adopting means to resolve issues and arriving at acceptable solutions.

The two-day residential workshops contributed much towards creating an affinity among the participants who, at the end of the workshops, pledged their support to building reconciliation in their communities, with the expectation that such a measure would contribute to reconciliation at the national level. They became convinced that drama was an interesting and useful tool for this purpose.

Links to dramas:

<https://youtu.be/L0OexrMZblw> Vavuniya drama

<https://youtu.be/o9qFQ765HSU> Ampara drama

<https://youtu.be/YtT-0OVrYgc> Kurunegala drama

<https://youtu.be/Et9LJkWI5v4> Galle drama

*** Visits to multiple religious worship venues by grassroots leaders ***



A series of visits to Buddhist temples, Hindu kovils, Catholic/ Christian churches and Islamic Mosques was a unique opportunity provided by SAPRI to multi-religious grassroots political leaders and community members to be introduced to “Other Religions” and their religious practices.

The program was organized in August and September 2022 under the *Reconciliation at Grass roots led by Women Local Government Members* project and took place in the districts of Ampara, Galle, Kurunegala and Vavuniya. For most participants the visits to venues of other religions were a totally novel experience. They were amazed by the cordiality in which the visiting multi-religious group was received by Buddhist Monks, Hindu Kurukkals, Catholic/ Christian Priests and Islamic Imams, who not only gave detailed responses to their questions but treated them with hospitality as well. (YouTube video link <https://youtu.be/vf9eDq40oWY>)

Some of the religious venues were a discovery even to the participants of those particular religions. Mandala Maha Viharaya in Ampara was one such significant Buddhist Temple. It was explained that the name “Mandala” derived from the Galoya Development Board (Galoya Sanvardhana Mandalaya), a major development project in the 1950s and it occupied the land of the current temple to run their office. Immediately the Board vacated the premises, a Buddhist Temple was built, and a Hindu Kovil, a Church and a Mosque had also come up in close proximity in view of the Hindu, Christian and Muslim presence in the area, in addition to Buddhists.

The visiting project participants of Galle learnt that the Kathiresan Hindu Kovil in Galle that they visited, was established prior to 1800s. In the colonial period, a number of Hindus from India had visited Galle for trading purposes and in order to meet their religious requirements this kovil was established close to the city and is said to be the oldest Hindu Kovil in Galle. A special feature of the Kovil is the presence of both Hindu and Dutch architectural features in the Kovil buildings.

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The lighting of oil lamps instead of candles, inside the Church of Ceylon, the Anglican Church in Kurunegala, was a great attraction to the project participants. In addition, the boundary wall of the Church demonstrating architectural features similar to the “Ath Pawura” (Elephant wall) which is present in most Buddhist temples, was seen as an attempt at merging with existing cultural symbols of the country.

The visiting Community Leaders were attracted by the Meeran Jumma Mosque in Galle built over 300 years ago and having an amalgamation of British and Islamic architecture.

The participants were able to get an introduction to the respective religions; an exposure to the different modes of worshipping; and learn about the services rendered to the communities by the venues of religious worship; during the tour. The women councilors and community members spontaneously accepted the invitation of the clergy to sustain the dialogue established during the visits and undertook to maintain contact with these venues while the clergy emphasized their interest in joining multi-religious activities that the women political leaders and the community would be conducting in their respective areas.

Following the series of visits, a discussion was conducted for the participants to reflect on the visits and articulate their views on ensuring the continuity of the dialogue with the clergy of the four religions.

The participants made the following observations:

“We learnt many unknown religious facts about others religions. Many misunderstandings that we had, were removed because of these visits.”

“I had never been to a Mosque before the SAPRI project. I was under the impression that women were not allowed inside Mosques. I am grateful to SAPRI for providing this opportunity” (A view articulated by a number of participants)

“Until SAPRI’s Religious Venues Visits, the Buddhist Temple was the only place I had been to. With the new exposure I am now aware that Muslims and those from other religions are as same as us, with the same type of blood flowing through our veins”. (Councilor Amitha Dassanayake of Kurunegala)

There is no doubt that the activity was instrumental in reducing, at least to some extent, any misconception that the participants may have had about different religions. It certainly enhanced mutual understanding among the group of participants belonging to multiple religions in Sri Lanka.

SAPRI is confident that this fruitful effort would contribute, even in a small way to building reconciliation in the multi religious society in Sri Lanka.



Heal the Past- Build the Future: Enhancing the Freedom of Religion & Belief in Sri Lanka

Recognizing the importance of religious harmony as an essential factor for sustainable development in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country such as Sri Lanka, the South Asia Policy & Research Institute (SAPRI) joined hands with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to launch a project on Enhancing the Freedom of Religion & Belief in the country, leading to 'Heal the Past and Build the Future'.

The project was designed to promote harmony and co-existence in Sri Lanka, targeting the clergy of the four main religions in the country, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic/Christian and Islam and conducted in the districts of Galle, Gampaha and Kurunegala having a prominent multireligious and multiethnic presence..

The project commenced with a workshop for training of facilitators in the three districts as the district facilitators played an important role in the selection of participants and ensuring their continued association with project activities while assisting with logistical arrangements. A curriculum workshop was conducted thereafter with experts, academics and clergy of different religions joining in with their contribution. ToT sessions were held next to train the resource persons on the modes of organizing the workshops incorporating the interests of the participants while focusing on achieving the project targets.

In view of the relevance of the involvement and contribution of the beneficiaries of the project in project planning and implementation, Project Planning Workshops with Beneficiary participation were held in the three districts. The input of the beneficiaries was fed into the structuring of the project and the agendas of the project activities drawn up accordingly. The actual project process commenced thereafter.

The first phase, of the project was Intra-faith dialogue workshops. Groups of Buddhist; Hindu; Catholic/Christian; and Islam clergy of the three districts met as separate groups in each district twice, and discussed the intricacies of their own religion and attempted to understand 'other' religions and learn their main features in order to recognize the similarities and differences among religions. The knowledge the project participants gained on other religions was expected to nurture an interest among the participants towards positive interaction with members of other religions, both the clergy and laity.

The lessons learnt at the Intra-faith dialogue sessions led the participant clergy to strive for peace and development in the country through harmony and co-existence among the different groups in the society.

The next phase of the project will be Interfaith Dialogue for the multi-religious clergy who went through the Intra-faith Dialogue process. They would, thereafter, break into groups comprising multi-religious clergy and commence interaction with their respective communities to foster harmony and peaceful co-existence at the grassroots level.



🇳🇱 Highlights of the Speech of Ambassador Bonnie Horbach, of the Netherlands 🇳🇱

“I am very impressed by the initiative taken by SAPRI on this project, mainly for two reasons. First because it is addressing reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Secondly it is doing so through the leadership skills and capacity of women. As you may be aware the Netherlands is committed to promoting women’s empowerment and gender equality all over the world. It is one of our key priorities. Although the glass ceiling might be becoming smaller and smaller, women’s contribution to the betterment of our world and shaping a collective future, there is one area where women’s leaderships potential is not recognized adequately. And that is their ability to build peace, reconciliation and trust between communities”.

“We have an inspiring example in Madam Kumaratunga. She embodies the female potential to contribute to peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Though losing her father when she was a teenager and later her husband due to violence, and surviving a deadly suicide attack on her life, Madam Kumaratunga’s determination and courage to pursue genuine peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka remained intact. We see this in her efforts doing her presidency and the respect she received from the people who were affected by the conflict. That is an example of real strength women can bring into transforming communities, to build coexistence and harmony, if they are given the right opportunity and necessary space to operate”.

“When a country like Sri Lanka has experienced deadly conflicts over longer periods, it makes reconciliation more challenging. It can take years, decades or even generations to come to terms with the past and foster trust. A shared trust and mutual respect and understanding. It requires time, resources and commitments. More importantly, it requires brief and courageous steps by all levels of society”.

“Do women here today, you, in this room, have taken those steps? You are leading the way to reconciliation and building one Sri Lanka with all the beautiful shapes and forms, religions and ethnicities for your girls and your boys equally, respectfully, side by side. I do not need to explain to you that so



much is needed for achieving lasting peace and reconciliation, particularly in a country such as Sri Lanka, where the conflict has perpetuated deep rooted divisions among communities and created social, economic and political inequalities between them.”

“..... this project, *Reconciliation at the Grassroot Level led by Women Local Government Councilors* is groundbreaking. An ingredient that is needed for reconciliation in any country is trust. Trust between and within communities. And that is what seems to be lacking today. It might even be the root of today’s problematic situation. The lack of trust. The lack of trust between communities, between local leaders and citizens, between political parties, between ethnic groups, between religious groups. And as we have seen over the last few months the trust deficit between government and the people.”

“Long lasting peace and reconciliation can only become a reality if women are a part of the solution and offered a fair-share of the responsibility to actively participate in the process. I see opportunities emerging through projects like these. But most of all, your willingness to forgive, listen and understand. This gives me hope and inspires me to be better, like you.”

“I wish SAPRI good luck and encourage you all to continue this remarkable work that will immensely benefit this beautiful country and its people, now and for the generations to come.



Highlights of the Speech of Former President Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Chairperson, SAPRI



“First, I would like to thank the Embassy of the Netherlands and the Government of the Netherlands for being a very active and generous partner in our programs on Women’s Empowerment which have actually continued for some years. This is the last one, for the moment. There were others for which the Government of the Netherlands has supported us.

This is a program to empower women, mainly to empower women local government councilors. I am very happy that the Mayor of Colombo who is the leading lady representative of local government bodies is here with us today. I know you have engaged in many women empowerment projects, long before you took on this responsibility, and where we also have met during some projects.”

“We felt it was important to empower the women councilors because after many years of independence of over 65 years, for the first time the government decided to impose a quota of 25% for women at the local government elections. I think that is not enough. Because our population consists of 51%-52% women. At least we should have about 35% women. But this was a good beginning. It was the government of 2015 that brought this in. But the women were not trained as our friend from Kurunegala mentioned. They were given no training at all; they were just thrown into the water to manage on their own. So, I must congratulate Madam Geetha de Silva and the SAPRI staff for imagining this, creating this program, at a very opportune time.”

“And I think today it is absolutely essential that all political people, men and women are given training in values and ethics. Today, our country is financially, totally bankrupt. When the state becomes bankrupt, the people also become bankrupt. If we actually get all of us together to develop our country, develop our villages, towns, provinces and the country, automatically, individuals will also develop themselves. As the economy develops there will be much more money to go around. There will be more jobs, and better paid jobs.”

“The project has been focusing on ‘Reconciliation’ one of SAPRI’s main focus areas, reconciliation through building religious harmony.”

“The divisions in the country have been encouraged and provoked by certain politicians for their own ends. Isn’t that so? Especially at elections time some political parties talk about the greatness of the Sinhalese, Buddhist and that only they own this country.”

“Then the Tamil people come and say “we want our part of the country divided because the Sinhalese people do not care for us and do not give us our rights”. Then the Muslim people also started complaining after some time.”

“Our people, the Sri Lankan people, basically in their hearts they do not have hatred for each other. All of you must understand this. This is what organizations like SAPRI are trying to promote in a small way. For the first time in the history of independent Sri Lanka an institution called ONUR, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, was set up, which I had the privilege of chairing. We did lot of programs with thousands of school children, with adults etc. I believe we have to promote this at the topmost level.”

“Now that the project is over, I am requesting the participants not to forget what they have learnt up to now and continue these efforts in their villages, in their pradeshiya sabhas, in the institutions where they work. They can do this kind of work on their own and perhaps SAPRI can help them to some extent.”

