BACKGROUND

Between January 2019 and January 2020, the Centre for Equality and Justice held workshops and intergenerational forums for approximately seventy five (75) youth and twenty (20) elders (including male and female) in the project districts of Monaragala, Trincomalee and Vavuniya in order to bring the voices of youth and women into the process of reconciliation.

Three (03) intergenerational dialogues were held to share experiences as most young people were not aware of the impact and the root causes of the ethnic conflict. It was also a platform for elders to share their personal experiences on nature and impact of the conflict with youth. Twelve (12) dialogue forums were organized at divisional level by youth who participated in the initial intergenerational forums to discuss the necessity to reconcile communities, the role of youth in reconciliation and how youth can contribute in the long term to bring about reconciliation. Six (06) common intergenerational forums were held for approximately two hundred (200) youth to share what they learnt in the intergenerational forum and also how they understood the term 'reconciliation', how the issues/challenges in their respective districts could be addressed to contribute to reconciliation etc.
The youth networks also worked with over one hundred (100) government officials to garner their support for reconciliation initiatives and also with the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) on district development plans from Monaragala, Trincomalee and Vavuniya districts to incorporate women and youth views into such plans. Further, the workshops brought together government officials and youth from the respective districts to identify the role youth can play in the five-year development plan proposed for the district. The youth and women beneficiaries were also supported with seed grants to conduct activities and small projects to promote reconciliation at ground level in their communities.

During the project, a total of approximately one thousand two hundred (1200) young men and women representing diverse ethnicities from the above specified three districts were trained as change makers to deliver impact on social cohesion and reconciliation. A social media campaign was also carried out to take the views of youth, women and elders to a wider audience to promote debate and discussion. Youth’s views on reconciliation were shared through their personal narratives, debates, discussions, drama, focused group discussions and their interactions with the elders.

The objective of the intergenerational dialogues, workshops and other spaces was to facilitate the understanding of the nature of conflict and to establish networks among conflict affected women and youth to advocate for and promote social cohesion and reconciliation. Additionally, proposals and ideas on social cohesion and reconciliation of the youth were discussed in order for their views to be taken into consideration in the implementation of the district development plans and workplans of national government institutions.

This briefing paper highlights and amplifies the voices of youth in Sri Lanka on reconciliation captured solely from youth workshops and intergenerational forums that were held in Monaragala, Trincomalee and Vavuniya. Views and opinions of youth are most often absent from peacebuilding and reconciliation discourses and therefore youth rarely have the opportunity to shape such related policies and processes. The findings from this project give us reasons for optimism, but also point to areas of concern. Youth views express the lack of knowledge and understanding, and their sense of frustration with the way things are in society. However, they also share a belief that their generation can do things for the better.

**DEFINING YOUTH**

‘United Nations categorises those within the age range of 15 to 24 years as ‘youth’. In some countries the upper limit is moved up to 29 years. In Sri Lanka the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) has established the age range to be 14 to 29’


For the purposes of this project, youth were defined as those between the ages of 19 and 25.
DEFINING RECONCILIATION

There is currently no universally agreed-upon definition of reconciliation. It may mean different things to different people in various contexts. A few well-known definitions are cited below.

‘Reconciliation is a complex set of processes that involve building or rebuilding relationships, often in the aftermath of massive and widespread human rights violations. It can occur at the individual, interpersonal, socio-political, an institutional levels and can be described as “thin” if it is based on coexistence with little or no trust, respect, and shared values, or “thick” if it is based on the restoration of dignity, reversing structural causes of marginalization and discrimination, and restoring victims to their position as rights bearers and citizens’


‘Reconciliation is the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships, and this includes a range of activities. It is a voluntary act that cannot be imposed.’ This process, as defined, involves five interwoven and related strands: developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; acknowledging and dealing with the past; building positive relationships; significant cultural and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic and political change.


‘Reconciliation is about bringing the parties, communities and peoples involved in the conflict together. Its objective should be setting in motion the beginning of a new political life under conditions of the absence of war and violence. In societies of conflict, reconciliation is necessitated by the breakdown of community relations during the protracted civil war in which violence, mutual hatred, and suspicion had defined inter-community relations.’


Meanwhile, youth participants at the CEJ organized workshops and discussions had their own understanding of what reconciliation means. Some of these ideas are captured below:

“The connections and relationships people foster with compromise, understanding, compassion, kindness; irrespective of their caste, religion, race or language.”

Youth participant, Vavuniya

“People coming together regardless of their race, religion or language”

Youth participant, Monaragala

“Without distinguishing a person’s status as having a higher or lower status-everyone should be given the same amount of rights.”

Youth participant, Trincomalee
I. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES: WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

The youth expressed their views on reconciliation in different ways, using different phrases, messages and examples. Nevertheless, they were able to capture the fundamental and underlying meaning of the term. However, it must also be noted that a few youth participants mentioned that they had no understanding of what reconciliation was.

The common sentiments that arose through the discussions were that reconciliation should start at a very early age, i.e at the preschool level and also to ensure that mixed school systems were established; learning the two languages, Sinhala and Tamil must be made mandatory for every citizen of Sri Lanka; ideas, opinions, attitudes, religions and races of others need to be respected; and that onez law needs to be applicable to all citizens for true reconciliation to be achieved.

Some others also raised the view that although reconciliation needs to happen within our homes, offices, schools and villages, it needs to first arise within one’s own thoughts and that we must love people of other religions and races equally. Therefore, it is important to start reconciliation at home so it will spread within our communities and then, to the entire nation where one day all people can live together harmoniously.

“Reconciliation is being able to question and discuss issues together and come to a middle ground and to be aware of the rights of others and our duties.”

Youth participant, Monaragala

“The freedom I have should be extended to others”

Youth participant, Vavuniya
The Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2009 making way for peacebuilding and recovery. Reconciliation became the foremost approach in the peace building discourse. Over the past few years, reconciliation and transitional justice has become a multi-faceted challenge and the progress made and prospects for meaningful reconciliation is questioned by many.

Youth participants through their discussions and group activities identified the challenges and the underlying root causes that impede advancing the reconciliation agenda in the country:

**A) RACE, RELIGION AND CULTURE**

It is a well-known fact that there exists an ethno-religious divide within the communities and in the nation as a whole. This is used as a reason for seclusion and segregation and to not interact with people of another religion or race. This lack of interaction is amplified at a time when a specific ethno-religious community is faced with a problem. In such a situation, only members of that ethnicity or religion will raise their voice and strive to find solutions. The same is true not only with the members of the community but also the leaders. For example, a Muslim leader will raise their voice only when a problem arises for the Muslim community and the same applies to Sinhalese and Tamil leaders. When there is a problem for one community, rarely do the leaders of other communities voice their concerns to help address the issue. Our leaders lack the thinking that they are a leader for everyone.

Different religions and races have different traditions, customs and practices. As such, the abaya and burqa are cultural attire for Muslim women and very recently in the aftermath of the Easter attacks, this became a topic of conversation and was debated by people belonging to other religions, which resulted in mistrust and tensions between communities. As a result, conflicts easily arise between such communities.

In addition, the practice of faith based schools has been adopted in this country. Exposing children at a very young age to other communities can help them understand that they are not different from other children. This exposure will promote respect for other religions and cultures. Faith-based schools only further isolate communities.

**B) LANGUAGE**

Although the youth participants were from multiple districts of Sri Lanka, they unanimously agreed that language played an integral role in the post-conflict reconciliation process. They further added that we live in a time where our communities continue to be divided based on the languages we speak. In a small country like Sri Lanka, where there are only two native languages spoken, communication between communities is largely problematic because of the lack of understanding of the other’s language. Not being able to effectively communicate because of the language barrier has led to misinterpretation which can have and has had serious consequences in the past. There are situations where a single word has led to conflicts in communities.
“It takes years to build and progress on reconciliation, but just seconds to destroy it.”

Youth Participant, Trincomalee

Further it was added that people had very poor knowledge on conflict resolution. A private issue between two people then involve the families, then extend to the neighbours which in turn it becomes a community problem.

People are so narrow-minded that they do not make an attempt to understand another person. This attitude stems from the lack of compassion, kindness and empathy. This then leads to lack of trust amongst and between one another and fails to instill the value of unity. People also have a pre-existing bias that we cannot live unitedly. It was also pointed out that many a time, people have commented and discussed other religions and cultures in a condescending manner and also discriminate people based on their economic status.

Jealousy was yet another fueling factor that challenges reconciliation. People are also known to not be genuine with one another and this artificial behaviour leads to further mistrust and scepticism. Lack of freedom of expression, compromise, low self confidence and inability to accept one’s mistakes were some other characteristics that were identified as challenges.

E) POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICIANS

In many situations this nation has failed to establish a Sri Lankan identity. One such instance is where the political parties have been divided by race or religion. This has fractured our political system and culture since the politicians now thrive on the race, religion and culture divide which has had a damaging effect and a lasting impact on the people.

“People tend to believe that their perspective of the story is correct.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

C) VARYING LAWS APPLICABLE TO DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

The Sri Lankan constitution allows for different communities to be governed by their own laws. The youth were of the opinion that by creating separate laws for Sinhalese Tamil and Muslim people, a divide has been created. As a result of a different set of laws being applicable, people belonging to different religions and races do not have the ability to exercise their rights equally.

D) VALUES AND ATTITUDES

The basic values and morals of today’s communities are disintegrating. People feel that their thoughts are always right and as a result they also have biased attitudes. Consequently, people would then refuse to accept or respect the opinions and views of others even when it is rationally presented. Such differences of opinions coupled with negative emotions such as anger, hatred, dissatisfaction and revenge that are so prevalent in society may then lead to violence and conflict. This has been witnessed and recorded in the history of this country.

“There war was created due to the political needs of certain groups. The innocent people did not ask for a war but they suffered the most.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala
Over generations people have fallen into such traps of the politicians and have over many decades acted according to the way the politicians want them to, without having a clear understanding of the consequences of their actions. This was seen as a major threat to achieving lasting peace and reconciliation in the country.

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Youth Participant, Monaragala

F) DRUG USAGE

Drug usage has been spreading quite rapidly over the last few years. Therefore, as a result of drug usage, if there arises a problem where a person who belongs to one community attacks another person from a different religion or race, this then results in a communal problem or tensions that affects reconciliation as a result.

G) OTHER CHALLENGES

Some of the other factors that were identified as barriers to reconciliation were child abuse, lack of suitable and lucrative opportunities due to discrimination, a high level of youth unemployment, media and biased reporting and sometimes the interventions and the pressure exerted by the international community. Most importantly, it was raised that there are only a small cohort of people in the country who are racists, but this has a debilitating effect on the entire nation.

“We don’t know our own political history, we learned so much yesterday. If they had stopped it saying that there is no need for history, we wouldn’t know that all of this happened. Only if we write down what we know now, the future generations will be aware of what happened in the past. They are the ones, we are the ones who will need to take future political decisions. It’s a shame if we didn’t know our history.”

Youth Participant, Vavuniya

Youth, especially in the war affected districts and also in the South have very little understanding of the thirty-year conflict and the JVP insurrections that took place in the early 70’s and the late 80’s. These experiences have largely remained with their parents and elders who lived through these conflicts. The root causes of the conflict and its historical underpinnings are rarely debated upon. Therefore, the intergenerational dialogue was an important space and platform for the sharing of such knowledge and experiences. Intergenerational forums were conducted in Trincomalee, Monaragala and Vavuniya in March, June and July 2019 respectively.

“History is important to solve problems. It is also important to prevent problems in the future.”

Youth Participant, Vavuniya
However, the frustration of the participants also came through:

“It is important, but there is no use anymore. They’ve been talking for the past so many years. If something was going to change and be resolved, it would have happened by now”

Youth Participant, Vavuniya

At the conclusion of this exercise, the youth shared that it is important to understand intergenerational experiences and that some of the stories that were shared during the workshop had not been heard before.

“It is important to know what happened. That’s how we can identify what went wrong and not repeat the mistake. Otherwise, we will end up making the same mistakes.”

Youth Participant, Vavuniya

They further understood that it was important to remember the experiences of other people during the conflict, especially the older generation.

“During the war, we always looked with suspicion and had to be very careful and cautious during displacement. We found it very difficult to travel to other districts due to permission approvals. After the war, a lot of things have changed and we are able to get many things done with ease. One wrong cannot be made right by another wrong. The issue has to be identified and the fault-doer must wholeheartedly apologise. This is what will prevent future situations and will truly be a process of reconciliation. The youth should forget the past, forgive and build an ever-lasting peaceful Sri Lanka”

Elder participant, Vavuniya

The youth very strongly believed that history needed to be recorded so that it does not get lost with their generation.
4. SHARING FROM OUR PAST

A) MEMORIES FROM THE PAST

Memories are important and they are formed by incidents. They influence and determine our characteristics. Numerous activities were conducted for people to share their personal memories of their own experiences or, of something they had heard of. Such experiences that were shared centered around milestones in Sri Lankan history; the burning down of the Jaffna library in 1981, the 1996 cricket world cup, Keppetipola massacre, etc. The outcomes of this exercise are highlighted below.

Some initial reactions were:

“I felt angry about what the Tamil lady said about our Army because our Army acted humanely during the war. We have seen on television how the soldiers even carried people in their arms.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

“I think these atrocities need to be avenged. No one should be able to get away with this kind of behavior”

Youth Participant, Vavuniya

Towards the end, it was observed that many of them had been moved by, and commented on tragedies which affected communities other than their own, showing that once we look past identities, we are able to empathize with others.

“Youth Participant, Vavuniya

“I don’t understand how people can do these things to each other”

Youth Participant, Trincomalee

i. Differing memories and perceptions of the same incident

A key learning was that it is wrong to promote one’s own memory as the accurate narrative while discounting all others. This was particularly so in the case of collective memories, where more than one individual and community were involved, and that the memories of all should be heard in order for society to move forward, even if such memories are diametrically opposed. Attention was also given to the fact that memories and perceptions can be shaped by external factors. Some of these include media reports and the powerful, influential or affluent figures who are capable of shaping a narrative and influencing the public’s memories.
“To avoid problems we should go to the sources and find the truth rather than relying on one source or on unconfirmed sources.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

For example, the Tamil and Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka have a different approach to 18th May 2009 which marks the end of the thirty-year Sri Lankan civil war. While many Tamil communities remember it as a day of mourning and remembrance, most Sinhalese communities celebrate it and remember it as victory day. It was pointed out that until both communities discussed their differing perceptions with each other, Sri Lankan society would always be divided.

Participants agreed that each community has the same right to mourn and to remember, and that we need to discuss our feelings between communities without the interference of politicians and media. It was highlighted that we need to be able to mourn without the identities and stereotypes we assign to people, without justifying one side’s actions, and to remember that on both sides, many of the victims were civilians.

“The “forget and move on” narrative is an attempt to get rid of the responsibility to deal with the underlying issues which cause conflict.”

Elder Participant, Vavuniya

ii. Response to videos depicting conflict related stories

Yet another important exercise was for people of different communities in attendance to watch videos that gave them an opportunity to reflect that people of different races and from different parts of the country had experienced different aspects of the conflict. The selected six videos were taken from the 'Herstories' archival project which is the first of a series of Sri Lankans’ histories that focuses on mothers from the South and North. It highlights their strength in the face of adversity, and their hopes for their children's and Sri Lanka's future. (https://herstoryarchive.org/) The videos facilitated the understanding
that everyone has a point of view, and that there are different narratives. The responses and reflections of the participants after watching such videos are highlighted below:

“All this while, I thought that only the Sinhalese faced injustices but I felt that other races have also suffered.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

Participants were cautioned against generalizing about a whole community, and were reminded that people in the South were also heavily influenced by the media and didn’t know the truth of what happened or why the LTTE was formed. It was important for all communities to know and understand the history if the nation is to move forward together. Having divisions and differences are unavoidable, but listening and understanding is important. Villainizing the other party and avoiding them is unacceptable.

“There can be a downside. Sometimes if new generations forget, they may be able to live in peace with each other. Otherwise they will be resentful and will continue to be filled with hatred and anger and remain divided”.

Youth Participant, Vavuniya

B. MEMORIALISATION

Opinions were shared on whether war museums and whether such institutions were welcomed. Below are some key messages that captured the essence of this discussion:

“What happened is our history. Recording, preserving and remembering our history is good and important. There is no point in living without the history of our people. However, they are not allowing us to talk about what happened to us”.

Youth Participant, Trincomalee

It was noted that knowing and understanding the past and knowing what went wrong will help future generations understand the issues, and to know what not to do. This will help them to find solutions when they are faced with the same problem.

However, some others felt that:

C. IDENTITIES AND VALUES:

Sri Lanka being a multicultural and pluralistic society, people have multiple and varying identities. So while talking about this topic, it was pointed out that when we define identities, there is a danger of generalizing traits to an entire community without noticing the nuances within. There was a further discussion on the importance of not holding on too much to identities, whether racial or religious, since that can help us justify atrocities against others and dehumanize them.

There are dangers of separating people using different identities. This was discussed with reference to the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka and how the government had identified the perpetrators by the community they belonged to. In the aftermath, as a result of this, we witnessed the grave repercussions the members of the Muslim community as a whole had to face.

Participants were also asked about values and morals that are instrumental for advancing reconciliation, and what values they think are being lost to new generations. It was agreed that values are important and can change people for the better or worse, as they did during the conflict. The importance of prioritizing our values over identities was reiterated. However, contemporary issues in Sri Lanka signify changing values. One such example given was the anti-Muslim sentiments brewing in the country and this can be largely attributed to people strongly holding on to their identities.
5. IMPLEMENTATION OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE TO MECHANISMS TO ADVANCE RECONCILIATION

Usually in the aftermath of a war, the trust in society deteriorates; people are alienated and divided. In such situations, transitional justice (hereinafter TJ) becomes a mechanism in restoring trust and faith in people and bringing about coexistence and reconciliation.

“TJ is used to help the families that were impacted by the conflict. It applies to all sections of society without any distinction of religion, race etc.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

While understanding the importance of TJ in the context of a post-conflict country such as Sri Lanka, the youth while appreciating the steps taken, had serious concerns with effective implementation of the four pillars of transitional justice. Their opinions are highlighted below:

A) TRUTH

The importance of one of the four pillars—truth is truth telling and memories in a transitional justice process was analysed including the catharsis that victims experience in talking about what happened to them, and the power of including everyone who was affected. However, the challenges were spelled out as:

“Can we determine what is the actual truth in the stories that were related? There are occasions where the truth cannot always be always said in the open at that particular moment.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

Some participants had an in-depth knowledge of transitional justice, some others confused it to mean reconciliation while for some others this concept was new. At the outset, the concept was clearly explained through role-play activities. All participants then agreed that reconciliation was directly linked to peace building and transitional justice and also understood the differences between them.

“TJ is relevant after the end of a conflict, but reconciliation is relevant at all times.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

B) JUSTICE

Similar concerns were raised in regard to a second pillar; the right to justice. The youth discussed that justice can mean two different
things with regard to the same problem for people affected on either side.

“For example, if we take the discussion on burka, both parties seek justice for their perspectives. Whose right to justice should we ensure?”

Youth participant, Monaragala

C) REPARATION

The third pillar of transitional justice; reparations will not be able to satisfy victims one hundred percent but it is important to take everyone’s opinion into consideration to satisfy as many people as possible.

D) GUARANTEES OF NON-RECURRENTNESS

Some participants pointed out that in the role play activity, parties told their children not to play with the other family’s children, thereby creating a division among the children as well. The children would also learn to fight due to this. Therefore, it is necessary to take steps to change the mindset of the children that is corrupted by their elders, while also attempting to change the attitudes of the elders as well.

“We have to discuss how this should practically be implemented within the society. Within this forum, we were able to understand and learn about reconciliation and transitional justice. As agents of change we should discuss how we can take this into society in real life.”

Youth Participant, Monaragala

The sustainability of TJ mechanisms were also questioned by the youth; whether the steps taken by one generation for the ‘prevention of recurrence’ would be sustainable for the next generations. Their biggest concern was whether TJ would be sustainable based on practical realities. Some others also mentioned that realising the goals of truth finding or reparation under TJ proves to be very difficult, as those who hold power have no will to build trust among the Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims and that in developing countries such as Sri Lanka, politics define these issues.

A transitional justice process would not be able to satisfy everyone. However, it would most certainly help to bring more comfort and reconciliation amongst the people.

“The attitudes of the people should change for the required transformation to occur in society.”

Elder participant, Monaragala

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6. INTERACTION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND YOUTH

The youth participants had no previous knowledge of the district development plans. At the outset, the facilitators gave an overview of what the plans entailed. This was followed by group activities to explore possible youth participation in the implementation of such plans. The group activities primarily focused on four questions:

1. What areas do youth find important for development plans?
2. How can youth coordinate with government officials on these plans?
3. According to youth, what are the gaps in the proposed fields of development plans?
4. With regard to the gaps identified by youth, how can they contribute in the implementation of these plans?

The youth were also introduced to the seventeen (17) sustainable development goals (SDGs) and were guided to see how the targets detailed in the SDGs could be achieved through the district development plans. Through this, the interdependency factors and interconnectedness between social, economic, political and environmental development was highlighted. A key message was that development and peace are inextricably intertwined and one without the other is not possible.

The youth proposed project ideas for six development areas under the subsections of the district development plans, listed below:

1. Agriculture, Social Services
2. Livestock, Health services
3. Fisheries, Social Services
4. Forestry and Wildlife, Local Government services
5. Industries

The youth groups then also went on to analyse entry points at which they can get involved at the different stages of the district development plans; development process, policies and planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This briefing paper summarizes how Sri Lanka’s youth have responded to peace and reconciliation processes through personal, relational, intergenerational, structural and cultural dimensions. An analysis of the project activities and the thoughts and opinions of the youth highlights that while a decade has passed since the end of the civil war in 2009, young people in Sri Lanka still live in a period of transition. Youth voices and participation in this period are critical for sustainable peace and reconciliation. Even though they harbour doubts and concerns, young Sri Lankans have a strong sense of pride in their country and are ready and willing to serve as agents of change in the process of reconciliation. It is important to seize and direct this positive energy of the next generation in order to develop sustainable peace, promote reconciliation and establish harmony.

“If humanity prevails over religion, race, class, etc., these problems would not occur. This humanity exists in Sri Lankans and emerges during times of natural disasters, emergencies. There is indeed hope!”
— Youth Participant, Monaragala

“Knowing the past and knowing what went wrong will help future generations understand the issues, and to know what not to do. This will help them solve similar problems when they are faced with them”.
— Elder Participant, Trincomalee

“People of all races should live together in harmony like the children of one mother.”
— Youth Participant, Monaragala

“Forego the identity of I or me and instill the identity of us/we”
— Youth Participant, Monaragala