

# Collectives for Coexistence

## The Role of Civil Society in Sri Lanka's Transitional Justice Journey



Institute of Social Development – ISD  
264/4 Ranawana Road,  
Katugasthota  
Sri Lanka

P: 0094 81 207 1228  
E: [kandyisd@sltnet.lk](mailto:kandyisd@sltnet.lk)  
W: <https://www.isdkandy.org>  
FB: <https://www.facebook.com/ISDKandy>

Photographs by ISD Kandy

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A project implemented by the Institute of Social Development (ISD), Kandy, Sri Lanka supported by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) with technical support from the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR).



The Institute of Social Development (ISD) is a non-governmental organization based in Kandy, Sri Lanka established with the aim of empowering marginalized communities. Founded in 1991 by a group of intellectuals, ISD implements projects on promotion of transitional justice, truth and reconciliation, democratic governance, human rights, advocacy and gender empowerment.



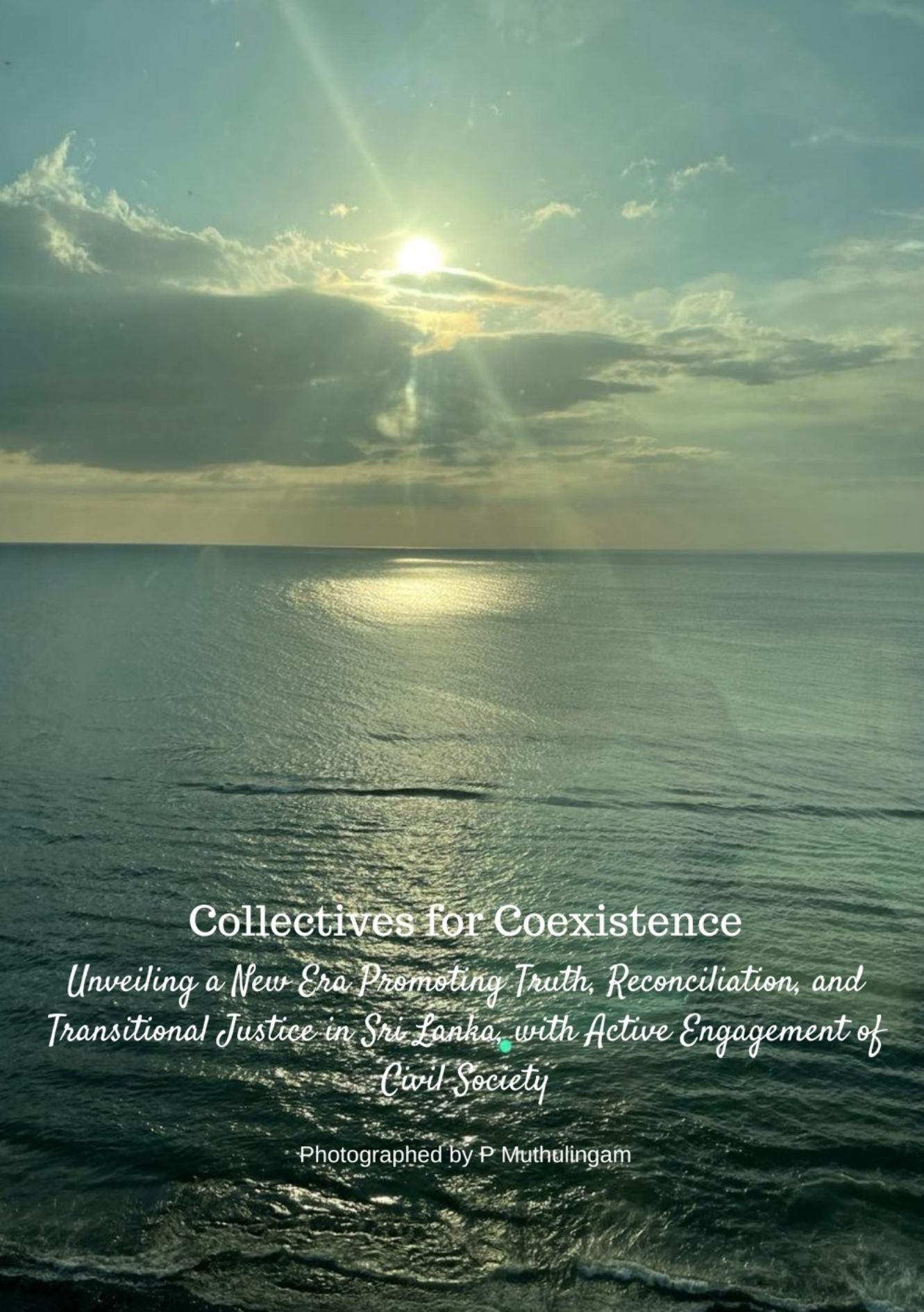
Founded in 1999, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (“the Coalition”) is the only worldwide network of Sites of Conscience. With over 300 members in 65 countries, they build the capacity of these vital institutions through grants, networking, training, transitional justice mechanisms and advocacy.



The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation is a consortium of nine global organizations that works alongside communities to amplify the voices of survivors and inspire collective action in countries struggling to confront human rights violations.

*For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.*

- Nelson Mandela -



## Collectives for Coexistence

*Unveiling a New Era Promoting Truth, Reconciliation, and  
Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka, with Active Engagement of  
Civil Society*

Photographed by P Muthulingam

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# Preface

It is with great pleasure and a sense of accomplishment that we present to you this publication *The Role of Civil Society in Sri Lanka's Transitional Justice Journey* based on the lessons learned from strengthening links between Civil Society and Transitional Justice mechanisms in Sri Lanka. It is ISD's honour and a responsibility to share insights from our collaborative project with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), a project that has been implemented since 2016.

After enduring three decades of civil war in the country, the imperative for justice and reconciliation resonated both nationally and internationally. In response, the Sri Lankan Government initiated the implementation of the 32/I UNHCR recommendations, a crucial step towards addressing the grievances of victims and fostering a path towards healing. During this critical period, ISD partnered with the ICSC to embark on a significant project focused on Transitional Justice. With the generous support of the Secretariat for Coordination on Reconciliation Mechanism (SCRM), our joint efforts aimed to fortify the government's Transitional Justice mechanisms. The project sought to amplify the role of civil society in this transformative process, recognizing the invaluable contribution it could make in shaping a more just and inclusive society.

This publication includes the lessons learnt as well as the challenges we faced in implementing this project. Within these pages, we have tried to share our experiences, and to include the salient points from our collective journey together with the members of the district level Truth and Reconciliation Forums and the grassroots level Village Solidarity Forums. It includes experiences based on diverse perspectives, narratives, and reflections of different religious and ethnic groups, spread across the 25 districts of Sri Lanka, illustrating our engagement with the different groups across the island.

Contained within this publication are not only the successes achieved but also the challenges confronted. Each lesson learned provides valuable insight, showing the way forward for those who embark on similar journeys. We believe that the experiences recounted here can serve as a guidepost, offering insights that can inform and inspire future strategies and actions in Transitional Justice.

It is our hope that the lessons and challenges shared within these pages are a source of inspiration and helps those who shape the future of Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka and beyond, and that it fosters resilience, compassion, and justice for the next generations.

P Muthulingam  
Executive Director  
Institute of Social Development – ISD  
Kandy, Sri Lanka.  
January 2024

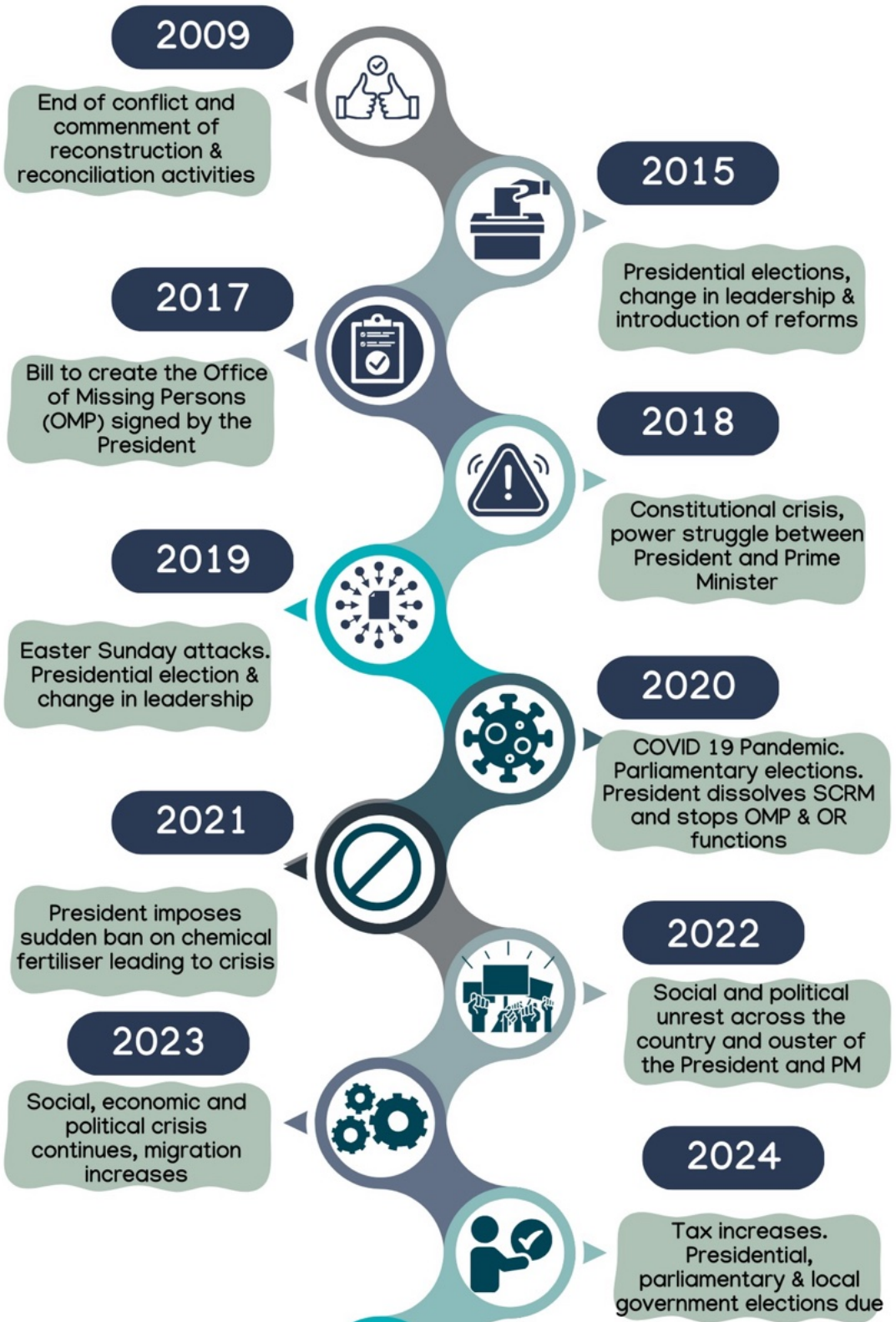
## Abbreviations

BLC	Building Local Capacities to Engage in the Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
SCRM	Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms
ONUR	Office of National Unity and Reconciliation
OMP	Office of Missing Persons
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
CTF	Consultation Task Force
MDPs	Missing and Disappeared Persons
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
ICSC	International Coalition of Sites of Conscience
NGO	Non Government Organisations
OR	Office of Reparation
PCICMP	Presidential Commission to Investigate into Complaints Regarding Missing Persons
PM	Prime Minister
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (political party)
TRF	Truth and Reconciliation Forums
VSF	Village Solidarity Forums
GIJTR	Global Institute for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation
MCC	Mannar Citizen Community
ISD	Institute of Social Development
RTI	Right to Information
TJ	Transitional Justice



**Sri Lanka:  
the Need for Sustainable  
Peace**

# Key Events in Sri Lanka 2009 – 2024



# **Sri Lanka: The Need for Sustainable Peace**

## **Transitional Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation**

After almost thirty years of long-lasting conflict, Sri Lanka was ready to deal with justice, accountability, and reconciliation. As the country tried to understand their past through various justice efforts, it was crucial to invest in new and innovative truth and justice projects. The effectiveness of these projects became very important because there was not much trust in society, and communities needed genuine reconciliation. Both Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) needed support. However, this support had to be careful and focused on projects that met local needs, especially those of the victims. These projects also had to follow international rules for credibility and be accepted by all Sri Lankans.

The Good Governance (*Yahapalanaya*) Government, which came into power in 2015, set up some organizations to handle truth and reconciliation efforts. These include the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM), responsible for managing the transitional justice consultation process, and the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), leading reconciliation and community-rebuilding activities. In August 2016, the parliament successfully passed the bill to create the Office of Missing Persons (OMP). However, it took more than a year of delays until President Sirisena signed the Act in July 2017. Apart from concerns about the constitutionality of the OMP Act, representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) have expressed worries about the criteria for selecting commissioners. They emphasize that the success of the OMP largely depends on the credibility of the commissioners. Additionally, CSO representatives have raised concerns about victim fatigue, the limited results from previous commissions, and the deep distrust of the families of the disappeared towards Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) initiatives.

The 2016 Consultation Task Force (CTF) report underscores the communities' lack of trust in government transitional justice efforts, especially regarding the state's capability to address the longstanding problem of Missing and Disappeared Persons (MDPs). The CTF puts forward specific suggestions, emphasizing the importance of establishing an easily accessible OMP with central and regional offices. Additionally, the report recommends hiring skilled family members of disappeared persons to enhance the effectiveness of the OMP. The need to uncover the truth about the past is crucial for peace and justice in Sri Lanka. The CTF suggests that a commission should focus on revealing the truth about the conflict, addressing discriminatory practices, and providing practical recommendations for reconciliation. The CTF report also recommends including historical events like the burning of the Jaffna Public Library and the expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province in school curricula. However, these recommendations faced challenges during the Good Governance Government due

to limited trust in government processes, delays in establishing transitional justice mechanisms, and the urgent need for victim support. It is in this context, that ISD initiated awareness among CSOs and the community regarding the truth, justice, and reconciliation program initiated by the government, aiming to promote civil societies and communities to act as pressure groups. Simultaneously, ISD liaised with the SCRM, OMP, and Office of Reparations (OR).

In the midst of these challenges, ethnic tensions and violence increased, including events like the Easter Sunday Attack and violence against Muslims in Digana. This turmoil laid the groundwork for a change in government, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president in the 2019 Presidential election, supported by ethnic hardliners and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists. The new president prioritized Sinhala identity and Buddhism, leading to a majoritarian approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government gained significant power, passing the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution. The new government showed little interest in reconciliation initiatives, with institutions like the Office of Missing Persons (OMP), Office of Reparation (OR), and Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) remaining inactive. All activities were halted, and a new reconciliation program was launched after one year. Since the government took office in 2019, there has been growing distrust among victims regarding reconciliation and peace efforts. A culture of impunity is on the rise, and ethnic and religious divisions among youth pose a threat to peace. ISD aimed to contribute to post-conflict peace-building, stability, and rebuilding efforts and changed the project's name to "Collective for Co-existence" to better align with this new context.

In February 2020, during the Independence Day celebrations, the government stopped the singing of the national anthem in Tamil, a practice reintroduced by the previous government. The President initiated a task force for the "One Country, One Law" concept, appointing a controversial Buddhist monk with a history of legal issues as the chairperson. A debate surrounds the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution, with Tamil factions urging its full implementation. The Indian factor, as the amendment was implemented under Indian mediation, adds complexity. Minorities distrust the government's commitment to devolution, evidenced by persistent delays in provincial council elections. Tamil political parties in the North, East, and Central Sri Lanka unite to seek international pressure for devolution and urge it to fully implement the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment.

In 2022, Sri Lanka experienced its most severe economic and political crisis since gaining independence, resulting in a dire financial predicament. The nation struggled to afford crucial imports, leading to acute shortages of essential items such as food, medicines, energy, fuel, gas, and construction materials. The economic downturn elevated the cost of living, ranking Sri Lanka among the top five nations with the highest food price inflation globally, pushing many vulnerable citizens into poverty and causing widespread unemployment. In numerous households, incomes were

insufficient to meet rising basic expenses, hinting at a long-term recession and an increase in poverty nationwide. The intertwining of economic and political factors emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive and effective measures to address these pressing challenges. Amidst the economic crisis and escalating costs of living, the middle class spontaneously mobilized in protest against the deteriorating economic conditions, gathering in front of President Gotabaya's residence. Subsequently, inspired by this movement, the youth staged protests in front of the Presidential Secretariat and seized control of Galle Face, marking a significant escalation in the demonstrations.

In May 2022, violence erupted when supporters of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse attacked protesters at Galle Face, triggering conflicts between pro-government and anti-government demonstrators nationwide. Amidst the chaos, Prime Minister Rajapakse resigned, and Ranil Wickramasinghe, holding only one parliamentary seat, was appointed as the new prime minister. Sri Lanka's economic troubles worsened in April 2022 when it defaulted on debt repayments and declared bankruptcy, sparking public outrage and calls for the president's resignation. Tensions reached a climax on July 9, 2022, as protestors from across the country gathered in Colombo, storming the presidential secretariat, the official residence of the president, and other government buildings. Faced with the crisis, President Gotabaya resigned and fled overseas, leading to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe being appointed as the acting president. In a subsequent parliamentary vote later in July, Ranil Wickramasinghe assumed the presidency.

In 2024, a semblance of "stability" may be present, but more political and economic turmoil is expected in Sri Lanka, with the year poised to witness a trifecta of elections, including Provincial, Parliamentary, and Presidential, against the backdrop of escalating costs of living and high taxation. Amidst this complex situation, the relevance of issues related to transitional justice becomes even more pronounced. The need for addressing historical injustices, ensuring accountability, and fostering reconciliation takes precedence. The outcome of the elections, coupled with the economic landscape, will significantly impact the trajectory of transitional justice initiatives. As the nation navigates through these multifaceted challenges, the importance of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to transitional justice cannot be overstated, offering a potential pathway towards a more just and reconciled future for Sri Lanka.

## **Why Collectives for Coexistence**

From October 2015 to March 2016, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), together with ISD carried out a needs assessment. The goal was to understand the priorities of local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the government regarding transitional justice. The two organisations also aimed to identify areas where technical support was needed, particularly in addressing the issue of missing persons.

Through conversations with victims, families of the missing, CSO representatives, and Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) officials, the partners discovered a widespread public distrust in the GoSL's efforts to handle the past and provide legitimate platforms for truth and justice. Concerns about ongoing human rights violations and intimidation, especially in the North and East, persisted locally and internationally. Despite changes in leadership and some progress in addressing socio-political needs, there were limited improvements in the daily lives of people in these regions. CSO representatives emphasized that public perception of the GoSL's intentions would depend on how it addressed issues such as political prisoners, the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act, and land restitution for Tamils in the North.

Apart from issues of distrust, the assessment identified a clear need for capacity building around transitional justice. Since the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka in September 2015, the country has garnered international attention, leading to various domestic activities. However, there was little coordination of these efforts. While international NGOs partnered with Colombo-based NGOs to conduct awareness workshops in the North and East, CSOs in these regions lacked the capacity to actively participate in these discussions. The assessment also highlighted the limited opportunities for CSOs in the North and East to directly engage with the GoSL, as advocacy efforts were often led by Colombo-based NGOs with minimal input from the rest of the country.

Despite the limited capacity of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Northern Sri Lanka to engage with formal transitional justice mechanisms, various actors, including NGOs, family associations, priests, and nuns, are actively documenting human rights violations such as disappearances and torture. Notably, priests in Mannar have documented around 3,800 disappearance cases. However, due to entrenched distrust and security concerns, there is a lack of collaboration, resulting in duplicated efforts and a lack of systematic archiving of documentation. Participants often face harassment and intimidation, and there is no centralized database for previous truth-seeking processes. The issue of disappearances is closely tied to truth-telling and survivors' right to know the truth. Since the 1980s, Sri Lanka has grappled with a high incidence of missing persons, with uncertainty about the actual scale and little confidence in state mechanisms like the Presidential



Commission to Investigate into Complaints Regarding Missing Persons (PCICMP). Families of the disappeared, especially women who form the majority of complainants to PCICMP, endure ongoing harassment when seeking information.

Despite the challenges, families and victims are resilient in their quest for truth, justice, and accountability. The Collective of Coexistence project was developed during a critical period when the government of Sri Lanka was in the process of planning laws and setting up the Office of Missing Persons (OMP). Recognizing the crucial role of advocates and families of the missing in this transitional justice landscape, the project focused on providing concrete skills, facilitating knowledge exchange, fostering networking opportunities, and promoting trust-building.

Since 2016, ISD funded by ICSC has implemented the project *Building Local Capacities to Engage in the Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka* (BLC). Through this project ISD actively advocated for the truth and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka by engaging Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) throughout the country. The project supported initial government efforts, such as employing a transitional justice coordinator, drafting laws related to missing persons, and establishing the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM). The project aimed to enhance the capacity of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and create a platform for dialogue and collaboration, promoting consensus on common issues among diverse stakeholders.

In 2019, with the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the government's stance on reconciliation changed. The 20<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution paid little attention to reconciliation, resulting in institutional inactivity and distrust among victims. President Gotabaya dissolved the SCRM and ceased the functions of the OMP and OR. During this time, when NGOs were closely scrutinised by the government, the ISD office was raided by the NGO secretariat, during which all documents were meticulously inspected. Following a thorough review, it was concluded that the ISD was doing a commendable job advancing the cause of coexistence. This acknowledgment underscored ISD's significant role in fostering collaborative efforts towards promoting peace and coexistence within the country. In response to this changing context, ISD renamed the project as *Collectives for Coexistence*.

# Driving Forces of the Project



International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**



**GIJTR**  
Global Initiative for Justice,  
Truth & Reconciliation

**10**  
**1 NATIONAL**  
**+ 9 PROVINCIAL TRFS**



National & Provincial  
levels TRF  
Coordinators

Lobby & advocacy with national  
& provincial authorities

Analysing & addressing  
transitional justice issues

Developing national & provincial  
networks

Discussing & resolving issues

**25**  
**DISTRICT TRFS**



District Level TRF  
Coordinators - NGO &  
Civil Society

Lobby & advocacy with district  
level stakeholders

Awareness creation as an early  
warning system

Coordination of district &  
community level actions

Facilitation & monitoring of  
reconciliation activities

**240+**  
**VSFS**



Village Solidarity  
Forums & Community  
Organisations

Conduct monthly meetings to  
identify and resolve issues

Act to mitigate conflicts at  
community level

Liaise with district level forums

Conduct community level  
initiatives to promote  
coexistence

Share ideas and experiences  
through joint activities with other  
community stakeholders and  
community leaders

In 2016, initiatives were undertaken to build local capacity and advocate for Truth & Reconciliation Forums. Following the change in government in 2019 and due to the government's stance on Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation, the initiative was later renamed

## Collectives for Coexistences



# **Challenges: Overcoming Turmoil Amidst Changing Dynamics**

# **Challenges: Overcoming Turmoil Amidst Changing Dynamics**

## **Challenges Faced by Ethnic Minority Groups**

Sri Lanka boasts a diverse cultural landscape shaped by several ethnic groups. The predominant Sinhalese, with a majority following Buddhism, have historically held a significant influence in the country's politics and culture. Tamils, a major minority, are further divided into Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. The Sri Lankan Tamils primarily reside in the Northern and Eastern provinces while the Indian Tamils or Malayiyaga Thamails reside in the Hill Country and are descended from Indian workers brought to work in the plantations. Moors, descended from Arab traders and Malay and Indian immigrants, follow Islam and are dispersed across the nation, particularly in urban areas and the Eastern Province. These Ethnic minorities face various challenges, based on historical, social, and political dynamics. They face marginalization in various aspects of society, including employment, education, and political representation. Economic disparities persist, with ethnic minorities often facing challenges in accessing economic opportunities, employment, and business resources.

The three decade long civil conflict in Sri Lanka, caused significant displacement of ethnic minorities. Many were forced to leave their homes, resulting in long-lasting social and economic consequences. Disputes over land and property rights have been a source of contention, particularly in regions affected by conflict. Many ethnic minorities have experienced challenges in reclaiming their lands and properties after displacement.

Language disparities, especially between Sinhala and Tamil, have created challenges in education and access to public services. Limited availability of resources in minority languages can hinder effective communication and participation in various sectors. Protection of cultural and religious rights remains a concern. Instances of restrictions on religious practices and cultural expressions have been reported, affecting the free exercise of these rights. Although efforts have been made to address political representation, ethnic minorities often face challenges in achieving proportional representation in political institutions, limiting their ability to influence policies that affect their communities. Achieving meaningful reconciliation and addressing the legacies of the civil war remain ongoing challenges. Rebuilding trust among communities, ensuring justice, and addressing issues of accountability are essential for lasting peace and stability.

## **Ethnicity and Racism in Politics**

Ethnicity and racism play significant roles in determining political representation in Sri Lanka, shaping the country's political landscape. Historically, political power has been concentrated within the majority Sinhalese. This majority-minority dynamic

has led to perceptions of unequal political representation for ethnic minorities, including Tamils and Muslims. The country has experienced ethnic polarization, especially during and after the civil conflict. This polarization has, influenced political decisions, with parties aligning themselves along ethnic lines to appeal to their respective constituencies.

The way electoral districts and boundaries are drawn impacts political representation. There have been concerns about the manipulation of these boundaries to favour one ethnic group over another. Political parties appeal to voters based on their ethnic identity, leading to ethnic interests taking precedence over broader national issues when it comes to voting. Some political parties in Sri Lanka are explicitly aligned with particular ethnic groups. Efforts to address ethnic disparities have included power-sharing arrangements, particularly in the context of devolution of powers to provincial councils, however, the effectiveness of these arrangements are still being debated. Issues related to reconciliation, justice, and the inclusion of minority perspectives in decision-making processes remain important and relevant in the current political context.

## **Northern Tamils and Remembrance of the Dead**

In post-civil war Sri Lanka, the Tamil community in the northern regions faces government restrictions hindering their remembrance and commemoration efforts. The Sri Lankan government impedes Tamils from honouring their dead, with criticism directed at its approach for stifling mourning attempts. A major point of contention arises from the government's opposition to Tamil-led initiatives for memorials and remembrance ceremonies dedicated to war victims. Authorities have dismantled and prevented the construction of memorials, citing concerns such as public order and potential ties to separatist sentiments.

The government is also accused of suppressing remembrance through legal means, using the Public Security Ordinance and Prevention of Terrorism Act to curtail gatherings associated with Tamil separatism. This legal intervention creates challenges for the Tamil community to openly express grief and remember those lost during the conflict. Reports indicate a military presence at memorial events, contributing to an environment of intimidation and surveillance. The militarization of northern regions intensifies the perception that remembrance activities are closely monitored, discouraging open commemoration. These restrictions underscore the complex dynamics and lingering tensions in post-civil war Sri Lanka, emphasizing the need for reconciliation and a more inclusive approach to remembrance in ongoing discussions about post-war recovery and healing.

## **Land Rights and Military Presence in Former Conflict Areas**

Despite the conclusion of the war in 2009, the Sri Lankan military persists in maintaining control over significant portions of land belonging to the northern population, a contentious and enduring problem. The residents of the northern region express profound frustration and discontent with this ongoing situation, as they yearn for the restoration of their land rights and autonomy. This protracted military presence not only impedes the region's socioeconomic development but also exacerbates tensions and grievances among the local populace. The persistence of this issue underscores the urgent need for constructive dialogue and meaningful action towards achieving a sustainable resolution that respects the rights and aspirations of the people of the north.

## **Mistreatment of Workers from Malaiyaga Tamil Community**

There have been several incidents of discrimination and mistreatment of Malaiyaga Tamil workers reported in recent times, particularly those involved in domestic work, including children. Some of these incidents have even resulted in death, with rights groups and activists calling for legal redress that often go unheard.

Tamil domestic workers, particularly children, are vulnerable to exploitation due to their marginalized status. Instances of child labour involve young Tamils forced into domestic work under harsh conditions, enduring long hours, meagre wages, and lacking access to education and healthcare. While legal safeguards are in place, their effective implementation may be hindered by factors such as undue influence exerted by powerful individuals over the authorities, as well as their financial capacity to mitigate these issues discreetly.

Addressing these issues requires advocating for the rights of Malaiyaga Tamil communities, particularly children. Initiatives focused on awareness, policy reforms, and improved access to education and healthcare can contribute to breaking the cycle of discrimination and exploitation.

## **Struggle for Fair Wages Among Plantation Workers**

The debate surrounding the wages of plantation workers in Sri Lanka has persisted for many years, with consistent calls for improved compensation. As far back as 2015, plantation workers began advocating for a significant increase in their minimum wage, demanding a raise from the existing LKR 500 to LKR 1,000. In 2019, the government under President Gotabaya took action, compelling plantation companies to implement the demanded wage increase. Despite this intervention, the reality on the ground has not reflected the promised improvement.

Even with the economic crisis looming and the cost of living skyrocketing, the pledged wage adjustment has yet to materialize. This ongoing disparity between promises made and actual implementation not only perpetuates the financial struggles of plantation workers but also underscores broader issues of economic inequality and government accountability. The failure to address the fundamental needs of the workforce highlights systemic challenges that must be addressed for these workers.

## **Violence against Muslims**

There have been several incidents of violence against Muslims that have taken place in Sri Lanka since the end of the conflict in 2009. These acts of violence have been exacerbated due to the anti-Muslim rhetoric perpetrated by some nationalist factions including extremist Buddhist monks.

In June 2014, anti-Muslim violence erupted in Aluthgama and Beruwala after a rally organised by a Buddhist extremist group. The violence resulted in several deaths, injuries, and significant property damage. In March 2018, there were reports of anti-Muslim violence in Ampara following an incident at a mosque. Later in March 2018, violence erupted in the Kandy district, leading to the imposition of a state of emergency. Homes, businesses, and mosques were damaged during the unrest.

## **Easter Attacks and its Aftermath**

The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, which occurred on April 21, 2019, had a profound impact on civil life in the country, and changed inter-ethnic dynamics among the different ethnic groups. The attacks caused a tragic loss of lives and numerous injuries affecting people from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. In the aftermath of the attacks, there was a substantial increase in security measures across the country including the deployment of security forces at public places, religious sites, and crowded areas. These measures contributed to a heightened sense of tension and anxiety in civil life.

The Easter attacks exacerbated existing tensions among different religious and ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. There were reports of increased suspicion and hostility towards the Muslims, as the perpetrators of the attacks were identified as Islamic extremists, further straining inter-community relations. The attacks had social and economic consequences. Businesses and livelihoods, especially those linked to tourism, suffered in the aftermath due to a decline in visitor numbers and economic uncertainties. Muslims faced security concerns and increased scrutiny there were reports of incidents where individuals or businesses associated with the Muslim community were targeted and there were increased calls for boycotting Muslims businesses. The attacks and its aftermath brought to light the need for rebuilding trust and promoting inclusive policies to create a more resilient society.

## **Challenges posed by COVID**

The COVID-19 pandemic posed various challenges across Sri Lanka, affecting different ethnic groups in diverse ways, although the virus itself did not discriminate based on ethnicity. Economic challenges included job losses, income reduction, and disruptions in livelihoods. Ethnic minorities, particularly those in lower-income brackets, faced heightened economic vulnerabilities, impacting their ability to sustain their families and meet basic needs.

Disparities in healthcare access and infrastructure were highlighted during the pandemic. School closures and the shift to online learning posed challenges, particularly for students without access to digital resources. Overcrowded living conditions in certain areas, often experienced by ethnic minorities, increased the risk of virus transmission. Physical distancing and quarantine measures were challenging in such environments, contributing to the higher vulnerability of these communities.

The pandemic sometimes fuelled social stigma and discrimination. Ethnic minorities often faced prejudice and blame. In the early phases of the pandemic, a Muslim man, who had recently travelled abroad, was identified as having contracted the virus. This led to broader stigmatization and unwarranted allegations against the Muslim community. By prominently featuring the ethnicity of pandemic victims, media reports fostered misconceptions that certain ethnic or religious groups were more to blame for spreading the virus. The situation was further exacerbated when the head of public health inspectors made statements on television attributing the spread of the virus to Muslims based on their lifestyle and living arrangements. Forced cremations, imposed on all COVID victims regardless of the Muslims' religious beliefs that call for burial instead of cremation, intensified existing conflicts. These incidents fuelled unwarranted fear and discrimination and distracted from the core message of collective responsibility to combat the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, although the Sri Lankan government implemented widespread lockdowns and closures of businesses to curb the spread of the virus, plantation workers were required to continue work in order to generate crucial foreign income for the country. The living conditions in plantation line rooms, characterized by close quarters and limited space, were severely affected by quarantine measures, mandating the quarantine of entire line rooms if even a single COVID-19 case was detected in the area. Consequently, plantation workers found themselves grappling not only with the risk of infection but also with the prospect of losing their livelihoods for extended periods due to quarantine requirements. The situation underscored the vulnerabilities of marginalized communities during times of crisis.



## **Political and Economic Crisis and its Implications on TJ**

In 2019, Gotabaya Rajapakse became president of Sri Lanka with an overwhelming mandate, garnering 6.9 million (52 percent) votes. The public, reeling from the devastating Easter attacks of April 2019, had placed their hopes in him for enhanced safety and security. His brother, former President Mahinda Rajapakse assumed the role of prime minister under Gotabaya's administration. However, the popularity of the Rajapakse government gradually eroded due to a series of policy missteps, including the controversial ban on chemical fertilizers and tax reductions that precipitated a severe economic crisis. Dissatisfaction among the populace escalated, fuelled by power outages, fuel and gas shortages, escalating commodity prices, and essential item scarcities.

Protests ensued throughout the country popularly known as the *Aragalaya* (the struggle), culminating in the storming of the president's official residence and a three-month siege at Galle Face. Despite the resignation of the cabinet, public discontent persisted, primarily centred on the demand for the president's resignation. In April 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on debt repayments and declared bankruptcy, further intensifying public unrest. In May 2022, clashes between supporters of the prime minister and protestors at Galle Face sparked nationwide confrontations. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's resignation amid the turmoil resulted in Ranil Wickramasinghe, holding only one parliamentary seat, assuming office.

The outcry for the president's resignation reached a tipping point on July 9, 2022, as protestors from across the country converged on Colombo, storming the presidential secretariat and other government buildings. Amid the crisis, President Gotabaya resigned and fled abroad, leading to Ranil Wickremesinghe being appointed acting president in July 2022.

One of the most remarkable elements, perhaps even the primary redeeming quality, of the *Aragalaya* movement was its ability to bring together diverse ethnic groups in a concerted endeavour to oust the incumbent president. Led primarily by impassioned youth activists, the protesters fervently advocated for solidarity among various ethnic and religious factions, underscoring the deep-seated historical strife within Sri Lanka. In doing so, they underscored the imperative of truth and reconciliation in the wake of recent tumultuous events. Despite the country's complex social fabric, marked by centuries of ethnic tensions, the protesters transcended these divisions in pursuit of a common cause. Their calls for unity resonated deeply with citizens disillusioned by the political status quo, fostering a sense of shared purpose and determination among individuals from all walks of life.

# Objectives of the Project



## Phase 1

1. Improve Sri Lankan civil society's capacity to document human rights abuses and securely store documentation for use in local and national truth, justice and reconciliation processes.
2. Build Sri Lankan civil society capacity to assess and address the wide-ranging impacts and pressing needs of victims and survivors of the conflict, such as trauma healing, truth-telling and coming to terms with the past.
3. Support Sri Lankan civil society in addressing the needs of families of the missing by sharing the experiences of other contexts, engaging them on issues related to international best practices, and building capacity for civil society engagement with domestic policy related to missing and disappeared persons (MDP).
4. Facilitate greater coordination among Sri Lankan actors currently engaged in transitional justice initiatives to build a sustainable movement around truth and justice.



## Phase 2

1. Support the mandates of the GoSL-established transitional justice mechanisms—the OMP and OR—to meet survivor's and affected communities' needs by providing platforms for trust-building.
2. Identify the perceptions and needs of local communities and victims groups as it relates to the search for the disappeared and the delivery of reparations.
3. Provide technical support to CSOs and representatives from the OR and OMP to raise awareness on reparations, redress, rehabilitation as well as the search for the missing and disappeared among established local and community-based entities.
4. Build the technical capacities of OMP and OR staff to understand the needs related to, and undertake, the search and identification of the missing and disappeared in Sri Lanka.
5. Support and provide technical assistance to the Truth and Reconciliation Forum's (TRF) to implement its strategic activities.



## Phase 3

1. Capacitate youth to counter hate speech and reject violence.
2. Enhance TRF members to engage to promote non-violence among the community during elections.
3. Support educators to identify key avenues for history curriculum reform to promote a shared history which ensures inclusiveness.
4. Capacitate schoolteachers and educators to effectively teach and foster civic education at schools.
5. Promote responsible use of social and digital media among youth.
6. Capacitate women to increase public participation in political and social life.
7. Evaluate and document project impacts with the support of TRF at the district level.



**Achievements:  
Promoting Transitional  
Justice & Reconciliation  
Across Sri Lanka**

# EXPERIENCES OF VSFS

## Some Examples of Community Activities

- Addressing flood threats by constructing a drainage systems. in Thudella and Adiambalama.
- Taking steps to set up water lines to address the high cost of purchasing drinking water and health issues affecting workers living in boarding houses due to contaminated well water in Averiawatta, Kalahapitiya, Kovinna, Kimbulapitiya, and Liyanagemulla.
- Setting up child health clinics to address issues of lack of childcare facilities in Averiawatta.
- Creation of Peace Gardens and organic vegetable market promoting income generation and fostering exchange between families in Katunayake
- Organising a Shramadana campaign to enable the removal of waste and preventing dengue outbreaks in Katunayake, raising awareness among the village community.



# **Achievements: Promoting Transitional Justice Across Sri Lanka**

## **Truth & Reconciliation Forums: Building Bridges across 25 Districts**

The Collectives for Coexistence project that was implemented across the 25 districts of Sri Lanka, aims to foster transitional justice, truth, and reconciliation from grassroots levels, to district, provincial and national levels. Initiated in 2016, in a few selected districts, the project gradually expanded to embrace every corner of the island nation due to its relevance. The journey was rife with achievements as well as challenges and marked by valuable lessons and insights.

Since 2016, ISD has embarked on a transformative initiative, dedicated to the establishment and fortification of Truth and Reconciliation Forums (TRFs) across all 25 districts of Sri Lanka. This undertaking is noteworthy, considering the challenging backdrop of crises that have unfolded within the country during this period, including the tragic Easter attacks, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the concurrent economic and political upheavals within the country. In setting up these TRFs ISD had to navigate through administrative hurdles, logistical complexities, and the socio-political landscape, in order to foster reconciliation with impacts on district and community levels.

In the face of the many challenges that faced the country in the last years, the TRFs have emerged as catalysts for positive change. The TRFs, far from being mere structures, have proven to be dynamic entities deeply embedded in their communities. Through a range of reconciliation activities, they have played a crucial role in providing support and guidance to communities grappling with the aftermath of the crises. By fostering open dialogue, understanding, and unity, these forums have empowered communities to navigate the challenges posed by the Easter attacks, the COVID pandemic, and the economic and political uncertainties. The forums have served as invaluable resources, enabling communities to better deal with the crises that have affected the country, by creating spaces for healing and dialogue.

The activities implemented by the Truth and Reconciliation Forums (TRFs) in each district have proven instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding of societal issues among communities. Through concerted efforts, these forums have empowered communities to undertake collective actions, thereby mitigating potential conflicts that may have arisen due to unresolved issues.

## **Village Solidarity Forums: Truth & Reconciliation at Grassroots Level**

Building on the valuable insights gained from four years of project implementation, the Truth and Reconciliation Forums (TRFs) demonstrated a proactive response by creating Village Solidarity Forums (VSFs). These forums, born out of the lessons learned, now stand as integral components of the reconciliation landscape, with 240 VSFs established across the country. The decision to establish Village Solidarity Forums was driven by a recognition of the need for more localized and community-driven efforts in reconciliation. The lessons learned from the initial TRF activities highlighted the importance of addressing issues at the village level, where nuanced challenges and opportunities could be better understood and addressed. The VSFs were conceived as platforms for fostering solidarity, understanding, and collaboration within individual communities at grassroots level.

As these Village Solidarity Forums took root, they quickly became catalysts for positive change. Their localized focus allowed them to address community-specific concerns and grievances, promoting a sense of ownership among the communities. By leveraging their intimate knowledge of local dynamics, VSFs have been able to tailor reconciliation initiatives to the unique needs of each village, contributing significantly to the overall success of the broader project. Several VSFs have already demonstrated their effectiveness by making noteworthy contributions to truth and reconciliation within their communities. Whether through organizing community dialogues, implementing educational programs, or initiating collaborative projects, these forums have become agents of positive transformation. Their impact extends beyond mere discussions, as they actively engage in practical actions that promote understanding, healing, and unity among community members.

The VSFs facilitate community development projects that address local needs, such as infrastructure improvements, educational programs, and healthcare initiatives. They engage in lobby and advocacy efforts, on a range of issues, from advocating for improved access to basic services to challenging discriminatory policies and practices. The forums prioritize gender empowerment initiatives, recognizing the fundamental importance of gender equality in fostering inclusive development. They work tirelessly to raise awareness about gender-based discrimination, provide resources and support to women and girls, and advocate for policies that safeguard their rights and promote their participation in decision-making processes. Through their approach, the VSFs serve as catalysts for positive change, driving forward a vision of inclusive, equitable, and rights-based development at the grassroots level.

## **Halting Violence: Locals Mobilize to Prevent Violence Against Muslims**

There have been escalations of ethnic violence against Muslims in recent times. During the Digana Riots of 2018, the violence extended beyond Kandy, spreading to other areas in Sri Lanka. Members of the TRFs took proactive measures to curb the growing wave of violence. Responding promptly to the situation, TRF members, trained by the Global Institute for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR), mobilized activists dedicated to promoting peace. Their collaborative efforts aimed to prevent the attacks from escalating, working in cooperation with local police and state authorities.

The perpetrators of these acts were often young individuals, including unemployed youths, three-wheel or tuk-tuk drivers, and urban and rural day labourers. Their vulnerability to manipulation stemmed from ignorance and a lack of exposure to the values of pluralism, equality, good governance, and peace. In response to this, ISD took initiatives to enhance the capacities of three-wheel drivers and rural youths. ISD focused on educating them about democracy, governance, truth, and reconciliation. The organization conducted both in-person and virtual awareness-raising workshops with these groups, aiming to foster a greater understanding of these values and promote a more harmonious and tolerant society.

## **Leading by Example: Community Leaders Prevent Conflict between Groups**

Buddhist monks in Badulla were reportedly trained to organise activities against Muslims, posing a potential threat. However, TRF played a crucial role in preventing such actions. Following the Easter attacks and subsequent anti-Muslim riots, the TRF committee in Badulla, along with other CSOs, took immediate action. They engaged in discussions with the District Secretary and the head of the police department in Uva Province to bring the situation under control.

The proactive measures taken by the TRF committee, involving 16 members including 4 ladies and 12 gentlemen, proved effective in averting potential anti-Muslim riots in the district. Through collaborative efforts and dialogue, the TRF members engaged with the police authorities, ensuring that the situation did not escalate further. Additionally, TRF organised a meeting with the Deputy Inspector General in Badulla to discuss strategies for reducing conflicts between the Sinhalese and Muslim communities. These initiatives reflect the TRF's commitment to promoting peace, dialogue, and conflict resolution in the region.

In Mawanalle, a meeting was convened following the vandalism of Buddha statues, bringing together Division Secretaries to identify those responsible. During the discussions, it was emphasized that the influence of Buddhist priests is significant, as people tend to pay close attention to their guidance. ISD undertook an initiative

to raise awareness among local authorities in the area, including the Divisional Secretary and the Police, regarding the need to prevent clergy from wielding undue influence over the public, particularly in a manner that could incite violence against minorities. During these efforts, emphasis was placed on the crucial importance of maintaining a secular government sector. The discussions aimed to underscore the principles of neutrality and impartiality within the government sector, emphasizing the need for officials to operate independently of religious influence. By advocating for a secular governance framework, ISD sought to create an environment that upholds the principles of equality, tolerance, and non-discrimination, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.



# EXPERIENCES OF VSFS

## Some Examples of Lobby & Advocacy

- Deploying police officers to prevent harassment, abuse, and theft in commercial areas, along with installing streetlights for nighttime security.
- Addressing transportation issues by lobbying to place bus stops in strategic locations to prevent road obstructions. Submitting letters to relevant state institutions to address these concerns.
- Engaging members from different VSFs in advocacy efforts related to labour laws, information laws, and social media laws.
- Informing VSF about employment issues affecting some members (in the Free Trade Zone) and taking action to ensure back pay and re-employment through the labour commissioner.



## **Increasing Social Activism: Grassroots Groups Address Land Issues**

The TRF and the VSF collaborated to address land issues related to unauthorized individuals encroaching on properties in the Trincomalee district. To tackle this matter, a formal application under the Right to Information Act (RTI) was submitted to the relevant Divisional Secretariats. This application sought comprehensive information regarding the encroachments and related details.

Upon the receipt of this application, the TRF and VSF actively engaged in discussions with the Divisional Secretariats, presenting the concerns surrounding unauthorized encroachments on land. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the TRF and VSF sought the intervention of the Divisional Secretary to mediate and resolve the land-related issues in the Trincomalee district.

Through collaborative efforts and the mediation facilitated by the Divisional Secretary, a resolution was achieved, settling the disputes arising from unauthorized individuals encroaching on land. This successful outcome demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing the Right to Information mechanism and collaborative initiatives involving local organizations like the TRF and VSF in addressing and resolving community issues related to land encroachments.

Several members of the VSF from the Jaffna district have voluntarily stepped forward to advocate on behalf of the Mannar district VSF in relation to a windmill electricity generating project. This project has raised concerns as it involves the forceful takeover of land owned by many members of the Mannar community by the government. The Jaffna district VSF members are actively engaging in support of their counterparts in Mannar, aiming to address the issues surrounding the land acquisition for the project.

In addition to the VSF involvement, the Mannar district partner, Mannar Citizen Community (MCC), associated with the TRF, took proactive measures to voice their concerns. MCC organised a demonstration against the proposed windmill project to draw attention to the adverse impacts on the Mannar community. Significantly, the Jaffna TRF has expressed solidarity with this cause and has committed to joining the protest alongside MCC. In a collaborative effort, they have extended an invitation to other districts to offer their support, recognizing the importance of unity in strengthening the protest against the controversial project. This collective action underscores the significance of regional cooperation in advocating for the protection of community rights and interests.

## **Peace Gardens: Innovative Actions for Food Security during Crisis**

Sri Lanka, once known as the 'Granary of the East' (*Peradiga Danyagaraya*), was not only self-sustaining in rice and other food crops but also managed to export them to neighbouring countries. However, during the colonial era, the focus shifted towards cash crops, neglecting paddy cultivation. In Sri Lanka's present, a customary practice involves community members collectively working in paddy fields or vegetable gardens owned by a single family. During harvests, villagers join together to harvest across each other's fields, fostering a sense of collectiveness, community, and sharing. In the aftermath of modernization, the country became reliant on imports for essential food items like rice and onions. Presently, Sri Lanka finds itself entirely dependent on imported food for daily consumption, leading to the current food crisis in the nation.

Sri Lankans have traditionally relied on chemical fertilizers for agriculture. However, the abrupt ban on chemical fertilizers by former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resulted in a significant decline in rice production. As rice constitutes the staple diet in the country, the shortage led to a severe food crisis, marking a historic challenge in terms of food security for Sri Lanka.

To address these challenges, a transformative initiative is underway to reintroduce the traditional culture of home gardens. The term "Peace Garden" was adopted by ISD to signify the promotion of pluralism within the concept of home gardens and emphasize the importance of social and familial cohesion during times of crisis. This initiative aimed to foster inclusivity and harmony within communities. In every village, characterized by diverse social dynamics including caste distinctions, land ownership, and the presence of both landowners and landless individuals, the establishment of Peace Gardens served as a symbol of unity and shared prosperity.

This effort is led by key functionaries from the Department of Agriculture, who have been capacitated for this purpose. These functionaries, affiliated with the VSFs, carefully select representatives from vulnerable families to participate in the program. The selected families receive training on the concept of peace gardens, with the functionaries visiting their homes to provide advice as well as tools and seeds. This empowers them to create their own peace gardens. Simultaneously, the families are engaged in awareness-raising sessions on the values of democracy and pluralism.

A significant portion of the population lacks awareness about balanced and nutritionally rich diets. The training teaches them that it is crucial to adhere to the nutritional pyramid in our daily lives to mitigate the risk of non-communicable diseases. Striking a balance is key, with limited consumption of fats and sugars, while ensuring a higher intake of proteins.

The escalating costs of vegetables have rendered some varieties financially inaccessible for many people. In response to this, home gardening has become increasingly essential. Utilizing available resources, one can establish a home garden without the need for a large plot of land. Even small spaces like balconies and rooftops can be effectively utilized for this purpose. A resource person has demonstrated the concept of vertical home gardening, showcasing images that illustrate how individuals can maximize limited space to cultivate their own produce. This not only addresses affordability concerns but also promotes self-sufficiency in terms of fresh and healthy vegetables.

In areas such as plantations, where available land for cultivation is limited, the concept of vertical home gardening has been introduced by ISD. Innovative methods involve utilizing bamboo trees and PVC pipes to create vertical structures for planting. Additionally, using pots and bags offers a flexible solution for growing vegetables in confined spaces. The introduction of unconventional containers like bottles and cans has inspired the communities to explore new and creative ways of planting, making the most of available resources in resource-scarce environments.

The deliberate choice of peace gardens as a medium for spreading messages of social cohesion and non-violence during the current economic crisis is strategic. This theme is more likely to resonate with participants from marginalized groups who may feel that their families have more immediate needs than attending workshops hosted by local NGOs. Beyond symbolism, the peace gardens offer the additional benefit of providing community members with a sustainable source of food. This initiative aims to encourage collectiveness, mitigate economic challenges, strengthen peace, and address common community issues. Coordination of these activities is facilitated by TRF member organizations, which hold meetings with key functionaries from the VSF. This collaborative effort provides technical support, addressing any challenges that may arise during the implementation of these transformative initiatives.

In specific regions like Hambanthota and Matara, members of the VSFs organised local *Polas* (village markets). An inspiring display of solidarity, these events saw participants sharing homegrown vegetables, cultivating a sense of community support. The exchange of vegetables utilized a barter system, addressing crucial issues such as climate change, food security, and the unique challenges faced by people residing in line rooms. Notably, these individuals have embraced innovative methods like growing crops in pots, showcasing resilience and adaptability in the face of changing circumstances. Through these initiatives, ISD and VSF are contributing to community well-being, social unity, and sustainable practices.

# PEACE GARDENS

Bringing people together in Batticaloa, Eastern Province



I'm part of the Village Solidarity Forum in Mawadippali. I want to say thank you to those who gave us seeds. We believe it's important to be grateful to them, just like we're thankful to God. Let's not keep all the food for ourselves; we should share it with our neighbours and family. This week, we're planting corn and cassava. We believe it's better to help someone learn to fish than to give them fish every day.

A. M. Mohamed Thamby, Mawadippali

I share what I grow with neighbours and relatives. They're friendly and even share their tools and seeds with us. Our garden helps us get vegetables even when they're not available in the market. VSF trained us on gender, helping me to explain these issues to others and to resolve disputes. I've helped many, especially during Covid. Parimala, Pandiruppu



Poster by workers at the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, advertising the produce of their peace gardens.



## **Creating Awareness: Supporting Rights Issues among Village Ambassadors**

Various forms of discrimination persist in society, encompassing factors such as class and gender. It is crucial to comprehend these discriminatory practices to foster a supportive environment for the rights of all individuals. Recognition and understanding of personal rights are fundamental prerequisites for advocating the rights of others. It is essential to be aware of the rights stipulated by the laws of the country, as this knowledge serves as the bedrock for promoting equality and justice.

Capacity-building initiatives have been implemented to empower individuals with knowledge on key aspects such as the Right to Information (RTI), gender equality, governance principles, and fundamental human rights. Training sessions have been conducted, equipping designated key individuals to serve as village ambassadors. These ambassadors play a pivotal role in disseminating information, advocating for rights, and fostering a culture of awareness within their communities.

The focus on the Right to Information (RTI) ensures that individuals are well-versed in accessing information, promoting transparency, and holding authorities accountable. Gender sensitivity training aims to dismantle gender-based discrimination, fostering an environment where all genders are treated with equality and respect. Governance training provides individuals with insights into the principles of good governance, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and effective decision-making.

Empowered by this knowledge, individuals trained as village ambassadors become catalysts for positive change within their communities. They serve as advocates for rights, working to eliminate discrimination, and championing a culture of inclusivity and justice. This grassroots approach not only builds a network of informed individuals but also contributes to the broader goal of creating a society that upholds the rights of all its members.

## **Celebrating Diversity: Promoting Understanding Between Groups**

ISD commemorated the 200 year journey of the Malaiyaga Thamilar Community's arrival in Sri Lanka in 2023 with several events and activities one of which was a mobile museum. The inauguration of the 'Malaiyagam 200 Mobile Museum' took place in the Nuwara Eliya district on the first day of the "Malaiyagam 200 – Legacy of Malaiyaga Thamilar" event on May 19, 2023. This mobile museum exhibition spanned three days, attracting an attendance of over 10,000 people.

The Mobile Museum Exhibition featured information, images, and artifacts highlighting the journey of Malaiyaga Thamilar to Sri Lanka and their two centuries

of struggle for equal citizenship in the country. Artifacts were sourced from the ISD Tea Workers Museum located in Pussellawa, Central Province. The exhibition drew a diverse audience, including the public of Nuwara Eliya, school students, government officials, ISD VSF members, and tourists.

In tandem with the exhibition, ISD organised a signature campaign, aiming to collect signatures from museum visitors to exert pressure on the Sri Lankan Government. The campaign sought to address crucial issues, including the provision of adequate and affordable houses for the plantation community, granting title deeds to the 37,000 houses of residents who repaid housing loans, integrating plantation settlements into the Disaster Management Centre with the establishment of disaster management committees, ensuring proper postal services to plantation settlements, and establishing promised Divisional Secretariats with an increase in additional secretariats in the Nuwara Eliya District.

A significant total of 7,259 signatures were gathered per campaign (7,259 signatures multiplied by 5 campaign sheets). Additionally, ISD captured video statements from museum visitors, where 85 percent expressed their willingness to join the lobby for Malaiyagam community rights. Many visitors noted that the museum experience provided valuable insights into the Malaiyagam community's lifestyle, living conditions, and challenges in accessing educational and other rights. Some were astonished to witness the continued existence of Malaiyagam community members in 200-year-old line rooms. A few visitors even requested the Mobile Museum to be conducted in their localities, recognizing the significance of raising awareness about the Malaiyagam community.

For the next Mobile Museum route, ISD, in collaboration with district TRF Partner organizations, strategically commenced from the Eastern province, moved to the Southern province, and then progressed to the Northern province. This strategic journey aimed to maximize the impact of the Mobile Museum in reaching diverse communities and fostering a broader understanding of the challenges faced by the Malaiyagam community, across the country.

# MALAIYAGAM 200

## Celebrating Diversity and Promoting Understanding

This was my first ever trip to Jaffna, before this I had never gotten the chance to socialise with Tamil people...

As people of the South, we used to think that the Tamils are a cruel people. Due to the distressing events of the war and the widespread media coverage of controversial information that negatively portrayed the Tamil community, I developed an aversion and hatred towards them. Honestly, the Tamil community warmly welcomed us, showing great hospitality and kindness. They not only offered us delicious food, but we also had the opportunity to participate in various activities together, which turned out to be a great experience for us. They are truly genuine and kind-hearted. They involved us in their religious practices, welcomed us into their sacred places, and shared their rituals and customs with us. We assumed that we would be prohibited from entering their shrines, but surprisingly, that was not the case. They proved to be extremely humane and compassionate.

A grand ceremony had been organized in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Indian Tamils to work in the plantations. We also participated in this event. Learning about their initial struggles upon arriving in Sri Lanka deeply saddened me. They are human beings just like us, reminding us that we all belong to one race, differentiated only by our different religious practices. Just as we perceived them, they too would have perceived us, the Sinhalese community as hostile and harmful towards others. Our visit to Jaffna and learning about their culture revealed that this was not true. Like us, their livelihood relied on agriculture. We all share the same red blood in our veins. I believe that, despite our differences in skin colour, religion, and language, we are all members of the same human race. Our main obstacle was the language barrier, which prevented us from exchanging ideas more freely. We believe that collaboration between the Northern Tamils and the Southern Sinhalese, through the Village Solidarity Forums can foster a beautiful Sri Lanka where everyone can coexist.

Nishadi, VSF member, Meegahajandura, Hambanthota, Southern Province





## **Unveiling Justice: TRF Intervenes to Mitigate Domestic Violence**

In a distressing incident in Konavil, Kilinochchi, the TRF played a crucial role in addressing a severe case of domestic violence. A VSF member and a mother of two, endured a brutal attack by her husband, resulting in her admission to Jaffna General Hospital for treatment. She had been facing domestic violence intermittently, yet she remained silent, considering it a normal aspect of household life.

The turning point came after the Gender and Governance training, where VSF members gained awareness that domestic violence is not normal and should be addressed. The victim suffered a vicious assault by her husband at their residence, leading to fractures in her face and rib bones as she was beaten with a bike helmet and kicked. Initially admitted to Kilinochchi Primary Care Hospital, she was later transferred to Jaffna Teaching Hospital due to the severity of her injuries, including vomiting blood. Despite the severity of the case, the VSF members faced resistance when they approached the police station, with officers dismissing it as a family dispute that would resolve itself. Undeterred, they sought justice and took the matter to the hospital staff, who filed a case against the husband. However, the husband vanished from the village, leaving the woman's children under the care of her aunt.

In a display of solidarity, Kilinochchi Konavil VSF and TRF members collaborated to locate the abusive husband and exert pressure on the police for immediate action. VSF youth actively searched for the perpetrator, and after four days, he was apprehended when he came to the hospital to request forgiveness from his wife. However, the wife decided to seek legal redress for the husband's actions.

## **Sensitising Youth: Diversity, Gender Equality, and Social Cohesion**

ISD aimed to tackle the ethnic and political divisions prevalent among Sri Lankan university students. In Sri Lanka, the school system is structured along ethnic and linguistic lines, exemplified by institutions like Sinhala Balika Vidyalaya, Muslim Balika Vidyalaya, and Hindu College – the latter representing Tamil ethnic schools. While there are a few bilingual schools with separate classrooms for Sinhala and Tamil students, the overall educational framework contributes to ethnic and linguistic polarization among young learners. Although the Sri Lankan University system was initially designed to foster social cohesion, it, too, struggles to promote unity in the present context.

University students often demonstrate notable ethnic, religious, and political polarization, frequently lacking awareness of the religious and cultural dimensions of their peers from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. This prevailing trend

underscores the imperative to cultivate a culture of co-existence, diversity, and pluralism among university students, laying the groundwork for future reconciliation and peace initiatives. Recognizing this need, ISD has integrated activities into the project that directly involve university students, aiming to address and alleviate the existing polarization within this demographic.

A group of 55 university students were provided awareness about the significance of diversity, multiculturalism, co-existence, and reconciliation in a session conducted in both Sinhala and Tamil. The awareness session commenced with an exploration of the History of Sri Lanka and mythology. During this segment, the trainer shed light on the authentic history of Sri Lankan society and how mythology has influenced and created confusion within it. Following this, the focus shifted to ethnic diversity, delving into the pluralistic history of Sri Lankan communities and how pluralism has historically benefited these communities. Sessions were conducted on Governance and Democracy, introducing the concept of democracy to students and discussing its elements. It was emphasized why democracy is considered the best system to safeguard human rights and ensure pluralism. Additionally, the concept of governance was explored, discussing the principles of good governance and the role of Sri Lankan youth in advocating for its implementation.

In the effort to promote social cohesion among university students, sessions included those on Gender and Law and Dating Violence. During the dating violence session, participants, engaged in discussions, sharing their experiences. Healthy arguments arose, particularly regarding the perception that aggression towards an intimate partner is a way of expressing love and possessiveness. The difference between violence and affection, was emphasised, providing practical examples and indicating that violence is never a language of love or peace. Procedures for taking action against dating violence was also presented. Sessions enlightened the students on topics of conflict, conflict resolution, the true meaning of transitional justice, and co-existence. The importance of conflict resolution and transitional justice in achieving sustainable cohesion among Sri Lankan societies was highlighted.

## **Transforming Media Practices: Fostering North-South Understanding**

A press conference convened in the former conflict-ridden Mullaitivu region had the specific objectives of addressing the concerns surrounding the development of the Mahawali 'L' zone in the Mullaitivu district. The primary audience for this event was the media. The outcomes of the press conference were notable. The forum expressed appreciation for the development initiatives but urged authorities to be transparent and prevent any hidden agendas associated with the development. Concerns were raised by the local population in the respective district who suspected the possibility of Sinhala colonization in their region after the war.

Consequently, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) was urged to provide assurances to allay the fears of the majority in the respective district, with the aim of preventing any unwarranted tension. The key message conveyed during the press conference was subsequently disseminated through the national media's newspaper, and as a result, the TRF gained recognition in the region. One Tamil journalist expressed concerns that their news submissions are being altered by Sinhala editors, leading to a different perspective in the telecasts. Open communication and collaboration between Tamil and Sinhala media professionals can be a constructive step toward a unified and unbiased journalistic landscape.

A program was held in Anuradhapura for media practitioners, aimed to equip them with a strong understanding of Transitional Justice and reconciliation, recognizing the media's influential role in shaping public perceptions. Journalists that attended this program committed to incorporating the knowledge gained into their practices, pledging support and expressing willingness report on the subject. Special attention was given to addressing potential village issues, highlighting the media's crucial role in peaceful resolution. A recommendation emerged for a media workshop to unite the North and South, dispelling negativity and promoting collaboration.

Recognizing the significance of fostering reconciliation, particularly among the youth and within the media, is crucial. The challenge lies in countering negative propaganda propagated by certain southern politicians, often supported by the media, amid a backdrop of political instability. In response, ISD took proactive measures, conducting media workshops, at the national level and district level. These workshops played a crucial role in dispelling misconceptions among media personnel. The assistant director from the Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation provided valuable insights into the current TJ process in Sri Lanka, contributing significantly to journalists' education. Collaborative efforts set a foundation for informed and responsible reporting in transitional justice and reconciliation.

## **Promoting Mental Wellbeing: Insights from Psychosocial Workshops**

ISD organised a series of psychosocial workshops in both Sinhala and Tamil, with the objective of creating awareness among VSF and TRF members on psychosocial issues and enabling them to identify victims with psychosocial challenges, so that these victims could be directed to appropriate service providers.

The Tamil workshop covered an introduction to psychosocial concepts, the links between healthy humans and mental health, the pyramid of psychosocial support, understanding psychosocial issues, factors influencing mental health, signs and signals of psychosocial problems, and basic skills on providing psychosocial support.

The Sinhala workshops covered topics such as the importance of mental health, causes affecting mental disorders, identification of people suffering from mental disorders, mental health in women and children, aging and its impact on the mind, common mental problems in adolescence, and support available for those in need.

The outcomes of the workshop were positive, with participants actively engaging in discussions and gaining insights into identifying and directing psychosocial victims for necessary treatment. The workshop highlighted that need for psychosocial and healing support due to lingering effects from past war experiences. Participants also expressed a heightened awareness of mental health issues and a commitment to supporting those around them who may require such assistance.



**Lessons Learnt:  
Navigating Collaboration,  
Adaptability, &  
Sustainability**

# Lessons Learnt: Navigating Collaboration, Adaptability & Sustainability

## Collaboration with Diverse Stakeholders

Throughout the initiative, ISD successfully cultivated mutually beneficial relationships among individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and geographic backgrounds through TRFs and later through the VSFs. Moreover, the project facilitated meaningful connections between civil society actors and local government agencies.

Promoting linkages between civil society actors and local government agencies, contributes to positive change at community level.

The project has served as a bridge, promoting unity and cooperation where differences once prevailed. This achievement not only aligns with the project's objectives but also underscores the broader societal impact of effective stakeholder engagement.

The relationships forged between civil society actors and local government agencies have made it easier to navigate community-level issues. The enhanced understanding resulting from these connections has facilitated smoother communication and cooperation, ultimately leading to more accessible and efficient services. As a result, community members now find it easier to address and resolve issues at the local level, thanks to the strengthened ties between different stakeholders. Robust stakeholder engagement is not merely a means to an end; it is a catalyst for positive social change. ISD's experience underscores the transformative power of building connections and fostering collaboration among diverse groups including community groups, community leaders and local government agencies.

## Adaptability to Changing Contexts

ISD encountered a succession of challenges, including security concerns, political crises, and the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic when implementing this project. These challenges underscore the critical importance of maintaining agility in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

It is vital to be flexible and adaptable in responding quickly to unexpected situations like security issues, political crises, and pandemics.

The impact of the Easter attacks in 2019 prompted ISD to swiftly adjust its strategies, recognizing the need to address evolving socio-political dynamics while upholding principles of inclusivity and peacebuilding. Subsequently, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic demanded further adaptation, leading ISD to restructure its project implementation to respond to emergent community needs amid lockdowns and societal shifts.

The political crisis in 2018, marked by conflict between the president and the Prime Minister, added a new layer of complexity. ISD successfully navigated this challenging terrain, ensuring that its initiatives continued to positively contribute to societal development despite the turbulent political landscape.

The economic crisis in 2022, characterized by the unexpected ousting of a previously popularly elected president, brought about unprecedented challenges, including economic and political instability, rising costs of living, fuel shortages, and a prevailing sense of despondency among the population. ISD had to respond to the changing contexts by evolving its strategies to address urgent needs arising from the complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. This experience underscores the necessity for organizations to remain flexible, innovative, and steadfast in their pursuit of transformative goals amid changing circumstances.

## **Role of TJ Forums and Community Engagement**

Empowering local forums, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF), to serve as intermediaries between communities and transitional justice mechanisms has proven to be a pivotal strategy with far-reaching benefits. This approach not only enhances awareness but also promotes active engagement and advocacy, fostering a more inclusive and participatory process in the pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

The multifaceted nature of transitional justice processes necessitates a flexible and adaptive strategy involving community led initiatives.

One notable avenue through which TRFs contribute is by organizing workshops that serve as platforms for education, dialogue, and skill-building. These workshops empower community members with the knowledge and tools necessary to actively participate in the transitional justice process, fostering a sense of ownership and agency within local communities. TRFs excel at orchestrating dialogues that bring together diverse stakeholders, including community members, civil society representatives, and transitional justice experts. These dialogues serve as spaces for open discussion, allowing for the exchange of perspectives, experiences, and aspirations. By providing a structured platform for dialogue, TRFs facilitate the identification of common ground, the resolution of disputes, and the generation of collaborative solutions, thereby contributing to a more harmonious and cooperative transitional justice process.

Additionally, the role of TRFs extends beyond mere facilitation to advocacy. Empowered TRFs can advocate for the recognition of local voices within the broader transitional justice framework. Through effective communication channels



and collaboration with national mechanisms, TRFs ensure that the unique needs and concerns of local communities are not only heard but also incorporated into the overarching transitional justice initiatives. This advocacy contributes to the development of more contextually relevant and impactful strategies, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional justice processes.

## Capacity Building Towards Sustainability

Delivering comprehensive training on a diverse range of topics to members of the Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF) as well as government stakeholders serves as a strategic investment in the long-term sustainability of the initiatives introduced by the project. The objective is to empower these key actors with the necessary skills, knowledge, and tools to autonomously drive and perpetuate the project's objectives well beyond its conclusion.

Empowering local stakeholders enables them to continue to implement the activities introduced by the project ensuring sustainability of initiatives and lasting impacts.

Training enables TRF members to navigate complex social dynamics, mediate disputes, and facilitate constructive dialogues within communities. For government stakeholders, training ensures that the government bodies involved have the requisite knowledge to integrate and institutionalize the project's outcomes within existing frameworks. Training also ensures that both TRF members and government stakeholders have the tools to continue to implement initiatives introduced by the project. It enables them to make informed decisions, adapt strategies, and continually improve the effectiveness of transitional justice and reconciliation efforts.

By equipping these key actors with a diverse skill set, the project ensures that its principles and initiatives continue to thrive, leaving a lasting legacy that extends well beyond the conclusion of the project timeline. This approach not only strengthens the capacity of individuals and institutions but also contributes to the sustainable development and resilience of communities.

## Community Led Initiatives

The role of engaging diverse community groups and the recognition that inclusivity is a deliberate and transformative approach has been a valuable lesson. By involving individuals from various backgrounds, ISD acknowledged the diversity in perspectives and experiences within the community. The participation of women ensures gender sensitivity, youth involvement brings fresh insights, and the guidance of

TRFs can play an important role as an inclusive platform for facilitated dialog, identifying common ground and findings collaborative solutions.

community leaders adds relevance to context, collectively contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in transitional justice processes.

The multifaceted nature of transitional justice processes necessitates a flexible and adaptive strategy. This lesson learned emphasizes the need to appreciate and navigate the complexity inherent in involving diverse community groups. It is not just about representation but about actively tapping into the unique strengths and perspectives each group brings. It is through this collaboration that the project becomes more resilient, responsive, and capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges that transitional justice initiatives often encounter.

## **Prevention of Violence in Communities**

One of the most important lessons learnt is that adaptive strategies are required for mitigating communal violence emerging from local communities. Experience shows that the practice of TRF members collaborating with local authorities to conduct dialogues on peace and tolerance, alongside documenting incidents, has emerged as a successful response to the rising challenges related to communal violence.

Proactive responses are needed to address immediate conflicts and build long-term community resilience by using existing structures and local knowledge.

This lesson highlights the imperative to be proactive and responsive in the face of evolving circumstances. As communal violence escalated, the TRFs collaboration with local authorities became an essential component of the project's strategy. The involvement of TRF members in facilitating dialogues on peace and tolerance not only addresses the immediate need for conflict resolution but also contributes to the long-term goal of fostering community resilience against violence. This collaboration serves as an effective strategy to address underlying issues contributing to communal violence. Through these partnerships, the project leverages existing structures and networks, tapping into the local expertise and knowledge of those who understand the intricacies of the community. This collaborative approach enhances the effectiveness of the initiatives, ensuring that responses are not only timely but also culturally and contextually relevant.

## **Empowering Women to Take on Leadership Roles**

Women and girls have increasingly stepped into pivotal roles within their communities, actively participating in various community activities and assuming leadership positions. This shift marks a significant stride towards gender equality and empowerment. As women and girls assert themselves

Recognition of women and girls as leaders enhances the overall well-being of communities.

in community affairs, they bring fresh perspectives, innovative solutions, and a deep commitment to positive change.

Simultaneously, there has been a concerted effort among both youth and adults to acknowledge and support women's leadership and advocate for gender equality. This inclusive approach recognizes the invaluable contributions of women and girls and seeks to dismantle barriers that impede their progress. Through mentorship, capacity-building initiatives, and policy advocacy, efforts are underway to create an environment where women are afforded equal opportunities to lead and thrive.

The recognition of women's leadership and promotion of gender equality not only enhances the overall well-being of communities but also fosters a culture of inclusivity and social cohesion. By harnessing the collective talents and potential of all members, irrespective of gender, communities are better equipped to address complex challenges and achieve sustainable development. This collaborative effort towards gender equality signifies a fundamental shift towards a more equitable and just society for all.

# EXPERIENCES OF VSF

## Some Examples of Gender Empowerment

- Addressing violence against women in villages through the support window introduced by the TRF/VSF aimed at resolving issues and addressing mental health concerns.
- Resolving issues faced by women workers in free trade through TRF officials, including language barriers. Efforts have been made to request Tamil-speaking officers at police stations to handle complaints.
- Educating members in villages about gender-based violence, drug abuse, and child abuse, involving government officers from the children and women's affairs section of the relevant police station to prevent domestic violence and offer support to affected individuals.
- Linking single mothers, widows, and young women to the relevant support services offered by various agencies.



## Documentation And Using M & E To Build a Case

The lesson learned from project development underscores the paramount importance of comprehensive monitoring, documentation, and reporting. A crucial aspect involves adopting a bottom-up approach in the documentation and reporting system, ensuring the inclusion of ground-level data. This methodology not only enhances credibility but also infuses the reporting system with authentic, real-time needs. The participatory approach deepens the documentation process, providing a more comprehensive and accurate representation of actual circumstances on the ground. By incorporating ground-level data through a bottom-up approach, the reliability of the reporting system is reinforced, fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment that aligns with stakeholders' genuine requirements.

Adopting a bottom-up approach, in monitoring, enhances the reporting system's credibility, addresses real-time needs, and fosters a collaborative environment.

Furthermore, these reports evolve into dynamic tools for ongoing project development, encapsulating collective wisdom and insights from grassroots experiences. This information guides future actions, interventions, and strategies, becoming a resource for developing effective advocacy tools. The integration of comprehensive, ground-level information serves as a compelling foundation to build persuasive cases for lobbying with stakeholders. Advocacy tools, fortified by authentic data and participatory insights, play a pivotal role in catalyzing change within existing framework conditions.

## Using Evidence Based Data for Future Planning

The project's collaboration with entities closely connected to the ground has proven highly beneficial. Collaborative efforts with TRFs and VSFs have revealed valuable findings regarding the transformative potential inherent in grassroots initiatives. By working closely with these forums, the project has generated a diverse array of stories and anecdotal evidence showcasing successful activities that originated at the grassroots level, leaving lasting impacts on communities. These real-life experiences serve as a rich resource for lessons learned in conflict mitigation, transitional justice, and the promotion of truth and reconciliation.

The project's collaboration rooted in community connections, has provided valuable insights into the transformative impact of grassroots initiatives.

TRFs and VSFs, being embedded within the communities they serve, are invaluable sources of authentic narratives. These stories highlight instances where communities, through their own initiatives, successfully prevented communal violence, an illustrative case in point. Such case studies, compiled through

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collaboration with TRFs and VSFs, become compelling tools in advocating for the efficacy of grassroots approaches in conflict mitigation, transitional justice, and reconciliation initiatives. The evidence gleaned from these stories guides the development of future initiatives, ensuring that they are grounded in the realities of affected communities and maximizing their potential for positive impact.

## **Developing Advocacy Tools based on Ground Realities**

The value of decentralized coordination in community engagement through forums like TRFs illuminates the effectiveness of decentralized approaches. The establishment of regional focal points and district-level coordinators within these forums proves instrumental in fostering awareness-raising, monitoring, and advocacy. This strategic positioning of district focal points creates localized hubs of activity, ensuring that initiatives are customized to align with specific cultural, social, and contextual dynamics of each community.

Decentralized approaches enable effective advocacy by providing nuanced understanding of local contexts.

Regional and district-level coordinators act as conduits of information, ensuring that intended messages reach communities effectively. Their proximity to the grassroots level enables a nuanced understanding of local sentiments and concerns, allowing for the adaptation of culturally sensitive advocacy strategies. District-level coordinators, embedded within the local fabric, possess an intimate understanding of ongoing developments and challenges, enhancing the capacity to address emerging issues promptly. TRFs have emerged as dynamic and adaptive entities capable of navigating diverse district dynamics.

## **Dissemination and Replication of Successful Initiatives**

The project's experiences yielded numerous successful initiatives that have the potential to be replicated and shared across diverse regions, projects, and contexts. Several highly successful initiatives emerged from the project, each offering valuable insights and lessons that extend well beyond their initial implementation. Notable among these initiatives are the establishment of peace gardens, the strategic engagement of youth to promote reconciliation, the cultivation of mutually beneficial relationships between government entities and community stakeholders, the utilization of grassroots groups in mitigating communal violence, and the creation and operation of local-level entities such as the TRFs and VSFs as instrumental agents of community reconciliation.

Successful project interventions can be replicated and disseminated in other regions, projects, and similar environments.

The peace gardens initiative not only beautified local landscapes but also served as symbolic spaces fostering unity and understanding. Involving the youth in reconciliation efforts not only empowered them but also proved to be an effective strategy for building bridges between different communities. The development of harmonious relationships between government bodies and community stakeholders showcased the potential for collaborative governance models. Meanwhile, leveraging grassroots groups to address communal tensions demonstrated the effectiveness of community-driven solutions.

Furthermore, the establishment and functioning of local entities like the TRF and VSF played a pivotal role in facilitating community reconciliation, providing structures through which dialogue and cooperation could flourish. The experiences and lessons garnered from these initiatives are not confined to the project's specific region; they possess transferable value and can be replicated in diverse contexts, projects, and regions. Sharing these successes can contribute to the broader dissemination of effective practices, fostering positive change and reconciliation beyond the project's immediate scope.



**Recommendations:  
Suggestions Informed by  
Experience and Insights**



## **Recommendations: Suggestions Informed by Experience & Insight**

### **Elevate Stakeholder Engagement and Adaptability**

In this strategic initiative, the focus is on elevating stakeholder engagement by organizing routine National and Provincial consultative meetings. These gatherings will bring together transitional justice mechanisms, local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and communities, providing a vital platform for the ongoing assessment of evolving needs, perceptions, and challenges within the project framework.

Facilitate a consultative approach for enhanced stakeholder engagement

To ensure a comprehensive approach, a blend of virtual calls and in-person meetings must be employed. This dual strategy aims to not only maintain but also strengthen relationships among stakeholders. Through these engagements, the project team will share pertinent findings, fostering a transparent and collaborative environment. Moreover, this approach allows the project to remain agile and responsive to the dynamic shifts in the social and political landscapes, ensuring that the initiatives stay aligned with the current needs and priorities of the diverse stakeholders involved.

Stakeholders can optimize communication by utilizing tools such as WhatsApp and Telegram to establish purpose-driven groups, organised either regionally or thematically. This approach will facilitate focused discussions and interactions among stakeholders, enhancing overall collaboration. By creating these groups, the project can ensure seamless and instantaneous sharing of information. This proactive communication strategy is essential for identifying and addressing real-time needs swiftly. Leveraging virtual platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram becomes a dynamic and effective approach, allowing for the quick dissemination of crucial information, updates, and responses. Adopting this tech-enabled communication framework will not only streamline coordination but also significantly contribute to the overall agility and responsiveness of the project in meeting evolving demands and challenges.

### **Cultivate Adaptability to Different Contexts**

It is recommended to adapt, replicate, and disseminate successful methodologies from the project's interventions to suit various contexts effectively. This involves recognizing and integrating cultural nuances to ensure the relevance and success of project initiatives in different settings.

Adapt and disseminate successful methodologies to suit different situations and contexts

In order to achieve this, it is crucial to carefully analyse the proven success factors from previous interventions and tailor them to fit the unique characteristics of each context. This adaptive approach not only acknowledges the diversity of cultural nuances but also enhances the likelihood of successful implementation.

Furthermore, the dissemination of these methodologies should be undertaken systematically, considering the specific needs and challenges of each target area. By incorporating cultural considerations into the planning and implementation phases, the project can ensure that interventions are not only culturally sensitive but also more likely to resonate with and positively impact the communities involved.

### **Empower Transitional Justice Forums as Advocates**

It is strongly recommended to empower local forums, specifically the Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF) and the Village Solidarity Forum (VSF), as key intermediaries between communities and transitional justice mechanisms. This empowerment is crucial to elevate awareness, engagement, and advocacy within the community, thereby fostering a sense of active participation in the transitional justice processes.

Empower local forums for robust community engagement in transitional justice

To materialize this recommendation, it is essential to facilitate strategic activities conducted by TRFs and VSFs. Workshops and dialogues led by these forums become integral mechanisms aimed at bridging the informational gap between local communities and national transitional justice processes. By actively engaging TRFs and VSFs in these strategic endeavours, the project ensures the transformation of these forums into dynamic platforms that facilitate understanding, communication, and collaboration.

This approach not only empowers local communities to actively participate in transitional justice but also strengthens the capacity of TRFs and VSFs to serve as effective mediators. The project's commitment to involving these forums as active participants contributes significantly to their evolution into dynamic hubs for community-driven initiatives, playing a pivotal role in the overall success of transitional justice endeavours.

### **Promote Inclusive Community Centric Approaches**

It is recommended to actively encourage engagement with a variety of community groups, encompassing women, youth, and community leaders, to enhance the inclusivity of the project. This approach recognizes the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives to enrich the transitional justice initiatives.

Foster inclusivity by engaging diverse groups in the community.

To effectively implement this recommendation, the project should acknowledge the multifaceted nature of transitional justice processes. It is crucial to design initiatives that specifically address the unique needs and concerns of various community segments. By tailoring strategies to accommodate the distinct requirements of women, youth, and community leaders, the project ensures a more comprehensive and responsive approach to transitional justice.

This commitment to diverse community engagement not only promotes a more inclusive project but also strengthens the potential for positive and lasting impacts within each segment of the community. The acknowledgment and incorporation of diverse voices contribute to the creation of a more equitable and representative transitional justice framework.

### **Invest in Capacity Development and Awareness Raising**

It is recommended to provide continuous technical support and capacity-building initiatives for key stakeholders, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF) members, Village Solidarity Forum (VSF) members and transitional justice mechanism staff. The project should explore options for providing such capacity development support, resources can be leveraged from other donors and projects working in the sector as well as some government sector mechanisms. Private sector avenues may also be explored and engaged for support.

Sustain activities and impacts through regular technical support and capacity building.

To ensure sustained impact, the project should incorporate comprehensive training programs covering awareness-raising, self-care, trauma referrals, and security measures in potentially volatile environments. This multifaceted training approach not only enhances the professional skills and capabilities of stakeholders but also addresses crucial aspects like well-being and safety.

By consistently offering technical support and capacity-building initiatives, the project can foster a resilient and skilled community of practitioners. This investment in ongoing training not only contributes to the effectiveness of transitional justice initiatives but also reinforces the commitment to the holistic development and preparedness of the individuals involved in these critical processes.

## **Support Local Agencies, Communities & Focal Points**

Embracing a decentralized approach is crucial, as it allows for the customization of activities to align with local contexts and needs. By strategically positioning regional focal points and district-level coordinators, the project ensures a more nuanced understanding of the diverse dynamics within communities, enhancing the effectiveness of initiatives.

Engage local actors to gain a better understanding of dynamics within the community and crafting effective and responsive solutions.

This decentralized model not only facilitates the tailoring of activities but also enables a more responsive and culturally sensitive implementation of awareness-raising, monitoring, and advocacy efforts. The regional and district-level coordinators serve as vital conduits, ensuring that initiatives are not only well-informed but also aligned with the unique cultural, social, and contextual nuances of each community.

It is recommended to establish and support regional focal points and district-level coordinators within forums like the Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF) to ensure continual awareness-raising, monitoring, and advocacy at the grassroots level. Embracing a decentralized approach is crucial, allowing for the customization of activities to align with local contexts and needs. By strategically positioning regional focal points and district-level coordinators, the project ensures a more nuanced understanding of the diverse dynamics within communities, enhancing the effectiveness of initiatives.

This decentralized model not only facilitates the tailoring of activities but also enables a more responsive and culturally sensitive implementation of awareness-raising, monitoring, and advocacy efforts. The regional and district-level coordinators serve as vital conduits, ensuring that initiatives are not only well-informed but also aligned with the unique cultural, social, and contextual nuances of each community. This approach contributes to the project's success by fostering a deep connection with the local communities it aims to serve.

## **Customise Initiatives to Specific Audiences**

It is recommended to tailor awareness-raising initiatives to specific audiences by customizing methodologies for diverse groups such as rural development societies, youth parliament representatives, village leaders, and victim groups.

Ensure that solutions are tailor made to suit specific problems and implement solutions that are relevant and responsive to issues in the community.

To implement this recommendation effectively, the project should foster collaborative workshops and roundtable discussions that bring together national and local partners. This collaborative platform serves as an opportunity to exchange experiences, address challenges, and collectively develop effective strategies for targeted awareness-raising. Customizing methodologies for specific audiences ensures that awareness-raising efforts are not only relevant but also resonate with the unique needs and perspectives of each group. The collaborative approach, involving both local and international stakeholders, enriches the project's strategies by incorporating a variety of experiences and insights. This tailored and collaborative approach contributes to the overall effectiveness of awareness-raising initiatives across diverse target audiences.

## **Promote Women as Community Leaders**

Throughout the project, it has become evident that the inclusion of women and girls has not only resulted in their individual empowerment but has also contributed significantly to the overall success of community initiatives. Women leaders have emerged within the Truth and Reconciliation Forums and Village Solidarity Forums, demonstrating their capability to lead and effectively participate in decision-making processes alongside their male counterparts. Their leadership roles have not only enriched the diversity of perspectives but have also led to more comprehensive and holistic approaches to addressing community challenges.

Encourage Women and girls as to take on leadership roles in their communities

To build upon these achievements, it is essential to expand support mechanisms tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of women leaders. This may involve providing access to training and capacity-building programs focused on leadership skills, conflict resolution, and advocacy. Additionally, efforts should be made to address systemic barriers that hinder women's full participation, such as discriminatory practices and unequal access to resources.

Furthermore, promoting gender-sensitive policies and practices within the project framework will help create an enabling environment for women's leadership to flourish. This includes ensuring equitable representation in decision-making bodies, allocating resources to support women-led initiatives, and fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity within community forums and discussions.

By prioritizing the empowerment of women and girls and actively involving them in leadership roles, the project can not only enhance its impact but also contribute to broader social transformation and the advancement of gender equality agendas. It is through these concerted efforts that sustainable and inclusive development outcomes can be realized, benefiting communities as a whole.

## **Strengthen Knowledge Management & Sharing Practices**

It is recommended to emphasize the significance of comprehensive reports summarizing key findings, recommendations, and emerging themes derived from in-country meetings, workshops, and consultations. This emphasis ensures that the project maintains transparency, accountability, and continuous development through meticulous documentation and reporting practices.

Foster knowledge sharing, learning and innovation

To further enhance knowledge sharing, the project should actively develop case studies encapsulating best practices and lessons learned. These case studies serve as valuable resources for understanding successful interventions, providing a basis for replication in other regions facing similar issues. By systematically documenting and disseminating project experiences, the initiative contributes to a broader knowledge base, fostering an environment of shared learning, innovation, and effective problem-solving.

## **Proactively Address Communal Violence**

It is recommended to proactively address the increase in communal violence through strategic collaboration with Truth and Reconciliation Forum (TRF) members, Village Solidarity Forum (VSF) members and local authorities. This collaborative effort should involve conducting dialogues on peace and tolerance to mitigate potential conflicts before they escalate.

Collaborate to prevent and mitigate potential for conflict and violence in communities

Simultaneously, there should be a robust documentation process in place to record incidents of communal violence. This documentation serves not only as a record but also as a tool to showcase the project's responsiveness to emerging challenges. By transparently showcasing the actions taken in response to communal violence, the project can underscore its commitment to peacebuilding and conflict resolution within the communities it serves. This recommendation aims to create a preventive and responsive framework, ensuring the project actively contributes to the reduction of communal violence and promotes sustainable peace.

## **Use Evidence Based Data in Preventing Conflict & Violence**

It is strongly recommended to utilize evidence-based data as a foundation for conflict prevention. This involves the generation of comprehensive reports summarizing key findings, recommendations, and emerging themes derived from community, district, regional and national level meetings, workshops, and consultations. These reports are indispensable for fostering transparency, ensuring accountability, and facilitating ongoing project development.

Use project generated data to predict the potential for conflict and implement preventive measures.

The data generated by the project serves as a valuable tool for proactively identifying the potential for conflict within the targeted communities. By systematically analysing this data, the project can gain insights into emerging trends, tensions, and dynamics that may indicate a heightened risk of conflict. This proactive approach allows the project team to be vigilant and prepared to face potential situations before they escalate.

By analysing project-generated data, potential conflict patterns and indicators are identified, enabling the development of strategic interventions to address underlying issues and mitigate tensions. This data-driven approach equips the project with the foresight needed for implementing preventive measures, fostering a proactive stance toward sustainable peace and stability in the communities served, ultimately contributing to the overarching goal of promoting harmony in operational areas.

Additionally, establishing regional focal points and district and community level coordinators within forums like the TRF and VSF is crucial. This decentralized approach not only supports ongoing awareness-raising, monitoring, and advocacy but also enables the customization of activities to align with local contexts and needs. By adopting this decentralized model, the project ensures a more responsive, culturally sensitive, and effective implementation of initiatives, contributing significantly to conflict prevention efforts in diverse communities.

## **Plan for Sustainability**

It is crucial to ensure continuous adaptation to regional needs throughout the project's lifecycle. This adaptability is key to the sustainability and effectiveness of the project, particularly in fostering meaningful connections between civil society and transitional justice mechanisms. By staying attuned to evolving regional dynamics, the project can tailor its initiatives, enhancing their relevance and impact

Develop collaborative partnerships and networks of local stakeholders to ensure sustainability.

while contributing to enduring partnerships and connections within the communities served.

Continuous adaptation to regional needs throughout the project's lifecycle is of utmost importance. This adaptability serves as a linchpin for the sustainability and effectiveness of the project, specifically in fostering meaningful connections between civil society and transitional justice mechanisms. By remaining attuned to the evolving dynamics within the regions of operation, the project can proactively tailor its initiatives. This strategic customization ensures that project activities are responsive to the unique challenges, cultural distinctions, and emerging priorities within each region. The adaptability of the project becomes instrumental in not only enhancing the relevance and impact of its interventions but also in cultivating enduring partnerships and connections within the communities served.

In essence, the project's commitment to staying flexible and responsive to regional dynamics establishes a framework for sustained engagement. This adaptability contributes not only to the immediate success of the project but also to its long-term impact, fostering lasting connections and meaningful collaborations that endure beyond the project's lifecycle.



## **In Conclusion...**

The Collectives for Coexistence championed empathy and understanding of the "other" – whether defined by ethnicity, religion, region, or caste. In a society where divisions based on these differences have historically fuelled tensions and conflicts, initiatives like these are timely and relevant. Sri Lanka's social fabric is intricately woven with diverse groups, often isolated and demarcated by their distinct ethnic and religious identities. Unfortunately, these differences have too often been manipulated by opportunistic individuals, including politicians, to advance their own agendas, often at the expense of peace and harmony.

Against this backdrop, the Collectives for Coexistence project emerged as a transformative force, actively working to bridge divides and foster reconciliation through collective activities. By bringing together individuals and communities from various backgrounds in collaborative activities through the Truth and Reconciliation Forums and the Village Solidarity Forums, the project nurtured a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity.

Through these collective activities, participants not only gained insights into the experiences and perspectives of other ethnic and religious groups but also forged meaningful connections built on empathy and mutual respect. These interactions laid the groundwork for reconciliation, breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of collective coexistence that transcended differences.

As we reflect on the impact of the Collectives for Coexistence project, it becomes evident that its legacy extends far beyond its duration. It serves as a testament to the power of collective action in promoting unity and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding. Moving forward, it is imperative that we continue to uphold these values and actively work towards building a more inclusive society, where diversity is celebrated rather than feared, where every individual and community is valued and respected regardless of their background. Only then can we truly fulfil the promise of a peaceful and just Sri Lanka.

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We appreciate the collaboration with government agencies and stakeholders across the country which has been invaluable, making the execution of activities in the regions possible.

Our heartfelt acknowledgment to the dedicated members of the Truth and Reconciliation Forums across the districts and the Village Solidarity Forums in over 240 communities. Despite significant challenges, your commitment to carrying out your duties has been commendable.

We express our gratitude to our consultants, resource persons, trainers, and other service providers. Your expertise, commitment, and collaborative efforts have significantly contributed to the success and impact of our initiatives.

A special appreciation goes to the ISD team working tirelessly with communities at all levels. Your dedication has been instrumental in the success of this project, and without your efforts, it would not have been possible.

We extend our gratitude to the communities and individuals across Sri Lanka actively contributing to the vision of ensuring that future generations experience a society rooted in truth and justice. Your collective efforts are crucial for building a better and more just future for all.

Executive Director and Board of Management  
ISD Kandy  
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Institute of Social Development – ISD  
264/4 Ranawana Road,  
Katugasthota  
Sri Lanka.

P: 0094 81 207 1228

E: [kandyisd@sltnet.lk](mailto:kandyisd@sltnet.lk)

W: <https://www.isdkandy.org>

FB: <https://www.facebook.com/ISDKandy>

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