

Sri Lanka: Responding to new challenges for peace in the shadow of the Easter Sunday attacks

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About the research

The *Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* policy engagement was created as part of the Local International research project. The project investigates what peacebuilders care about and why they collaborate with certain individuals. Peacebuilding involves the creation of conditions for a lasting peace and entails reconciliation efforts within and between communities that have been affected by war. Without such efforts, 'peace' will only exist as an absence of warfighting; tensions will remain, leaving a society at risk of falling back into war. Sri Lanka's civil war ended in May 2009, and the peacebuilding process has faced complex challenges. The prospects of a sustainable peace have been further challenged by the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks of 21 April 2019. In response to this, the Peace and Reconciliation project ran an emergency workshop in Colombo, four days after the attacks, with influential Sri Lankan peacebuilding actors to discuss progress in peace over the last decade, and the new challenges arising from the attacks.

Policy implications

- Donors should engage with the deep, complex and locally-applicable processes that lead to longer-term change. For example, often individuals in Colombo work with each other due to their shared personal experiences instead of their organisational affiliations.
- Support for inter-religious dialogue and associated educational initiatives at the local community level must be prioritised. Efforts should be made to instil a broad civic education amongst the population about the war, the present political situation, and everyone's role in peacebuilding.
- An improvement in public education that engages youth is urgently needed. Disengagement from reconciliation programmes is especially high among under-30s. Many of these individuals were not taught in school about the civil war and are unaware of the context behind the fighting or even the actors who were involved.
- International actors should encourage the Sri Lankan government to be open to reconciliation measures but must also adopt a flexible approach that acknowledges that it is politically unpopular for the government to be seen to be doing this.
- International actors should not continue to provide public services in place of the government, but should instead support the government to deliver these programmes to its own citizens.
- Technical terminology used by donors (for example 'social cohesion', 'social integration' and 'peacebuilding') is confusing and often meaningless at the local level, where these phrases have all come to mean the same thing to the population.

Key findings

- Donors must avoid ineffective 'quick and easy' reconciliation efforts and should separate their programmes in Sri Lanka from their regional and global agendas.
- Local communities have been conducting reconciliatory work over the last decade. However, these activities are not always easily identifiable to international actors.
- 'Reconciliation' is a disengaging term associated with programmes considered to be narrow and superficial. Some feel that, because they were not involved in the war themselves, they have no role to play in reconciliation. Others interpret reconciliation as a way of prosecuting military and police personnel.
- Muslims in Sri Lanka are being persecuted, especially by far-right religious nationalists, following the attacks.
- Sri Lanka's divided government and parliament lack the empathy and vulnerability that are essential to building peace and representing the electorate. This was demonstrated following the 21 April 2019 attacks, when parliamentarians were quick to assign blame instead of reaching out to the affected population.
- Sri Lanka's current political climate encourages its political leaders (as well as contenders for the leadership) to take an uncompromising stance on strengthening national security.
- Gender, class and caste are usually excluded from conversations about peace; individuals marginalised on the basis of their identity must be incorporated into peace programmes as a priority.

Further information

For more information about the *Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* policy engagement, see: <https://localinternational.net/>.

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