WBCT Mobilizes Collective Action during COVID-19 Lockdown to Assist Low Income Families in Colombo

Sri Lanka’s lockdown due to the COVID-19 global pandemic has harshly and disproportionately impacted the poor and vulnerable communities, which are dependent on daily-wage work for their survival. Members of the We Build Colombo Together (WBCT) initiative gave leadership to a collaborative effort to deliver essential food items for some of these families living in urban low-income areas in Colombo. Branded as “Together We Can Feed Them All” this collaboration was one of the two “collective impact” activities carried out by WBCT and brought together more than 100 Community Development Councils (CDCs), which represent urban low-income families, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, the COVID-19 Task Force and many other individuals.

Read more >>>

Mobilizing Youth on Cyber Space for Positive Content and Countering Hate Speech

Strengthening the Role of Women Leaders in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360° Support to Emerging Women Leaders

Work together, win together

Enabling People to Develop Empathy for the “Other” by Sharing Memories and Personal Truths

Working From Home during a Global Pandemic

Unity is strength... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.

Matte Stepnek
“Together We Can Feed Them All”

Over 5000 families from the Colombo Municipal area that fell through other relief assistance programs, including some of the isolated groups who were unable to leave their lock-down areas, received basic ration packages. Dry food assistance enabled the recipients to pay attention to other urgent issues they were battling with during the lockdown period.

100 community development councils - Over 5000 families from the Colombo Municipal area

Sharing her views on WBCT’s COVID-19 assistance activities, Nirmani Liyanage, WBCT’s Manager and Urban Planner said “Inclusive cities, urban health and well-being are central to WBCT’s collective mission. So we try to remain true to our cause even when everything goes wrong. Unfortunately, for many, urban development and planning is about physical space and infrastructure. But for me the most crucial element of urban development is “people of the city”.

Emphasizing the crucial role undertaken by the CDCs in ration distribution, Vraie Balthazaar who is part of WBCT’s core team stated “We worked the with Colombo District Secretariat to hand over a portion of the goods. Our other arm is an equally important team of people whose role in this process is invaluable— the CDC’s (the Community Development Councils). Established over 30 years ago, the CDC’s role is to work on the participatory urban development of their areas enabling members of the community to serve as community leaders. This voluntary role is hard work and often thankless. But it is times like this, that this network is vital. They are able to identify those who are most vulnerable in their communities— those who may not be registered on the Samurdhi or poverty relief assistance. Those who are falling through the cracks. We have nothing but gratitude for the work people do to support their communities. We salute these leaders whose jobs are incredibly hard.”

In 2019, WBCT coordinated with the Colombo Municipal Council to provide official identification cards for all CDC members in recognition of over thirty years of service they have done on behalf of their low income, marginalized communities.

“We Heal Colombo Together”

As part of second phase of WBCT known as “We Heal Colombo Together”, WBCT members organized the second collective impact initiative carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic by starting a Vesak lantern delivery service in partnership with Pick Me Taxi and Delivery Service company. Low-income families that made Vesak lanterns as a seasonal income generation activity were unable to sell their items because of ongoing curfew regulations. These families were already reeling from income losses since the lock-down began and desperately needed assistance to stay afloat. As a result of this collective impact measure, vendors were able to sell lanterns they made this year and unsold stocks from 2019 when their seasonal income activity was first affected following the Easter Sunday’s violence. The ripple effect of this assistance activity meant that when one individual or family had been helped to deliver their lanterns, WBCT was indirectly helping another five to ten families that were part of the lantern production process. Without WBCT’s assistance these families could not have been able to absorb the shock of income losses from this seasonal income activity for a second consecutive year. WBCT directly worked with three main vendors and altogether around 35 families living in Narahenpita, Wanathamulla and Rajagiriya areas were able to benefit from the initiative and earn much needed income.

Explaining how the Vesak Lantern delivery activity fits in with WBCT’s aim, Nirmani Liyanage added “I believe in enabling vulnerable and marginalized people in cities to achieve their dreams by expanding the number of opportunities and the access to those. This is one such attempt. WBCT simply connected PickMe and the producers of Vesak lanterns for urban underserved communities, so they could sell their products despite curfew. We only spent a little bit of our time and labor to make this happen.”
Collective impact methodology for youth inclusive peacebuilding in Colombo

Members of WBCT represent businesses, civil society, academia, government and security agencies as well as local communities in Colombo

Approach

Puts urban communities affected from rapid re-development and gentrification and other stakeholders who are invested in these areas - either professionally or personally - at the center of decision making.

Mobilized community representatives

150 in Colombo - to improve wellbeing through collective action

Outcome

enabled shared decision making and collective action between people at the grassroots and those in positions of power and influence, based on locally-led analysis and evidence-based interventions.

2 YEARS
100 COMMUNITIES REPRESENTING 50% IN COLOMBO
Mobilizing Youth on Cyber Space for Positive Content and Countering Hate Speech

Online hate speech has been on the rise in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan social media users are increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and hate speech that exacerbates social cleavages along ethnic and religious lines. 43% of the users are between the ages of 18 and 24 and 32% users are between the ages of 25 and 34 in 2018 (source: http://www.statista.com)

Misinformation about Muslim communities spread like wildfire through social media and many of these Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups share calls to violence following the anti Muslim riots in Digana and Ampara, in 2018, mainly targeting the Muslim minority. During these riots, in spite of a temporary government ban on the use of social media, youth managed to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to continue their online presence and activities. Although they were not creating content, youth were found to be the largest group that internalized narratives of prejudice and hate espoused by social media posts and also responsible for sharing those posts in their online networks and via internet-based smart phone Apps such as WhatsApp and Viber. It is within this context that Search launched its Cyber Guardian project in March 2019 based on the 3Cs approach: Content, Countering, and Champions. The project set out to work with already well-established national level young social media influencers while also identifying and capacitating potential youth champions from the districts of Kandy, Puttalam, Badulla and Batticaloa – identified as hot spots for racially and religiously motivated hate speech online. The Association of Youth Model United Nations (AYMUN) joined the project as Search’s main partner for this project. With support from the Global Communities under USAID’s Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Program.

Within weeks of its launch, the April 21 Easter Sunday violence made Search and AYMUN to re-strategize some of the key activities amidst a resurgence of anti-Muslim hate speech online and mobilization related challenges. For a start, this meant that the National Champions suddenly needed to play a much larger role than was originally anticipated. In a baptism of fire, the twenty selected champions who had large numbers of subscribers on their Facebook pages were suddenly on the frontlines identifying and countering fake and hate news instead of playing a supportive role to their peers. They became key players who would lead the project’s 3C approach. While thirteen of the National Champions were Sinhalese, four and three belonged to Muslim and Tamil ethnic backgrounds.

The National Champions played a crucial role by identifying hate speech contents and sharing details of their findings with relevant state authorities and institutions, in a bid to prevent a spill over into offline violence against Muslim groups. The twenty National Champions were provided with three capacity building opportunities, which enabled them to improve their knowledge and skills in areas such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Cyber Security, Digital Marketing, and Facebook policies. At a reflective session held in August 2019, the National Champions group, on their own accord, decided to work as a team when countering hate speech on social media.

Between September 2019 and January 2020, these twenty National Champions produced an average of 125 posts of positive content on a monthly basis that reached over 2MN Facebook users while engaging around 1MN of them in countering hate speech. According to an evaluation done by an external party, 31% of the National Champions that took part in the evaluation had reached the status of an advocate by the project’s end.

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As the ground situation began to improve in the districts, the project was able to activate its re-strategized mobilization and capacity building work aimed at young social media users from the four districts.

Instead of conducting district-based trainings, the new situation compelled the team to re-design training activities and bring youth from all four districts together for workshops. A total of 76 youth from the four districts were trained in the first two boot camps and another 36 joined the third and final boot camp held in December 2019. The three-day boot camp trainings focused on power of social media, internet privacy, countering hate speech and fake-news, understanding and building audience and digital storytelling. The project partners later understood that more skill development support and engagement over a longer time period was necessary in order to prepare the selected youth to become champions who can play an equally catalytic role to that of the National Champions.

M.S. Shahid Abdul Hameed from Puttalam described to the external researcher that he learnt video editing in the boot camp and was applying those skills to make his posts attractive. Iyookhan Fatima Aksha said she was using the skills she gained in the boot camp to edit posts on her mobile phone and also to disseminate information among Silent Volunteers, a group in Puttalam. Angela from Batticaloa stated that she now pays a lot of attention to the content’s authenticity before sharing posts.

In order to promote social media-based activism, National Champions and boot camp participants were offered an opportunity to make a pitch, within the budget range of 100,000 LKR, for positive content generation as individuals or groups. The selected grantees came up with ten image-based social media campaigns, ten video-based social media campaigns and ten offline workshops on the responsible use of social media to be conducted in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. These seed grant campaigns and workshops allowed the recipients to engage with their audiences more effectively through storytelling format over a longer period as opposed to single post focused engagement and countering on social media carried out by the National Champions. Together, the seed grants campaigns reached over 1MN users within two months.

The second strand of Cyber Guardians enabled National Champions and trained youth to engage with external stakeholders to increase and widen their knowledge and engagement in peace-building and social media arenas. A meeting arranged with Facebook’s Sri Lanka Policy Programs Manager helped to establish direct links between the Facebook administration and National Champions enabling a systematization of future reporting on hate speech and misinformation related posts on Facebook.
A half day final networking event held in January 2020, in Colombo, brought all the project trained National Champions and other youth to meet representatives from civil society organizations, IT professionals, social media influencers, and public officials. The trained youth were able to share their learnings, and achievements, as well as develop links among each other. A two-part resource pack containing the modules of the Boot Camp Training and the process used in building the capacity of the National Champions compiled by the project was shared with all attendees of the final networking event. For more information please check out the toolkits we developed for this project, including the Resource Pack for Trainers, and the Training Curriculum.

In terms of strengthening sustainability of the participants' online activism beyond the project period, two areas needed more work: Linking all participants from boot camps and national champions into a single Facebook or WhatsApp group enabling communication and sharing resources on one platform might have increased the likelihood of networking among and between different groups as well as the National Champions who already had established presence online. In terms of retaining the youth participants' interest in social media-based activism, more time and creative thinking will have to be expended in similar future efforts; more so because the external evaluation also attributed personal and professional development as a main reason for the majority youth's initial interest in the project rather than being inspired to promote reconciliation and pluralism through online engagement. However, their immersion in peacebuilding and coexistence promotion activities during the project period laid a foundation to build on by bringing together their youthful energy, fresh ideas and readiness in building bridges between divided communities.

What's New?
- Latest Projects

Despite ratifying all relevant UN resolutions and treaties concerning the rights and advancement of women and girls affected by conflict and Gender Based Violence (GBV), including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Sri Lanka has made little progress in terms of enacting these international treaties through legislation in parliament. The country has yet to release the much anticipated National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. Despite being disproportionately affected by the country’s 30-year-war, women remain largely excluded from crucial decision making structures and forums. Little has been done to address comprehensively, accountability and justice specific GBV issues as well as those of war-affected women across the country.

Without prioritizing and placing women’s voices, representation and participation at the center of all relevant decision making structures and forums, reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts cannot and will not be meaningful and sustainable. The country’s post-COVID-19 situation has added an additional layer of new challenges, ranging from economic to ethnic, to the existing context that women were encumbered by.

Strengthening the Role of Women Leaders in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation and Politics in Sri Lanka

With the election of 1919 women leaders into local governing structures in 2018 - a result of the mandatory 25% quota system for women in local governance - which was championed by several women’s organization as well as Search, the country has been presented with a new opportunity to increase women’s active participation in local level decision making as well as peacebuilding and reconciliation. Within this context Search will be implementing two projects over the next two years: the Women in Learning and Leadership (WILL) project funded by the European Union, and the Strengthening the Role of Women Leaders in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka project implemented through the Women and Girls Empowered (WAGE) Consortium and funded by the U.S. State Department’s Secretary’s Office of Global Women’s Issues. Both these initiatives build on the learnings and advancements of an earlier WILL project, which was implemented in a number of districts in 2018 and 2019.

Both projects will be working with partners in the districts of Jaffna, Kurunegala Badulla and Ampara by enabling women political leaders and Civil society women leaders representing diverse sectors to leverage each other’s leadership roles, knowledge, networks, and other resources to advance the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the country as well as to ensure more effective and accountable service delivery to their constituents.

In order to achieve this the initiatives will have a series of capacity development workshops for both elected women as well as CSO leaders, provide opportunities for networking with diverse stakeholders including male leaders and private sector, support the women to conduct participatory need assessments with their constituencies and develop collaborative action plans to address GBV, economic empowerment and reconciliation related issues.

Search, together with its Partner the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA) is implementing the WILL project with the overall objective to strengthen Sri Lankan women’s voices and participation to positively influence political decision-making processes particularly at the local government level. WILL is implemented with the financial support of the European Union. Read more on our website: https://bit.ly/3ikKP1q

The Strengthening the Role of Women Leaders in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka project is implemented by the global WAGE consortium led by the American Bar Association Rule of Law in close partnership with the Center for International Private Enterprise, Grameen Foundation, and Search for Common Ground, with support from the U.S. State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues. The WAGE Consortium aims to advance the status of women and girls by strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations in target countries to improve the prevention of and response to gender-based violence; advance the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda; and support women’s economic empowerment. Read more on our website: https://bit.ly/2Rhqw93

The activities of both projects have been designed to increase symbiotic relationships, synergies and cross-fertilization between women councilors and local civil society women leaders with an aim to increase women’s voice, leadership and participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation forums.
Women are systematically and intentionally under-represented in peacebuilding processes and forums and young women find themselves even more excluded from these vital decision making platforms compared to older women. Young women’s potential as bridge builders should be harnessed to build trust among different ethnic and religious groups. There is also a pressing need to ensure their active participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation forums in local areas, which have seen a further erosion of inter-communal relations and co-existence following the 2019 Easter Sunday’s violence.

The Young Women as Drivers of Peace: Providing 360° Support to Emerging Women Leaders, focuses on emerging young women in Ampara, Puttalam, Batticaloa, and Kurunegala districts who have been denied of opportunity, representation, and participation in peacebuilding and governance largely due to entrenched patriarchy, cultural and gender prejudices. The project will provide mentoring, training, networking assistance, and small grants to young women leaders to collectively design, implement and monitor peacebuilding interventions in their communities, while developing and deploying their agency to actively participate in local peacebuilding forums.

Search is collaborating with four well-established organizations for implementation of this project: the Women's Resource Center, Muslim Women's Development Trust, Sarvodaya ShanthiSena and the Muslim Women’s Research and Action Forum.

The Project is funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and supported by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR). For more information on project activities please follow https://bit.ly/32k549Q
Work Together, Win Together: Phase 2

A continuation of Work Together, Win Together Phase 1 project that Search implemented in 2018 and 2019 has been viewed as a priority in the context where Sri Lanka has seen a rapid escalation of hate speech on social media following the Easter Sunday's attacks that took place in April 2019. In its phase two, the project is raising the capacity of youth to recognize and counter hate speech with positive content and also to advance peaceful co-existence and reconciliation on social media. It will also facilitate opportunities for networking among peers as well as with social media influencers.

A total of 350-400 youth participants will be selected from the Northern, Eastern, Western and Southern provinces and 40% of them will be women. Meanwhile, selection will also ensure to include university students who are among youth groups most active on social media platforms.

Work Together, Win Together (WT2) project, is implemented with support and funding from GIZ's Strengthening Reconciliation Processes (SRP) project, commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office, Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and Maldives.

For more information on project activities and Social Media presence-

www.sfcg.org  welankaofficial  welanka
An Outstanding Contribution to Transitional Justice and Reconciliation:

Enabling People to Develop Empathy for the “Other” by Sharing Memories and Personal Truths

In January 2020, Search together with the Herstories project concluded the Community Memorilization Project (CMP), which was implemented together with Prathiba Media Network, Viluthu, Sarvodaya Shanthisena and Women's Development Forum. Between September 2015 and January 2020, the CMP project was implemented in Matara, Ampara, Mannar, Moneragala, Kalutara, and Anuradhapura and reached over 3000 people. The overarching aim of CMP has been to create a conducive environment, which values acknowledgement and protection of multiple historical memories and personal truths on violent conflict across socio-ethnic, political, cultural, and geographic divides. Community members and youth engaged in a three-tiered dialogue process, while broadening and reinforcing the core messaging in innovative media content and institutionalizing memory archives through libraries. Conducted at village, divisional and inter-district level, the three-tiered dialogue process enabled 2,077 individuals to share their personal truths and memories, develop empathy for the “other”, identify universal values, which they could promote in their local communities and build relationships.

The CMP also capacitated and assisted 161 individuals to become Champions who would mediate or intervene in local level disputes. The introduction of inter-generational dialogues between youth and adults in the second phase created space for young participants to interact with their elders and peers through inter-district exchanges. These inter-generational dialogues enabled 403 youth to increase their ability and interest to work for non-recurrence of violence by improving their understanding of memory, transitional justice and peacebuilding tools. In a follow up activity, 193 youth participated in peer-exchanges that allowed them to interact with peers from the six districts, visit places of memory and gain further understanding about Sri Lanka's violent past while engaging in dialogue about non-recurrence of such violent incidents. A special website, www.memorymap.lk hosts a large number of videos, interviews and other vital material that were produced during the two phases of CMP. Click here to read the final evaluation of the project.
Working From Home During a Global Pandemic

Search Sri Lanka team was compelled to adopt “Working from Home” (WFH) approach a few days after Sri Lanka went into lockdown mode on March 20. Since the WFH approach was a first for the entire team, Search SL management decided to provide all staff a basic awareness in the use of latest collaborative technologies and online platforms for meetings and conducting trainings. Here are a few important tips to work effectively and have space for collaborative work sharing methods:

Essential Tools for working remotely –

Device of your choice: Laptop/ Phone/Pad

Internet: Wi-Fi router or mobile hotspot

Storage: Google drive or any cloud technology

Collaborative technology: Enable teams to work collaboratively, work and share effectively (Audio, web and video conferencing facilities)

5 best practices when working remotely:

Communication is Key
make sure that every staff member is kept in the loop as it is important to make sure each team member is copied on relevant communication.

Communication platform options
Have options of communication platforms Ð Speaking on the phone can help make this environment feel as normal as possible and it can also help the team connect on a more personal level.

Universal work sharing tool
Whether it is google drive, drop box, cloud, make sure everyone has access to everything they need and an easy way to collaborate with teams outside the office.

Use a video
When communicating through emails and calls you do not get the non verbal communication that helps build connections with other team members. Video calls through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Skype and Google Hangouts can help your team stay connected and get the virtual face to face interaction they need.

Video conferencing solution
Have a reliable web and video conferencing solution Ð A universal web and video conferencing solution helps the entire organization stay connected and be more collaborative.
What we did during lockdown

Boop!

Home Gardening

Coconuts make me go nuts!

Camping at home

Hat is important when planting!

I wonder WHY my scale is high!

Hello from the other side!
Throughout 9 years, 23 projects, with the support of 13 donors, across Sri Lanka, connecting diverse conflict-torn communities, capacitating and engaging with change agents, creating inclusive space for dialogue, enabling people to share their personal truths and narratives of conflict and violence, introducing Common Ground Approach to deal with difficult and divisive issues, facilitating critical discourses on transitional justice, reconciliation and pluralism, networking stakeholders to leverage each other’s strengths and resources, and working at multiple levels from the grassroots to the national to support structures, systems and institutions steering peacebuilding initiatives, SFCG has played a catalytic role to build and strengthen Sri Lanka’s enduring journey toward reconciliation and pluralism.

We thank each and every one of you who has supported us in our efforts and activities over the past nine years and look forward to working together to build a peaceful Sri Lanka.