

Opportunities for peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka through shared values



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Fifteen years since the end of the civil war, Sri Lanka is still recovering from collective trauma, mistrust, and violence. The majority-minority divide affects how each group looks back on the war, how they see each other, and what they expect from their government. New and emerging intercommunal tensions erode trust in the ability of the state to provide security and address grievances, particularly as minority groups are frequently blamed for problems. Sri Lankans of all backgrounds have complicated feelings and expectations about reconciliation initiatives given the limited success of previous formal efforts, whether because they have not been adequately resourced or prioritized, or because they focused more on security and nationalist goals rather than healing and social cohesion.

Since 2011, Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka has helped communities address historical grievances, memorialize conflict and survival, and promote collective healing. Based on this long-standing work, we see three main opportunities for reconciliation:

- We need to build trust and reduce polarization, especially through examining pluralistic experiences of past violence and emphasizing common values of empathy and respect. This allows Sri Lankans to address the complexities of their experiences with conflict, while laying the groundwork for a joint future.
- We need to create space for young people and other traditionally marginalized groups to meaningfully participate in decision-making that impacts their futures.
- We need to ensure that national reconciliation efforts are echoed widely at the community level. These are complementary and need to be part of a holistic system.

Since the war ended in 2009, successive Sri Lankan governments enacted various reconciliation measures: in 2010 the Rajapaksa government appointed a “Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission,” though human rights groups argued that the Commission was a tool to deflect international pressure about violations of international law during the war.¹ In 2015 the “Good Governance” government led by President Sirisena pledged to support an independent domestic inquiry into civil war era abuses and introduced a national reconciliation framework modeled largely on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.² President Sirisena’s government also established a Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, which supported the Consultation Task Force, Office of Missing Persons, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, and Secretariat for Reparations.³ The current government, led by President Wickremesinghe, approved a plan for a “National Unity and Reconciliation Commission” (NURC) in May 2023, which reportedly intends to address past weaknesses by identifying root causes of violence and taking up truth-seeking for abuses during the civil war.

¹ International Crisis Group, “Statement on the Report of Sri Lanka’s Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission,” December 22, 2011. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/statement-report-sri-lankas-lessons-learnt-and-reconciliation-commission>

² Stephanie Nebehay, “Sri Lanka plans South Africa-style commission to confront war crimes,” *Reuters*, September 14, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/14/uk-sri-lanka-warcrimes-un-idUKKCN0RE0RV20150914/>

³ ONUR website, “About Us.” <https://onur.gov.lk/about-us/>

However, these national attempts at reconciliation have largely been viewed by minority communities and human rights groups as a way to manage or mitigate international pressure on Sri Lanka rather than steps toward genuine peace and reconciliation. Sri Lankans raise critical questions about the NURC's ability to address past weaknesses, particularly when upcoming elections could usher in a government unwilling to prioritize current efforts.

Moving on from the painful past in a manner that secures long-term peace and social cohesion requires several considerations:

Building trust and reducing polarization, especially through an emphasis on shared history and values.

The Easter Sunday attack in 2019 demonstrated the prevalence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions between Sri Lankan communities, which continue in part due to a lack of public dialogue about past violence. National narratives feature one-sided ideas of victimhood, leaving little room for alternative experiences of conflict over the past three decades. Memorialization is an important part of rebuilding trust after violence, as it allows communities to enhance their understanding and empathy through the act of telling and hearing about all sides of a conflict. Through combined oral history, documentation, dialogue, and engagement across divided communities in projects like Search's "[Memory Map](#)," we can foster values of understanding, empathy, collective renunciation of violence, agency, and resilience for the future.⁴ It is critical for Sri Lanka's communities to have a space to share experiences from the civil war and prior to 1983, particularly if they are different than the experience of the majority group. Developing respect for diversity in Sri Lanka's past, and increasing awareness and acceptance for pluralistic views of history is a first step to reducing polarization, building trust, and strengthening relationships, and can provide a less controversial way to address social cohesion, as feeling that your own grievances are being heard is key.⁵

Creating space for meaningful participation and contributions from traditionally marginalized groups, such as youth.

Age divides in Sri Lanka are particularly germane: considering the war lasted for 30 years and has now been over for 15, those who felt the effects of or participated in the early years of war hold vastly different experiences than young people who largely only know relative peace. Still, parents often pass down intergenerational trauma and prejudice linked to wartime experiences, which can fuel further alienation and violence even among those without first hand trauma from the war. In this context, it is important to foster space for and capacity of traditionally marginalized groups to participate and lead in political and social life. When youth are empowered to promote reconciliation in their communities, they can support sustainable social cohesion and trust-building.⁶ Young people are also well-placed to mitigate and counter hate speech and mis- and disinformation on social media, which has driven significant escalations in intercommunal violence in the recent past; following training in social media use and media literacy, young Sri Lankans were able to reach more than two million social media users every month, promoting positive content and tolerance.⁷

⁴ For more, see Search for Common Ground's "Community Memorialization Project" and the "Memory Map": <https://memorymap.lk/>

⁵ For more information, see Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka's "Traveling History Museum" project: <https://www.sfcg.org/project/the-traveling-history-museum/>

⁶ For more information, see Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka's "Young WILL (Women in Learning and Leadership)" project: <https://www.sfcg.org/project/young-women-in-learning-and-leadership/>, as well as the "Youth as Active and Responsible Citizens" project: <https://www.sfcg.org/project/youth-as-active-and-responsible-citizens-youth-act/>

⁷ For more information, see Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka's "Cyber Guardians" project: https://documents.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SFCG-Sri_Lanka_Cyber_Guardians_Final_Evaluation_2020.pdf, as well as the "We-digital Heroes: Youth in Digital Peacebuilding" project: <https://www.sfcg.org/project/we-digital-heroes-youth-in-digital-peacebuilding/>

Complementary national and community-level reconciliation and accountability efforts.

Sri Lankan civil society efforts to support reconciliation tend to be small in scale, but are received positively by communities, especially where national government initiatives have not reached people at a local level. Community-level and informal efforts are especially critical since many political analysts predict that government-led initiatives are unlikely to be seriously prioritized in the next five years. Formal mechanisms for truth, reconciliation, accountability, and justice should work in parallel with community-level and informal efforts that emphasize inclusivity, participation, and empathy, enabling community-level activities to continue even if state-led initiatives stagnate. Any reconciliation initiatives must resonate with communities by demonstrating innovation, relevance, and benefits to lived experiences, and should strengthen resilience and address people's everyday needs so that peace is linked to tangible improvements in their lives. Implementing the same types of activities with little progress has only fostered frustration and fatigue among communities, and it is clear a change is needed.

Meanwhile, the international community should maintain dialogue with and pressure on any new government to support state-led reconciliation initiatives and mechanisms that build on past lessons to deliver meaningful truth, accountability and justice to victims and their families. The Sri Lankan government must take responsibility for its own role, and support public discourse that allows for the full range of narratives and experiences of violence. The international community can support by continuing to share their own learning - whether from South Africa, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, or others - and helping Sri Lanka prioritize its own contextually-relevant mechanisms and approaches that meaningfully engage with diversity and build trust.

About the authors:

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