

[Form 6]

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THE NIWANO PEACE FOUNDATION
THE FINAL REPORT OF ACTIVITY GRANTS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2012

Title of the project: The removal of ethnic and religious divisions in Galle District of Sri Lanka through the training of religious clergy and young people.

Organization/official title: Peace Direct

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REPORT ON PROJECT ACTIVITIES

PROJECT TITLE: The removal of ethnic and religious divisions in Galle District of Sri Lanka through the training of religious clergy and young people.

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Purpose of the Activity

The original activities set out were to develop the programmes of our Sri Lanka partner, the CPBR, and their work with religious leaders and young people in Sri Lanka, working towards inter-faith harmony and reconciliation. The project funding from Niwano was intended to cover the development of a new Resource Centre in Galle, Southern Province.

However, due to a shortage of funding for the youth work in the project, Niwano kindly agreed to reallocate the grant to be spent on continued support of youth activists in Southern Province through their existing IFD (inter-faith dialogue) Centre, rather than setting up a separate Resource Centre. Some costs were then allocated towards the costs of existing Resource Centres, to prevent their closure, which would have been a great loss to those communities.

Content and method of the activity & course of actual events

The youth activists and religious clergy have had an exciting year and funding shortages have not halted programmes with many working unpaid or meeting in people's homes to ensure activities are not disrupted. One particularly successful activity has been the youth activists' Voice of Image (VOI) photography project which encourages young people to explore local tensions and conflict through photography and use these photos to start dialogues through public exhibitions. The young people have produced some beautiful photos some of which are attached.

The youth activists and religious clergy have carried out well over the 10 peacebuilding activities stipulated for the year, some of which are detailed below. Although lack of funds meant a youth centre in Galle was not possible, young people in Galle have been active and been receiving training in conflict resolution.

Achievements of the Activity

'... I am coming from Sinhalese Buddhist village. I was never, ever, able to spend days with people who are from other communities. During these few days I feel I have grown to a level to understand that it is not only us Sinhalese, but there are many different people that share this land with us as equals...' **Vimukthi, Siripura**

Highlights from this year's activities include:

- In Anuradhapura a new VOI group is formed in a village called Wahamollgollawa, and the core members of Anuradhapura VOI group are conducting classes for this new group at a community leader's home. They are traveling a long distance with their own expenses to train this new group in Wahamollgollawa.
- A two day workshop for 25 youth activists facilitated by an international trainer was conducted to develop their political understanding of the local and international context as well as to introduce basic techniques of facilitation.
- The EWDS (early warning and dispute systems involving young people and religious clergy) councils are still operating and doing village level dispute solving. Hatton EWDS group, for example, is very active with 26 members.
- The youth activists have become particularly involved in environmental conservation and have a project called 'Environment Care – for Better Tomorrow' and these groups are very active in all project locations. They have started to extend memberships and conducting different environmental conservation activities
- After the initial meeting to carry out a baseline study with 79 youth including 27 males and 52 females (19 Hindus, 24 Christians/Catholics, 16 Muslims and 20 Buddhists) another field visit was conducted in Galle District to form 4 new EWDS groups.
- The two new youth groups in Galle Town, and Udugama-Galle have started doing community service work. Since they are newly formed, they are still exploring ways to establish themselves within the community and gain their support and trust. The Galle

Town group meets at Galle IFD centre, while the Udugama group meets at a Hindu Sunday school.

- The youth actively participated in organizing a Ramadan festival at the Galle IFD centre to celebrate the festival with other religious communities.
- Through all these activities, the CPBR have been measuring the amount of time dedicated to peacebuilding and community activities by their activists. They have been using this voluntary work as an indicator showing the credibility and community support for their work. By the middle of 2013, they had already recorded an incredible 20057 hours of voluntary activities, from over 800 volunteers.

Case Study

Maziyya Hilmi is a determined woman, especially when the stakes are high. A Muslim from Galle, (which is majority Sinhala) she is all too aware of the violence that can spark when tensions between the region's Buddhists and Muslims arise. Alongside her responsibilities as wife, mother and primary caregiver of her household, Maziyya joined the CPBR in early 2013, in order to get more involved in preventing conflict in her community. This July she got her chance. In the police department where she works, Maziyya heard that three officers had delivered a report predicting widespread violence in Galle city. A visiting Islamic scholar, broadcasting a sermon in honour of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, had offended the Sinhalese Buddhist population. Angry crowds had formed and were throwing stones at the gathered Muslims. Gangs of young people from each side were starting to clash as tempers flared. The police tried to control the situation in the streets. Maziyya felt she had to act. She recalls:

"I immediately called the Inter-Faith Dialogue Centre at CPBR and spoke with colleagues from all faiths. Then I called one of the most influential figures in Galle's Muslim community, Awun Hajjiar, and explained the situation. He came at once to my home with six Moulovies (Muslim scholars) to discuss it further.

“When they arrived, all of them asked me, ‘You are a female - why do you want to intervene in this?’ I explained to them that I cannot expect others to intervene; I cannot turn a blind eye and wait until someone gets hurt. I suggested that the next day, being a Friday, they could use the Friday sermons to spread a strong message through mosques asking people to avoid clashes with Buddhists, and to not deliberately seek to take this incident further. Though Awun Hajjiayr was not very keen at first, when I insisted he called six mosques in the area and requested them to pass the message.

“On Friday, to ensure the instructions were being followed, I sent five of my male relatives - who usually visit the same mosque for prayers - to different mosques. They all confirmed to me that the message was given at all the mosques they attended. Later the Moulovies had called the young Moulovie who stirred up this tension to make a public announcement and apologise to the Buddhist community.

“The day the incident happened, I had also called a leading Buddhist monk in the area from our Inter-Faith Dialogue Centre to tell him about it and to discuss how we could prevent violence. A few days later I called the monk, Sarana Thero, to check on progress. He informed me that he had telephoned the two temples in the vicinity of the mosque and advised the chief monks to take steps to restrain any violent retaliation by the Sinhala Buddhist community.

“A few days after that, he had also gone to the police with 15 others - including four monks from temples around the village, some Muslim clergy, and the young Moulovie - to withdraw the police complaint that was made on the day of the incident. He informed me that the group had vouched to the police that they will take responsibility for avoiding events like this in the future.

“This entire process took about two weeks, during which tension among the community was highly charged. Muslim parents stopped sending their children to the village pre-school because it is attended by both Muslim and Buddhist children. After the incident was settled, they have again started sending their children to the pre-school.

“Another good thing happened after this is that Sarana Thero and Awun Hajjiaar have developed a very good personal relationship. They have attended several events together and are working closely. I am very happy to have been able to bring them together.”

By acting quickly, collaborating across religious lines, and refusing to accept anything less than committed action to quell the rising anger in Galle, Maziyya Hilmi stopped conflict in its tracks – and, crucially, she built new alliances between Buddhist and Muslim leaders dedicated to peace. Without her prompt action, tensions in Galle could have hit tipping point, opening the door to bloodshed and deepening the Buddhist-Muslim divide. In 1985 a similar situation had caused widespread violence in the city and long-lasting animosity amongst its people.

History did not repeat itself in Galle this month because one woman, defying gender stereotypes and pressuring local leaders to act, made certain it wouldn't. Maziyya's story is proof that violence is not inevitable. Most promising of all, it reveals a desire amongst both Muslims and Buddhists to collaborate for tolerance and acceptance, against extremism and ignorance.

Future areas to be pursued

Despite the lack of international recognition, Sri Lanka still remains a hot bed of local interreligious and ethnic tensions which often erupts to larger violent conflicts. The rising anti-Muslim sentiment and the clashes between the Sinhalese and the Muslims still continues with more than 20 mosques been attacked this year. The recent attack on the mosque in Colombo by some 100 Buddhists during evening prayers, in which at least four people were wounded, is indicative of the growing religious intolerance among religious communities in Sri Lanka.

CPBR is seeking funding in the next year to continue its vital work with local communities, in particular young people. The photography project has proved particularly successful in promoting religious and ethnic tolerance and CPBR would like to scale up their work in this area, similarly they feel there are many more opportunities with their environmental work.

Because of the heightened political tensions in Sri Lanka, the CPBR has always had to work in a cautious manner, working closely with communities to prepare them for interreligious activities.

Above all, the CPBR have adopted a policy of avoiding high profile and political events that could produce a backlash from conservative elements in society. This patient approach to building social change from the community level has paid off and given the CPBR great credibility in Sri Lanka as an organisation truly dedicated to inter-faith reconciliation. This can be seen in the fact that not only have the CPBR created a network of youth and religious clergy activists, but further is seen as credible in the communities they work in, as evidenced for example by the case study above, where the credibility of a CPBR activist with both community and religious leaders and the local police allowed them to intervene to help resolve ethnic tensions.

Because of this growing credibility, the CPBR feel that they are ready to launch higher-profile events, and are planning a national level conference for 2014 which will be held with the participation of over 500 people, including representatives of NGOs/INGOs, government officials, political leaders, civil society, faith-based organizations, media, potential donors and members of diplomatic missions, who will gain an insight to the current peace efforts led by grassroots, and their recommendations to the national/international actors to make all efforts for social reconciliation in Sri Lanka more meaningful and sustainable. Peacebuilders in Galle will be central to these plans, and their on-going involvement has been facilitated by the generous support of the Niwano Foundation.