

Annex 12: Social Cohesion Initiatives

“Local governments in Sri Lanka are seen to have an important role to play in addressing local needs and priorities of the people, stimulating local economic development and through improved local governance contribute to social cohesion and peaceful co-existence among the ethnic communities. A more accountable, inclusive, and responsive local government would increase public trust in institutions and contribute to addressing some of the root causes of the conflict” – *ROM Report 2021*

Inclusive Participation in Youth – Meera’s Story of Finding her Space in the Community

Meera is a member of the youth shadow council in Batticaloa District. She is a vibrant participant in the youth circle and contributes enthusiastically to its activities. However, this was not always the case. Meera used to be known as Pavithiran and is transgender. Her transition was not welcomed by the community, and she was ostracized. This led to Meera being reserved and shy.

She joined the youth group last year, and within a year her personality has flourished. She participated in the youth shadow council formation



and pocket meetings conducted by CDLG last year, as well as the workshop conducted on 5 thematic areas.

These include conflict sensitivity and human rights, local governance system and local Government, social media, leadership, and gender equality. Now she not only expresses her opinions but also works to support fellow transgender youth and fight for their rights.

Meera at the training with fellow members of the Youth Shadow Council

Praja Mandala Development Statute for Department of Local Government in North Central Province

This Praja Mandala statute was developed by an externally hired consultant along with key officers of the DLG and LAs of North Central Province, including recently developed Resource pool. This statute makes it compulsory for 25% women and 25% youth to take up the Praja Mandala office bearers' positions. In addition, a Praja Mandala Development work manual was also developed based on the Praja Mandala Development statute. The statute was developed in spite of challenges faced by DLG NCP and UNDP CDLG project, mainly due to the non-availability of Provincial Chief Ministers and the Provincial Council. Once the proposed statute is passed through the Provincial council, it can be used as main policy documents towards the establishment of Praja Mandala and community development programs of the DLG and LAs in NCP.



LAs conducting trainings in the villages

A guidebook has been developed based on the statute at the moment, so till the statute can be passed the CLG has the authority to give permission to implement the guidelines through authorized letters, which is being implemented at the moment. The process of training LAs to conduct 10 short trainings to Praja Mandala members has helped shrink the gap between LAs and community, as the LAs now go to the villages to conduct trainings as trainers. This not only helps build public trust in institutions, but also helps build a sense of shared responsibility on both sides to create better community engagement and service delivery. This may be a significant policy instrument for DLG NCP towards betterment of the communities and the citizens in the North Central Province

Institutional and Organizational Development of the Community Centers (CC) Focusing on Increased Relationship with Local Authorities in the Northern Province

The work that CDLG does in strengthening the CCs focuses on increasing their strength in local planning and budgeting. This brings people from all walks of life together and paves way for them to attend trainings on social cohesion, peace building etc, as well as give them a deeper understanding of their role in the wider society they live in.

In Northern Province, basic information has been collected from 44 Community Centers for the preparation of the profiles of community centers. So far, profiles for all community centers have been completed with the basic information collected as part of this process.

It was discovered at the project initiation that after 2018, no meetings were conducted in these community centers. However, with continuous motivation and mentoring, 44 Community Centers have convened their general meeting with the selection of new representatives after the four years hiatus. Among the newly elected representatives of these CCs, women and youth have been included in the action group. E.g. in Vavuniya 4 CCs out of 16 CCs had women leadership positions earlier and now 11CCs have women in leadership positions.



Profile creation of CC in progress.

There are 68 action groups with participation of youth in the 38 community centers. They have identified



and listed down resolvable problems. These action groups have contributed in renovating 11 community halls in these villages. Public libraries have been established in 7 community centers to enable community gathering and access to information as well.

Identifying common problems with community members

Furthermore, Pre Schools are planned in 6 community centers, supply of drinking water to community in Evening coaching classes are conducted in 6 community centers, Youth awareness programme are conducted in 4 community centers, whereas 30 community centers have undertaken Shramathana/Environment cleaning activity with the involvement of the community.

Bringing about change in the Community by the Community

In Northern Province, the Katkuzhi village and Thekkawattai village share a common ground owned by the Municipal Council since 1996. The maintenance of the ground belonged to the Thekkawattai village. Earlier the youth in these two villages played in the ground harmoniously. But due to the various challenges in the country, including the ethnic conflict, the situation escalated and youth from the two villages started having little arguments that escalated into not being able to play together anymore. Eventually, they stopped playing here altogether. As a result, the playground has been covered in overgrowth. Over the years, the use of drugs and other addictive substances had also increased in these villages.



The overgrown ground being cleaned by the community

It was during this period that new working groups were chosen, including those involving youth members. When the community center started initiating new projects, including the opening of a new library. At the opening ceremony of this library, the chief guest- Assistant Commissioner of Local Government (ACLG)- spoke about the importance of a library and playground. Following this, the Katkuzhi CC members met with the Thekkawattai CC members, that culminated in a discussion on how the state of the ground is contributing to other problems in the community. The two communities proceeded to get together, with the support of the Municipal Council. The youth from both villages played with much excitement in the newly renovated ground that has been an overgrown dump for almost a decade.

This was the situation when the CDLG project selected the Katkuzhi Amman Community Centre under their increasing democratic participation initiative. The first meeting after the selection focused on selecting working groups and identifying problems. The youth participants brought up the subject of the playground during this process, following which letters were sent out to relevant local authorities, trying to revive the once active playground- to no avail.



Youth from both villages playing in the ground now happily shared by them