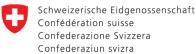# The Sri Lanka Dialogue Project

Executive Summary

The Sri Lanka Dialogue Project (SLDP) engages members of the Buddhist Sangha (clergy) as well as members of the Tamil (Hindu and Christian) and Muslim communities in order to rebuild confidence between communities in conflict, reduce prejudices, fears, and perceptions of threat from the other. By doing so, the project offers a basis for a change in attitudes that can lead to political rapprochement and, finally, to a successful conclusion of the peace process.

The Maha Sangha Working Group (MSWG), formed in 2007, provides a space for dialogue between the Sri Lankan religious actors engaged in efforts to promote reconciliation and the creation of peaceful relationships amongst communities in the country. Thus far, the MSWG has been involved in meetings and joint activities. After going through positive experiences and successfully overcoming challenging moments of the dialogue process, the participants are starting to reach out to members of the Muslim and Tamil communities in order to collectively discuss possible political solutions. In line with other projects of "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research", the approach used in the SLDP reflects the historically-rooted observation that debates about religious values or worldviews constructed upon religion tend to divide interlocutors rather than unite their common understanding of the challenges at stake. Therefore, the methodology used in the project suggests that dialogue involving parties with different worldviews should focus on practical measures.

GENERAL PROJECT INFORMATION

The Sri Lanka Dialogue Project (SLDP) was initiated both to study interactions between religion and politics in Sri Lanka, and to explore the possibilities of setting up a confidence-building process between representatives of different religious communities in order to promote long-term conflict prevention and transformation. Initiated in January 2006, the SLDP is located in the "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research" programme jointly coordinated by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Political Division IV (FDFA-PD IV) and the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) in Geneva. The programme's rationale is rooted in one of the thematic areas of focus of Switzerland's peace and human rights promotion, namely initiatives aimed at contributing towards the transformation of conflicts that arise as the result of clashes between different values and social orders.[1]

The SLDP engages members of the Buddhist clergy (Sangha) as well as members of the Tamil (Hindu and Christian) and Muslim communities with the aim of rebuilding confidence and relations between politically-influential actors. This is achieved through common work on concrete and practical activities, and aims to remove obstacles to political solutions and develop creative approaches to the transformation of the conflict.

[1] For a detailed explanation, see "Bill of the Swiss Parliament" 2007, 57/Botschaft 2007, 4775f.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

a. The Sri Lankan situation

Since independence from British rule in 1948, Sri Lanka has been characterized by high inter-communal tensions.[2] In 1983, civil war erupted between secessionist Tamil militants and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) forces. In 2009, after more than 25 years of violence, the GoSL forces defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and killed the movement's leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. In spite of the cessation of hostilities, a political settlement towards the resolution of Tamil-Sinhalese grievances has yet to be achieved. Prevailing land issues between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim population, as well as the return of over 280,000 refugees still need to be addressed.[3] While the armed confrontation might have been settled, the structural conflict drivers are still far from being solved.

The conflict in Sri Lanka, although generally characterized as an "ethnic" conflict, is the result of a complex mix of factors. At its core, the conflict was born out of a mounting Sinhala nationalism in the struggle for independence faced by the drive of the Tamil and Muslim communities to assert their identity and rights.

[2] For a detailed analysis of the structural conflict drivers see Jonathan Goodhand. 2001. *Conflict Assessment: Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka*, London: The Conflict, Security & Development Group/Centre for Defence Studies.

[3] See e.g. International Crisis Group (ICG). October 2008. *Sri Lanka's Eastern Province: Land, Development, Conflict*. Asia Report n°159, Colombo and Brussels: ICG. See also ICG. November 2007. *Sri Lanka Sinhala Nationalism and the Elusive Southern Consensus*. Asia Report n°141, Colombo and Brussels: ICG.

Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism are intimately connected.[4] Although initially only a few members of the clergy actively participated in party politics, religion and the Maha Sangha offered an important source of symbolic power constantly tapped by political actors and leaders. Sri Lankan religious actors have thus played an important role in escalating or deescalating the conflict and its discourse. Although at present there are strong Buddhist-based voices opposing possible political arrangements, Buddhist monks do have a potential for moderating and easing tensions. Based on their religious authority, their capability to influence government, and their capacity to mobilize Sri Lankan society, the monks can play an important role in peacebuilding.

The Sri Lankan conflict is not a religious one *per se*, but religion is a key element in its transformation. It became clear that the Buddhist clergy had to be integrated in all future peace processes[5] when, in 2002, Norway's mediation efforts failed after the negotiation of a very promising cease-fire agreement that established the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission.

b. The role of Switzerland

The SLDP is part of Switzerland's approach to peace promotion and conflict resolution. The project seeks to learn about the visions and concerns of the Buddhist clergy in relation to future political arrangements in Sri Lanka, and to address those visions and concerns by means of an empirical confidence-building process. It aims to engage actors in a dialogue on concrete problem-solving activities, thereby initiating the reconstruction of mutual perceptions and the development of mutual trust. There is no lack of attempts in Sri Lanka's history to reach political agreements with the objectives of toning down the "Sinhala only" provisions of the first amendments of the constitution, increasing the political autonomy of the provinces, and protecting the minority rights of the Tamil and Muslim communities. Most prominently, the implementation of the 13th amendment, passed in 1988 following the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, which recognized Tamil as an official language and provided for provincial councils to give the northern and eastern provinces more autonomy, is problematic. The fierce opposition from nationalist movements has hindered its implementation. Ultimately, political agreements will only succeed with the transformation of the

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[4] This connection has long historical roots, explaining them would go beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to note that the Sinhalese are mainly followers of the more traditional (orthodox) Theravada Buddhism, but also derive religious interpretations from the Mahavamsa chronicle about the rise and fall of the Buddhist civilisation on the Island. Finally, the concept of Dhammadipa (literally 'a place blessed by Buddha') links the territory/land of the Island with the place designated to protect Buddhism. This leads to a superimposition of territorial, communal and religious integrity.

[5] On the importance of Buddhist monks in politics as well as the critical role played by religious actors and Buddhist monastic voices in the Norwegian mediation efforts, see Iselin Frydenlund. 2005. 'The Sangha and Its Relation to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka'. *PRIO Report* n°2, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute. Frydenlund is very careful to note that the more or less quiet majority of the Sangha holds moderate political views, but the highly nationalist minority is more vocal and tends to monopolize the discourse.

dominant discourses in both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

The approach adopted in the SLDP, as in other projects of "Religion and Politics", rests on the historically-rooted observation that debates about religious values or worldviews constructed upon religion tend to divide interlocutors rather than unite their common understanding of the challenges at stake. This is explained by the fact that compromises are often perceived as a capitulation or, in the worst case, a betrayal of one's own value system. In contrast, the methodology used in the project suggests that words gain their meaning only through action, and therefore that dialogue involving parties with different worldviews should focus on practical measures. Switzerland's role comes in as a facilitator, providing suggestions, advice, and technical support to the parties in dialogue.

c. Actors involved

☐ *The Sangha Working Group*

The main actors of this project are Sri Lankan monks and lay people. After an initial fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka, during which the Swiss team conducted around 60 individual discussions with representatives of the Sangha, a first Maha Sangha Working Group (MSWG) was formed. The group discussions that have taken place since are based on the different points of view of the monks on the conflict in Sri Lanka, as well as on matters of concern to the Sangha. Thus, it is the participants of the working group who direct the topics of discussion and the activities they pursue.

The MSWG regroups participants with diverse social and political backgrounds, the majority of whom can generally be categorized as *moderate* while the others could be considered more *nationalist* in their political ideas regarding a political solution in Sri Lanka. The group also reflects the regional and geographical diversity of Sri Lanka, as the monks come from a range of locations; Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Anuradhapura for instance.

Finally, the MSWG participants also represent the hierarchical system within the Sri Lankan Sangha: on the one hand, participants range from senior and influential members to more junior monks, and on the other, they represent the three main bodies of the Sri Lankan Sangha: the Siyam Nikaya (including Malwatte, Asgiriya, and Kotte chapters), the Amarapura Nikaya, and the Ramanna Nikaya – thus encompassing religious actors from all castes.

It is important to mention that the MSWG has also met and received approval from the most important religious actors in Sri Lanka. The Mahanayaka Theros, to whom the group has presented the activities and objectives of the project, gave it spiritual approval and agreed to become patrons of the project.

☐ *Civil Society Organizations*

As part of the project, numerous meetings have been held with representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non governmental organizations (NGOs), together with academics, experts, and religious dignitaries from diverse religious com-

munities. Discussions revolved around the adjustment of the project's design, objectives and activities, and the identification and establishment of contacts with potential partners, participants, and invitees to future MSWG meetings. The results from such consultations and dialogue activities have allowed a more fine-grained strategy.

☐ *The Graduate Institute's CCDP*

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) co-directs the "Religion and Politics" programme and coordinates the operational and learning aspects of the SLDP project. It is in charge of the organization, financing and reporting of activities, while providing side-reflections to the process rather than being an integral part of the dialogue. After its creation in May 2008, the centre took over the role previously held by the Graduate Institute's Program for the Study of International Organizations (PSIO).

☐ *FDFA-PD IV*

In 2007, the Swiss Medium plan for Human Security in Sri Lanka reflected the conviction of the Swiss government in its capacity to contribute to the reduction in human suffering caused by the conflict, as well as its ability to contribute to the finding of a political solution to armed conflict. One of the programme's components that reflects this is the thematic focus on *Conflict transformation and peace building*.[6]

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[6] Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). 2009. *Swiss Medium Term Plan for Human Security (SMTP) in Sri Lanka 2007-2009*. Bern: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Directorate of Political Affairs (DP).

The FDFA-PD IV is interested in broadening its knowledge and experience in the area of peace promotion in contexts where worldviews tend to divide interlocutors. It considers the enhancement of cooperation across different religions and worldviews as an area of expertise it seeks to enhance and promote. The SLDP is one of the projects exploring possibilities of cooperation and conflict transformation in conflicts with a religious component.

ACTIVITIES OVERVIEW

Since its initiation in 2006, the SLDP team has developed important contacts and has facilitated many working group discussions with members of the Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka. The formation of the working group in 2007 has trickled down in confidence-building processes, a delicate and challenging step in the mediation process. Currently, confidence levels between the clergy and the SLDP team as well as within the clergy participants themselves are at an advanced stage. Participants have held meetings with politicians and experts for knowledge sharing purposes, they have visited the Internally Displaced Populations's (IDPs) camps in the north and have also agreed and produced a 10-point statement to be used as their action plan of reference. The document highlights the need for cooperation and sustainable peacebuilding by bringing together all communities with the objective of reconciliation. It also highlights that through the principles of the Buddhist religion, a lawful and just society can be encouraged by leaders, religious

dignitaries and institutions. Below is a summary of all the activities that have taken place since the inception of the project and the working groups.

○ **Meetings with Monks**

The SLDP team has held around 60 individual discussions with representatives of the Sangha since 2007. The project was presented and the monks expressed their views on the conflict and brought up matters of concern to the Sangha.

At first glance, these meetings were used for establishing contact and delving into the perspectives of the different monks on the conflict in Sri Lanka, as well as on the matters of concern to them. The meetings served as a basis for selecting potential participants in future MSWG meetings. They offered the opportunity to discuss potential areas of joint activities.

In parallel to meetings with MSWG members, meetings with potential new participants took place. Names and contacts were mostly suggested by other MSWG members. Meetings also took place with the Mahanayaka Theros of the four most influential Nikayas in order to present the project and to invite them to become patrons of the project.

The individual meetings were crucial for establishing the minimal trust needed to conduct WG sessions and for identifying obstacles and opportunities.

○ **Working Group Meetings**

Once an MSWG was formed, regular meetings served to give and receive feedback on the proceedings, to evaluate the progress and the organization of the project, to discuss possible activities of the MSWG, and to ensure continued participation. The SLDP team has so far facilitated eight MSWG meetings in the cities of Colombo, Kandy and Anuradhapura.

The first two MSWG meetings served to highlight the general objectives of the project, build up trust between the Swiss team and the monks as well as among the monks, and to discuss possible activities. Naturally, the monks needed to make sure that the Swiss interlocutors had no hidden agenda and had a pristine interest in facilitating an open and transparent dialogue. It became clear that the participants needed to discuss among themselves their diverse understanding of the developments in the country and establish a way to address issues in a group.

While the monks were supportive of dialogue, some of them were in favor of discussions with the LTTE on sensitive topics such as the concepts of Eelam, devolution of power, and power-sharing. However, they considered mistrust and inflexibility of both sides (GoSL, main parties/Southern Sinhalese majority and LTTE) to be almost insurmountable obstacles to constructive arrangements. The monks were willing to invest time and energy, but were still debating with regard to their role and which approach and strategy to take.

The participants also agreed that a political solution to the conflict was needed and that the Maha Sangha should carry this message to their religious and lay constituencies. However, the monks were careful not to risk exposing themselves and being labeled "pro-LTTE"; they therefore decided to focus on long-term solutions and not to address the current situation in the country. The monks also identified a lack of information and knowledge on the part of the Maha Sangha and the need to become more familiar with the arrangements provided for in the 13th amendment, as well as with examples of power devolution in other countries. Therefore, experts were invited to present examples, answer questions, and give recommendations on cases of devolution of power, power sharing issues, and political arrangements, while simultaneously confronting these with the views and concerns of the Sangha.

The next three MSWG meetings continued on discussions with politicians and representatives from different political parties. These meetings served to consolidate the group, to include further monks and discuss possible next activities. The monks also used the meetings for discussing the political situation and issues of concern to the Sangha.

In the follow-up to a discussion with politicians and experts, the MSWG developed a 10-point statement with proposals they saw as necessary to address the conflict and to bring about sustainable peace. It became clear during these meetings, that the monks supported a political solution, but that they opposed certain elements of political arrangements (in particular the devolution of specific powers to provinces).

o **Visit to the Mahanayake Theros**

During a two-day workshop in June 2009, the MSWG visited the Mahanayaka Theros. The MSWG presented the project and ensured its "approval" from the Mahanayaka Theros. They exchanged viewpoints about the situation and secured the consent of the Mahanayaka Theros for future activities of the SLDP.

o **Working Group Visits to IDP Camps**

After the GoSL announced that its forces had won the war, the country was faced with the challenge of handling a large amount of IDPs. The monks' concern was, at this point, how to help the IDPs in the camps. Therefore, a part of the WG meeting in June 2009 served to visit the camps and reflect on the approach needed to address the new situation.

A delegation from the MSWG visited IDP camps in Vavuniya on several occasions from June until August 2009 and held meetings with a local interfaith council. These visits resulted from the WG's wish to assist IDPs and to learn about the grievances and needs of the Tamils.

Besides bringing some goods to the camps, the delegation held meetings with local authorities and conducted discussions with and listened to the concerns of clergy from the different religious communities (in and around the camps).

o **Upcoming events**

An upcoming meeting is on the agenda. The next mission to Sri Lanka and dialogue with MSWG members should take place in November 2010. This meeting aims to assess the local situation after the end of the war and outline the next SLDP steps in coordination with the MSWG.

CURRENT DYNAMICS

a. Progress

During the SLDP's initial phase, the Swiss team conducted a fact-finding mission to assess the projects taking place with religious actors in Sri Lanka. Once the initial stocktaking was conducted, the team began contacting local experts and members of the Sangha with three main objectives in mind: to assess the political and conflict situation; to make contacts and build trust with possible participants; and to assess perceptions and important issues facing the Sangha with regards to a political settlement to the conflict.

In the second phase of SLDP, a group of moderate monks (the MSWG) were brought together, facilitating the development of a platform and discourse on constructive arrangements towards peace. The MSWG began addressing, within this platform, political issues which, from the Buddhists' point of view, are important because they relate to religious values. The SLDP also enabled those moderate monks to discuss with representatives from other groups (religious dignitaries, politicians) and test suggestions made by the monks with influential persons from the Tamil and Muslim religious communities.

The long-term goal of the project is to facilitate a publically acknowledged, practice-oriented dialogue. However in the current political situation, facilitating an intra-group project on peace issues might be tenuous. Therefore the SLDP is focused on ensuring the continuation of dialogue and confidence-building measures between and among participants in the current phase, as well as facilitating concrete projects and meetings between Buddhist and Hindu representatives.

b. Difficulties encountered

Putting together a group of monks from various political perspectives proved to be a challenging task. Working firstly with a group of moderate monks has been inevitable, since at first the more moderate monks refused to work with radical monks. The more radical representatives of the Buddhist clergy are highly skeptical of external interventions; they express the harshest criticism against all types of negotiated solution to the conflict and benefit from a high level of publicity and support. The critical question remains how to facilitate a process with one group without losing the contact with the other.

In line with its methodology, the project uses a multi-track approach. However, due to the current situation and the political tensions within Sri Lanka, working on a higher level has been almost impossible. Even the work with high-level representa-

tives of the Buddhist clergy presents challenges when it comes to addressing political problems and inter-community work, for instance the development of a dialogue/inter-community platform seems only possible on apparently "non-political"/"non-peace" issues.

Currently, the MSWG jumps from one proposal to another, and decisions on activities are made in a rather *ad hoc* manner. The discussion is lacking longer-term objectives such as the inclusion of other communities in the dialogue. The reason for this might be traced back to a local specificity. However, it is also due to a lack of knowledge on the instruments at disposal for identifying goals, breaking them down into objectives and developing corresponding activities. A possible way to remedy to this situation is to bring in an external facilitator who would work with the group and develop projects in a participative manner together with the MSWG members, using methods such as appreciative inquiry, i.e. forward-looking methods, aiming less at in-depth analysis of problems but rather focusing on developing options for change.

LESSONS LEARNED

☐ **Continued engagement is needed.** It became clear very soon, that the SLDP cannot be a short-term project. The necessity of engaging continually in confidence-building cannot be underestimated; it is a process which has to con-tinually take place with participants of the working group.

☐ **Local ownership is key.** Such a dialogue should be based on the commitment and dedication of Sri Lankans themselves. Sri Lankans know the problems and the complex situation of their country, and they have to find viable and acceptable solutions to the majority of their society. The SLDP therefore seeks to facilitate, advise and provide technical support in this regard.

☐ **Adopt clear strategies.** Approach, objectives and activities need to be identified and developed on two levels. On the diplomatic level, FDFA-PD IV has to be clear about its strategy and approach in order to give guidance and guarantee for the continuation of the process. On the country level, objectives and activities have to be defined in a participative way, together with the monks.

☐ **Focusing on achievable goals and concrete activities is crucial.** It will be important to invest in small, realizable projects in order not to be faced with feelings of failure. The challenge ahead for the FDFA-CCDP team is how to facilitate such a process in a context-sensitive way.

☐ **Continuous broadening of the MSWG is needed.** The MSWG itself has insisted on the importance of broadening the group, and had continually invited new members. This has rendered the group more representative of the various Nikayas in the country. The

coordinating team will have to rely on the recommendations of the current MSWG members pertaining to extending invitations to further participants, while proposing new names as well. Attention has to be paid to include monks from outside Colombo and not only "scholar" monks.

About the project brief

The project brief is continuously updated by Moncef Kartas and Azar Eskandarpour of the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), with the initial support from Natalie Schweizer.

The brief serves to highlight the project's progress since 2006 and will be followed by other project outputs, both of the Sri Lanka Dialogue Project (SLDP) and the other projects falling under the "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research" programme.

For more information, visit http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp/religion_politics.html