

LISTENING AND LEARNING

Case Studies from the Field

Nilakshi De Silva and Mohammed Sadaath

January 2017-February 2018

The Community Memorialisation Project

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ABOUT THIS NOTE

In order to understand how the Community Memorialization project may be contributing to changes in perceptions, attitudes and behavior among project participants, a series of case studies were undertaken in the project areas, located in various parts of Sri Lanka, namely Matara in the south, Ampara in the East and Mannar in the north. The case studies are based on two interviews with each respondent, about one year apart, which were carried out by the CMP's evaluation team consisting of an external consultant and a CMP team member. The interviews were conducted between January 2017 and February 2018. A selection of these case studies¹ are presented here, to provide an overview of the ways in which a project such as CMP can expect to contribute to change and peace building.

¹All names have been changed to allow the sharing of stories, while maintaining the privacy of the respondents.

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1

FROM APATHY TO CHAMPION: THE STORY OF AMARAPALA

For many Sinhalese living in the South, the experiences of those living in the north and east during the war remain abstract. Despite Sri Lanka being a small country in terms of geography, there is a separation between places such as Matara and Samanthurai that is about more than the distance involved.

For Amarapala, a 68 year old, Sinhala man living in Beliwatta, Matara, the war was something that he did not experience directly. His perceptions of the war were shaped by what he saw, heard and read on the television and newspapers. He has no relatives or friends living in the north or the east; while he has visited Jaffna soon after the war ended, that trip had hardly any interaction with the locals. He has a young son in the Navy and he is sympathetic to the armed forces, and early in his involvement with the project, his views of the conflict were largely black and white, with the LTTE clearly the instigator capable of great harm - *“because of these things even the Tamil people were against them”*; the armed forces on the other hand are seen as above reproach - *“it is not nice to talk about the army like that because they went through a lot of hardships during the war.”*

While he was open minded and wanted to know more about the experiences of the people of the north and east, he was apathetic about his role in promoting reconciliation:

What can we do when we can't even complete our own work. We can't change the country. There is nothing that we can do personally ... It is difficult for us to do anything by ourselves, there is no point in us talking to the media as individuals either.

The project provided Amarapala with an opportunity to attend several workshops with people of his own area as well as others, visit Samanthurai in the East, and live in the house of a Tamil family for 2 days. After this visit to the East, the difference in his attitudes and perception was marked. He was energized by the topic in a way he was not before and he was eager to share his experiences with others in his family and village, emphasizing the new and previously unknown elements of what he experienced.

I started to compare my situation with them. We make a big deal out of small things, but they have suffered throughout their life. They have survived these difficult situations. These are unheard stories that are often not shared by the media.

He felt an empathy towards his hosts that was a far cry from what he felt when his knowledge of these experiences were mediated through the media:

I felt sad they had little to no experience in mingling with society, probably not gone outside the district. They had faced war for years and they are still trapped in that environment. That man is 60 years, and war was 30 years; half of his life he has lived with war... We spoke about what happened during the war, it was sad to listen to them. When the war was intense, they used to sleep in the middle of paddy fields so that neither parties (LTTE/ army) could see, covering themselves with polythene paper for rain.

His black and white understanding of the conflict was also affected and he was able to hear about incidents perpetrated by the Armed forces without getting agitated, and accept that they too may have harmed and harassed innocent civilians.

The most striking change however is in how he sees his role in promoting reconciliation. Where there was apathy now there is agency. Previously he was sanguine about not being able to speak Tamil or converse in depth with other ethnicities, being perfectly satisfied that he understood enough through sign language. Now he feels the need to have actual conversations and understands the language barrier as his own shortcoming.

We managed to have a conversation, despite the language barrier. They could also talk a little bit of Sinhalese. I feel bad for not learning Tamil. I know very little. Older people are not keen to learn, they also don't think that is important to learn Tamil.

From his own experience, he understands the power of what he can do. He goes on to say:

Making peace is a bottom up process. When there are stronger bonds of friendships at ground level, we will also start to question politically motivated conflicts. We will start asking who we are fighting with. For example, if a conflict happens, I would want to make sure Raj (the family he met in Samanthurai) is safe, and he of me. The mutual bonding begins, if that continues this problem would not be there. Conflict resolution is a voluntary act. If people are more humane, these issues will not arise.

From thinking of himself as a victim or bystander, Amarapala has progressed over the course of the project to think of himself as an agent of change. He sees the value of bonds created at the ground level and how that can develop into a wider force working towards the non-recurrence of violence.

2

I NEED TO CORRECT MYSELF: THE STORY OF VAJIRA

Vajira is a 47 year old Sinhalese woman from Urubokka, a village in the interior of the Matara District in the south of Sri Lanka. She is intelligent and articulate, and she was able to put into words how the CMP experience affected her.

The [village level dialogue workshop] in Urubokka was something new for me. It was not about ordinary, day to day issues that we generally talk about. Although there are programs done by local NGOs and other institutions, they did not work on this particular issue. No one approached us to listen to us. Many people in the village participated and they were happy that there was an opportunity to share experiences with each other. It was a new experience for all.

[The project] got a voice recording from me because I was very much affected by the JVP violence. The Urubokka program refreshed memories of that violent era. I felt that for a group of our own people to be so violent against us, there has to be something terribly wrong. I was very angry with the system. My education was disrupted. My relations were lost, my younger sister suffered a lot, my mother almost went insane and this issue affected our family situation. My sister was very young when that happened, she was 3 years old, and we could not feed her properly. We had tea lands and they destroyed the factory, roads and overall the household economy. While the rich could cope because they had money, contacts and resources, people at the bottom tier found it difficult to get up and move on. They suffered mentally and physically.

In the program we were able to talk openly about what happened. For a very long time I kept a deep-rooted anger inside me, because the violence took my education and it totally changed our life. It is always good to let out the pain of memories rooted in you and the dialogues provided a good platform. We also feel like adding and contributing our story, while absorbing other people's experiences. We have to release these thoughts, address our weaknesses and correct ourselves. Now when I talk, I'm not in pain because now I know that others (Muslims, Tamils) have gone through the same or more. When I listened to those stories, my pain thinned and became more subdued.

Ethnic, religious and caste-based labeling and division is very prevalent in rural areas and people try to divide each other for various reasons. For the first time the idea that we should correct ourselves and that we should not divide ourselves like this, came to me on that day [in Urubokka]. Then when I saw the information shared at the Matara workshop, showing how others were affected by war and violence, it was very convincing and I felt that even more strongly. By the time I went to Ampara, I was quite convinced that I had to change my perceptions and correct myself.

She went on to talk about the district visit to Ampara and what she felt during that experience:

Prior to this, I had been to Mannar with my daughter, for a leadership development program by another local NGO. We stayed in a Tamil house. My first reflection, that I need to correct myself, came to me on that visit. But I did not know how to implement such a change. There was no pressing need for us to start a friendship with that family. We stayed, we talked, and then we parted. But [the inter district visit to] Ampara was different. When we went there, they were waiting for us and welcomed us very warmly. Here, there is no custom to take your visitor's bags, but there they took our bags, held hands and took us to their house. They were more warm and welcoming than our own people.

My daughter stayed in a Tamil house and I stayed in a Muslim house in Kalmunai. We could not converse; my host was talking, and I was just nodding. But they somehow understood our ideas, without words. Maybe they connected with feelings, for example they showed us the washroom if we wanted to go. By about the second day, we were slowly talking their language and were able to converse the essentials. By the third day we were talking about our experiences in war. From the words they expressed I felt that they had also suffered like us. We still keep in contact and talk to each other in broken language, we call ourselves akka/nangi (elder sister / younger sister) and ask about what is happening in each other's areas.

The lived experience of the visits made us understand the real story. It was different to hearing it from the TV. Learning by living their life is different to hearing their story from a third party. We learnt by their experience.

As part of the visit to Ampara, she visited Aranthalawa which has a graphic memorial erected in memory of the 28 Buddhist monks killed by the LTTE during the war.

In Aranthalawa I was in so much pain. We are Buddhists and respect monks like they are gods. I was very shocked, I was sad and angry. Later when I saw the other incidents at the kovil and in Samanthurai, I felt that Aranthalawa was only one incident among many other incidents, and my anger went away.

I think that monument is valuable. The memory of those incidents should not fade away with time, they should be kept for younger generation to remember but not to instigate anger. If you first see it with no background information you get angry. But if you know the incident you don't get angry when you see it.

Overall she feels that the Sinhalese as a race, need to change the way they think.

During the visit, we went to Aranthalawa, Samanthurai, and to a kovil. We saw the property damage and we got to know about the lives that were lost. I felt that we are a weak race. We should be able to understand – it is our weakness that we do not. You have to feel the pain of other people.

We should be like one, we should shed all our ethnic, caste, religious differences and we should involve everybody. Tamil people should come to big positions in the country, we should aim to have Tamils as President or Prime Minister. They should be given the chance to talk. When we find Sinhalese in high up positions we feel good. Those Tamil people should also feel the same way. We are the majority but they should also be given the chance. Our opinion gets prioritized, just because we are big in numbers.

We need to change our (racist) attitudes. The process of correcting ourselves should start from schools, at a very young age. It is good if there is an opportunity to learn Tamil for adults. The small children learn it at school. Adults don't have much opportunity. We feel helpless because we do not understand what they are saying. They understood our feelings and needs very quickly but we could not understand their feelings, emotions and needs because we did not know their language. I also noticed that the Tamil people are very skilled. They talk our language very fluently. At that point I felt we are a weak race because we only talk one language and we don't try to absorb the good in other people.

Finally she said:

Programs like this should be scaled up at national level and start in schools, dhamma (Buddhist religious) schools and religious institutions. If there is support from the government like how you all are supporting this effort, then definitely things will change.

3

AWARENESS OF OTHERS EXPERIENCES AS A BASIS FOR CHANGE: THE STORY OF VIJAYALUXMI:

Vijayaluxmi, a 47 year old Tamil woman from Samanthurai, has had a difficult life due to direct impacts of the war. She lost both her parents when she was very small, and went to live with an aunt from a young age. She was not able to study under the circumstances and her education did not progress far. Within a few days of her marriage she was displaced from her village to another village. Soon after, her husband was abducted while he was away selling fish and she has no information about what happened to him. Isolated within her part of the country and without access to much information about what was happening elsewhere, Vijayaluxmi thought that their situation was unique and that no one else had to face the problems they had.

Through the CMP, Vijayaluxmi had the opportunity to interact with people from other ethnicities. Speaking with the Sinhalese from her own district was a new experience for her and they shared what they went through during the war. In the process she realized that both ethnicities had suffered:

During the dialogue Kanthi Akka (a Sinhalese woman also from Ampara) told me that the LTTE had slaughtered more than 50 people in her village one night. I did not know that such a brutal massacres had happened to the Sinhalese. Before participating in the dialogues and taking with them, I used to think that they are Sinhalese, they have the protection of the security forces, what harm would have happened to them?

Interestingly, Vijayaluxmi realized that the Sinhalese were also equally ignorant about the experiences of the Tamils. When she said to the Sinhalese people she met at the dialogues that she thought they had not experienced the worst effects of the war, she says they said the same thing back to her:

I have told them directly and openly that I thought they didn't have to experience the terrible effects from this war. In turn Ka Akka said they thought the same. But after she participated in the dialogue she realized the difficulties faced by the Tamils.

The similarity of their experiences as well as the similarity of the way they thought, created a shared bond helping these women from opposing sides to overcome barriers and become friends.

In the process, the way Vijayaluxmi used to think about the Sinhalese community has changed. Before she took part in the dialogues, her mentality was prejudiced due to her own experiences with the conflict, and she thought the Sinhalese hated her community. After she took part in the dialogues, she changed her mind. She says “now I think they like us”.

Vijayaluxmi understands the value of remembering in order for others to become aware and to understand the incidents that happened, as well as to develop sympathy and empathy for the suffering of others. She says:

We didn't know what happened to them. After seeing all the incidents and sharing experiences I know what has happened to them and I think it is the same for the Sinhalese as well. They all came forward and showed their issues and effects by drawing maps. Otherwise we do not know. I didn't know who else was affected. Until I saw those stories I didn't believe that Sinhalese people were affected. Sinhalese people have been affected. So while we are sharing and seeing the past we should take care to prevent the same in future.

4

WE SHOULD ALL THINK THIS IS OUR COUNTRY: THE STORY OF ANUSIYA

Anusiya is a 19 year old university student from Samanthurai, Ampara. While her family is of Tamil ethnicity, she has lived all her life in a mixed village which has both Tamil and Muslim families. Of her village she says:

We are not divided here. We all live together. They send their food during their festival times. They also send us the porridge during their fasting period. We serve our Christmas cake to them. They all come to our houses and we all go to theirs.

Even though she lived among other ethnicities, she did not know of their experiences during the war. She had had no opportunities or experiences of speaking with Sinhalese and Muslim people about the war. As she had only spoken with Tamil people about the war and had heard only their stories, she thought that only the Tamils had suffered.

When I was young I noticed that several fingers on my grandmother's hand were bent, so I asked her why her fingers were like that. She said her hand was injured in a bomb blast. After listening to her story I came to know a little bit about the violent incidents during the war. My grandmother also recounted details about how they were displaced from their village. But I did not know the reasons for this. People of one ethnicity acted against another but I always wondered why were they acting like that? I had this question for a long time. I was anxious when I heard about these incidents. We are all human, but why would they act against each other like this?

The workshops and visits provided an opportunity to expand her knowledge. Meeting people victimized by the war helped her to feel empathy and she says that listening to their stories, she felt the same fear they had felt when they faced these incidents.

After I saw the banners and maps pertaining to violence faced by the Muslims I thought that all ethnicities have faced the same predicament due to violence. Meeting affected people face was a definite plus point of this project. There was a sister from Matara who spoke about a bomb blast at the Mosque and another sister from Mannar who spoke about a massacre that happened in the church. Before this program, I had heard only that Tamils were displaced and lived in refugee camps.

Before going to Matara, I thought the Sinhalese are angry with us due to the problem between Tamils and Sinhalese. I thought they treat us differently. Also I was afraid to stay in a Sinhalese' house alone. But all my fears were eradicated due to the treatment and love I received from the host family. Aunty treated me like her daughter. After I came back, they often call and speak with my mother and father. They called a week ago too, and talked with my mother, father and me. They told us that they will come to our place when they come to Ampara and my father also promised to visit them at their house. My father can speak Sinhala well so he is the one who speaks with them and translates for my mother and me.

As a youth, she found the transfer of memories through the CMP particularly useful and relevant:

We don't know what happened in the 1990s. I was surprised to listen to the incidents that had happened before I was born. I kept thinking have such things happened? They should not happen anymore. I think remembering old incidents would be difficult for those affected

by the violence. But for youth, remembering the past is very vital in order to mold our mind towards non – recurrence of future violence. In my mind I am now thinking this kind of bad experience should not come back to us. There was uncountable loss that we underwent. As a youth I don't have that much of capacity to bear such kind of suffering.

Everyone should learn about conflict and how it had originated. If we know this we can do something to identify such conflict at the beginning. I think if this knowledge would have given to the last generation the violence during the 1990s would have been mitigated.

Every individual should have a vision and objective towards peace. I think this country should be a nation for all. We all should think this is our country. Changes should start from every individual, at a very primary level like home, father – children relationship and neighbors' relationship. Every individual should think about this. We shouldn't value everything through misperception and on the basis of money. We should all try to help each other.

5

FROM INTOLERANCE TO REFLECTION: THE STORY OF HEMANTHI

Hemanthi is a 25 year old Sinhalese university student from Godapitiya, Matara. She is from a largely mono ethnic Sinhala village and her exposure to other ethnicities has been limited until she went to university. However, while she counts other ethnicities as within her friendship circles, she still found herself feeling irritated by some of their cultural and religious practices, which are different to her own:

At university I have Tamil and Muslim friends, and we eat and live with them together. There are no major issues. But there are laws that are only specific to them given by the mosque and that annoys me. For example the Burka, how can they be allowed to write exams in this? Anyone can write in place of them. The Muslims don't try to mingle with us, they are scared by their own rules/religion. Sometimes we face problems while trying to work together. For example, in the youth meetings, they don't even come to eat with us, and stay in their own group. Some Muslims say that their religion prohibits them from sitting with other religions in a group. How can we solve problems like this?

Hemanthi participated in several rounds of dialogues under the CMP, starting with the homogenous village dialogues. Because of her age, and limited experience of the war and those affected by the war, she found these village level dialogues useful:

The dialogues and learning about what others have gone through was useful for me. I was not aware of the personal stories of war, I was only aware of the stories that my parent used to share, the only remembrance I have is the bomb that happened here. Both Tamils and Sinhalese were affected by war. After hearing those stories, I feel that we don't need to have a war again.

As she went through the various rounds of dialogues, each including bigger and bigger groups from other ethnicities however, Hemanthi found herself feeling impatient with the way the meetings were structured:

They discussed the same topics over a varied group of people over and over again. In Dikwella program, people were frustrated, because the content was monotonous. At the beginning of the program, people knew they will be talking about the same thing. Even on the session on the tree, while the method was different, the incident, the content was the same. It would have been less boring if there were more activities.

Gandara program had a lot of people, and in a large crowd you can't give time for everybody to talk. There was also a language issue which was eventually solved by talking in English. But there were some who could not talk neither English nor Sinhala, and we had no way of communicating with them. Overall, I think the Gandara program could have been better planned. The village level conversations in contrast were really good. That was a small group so there was more space to talk. We used to talk while at lunch also. When there is a large group it is difficult to get to know each other.

Another issue was that it was the same set of people that went to the entire program. There was no intergroup dialogue, I only knew the people in my group.

They also only talked about the war, they did not talk about the problems faced by Matara (JVP). They were probably not aware that these things happened during the JVP times.

Yet, she feels that the workshops helped to change some of her attitudes:

I think I changed my attitude about myself and others. I used to label people by their ethnicity. (e.g they are Tamil/Muslim I am Sinhalese attitude), and I used to think that we are above everyone else, because we are Sinhalese. That has changed. I started thinking that we are all the same. Now there is no need to confront them. The feeling that we are above all comes from the fact that we are big in numbers, we are the majority, and that Tamils have always been our enemies. The media also boosts that we are the bigger race. Now there are Muslim Sinhala issues emerging especially in Godapitya and Weligama.

The program helped us to think within us how we can mitigate conflict. Those days I used to get angry a lot, but now I have started thinking rationally about these issues. I have learnt to keep quiet.

Speaking of physical memorials, Hemanthi felt that they can be a positive thing, especially for the youth:

It's good if monuments are built in such a way that does not create anger. I remember things, but I don't use it for revenge or get angry. Anger should not be remembered. When you are so engrossed with the past you are missing energy to face the future.

People should remember that this kind of a war happened. We know history because in the past people left monuments and documents. It is important to remember, so that we can prevent these things happening again. If we address the root causes of war, it will not happen again.

Speaking of the future, she felt that programs such as CMP are important and should be expanded:

I think that individual attitude change is important. Everyone should know how to live harmoniously. The formal education system only does this in theory, there is civics as a subject, but we are only focused on passing the main subjects.

The dialogue should expand beyond war to economic/social issues that people face every day. People need to move on from War/JVP. The workshops should be more forward looking.

Hemanthi is not yet completely comfortable in a multicultural, ethnically diverse setting. While she feels she has friends from other ethnicities, it is clear that she is still quite suspicious of them. Yet participating in CMP has engendered a change in her attitudes. She has gone from outright intolerance to a less confrontational attitude, to some reflection and aspiration towards a more rational response. She sees the value of 'keeping quiet' on some issues in the name of ethnic harmony. Her earlier sense of superiority as a Sinhalese has diminished and she is aware that being numerically stronger doesn't mean her race is somehow above the others. This may perhaps be only a small change but it is a positive change nevertheless.

6

STRENGTHENING EXISTING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP: THE STORY OF RATHNASIRI

Rathnasiri, a Sinhalese man from Matara District, is already committed to promoting reconciliation. He works for a well-known local NGO, which is active on this issue, and Rathnasiri has worked extensively as a community leader, both through his employment and in his private capacity, to promote reconciliation between ethnicities within his community.

I am from Keerapitiya – Urubokka. The village is surrounded by estates so there is a neighboring Tamil community. Compared to the past, the village has changed now. Estate Tamil people were ill-treated (in shops, government officers like the DS office) because they do not know the language or because they did not have ID cards/ birth certificate etc. Some had never been to a government office and children were not accepted to school because they were estate Tamil and abused in various ways. Now it is better because a considerable amount of work has been done to address these problems. Our NGO organized mobile clinics and facilitated to get their documentation done and accompanied them to the DS office when needed. The language issue is still there because still no one works in Tamil here but a young lady originally from the estate helps us with translation.

When he was a young man, he was motivated enough by the violence and the threat posed by the LTTE that he joined the Sri Lanka Army. However, it did not take him long to realize that violence was not the answer:

I was very angry with what I saw on TV about the war, and I wanted to contribute. So I joined the army after I left school and served for 5 years. While I was actively engaged in war (in Muttur, Killinochchi, Batticaloa), a lot of us felt it was not right and that war cannot find answers for these problems. I felt that humanity and reconciliation can achieve more things than war. I left the army and started doing community development work and dedicated my entire life to social development activities.

My attitudes changed because I participated in programs like this. If you compare my thoughts and attitudes to my brothers and sisters they are quite different. In some ways you can say they have some racist ideas. They didn't like my getting involved with estate people. They didn't like that we would visit the estates, sit in their homes and drink tea with them. They found this odd. Even some of the people we work with, they wouldn't even drink a glass of water from those homes. Later we were able to change some of these attitudes.

Talking about the workshops done by the CMP, he noted that it provided the space to learn something deeper and different about the people in his community, even those he already knew quite well:

People were very satisfied with the Urubokke programme. It was the first time they got an experience of that nature and they got a chance to refresh their memory. There were people who were affected by violence in Urubokke, for example Mr. Sumanasiri who had an amazing story to tell. Although he lived among us and was always among us, no one knew his story before this. That opportunity was given by this program and that is very valuable.

Speaking about the reaction to the workshop and the project, he said:

Before they came for the program the Sinhalese people in our community were a bit reluctant to come. But after they came, they relaxed and now they like these programs. They liked the inter district visits and freely share their experience of these visits with others.

For me, the workshop session about ethics using the visual of a tree was the most favorite session, among many good sessions. That was very memorable and what was communicated through that session really hit me very hard. The message that we should not let this happen again was very clear. I will never forget that experience.

Rathnasiri has developed a close friendship with the host family he met in the inter district visit.

In Ampara I stayed with a Tamil man called Muttiah. In his family, only he could speak Sinhala (not the wife) but they treated us very well. He talked with my family on the phone, we exchanged a lot of ideas. He also taught Tamil words to my daughter and helped her with her Tamil lessons. Once in two weeks we talk to each other by phone. When we were in Ampara, he took us to meet other civil activists in the village. We exchanged ideas, they also like to come to the South and visit the estates. We are actually preparing to go there again and invite them for a visit here.

The Tamil people in Ampara said that the visits helped them to understand that there are good people among the Sinhalese, as until now they had not thought this way. Everyone was very emotional when we left, all sides were crying. I think that indicates that the program is successful.

Looking back, he highlighted the selection of participants as a key ingredient of CMP's success:

The CMP should be commended for finding the right target group. They targeted people who were not rigid but people who were willing to change. We created a set of people who could work as a collective and support our work. That is the biggest victory for us. Up to now it was very difficult to find people who support reconciliation, all we could find were people who were against it.

Looking forward, he felt his experience with the CMP improved the skills he already had and increased his motivation to engage in reconciliation work, as he realized that there are others interested and committed to working on this issue:

As someone who is already working on this issue of reconciliation we were able to use the workshop content to shape our own work. Subsequent to the dialogue workshops, we organized a film-based discussion with both ethnic groups based on a film produced through Search's Sikka project². It gave a good message. It was helpful for them to let out their thoughts. By doing so, they realized the relativity of the idea (that they may not be 100% right), the need for a balanced view point and respecting other people's ideas. That was a good lesson. In this way the CMP was an opportunity for us to confirm and validate our own thoughts and processes.

² Sikka Team is a drama series produced by SFCG Sri Lanka which is based on a local cricket team, united by the passion for the sport, divided by the trauma of past conflict. Using cricket as a metaphor to address deeply-rooted conflict, Sikka Team follows the stories of players who must gradually learn to work as a team to overcome their differences and win the competition.

Now the adults teach children about the need to live in harmony. I did not know that there were other people who were interested in and committed to reconciliation. This message should spread, the program should continue and expand to reach other villages. We need more champions who are passionate about the issue.

He has always felt the agency he had to change the way people think about reconciliation, and sharing some final thoughts with us he said:

Peace will only prevail when we start thinking as a Sri Lankan nation, not as Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims. The future will be a challenge with natural and man-made disasters and we should work as one to face/prevent these. Reconciliation is everybody's responsibility. I have a duty as an individual, my family, village all have a stake in making it work. We should start with teenagers, that is a critical age where they become more self-aware. Organizations like these can target teenagers who are left behind from the schooling system and that is good.

7

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: THE STORY OF MUMTAZ

Mumtaz is a 38 year old Muslim woman living in Mannar. She is the mother of 3 school age children. She has never been employed outside of her home. Instead, she volunteers for the village Women's Society, working as its secretary for 4 years, and is currently its president.

Mumtaz says she heard many stories of how people suffered during the war at the dialogue workshops. While they had heard similar stories before taking part in the workshops, for her the real value of the workshops was in learning how they can prevent such tragedies in future.

We learned about what kind of values and initiatives we should take as individuals. We should live with understanding. You see, the so called ethnic problem was started due to misunderstanding and due to lack of understanding. If they (Tamils and Sinhalese) could understand about each other we would have prevented these tragedies and losses.

She notes specific sessions and activities during the workshop which helped her to understand better.

*The role play was very good. What I realized was that **we** are the main cause for escalating any kind of issue. I saw that in the role play a minor issue that could have been solved by the GN, escalated up to large scale.*

Mumtaz goes on to recount an incident where she was able to use the learning from the workshop.

I used the learning in my life. Last night there was a quarrel between Muslim and Tamil neighbors. This quarrel was caused due to a Muslim's woman's cow damaging a Tamil woman's paddy field. The Tamil woman explained that they are doing this cultivation under tremendous difficulties, without enough water and incurring a huge cost on obtaining water through pumps. When she heard this, the Muslim woman went to the Tamil woman's house and apologized for what happened. She made sure to tie their cow to a tree before she left the village to go to the hospital. While the Muslim woman was away, the Tamil woman had recounted the story to her son, who was visiting from Jaffna. He had escalated the conflict by starting a quarrel with the Muslim family and arguing with them. So I went there and told them we should live together and not fight for small things. I explained to them about the consequences of conflict, as I had learned from the dialogue workshops. They listened to me and they became quiet, and the quarrel ended and they all went away.

While she is only one person and her influence may not spread beyond the village, Mumtaz's experience shows that individuals at the local level can act effectively and in a timely way to reduce conflict, especially to reduce the potential for small arguments to escalate into big conflicts.

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NOVELTY OF MEETING PEOPLE FROM OTHER ETHNICITIES: THE STORY OF MARY

Mary is a 35 year old Tamil woman from Mannar. Her life was disrupted due to multiple displacements during the war years and she has also lost her arm due to the violence.

I was born and grew up in Adampan in Mannar. In 1995, we were displaced to Nedunkeni. I studied up to grade 7 in Nedunkeni. From there we were displaced in 2009 and came to Madu. After that we went back to Nedunkeni. My parents asked me to stop my studies due to the war. My hand was damaged and my arm was amputated after a shell attack. I got married in 2011 when we resettled over here. When we came back here our house was completely destroyed. An NGO organisation helped us to rebuild in 2011.

Because she was very young when the Muslims were driven out of Mannar she grew up without any close contact with anyone outside of her own ethnic community. She spoke of how meeting with Muslims on returning to her village was a new experience for her:

I came to know Muslims only in 2016. Before that I didn't know who they are. When we settled down in Sornapuri there were few Muslims who were also resettled over there. I heard about Muslims but I didn't have any experience of meeting them. Upto that time, we had always lived in areas where there were only Tamils. When we came back here, people would speak about Muslims with lot of prejudice.

While she started to interact with people from the Muslim community on her return to her village, she knew even less about the Sinhalese community. Mary speaks about how the experience of meeting Sinhalese people and travelling to the Matara in the South was a novel experience for her.

(In the CMP project) I agreed to be a host and have participants from other parts of Sri Lanka stay at our house. I didn't know about the Sinhalese, and had no experience with them as I have had with Muslims. We got an opportunity to share our experience with others through this program. We learned about the incident in Godapittiya mosque in Matara. Till that I thought that only we faced such kind of tragic incidents. After I went to Matara I realised that Sinhalese also faced same tragedies. For instance, the bomb blast incident happened in front of mosque. During the discussion one elderly Sinhala man told us about how his family was massacred. He said his entire family had been destroyed. He was in agony when he described the incident.

Mary compared the experiences she heard about and comparing them to her own experiences, she felt that the suffering that she and her own community faced in Mannar was unlike what they faced in the South.

They lost relatives. But comparatively to us, the tragedies they faced were very low intensity. However, when we observe the way they presented the incident it looks like a great incident and unforgettable for them. We have faced lot more tragic incidents than them.

Nevertheless, the visits and interactions have helped to remove some of the prejudice caused by lack of interaction between the communities.

The visit (to Matara in the South) was so good. They treated us well. The host family we stayed with often telephone us and talk. But only issue is they cannot speak Tamil and we also do not know to speak Sinhala. I am now thinking to learn Sinhala. Sinhalese are very good people. They treated us well. And they were worried about my health and after I came back home, they called and asked after my health.

Looking back over her experience with CMP, Mary doesn't think it is helpful to remember the past too closely.

I don't like to remember the past incidents. I think rather than remembering the past we should think about how we can go forward. When I think about the bodies lying on the ground and the bad smell, I feel very bad. I don't want to recall those incidents again. Sometime when those incidents come to my mind, I cannot sleep. But if we remember the incidents and understand the reason for that particular violent incident, perhaps we can prevent future violence.



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About the Project:

The Community Memorialisation Project is a joint project of Search for Common Ground and The Herstories Project along with district partners - Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Development in Mannar, Prathiba Media Network in Matara and Women Development Foundation in Ampara. The project captures individual and shared community narratives in order to prioritise and strengthen community owned memorialisation. Its primary objective is to facilitate an environment that acknowledges and preserves multiple histories, while encouraging empathy through inter-generational transfer and inter-regional sharing of memory to support peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Building on individual stories the project team works with the communities to share their stories and facilitate dialogue within their communities about why memorialisation is needed, why multiple narratives should co-exist, and how we remember, at the divisional level and between the participating districts. The process focuses on empathetic listening and acknowledgement. While the project is expected to have a cathartic and empathetic impact on the participants sharing their life stories at an individual level, it will also facilitate their voices and needs to be heard, through its wide dissemination. The success of the project is in attitudinal changes – about the need to hear and acknowledge the many personal truths that exist. At a wider level, it will contribute to how Sri Lankans memorialise and historicise our past, and to making processes of justice, truth and reconciliation inclusive.

