

Conflict, Community and Faith: The Politics of Public Action in Sri Lanka

Aims and objectives of research

In literature on peace building and reconciliation, non-governmental public action is often seen as an alternative path to peace building as opposed to formal negotiation between the combatant parties and top down policies of the state. Faith-based organisations with specific values of peace or non-violence often are considered as important contributors to such local capacities for peace. Our research on faith-based non-governmental action in the conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka seeks to illuminate the complex processes through which faith-based action may either serve as a resource for social healing, or alternatively may exacerbate the roots of conflict.

Key research questions/hypotheses and methods

- What spaces are available for non-governmental action in situations of long-term conflict?
- Are faith-based organizations especially effective in these situations?
- What are the key differences between different faith-based organizations and do these differences have implications for the organization's possible role in conflict situations?

The project will combine an initial survey of the work of faith-based organizations in two districts in Eastern Sri Lanka, with multi-sited ethnography, tracing the chains of resources and rhetoric which link faith-based agencies to donors and to local actors.

Relation to the programme

Programme related questions include

- Where is the line between legitimate and non-legitimate public action?
- In a situation of conflict, is this the same as the line between the safe and the non-safe intervention?
- Do faith-based organizations experience unusual constraints as well as unusual opportunities in their repertoire of interventions?

Relevance of your research to user groups and which ones

We will be working in partnership with local NGOs and selected INGOs, while the research itself will be conducted within a consortium of three Sri Lankan universities (Peradeniya, Eastern Southeastern) which has been recently established to build social science capacity in a way which cuts across the country's ethnic fault-lines. The research will be of more general relevance to practitioners and policy-makers interested in the broad relations between aid, faith and conflict.

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