



Preliminary Research Findings Brief

Conflict, Community and Faith: The Politics of public action in Sri Lanka

Project aims, objectives, methods

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 has concentrated on two districts in Eastern Sri Lanka, Ampara and Batticaloa, which have both been affected by the war and by the 2004 Tsunami. Within these Districts there are Hindus, Buddhist, Muslims and Christians of various denominations. The first phase of our work, ending in March 2008, has sought to map the changing role of religious organizations in the two Districts. In the second phase we will be working on a number of case studies - of particular settings, events, and organizations - which will help us better understand the role of religious organizations in a deeply contested social landscape.

Key research findings

In the first phase of the project we have concentrated on mapping the role of religion and religiously-based organizations in what has turned out to be a complex and rapidly changing situation. Two key changes that have shaped our work so far are:

- The collapse of the 2002 ceasefire agreement and return to open warfare between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE
- The gradual withdrawal from the East of most of the agencies who arrived in the wake of the 2004 Tsunami (locally this is sometimes referred to as the "Tsunami-third wave", signifying its adverse local impact)

We are now completing the first phase of our work, from which a number of important issues have emerged which will be explored in greater detail through case studies to be developed over the next few months:

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- There are widespread reports of an intensification of religious engagement at moments of local crisis (during the worst periods of the war, immediately after the Tsunami): churches, mosques and temples were packed with crowds of worshippers
- In the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami people flocked to local religious institutions for safety and relief sometimes cross-cutting religious boundaries. These local spontaneous self-help efforts however were shortlived partly as an outcome of the massive influx of donor support in the period that followed.
- 'Conflict' is not a factor external to religion in Eastern Sri Lanka: there are intense internal struggles going *within* some of the major religious traditions: between the mainstream churches and new pentecostal churches, between older local forms of Muslim practice and new reform movements, for example
- Religious institutions and religious leaders often play crucial roles as mediators and peace-makers at flashpoint moments, but this capacity varies greatly from religious community to religious community: it is most visible among Muslims and Christians, but much less so among Buddhist and Hindus.
- The arrival of foreign NGOs associated with evangelical Christian interests is widely seen as potentially destabilizing local inter-faith relations, and there are persistent rumours of NGOs offering aid in return for conversion
- Despite these rumours, there are many impressive examples of faith-based organizations successfully working in a 'faith-blind' way

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Policy and practice implications

- Local religious institutions are among the most resilient sources of local cohesion and healing in times of crisis
- BUT the situation is extremely complex and dynamic, making it very unwise to base external interventions on assumptions about the social importance of 'religion' or 'faith' in general
- Local religious leaders and local religious organizations have many years of experience of working in a divided and insecure environment: they possess the best knowledge of which interventions can address local conflicts successfully and which ones may exacerbate conflict.
- Several mechanisms have been established for interreligious dialogue in some locations but their impact on peace is yet to be ascertained.

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Key publications and outputs

No publications or outputs as such at this stage.

For further information

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