

UCDC: Promoting Peace Committee Work at Grassroots Level for a Peaceful Multi-Ethnic Society



Meeting of UCDC members in Badulla

It is 10.30 am and discussions between members of the Uva Community Development Center (UCDC) in Badulla are reaching a climax.

“We are getting through to over 5,000 people in Uva Province (Badulla and Monaragala districts) with Peace and Development-oriented activities. And we are being quite successful for the time being”, says Manel Ratnayake, President of UCDC.

“But what would happen if we had a bomb blast in Badulla or Monaragala and violence erupted, like in 1983 when hundreds of people were killed?”

“Right now, we are having a very good awareness campaign at village and plantation level”, admits Ganesha, a school principal and member of a Peace Committee in Kumbuhana village,

“Over 800,000 people are living in both districts and we only have reached 5,000. There is still a long way to go.”

“I do not agree’, says Mrs. Sareefa, a Peace Committee animator from Monaragala.

“Sri Lanka was hit by the tsunami two years ago, but we all joined hands: many people from Monaragala



Mrs. S. Sareefa (right), Animator of a Peace Committee, Bassera DS Division, Monaragala



Mr. Manel Ratnayake, Chairman of UCDC

The Uva Community Development Center (UCDC) has a network of 100 Peace Committees in the Uva Province. UCDC's charismatic leader, Manel Ratnayake, is a recognized peace-building activist.

“Conscious of the multi-ethnicity, poverty and lack of education in the Uva Province, we started Peace Committee work in 1990”, Manel Ratnayake explains. Badulla and Monaragala are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural districts, home for Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils. “Peace Committees were set up at village level. They are composed of members of the Grama Sevaka (local administration), religious leaders, local politicians, but also youths, women and farmers' associations.”

“These Peace Committees are organized on average once a week. We have 42 animators visiting and facilitating the meetings: all of them were trained so they have knowledge on the ethnic conflict history and they can handle a committee.”

“Peace Committees are platforms for dialogue where we can identify problems and help participants find solutions”, Manel Ratnayake continues. “Issues tackled range from home-based violence to human rights, access to health and educational facilities, alcoholism, infrastructure development (water, electricity)... We also build the capacity of these communities by partially funding initiatives.”

“We believe it is essential to empower people at grassroots level to improve ethnic relations by facilitating better understanding amongst ethnic groups and prepare a ground for a peaceful multi-ethnic and egalitarian society”, Manel adds.

FLICT initiated a partnership with UCDC in 2004. This collaboration resulted in several achievements. “A significant impact of Peace Committees is increased community-based cooperation, often in the field of infrastructure development.”

“I have been a member of Atampitya’s (Badulla district) Peace Committee for 10 years”, says Dayani Weerapperuma, 47 years old. “Our village is quite isolated. There is no commitment and a lack of awareness of people on many issues. Atampitya’s Peace Committee is a good opportunity for people from different ethnic and social background to meet, share ideas and plan for activities that will benefit the entire village. We meet twice a month and we regularly take part in activities organized by the PC: for Sharmadana (voluntary community work)... Recently, both Tamils and Sinhalese from our village gathered to build a well where both communities can now come and collect safe-drinking water. Today, we have a pre-school where both Sinhalese and Tamil children go. We also have a Buddhist temple which Tamil people also visit regularly.”



Mrs. Dayani Weerapperuma, Peace Committee member, Badulla district



Ms. Selvanayagam Sirimala, Peace Committee member, Asilabbe estate, Badulla district

“Our village participated in an exchange programme between Sinhalese and Tamil villages organized by UCDC”, remembers Selvanayagam Sirimala, a 24 year-old Tamil woman. “When our Sinhalese friends arrived in our village, they looked a bit frightened: we understood they had never been in a Tamil village before. On the first day, we took them to Hindu Kovil, our Hindu temple. For many, it was the first time they had entered a Hindu temple and they enjoyed very much wearing the “pottu” (red dot Hindus wear on the forehead after visiting a temple). They were also interested to learn about plantation workers and their living conditions. In the evening we introduced them to Tamil Traditional events: nobody slept at night, we had such a good time! We all realized there were so many similarities between both cultures. It was a very enlightening moment for all of us.”