

Executive Summary

Background

For the purpose of the focus of this Project, namely the predicament of the ethnic minority communities of Sri Lanka, the understanding of the political context of the country must be weighted by an emphasis on the ethnic conflict and its ramifications.

Over the last 30 years, the political objectives of the ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka have evolved from demands for individual and social rights as equal citizens and for specific cultural rights, to a new platform of ethnic community-based regional autonomy or even territorial secession. At the same time, the civilian and institutional politics of the ethnic issue became driven by the dynamics of the emerging armed confrontation between the Sri Lanka State (headed by successive ethnic Sinhala-led elected governments) and Tamil secessionist insurgent groups.

In a situation of a lack of equal citizenship status and weak bargaining power for the marginalised ethnic minorities, a post-war context may also be the opportunity for a shift from direct political activism to a more diversified range of initiatives and endeavors by civil society actors in ethnic minority society, for post-war survival and socio-economic rebuilding. The massive societal dislocation at the end of a 30 year military/ethnic conflict presents a challenge to re-build the social foundations for a rejuvenated ethnic minority society that, in the long term, may be energised to seek a recovery of identity and political dignity.

The MRG project was designed before the end of the military conflict in Sri Lanka, and implemented in the immediate aftermath of the 'victory' of the Sri Lankan government over the LTTE. It needs to be viewed as one of the endeavors by the international community as well as civil society groups to strengthen CSO capacity to promote minority rights, and reflects the active engagement of these actors with initiatives that aim at bringing about better understanding and cooperation between minority groups and civil society.

Involvement in the MRG program further strengthened the organizational capacity particularly of the community based organisations participating in the project. It also brought minority concerns and minority rights into the mainstream media, in all three languages.

This project was well designed and sensitive in its conceptualizing; in final phase of the war the context and environment within which the project was implemented changed, and MRG was able to liaise closely with its partners in responding strategically both to the need to

ensure of safety of those involved in the project as well as to the need to adhere to the founding principles of the project.

The project was critical for minority rights activists, especially those who raised the issue of the Tamil and the Muslim community, to give voice to the situation of minorities affected by the war and, the post-war developments. Opportunities provided and facilitated by MRG for international advocacy had created better communication on the issues on the need to support and promote the rights of minorities in Sri Lanka, among European and British political actors.

In this review of the project it has to be stated that the focus on supporting the political rights of minority communities in Sri Lanka remains as important today, three years after the 'end of the military conflict', as it was when the project was conceptualized in 2008. The space that was created through this project for the articulation of minority rights in Sri Lanka at the national and international levels, incorporated key advocacy interventions that played an important role in bringing into the international arena some of the more complex and difficult aspects of working on minority rights within a context of majoritarian ethnic political domination. Feedback from those who had participated in the project showed clearly that MRG is viewed as a well respected and credible organization that should look to develop further on the outcomes of the project for future engagement and strategic interventions to support minority rights in Sri Lanka.

Key Findings:

Key Results Area 1: Strengthened capacities of 20 minority communities and activists (CBOs) to engage with national and international stakeholders (decision makers and NGOs) on minority rights issues.

The National Training for minority rights activists, the voter rights campaign conducted at district and at national levels and, the educational campaigns were viewed by participants as having been most useful. These were also activities which reached many, including the majority Sinhala community in these different arenas. These meetings and workshops were significant as both the Plantation Tamils and the Muslim IDPs were made aware of issues facing the two communities. They were able to interact with the Sinhalese too. It is creditable that MRG and the partners also chose topics such as education and voting rights which are crucial minority issues, but considered not to be overtly threatening, which was important considering the security issues at that time.

However one of the main drawbacks of the workshops was that there was very little follow up on these activities. Follow up would have been possible if there was an action plan drawn up and a training module developed, even after the workshop/campaign. Short-term training programmes must be followed through to ensure commitment from organizations, that the training received by its members is usefully integrated into other programmes of the organization. It is not always possible to get this kind of results and hence, this can be one of the lessons learned in adopting this type of methodology.

Key Results Area 2: Strengthen capacities of 5 national mainstream Sri Lankan NGOs to effectively incorporate minority rights protection in their work.

The National Training for NGOs/CBOs had been well conceptualized and delivered. While the participants were mostly from organizations already engaged in rights issues and working with minority communities in the plantations sector and the internally displaced community, it usefully brought to light a number of issues related to minority rights in the context of a post-war environment.

A major challenge of the meeting was the uneven knowledge and experience of participants. Although the training requires participants with a specific level of knowledge/experience, often either the same participant is sent to many trainings / workshops or, because there is not a suitable person available, whoever is there may be sent as a participant, even a new recruit to the organisation. Strategy meetings for CBOs and NGOs served as a preparation for the project's international advocacy interventions. The evaluators feel that the modification of activities under this component was a strategically valid decision at the time, given that a broader approach may have affected the quality, confidentiality and hence effectiveness of the advocacy programme. The modification of activities and the ensuing results such as collective outlining of long-term and short-term strategies, as well as identification of already functioning fora that critiqued un-democratic policies of the government and the need to defend citizens' rights, show that this had been an effective intervention. Meeting with key government Ministers (Minister of Justice) was an achievement, in that the situation on minorities was highlighted.

Key Result Area 3: Successful advocacy implemented by national CSOs, using good quality information produced, leading to an improvement in government's human rights policies and plans for minority communities.

This segment of the project has been conceptualized as the 'public' domain, where partner organisations used a range of communication strategies from preparation of briefing papers, art exhibitions in schools, posters, newspaper advertisements, culminating in taking the issue of Sri Lanka minority rights to the international arena. The MRG report on the rights of minorities in a post-war context brought the issue very much into the international domain and, was useful in the coming together of a strong international lobby on Sri Lanka.

Collaborative actions on specific activities such as participating in programmes of the other partners, has resulted in better inter-action even after the completion of project activities. However, the expectation of the project, that bringing minority communities together would lead to a strengthening of collaborative political strategies, did not necessarily unfold in that way; politically, minority communities remain focused on their respective issues even in the mainstream political arena.