Asia REF
Religious & Ethnic Freedom

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs
in SRI LANKA

Introduction

In line with the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program's learning agenda, this brief aims to provide valuable insights into the institutional and staff capacity needs, strengths, and challenges faced by local partners in the context of promoting religious and ethnic freedoms in the Asia region. This learning brief focuses on answering learning questions to enhance our understanding of the capacity building needs and strengths of local partners. By analyzing their experiences, the Asia REF team aims to identify information gaps, technical capacity needs, and the factors that hinder or facilitate effective work in promoting religious freedom. This knowledge will guide the team in developing targeted interventions and strategies to strengthen the capacity of local Asia REF partners to promote religious and ethnic freedoms in Asia.

The data was collected during the Local REF perspectives workshop in Sri Lanka on August 11, 2023. In total, 16 people participated in the meeting, including 6 females and 10 males. The discussion focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks (SWOT) local NGOs face in implementing internationally funded religious freedom projects, as well as their assessment of the benefits and limitations of cooperation with donor organizations. Delving into the strengths and weaknesses within their respective organizations, the analysis aimed to uncover the underlying factors that influence their engagement in their respective fields. The analysis draws upon the diverse perspectives and experiences of civil society members, offering valuable insights that can shape the future direction of their organizations.

Institutional & Staff Capacity of NGOs in Sri Lanka

Strengths

- Long-term engagement with communities that go beyond project cycles and sought to engage communities sustainably increases the credibility of the organization.
- A skilled and well-trained staff with adequate knowledge of context and engagement methods is an asset to the organization.
- Maintaining and developing networks continues to be useful to gain trust in new communities, share knowledge and practices, and support initiatives with a common goal.
- Organizations taking an inclusive approach to peacebuilding while considering the issues of vulnerable groups are strengthening their positions in communities.

Weaknesses

- Certain groups of organizations work in silos while excluding others, which means exclusion from specific grant opportunities and even access to specific communities.
- There is a need for more creative and innovative approaches to peace given the changing socio-political context in Sri Lanka. The narrative around peacebuilding that often centers on ethnic conflict should be changed to issues more pertinent today when engaging youth specifically, as their civil war experiences may be limited or nonexistent.
- Shorter programming and project periods do not allow the implementing organization to fully engage in the community or group it works with due to the limited available time. Shorter project periods also bring to question the effectiveness and impact of the project and raise concerns about funding versus impact.

Opportunities

- Building and nurturing robust networks among various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, government bodies, community leaders, and international actors.
- Facilitation of knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices and collaboration among peacebuilding actors to extend the reach and impact of peacebuilding initiatives.
- Inclusive peacebuilding that recognizes the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals, including those from the LGBTQ+ community. Peacebuilding initiatives must strive to include LGBTQ+ voices at every level of decision-making. Inclusion also entails addressing the specific challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community during and after conflicts.
- Many of the changes that have taken place in Sri Lanka's recent past have opened more avenues for programming interventions in spaces related to ethnic and religious freedom, inclusivity, media freedom, and freedom of speech. This is an opportunity that could be grasped by CSOs for innovative approaches and interventions.

Threats

- Stakeholders and politicians in the community may intervene unnecessarily for their own interests. There were also many instances of government stakeholders obstructing specific projects or beneficiary communities based on their prejudices and for their expedience.
- Some local government and provincial-level authorities need more capacity or training to carry out their project responsibilities. Furthermore, these government stakeholders also needed more resources, on their part, for the effective running of the project.
- Peacebuilding organizations have often been subject to extreme scrutiny and surveillance. This has materialized in many ways, including the questioning of staff, intimidation, and other threatening measures. Some participants felt that this has increased since the citizen-led protests in 2022 and felt they had always to be vigilant of new threats.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- INGOs have access to international development funds and other investments and channel these types of funds to countries like Sri Lanka to work on peacebuilding and related issues.
- INGOs often have extensive global networks, which provide local organizations access to resources, knowledge, and support from international partners, donors, and volunteers.
- Collaborating with INGOs provides local civil society organizations with valuable access to innovative processes and technical expertise crucial for effective community engagement and intervention enhancement through rigorous research and knowledge creation.

Weaknesses

- International donors are often rigid in their expectations with timelines, reporting structures, monitoring, and evaluation. The rigidity adds pressure on the local organizations and hampers the impact they could have through their work than if there had been more flexibility and collaboration throughout the grant timeline or project.
- Specific donor funding and grants being repeatedly given to the same organizations is an unfair practice, especially as peacebuilding has become a rather crowded space in Sri Lanka.
- Broader international goals based on funding and trends are sometimes imposed on local CSOs, which leads to wasted resources and short-term benefits that do not create sustainable change in the community.
- Project applications and donor relations have often been tedious and difficult for organizations, leading to burnout among staff and volunteers. Some expectations by donor organizations need to consider the rapidly changing socio-political context of Sri Lanka and the challenges that CSOs face when attempting to implement project activities that are no longer viable due to changed circumstances.
- It seems that only a small number of NGOs and CSOs were continuing to work on religious and ethnic freedom issues, potentially due to the increased surveillance and threats to activists since the Citizen led protest of 2022.

Opportunities

- Engaging the commercial capital, Colombo, on peace and reconciliation in order to address ongoing ethnic and religious issues in a diverse and populated city.
- Despite the unfortunate nature of the volatile socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka, it offers spaces for intervention and engagement from donor organizations and INGOs on issues of peacebuilding, religious freedom, social cohesion, etc.

Opportunities (continued)

- The recent economic crisis has increased the government's interest and openness to international development funds and investments. This could be leveraged in creating more opportunities for grants within Sri Lanka to engage in the peace and development space.

Threats

- Beneficiaries of many projects have fallen into a dependency mentality because of the continuous streams of resources that have poured into their communities as more and more peace-related organizations and aid agencies have flocked to work in Sri Lanka's peacebuilding space. This has unfortunately led to beneficiaries opting for quick material resources over benefits and skills that would have a more long-term impact on their communities.
- Given the socio-political volatility in Sri Lanka, political spoilers often use narrative around 'international agenda/conspiracy' when referring to human rights and civil society organizations that are working against racism, corruption and hate. There are instances where being associated with foreign funding can pose a threat to local organizations, especially when those funding agencies insist on being branded on programs and materials.

Conclusion

The SWOT exercise conducted for local organizations promoting religious freedom in Sri Lanka highlights several key insights.

Local NGOs are well-positioned to address religious freedom issues because they have long-term community engagement building credibility, skilled staff with contextual knowledge, maintained networks to gain trust and collaborate, and inclusive approaches considering vulnerable groups to strengthen community positions. However, their impact can be limited by siloed approaches, lack of innovation, and short project cycles. They often lack capacity to ensure accountability and sustainability of interventions. Due to the sensitive nature of FORB work, increased scrutiny and threats limit organizations.

Donors and INGOs have an important role in addressing these gaps. They can provide funding, networks, and technical expertise to build capacity. Moreover, coordination and knowledge sharing allow local NGOs to gain insights into different practices. Consolidating and supporting local NGOs also lends them credibility with stakeholders, including government. The effectiveness of FORB advocacy will require flexibility from donors, fair distribution of resources, and aligning goals with community needs.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for donors to consider and contribute to strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and support their efforts to promote religious freedom in Asia.

Adopt more flexible funding structures that allow local organizations the freedom to adapt project timelines, reporting structures, and evaluation mechanisms according to the changing circumstances and needs on the ground. Flexibility in funding can reduce pressure on local organizations and enhance their ability to maximize the impact of their initiatives.

Invest in programs that focus on resilience building and capacity strengthening for local organizations. This could involve training and resources to help organizations navigate challenges related to project applications, innovative and creative program approaches, donor relations, and the evolving socio-political context. Strengthening organizational resilience will improve their ability to sustainably engage in peacebuilding efforts.

Encourage and fund FORB initiatives that actively involve and address the needs of Gender and LGBTQ+ communities.

Advocate for longer project periods to allow implementing organizations sufficient time for meaningful community engagement. Longer project durations will enable a more in-depth understanding of community needs, better assessment of project impact, addressing concerns about effectiveness and funding versus impact, and build credibility of the local organizations.

Support initiatives that encourage collaboration among stakeholders, including civil society organizations, government bodies, community leaders, and international actors. Promote partnerships that transcend traditional boundaries, enhancing the reach and impact of peacebuilding initiatives. Foster collaboration and networking among civil society organizations working on similar issues by promoting dialogue and joint projects, aiming for more effective interventions and sustainable change.

Encourage and facilitate collaboration among different organizations by creating grant opportunities that require partnerships. This can mitigate the issue of organizations working in silos and promote inclusive approaches to peacebuilding.

Identify untapped communities and people groups to increase the availability of diverse funding allocation and avenues to strengthen capacity of local organizations. Map and create knowledge on changing socio-political and economic landscape in order to frequently identify areas in need of engagement.

Advocate for diversified grant allocations by donors. Encourage a fairer distribution of grants to various organizations, particularly in the crowded peacebuilding space of Sri Lanka. This approach will foster a more inclusive and dynamic landscape for peacebuilding initiatives.