

WHAT'S DIASPORA GOT TO DO WITH IT? REFLECTIONS ON ENGAGING SRI LANKA'S DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN PEACEBUILDING

SUMMARY

International Alert has been working with Sri Lanka's diaspora communities for over four years, exploring their potential as an additional peacebuilding actor to those operating within the country. This paper highlights the experiences of both a peacebuilding practitioner and a diaspora partner in implementing cross-community dialogue work in the UK for the objective of long-term peace in Sri Lanka. Although diaspora communities are a unique actor with multiple ties to the country of heritage and residence, they are rarely homogenous by nature, representing many political opinions and experiences. A key challenge therefore for building the peacebuilding capacity of diaspora communities is to acknowledge grievances, respect multiple opinions and harness collective capacity to address the needs of people on the ground. As part of this challenge, it is crucial to advocate for the acceptance and inclusion of all diaspora communities by Sri Lankan state and society.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this paper and intended audience

This paper shares the experiences of engaging UK-based Sri Lankan diaspora communities¹ for peacebuilding in their country of heritage, Sri Lanka, and their country of residence, the UK.

It is written from the perspective of International Alert (Alert) as the programme provider and a diaspora community member who is a partner in the programme. We hope to explore the key lessons, challenges and opportunities of this type of intervention to support other agencies in the design, monitoring and evaluation of similar interventions.

This paper also seeks to share key messages of this programme with diaspora audiences, government agencies and civil society, all of whom could have a fundamental impact on diaspora and peacebuilding interventions in the future.

Specifically, we would like to highlight key recommendations, speaking to Alert's peacebuilding mandate, in terms of what worked well and why during the programme and what did not. Given the volatility of the context during the period of inception and the process-orientated approach,² it has always been challenging to set realistic indicators of success that are tailored for a long-term process within a short-term funding cycle. For this, we feel it is important to share retrospective indicators of success of the programme at different stages of intervention. Finally, this paper also offers a longer narrative of reflections from the perspective of a practitioner and a diaspora community stakeholder.

¹ In this paper, we define diaspora as individuals with distinct ethnic links to a country other than their country of residence.

² In this context, process is also integral to our desired outcome. Alert's objective with this programme is not to define the specific peacebuilding intervention of the diaspora, but rather to define the process that leads to the final decisions – inclusive of all people, opinions and positions. Within this process, we encourage a peace-supporting approach, meaning we encourage a pragmatic rather than position-led approach that is multi-stakeholder, multi-issue and context sensitive. We do not define the specific peacebuilding intervention to come out of that process – although we have been asked to do so on many occasions; it is for the community to define what the role of the diaspora should be and what the specific outcome of this joint approach is. Alert is a facilitator and capacity-builder in this equation.

About International Alert's work

Alert's work with the Sri Lankan diaspora in the UK was funded by the British High Commission in Sri Lanka. Alert also receives funds for other programmes across the globe for peacebuilding interventions that are specific to the context from a wide range of other donor agencies, as detailed in the organisation's annual report. This information is significant to this paper as Alert's role is a central point of contention in the programme.

Alert has been working with Sri Lanka's diaspora³ communities in the UK since the beginning of 2009, before the conclusion of the civil war in Sri Lanka in May 2009. It has facilitated a programme that runs in parallel, working separately with political and civil society actors in Sri Lanka and the UK and bringing together these actors when possible to learn about each other's positions, hopes and underlying fears. Furthermore, it has played an important role in exploring potential opportunities for collaborative, peace-supporting engagement.

Alert's starting hypothesis is that diaspora communities can have a *significant* role to play in peacebuilding, reconciliation and recovery. They are a unique actor with multiple ties to the country of heritage and residence – financial, emotional, cultural and political. In the case of Sri Lanka, times of war served to either significantly divide communities into one camp or the other or to make interactions about war and its respective actors a taboo subject among the majority of communities. This resulted in years of stagnant relationships rooted in polarised positions.

For Alert, the starting point was that, as long as Sri Lanka's diaspora communities were active on Sri Lankan issues, there would always be an opportunity to harness this motivation for peacebuilding. Although this was in fact true, the challenge became about building the peacebuilding capacity of communities, acknowledging grievances, respecting multiple opinions, harnessing collective capacity to address the needs of people on the ground and, importantly, advocating for the acceptance and inclusion of all diaspora communities by Sri Lankan state and society.

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Here in the UK, from 2008 to 2014, Alert provided open spaces⁴ for dialogue between 'the activist', the 'non-activist', Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities and young cross-party political actors (Sri Lankan and British). This dialogue took place in a context where these spaces are often closed or exclusive to the activist and high-ranking politicians.

We have taken this approach because we believe that, if the solutions to Sri Lanka's problems are to be addressed by Sri Lankans, then the exclusivity of the debate to the 'activist' is also a fundamental problem. Our approach is built on the principles that communities, old and young, first and second generation,⁵ across the ethnic and political spectrum have an opinion (and an important experience) and that they have the right to express this without fears or perceptions of what others in their community or beyond may think. Importantly for Alert, we believe that a healthy debate is also one that includes alternative political viewpoints not always represented in larger political debates on Sri Lanka. It is only when these spaces become common practice that people will have ownership of a process that is working to achieve an interdependent peace.

Background to the programme

The conflict context in Sri Lanka in 2008 was rapidly changing. Analysts at the time were discussing multiple scenarios with respect to what may happen in 2009 and beyond. Civil society, including the business community (with which Alert has a long history of engagement), felt it important at this juncture to reflect on the peacebuilding activity that had taken place up to that point. This endeavour, combined with the transcontinental nature of many business actors, gave rise to the initial thinking of introducing an interesting actor to the conversation on the future of Sri Lanka's conflict – the Sri Lankan business actor outside of Sri Lanka (be they Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim⁶ or Burgher⁷).

3 'Sri Lankan diaspora' is a key term of contention for diaspora communities. Often, Tamil communities reject the assertion that they are linked to Sri Lanka and the state, which is perceived to have committed crimes against Tamil communities. With this in mind, Sri Lankan diaspora is often perceived as a Sinhalese diaspora. For the sake of this paper, however, when we refer to Sri Lankan diaspora, we mean all ethnic communities with links back to Sri Lanka.

4 'Space' is referred to here as a range of different forums for open, facilitated discussion. It also sometimes refers to the opportunity for new *interactions* with new contexts and new actors. These spaces manifest themselves as workshops, community meetings in the UK with/without panellists, community meetings in Sri Lanka, formal meetings with officials, discussion circles and peacebuilding skills trainings.

5 First-generation individuals are those who were the first generation in their families to have migrated to the UK. Second generation are those who were either born in the UK or, despite being born in Sri Lanka, have spent a significant part of their childhood/upbringing in the UK.

6 Muslim communities in Sri Lanka are often referred to as a distinct ethnic group because of ancestral links to the birthplace of Islam, the Middle East.

7 The Burgher community of Sri Lanka are a distinct ethnic group with mixed colonial European and Sri Lankan heritage.

Diaspora communities are rarely homogenous by nature as they represent the many political opinions and experiences that exist in their country of heritage. Moreover, the end of the war in 2009 seemed to further divide people on personal levels, making it increasingly difficult to identify cross-community entry points of engagement with Sri Lanka, even among private sector actors who have traditionally found more common ground than most.

The triumphalism of winning the war shown on the streets of Sri Lanka in 2009 and again on the subsequent anniversaries to date continues to be interpreted by many in the diaspora, from all ethnic groups, as Sinhalese triumphalism over the Tamil community. For many other diaspora communities (be they Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim or

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Burgher), the perception of the Westminster Tamil diaspora protest in 2009 using the flag of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or 'Tamil Tigers') reinforced the fear that supporting the Tamil community's plight would mean supporting the LTTE. For many, including some within the Tamil diaspora, the LTTE did not represent the Tamil voice or provide the answer to the conflict in Sri Lanka. In contrast, for many in the Sinhalese diaspora community, celebrating the end of the war also implied

tacit endorsement of the government of Sri Lanka, which for many was a far cry from the political position they held. Thus, among the seemingly clear-cut representation of views on the streets of both London and Colombo in 2009, the reality was that there was still a large majority who remained and still remain silent in the post-war discourse. The Muslim community, somewhat torn and also victimised at different points in the conflict, became increasingly insular. The community did not want to be seen to be taking sides and chose to increasingly disengage from the post-war debate on the future of Sri Lanka.

Given the extremely polarised inter-community dynamics at that time, the project began to follow a clear shift in purpose – from multi-ethnic platforms in support of peace⁸ *in Sri Lanka*, to multi-ethnic platforms in support of peace and understanding *in the diaspora* first and foremost. The end of the war also provided the opportunity for new spaces to open up among all communities – the change in the actor landscape allowed for potential cross-community peacebuilding opportunities.

Meanwhile, from a practitioner's perspective, the discourse on the role of diaspora communities in a conflict context was and is still dominated by theories and examples of the diaspora community playing a destructive role in the conflict. Consistently, examples referred to the LTTE-supporting diaspora communities who sustained the armed struggle in Sri Lanka both financially and ideologically. In contrast, other thinkers focused on the constructive and untapped development potential of diaspora communities, slowly replacing the shrinking development budgets of Western aid agencies. There were no examples of programmes that had consistently engaged diaspora communities for peacebuilding in their country of heritage at the time of inception, making this programme an unchartered field of work.

Retrospective indicators of success

The programme was and is designed on the basis of three phases. Phase I is focused on a greater understanding of the diaspora landscape in the UK and opportunities for diaspora engagement in Sri Lanka. Phase II prioritises engagement in relationship building and building peacebuilding capacities of second-generation diaspora persons. Phase III seeks to extend the groups of diaspora peacebuilders, to deepen their skills and knowledge, and to facilitate further opportunities for dialogue between the diaspora and political actors in Sri Lanka. The following diagram illustrates the various **targets/objectives** for each phase.

⁸ Peace is when people are anticipating and managing conflicts without violence as well as engaging in inclusive social change processes that improve the quality of life. They are doing so without compromising the possibility of continuing to do so in the future, or the possibility of others to do so. This is the idea behind interdependent, positive peace.



INSIGHT INTO ALERT'S UK PEACEBUILDING EXPERIENCE

Finding the right approaches (or constructive/successful approaches)

Working with young diaspora groups of Sri Lankan origin presents a set of challenges and opportunities that needs to be constructively engaged with and taken into consideration. Below are some of the approaches by Alert that have proved to be positive in terms of challenging negative perceptions of the diaspora and opening up space for diaspora engagement.

Exposure to the context and to a wide range of opinions from a wide range of stakeholders⁹

This approach was crucial for challenging one of the obstacles to constructive dialogue among diaspora communities. A balanced understanding of the realities on the ground, especially from those who are working on some of the key conflict, humanitarian and development issues, is crucial to bringing some truth to the misinformation, or manipulation of information, that is evident among diaspora communities. This clarity has often been key to shifting negative perceptions about 'the other'.

⁹ Stakeholders in this context are not as easily demarcated as in other projects. Our partners are also the stakeholders whom we seek to facilitate in peace-supporting discussions and actions. They are community members working through their grievances to influence change within the wider community.

Introducing challenging voices from the ground

This approach relates to the concept that information is key to unlocking perceptions and developing interdependent peace. Alert has introduced challenging voices, from political and civil society in Sri Lanka, to constructively engage with diaspora communities here in the UK. This gives both parties the opportunity to share first-hand experiences of issues, analyse trends and provide multiple suggestions on how to move forward. Without this opportunity, communities tend to follow narrow channels of information that are inclined to only relate to their respective positions. Individuals are less likely to seek out challenging perceptions and, when they come across challenges, they may respond aggressively, resorting to personal attacks rather than operating in the spirit of deepening understanding.

Working with individuals rather than organisations

Although this approach has multiple and potentially detrimental challenges (see also next section), it can also prove refreshing as individuals do not come with the organisational baggage. Individuals usually engage because of their respective personal and professional interests and the desire to have a positive impact in their country of heritage.

Facilitating discussions

Those who have experience of attending Sri Lankan events in the UK will be aware of the nature of discussions during those events. If there is a largely mixed audience, discussions tend to descend into shouting and personal attacks either at panellists or at each other. Facilitated discussions by those who are trained in the facilitation of polarised opinions have been crucial for ensuring constructive conversations aimed at identifying the root causes and forming the basis of understanding. Without this type of skilled facilitation, and several interactive workshop tools, individuals tend to have either light-touch engagement (steering away from any conflict-related issues) or position-based advocacy. These constructive dialogues are critical for unlocking positions and finding collaborative points of engagement.

Challenging perceptions

Negative, unfounded and generalised *perceptions* by each of Sri Lanka's ethnic communities constitute one of the key drivers of division, prejudice and sometimes racism between communities. These perceptions also create barriers to multi-community and multi-issue peacebuilding interventions. Unless challenged and unpacked, these perceptions tend to drive divided communities, overriding the potential of multi-community, issue-based actions. Alert has facilitated dialogue on several issues to unlock the multitude of perceptions that can arise from a particular issue. At the same time, it has produced visual material on histories

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and drivers of individuals' perceptions of reconciliation and perceptions of 'the other', all of which aim to help communities go beyond perceptions and stereotyping.

Open spaces of discussions

Open spaces tend to encourage individuals who do not normally advocate along the lines of one position or another to at least take part in discussions to better understand each other. Alert has used these spaces to take back the exclusive ownership from the activist and give it to the community at large. These spaces are either workshops with resource people from Sri Lanka, panel discussions, visits to meet community activists in Sri Lanka, or civil and political society discussions on particular issues of interest or concern. The activities have enabled Alert to activate individuals seeking to engage in and pursue peacebuilding activities that suit their particular interests.

Training

Building the capacity of individuals on key conflict-resolution skills such as facilitation, workshop design and conflict analysis has helped to empower stakeholders to carry out workshops and design projects independently of Alert. This helps to ensure ownership of the process and outcome, as well as the sustainability of work and other legacies to be developed on the back of Alert's initial intervention.

Challenges that remain

While Alert's approach to this programme has managed to tackle some of the major impediments to constructive engagement with the diaspora and its relation to Sri Lankan political actors, some challenges still remain for *this work*.

Creating a new peacebuilding constituency within diaspora communities

Alert has traditionally worked through in-country partnerships, as this way of working ensures locally owned and managed responses to conflict. However, this working style with regard to Sri Lanka's diaspora community initiatives has been an immense challenge.

Incidences of non-diaspora organisations working with diaspora communities for peacebuilding in their country of heritage are limited to non-existent. Those organisations that do work with diaspora groups often do so for a developmental objective, and their mandate does not enable them to address peace and conflict dynamics. On the other hand, diaspora organisations themselves are often wedded to a particular political position or aligned with one of the key conflict actors or have played some part in the polarisation of diaspora communities. In addition, other organisations that have the capacity to reach out to multiple ethnicities and create spaces for collaborative peacebuilding often believe that the endeavour is too political and risks dividing friendships.

As a result, Alert has had little choice but to work directly with as wide a range of diaspora individuals as possible, with little or no formal partnerships. This is a capacity challenge for the team, as Alert has had to do the frontline work of building relationships as well as mobilising and challenging individuals and organisations across the community. It also constitutes a reputational challenge, in the sense that working directly with a broad section of the community allows spoilers to invent perceptions of alignment with one side or the other as well as the risk that the organisation is drawn into personal agendas, interests, alignments, etc.

Relying on individual capacities

Alert typically partners with organisations that are structurally set up to incorporate peacebuilding activities into their daily work. However, diaspora members are not necessarily professional peacebuilders: they have other day jobs and busy lives that affect their ability to engage in project cycle restrictive timeframes and process-orientated activities. For them, peacebuilding is generally something that is done after the day job or at the

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weekend, making process-orientated initiatives difficult for individuals to take on. For these reasons, it has been important to ensure that project outputs remain personally rewarding, achievable and not too far out of the personal comfort zone of individuals. Group dynamics and personal politics often play a role too in promoting certain activities but can be detrimental to group cohesion; understanding these dynamics and working with them is also crucial.

The question is to what degree is this level of personal accompaniment sustainable? Is it really feasible to expect to build a peacebuilding constituency that is able to work with and through its differences for the long-term inclusive peace of the country of heritage, and to do so on a part-time, on and off basis? The answer is not clear-cut – it is necessary to inject a high level of time and energy into building the capacity and understanding and making strategic links. The knowledge, skills and network provided by Alert are in theory the perfect combination, which should be sustainable in the long term. However, within this ideal combination, there are also a number of external factors that are entirely out of Alert's control; these factors sometimes far outweigh Alert's impact and influence on a situation. Such factors must be taken into account when considering any accompaniment – in particular, accompaniment of individuals whose capacity to build peace only constitutes a small fraction of their life as a professional in their respective field, as a parent, as a partner and so on. This also touches on the issue of scale and the value of peacebuilding versus value for money. For Alert, ideally, the perfect combination will be created with every peacebuilding intervention and the impact will be widespread and structural. However, we do not value changing the lives of thousands over hundreds or even tens: as an organisation with limited resources, Alert, much like many other organisations in this challenging time, has to respectfully weigh up the principled approach versus the pragmatic approach, and to judge for itself what level of investment is required for which activities in the current context.

Dealing with political sensitivities

How do you engage the principled activist when the incentive of working towards a peaceful future is not enough? The challenge remains how to actively engage those on the far end of the political spectrum when the project itself does not take a position-led approach, but a process-led approach. The kind of space the project provides and promotes has many risks and is in fact like walking a very fine line: Alert could do many things 'right', but it is also being watched to see if it does something 'wrong', thus reinforcing negative perceptions. However, being criticised at the same time by the far ends of the political spectrum, from both sides of the divide, is probably a good indicator that Alert has some relevance with the moderate majority. Furthermore, along with the crippling challenge of time, even more challenging is the pressure from families and wider communities to not get involved in such a 'risky' initiative. The engagement of some of our stakeholders leads to a great deal of pressure from family and friends due to the feared perception that it is the whole community's position.

This brings us to the significant issue of scale of impact and outreach versus maintaining discretion and abiding by sensitivities. The sensitive nature of diaspora dynamics and politics and the negative perception of diaspora communities in Sri Lanka have meant that the project has had to take a slow and careful approach. Alert was mindful that the 30-year war meant that communities had struggled through many attempts at dialogue and advocacy in the past and that attempts were not always successful. For this reason, Alert has had to try a different approach and a new process. This was a significant struggle not merely because of Alert's role as an outsider, but also because those who were active on Sri Lankan issues were already vocal advocates and those who were not were actively disengaged for various reasons – the biggest being the fear of being stereotyped or attacked for their beliefs.

With the need to multiply efforts (to ensure wider impact) and increase scale, Alert highlights and promotes such engagement as good practice. This in turn places a great deal of attention on the individuals involved, increasing the pressure and risk placed upon them. The challenge becomes about highlighting good practice and promoting

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similar activities without risking the good faith and good practice of a small number of individuals. One-to-one accompaniment is important but does it answer the question of significant scale? The project began with a few interested and well-intentioned individuals coming together around a table and is now in a position to attract at least 100 individuals to each gathering, with a significantly larger number of followers. However, it is important to emphasise that, for this programme, the

process and the quality of conversation constitute as significant a goal as the scale of outreach. Therefore, in this case, scaling up means finding new ways of including those who would normally steer clear of programmes that engage Sri Lanka (from a position of boycott), engage international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) or become associated with the term reconciliation and/or peacebuilding. When some of these positions are heard, they are not normally understood. This lack of understanding or misunderstanding is usually one of the key drivers of divisions. For this type of programme, scaling up also means diversifying the range of actors, voices and opinions or working at a different level – for example, including politicians.

Working as an external actor

On the one hand, Alert's presence in Sri Lanka has been one of the key factors in winning the trust of diaspora communities in the UK as we continue to maintain good analysis and understanding of the ground realities. On the other hand, it has also been one of the key factors that raises suspicion. The fact that we have worked with multiple actors, civil and political society over a prolonged and challenging period of time illustrates the strength of our dedication and deepens our understanding of the context during its multiple phases. However, the fact that we have maintained a presence also raises suspicion in a context where other peacebuilding organisations have ceased to operate and where the space for NGOs has increasingly been restricted.

From the perspective of Alert, analysis illustrates a significant need for peacebuilding civil society organisations. We believe that Alert's approach to peacebuilding still holds meaningful value in a context where the violent war may be over but the conflict, at a structural and societal level, continues to exist. Guided by our code of conduct, we maintain that we work with all parties for the greater good of structural and community-level peace, working to shift the direction of negative impact and enhance the potential of the positive. Through the lens of conflict sensitivity,¹⁰ we engage with different people and institutions to support their positive interventions,

10 See Conflict Sensitivity Consortium 'How to Guide', available at <http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/content/how-guide>

demonstrating the impact of the negative on wider society and connecting people to each other to overcome exclusion and increase coordinated efforts when possible.

It is easy to fall into the mindset that you are doing something wrong given the level of polarisation of the debate and the unwillingness to engage in conversations perceived as either diluting the critical issues or creating problems out of peaceful conditions. We have found that the most important way of counteracting this – contrary to the related urge to resort to subterfuge – is to maintain our transparency.

The discussion on transparency and perceptions of neutrality bring us finally to the big question of where Alert stands in relation to the issue of reconciliation in Sri Lanka. While we perceive ourselves to be neutral, and work hard to communicate this stance to others, we also need to acknowledge that in this context neutrality does not exist. Our peacebuilding approach places us in one camp with respect to the Sri Lankan context: in particular, our presence as an INGO ensures that we are perceived as having a ‘hidden agenda’ and, furthermore, the funding of this programme pigeon holes our position even further. So, in reality, despite our efforts to maintain true impartiality, the perceptions that are drawn from our position as an INGO ultimately raise questions about this impartiality in people’s minds. The reality is that our agenda is inclusive, participatory and community-owned peace; our funding is declared every year in our independently audited accounts, which are published online and we have not turned away from conversations with individuals who are willing to engage. However, being independent can also leave organisations vulnerable to attacks by individuals or groups with ulterior motives.

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The attempt to avoid taking a particular stand on the issue of reconciliation has defined our approach. However, as we continue to work on this project, we are beginning to ask ourselves increasingly – and to be asked – what is Alert’s vision in terms of reconciliation? Can we give more of a clear answer on our position on

the big issues as they arise? While these are obviously questions that we face in all of our work, the challenge is much more evident in the diaspora programme because we are delivering directly rather than through partners. We are both outsiders and insiders, and both positions produce inaccurate perceptions of particular sets of values and positions.

Certainly, we need to make clear that we are aware of these problems, that we acknowledge and recognise them, if we are to avoid unintentionally alienating people through not showing enough empathy for the issues that they find difficult and emotionally fraught. We have learnt that we need to find a clearer way of doing this that is positively neutral (rather than negatively neutral).

WORKING WITH POLITICAL STAKEHOLDERS

Despite the multiple challenges outlined in this document, Alert has had multiple achievements and breakthroughs too. Alert has facilitated the formation of several multi-ethnic second-generation working groups that focus both on dialogue and professional initiatives. These professional initiatives seek to develop partnerships with Sri Lankan-based organisations in support of professional projects that also build understanding and collaboration between communities (both in the UK and Sri Lanka). In the process of facilitating these groups, Alert has challenged prejudices, provided opportunities for exposure to new contexts and multiple opinions, and built core peacebuilding competencies with a whole new cohort of actors. Alert has also helped to shift perceptions of the term ‘diaspora’ in Sri Lanka and opened up a debate about the potential of constructive dialogue with diaspora communities for long-term, positive and interdependent peace. In one initiative, Alert started working with young parliamentarians in Sri Lanka as well.

Engaging young parliamentarians for peacebuilding

Working closely with a partner organisation in Sri Lanka specialising in political actor dialogue, Alert began its outreach to the then newly elected members of parliament. It invited all those under the age of 40, elected after the end of the war, in 2010, to take part in inter-party dialogues on diaspora and reconciliation. Alert sought this engagement in order to strengthen the vital links between communities in the UK and Sri Lanka and, importantly, to connect the wider Sri Lankan community to an array of political actors from Sri Lanka. In this way, the conversation is opened up and broadened beyond the previously tried ‘diaspora representatives’ and ‘Sri Lankan government representative’ dialogue.

Engaging diaspora communities for peacebuilding alone would be missing a key piece of the puzzle; critically, they are transnational actors, moving back and forth between Sri Lanka and their new country of domicile. Their attitudes, activism, concerns and interests are therefore affected by the social, economic and political context in Sri Lanka. For diaspora communities to play a peacebuilding role for all ethnicities and regions in Sri Lanka, they must be better understood by Sri Lankan communities and have ties that go beyond the personal. In Sri Lanka, there must be a national-level debate about the desired/necessary role of diaspora communities for the benefit of communities in Sri Lanka. This discussion should happen in Sri Lanka and among the diaspora – and when possible, most importantly, between diaspora communities and Sri Lankan communities. Engaging parliamentarians was a means not only of connecting diaspora to multiple-level actors but also of kick-starting this debate in Sri Lanka.

In 2011, the young group of parliamentarians put themselves forward as interested candidates in these dialogues and thus engagement began. Alert followed a process of dialogue, first among parliamentarians themselves with the objective of introducing dialogues later on with diverse Sri Lankan diaspora community groups in the UK.

The young group of cross-party parliamentarians interacted with diverse Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim diaspora communities. Over time, this resulted in an increased level of trust and confidence as well as a strong sense of commitment and responsibility by the young MPs. In fact, during post-visit evaluation, the majority of MPs expressed an improved understanding of the diversity of opinions within the Sri Lankan diaspora and acknowledged the increased potential for the diaspora to be engaged as important actors in the reconciliation and rehabilitation process. The diaspora communities whom they met were encouraged by their candid, non-confrontational and cross-party approach; while some had deep reservations, many conveyed their desire to build bridges and to strengthen reconciliation between communities in-country.

While the young MPs have been keen to build on this process, they have grappled with the challenge of securing further support from the wider political society in Sri Lanka. After their first interaction with diaspora communities, they

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issued a joint report, which was presented to the Secretary of the President of Sri Lanka, the leader of the opposition and the leader of the Tamil National Alliance. While they received encouragement from all parties for their continued engagement, the young MPs felt that the process lacked the recognition required to make a greater impact. On several occasions in Sri Lanka, they continued to advocate for a comprehensive national action plan to engage the Sri Lankan diaspora, and the Tamil diaspora in particular. In recent times, they have chosen to take a slightly different approach and have become active on some of the issues

directly (issues brought forward by diaspora communities in their discussions with the MPs) through their engagement with a range of expert civil society and respective youth and women parliamentary caucus. Acknowledging that policy change is a much longer-term outcome, they are focusing on raising awareness of the issues, broadening engagement across the political and civil society spectrum as well as speaking out against injustice.

LESSONS FROM THE DIASPORA PARTNER PERSPECTIVE¹¹

This section of the paper aims to illustrate and outline my experiences of working with the peacebuilding INGO International Alert¹² and, more importantly, the issues faced as a ‘pro-peace’ or ‘pro-cross community dialogue advocate’ diaspora member in the highly polarised context of Sri Lankan communities based in London. After being part of Alert’s diaspora project and running peacebuilding dialogue workshops for over two years, I aim to present the key challenges of diaspora engagement from a diaspora perspective, illuminating the issues we face.

My engagement with Alert and the Sri Lanka programme more broadly uncovered and nurtured identity politics of participants in a structured, productive and pragmatic manner. Indeed, the majority of my colleagues who also worked as partners of the programme had some level of engagement with Sri Lanka prior to working with Alert. However, the Sri Lanka project cultivated a deeper, more political understanding of and involvement with the multitude of issues facing post-war Sri Lanka. Personally, my interaction with Sri Lanka went from a latent part of my identity to a broader and more nuanced realisation of the struggles in Sri Lanka and the role that diaspora

¹¹ This section will share insights from a Sri Lankan diaspora individual’s UK peacebuilding experience with Sri Lankan diaspora communities and Alert.

¹² This refers to the Sri Lanka programme at Alert – ‘diasporas as drivers of peace’.

members, such as myself, can play in promoting peace. My personal transformation from inactive diaspora member to participant in the project to pro-peace activist illustrates how quickly change can occur if the tools and increased capacity are put in place. In essence, the ability of youth to stand in opposition to divisive and racist ideology and to challenge the status quo of older generations can be highly effective – if given the appropriate tools to do so.

Cycles of conflict – here, there and everywhere

How can implementing a peacebuilding intervention with diaspora communities make any difference? After working within the Sri Lankan diaspora and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders – such as political activists/campaigners (both diaspora and non-diaspora), INGOs/community-based organisations (CBOs), artists, students and professional organisations – one question always emerges: “what is the point of working with diaspora communities? The issue is clearly in Sri Lanka – not London!”

It is evident that events in Sri Lanka heighten conflict in London, but more importantly actions in London can often make community tensions in Sri Lanka more fragile. The cycle of conflict intensifies within and between people with antagonistic approaches regardless of distance, exacerbating or at worst provoking conflict in Sri Lanka. These links clearly illustrate the need to start peacebuilding among Sri Lankan diaspora communities, engaging their voices in constructive and structured conversations, which begin to undo negative perceptions or ethnic stereotyping, moving towards uncovering and understanding real grievances.

Diaspora as agents of peace – redefining local peace and re-imagining international actors

The world of peacebuilding and, more specifically, the discipline of peacebuilding programme design emphasises the need to engage multiple actors at multiple levels. In this sense, incorporating a thematic approach with various

In a globalised and transnational world where migrant communities wield economic, political and social clout, the Sri Lankan context offers an instance where local peacebuilding can be redefined as inclusive of its diaspora voices.

stakeholders interlinks and strengthens a wider and more sustainable pro-peace movement. The design of engaging diaspora communities is at the fore of redefining what a ‘local’ intervention is. In a globalised and transnational world where migrant communities wield economic, political and social clout, the Sri Lankan context offers an instance where local peacebuilding can be redefined as inclusive of its diaspora voices. It is imperative to see the potential of diaspora communities’ role in peacebuilding, reconstruction and reform in Sri Lanka at

multiple levels. The wealth of expertise, talent and economic affluence puts Sri Lankan diaspora communities in a prime position to help Sri Lanka’s recovery from violent conflict.

However, building, advocating and fostering an inclusive peace in Sri Lanka means that diaspora communities need to first enter into a reconciliation process on their doorstep, in diaspora community hubs across the globe, to address the issues that drive division between them. These divisions are at times so stark that ethnic communities appear to live parallel lives in diaspora hubs, clashing when they meet. It is important to remember that diaspora communities have also suffered the impact of conflict (be it from afar or first hand). When attempting to foster a space where all sections of the diaspora¹³ can converge in cross-community dialogue or cross-community advocacy, the memory of 30 years of brutal conflict is present at every level. The memory of violent conflict in Sri Lanka is an integral part of the diaspora identity, shaping, binding and dividing all communities and their potential to work collectively for peace.

The process of peacebuilding with the diaspora is further complicated by the fact that the role of the diaspora within a peacebuilding process is undefined and unexplored. This can inhibit individuals from participation, particularly those looking for a quick and highly visible return. These factors highlight the importance of addressing inter/intra-diaspora dynamics primarily to be able to work with Sri Lanka more effectively.

Realpolitik

If there are legitimate reasons for the rejection of the current situation and structures in the context are not conducive to political, social or economic change, what forms of activism can diaspora communities realistically take?

The larger structural issues present in Sri Lanka can make diaspora peacebuilding activity in the country particularly difficult. Furthermore, the challenge of awakening diaspora communities to their own potential as peacebuilders,

¹³ The term ‘diaspora’ is often conflated with the politically active Tamil diaspora in Sri Lanka. Often, the understanding of the diversity present within communities is limited in Sri Lanka.

in this immensely confrontational and difficult context, is a deeply challenging aspect of engagement with the project.¹⁴ In light of the larger structural issues, there is a sense of apathy surrounding engagement with Sri Lanka. This presents the challenge of stakeholder 'buy in' for peacebuilding and cross-community engagement or engagement with Sri Lanka entirely. Engagement with each other, the government or INGOs is often seen as circumventing the structural issues and weakening messages of advocacy from within a community.

We have seen an obvious disengagement with the Sri Lankan government from diaspora communities because of fear of negative affiliation being perceived with the current political regime.¹⁵ Protests outside the British parliament are frequent but attract less attention than they used to. While these protests are visible, their outcome is often futile, further perpetuating the sense of hopelessness felt across communities.

The truth is that all communities are looking for a new kind of effective activism. All communities are struggling to find a way to influence, encourage and foster change in Sri Lanka; they are in search of inclusive change processes that foster peace.

As part of Alert's project, I have coordinated and facilitated dialogue workshops with a group of cross-party, first-time Sri Lankan MPs. The purpose of these workshops was to build constructive bridges between activists in

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diaspora communities and political actors, offering them an effective space to lobby decision-makers. These inter-community second-generation workshops offer space for diaspora members to listen to each other, influence future policy-makers and critically discuss their vision(s) for the future of the country. Inadvertently, through conversation, cross-ethnic advocacy messages frequently appeared, illuminating the synergy between grievances, everyday issues and aspirations between conflicting

communities. Often, these spaces offer a unique opportunity for people to engage with the Sri Lankan political system after 30 years of civil war, offering them space to be heard and to find commonalities across ethnic backgrounds.

This type of cross-community approach requires larger buy in with numerous stakeholders, all with a shared interest in working together and supporting one another. It offers the beginnings of conflict-sensitive, cross-community and pro-peace dialogue, action and advocacy. However, one of the perceptions these activities generate is that they ultimately dilute the key message. I have heard many times that, although working with other communities represents progress, talking politics detracts from the strength and solidarity of their specific community rhetoric. I offer a different approach that is not about diluting or weakening their specific messages, but about strengthening and reinvigorating them by supporting certain aspects of them – cross community.

'Who are these people that claim to speak on my behalf?'

Despite the divisive and outdated ethnic stereotypes that overshadow the vast majority of diaspora, it is obvious that ethnic, political or religious identities are not conveniently clear-cut. The perceived demarcation between these identities is often hijacked by outspoken activists claiming to represent their community, but not necessarily reflecting the vast majority of individuals. It often does not reflect the views in between. This heightens the need to offer space to the silent majority – those who may not be the most vocal in political arenas but who often offer the most pragmatic, inclusive and sensitive insights into the future of Sri Lanka.

INGOs – flies on the wall, actors in the context or interfering foreigners?

INGOs such as Alert can inadvertently present themselves as a confusing entity for diaspora members. Their motivations can be questioned and their every action analysed and interpreted in a multitude of ways to suit a particular political agenda. However, for the most part, my experience of working in collaboration with Alert has led me to believe that spaces are both open and closed to us as diaspora members, just as they are to INGOs. Popular discourse would have you believe that community interventions should be led by the community. However, I would also argue that the ethnic bias of those in the community directly implementing the project presents a major challenge to engagement for some actors. This experience presents INGOs as proactive facilitators and effective conduits that support a new kind of conflict-sensitive activism.

¹⁴ This is an argument that is often made with regard to human rights, land occupation, accountability, independence of the judiciary, media freedom and freedom of religious expression.

¹⁵ In light of accusations of war crimes against the Sri Lankan government, communities in London (particularly the second generation) have distanced themselves from the government of Sri Lanka.

Implementing peacebuilding projects on the ground in Sri Lanka – diaspora challenges

Although diaspora communities across the board want to mobilise to help Sri Lanka, the reality is that few have the commitment or willingness to work cross community. In essence, through our experience, many diaspora members are far more comfortable contributing money towards a specific development project rather than engaging in a peacebuilding activity. These development projects often work in singular ethnic or religious terms and can exacerbate conflict and inequality in Sri Lanka. The challenge is to encourage communities to think about supporting other communities outside of their own, urging them to work together to strengthen cross-community cooperation and relations both here and there.

This ‘conflict-sensitive’ development approach has been an entry point of engagement for dialogue initiatives between cross-party Sri Lankan parliamentarians and diaspora members (including some who actively reject Sri Lankan government interaction). The groundwork for such dialogue workshops involved identifying key themes and concerns within Sri Lanka and allowing space for these issues to be addressed in a cross-community environment.

“You young fellows certainly have guts. But let’s be honest, you have never even lived in Sri Lanka – you don’t have a role to play – what do you know?”

As second- and third-generation diaspora, we are often bombarded with questions by elders within communities over why we want to engage with Sri Lanka. It is the default position for older members of the community to shout down younger generations due to their lack of exposure and experience in their ancestral homeland. Alert has worked to build the capacity of a core group of individuals by taking a two-pronged approach to capacity building:

1. Firstly, by exposing diaspora members to the context in Sri Lanka, thereby equipping them with the knowledge to speak confidently on the range of social, political and economic issues and conflicts occurring in the country;
2. Secondly, by equipping diaspora individuals with the skills to promote dialogue and conflict-sensitive activism and by building their capacity for facilitation, mediation, analysis and conflict sensitivity.

Taking part in these trainings has transformed our credibility within the community. However, when engaging either first generations or position-led political activists, suspicion still remains about the depth of our exposure and more broadly about our motivations for engaging with a project funded by a foreign INGO. After spending some time at our inception grappling with our identity, it must be noted that we take full ownership of our activities and are in control of the projects we choose to implement, although often reaching out to our contacts for guidance, support and evaluation mechanisms.

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Keeping the momentum for project ideas has been a continuous issue. Our support base has grown considerably, improving our outreach within communities and raising the profile of our activities. However, maintaining growing support can be a capacity issue for groups comprised of individuals with separate careers and full-time jobs. Implementing initiatives with part-time peacebuilders can be frustrating for our support network.

On the other hand, it also means as Sri Lankans that our intervention is organic within the community. We are encouraged and supported by other actors, but not dictated by them – it is for the community, by the community.

We are where we are

After working extensively with second-generation diaspora individuals and groups, across ethnic and political divides, it is clear to me that there is an underlying universal current of defiance when accepting the current situation in Sri Lanka. The overwhelming theme is that the current situation in Sri Lanka is one that has been achieved by default, not through political settlement or through international intervention, but simply through the destruction of the LTTE. Given this context, how much peace can we possibly build?

“How can we have lasting peace whilst all these questions remain unaddressed? We cannot allow this to be swept under the carpet and forget about it.”

While lack of violent conflict may be the highly prized and optimum situation for some, for others it is a painful, humiliating and transient part of a wider political struggle. The murky details surrounding the conclusion of the war and root causes of the conflict permeate every aspect of community perceptions and relations. While these questions remain unanswered, we can only hope to muster a limited amount of approval and interest from a cross-section of diaspora communities.

Working with the diaspora can often feel like we are attempting to encourage people into a dangerous and unknown middle ground – away from entrenched identities, political ideologies and a part of their identity that has been reinforced in their community silo for most of their existence. Dialogue work can seem unattractive to many diaspora members as it attempts to lure diaspora members into the murky middle ground or no-man's-land of positive inter-community engagement. With the vast structural barriers to inclusive peace plainly evident, dialogue can sometimes feel like a swell in the greater tide of political change that must happen in Sri Lanka. Despite these challenges, cross-community advocacy and positive action offers the potential for a new relationship between the diaspora and Sri Lanka; informed, diverse, constructively critical and credible *cross-community* voices are harder to challenge and cast aside than any single message or single community voice.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

Based on the past years of experience, Alert has gained great insight into lessons learnt and possible opportunities for future work on diaspora communities. Reflecting on this, the following considerations have been identified.

- 1. Understand the diaspora dynamics:** It may be convenient for home communities and policy-makers across the globe to perceive diaspora communities as a homogenous group that represents the country of heritage as a whole. In reality, diaspora dynamics are incredibly complex and represent the myriad of views that exist in the country of heritage. There are multiple social, political, economic and ideological divisions. Diaspora communities are representative of *their views* and *their experiences*; they are *not* representative of

In reality, diaspora dynamics are incredibly complex and represent the myriad of views that exist in the country of heritage.

the views and experiences of communities, civil society and political society in their country of heritage at the present day. Nevertheless, they still have a special connection to the country of heritage and the ability to be able to have a significant impact, be it political, economic or developmental (human and otherwise). Diaspora communities have unique capacity and understanding of the country of heritage and offer a

completely different perspective, which if harnessed for peacebuilding could have a significant and positive impact on communities currently residing in Sri Lanka.

- 2. Recognise generational divisions in experiences, attitudes and motivations:** When considering engaging diaspora communities for peace, actors should try to engage an additional lens of analysis to the social, political and economic perspective – the generational lens. Even first, second and third generations from the same family are very different actors. They have different personal challenges and motivations. Intergenerational dynamics are also crucial to the knowledge, motivations and actions of second- and third-generation diaspora members, often with one generation inheriting the historical experience of the other.
- 3. Work to address the divisions, if possible:** Diaspora divisions are a major challenge and attempts have already been made by other actors to find some common consensus; however, it is crucial that some facilitated space is provided so that communities have the opportunity to engage in honest and constructive conversations. These conversations should seek to help communities understand the deep-rooted grievances that underpin these divisions and to move away from the stereotypes and labelling that reinforce parallel lives and negative cycles of behaviour.
- 4. Ensure needs-based approaches that reflect the realities and go beyond one's own community:** This is key to ensuring a sustainable and positive impact on the lives of war-affected communities. Diaspora communities always act on behalf of communities on the ground. However, the interaction they have with these communities is often unrepresentative of the full reality and limited to the same ethnic group as their own. The same can be said of communities in Sri Lanka and their perception of Sri Lankan communities abroad. Building knowledge of actual needs, gaps and motivations of the respective communities is a crucial starting point for engagement; the assumptions of each community are often incorrect and fuelled by other actors for political gain.

5. **Create open and inclusive spaces for dialogue between home country civil society, policy-makers and diaspora communities:** In addition to ensuring connections between local communities and diaspora communities, space must also be provided for conversations to take place between multi-interest diaspora communities, policy-makers and home country civil society. A multi-stakeholder approach is required to shed light on the short-term and long-term needs of people on the ground (from multiple perspectives), on the reality of the political landscape, and on the capacity and willingness of the diaspora to offer support. This will help to address the misinformation passed from one constituency to the other, which perpetuates stereotypes and prevents progress. It will also move the debate away from the small number of individuals who have traditionally monopolised the space, instead ensuring that an array of voices, concerns and solutions are discussed and explored. To complement this, spaces should and could be created to advocate for the positive role of diaspora and other external actors in the current context to encourage ‘home country’ governments to engage constructively and create the right framework conditions.
6. **Build the capacity of new peacebuilding constituencies:** Stakeholders should not assume that diaspora communities have the required knowledge and skills to be able to act as peacebuilders. Considered effort must be put into building the skills of individuals so that they can work with and through their differences.
7. **Support both home and host policy-makers in defining their expectations of the diaspora and address some of the concerns on the ground:** Host country policy-makers have limited understanding of the complex dynamics of diaspora communities, often speaking only to the individuals who actively approach them. Likewise, home country policy-makers have limited understanding of diaspora communities, given that interactions are usually limited to high-ranking politicians and the self-proclaimed representatives of diaspora communities.

CONCLUSIONS

As frequently mentioned in the media, the linking of various types of transnational activists, most visibly through social media or internet platforms, unites activists of a common cause across the globe. If we can accept that intra-state conflict can be determined, reproduced and reinvigorated by transnational actors, then the same actors

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can surely be called on to support peaceful community relations and governmental reform. However, this assumption works on the basis that the concept of peace is more attractive than open, dangerous and antagonistic forms of societal conflict.

This is an issue that underpins the entire diaspora project – can cross-community relations be a priority in light of the multitude of grievances fuelling open conflict

between communities? Can pro-peace, conflict-sensitive approaches ever be a worthy adversary to traditional divisive community rhetoric? From Alert’s perspective, the answer is ‘yes’. Diaspora communities can have a significant role to play in peacebuilding, reconciliation and recovery. They are a unique actor with significant ties to the country of heritage. The challenge is to first provide space to understand and acknowledge respective grievances. This space should support communities in harnessing their capacity to address the needs of people on the ground and in gaining acceptance from Sri Lanka’s political community that the diaspora are a legitimate constituent to be taken seriously and engaged with constructively. The diaspora are unique to other actors in Sri Lanka because they can offer a different perspective, capacity and approach to those living in Sri Lanka, while also being very much part of the country and its people.

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About International Alert

International Alert helps people find peaceful solutions to conflict. We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding organisations, with nearly 30 years of experience laying the foundations for peace. We work with local people around the world to help them build peace, and we advise governments, organisations and companies on how to support peace.

Acknowledgements

This publication is funded by the British High Commission in Colombo. International Alert is also grateful for the support from our other strategic donors: the UK Department for International Development UKAID; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The opinions expressed in this report are solely those of International Alert and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of our donors.

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ISBN: 978-1-909578-72-2