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Case Study

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## Promoting Community Resilience through Religious Leadership in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

Community resilience is the ability of communities to face and recover from challenges using their own resources. Religious leaders are active stakeholders in the social systems, and they play a critical role in promoting community resilience. During challenges faced by communities such as disasters, emergencies, conflict, and crisis, religious leaders, religious communities, and religious organizations help communities cope with them and bounce back to normalcy. Further, religious leaders could shape the way communities perceive challenges and change. This case study describes the Pillars of Resilience Project, which aimed to build the capacity of religious leaders on Community Resilience. It was possible to train 207 religious leaders from all major faiths of Sri Lanka at six locations through one-day workshops. The project culminated in the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience, which brought together the religious leaders for a day of discussions and sharing. This project shows us that religious leaders' capacity building could be used as a strategy in promoting community resilience.

**Key words:** *Community Resilience, Religious Leadership, Disaster Preparedness.*

## 1. Background

Resilience could be defined as "the ability of individuals, communities, organizations or countries exposed to disasters, crises and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact of, cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and stresses without compromising their long-term prospects." Resilience operates across the whole social ecosystem ranging from the individual, household, community, local government, government, organization to regional levels (The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2014). Community resilience has been defined as the "ability of a community to 'bounce back' and recover using its own resources' and also the ability of groups or communities to cope with external shocks and stresses as a result of social, environmental and political change," as per the Disaster Management Center of Sri Lanka (Disaster Management Center, 2015). Since governmental structures alone could not mitigate disaster risk and assist communities through recovery, a whole society approach is needed using the community resilience approach (Rivera & Nickels, 2014).

Faith-based leaders play a critical role in promoting community resilience, both in disaster and complex emergency scenarios (Ager et al., 2015; Ramsay et al., 2010; Rivera & Nickels, 2014). During such challenges, faith-based leaders and faith-based organizations not only help communities to cope with them but also to bounce back to normalcy. In addition, faith-based leaders could shape the way communities perceive challenges and change (McGeehan & Baker, 2017).

Religious and faith-based extremism has created challenging circumstances in the recent past in Sri Lanka (Gunasingham, 2018; Imtiyaz, 2020; Morrison, 2020). However, suppose faith-based leaders could be provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes on promoting community resilience. In that case, they could be a definite asset during times of challenge and change. This case study documents the field practice of a project conducted to build religious leaders' capacity in promoting community resilience in Sri Lanka.

## 2. Methodology

The project commenced with a series of one-to-one consultations as well as planning meetings with the religious leaders from multiple faiths, as well as the professionals from disaster management and health.

After consultations with religious leaders' representatives of all four major faiths of Sri Lanka, a curriculum was developed to build their capacity for community resilience. The key topics covered were as follows:

1. Basic Concepts and Terminology
2. Role of Religious Leaders in Community Resilience
3. Disaster Management System in Sri Lanka
4. Health First Response in Disasters
5. Psychological First Aid
6. Hosting a Displaced Community in a Place of Worship
7. Assisting a Disaster Affected Community

In order to cover the above topics, a curriculum was developed with clear learning  
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objectives and content. Powerpoint presentations with videos, a participant handbook, unit tests, participant workbook, hands-on sessions, demonstrations and group activities were developed to deliver the learning material (N. W. A. N. Y. Wijesekara, 2019b, 2019a). Hands-on sessions were used for first aid training, while demonstrations were used to describe the content of the dignity kit to be provided to displaced persons. A group activity was used to simulate a scenario of hosting a displaced community in a place of worship.

In addition to providing technical inputs, one of the key objectives of the training was to create a platform for interreligious dialogue and networking. Targeting this, a Cross-Cultural Handbook was developed to provide an introduction to each other's religious and cultural practices, along with some stories of resilience which were common to all religions (N. W. A. N. Y. Wijesekara, 2019c). All training material was developed in English and were translated into Sinhala and Tamil Languages. The training materials used are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Knowledge Products Developed Through the Pillars of Resilience Project**

In order to deliver the training, it was decided to have eight one day training programs. One host religious organization was identified for each of the eight training programs. That organization was responsible for the identification and invitation of participants. In addition, they were responsible for arranging the logistics, including food according to the multiple cultural preferences of the participants. Even though the initial plan was to invite participants from all faiths to each of the training, this became a challenge with the Easter Sunday Attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inspired Islamic Extremist group. The trust which was there among the religious leaders between each other seemed to have been scattered. However, subsequently, interreligious training was possible. By the time of the Interreligious Symposium of Community Resilience, the religious leaders were quite free to engage and interact with those from other faiths. Special attention was paid to the days of communal prayers or observances when fixing days of training.

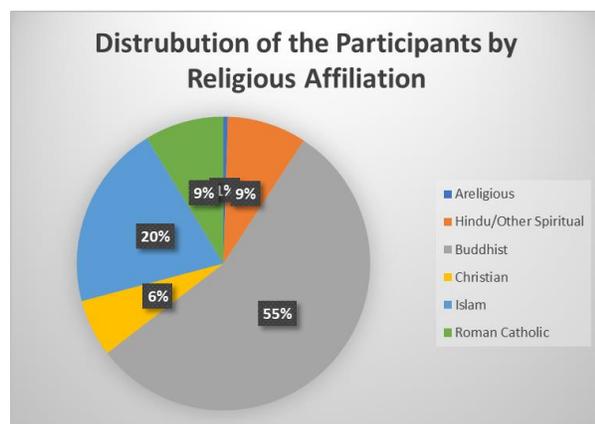
At the end of the training, the Interreligious Symposium of Community Resilience was organized. The participants, as well as guest presenters, were invited to submit their papers, which were compiled into a symposium proceeding (N. Wijesekara et al., 2020).

A series of plenary sessions were organized to share the multireligious perspectives on community resilience as well as the technical aspects. A mini-exhibition was organized as a side event to the symposium, which provided a space for fruitful networking and communicating activities. The participants who successfully completed the training were

recognised through award of a certificate of completion.

### 3. Results

A total of 207 religious leaders benefitted from the training. The distribution of the participants of the training by the religious affiliation is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 : The distribution of the participants of the training by the religious affiliation**

Fifty-five percent of the participants were Buddhist. Islamic faith represented 20% of the participants of the Pillars of Resilience training. Equal percentages of Hindu and Roman catholic representation were seen. The percentage of Christians was six. One person declared to be areligious.

The distribution of participants by the six training are as follows:

**Table 1 : Distribution of the Participants of the Pillars of Resilience Training by Host**

No.	Host of the training	Number of participants
1	Buddhist and Pali University, Pitipana, Homagama	73
2	The Seventh Day Adventist Church of Sri Lanka	21
3	Brahmakumari Raja Yoga Center, Dehiwala	27
4	All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama Branch, Badulla	33
5	All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama, Colombo	25
6	Caritas Sethmini Ratnapura	28
	Total	207

It should be noted that the largest participation was observed during the training organized by the Buddhist and Pali University, Pitipana, Homagama. However, this was a homogeneous group of Buddhist monks. Similarly, the training organized by the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama of Colombo and the Brahma Kumari Raja Yoga Cener also had a uniform group of religious leaders. However, other three trainings had mixed group of participants. The photographs of the trainings are shown in Figure 3 - 6.



**Figure 3 : Pillars of Resilience Training Hosted by the Buddhist and Pali University, Pitipana, Homagama**



**Figure 4: Pillars of Resilience Training Hosted by the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Sri Lanka**

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Figure 5 : Pillars of Resilience Training Hosted by the Brahmakumari Raja Yoga Center, Dehiwala



Figure 6 : Caritas Sethmini Ratnapura



Figure 7 : Pillars of Resilience Hosted by All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama Branch, Badulla



Figure 8 : All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama, Colombo

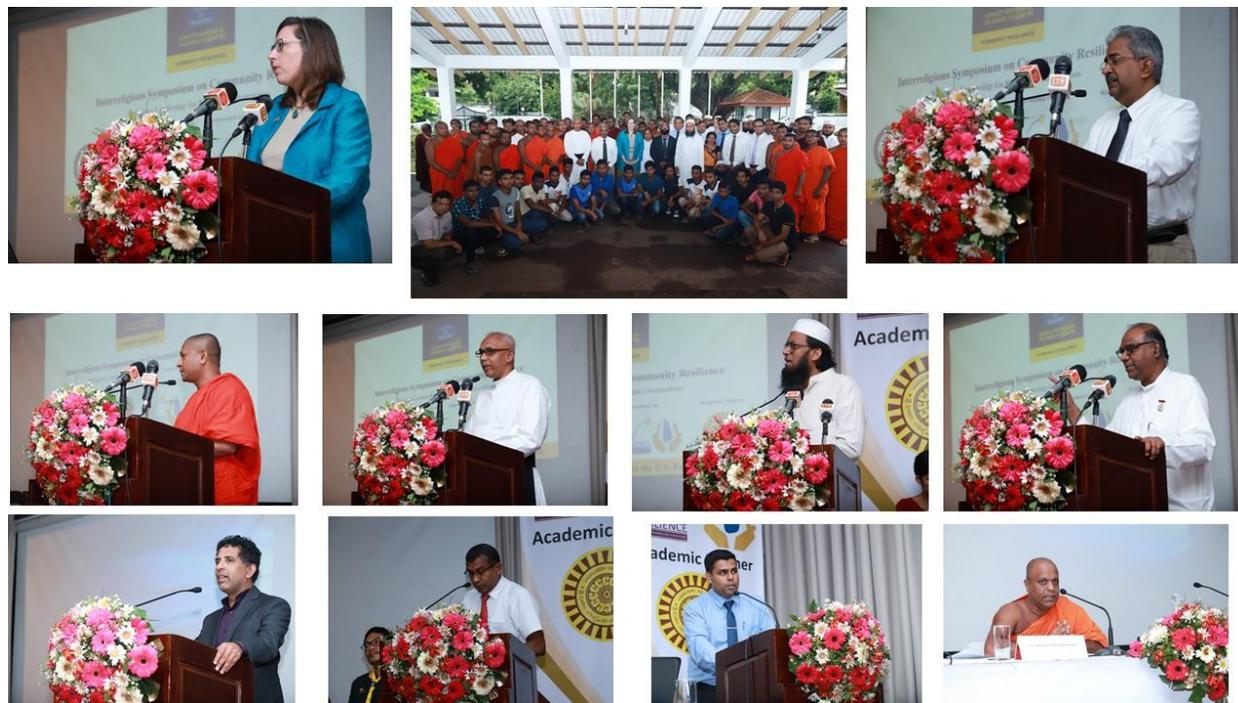


Figure 9 : Captures from the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience



Figure 10 : Participants from the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience

With the engagement of the Buddhist and Pali University as the academic partner, it was possible to add a lot of value to the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience. During the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience, out of the total of 207 participants, 128 were alumni of the training, while there were 33 other invitees. Scholars and Practitioners in religion and community resilience were invited to submit their articles for the symposium. It was possible to publish 18 papers on Community Resilience in the Symposium Proceeding. The Symposium Proceeding provided reflections by invited resource persons as well as the participants of the training to provide a deeper understanding of the concepts which have been covered in the Pillars of Resilience training.

#### 4. Discussion

Community resilience is a concept that demands for the empowerment of communities as well as reliance thereof during challenging times (Disaster Management Center, 2015). Disasters, emergencies, and crises could be overwhelming for the routine systems to respond with. Hence the assistance of the social system at large would be solicited during the response, as well as recovery. Among diverse stakeholders, the current project focused on the faith leaders as an asset in promoting community resilience.

A consultative process was adopted since the onset of the project. The collaboration of the authorities from health as well as disaster management was obtained for the curriculum development process, while the training needs and gaps were validated through consultations

with all major religious and faith traditions in Sri Lanka.

It was suggested by the religious leaders at the planning stages that the training programs to be conducted as a mixed group representing different religions of Sri Lanka. However, these had to be modified in the changed security and interreligious backdrop in the aftermath of Easter Sunday Incidents. For some training, only members of the particular religious or spiritual group were only invited. However, for others, mixed groups in relation to the religious affiliation were invited.

The Cross-Cultural Handbook developed during the process was instrumental not only to improve the cross-cultural understanding but also to share the similarities on key principles of community resilience which has been taught in all religious and spiritual traditions (N. W. A. N. Y. Wijesekara, 2019c).

Even though the project at the inception intended to train an equal percentage of religious leaders from all four major religious traditions of Sri Lanka, this could not be materialized. The reluctance of some religious groups not to get the training in a mixed group and one religion needing to train more religious leaders than allocated to them gave rise to this situation. Given the challenging inter-religious dynamics during the project period, this was consciously allowed, which was a better option than not obtaining the participation at all due to trust-building stages, especially at the initial stages of the project.

The feedback from the participants revealed that the trainings have been useful in enhancing their knowledge, skills and attitudes

towards the promotion of community resilience. Hands-on sessions and demonstrations were found to be most valued by the participants.

The culmination of the project was marked by the Interreligious Symposium on Community Resilience. The key feature of this one-day symposium was the opportunity provided for religious leaders from different traditions to communicate and network with each other. The symposium proceeding provided a value addition to the project by engaging invited resource persons as well as the participants to share their perspectives on community resilience (N. Wijesekara et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This case study documents the process of the Pillars of Resilience project conducted to build the capacity of religious leaders with the objective of promoting community resilience. In addition to equipping the religious leaders with theoretical and practical aspects of community resilience, the project also provided the opportunity to improve interreligious understanding and trust.

Investing on capacity building of religious leaders could be a useful strategy in building community resilience. It is recommended to establish a program to train and engage religious leaders in the community resilience promotion process.

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