



Policy Framework for Mobilizing Faith and Interfaith Activism for Promoting Peace and Development in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka Policy Report

Kalinga Tudor Silva and Fathima Afra

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka has had a long history of peaceful coexistence and tolerance among different religions. Over the past several centuries, however, this harmony has been disrupted and progressively undermined by colonial conquest, forced or unethical religious conversions during and after the colonial period, state policies favoring one religion over others, and the global rise of religious extremism.

This policy paper advocates for the mobilization of local faith actors LFAs as transformative agents of change. LFAs can play a pivotal role in promoting peace, trust-building, development, humanitarian assistance, and social welfare. The paper draws on an action research project conducted in the multi-religious Gampola region of central Sri Lanka, led by World Vision Lanka and funded by the British Academy through the University of Leeds. The project trained LFAs from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity in the Do No Harm (DNH) approach to peacebuilding. Following this, LFAs initiated community activities to build trust and mutual understanding in a context increasingly polarized along ethnoreligious and socio-economic parameters.

Key findings include:

- LFAs are trusted community figures who are capable of preventing, de-escalating, and responding to conflicts.
- Training in peacebuilding principles enhances LFAs' ability to act as "connectors" rather than "dividers."
- Educational visits to places of worship introduced schoolchildren to religious diversity, addressing gaps in Sri Lanka's segregated school system.
- WhatsApp groups emerged as effective, low-cost platforms for interfaith collaboration and countering misinformation.
- Despite initial institutional resistance, particularly from some Buddhist leadership, the project successfully engaged LFAs from all major religions.

Key policy implications:

- Recognize and strengthen the role of Local Faith Actors (LFAs) in peacebuilding.
- Revise and expand the National Policy on Reconciliation to explicitly include the role of religion and faith-based actors in reconciliation, peacebuilding, and interfaith cooperation.
- Engage religious institutions to support interfaith peacebuilding efforts.
- Promote interfaith education and exposure among school children.

- Reform religious education and reduce school segregation based on religion and language.
- Restructure religious governance to reflect Sri Lanka's multireligious heritage and support interfaith collaboration.
- Support digital platforms to build and sustain networks of LFAs for peacebuilding.

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible through the generous support of the British Academy, with funding administered by the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. We extend our sincere gratitude to our UK-based research team: Professor Emma Tomalin, International Team Leader and Project Coordinator, for her outstanding leadership; and research consultants Dr. Kathryn Kraft and Dr. Jennifer Eggert for their invaluable expertise and guidance throughout the project implementation. Special appreciation goes to Oscar Davis for his exceptional administrative support in coordinating weekly project meetings and effectively disseminating research findings through a series of webinars. Further, our project partners - Islamic Relief Worldwide and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers - played an essential role in advising on the research design and recruiting local faith actors to participate in the project.

We are equally grateful to our international research counterparts for their insightful collaboration: Professor Jayeel Cornelio, Robin Dagle, and Septrin Calamba in the Philippines; and Dr. Theodore Mbazumutima, Mr. Canesius Ndayikeza and Mr. Charle Rukundu, in Burundi. The intellectual exchange with these colleagues significantly enriched our work.

Our deepest appreciation goes to all the participants in Sri Lanka who generously contributed their time, knowledge, and personal experiences to make this research possible. Your willingness to share has been fundamental to the success of this study.

We also acknowledge with profound gratitude the immeasurable contribution of World Vision Lanka, particularly the expertise of Mr. Alex Ruban, , whose skilled facilitation of the Do No Harm workshop complemented and strengthened this research initiative.

This research represents the collective effort of all these individuals and institutions, and we are truly grateful for each contribution that made this work possible.

We thank our colleague and friend Alvin Andanje for his design of the Hidden Peacebuilders logo.

To cite this work: Silva, K.T. and Afra, F. 2025. Policy framework for mobilizing faith and interfaith activism for promoting peace and development in Sri Lanka. Hidden Peacebuilders Network.

Introduction

This policy framework emerged from a research project funded by the British Academy in the UK, which involved partnerships between academics, faith actors, and practitioners from 2023 to 2025.¹ The project is an initiative of the Hidden Peacebuilders Network, which aims to elevate the voices of LFAs involved in peacebuilding and to better understand the distinctive contributions of their work.²

As part of this project, a group of 24 local faith actors (LFAs) in the Gampola region of Sri Lanka were invited to participate in a training workshop facilitated by World Vision Lanka: 'Do No Harm for Faith Groups' (DNHFG) (McCants-Turner & Garred, 2022). The training aims to equip LFAs with the tools to recognize how their religious roles, language, and actions can either contribute to peace ("connectors") or unintentionally fuel conflict ("dividers"). It enhances their capacity to engage in peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts more consciously and constructively, utilizing their faith-based influence to promote social harmony, mitigate tensions, and respond sensitively to conflict dynamics within and between communities. The LFAs also participated in interviews with members of the research team to better understand the nature of their peacebuilding activities and both the 'tangible' (material) and 'intangible' (spiritual) dimensions of their work, as well as how they could be either 'connectors' or 'dividers' in their communities. Furthermore, they were each invited to record 10 monthly videos on their smartphones, responding to different questions each month that encouraged them to comment on the project's impact on their peacebuilding work.

¹<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/building-community-resilience-peace-and-reconciliation-as-a-response-to-global-disorder-the-tangible-and-intangible-aspects-of-local-faith-actors-contributions/>
In addition to Sri Lanka, the project also ran in the Philippines and Burundi. Partners included: the Universities of Leeds and East London (UK), and Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines); World Vision International, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers; as well as local NGOs, including Rema Burundi.

² <https://hiddenpeacebuilders.leeds.ac.uk/>



Country Background

Sri Lanka is an island nation in South Asia. As of 2024, the population stood at 22 million, comprising diverse ethnic groups and various religions. In 2023, Sri Lanka reported a per capita GNI of USD 3828 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2024). In the same year, Sri Lanka's Human Development Index was 0.776, ranking 89th out of 193 countries (UNDP, 2025). As in the last population census taken in 2012, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Muslims, and others comprised 74.9%, 11.2%, 4.1%, 9.3% and 0.5% of the population, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). As for the distribution of the population by religion, the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Roman Catholics, and other Christians accounted for 70.1%, 12.6%, 9.7%, 6.2%, and 1.4% respectively (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). There is considerable convergence between ethnicity and religion, with the Sinhalese predominantly Buddhist, the Tamil largely Hindu, and the Muslims invariably Islamic. There are, however, significant numbers of Tamil and Sinhala Catholics and other Christians complicating the ethnoreligious profile in the country to some extent.

Sri Lanka has a long history of ethnoreligious coexistence, as reflected in the country's rich social, religious, and cultural diversity (Whitaker 2022). The frequent incorporation of Hindu deities into Buddhist ritual—including such deities being a regular part of Buddhist places

of worship—is one aspect of religious pluralism in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Holt 2004). Religious pluralism is also evident in popular pilgrimage sites such as Adam's Peak, Kataragama, and Munneswaram, which attract pilgrims from all religions in the country (McKinley 2024; Piyarathne 2022; Pfaffenberger 1979). Similar pluralism is reflected in key religious festivities such as the annual Esala procession in Kandy; the celebration of events in the Buddha's life, such as Vesak; as well as the celebration of Christmas and the conclusion of Ramadan fasting (Silva 2002).

Despite the pattern of religious harmony established in the precolonial era, mistrust among communities increased from the colonial period onward, with the establishment of Christian hegemony during colonial rule and Buddhist hegemony in the post-independence era. The civil war between the state and the LTTE (1983–2009) was primarily an ethnic conflict driven by identity politics, competition over limited resources, and entrenched majoritarian policies of the state. However, there was a religious undercurrent: the Buddhist establishment firmly supported government forces, while the LTTE received some backing from Tamil Christian social activists operating in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka. The Hindu establishment in these regions remained largely apolitical, and LTTE efforts to instrumentalize Hinduism for political purposes failed from the outset (Spencer et al. 2015).

LTTE massacres of Buddhist monks, Islamic clergy, and civilians further intensified religious tensions. In 1990, the LTTE launched a campaign to expel Muslims from the Northern Province, leading to a mass exodus of Muslim communities from their homelands. Following the end of the war, Buddhist extremists initiated violent attacks against Muslims in southern Sri Lanka, further escalating ethnoreligious tensions. The Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 by Islamist extremists targeting Christians and tourists were widely seen as a turning point, marking a religious shift in the country's conflict dynamics (Silva 2023; DeVotta & Ganguly 2019).

More recently, social media has become a conduit for misinformation and hate speech, with specific religious groups unfairly blamed for crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic—despite research showing that most religions played a constructive role in both humanitarian and preventive efforts during the pandemic (Silva, Zawahir, Ramasamy, & Arumugam 2021). At the same time, religious extremism has been on the rise globally, with upsurges in religious right-wing movements across various faiths in both the Global North and the Global South (Ahmed 2023). This context underscores the need to address both religious and ethnic grievances as part of Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation process (Aliff 2015; Orjuela 2008).

Against this background, mobilizing LFAs in peacebuilding and development becomes essential. While religion can be a source of conflict and violence, LFAs can play a vital role in engaging local communities and fostering interfaith sensitivity and collaboration in the promotion of social harmony and mutual trust. It is important to recognize the agency of LFAs in shaping local public opinion in support of peace and community resilience, and to understand how they mobilize both material ("tangible") and spiritual ("intangible") resources in their religious practices to contribute to peaceful coexistence and sustainable livelihoods.

A Brief Account of the Study Population and the Mobilization of LFAs

The research was conducted from December 2023 to June 2025 in Gampola town and selected subunits of the Ganga Ihala Korale Divisional Secretary unit in central Sri Lanka. The study included all ethnoreligious formations in central Sri Lanka, which were distributed across urban, rural, and plantation sectors. Under this project, a total of 24 LFAs from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity were trained in the Do No Harm methodology. These LFAs included mid-level religious leaders, rather than top-ranking authorities in the religious hierarchy; lay devotees holding roles such as Sunday school teachers or office bearers in religious associations (e.g., a leader in a Muslim Women's Association); and volunteers engaged in various religiously inspired social service activities. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women among the selected LFAs.

Despite Gampola's rich multireligious heritage, recruiting participants for the project was initially challenging. It became clear that this reluctance stemmed from fears of being instrumentalized by unidentified external actors, concerns about religious conversion, and apprehensions about potential backlash from religious authorities toward those who joined the peacebuilding initiative. These concerns were particularly pronounced within the local Buddhist establishment, which also expressed a general mistrust of Christian NGOs, including the one leading the project. Enrolling Buddhist monks proved especially difficult due to prevailing anxieties about interfaith collaboration, despite the area's historical legacy of religious pluralism. One of the key successes of the project, however, was its ability to overcome this barrier by bringing on board several active Buddhist monks and one Bhikkhuni from the outset.

During the DNH training, LFAs were encouraged to identify methods they felt would help promote peace and harmony in their local areas. Following the training, meetings were held at each participant's respective place of worship to further discuss these ideas. At one of these meetings, the need to extend peacebuilding efforts to school children in the area was raised. However, implementing a school-based program in the short term proved difficult due to administrative challenges and the ethnically, religiously, and linguistically segregated school system in Sri Lanka. Taking these constraints into account, the LFAs decided to organize visits for selected school children to important places of worship in the area during school holidays. The aim was to raise awareness and understanding of each other's religions to dispel prevailing misconceptions. We were able to support this initiative by providing transportation for students and arranging refreshments during the visits.

LFAs organized the program to educate local schoolchildren about each other's religions from the four major faiths represented in the area. As elaborated elsewhere, the initiative involved an introductory presentation by a well-known religious leader from the relevant institution, explanations of the significance of key sites and sacred objects during visits to places of worship, interactive question-and-answer sessions, and, in some cases, meetings with religious devotees (Silva and Afra 2024). For many school children, this

was the first time they had ever entered a place of worship belonging to another religion, despite regularly seeing such places from the outside and hearing religious chanting from other faiths in their daily lives. According to the architects of this initiative, it was intended as a first step toward cultivating a new generation of peacebuilders, young people who, while not directly exposed to the civil war, are nonetheless deeply affected by the country's ongoing economic and political instability and the related conflict dynamics, including the religious turn seen in the post-war period. The programs were conducted during school holidays to avoid interfering with students' regular educational activities.

While the LFAs continued to meet from time to time, they quickly realized the need for a more regular means of interaction to share experiences, activities, and information about religious and community events. In response, the project leaders set up a WhatsApp group that connected all faith actors and the research team. This digital platform allowed for the timely sharing of project updates, LFA activities, and other relevant information.

Some LFAs were already part of other WhatsApp groups, but, for others, this was their first experience using a digital communication tool. The initiative marked a significant step toward establishing a network of local faith-based actors across diverse religious traditions. The next phase in LFA group dynamics involved establishing an interfaith forum to sustain the peacebuilding initiatives launched through the project. This forum was envisioned as a way to formalize the existing interreligious alliance. Significant progress has already been made in defining its aims and objectives, outlining its operational framework, drafting a constitution, and initiating the registration process as a voluntary organization with the Divisional Secretariat, the official body responsible for recognizing such entities.

This may be the only organization of its kind currently established in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, it reflects the strong commitment of LFAs mobilized by the project to carry forward its peacebuilding initiatives beyond the project's official timeline. The team is currently exploring potential sources of funding for the forum from state institutions, private sector partners, and civil society organizations.

The Need for Robust Peace and Reconciliation Policy and Action in Sri Lanka

Although Sri Lanka officially ended its civil war in 2009 and peace was technically restored, achieving genuine, lasting peace has remained elusive. Conflict dynamics have persisted in various forms, including waves of mob violence targeting Muslims and Christians, the Easter Sunday Islamist attacks on Christians and tourists, and ongoing mistrust within and between communities. Successive governments have undertaken several post-war initiatives, often driven by UN agencies, but these efforts have been largely ad hoc, inconsistent, and lacking in sustainability, as reflected in the continued prevalence of violence and ethnoreligious tension. In 2011, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) proposed recommendations to address the root causes of the conflict and reconcile longstanding grievances. The good governance regime elected in January 2015 endorsed a resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council, leading to several institutional developments.

In 2015, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) was established under the leadership of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. In 2016, the government formed a Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms (CTF), which conducted nationwide consultations to gather public views on reconciliation processes. Following the CTF's recommendations and aligned with the National Policy for Reconciliation and Coexistence, the Office on Missing Persons was established in 2018, with plans underway for an Office on Reparations. However, these largely externally driven interventions gained limited traction and were eventually stalled. This underscores the urgent need for a bottom-up, community-driven approach to peacebuilding, one that can lay the foundation for sustainable structural interventions like those outlined above.

A similar paradox applies to Sri Lanka's national policy on reconciliation. In 2017, the Government of Sri Lanka formulated a National Policy on Reconciliation and Coexistence, recognizing "a national need for an expressly stated comprehensive national policy on reconciliation" (2017: 1). The policy further emphasized that it was grounded in the principles of democracy, good governance, human rights, linguistic and cultural rights, the rule of law, national unity, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities (p. 3). It explicitly addressed critical issues such as linguistic rights, property rights, the rule of law, and transitional justice. However, it is noteworthy that the policy document did not identify religion or faith-based interventions as a possible avenue for reconciliation or as a response to emerging challenges, despite the already evident religious turn in Sri Lanka's conflict dynamics. Events such as the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 by a small group of Islamist extremists underscore the urgency of addressing what Appleby (2000) refers to as the "ambivalence of the sacred."

LFAs Should be Mobilized in Peacebuilding

LFAs are essential stakeholders in peace processes (where they can act as 'connectors' in the community using the DNH terminology) as well as conflict dynamics (where they can act as 'dividers' in the community).

First, LFAs are close to and easily accessible to their followers, with whom they interact daily. If a conflict arises, whether within their community or between their followers and others, LFAs are often among the first to notice it. This proximity and trust position them well to play a proactive role in preventing conflicts and de-escalating tensions when disputes do arise. For example, Buddhist and Muslim leaders in the area reported instances where they intervened to prevent local tensions from escalating following the Easter Sunday attacks and the subsequent backlash that occurred elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

Second, many LFAs draw on religious teachings that emphasize values such as love, social justice, compassion, non-violence, and dharma (right conduct), as well as spiritual practices like prayer and meditation. As revealed in a previous study, they are often also skilled in providing humanitarian assistance, which enables them to recognize and respond to humanitarian challenges both before they escalate and after they have taken root (Silva et al. 2023). This role is frequently expected of LFAs, for whom peacebuilding and humanitarian service are integral to their religious duty and calling. These themes emerged during consultative workshops and private interviews with faith actors from different religious backgrounds.

Third, LFAs mobilize both tangible religious practices and intangible faith-based and spiritual convictions to build trust and diffuse tensions within and between communities. For instance, *samatha bhāvanā* (calming or tranquility meditation) is practiced by Buddhist monks when they feel it is necessary to calm agitated laypeople. Similarly, a pastor working in a plantation area used devotional hymns to address incidents of domestic violence among his followers.

Fourth, while LFAs are generally expected by their followers to prioritize the interests of their own communities, they often rise above this expectation and extend support to others as well. For example, a previous study by World Vision Lanka found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, LFAs provided humanitarian assistance based on need rather than religious affiliation, making them key humanitarian actors during the crisis (Silva et al. 2021).

Fifth, during the COVID-19 pandemic, LFAs from different religious backgrounds worked together in responding to the crisis, viewing it as a shared challenge affecting followers of all faiths rather than as a problem limited to their own communities. Recognizing the universal vulnerability created by the pandemic, they saw collective interfaith action as essential. This collaboration played an important role in ultimately containing the spread of the virus.

However, this does not mean that all LFAs contribute to peace and harmony. On the contrary,

LFAs can also act as “dividers” within their communities. For instance, Spencer et al. (2015) observed how certain “conflict entrepreneurs” have used religion for their own purposes. In eastern Sri Lanka, where Spencer and his team conducted fieldwork, Buddhist monks and Christian priests often aligned with government soldiers and Tamil fighters, respectively, during the civil war. This alignment was shaped by the identification of these religious figures with the ethnic and political affiliations of their communities. In some cases, army soldiers and Buddhist monks were siblings from the same family, reflecting a deliberate familial strategy in which one member contributed to defending the nation, while another served its spiritual needs.

This tendency for LFAs to become “dividers,” we argue, further underscores the importance of training and engaging them as potential peacebuilders.



A group photo of the Local Faith Actors and stakeholders who participated in the DNH Reflection Workshop

Policy Implications



Local Faith Actors exposure visit to Ambuluwawa

1. Role of LFAs in Peacebuilding

Religions and LFAs play a central role in shaping public mindsets and, alongside the security establishment and law enforcement agencies, are crucial actors in building peace in Sri Lanka. Establishing peace and stability in the aftermath of prolonged conflict requires coordinated efforts among a range of stakeholders, including religious institutions themselves.

Although this research project engaged a limited number of LFAs from different religious backgrounds, it offers a valuable evidence base demonstrating that they can contribute meaningfully to peace and trust building in communities affected by religious polarization and influenced by various forms of religiously inspired extremism operating at global, regional, and local levels. This evidence includes interview data with LFAs, as well as video and photographic documentation, which will be presented in the country report.

To effectively engage their communities in peacebuilding, LFAs require institutional support from their respective religious establishments, moral support from the local population, and backing from an enabling policy framework. While community-level support was generally present, institutional backing from religious authorities was more uneven. Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic institutions initially showed some resistance, particularly due to concerns about working with a foreign-funded NGO and fears of religious conversion (Mahadev, 2018; 2023).



Local Faith Actors' Monthly meeting held in St Andrew's church, Gampola

2. Revisiting National Reconciliation Policy

The National Policy on Reconciliation, formulated in 2017, focuses on creating institutional structures and legal frameworks to stabilize peace in post-war Sri Lanka. As previously noted, the policy emphasizes the development of formal mechanisms for peacebuilding and transitional justice, including legal provisions to ensure the rights of war victims. However, it does not address the role of religion or faith-based actors in reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts.

While institutional structures and legal mechanisms are undoubtedly essential, it is equally important to cultivate a committed cadre of grassroots peacebuilders. Well-trained LFAs who are connected through interfaith networks and who respect both their own religious principles and those of others can play a vital role in reinforcing national peace initiatives.

The national policy on reconciliation should be updated to reflect the religious diversity of the country, not only as a potential challenge but also as a significant opportunity for peacebuilding in the post-war context. Incorporating faith actors from different religious traditions into a shared framework for peacebuilding remains both a necessity and a challenge in Sri Lanka. This study highlights practical ways in which LFAs from different backgrounds can be mobilized as effective partners in this process.

Providing formal peacebuilding training for LFAs would further enhance their capacity to foster trust, using faith as a source of motivation for compassion, social justice, and fairness in development.



3. Institutional Constraints and Leadership Engagement

Although LFAs hold considerable power and influence at the local level, their capacity for independent decision-making is often limited by their subordination to higher religious authorities. It is therefore important that the findings of this study (Afra and Silva 2025; Silva and Afra 2024; are shared with a broader audience, including key decision-makers within each religious tradition, and that the implications are discussed at an appropriate interfaith forum.

Not all LFAs may be willing to engage in interfaith activism, particularly given the potential disapproval from certain higher authorities within their traditions. This dynamic requires careful consideration when attempting to mainstream the involvement of LFAs in national-level peacebuilding.

In any case, working with LFAs calls for a cautious and respectful approach. In contexts where a well-defined religious hierarchy exists, consultation and advocacy with senior religious leaders may be necessary, especially when the autonomy of local LFAs is constrained by institutional structures.



'Unity in diversity' Workshop for students held in Aandiyakadawatha Jumma Mosque

4. Interfaith Education for Youth

To achieve the goal of educating local school children from different religious backgrounds about the area's religious diversity, LFAs involved in the project adopted an innovative approach. They arranged visits to various places of worship, where the significance of sacred objects and rituals was explained to the visiting students. In Sri Lanka's ethnically and religiously segregated school system, students rarely have opportunities to learn about other religions or interact with peers from different religious communities. This system tends to reinforce, and often deepen, ethnoreligious divisions, despite the long-standing tradition of interreligious interaction and shared religious experience that this study highlights.

Given the linguistic divisions and structural design of the state-controlled education system, the current segregation is unlikely to change in the near future. While policies are being developed to revise the national curriculum toward multicultural education and to promote trilingual language skills among students, progress has been slow due to limited resources and a shortage of qualified teachers.

In this context, organizing educational visits to places of worship, as done in this project, offers a more practical and immediate alternative outside the formal school system. Going forward, attention should be given to how the lessons learned through these visits can be integrated into the existing curriculum. As a potential next step, pilgrimage-style visits to multireligious sites such as Adam's Peak or Kataragama could further enrich students' understanding of Sri Lanka's religious diversity and promote interfaith respect from an early age.



5. Reforming Religious Education and Curriculum

The current school curriculum and the segregation of schools along religious lines must be re-evaluated, and a clear policy decision made on how religion should be taught in a way that promotes social harmony. The school children who participated in the visits to different places of worship clearly showed their interest in learning about the religions of other people living in the area, in addition to learning about their own religion, the experiences of which they readily shared with their peers from other faiths. This is an important point to consider as the new government formed in Sri Lanka in 2024 has launched a comprehensive program to reform the education system in the country (MOE 2025).³ There is strong potential to use extracurricular activities such as art, sports, music, and cultural events to foster mutual understanding among children from different religious backgrounds. Strengthening the provision of trilingual education would also enhance communication across communities and support national integration.

This project illustrated the potential of interfaith initiatives to educate school children about religious diversity and peaceful coexistence despite differences in belief. However, supportive policy interventions by the state are necessary to embed such practices within the formal education system and the broader administrative framework.



School children visit to the St Andrew's church Gampola

6. Religious Governance and Interfaith Infrastructure

Currently, religious affairs in Sri Lanka are managed by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Cultural and Religious Affairs, which maintains separate departments for each religion. This structure was established in response to demands from religious leaders and reflects competition over limited state resources. However, it does not reflect the country's multireligious heritage or the long-standing interfaith collaboration evident in many ritual and cultural practices, as discussed in this paper.

At a minimum, the ministry should include a dedicated unit to promote interfaith cooperation in areas such as humanitarian action and community development. The country's administrative structures and decision-making processes must be adapted to reflect Sri Lanka's religious pluralism and support more inclusive, cooperative approaches to governance and peacebuilding.

³. <https://moe.gov.lk/education-reforms/>



Local faith actors' mutual meet up at Galaha temple

7. Digital Networks and Peacebuilding

Finally, the role of WhatsApp groups among LFAs in each country, and the broader concept of a hidden network of peacebuilders globally, warrants further exploration—particularly in terms of building a pro-peace, multifaith voice among LFAs at regional and global levels. Such social networks provide a foundation for what Singh (2025) refers to as multi-stakeholder partnerships in a world facing interconnected crises, or "polycrisis."

The use of social media and internet platforms continues to grow globally. However, the extent to which these tools are used to promote social good varies depending on context. In the Sri Lankan setting, there is clear evidence of both positive and negative uses of social media in relation to peacebuilding and development. It is therefore essential that relevant authorities ensure the ethical use of digital platforms, especially when dealing with sensitive religious and cultural values and shaping the aspirations of youth.

WhatsApp, one of the most widely used social platforms in Sri Lanka, has proven to be a valuable tool in this project. The creation of WhatsApp groups connecting LFAs has supported mutual trust, helped counter misinformation, and increased youth engagement in community-based religious events. This network has facilitated information sharing within and between religious communities in the study area.

Given its cost-effectiveness and accessibility, the wider application of such platforms—within and across cultural and national boundaries—should be explored further. These digital spaces have already begun to establish an important social infrastructure among LFAs from different countries, offering agency to this vital group of interfaith actors in shaping the future of religion in the service of peacebuilding.

Sustaining and expanding this "hidden peacebuilders network" should be a priority. Future efforts must consider how such networks can be mobilized globally to contribute to world peace and sustainable development, drawing on the experiences of the two other countries involved in this study.

References

- Ahmed, Z.S., 2023. Drivers of religious extremism in South Asia. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. [online] Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-779> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].
- Afra, F. and Silva, K.T. 2025. Building community resilience, peace and reconciliation as a response to global (dis)order: Sri Lanka Country Report. Hidden Peacebuilders Network.
- Aliff, S.M., 2015. Post-war conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist hegemony. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 59, pp.109–125.
- Appleby, R.S., 2000. *The ambivalence of the sacred: Religion, violence, and reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Central Bank of Sri Lanka. 2024. Annual Report 2024. Colombo: Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Available at: https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/publications/aer/2024/en/Full_Text.pdf [Accessed 29 Jul. 2025].
- Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka. 2015. Census of Population & Housing 2012: Key Findings. Colombo: Department of Census & Statistics, p. 33. Available at: <https://srilanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Census-2012.pdf> [Accessed 29 July 2025].
- DeVotta, N. and Ganguly, S., 2019. Religious tensions behind the attacks in Sri Lanka. *Foreign Affairs*, April 2019. [online] Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sri-lanka/religious-tensions-behind-attacks-sri-lanka> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].
- Gombrich, R. and Obeyesekere, G., 1988. *Buddhism transformed: Religious change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Government of Sri Lanka, 2017. National policy on reconciliation and coexistence. Colombo: Government of Sri Lanka.
- <https://www.srilankaoundation.org/newsfeed/sri-lanka-launches-national-policy-on-reconciliation-and-co-existence/>
- Holt, J.C., 2004. *The Buddhist Visnu: Religious transformation, politics and culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mahadev, N. 2018. Economies of conversion and ontologies of religious difference. *Current Anthropology* 59 (6): 665-689.
- Mahadev, N., 2023. *Karma and grace: Religious difference in millennial Sri Lanka*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McCants-Turner, J. and Garred, M., 2022. Far beyond a tool: Do No Harm as spiritual (trans) formation for interfaith cooperation and action. *Development in Practice*, [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2102580> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

McKinley, A., 2024. Mountain at a center of the world: Pilgrimage and pluralism in Sri Lanka. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ministry of Education Sri Lanka (2025) Draft proposals for educational reforms, <https://moe.gov.lk/education-reforms/>

Orjuela, C., 2008. The identity politics of peacebuilding: Civil society in war-torn Sri Lanka. New Delhi: Sage.

Pfaffenberger, B., 1979. Kataragama pilgrimage: Hindu-Buddhist interaction and its significance in Sri Lanka's polyethnic social system. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 38(2), pp.253–270.

Piyarathne, A., 2022. Kataragama Pada Yatra: Pilgrimaging with ethnic “others”. In: M. Whitaker, D. Rajasingham-Senanayake and P. Sanmugeswara, eds. *Multi-religiosity in contemporary Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge, pp.101–112.

Silva, N., 2002. Introduction. In: N. Silva, ed. *Hybrid island: Culture crossings and invention of identity in Sri Lanka*. London: Zed Books, pp.1–7.

Silva, K.T., 2023. ISIS propaganda and local triggers in Islamic radicalization: A sociological analysis of Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka. In: G. Wrightson, ed. *Terrorism through the ages*. Leiden: Brill, pp.201–226.

Silva, K.T. and Afra, F., 2024. An intergenerational approach to interfaith peacebuilding in Central Sri Lanka. *JLI Blog*. [online] Available at: <https://jliflc.com/2024/07/intergenerational-interfaith-peacebuilding-srilanka-silvaafra/> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

Silva, K.T., Zawahir, N., Ramasamy, R. and Arumugam, S., 2021. The impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding activities of LFAs in Sri Lanka. *World Vision Sri Lanka*. [online] Available at: <https://jliflc.com/resources/the-impact-of-covid-19/> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

Singh, K., 2025. Multi-stakeholder partnerships in global affairs. *JLI Online Resource Library*. [online] Available at: <https://jliflc.com/resources/multi-stakeholder-partnerships-in-global-affairs/> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

Spencer, J., Goodhand, J., Hasbullah, S., Klem, B., Korf, B. and Silva, K.T., 2015. *Checkpoint, temple, church and mosque: A collaborative ethnography of war and peace*. London: Pluto Press.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2025. *Human Development Report 2025: A Matter of Choice – People and Possibilities in the Age of AI*. New York: UNDP. Available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2025reporten.pdf> [Accessed 29 July 2025].

Whitaker, M.P., 2022. Innovation and multi-religiosity at Sri Lankan interfaces. In: M. Whitaker, D. Rajasingham-Senanayake and P. Sanmugeswara, eds. *Multi-religiosity in contemporary Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge, pp.32–42.

**Policy Framework for Mobilizing
Faith and Interfaith Activism
for Promoting Peace and
Development in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka Policy Report