



Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order:

The 'Tangible' and 'Intangible' Aspects of Local Faith Actors' Contributions

Sri Lanka Country Report

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Executive summary

The research project Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order in Sri Lanka explores the important but often overlooked role of local faith actors (LFAs) in fostering social cohesion, conflict resolution, and community resilience in fragile contexts. The wider project focuses on Burundi, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. This report presents the findings from the Sri Lanka study, conducted by World Vision Lanka and scholars affiliated with the University of Peradeniya between December 2023 and June 2025 in Gampola town and selected subunits of Ganga Ihala Korale in central Sri Lanka.

The study was undertaken against a backdrop of global disorder manifested locally through Sri Lanka's legacies of civil war, ethno-religious tensions, economic crisis, political instability, and contested processes of reconciliation. It examined how LFAs contribute to peacebuilding through both tangible practices, such as community engagement and inter-religious activities, and intangible dimensions, including spiritual authority, moral influence, trust, ritual, and shared values. In doing so, the research highlights the need to recognise faith-based approaches within wider humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding strategies.

The project adopted a participatory action research approach, drawing on religious studies, sociology, and conflict analysis. Key activities included workshops with LFAs using an adapted Do No Harm for Faith Groups tool, monthly 'cellphilms'¹ produced by LFAs to document their peacebuilding practices, in-depth interviews, case studies, and a stakeholder workshop. A total of 24 LFAs from Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traditions participated, including village-level priests and male and female lay religious actors with strong roots in local communities.

¹'Cellphilms' is a participatory visual research method in which participants use mobile phones to create short films reflecting their lived experiences, perspectives, and community concerns, thereby enabling locally grounded forms of storytelling and knowledge production (Mitchell et al., 2017).

The findings indicate that LFAs can make a useful contribution to peacebuilding within their own communities and to promoting trust and mutual understanding among members of different religious traditions. However, Sri Lanka's longer history of relatively peaceful coexistence has been disrupted in recent decades by the manipulation of ethno-religious identities in political and economic struggles at both national and local levels.

The study therefore points to the value of integrating LFAs into the triple nexus of peace, development, and reconciliation, particularly through community participation and local engagement.

The project also generated two practical outcomes. First, participating LFAs developed an initiative to educate local schoolchildren about different religious traditions by organising visits to selected places of worship. For many children, this was the first time they had entered a place of worship belonging to another religion, despite encountering these religious spaces in everyday life. The initiative was designed as a first step towards nurturing a new generation of local peacebuilders.

Second, LFAs began planning an interfaith forum to continue peacebuilding work beyond the lifetime of the project. Considerable progress has already been made in identifying its aims and objectives, defining its mode of operation, preparing its constitution, and registering it as a voluntary organisation with the relevant Divisional Secretary. This demonstrates LFAs' determination to sustain relationships and initiatives beyond the project, with potential support from the state, private sector, and civil society organisations.

Overall, the Sri Lanka study shows that LFAs can play a constructive role in local peacebuilding when their tangible and intangible contributions are recognised, supported, and connected to wider development, reconciliation, and institutional processes. At a time when Sri Lanka continues to recover from economic and political crisis, strengthening trust among communities and confidence in institutions remains essential for long-term peace, stability, and recovery.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the project



This Sri Lanka country report forms part of a wider project - Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order - aimed at deepening our understanding of local faith actors (LFAs) and their role in promoting community resilience, peace, and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Burundi. Despite their significant contributions, LFAs have been largely marginalised in mainstream peacebuilding efforts and the field of peace and conflict studies. When acknowledged, the focus has primarily been on their 'tangible' contributions, whilst the 'intangible' or spiritual dimensions of their work remain overlooked. This reflects what scholars term a 'secular bias' in international peace, development and humanitarian action (Tomalin, 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2022). Within this framework, religious belief and practice are considered useful and relevant only insofar as they serve pre-defined development goals, provided that expressive religiosity is kept at a distance to maintain the supposed neutrality of the secular international aid system. This bias discourages any integration of faith-based community work with overt religious missions or practices, such as prayer and rituals that engage with the divine or higher principles.

Our research argues that this narrow engagement with LFAs not only overlooks valuable opportunities for collaboration and transformation but also constitutes a form of epistemological and ontological injustice (Jones and Petersen, 2011; Wilson, 2017). It forces faith actors to adapt their community engagement and outreach to align with the standards of the secular international aid system. Furthermore, the tendency to separate the 'tangible' from the 'intangible' aspects of faith-based peacebuilding in research and analysis risks misrepresenting how faith engagement operates in practice. Tangible or

material assets-such as buildings, governance structures, networks of trust, and local knowledge-are inseparable from 'intangible' or spiritual assets, including religious beliefs, prayer, worship and rituals. These spiritual dimensions mediate between the material world and the transcendental or supernatural, shaping how faith communities contribute to peace, humanitarianism, and development.

Our project takes place against the backdrop of growing global disorder, intensified by rising populism, the climate crisis, the threat of future pandemics, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and economic failure. These forces have contributed to widespread social inequality and violent conflict both within and between nations. The theme of Global (Dis)Order captures the fragility, uncertainty, and pervasive fear of violence experienced worldwide. Friedman (1993: 205) characterises this disorder as 'of a global nature, but [where] experience of that disorder is highly personal for most people [marked by] increasing violence and imagination of violence, increasing fear of catastrophe, or dangerous illness... of unemployment and bankruptcy and loss of property.' Written nearly three decades ago, these words are perhaps even more relevant today. Addressing this disorder requires radical, lasting solutions that engage a diverse range of actors and strategies. This includes voices often overlooked or dismissed by international policy frameworks, as well as bold new conceptual approaches that embrace diverse values, languages, traditions, and self-understandings. Our project responds to this challenge through participatory action research (PAR) with LFAs in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Burundi. To address this, our project had two overarching aims:

1. To better understand the "tangible" (or 'material') and 'intangible' (or 'spiritual') aspects of the contribution of LFAs to building resilience, peace and reconciliation as a response to Global (Dis)Order at the local level.
2. To promote broader recognition amongst the 'triple nexus' (1) of international peace/development /humanitarian actors of the 'intangible' or 'spiritual' aspects of the contribution of LFAs to building resilience, peace and reconciliation through co-producing (with LFAs) a conceptual framework that can inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders.

Overall, the project has addressed the following research questions:

1. What kinds of activities have LFAs engaged in with their communities to promote resilience, peacebuilding and reconciliation in response to the impacts of global (dis)order felt at the local level?
2. In what ways do LFAs mobilise 'spiritual' or 'intangible' forces? What meaning does this have for their approach to building resilience, peace and reconciliation and what harm might emerge from their (mis) application?

3. What lessons can be learned from highly localised initiatives that might be useful in other contexts and how can this contribute to developing a conceptual framework to inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders?

To address the project's research questions in Sri Lanka, the research team worked with World Vision Lanka. This country report presents the findings from the Sri Lanka study and is structured around the key aspects of the research. It begins with an overview of Sri Lanka's country context, establishing the socio-political and cultural background to the study. It then outlines the research methodology, including the design and implementation process. The report subsequently presents the key findings, supported by illustrative case studies, before offering a critical reflection on the project, including lessons learned and overarching observations. It concludes with actionable recommendations drawn from the study's outcomes, providing practical guidance for stakeholders.

1.2 Country Context and Global (Dis)order: Sri Lanka's Fragile Peace



Sri Lanka was recovering from 25 years of war, spanning 1983 to 2009, at the time of this study. Although the study area in central Sri Lanka, specifically Gampola and Ganga Ihala Korale, was outside the areas directly affected by the war, the spillover of social tensions resulting from the conflict was also evident there. Some army soldiers from the study area had fought in defence of the Sri Lankan state. Sinhala political leadership in the area and the Buddhist Sangha supported the government's war effort against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They typically held majoritarian sentiments supporting the Sri Lankan state and policies privileging Buddhism and the Sinhala language over minority religions and the Tamil language, as elaborated later in this report (Spencer et al., 2015; Orjuela, 2020).

Sri Lanka's post-war trajectory offers a vivid illustration of 'Global (Dis)Order'. The war itself both reflected and contributed to global disorder in several ways. Although it was fought within Sri Lanka, its effects extended far beyond the island, producing legacies of conflict that intersected with ethno-religious nationalism, colonial histories, global migration, religious geopolitics and, later, economic collapse. The large-scale exodus of civilians, mostly Tamil civilians from the northern and eastern regions, numbering at least two million people according to some estimates, created transnational consequences, affecting neighbouring India as well as countries in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. These patterns of displacement show how the Sri Lankan civil war was not only a national conflict, but part of wider patterns of global disorder. It reflected broader dynamics of postcolonial state formation, ethno-religious nationalism, forced migration, and humanitarian crisis. At the same time, it contributed to global disorder by producing refugee flows, politically active diasporas, humanitarian pressures, and international concern over reconciliation and human rights. Religious actors also responded to the war by providing humanitarian assistance to people displaced or otherwise harmed by the conflict. At the same time, some religious actors identified with different parties affected by the war, including the Sri Lankan security forces, the LTTE, or war victims more generally. This demonstrates how religion became entangled with the wider politics of conflict, identity, and humanitarian response.

In the post-war era, successive governments in Sri Lanka celebrated the military victory and largely neglected the need for reconciliation and peacebuilding. Some civil society organisations, such as the National Peace Council (NPC), took up the task of reconciliation and peacebuilding, but their success was limited by a lack of state support and by unresolved war-related hostilities that remained prevalent in society. In this sense, the end of the war did not resolve disorder, but transformed it into continuing struggles over memory, reconciliation, religious identity, and political belonging.

Following the end of the war, a series of episodes of ethnic and religious violence broke out in Sri Lanka, particularly targeting the Muslim minority and, at times, Christian minorities. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups increasingly framed these communities, especially Muslims, as new threats in post-war Sri Lanka, a pattern evident in incidents such as the Aluthgama violence in 2014 and the anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Digana/Kandy in 2018 (Morrison, 2020; DeVotta, 2016; Fowsar, 2020). Alongside struggles over economic opportunities and resources, rumours, hate speech, and anxieties about minority religious and economic influence often fuelled this violence, including attacks on mosques, Muslim-owned businesses, and other minority religious spaces (Fowsar, 2020; Morrison, 2020). State responses to these attacks were frequently criticised as slow, uneven, or shaped by majoritarian political pressures, contributing to a wider sense of insecurity and resentment among minority communities beyond Sri Lankan Tamils, who had been directly victimised by the war (DeVotta, 2016; Morrison, 2020). Subsequent waves of ethnic and religious violence caused economic and social displacement, damage to homes, businesses, and places of worship, and, in some instances, the loss of cultural and religious heritage (Fowsar, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021).

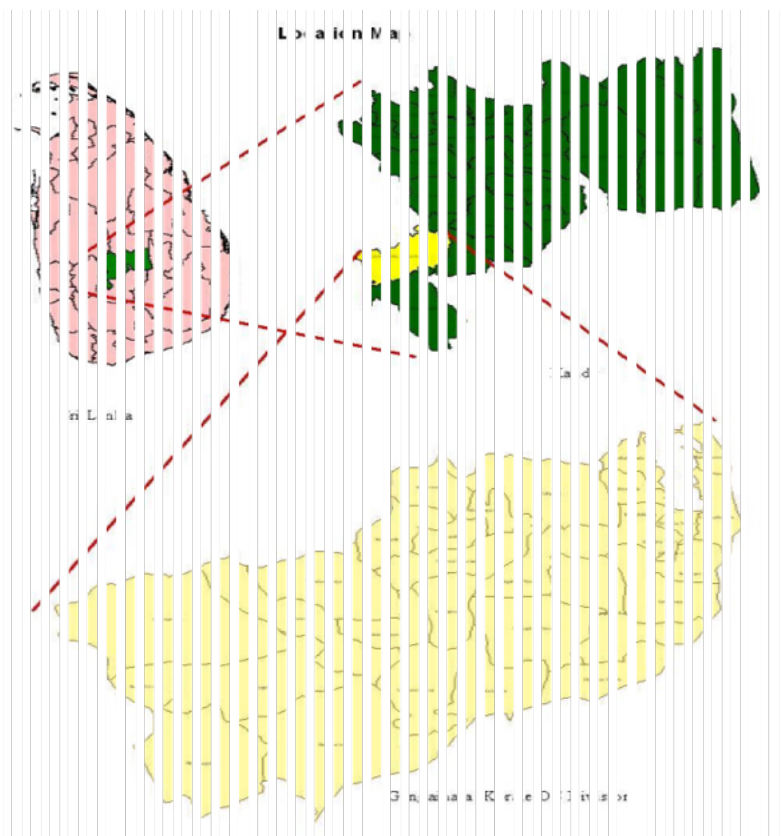


The Easter Sunday attacks by a small group of Islamic extremists, targeting tourist hotels and Christian churches in April 2019, added to the forms of disorder affecting Sri Lanka. This extremist terrorist attack reflected the combined effects of jihadist ideology originating in the Middle East and a sense of deprivation and discrimination among some sections of Sri Lanka's Muslim population. Fuelled by local triggers, including the ethnic riots targeting Muslims noted earlier, as well as wider global Islamic militant movements, these attacks intensified disorder in the country. They undermined tourism, a key source of much-needed foreign currency, and targeted Catholic and Christian minorities, who have often been viewed by Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim groups as a vestige of colonialism (Silva, 2023).

Finally, the economic crisis that engulfed Sri Lanka in 2022, and the resulting political crisis represented by the so-called Aragalaya protests, destabilised the country in an unprecedented manner. These protests brought together a wide cross-section of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds (Silva and Athukorala, 2022). The crisis compelled the government to acknowledge bankruptcy and its inability to repay debts accumulated over the post-independence period.

Thus, global (dis)order has manifested itself in Sri Lanka in multiple ways since the 1980s. These include civil war, ethnic riots, an economic crisis resulting in bankruptcy, and a political crisis resulting in mass street protests and regime change. The current project could not address all these complex forms of disorder that erupted in Sri Lanka between 2010 and 2024. However, it addressed a highly important yet often overlooked dimension of this wider context: the mobilisation of faith for peacebuilding amid serious forms of global (dis)order affecting the island nation.

1.3 Country Overview



Map 1: The study area in Sri Lanka, located within the Kandy district in the Central Highlands.

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 3,828 (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). The comprehensive welfare state established in Sri Lanka, inclusive of free health care and free education since the end of the British colonial period in 1948, contributed to improved social indicators for Sri Lanka, resulting in a literacy rate of 92%² and a life expectancy of 77.5 years as of 2023.³

Despite these achievements, Sri Lanka's economic growth has been slower than that of neighbouring countries such as India and Bangladesh, and the country experienced a severe economic crisis in 2022. A foreign exchange shortage made it difficult to

² <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-adt?>

³ <https://tradingeconomics.com/sri-lanka/life-expectancy-at-birth-total-years-wb-data.html>

import essential goods, including fuel, medicine and food. The crisis culminated in the government acknowledging bankruptcy and its inability to repay debts owed to domestic and international lenders. Since 2022, Sri Lanka has received support through the International Monetary Fund's Extended Fund Facility. This, alongside the recovery of tourism and remittance flows from Sri Lankans working overseas, has helped to stabilise the economy. However, in 2025, the World Bank described Sri Lanka's economy as stabilising but still fragile, particularly in relation to investor confidence and export income (World Bank, 2025).

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. According to the most recent population census, conducted in 2012, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Muslims and other groups comprised 74.9%, 11.2%, 4.1%, 9.3% and 0.5% of the population respectively (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). There is a high degree of convergence between ethnicity and religion, particularly among Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Hindus and Muslims. However, there are also significant Catholic and Christian minorities among both Tamils and Sinhalese in certain regions of Sri Lanka (NCEA, 2025; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Wickramasinghe, 2024).

Sri Lanka's post-independence history has been marked by repeated anti-establishment uprisings and violent conflicts. These include resistance by Sinhala youth in southern Sri Lanka in 1971 and 1987–89, and resistance by Tamil youth in northern and eastern Sri Lanka between 1983 and 2009. These uprisings were primarily secular rather than explicitly religious. However, ethno-religious sentiments often intersected with economic grievances, political exclusion and concerns about social justice. In the post-war period, ethno-religious identities became increasingly mobilised in political and social conflict, as reflected in violence targeting Muslims from 2012 onwards, anti-Christian attacks after 2010, and the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 by a small group of Islamic extremists targeting tourist establishments and Christian churches. Some commentators have described this post-war development as a "religious turn" in violence (Arulanthanm, Kumaraguru and Nilafdeen, 2025).

Sri Lankan politics and state policies have been largely shaped by identity politics and majoritarian state biases since independence in 1948 (Seneviratne, 1999; DeVotta, 2016). This was reinforced by the constitutional status given to Buddhism as occupying the "foremost place", while formally guaranteeing religious freedom to other religions practised in the country. In 1956, the popularly elected, pro-Sinhala Buddhist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna government made Sinhala the sole official language of the state, disadvantaging Tamil-speaking minorities, including ethnic Tamils and ethnic Muslims. The privileged position of English, spoken by the elite, and Christianity, practised by a minority, under British colonial rule was used as a justification for elevating Buddhism and the Sinhala language in the postcolonial state. However, the implications of this shift for Tamil-speaking ethno-religious minority groups were largely overlooked by the ruling elite in post-independence Sri Lanka.



This led to widespread protests by Tamil-speaking people, contributing first to limited recognition of Tamil through the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958, and later to its formal recognition as a national language under the 1978 Constitution (DeVotta, 2004). Nonetheless, parity of status between local languages, and among different religions, remains a contested issue. These unresolved questions continue to shape both majoritarian and minority political orientations in the country.

The Aragalaya protests of 2022 and the election of the National People's Power (NPP) government in 2024 created a more conducive environment for debates on social harmony, anti-corruption, anti-majoritarian politics and interfaith solidarity. The findings of this study resonate with this broader shift towards more inclusive approaches to social policy and peaceful coexistence. Representatives of the new government who participated in the Stakeholder Workshop held on 9 June 2025 confirmed their broad support for inclusive state policies conducive to social harmony and peaceful coexistence among different faith communities.

1.4 The Research Process

This research was conducted in the Gampola area between December 2023 and June 2025 by a team of researchers engaged by World Vision Lanka. The study involved a collaborative process in which researchers from a local university worked with World Vision staff, relevant government agencies in the area, and LFAs from different religious traditions through a participatory action research approach. In addition to addressing the project's research questions, the project sought to directly promote community resilience, peace, and reconciliation among the selected study population by influencing policy and practice during and after its implementation.

1.4.1 Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the study was to examine how LFAs contribute to community resilience, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in the Gampola and Ganga Ihala Korale areas of central Sri Lanka, particularly in response to the local impacts of global disorder. The study had two main objectives. First, it sought to understand the tangible, or material, and intangible, or spiritual, contributions of LFAs to peace and reconciliation in the study area. Second, it aimed to advocate for greater recognition of these contributions among local actors operating within the “triple nexus” of peace, development, and humanitarian aid. The research questions driving this study were as follows:

1. What kinds of activities have LFAs engaged in with their communities to promote resilience, peace and reconciliation in response to the impacts of global disorder felt at the local level?
2. In what ways do LFAs mobilise ‘spiritual’ or ‘intangible’ forces in their pro-peace interventions at the community level? What meanings do they have for their approach to building resilience, peace and reconciliation and what harm might emerge from any potential misapplication?
3. What lessons can be learned from highly localised initiatives that might be useful in other contexts, and how can this contribute to developing a conceptual framework to inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders?

1.4.2 Methodology and Research Design

The research design comprised several complementary and interlocking activities that combined data collection with relationship-building, social transformation, knowledge exchange, and joint learning. It adopted an interdisciplinary approach, combining theories and methods from the humanities and social sciences, particularly religious studies, sociology, development and humanitarian studies, and peace and conflict studies. These perspectives informed a participatory, action-oriented research design. The research was participatory because it involved non-academic partners in designing and carrying out the research, as well as in shaping and disseminating the project outputs. Through its action research approach, the project brought “together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 1).

Activity One:

Workshops with local faith actors

In each country, the project team held a three-day workshop with LFAs, using an adapted version of the Do No Harm for Faith Groups (DNHFG) workshop tool developed by World Vision International (WVI) (McCants Turner and Garred, 2022; Silalahi et al., 2016). WVI's DNHFG workshop tool is based on the “Do No Harm” conflict sensitivity training tool developed by CDA Collaborative through its Local Capacities for Peace Project. This tool was originally designed for use by peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development organisations working in fragile settings.

WVI reworked the tool for use with LFAs in ways that account for their faith identities and promote interfaith dialogue. The tool aims to strengthen participants’ understanding of the principle of “do no harm” and to explore how this principle can help them contribute more effectively to building resilience, peace, and reconciliation. It also encourages reflection on the role of theologies and religious teachings in peacebuilding.

For this project, the DNHFG workshop tool was further adapted at a workshop facilitated by World Vision Lanka in Sri Lanka in August 2023, attended by the core team and other local partners. This adaptation extended the focus on theologies and religious teachings and included greater consideration of the “intangible” aspects of faith-based activities in building resilience, peace, and reconciliation. It also explored how these intangible dimensions could be communicated to a broader audience across peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development sectors.

The project used this tool for two main reasons. First, the workshops provided an opportunity to gather data through which the first two research questions could be addressed. Second, they ensured that the project meaningfully involved LFAs, moving beyond a purely extractive research model.



The selection of LFA participants, including faith leaders, employees or volunteers from faith-based organisations, and members of local faith communities, was approached carefully because of the sensitivity of the topic. World Vision International, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers worked with local collaborators in each project setting to identify and invite LFAs. Participants included those with a track record in community-based resilience, peacebuilding, and reconciliation work, as well as those without direct experience in these areas.

Experienced facilitators from the project's non-academic partner organisations delivered each workshop, with support from local academic team members. Note-takers were also present to carry out ethnographic observation.

In each country, a follow-up DNHFG workshop was held approximately halfway through the project. This brought LFAs back together to share further reflections on their work and to discuss any changes they had made following the initial workshop.

The workshops played several roles in achieving the project aims. They provided a means of gathering data to address the research questions, while also reflecting the project's commitment to participatory action research. They enabled academics and LFAs to build trusted working relationships that continued throughout the project. They also created opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange among LFA participants. After the workshops, participants were encouraged to document their reflections and experiences by making short monthly recordings on their mobile phones, known as "cellphilms" (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Activity Two:

Production of 'cellphilms' by local faith actors

The use of "cellphilms" by marginalised communities as a collaborative and participatory research tool is well established. Cellphilms can help shift the balance of power within the research process and give greater ownership to local groups (McEntee et al., 2022). For nine months following the workshops, participating LFAs used their mobile phones to create short videos, of up to five minutes each month, within their communities. These videos responded to the following nine questions:

1. Tell us about a difficult situation you have encountered this month and how you have implemented the DNH principles?
2. What new connector have you observed in your community this month?
3. What is a new divider that you have seen in your community that you hadn't seen before?
4. Tell us about someone in your community who has done something for peace and how you have used DNH principles to support them?
5. Who have you inspired using DNH principles?
6. Based on experiences after the workshop, what would you change about it and what else do you need future training in?
7. Can you give us an example of how someone demonstrated more or less trust in the ability of religion to contribute to peace?
8. What is one spiritual thing that has changed in your personal and professional life since the workshop?
9. Now that we are wrapping up the project, how do you see yourself continuing the projects, initiatives, and connections that you have started, as well as the lessons you learned during the 1st and 2nd workshop? What other further support and specific help would you need to do this and from what sources?

The videos produced in each country were subtitled in the languages of the other two countries and shared with participating LFAs across all three project locations. Although some training was provided, the videos varied in quality, and not all LFAs had the time or resources to record every month. Nonetheless, the project produced a total of 167 videos overall. At the end of the project, World Vision Philippines edited a selection of these videos into a 10-minute film to share the project's work with a broader audience.



Activity Three:

Interviews with local faith actors

Qualitative research was carried out by the local academic teams, who visited LFAs in their communities to conduct two interviews: one at the start of the project and one at the end. A common set of research questions was used across the three countries to enable comparison, with some adaptations to reflect local contexts. The interviews deepened the research team's understanding of the tangible and intangible contributions of LFAs to resilience, peace, and reconciliation beyond what was observed during the workshops.

Activity Four:

Case studies

Each country team selected one or more LFAs whose work was examined in greater detail. This involved follow-up visits, observation of activities, and interviews with other community members. The case studies provided a more detailed understanding of how LFAs' peacebuilding practices operated in specific local settings.

Activity Five:

Stakeholder workshops

At the end of the project, a one-day stakeholder workshop was held in each country. These workshops brought together external stakeholders to share and discuss the research findings, reflect on their implications, and consider how the lessons from the project could inform future engagement with LFAs in peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian work.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic notes from the workshops and interview transcripts were uploaded to Atlas-ti (web-based coding software) and were coded by each of the country teams. This analysis was combined with observations from the monthly videos and case study notes relating to the intervention with school children and were written up in country reports.

Research ethics: Research ethics permission for this research was obtained from the University of Leeds research ethics committee [reference: FAHC 22-138].

1.4.3. How the research activities were carried out in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lanka research was carried out in Gampola town and selected Grama Niladhari divisions in the nearby Ganga Ihala Korale Divisional Secretariat area. These locations were purposively selected to include LFAs from the four main religious traditions in central Sri Lanka: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

With a total population of approximately 9,000 people, Gampola town served as an important centre for all religions in the area, including Muslims, who were underrepresented in the Ganga Ihala Korale division. In socio-economic terms, the study population included villages with predominantly Sinhala Buddhist populations, tea plantations with predominantly Tamil Hindu populations, some Christian and Catholic clusters, and the urban population of Gampola town, which includes diverse ethno-religious communities. Muslims in Gampola are also heavily engaged in commerce and trade. The selected study population therefore reflects both ethno-religious and socio-economic diversity in central Sri Lanka.

Ethnicity	Population	%
Sinhala	54924	80.9
Tamil	6701	9.9
Muslim	6126	9.0
Burgher	147	0
Other	17	0
Total	67915	100.0

Table 1: Distribution of the Population in Gangas Ihala Korale by Ethnicity, 2022

Source: Sampath Pathikada, Ganga Ihala Korale, 2022

Religion	Population	%
Buddhist	54803	80.7
Hindu	6868	10.1
Islam	5258	7.7
Christian	978	1.4
Other	8	0
Total	67915	100.0

Table 2: Distribution of the Population in Gangas Ihala Korale by Religion, 2022

Source: Sampath Pathikada, Ganga Ihala Korale, 2022

Religion	Population	%
Buddhist	5029	55.1
Hindu	695	7.6
Islam	3279	35.9
Roman Catholic	105	1.2
Other	16	0.1
Total	9124	100.0

Table 3: Distribution of the Population in Gampola town by Religion, 2023

Source: Gampola Urban Council

Together, these population profiles show why Gampola town and Ganga Ihala Korale were suitable sites for the study. They enabled the research team to engage LFAs from Sri Lanka's main religious traditions within a relatively limited geographical area. The contrast between the more Sinhala Buddhist profile of Ganga Ihala Korale and the more religiously mixed population of Gampola town also allowed the study to examine how majority-minority dynamics operate at the local level.

Although the area has a long history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, this did not necessarily imply deep mutual understanding or the absence of hidden tensions. Sinhala Buddhists held significant political and administrative influence, Muslims had an important economic presence in Gampola, and concerns about Christian conversion also shaped local sensitivities. These dynamics became visible after the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019, when some local Sinhala groups sought to retaliate against Muslims, but leading Buddhist monks intervened to prevent mobilisation. The study area therefore provided a valuable setting for exploring how LFAs can help ease unresolved ethno-religious tensions and strengthen community resilience.

1.4.3.1 Participants' details

To identify LFAs, the research team first requested a list of registered religious institutions from the Ganga Ihala Korale Divisional Secretariat. Based on this list, LFAs in the area were contacted and invited to participate in the project. Some were selected because of their contributions to community peacebuilding and their willingness to take part. However, some contact details were outdated, and a few LFAs were reluctant to join the interfaith programme because of personal concerns.

Because Muslim LFAs could not be identified within the Ganga Ihala Korale Divisional Secretariat area, the research team extended recruitment to Gampola town to ensure broader religious representation. A snowball sampling method was then used to identify additional LFAs in Gampola for participation in the first DNHFG workshop. A conscious effort was made to include participants from diverse religious backgrounds, genders, positions, and age groups.

A total of 24 LFAs attended the initial workshop. Some were unable to join the reflection workshop in July 2024 because of other commitments or lack of continued interest. Ultimately, 18 participants took part in the reflection workshop, including a few new LFAs. Over the 18-month period, some new participants joined after hearing about the project from active members, while others became inactive for personal reasons.

Information about the individual LFAs involved in the project from different religious communities is provided in Annexure 1.

Religion	Priest	Lay participants	Total
Buddhism	4	0	4
Hinduism	1	5	6
Islam	1	7	8
Catholic	2	0	2
Other Christian	4	0	4
Total	12	12	24

Table 4: Participant profile: Distribution of LFAs by Religion and Category



1.4.3.2 The research process

This study was conducted as an action research project using a mixed-methods approach and a variety of data collection procedures, as outlined above. Interviews with LFAs were conducted by Fathima Afra using an interview guide. These were carried out mainly through in-person meetings, although in some cases interviews were conducted by mobile phone.

Periodic group meetings were also held with LFAs. These meetings provided opportunities to check and verify information, ask follow-up questions, and reflect collectively on emerging findings. Detailed observations were made during visits to places of worship, and information was recorded in field notes, supported in some instances by photographic records. Similarly, the videos produced by LFAs were used as a source of information about their routine community-based activities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected LFAs to explore the project's research questions in greater detail. In addition, a case study method was used to examine specific aspects of community resilience and peacebuilding in practice. This included closer attention to the two practical outcomes that emerged from the research: school visits to places of worship and the establishment of an interfaith group to continue the work after the project had ended.

Finally, relevant published and unpublished materials were consulted to understand peace and conflict dynamics, and how these relate to ground realities in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. A detailed list of references consulted is provided at the end of this report.

Interview 1:

We began the research with an initial round of interviews, which focused on collecting basic information about the LFAs/RLs and their contributions to community peacebuilding. The project was explained to participants, and they were invited to take part in the research. Due to time constraints and participant availability, 12 LFAs participated in this initial round of interviews.

Informant No	Religion	Religious Position	Institution
1	Christianity	Brother	St. Andrews church
2	Buddhism	Monk	Sri Sumanarathanaramaya
3	Buddhism	Monk	Sri Anandaramaya
4	Non-Roman Catholic (N.R.C)	Pastor	Apostolic Church
5	Hinduism	Teacher In Charge	Galamudhuna Sri Muthumariyamman Araneri, Meenagola Maanikkapillayaar Araneri
6	Islam	Head	Gampola Muslim Federation
7	Islam	Secretary	Jami-ul Islam Mosque
8	Islam	Secretary	Haamidhiya Mosque
9	Islam	President	Gampola Muslim Council
10	Hinduism	Temple Priest	Sri Muthumariyamman kovil
11	Islam	Secretary	Association for Muslim Women Advancement
12	Islam	Treasurer	Gampola Muslim Federation

Table 5: Informants' details

Do No Harm for Faith Groups Workshop

The DNHFG workshop was held in Kandy, 3-5th December 2023, with 24 LFA participants. It began with religious observances, welcome speeches, and a round of self-introductions by the project team, resource persons, and participants. This was followed by participants setting ground rules for the workshop and discussing their expectations. Each subsequent DNHFG module was introduced in a way that enabled participants to progressively understand the causes and consequences of conflict, their possible complicity in conflict dynamics, and what faith actors and others can do to prevent future conflicts and mitigate or resolve existing ones. Each module involved a brief presentation by the resource person, followed by guided discussion and/or group work. Some sessions also involved games. The entire workshop was conducted in an interactive and participatory manner, with adequate time for participants to ask questions and seek clarification.

Group work was organised to allow male and female faith actors from different religious traditions to interact and collectively address problems within the DNHFG framework. Through this process, participants became familiar with DNH language and began to discuss issues using terms such as 'connectors', 'dividers', 'conflict sensitivity', and 'peacebuilding through collective action'.

Interview 2:

This interview was conducted with 10 participants to collect data on their peacebuilding journeys after taking part in the DNHFG workshop. It also focused on their understanding of the intangible dimensions of their contributions to peacebuilding, including the role of faith, religious teachings, spiritual practices, trust, and moral authority in supporting community resilience, peace, and reconciliation.

Monthly 'cellphilm' recordings

LFAs responded to one specific question each month, completing a total of nine questions over a nine-month period. These videos provided space for LFAs to share their own experiences of community intervention and peacebuilding in their local contexts. This participatory action research process was designed to capture the contributions of LFAs to peacebuilding in their own communities after their participation in the DNHFG workshop held in December 2023.

Reflection Workshop

The reflection workshop was conducted with 17 LFAs in Kandy (29-31 July 2024) to gather their reflections on the research project. Like the DNHFG workshop, it brought together multi-religious leaders, many of whom had participated in the initial DNHFG workshop, along with some new LFAs from the same research area who joined after hearing about the interventions led by their peers. The workshop helped identify the positive outcomes of the DNHFG process and explore future peacebuilding activities planned by LFAs within their own communities.

Religion	Male	Female	Total
Buddhism	4	1	5
Hinduism	1	1	2
Islam	6	1	7
Christian	2	1	3
Total	13	4	17



Stakeholder workshop

The stakeholder workshop and subsequent follow-up discussions demonstrated both the breadth of engagement generated by the project and its emerging relevance for education policy and interfaith practice in Sri Lanka. The workshop brought together a diverse mix of participants from religious communities, civil society organisations, World Vision Lanka, local faith actor networks, academics, and representatives connected to government and community development sectors. The event created a space for reflection on the project's findings and for discussion of how interfaith collaboration could contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and community resilience.

A particularly important theme running through both the workshop and later project meetings was education and the role of children in building interfaith understanding. Researchers reflected on how the project's activities had enabled children from different religious communities to meet one another and visit each other's places of worship experiences many had never previously had because of the structural separation of schools by ethnicity, religion, and language in Sri Lanka. Many Muslim children, for example, had never entered a Buddhist temple despite living nearby, and participants felt that these encounters fostered respect both for their own traditions and for those of others.

The project team viewed these activities as especially significant because Sri Lanka's education system often reinforces separation between communities. Although the country has a strong education system, children from different religious groups rarely interact because they attend different schools and sometimes study in different languages. The interfaith visits and shared activities developed through the project therefore emerged as an important informal educational intervention promoting social cohesion and reconciliation.



These discussions also began to connect directly with national-level policy conversations that developed after the stakeholder workshop. Sri Lanka is currently undergoing a period of educational reform, and members of the research team had recently spoken with the Minister of Education, an anthropologist trained in the UK who is interested in structural reform. They shared the project's findings concerning school segregation and the limited opportunities for interfaith interaction among children. The minister reportedly expressed strong interest in understanding the issue and exploring how gradual change might be introduced.

The discussions suggested that the project could contribute practical guidance to future education reform efforts. One proposal was that interfaith engagement could initially be developed outside the formal curriculum through exchanges, visits, and community-based activities before being integrated more formally into the education system over time.

The workshop conversations also highlighted the continuing impact of the relationships built through the project. In the aftermath of severe flooding in the research area, local faith actors who had participated in the initiative worked together across religious boundaries to coordinate relief efforts and support affected communities. These examples demonstrated how the project had helped strengthen ongoing interfaith networks capable of responding collaboratively during times of crisis.

Monthly and Weekly Meeting Notes LFAs independently decided to hold monthly meetings to plan and implement peacebuilding interventions within their communities. These meetings were hosted in various religious institutions, and the notes from these gatherings provide valuable insights into the evolving activities and initiatives led by LFAs. In parallel, the global research team conducted weekly meetings to share country-specific updates and discuss key concepts related to the research. The notes from these sessions also contributed to the development of new ideas and deeper conceptual understanding within the project.

1.4.4 Limitations and Challenges of the Research Design and Implementation

One of the main challenges at the initial stage of the project was identifying and recruiting participants for the DNHFG training. The research team used the list provided by the Ganga Ihala Korale Divisional Secretariat to identify LFAs. However, some contact details were outdated, some LFAs declined to participate because of busy work schedules, and others had personal concerns about joining an interfaith programme. As a result, the first DNHFG workshop had to be postponed twice due to the limited availability of participants. Since many of the LFAs who did participate were highly influential individuals already engaged in various community initiatives, it was also sometimes difficult to secure their participation in later project activities and to schedule interviews around their existing commitments.

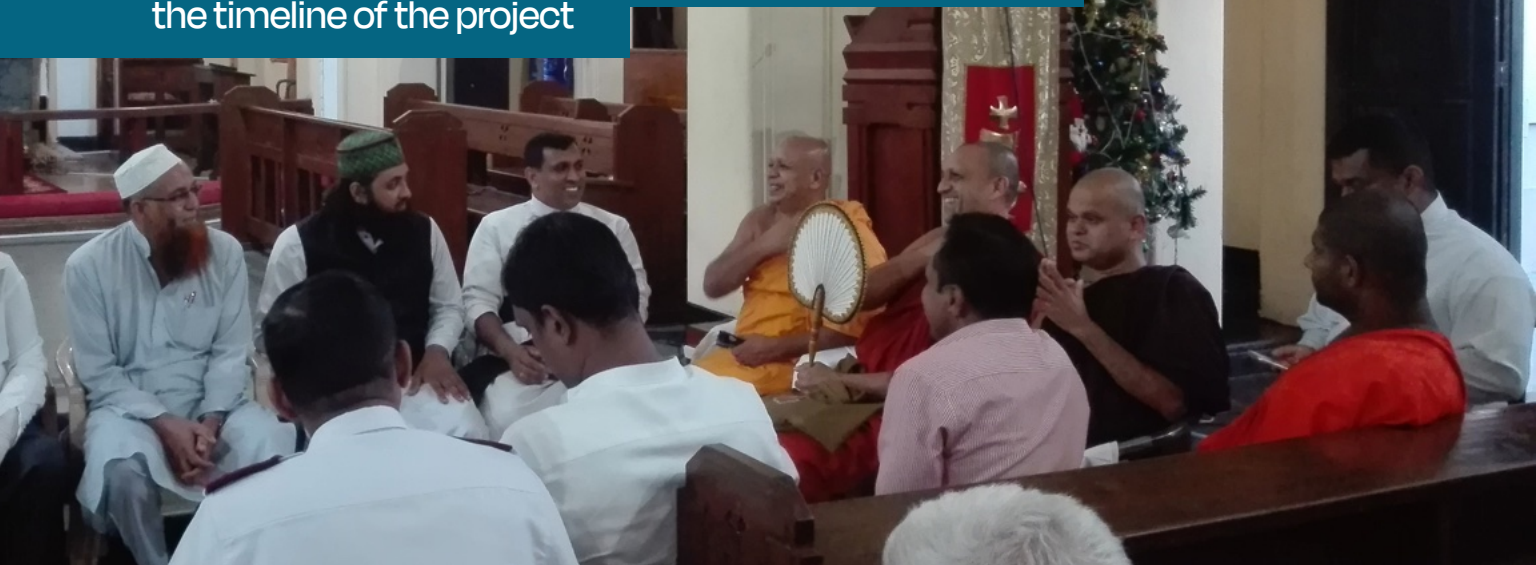
Another challenge was collecting monthly cellphilms, or video updates, from LFAs. Difficulties included limited understanding of the video questions, poor network connectivity, and reluctance among some participants who were unfamiliar with video recording as a research method. Access to suitable mobile phones was also a barrier, as some LFAs did not own smartphones and the project lacked funding to provide them. To address this, LFAs were encouraged to borrow good-quality smartphones from one another or from other members of their communities.

A further challenge emerged during the school visit programme, where some parents were reluctant to allow their children to visit places of worship outside their own faith tradition. Some Muslim parents were hesitant to send their daughters to religious sites of other faiths or to mixed-gender programmes. Muslim LFAs made significant efforts to address these concerns by engaging directly with parents and inviting them to join the visit series to build trust. Since the programme was designed for schoolchildren, the research team also had to navigate lengthy administrative procedures before implementation. Despite these challenges, LFAs managed the situation effectively and took responsibility for accompanying the children to different religious sites.

A final consideration was the need to treat religious leaders with appropriate respect in line with their positions. LFAs came from different religious traditions and held different roles within their respective religious hierarchies. This meant that certain forms of recognition and priority were expected for some leaders, such as separate front-row seating covered with white cloth for Buddhist monks. These arrangements had to be handled carefully to maintain dignity while ensuring that other LFAs, who also held respected positions within their own traditions, did not feel less valued. Over time, the close relationships developed among participating LFAs helped the research team manage these sensitivities to a considerable extent.

2. Findings and Outcomes from the Research

2.1 Offshoots from the research that emerged during the timeline of the project



Following the initial interviews with LFAs, a three-day DNHFG workshop was held. The workshops were a data-gathering opportunity to help address the project research questions, but also provided a space for the LFAs to benefit from the training as well as to develop action plans to apply their newly acquired knowledge within their communities and to promote peace through collective cooperation with other LFAs. These activities include:

- Educating children from different religious communities about each other's places of worship to enhance mutual understanding and respect.
- Organising Dhansala (the offering of food to all people, regardless of religion) during Vesak Poya Day, a major Buddhist festival that commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha.
- Conducting seminars to support and empower students from low-income backgrounds.
- Participating in cultural events organised by leaders of different religious communities.
- Establishing an Interfaith Forum among LFAs to sustain interfaith engagement and collaboration beyond the lifespan of the project.

As part of the project implementation in Sri Lanka by World Vision Lanka, the LFAs were also invited to participate in a series of capacity-building training programmes delivered by World Vision. These trainings are part of World Vision's established methodologies aimed at strengthening community resilience, wellbeing, and social cohesion. The key training areas included:

- **Empowered Worldview (EWV):**
A World Vision training approach designed to empower individuals and communities to move out of poverty by fostering positive mindsets, self-belief, and a sense of agency.
- **Celebrating Families:**
A faith-based World Vision programme that promotes strong family relationships, positive parenting practices, and the wellbeing of children.
- **Disaster Management Programme:**
Training focused on enhancing community preparedness, response, and resilience in the face of natural and human-made disasters.
- **Advocacy Training:**
Capacity-building sessions aimed at equipping LFAs with the skills to influence decision-making processes, raise community concerns, and engage constructively with local authorities.
- **Peace Dialogue Training:**
A World Vision-supported initiative to strengthen skills in conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding at the community level.

Out of the activities undertaken by LFAs, two developed into longer-term initiatives that have continued beyond the project's end. These represent important positive outcomes that did not emerge as planned interventions, but rather from the agency and initiative of the LFAs involved. The first was the establishment of a programme for schoolchildren in the area, initiated collaboratively by LFAs from different religious communities. The main objective of this initiative is to educate children about each other's religions through organised visits to local places of worship.

This approach helps to strengthen social cohesion by fostering mutual understanding and reducing potential divisions among the younger generation, while also actively involving them in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. The second outcome was the formation of an interfaith forum among the LFAs themselves. This forum provides a platform for ongoing collaboration and dialogue to sustain peacebuilding initiatives and interfaith engagement beyond the project's lifetime. We have already documented the first initiative in a blog published by JLI (Silva and Afra, 2024). We reproduce here an amended version of the relevant blog post, with additional information on its impact.

2.1.1 Towards an Intergenerational Approach to Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

It was a bright Sunday morning on June 8th, 2024, at Kobbawela Rajamaha Viharaya, an old Buddhist temple in Gampola, central Sri Lanka. Kobbawela Sumanarathana Thero, the chief monk of the temple, had invited a group of schoolchildren from different faith communities in the area to visit the temple that day.

About 40 boys and girls from different schools in Gampola town and Ganga Ihala Korale divisional secretariat had gathered in the temple since early morning. They included some 15 Muslim boys and girls, 20 Buddhist boys and girls, and a few Christian students from the town. Hindu students had also been invited, but they could not make it to the event due to transport difficulties in the plantation area where they were living. The lay administrators of the temple, the Dayaka Saba, played a key role in organising this event and providing food and snacks for all participants.

Among the other invited participants were a Christian priest, a leading Maulavi in Gampola, a young monk, and the Secretary of the Muslim Women Association, who were all LFAs who had participated in a Do No Harm (DNH) Training conducted in December 2023 under the Hidden Peacebuilders research project.

School children learning about each other's religions

Following the DNHFG training, LFAs convened their own meeting and decided to engage local schoolchildren from different religions in a faith-inspired group activity to help them better understand each other's religions.

This was considered particularly important as the state-run public-school system in Sri Lanka is ethnically and religiously segregated, and the students from different religions and ethnicities rarely get an opportunity to meet and interact with each other, let alone cultivate mutual trust. The first interfaith meeting of schoolchildren in this series was held at the Aandiyakadwatha Jumma Mosque in Gampola in January 2024, and, in this instance, the mosque leaders described the mosque's social history and demonstrated how daily prayers are conducted in the local mosque. Roughly 60 school children from different religions, accompanied by LFAs, participated in this initial meeting.

A long history of peaceful ethnic and religious coexistence

The program at the Kobbawela Buddhist temple began with an inspirational speech by Chief Monk Sumanarathana Thero, drawing on Buddhist scripture and the long history of peaceful coexistence among different communities in the area. His multimedia presentation illustrated Buddhist texts and sacred objects (see pictures 1 and 2). One of Buddha's key teachings was that all humans are equal, unlike other species in the animal world, which have different body shapes and inherent aggression towards one another.

Also, he illustrated how several popular Buddhist songs in Sri Lanka were sung by non-Buddhist artists such as Mohideen Beg (Muslim) and A.J. Kareem (Muslim from the Gampola area), in a pluralistic cultural and religious environment enriched by a plethora of artists from Buddhist and non-Buddhist backgrounds. Video clips were used to illustrate the power and inspiration of relevant pieces of music.

Learning about the meaning of sacred objects in Buddhist temples

Finally, he clarified the meaning and symbolism of sacred objects featured in Buddhist temples. According to the Buddhist tradition, the sacred objects are of three kinds, namely relics or bodily substances of Lord Buddha and other spiritual leaders of the community (dhatu), objects of worship associated with the life of Buddha, such as the Bodhi tree (paribogika) and statues built by skilled craftsmen to represent Buddha and other spiritual leaders and sacralised using prescribed procedures (uddesika). Subsequently, Gampola Sumanarathana Thero, a younger LFA in the project, took all the students gathered in Kobbawela temple on a tour of the temple premises. They started with the Bodhi tree, moved to the stupa (pagoda) and finally entered the Buddha chamber (budhuge). At each site, the monk gave a short presentation, and the students had the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification (see pictures 3-5).



Picture 1: Presentation by Kobbawela Thero



Picture 3: Walking tour of the temple



Picture 4: Presentation on why the Bodhi tree is sacred to Buddhists

For most Muslim students who participated in the event, this was the first time they had entered a Buddhist temple, learned about Buddhist sacred objects, and had the chance to talk with Buddhist monks and students in a religious environment. The Hidden Peacebuilders team in Sri Lanka plan to organise similar events in Hindu, Christian and Muslim places of worship in the months ahead. The aim of the LFAs involved is for students to learn to respect each other's religions and gradually overcome prevailing patterns of mistrust and mutual avoidance through this initiative. We see this as an important additional outcome of the DNH training implemented as part of the Hidden Peacebuilders research, which also highlights the need to incorporate youth into peacebuilding initiatives that use faith as an entry point. It is significant that LFAs and their religious institutions identified young people as an important target group for promoting social cohesion and building peace in Sri Lanka, and we hope to continue working with and for youth in our region.



Picture 5: A brief presentation about the significance of a Stupa in a Buddhist temple



Picture 6: It was the first time many Muslim students entered and learned about a Buduge

Following the visit to a leading mosque in Gampola, groups of students were taken to a Buddhist temple, Christian church and a kovil (Hindu temple) to feature the religious diversity in the area. The number of students visiting each institution is given in the following table.

Place of Worship	Male	Female	Total
Mosque Visit (Aandiyakadawatha Jumma Mosque)	31	34	65
Buddhist Temple Visit (Kobbawela Raja Maha Viharaya)	15	19	34
Church Visit (St Andrew's Church Gampola)	14	19	33
Hindu Temple Visit (Shri Muthumariyamman temple, Udahenthenna)	26	29	55

At each site, the students learned about the tangible sacred objects in the place of worship and the intangible values attached to them. Subsequent enquiries via a Google form indicated that, through these exposure visits, most participants' understanding of the relevant schoolchildren about the area's religious diversity and respect for one another increased. It also generated healthy curiosity about each other's religions while maintaining faith in one's own.

2.1.2 The Formation of an Interfaith Forum among LFAs

The idea for forming an interfaith forum came from the LFAs during one of their group meetings. They felt a strong need to continue the activities initiated by the project following its completion. This initiative was supported by both the research team and WVL local staff. Subsequently, enquiries were made about the possibility of registering this organisation as a voluntary group under the local Divisional Secretariat, and the requirements for this official process were identified. Office bearers of the organisation were then selected through mutual consultation, ensuring careful representation of both men and women from different religious backgrounds.

The interfaith forum seeks to promote mutual understanding among different religious communities in the area, drawing on resources from government agencies, private sector organisations, and interested civil society partners. According to its constitution, its mission includes promoting social harmony and mutual understanding among religions, building on the region's long history of peaceful coexistence.

These two project outcomes are still in the early stages of development, but they represent valuable initiatives to continue the interfaith legacy in the area at a time when multiple forms of disorder are affecting the local population.

2.1.2.1 The impact of the interfaith forum during the 2025 floods in central Sri Lanka

The floods and landslides that affected central Sri Lanka soon after the project period had ended had a significant impact on the study area, causing loss of life, displacement, and extensive damage to infrastructure and livelihoods. These events occurred in late November and early December 2025, when Cyclone Ditwah brought prolonged heavy rainfall across the country, triggering severe flooding and landslides, including in central hill-country districts such as Kandy and Nuwara Eliya (UN News, 2025; Copernicus EMS, 2025).

Many of the LFAs involved in the project were themselves directly affected by the disaster, facing personal losses and disruptions to communication networks in the immediate aftermath. Despite these challenges, the interfaith forum established through the project played an important role in facilitating a coordinated community response. The forum, which brought together LFAs from different religious backgrounds and had become a registered and active platform for collaboration, enabled actors to reconnect and mobilise once conditions stabilised.

A key outcome was the ability of LFAs to work collectively across religious boundaries in providing humanitarian assistance. Drawing on existing relationships and trust built

during the project, members of the interfaith forum coordinated the distribution of relief items, including food, stationery, and essential household goods, sourced through local and external donors. These efforts were carried out jointly by LFAs from different faith traditions, who worked together to serve affected communities irrespective of religious affiliation.

Importantly, these activities were not limited to ad hoc responses. The interfaith forum facilitated structured forms of engagement, such as organising distribution events in shared community spaces, including places of worship, and involving schoolchildren who had previously participated in interfaith programmes. This helped to reinforce both social cohesion and a sense of collective responsibility during a time of crisis.

Although the scale of the relief efforts was relatively modest, the significance of these actions lies in the demonstration of how relationships fostered through peacebuilding initiatives can translate into practical cooperation in emergency contexts. The interfaith forum provided a mechanism through which LFAs could pool resources, coordinate efforts, and respond more effectively than they might have been able to individually.

Overall, the experience of the 2025 floods highlights the broader impact of the project beyond its initial objectives. The interfaith networks established through the training and engagement activities not only strengthened dialogue and trust in everyday contexts but also enhanced local capacity for collective action in times of crisis. This suggests that investing in interfaith collaboration can contribute not only to peacebuilding but also to community resilience and disaster response.

2.2 Findings, Discussion and Recommendations



Here we present the key findings of the study from the angle of documenting the role of LFAs in peacebuilding, promoting community resilience and reconciliation among different communities in the area. Finally, some recommendations are made for strengthening the role of LFAs for the benefit of different stakeholders involved in facilitating recovery from multiple disorders impacting Sri Lanka at present

Local faith actors are an important driver of peace, reconciliation and community resilience in central Sri Lanka

LFAs are a diverse group of individuals, including both formal clergy and lay actors from different religious traditions, who work closely with local communities. Drawing on religious teachings and values, they engage in a range of activities, including mediation, religious education, voluntary service through faith-based organisations, and support for vulnerable groups facing everyday challenges.

Both men and women are represented among LFAs, enabling them to reach different sections of the community and engage in sensitive areas-such as family matters-that may otherwise remain private. They are highly respected and often serve as the first point of contact in situations of dispute, disagreement, or when support is needed, reflecting the strong relationships they maintain within communities.

Patterns of engagement vary across religious traditions. Among Muslims, daily interactions with Maulavis are common due to regular prayer gatherings, while among Christians, engagement often centres on weekly Sunday church attendance. Among Buddhists, temple visits tend to focus on monthly Poya days (a monthly Buddhist full-moon observance day in Sri Lanka, dedicated to religious reflection and practice),

although more frequent participation is observed among more devout practitioners. These patterns help explain how LFAs maintain close and regular contact with community members, enabling them to play roles that extend beyond spiritual guidance, including responding to social, economic, and interpersonal challenges.

The role of LFAs and the respect they receive within their communities underscore their importance. They can be seen as key social actors who play a significant role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Community members frequently approach them with a wide range of issues, including family disputes, land conflicts, and personal challenges and often follow their advice to improve their situations. In doing so, LFAs not only provide practical guidance but also draw on religious values such as compassion, justice, and service, approaching problems through the lens of their respective faith traditions. The following quotation from a LFA further illustrates this:

I worked as a security guard in this mosque. The person who deals with issues coming to this mosque is me. Problems such as land disputes, divorce, and family matters all come to me first. Before [the DNHFG workshop] also I have deal with issues, but after DNHFG workshop it was help to sort out issues in a proper way

- (Male Masjid Secretary).

This example highlights both the central role LFAs play in addressing everyday community concerns and the trust placed in them by those they serve.

The DNHFG training enhanced the capacity of LFAs to reassess and realign their roles in relation to peace and conflict dynamics and to contribute to broader processes such as promoting community resilience and peaceful coexistence among different religious communities.

Although this finding may not apply equally to all LFAs, it is supported by several observations. One key example is the increased conflict sensitivity among LFAs and a growing awareness of the need to build trust across religious boundaries. Following the training, concepts such as 'connectors' and 'dividers' became part of everyday discussion among actively engaged LFAs, indicating the integration of these ideas into their practical work.

For instance, Sister Ramani, a senior priest at the Sri Lanka Mission Church serving a tea estate community, encountered a situation in which another individual was claiming ownership of her church. Notably, both women and men serve as faith leaders within certain Buddhist and Christian traditions, while in Muslim and Hindu contexts, women may also take on leadership roles, either independently or alongside male counterparts.

Drawing on the conflict sensitivity skills gained through the DNHFG training, Sister Ramani approached the situation constructively. She reached out to the individual and invited him to discuss the matter peacefully. In addition, she mobilised members of her church to support mediation efforts and to explain the services provided by the church to the wider community. This approach contributed to a peaceful resolution of the dispute, demonstrating how training can enhance LFAs' capacity to manage conflict effectively.

Similarly, a pastor from another church shared how his previous prejudices against another religious community in the area gradually diminished as he engaged with them over time—an attitude shift he attributed to the DNHFG principles he acquired during the training.

Ultimately, the joint decision and action by the LFAs to educate school children about each other's religions through visits to places of worship reflects a commitment to transforming religious identity from a divider into a potential connector, fostering mutual respect not only for one's own religion but also for the faiths of fellow community members.

In promoting peace and mutual trust among communities, LFAs rely on both tangible and intangible dimensions of religion.

Within this project, the tangible dimensions of religion are understood as the visible and material expressions of faith, such as places of worship, religious symbols, artefacts, and sacred texts, as well as observable practices like rituals and prayer. The intangible dimensions, by contrast, refer to the underlying beliefs, meanings, values, and orientations that give these practices their significance. These include belief in a more-than-human power, a sense of calling or transcendent purpose, and dispositions such as awe, empathy, and compassion. While rituals, prayers, and other practices are observable, their importance lies in how they express and reinforce these deeper intangible dimensions. Similarly, elements such as moral guidance, the authority of religious leaders and sacred teachings, beliefs about the afterlife, commitments to non-harm, and engagement in charitable service all reflect these intangible aspects, even when they are enacted in visible ways.

In peacebuilding contexts, LFAs mobilise both dimensions together: tangible forms provide spaces and opportunities for engagement, while intangible values shape how individuals relate to one another. It is particularly these value-based, meaning-making aspects of religion that LFAs draw upon to foster dialogue, build trust, and encourage peaceful coexistence across religious boundaries. As one participant expressed:

There are many things we cannot see but we can feel. When we are in a relationship with people or when we deal with people in a proper way, we can feel them and understand them. Sometimes we don't need to communicate with them to understand their issues or emotions, we can understand their issues and emotions without using a language.

This is one intangible aspect which I felt through my religion. Another easy example, a common person doesn't know the value of diamond because he cannot distinguish between a genuine diamond and a worthless substitute. But the person who works with diamond knows its value. Likewise, I couldn't see people's issues always, but I can feel that and I always focus on it to reduce such a problem by finding the root cause. We can feel the God rather than see him. This is important in assessing issues in the community.

-(Male Christian Priest).

Understanding the intangible aspects of religion is especially important in building mutual trust between different religious communities. People often recognise the tangible elements-such as buildings, statues, and symbols-associated with their own faith, but may be less aware of the deeper intangible dimensions, including beliefs, values, ethical teachings, and dispositions such as compassion, empathy, and a sense of shared humanity that underpin these visible expressions. These intangible elements are crucial not only for promoting peace within individual communities but also for fostering interreligious harmony. In a country like Sri Lanka, which is home to diverse religious groups and has experienced religious tensions in the past, promoting mutual trust and peaceful coexistence across faiths is particularly vital.

Based on the views of our LFAs, many had never worked with people from other religions or lacked a proper understanding of the rituals and values of other faiths. If even faith leaders who are generally more socially aware hold such views, it is likely that many ordinary people face the same challenge. This issue is further compounded by Sri Lanka's ethnically segregated school system, which limits opportunities for children to learn about other religious traditions from an early age. Unless individuals actively seek out such knowledge in adulthood, they may remain unaware of other faiths. Therefore, creating opportunities to understand different religious traditions is essential for building mutual trust and promoting peace within diverse communities.

It is common to see temples, mosques, churches, statues, and other religious objects throughout the country. However, many people are not fully aware of the values and meanings behind these visible expressions of religion. This lack of understanding can contribute to religious tension or conflict. For example, if a Muslim person approaches a Hindu statue while wearing shoes, it may create discomfort or tension. For many Hindus,

the statue represents a form of the divine, and removing shoes is a sign of respect. In contrast, a Muslim individual may not recognise this significance, since in Islam God is understood as having no physical form. In this situation, the values of both individuals are valid within their respective religious frameworks. However, when individuals are only familiar with their own religious values, misunderstandings can arise. If the Muslim person understands the symbolic and religious importance of the statue, they may choose to act differently. Similarly, if the Hindu person understands the Muslim perspective, they may respond with patience and forgiveness. Without such mutual understanding, there is a greater possibility for conflict. This example highlights the importance of understanding the intangible meanings behind the tangible expressions of religion in fostering mutual respect and trust among different religious communities.

To foster this understanding, LFAs organised a series of visits to different religious sites with schoolchildren-an experience that was new for many of the students as well as for some of the LFAs themselves. Both the DNHFG workshop and these visit programmes created important opportunities for participants to learn about other religious traditions. This helped to reduce misunderstandings that can give rise to religious tensions and contributed to building mutual trust among people from different faith backgrounds. The quotation below provides an example that highlights the importance of engaging both the tangible and intangible dimensions of religion in peacebuilding. As one female Muslim respondent told us:

I did many activities within only Islamic community. But now I'm thinking that community is not only Muslim community, but community also means it include everyone. All are human beings, and everyone has the same blood. So now I'm in a stand to work with others. For the first time I visited a Church and Temple. I got many opportunities to work with others. So now my priority is everyone in society should get to know about these new lessons and everyone should live a peaceful life. I wanted to include other religious people in my program'

- (female serving as a secretary in a women's association)

Trust-building and social networking among local faith actors from different religions marked the creation of the first interfaith platform in the study area. Trust enables change it creates a social space for meaningful interaction.

The DNHFG workshop was the first opportunity for many LFAs to meet those from other religions. This experience, along with the lessons from the training, provided a platform for them to share their own religious experiences with people from different faiths. This opportunity for both giving and learning helped build trust among LFAs and shifted their previously negative perspectives about other religions. As one male Christian priest told us:

Yesterday, I read a news report about one maulavi had brutally attacked a madrasa student. Before our workshop I might have looked into the problems with the ethnic lenses and I might scold the whole Muslim community. But now I understood about Muslims. Therefore, I thought that, this is a psychological issue of that particular maulavi. So being with people and understand their emotions is important to do any activities in the society.

The above words clarify the importance of understanding different religious values, which can change people's perspectives toward other religions. Every religion teaches good values, but sometimes issues arise due to the personal character of individual followers-issues that are not necessarily related to their religion or religious community.

This understanding laid the foundation to create an interfaith forum in our research area, which is the first interfaith forum created in that place. At the same time, this social network helps many LFAs to solve issues in their own community. As an example, a female mosque secretary told us:

One issue that came to the mosque is an extra marital relationship between a woman (from one religion) and a man (from another religion). It will be a huge issue if we fail to handle this in a proper way, since it's connected with different religions. I searched more about this; I found the root cause for this relationship. I realise we couldn't handle alone by our side, since there is another religion connected. So, with the help of our forum LFA, I got a contact of chief priest of the place where this man lives. I went to meet him and told him about the issues. He was very happy about the way I approached. If not, it will create an ethnic issue. So, the the chief priest took responsibility and talked with that man. Our side we talked with that woman and we resolved the issue. Now it was over.

This example clearly shows that the social network created through the program is effective in addressing issues within the community. The trust built through the program brought changes in personal experiences and helped establish a strong social network. At the same time, it fostered genuine friendships among the participants, serving as a role model for the wider community. This point is further illustrated by the personal experience of a Buddhist monk, one of our LFAs in the project who became unwell during the first DNHFG workshop:

When I was sick and hospitalized the morning dana (food served to a monk) was bought by the pastor from the Gampola church and the lunch dana was bought by a maulavi. And in the evening, both of them came to see me. At that point I realised how important the humanity is. I realised humanity is above all religion. When they came to meet automatically, I felt I'm feeling well. They met the doctor and inquired about myself. It is really

a feeling of brotherhood. I got these valuable bonds through this workshop. Even the staff working in the hospital mentioned to me that, this is the first time they are seeing such an incident where a hospitalized monk was visited mostly by priests from other religions.

All the above examples illustrate how the project has served to establish a functioning interfaith social network among LFAs from different religions.

The Multi-faith Nature of Religious Practice in Everyday Life in Sri Lanka

As in other parts of Sri Lanka, the study area has a long history of friendly interactions and mutual influences between religions. Below, we share some examples of such interactions, which have largely been neglected or overlooked due to the rise of religious extremism and related tensions among communities. Nevertheless, these examples illustrate the rich multi-faith and multi-cultural heritage of Sri Lanka—an important foundation that should inform and shape future peacebuilding efforts in the country.

The interaction between Hinduism and Buddhism is widely documented in the sociological literature in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Buddhists seeking favours from Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Skanda and Pattini is well documented in the literature (Malalgoda 1976, Seneviratne 1999). One monk who participated in the reflective workshop in this project pointed to the presence of Hindu devas side-by-side with Buddhist places of worship in many of the Buddhist temples. The idea is captured by the famous Buddhist invocation ‘Budu Saranai Devi Pihitai’ (With the blessing of Buddha and assistance by deities).

In our interview with a leading Buddhist monk in Gampola town, he pointed out how when he was growing up, popular Buddhist songs by certain non-Buddhist artists such as Mohideen Beg, a popular singer from the Muslim community, and A.J. Kareem, a Muslim singer who originated from Gampola, appealed to him, and that he still plays their music from time to time. This is a clear example of how popular culture stood over and above religious identities in a way that characterised the multi-cultural and multi-faith nature of Sri Lanka’s society.

The popular multi-faith religious site Adam’s Peak (Sri Pada) is within 50 kms of Gampola town. People of all local religions, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, went on pilgrimage to this site, holding the belief that the footprint at the top of this mountain is the footprint of a founder of their own religion. One of the Buddhist monks who participated in the project held the position of chief incumbent of a Buddhist temple located in Adam’s Peak, adding to its importance for the local Buddhist community. The importance of this site, both from an interfaith angle and addressing global (dis)orders, are discussed in annexure 2.

The prevailing tensions in the area subsided to some extent due to project interventions as well as due to a number of other conducive developments

As noted earlier, there was some ethnoreligious tension in the area due to anti-Muslim riots in surrounding areas and the Easter Sunday attacks by an extremist Islamic group in 2019. This was a nationwide problem that affected communities differently. As we already noted, the Buddhist and Islamic religious leaders in the area had already contributed to easing these tensions in the local area. This created a conducive environment for implementation of the project in the selected study area. Even though we do not have hard evidence to support this statement, we do believe that the project contributed to the process of conflict resolution in the area by engaging LFAs in a process of reconciliation and peacebuilding. While we are not making the claim that the conflict potential in the area has been completely eliminated at the time of completing this study, the interfaith forum that is being planned will be a major step towards promoting trust and creating a community-based mechanism that can serve to minimize conflict potential in the area.

No intra community or inter-community violence and aggression has been reported during the study period in Gampola town or the selected project areas in the Ganga Ihala Korale administrative divisions. As reported elsewhere in this document, several LFAs involved in the project noted how they have addressed intra community issues including family disputes using existing positions such as family counsellors. With their training in DNHFG, they are now able to identify conflicts in their formative stage and address the root causes before they progress further. Improved education among school children among each other's religion and the new initiative by the trained LFAs to discuss dividers and connectors with their fellow religious actors in ways that devalue dividers and strengthen connectors together with other initiatives by WVL and its partner organizations to address poverty and social justice may be seen as a viable mechanism for promoting peace and social harmony in the ethno-religiously and socioeconomically divided population in the area.

3. Overall Reflections, Lessons Learned and Recommendations



Some of the important lessons from this study from the point of view of engaging LFAs in peacebuilding and reconciliation are as follows:

- First, with appropriate training and networking, LFAs can be effectively mobilised to promote trust-building within their own communities as well as to foster interfaith understanding across different religious groups. Despite their significant social and religious responsibilities and busy schedules, they demonstrated strong enthusiasm and commitment to promoting peace and social harmony at the community level.
- Second, the partnership approach adopted in this project was not initially well received. This was due to concerns over organisational 'turf', as well as resistance to foreign-funded NGO activities in the area. Such resistance was shaped by several factors, including fears that NGOs might act as fronts for religious conversion, particularly to Christianity. However, as the project progressed, a collaborative working relationship gradually developed between World Vision Lanka (WVL), government agencies, and local community leaders. This shift was largely driven by the positive outcomes of the project, including visible cooperation among LFAs from different religious backgrounds. In particular, there was initial hesitation from the local Buddhist establishment to engage with the project, reflecting broader concerns about conversion and anti-NGO sentiment. Over time, this resistance was reduced through the use of existing interpersonal relationships between project leaders and local religious actors, as well as through efforts to address concerns, build trust, and demonstrate neutrality. Overall, this highlights that engagement in this

sensitive domain requires careful navigation. Foreign-funded initiatives must proceed cautiously, prioritising local collaboration, trust-building, and transparency (Mahadev 2023).

- Third, there may be powerful vested interests at the local level that resist initiatives such as this one, as their underlying principles can challenge existing political alignments and parochial ethnoreligious agendas. In this project, rather than confronting such actors directly, the approach taken was to identify and collaborate with pro-peace elements within local communities. The broader political context also played a role. The Aragalaya protests that began in 2022, along with the subsequent political transitions in 2024, contributed to creating a more conducive environment for promoting a pro-peace agenda and strengthening interfaith engagement during the project period.
- Fourth, the combination of clergy and lay actors among the LFAs presented certain challenges. These were linked to differences in codes of conduct across religious traditions, as well as the tendency in some contexts for lay actors to defer to the authority of religious leaders, even when they held differing views. In addition, the gendered nature of public decision-making occasionally created tensions, particularly where the project sought to ensure equal participation of women and men. However, project leaders were able to manage these challenges by being attentive to religious and cultural protocols and making appropriate adjustments. For example, as Buddhist monks typically observe specific practices around meal times and may not dine with laypersons, workshop schedules were adapted accordingly to respect these norms. Such flexibility helped to maintain participation and minimise potential friction.
- Fifth, World Vision Lanka (WVL) had already established a strong reputation in the area through its child-focused programmes and outreach to disadvantaged communities, including those in tea estate regions and rural villages. The organisation had also recognised that peace and social harmony are essential foundations for sustainable community development, as well as for advancing human rights and social justice. While some level of collaboration already existed between WVL and local government agencies, the project further strengthened these relationships in a mutually beneficial way, enhancing coordination and reinforcing trust among key stakeholders.

3.1 Recommendations

The findings of this study provide useful guidance for promoting community resilience, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The recommendations are structured at both the national level and for specific stakeholders. Sri Lanka faces an ongoing need to strengthen peacebuilding processes in the post-war context, particularly considering the re-emergence of conflict dynamics, including the role of some religious actors in instigating tensions and violence. However, this does not imply that all religious actors contribute to conflict. On the contrary, this study demonstrates that, with appropriate training and facilitation, LFAs can play a pivotal role in promoting peace, as well as fostering trust within and between communities.

At the national level, there is a need for a well-informed and context-sensitive assessment of the different categories of faith actors, with a view to identifying those who can contribute positively to peacebuilding and to strengthening mutual understanding and trust across communities.

3.1.1 Recommendations for state policies and programmes

1. A database should be created on all faith actors in Sri Lanka, indicating their current and preferred involvement in peacebuilding, any training they have received within their religious traditions or from external sources, and their community or institutional engagements in promoting peace and social harmony. Such data would serve as a useful starting point for identifying and engaging relevant faith actors in programmes implemented by both state and non-state actors.
2. State policies and financial support should encourage peace education as a necessary component of the training of religious personnel at different levels.
3. Peace education should be integrated into general education in the country from the secondary level onwards. Educating children about each other's religions should become an important element of the regular education process. The project under consideration has illustrated a useful model for engaging local religious leaders through their places of worship.
4. State agencies should be encouraged to collaborate with non-state actors and religious institutions at the local level to promote interventions aimed at peaceful coexistence within and between communities.
5. While making necessary interventions, including strengthening law and order to promote peace, the state should engage with all religions in a non-partisan manner to solicit their contribution to promoting peace and social harmony.

3.1.2 Recommendations for NGOs

1. NGOs should identify the most effective ways in which they can contribute to promoting peace and harmony within the communities in which they work.
2. The relevance and local applicability of Do No Harm (DNH) and other related approaches should be carefully assessed before being adopted in programme implementation.
3. The potential role of LFAs and other key local actors, such as community leaders, should be carefully assessed and strategically mobilised for peacebuilding, particularly in addressing existing barriers within communities.
4. Faith-based NGOs, such as World Vision, Islamic Relief, and Caritas, may have both advantages and limitations when working with faith actors from different religious backgrounds. These should be carefully considered, and engagement strategies developed accordingly.

3.1.3 Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Religious Institutions

1. Conflict and peace dynamics, as well as peacebuilding more broadly, should be incorporated into the training of religious personnel at different levels.
2. Drawing on models such as the Catholic Church, a dedicated peace mission could be developed as an integral part of religious institutions, with clear roles and potential career pathways for those engaged in this work.
3. Greater effort should be made to identify and articulate how religious beliefs and ideas can contribute to peacebuilding and the promotion of mutual trust among communities.

3.1.4 Recommendations for Research

1. Further research is needed to better understand how religious ideas can be effectively used in peacebuilding, as well as how they may be misused to incite violence and conflict.
2. The intangible dimensions of different religions that promote peace, harmony, and community resilience should be further explored, with a view to integrating them more effectively into development and peacebuilding interventions.

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ANNEXURES

Age	Gender	Religion	Religious Position	Institution
62	Female	Christianity	Senior Priest	S. Sri Lanka Mission church, Dolasbage
43	Male	Christianity	Brother	St. Andrews church, Gampola
28	Male	Buddhism	Monk	Sri Sumanarathanaramaya, Gampola
47	Male	Buddhism	Chief Monk	Sri Anandaramaya, Gampola
58	Male	Buddhism	Chief Monk	Sri Sumanarathanaramaya, Gampola
58	Female	Buddhism	Nun	Gallen Viharaya, Digana
56	Male	N.R.C	Pastor	Apostolic Church, Udahenthenna
38	Female	Hinduism	Teacher In Charge	Galamudhuna Sri Muthumariyamman Araneri, Meenagola Maanikkapillayaar Araneri
60	Male	Islam	Head	Gampola Muslim Federation
70	Male	Islam	Secretary	Jami-ul Islam Mosque, Gampola
63	Male	Islam	Secretary	Haamidhiya Mosque, Gampola
63	Male	Islam	President	Gampola Muslim Council
41	Female	Islam	Principal, Teacher	Badhurdheen Mahamood Ahadhiya School, Gampola
72	Male	Islam	Maulavi, Gampola Chief Imaam	Town Jumma Mosque, Gampola
68	Male	Hinduism	Temple Priest	Sri Muthumariyamman kovil, Udahenthenna
52	Female	Islam	Secretary	Association for Muslim Women Advancement, Gampola
58	Male	Buddhism	Chief Monk	Sri Priyadharshana Ramaya, Gampola
-	Male	Christianity	Father	St. Andrews Church, Gampola
70	Male	Islam	Treasurer	Gampola Muslim Federation
-	Male	Christianity	Pastor	Kelhsamana Gospel Church, Dolasbage
39	Female	Islam	Member	Association for Muslim Women Advancement, Gampola
47	Female	Islam	Member	Association for Muslim Women Advancement, Gampola

ANNEXURES 2

An Example of Religious Pluralism, its Challenges and the Risk of Global (Dis)order

Religions offer different explanations for addressing global (dis)order and propose diverse pathways for overcoming it. In this report, global (dis)order is understood as the breakdown or weakening of social, political, ecological, and moral arrangements that sustain peaceful coexistence, alongside the emergence of new tensions across these domains. Religious ideas and practices can either mitigate such dynamics by fostering trust and cooperation or contribute to them when they are mobilised in exclusionary or hegemonic ways. As emphasised in the wider report, these forms of disorder are not only structural but also experienced in everyday life through insecurity, loss of trust, and heightened vulnerability among communities.

While this example focuses on religious pluralism at Adam's Peak-located outside the immediate project area-several factors informed its inclusion here. First, Adam's Peak is a major pilgrimage centre within the wider region and attracts pilgrims from multiple religious communities, including those present in the study area. Second, one of the LFAs involved in the project, Ahangama Jinananda Thero-who serves as chairperson of the interfaith forum described earlier-is the head monk of a Buddhist temple located within the Adam's Peak complex. He provided valuable insights into the long-standing connections between communities in the study area and Adam's Peak as a shared pilgrimage site for diverse faith groups across Sri Lanka. Finally, an important anthropological study of this site, *Mountain at a Centre of the World: Pilgrimage and Pluralism in Sri Lanka* (McKinley, 2024), was published during the course of this research. The present analysis draws on this work to deepen understanding of religious pluralism at Adam's Peak and its potential relevance for addressing questions of global (dis)order.

In an endorsement for McKinley's (2024) *Mountain at the Center of the World*, Anne Blackburn, a well known American scholar of the history of religion in Sri Lanka, observes:

At the pilgrimage site of Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, a footprint is embedded atop the mountain summit. Buddhists hold that it was left by the Buddha; Hindus attribute it to Lord Shiva; while Muslims and Christians identify it with Adam, the first human. The Sri Lankan state often uses the peak as a symbol to project a harmonious image of religious pluralism, despite increasing Buddhist hegemony

- (Blackburn, cited in McKinley, 2024).

McKinley's ethnographic study of Sri Pada (the local name for Adam's Peak), conducted over several years, offers a complex and multi-layered account of religious pluralism at the site. Drawing on historical sources, local folklore, and vernacular literature, the study traces the development of the pilgrimage centre and its changing significance over time. McKinley acknowledges that Adam's Peak has long been understood as a shared cultural and religious heritage among the different faith communities associated with it. However, he argues that this idea has been progressively undermined since the 1950s through state policies and local political actions that have promoted a form of Buddhist hegemony over the site, gradually eroding its pluralistic character. From the perspective of global (dis) order, this shift illustrates how the weakening of shared religious spaces and inclusive practices can contribute to the fragmentation of social relations and the consolidation of exclusionary identities.

This process has been accompanied by the increasing importance of commercial spaces along the pilgrimage route, where the participation of non-Buddhist actors has been progressively restricted. As a result, Hindu and Muslim presence within both the pilgrimage site and its broader ritual landscape has declined, with mosques and Hindu kovils reportedly removed under the authority of Buddhist temple institutions. While non-Buddhist participation in pilgrimage has therefore diminished over time, McKinley notes that an attenuated form of religious pluralism continues to persist at the site in the present day.

It is also important to note that the Adam's Peak territory is not only a sacred site but also a significant ecological zone. McKinley extends his analysis from religious pluralism to what he describes as planetary pluralism, offering an ecological perspective in which human communities must coexist not only with one another but also with animals, plants, and other living beings within a multi-species framework. The mountain has long been an important site of biodiversity, particularly in terms of its rich plant and animal life. McKinley introduces the idea of 'animal pilgrimage' to the mountain during the off-season, when human pilgrimage is limited. At the same time, however, the ecological integrity of the site has been increasingly threatened. Forest cover on the mountain has declined rapidly in recent years due to deforestation and new construction, despite its designation as a protected forest and wildlife reserve. These environmental pressures are closely linked to broader socio-political dynamics. The increasing politicisation of temple and local government administration, alongside the consolidation of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony over the site, has contributed to ecological degradation. This has, in turn, affected the sustainability of key natural resources, including two major rivers that originate from the mountain, thereby making downstream communities more vulnerable to both water shortages and periodic flash flooding.

From the standpoint of global (dis)order, this example demonstrates how religious, social, and ecological domains are deeply interconnected: the erosion of pluralism and the concentration of control in the hands of a single group not only generate social tensions but also contribute to environmental degradation and increased vulnerability to natural

hazards. In this sense, localised processes of exclusion and ecological decline feed into broader patterns of instability that extend beyond the immediate site. This case illustrates how the erosion of religious pluralism, combined with the monopolisation of control by a single community, can contribute to wider forms of global (dis)order. The resulting environmental degradation and threats to biodiversity further intensify these dynamics, highlighting the interconnected nature of social, religious, and ecological systems.

Enquiries in the study area revealed that, while Buddhist pilgrimage to Sri Pada has expanded in the post-independence period, Muslim and Hindu participation in pilgrimage to the site has progressively declined since the 1950s. Preliminary findings from the current study indicate that some local Muslims and Hindus perceive that they are increasingly unwelcome at the site, which is seen as being controlled by a relatively small group of Sinhala Buddhist religious actors. These actors are understood to be asserting greater control over the site in ways that diverge from its historical ethos of religious pluralism and peaceful coexistence among different faith communities. Such perceptions, whether fully substantiated or not, are themselves significant, as they point to the erosion of trust and shared ownership—key elements required for maintaining social order and preventing conflict escalation.

At the same time, it is important to note that these perceptions could not be independently verified through the present study and therefore remain indicative rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, they point to an important area for further research and engagement, particularly in the context of efforts to promote interfaith collaboration and sustain traditions of coexistence at shared religious sites. Addressing these issues is critical not only for restoring local interfaith trust but also for contributing to broader efforts to mitigate the forms of global (dis)order that arise from exclusion, environmental decline, and weakened social cohesion.

ANNEXURES 3

Photo Gallery



Do No Harm Workshop



Reflection Workshop



Local Faith Actors Monthly Meetings



Local Faith Actors community interventions as a group



Religious site visit series with school students



Local faith actors' mutual relationship

ANNEXURES 4

List of Participants in the Stakeholder Workshop

No	Participants Name	Designation	Organization
1	Mr Nimal Ratnayake	Secretary	Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs
2	Welivitiye Sujeewa Thero	Ministry	Buddhist Religious Cultural Affairs
3	Brammasri Lakshikantha Jegathesewara Kurukakal	Ministry	Sri Kandaswami Kovil Panadura, Sri Sai Vishnu Kovila Dehiwela
4	Dr. Sivasri Ramachandra Kurukkal Babusharma	Ministry	Member of Hindu Religious Affairs Advisory Board Secretary International Hindu Religious Federation Former President – Sri Lanka Council for Peace (Hindu)
5	Rev Bandarawatte Sumnarathna Thero	Faith Actor	Sri Sumanarathanaramaya Halagama
6	Rev Ahangama Jinananda Thero	Faith Actor	Anandaramaya, Harakola, Gampola
7	Mrs Nawshada Nanon	Faith Actor	AMWA Association Gampola
8	Mrs S Jegathesewary	Faith Actor	Galamuduna Araneri School
9	Bro. Upul Janaka	Faith Actor	Christ Church Kadugannawa
10	Pastor Amos	Faith Actor	Apostolical Church Rakshawa Janapadaya Udahethenna
11	Ms Achala	Faith Actor	Youth Officer, Divisional Secretariat, GIK
12	Ms Amali	Faith Actor	Counselling officer, DS office GIK
13	Ash Sheikh Fazil Farook Ash Sheikh Salman (Mowlavi)	Secretary PR officer	Council for Cooperation and Coordination Department of Unity and Coexistence ACJU
14	Rev Kumarage Ilangakoon	Retired Bishop	Dioses of Kurunegala
15	Prof Tudor Kalinga	Professor	University of Peradeniya
16	Prof. Premakumara	Senior Professor	Sociology Department, University of Colombo

17	Dr. Deshapriya S Wijetunga	Director General	Inter faith Harmony Forum
18	Ms Nirosha Anthony	Interfaith Lead	National Peace Council
19	Mr. Sabri Ibrahim	Secretary	Islamic Relief – Sri Lanka
20	Mr. Siraj Morugama	Consultant	Chrysalis
21	Dr Dhanan Senadhiraja	National Director	World Vision Lanka
22	Mr. Shiron Perera	Director - Field Operations	World Vision Lanka
23	Stanlake Kaziboni	Director - NRD	World Vision Lanka
24	Mr. Alex Ruban	Senior Manager – Field Operations	World Vision Lanka
25	Mrs Shika Samaratunga	AP manager	Kotmale east AP, World Vision Lanka
26	Mr Anton Fernando	AP Manager	Ganga Ihala Korale
27	Mr Sithum	DF	Ganga Ihala Korale
28	Ms Afra Fathima	Research Specialist	World Vision Lanka
29	Mr Ashok Kumar	Consultant	World Vision Lanka
30	Dr. Haniff	President	Kolannawa Jumma mosque
31	Jiffry Maulavi	Chief Maulavi	Gampola town masjid

**Building Community Resilience,
Peace and Reconciliation as a
Response to Global (Dis)Order:**

The 'Tangible' and 'Intangible' Aspects of Local
Faith Actors' Contributions

Sri Lanka Country Report