

Exploring the Role of Social Reconciliation Centres (SRC) in Promoting Community Sense and Social Integration

R.P. Pabasara¹

Introduction

Social Reconciliation Centres were established as per the Commission circular No. 10/2021 by the University Grants Commission (UGC), Sri Lanka. Serving as the main body within the universities to enhance social integration, and reconciliation, they organize various workshops, celebrations, training programs etc. Therefore, it is required to examine the role they play in fostering community sense and social integration. Though Mallawaarachchi (2020) has conducted a comprehensive study regarding the role of education in social cohesion in Sri Lanka, SRCs have not been established during that time. Also SRCs are not included into the seven categories Mallawaarachchi (2023) has identified. Meanwhile, Wickramasinghe (2021) has limited herself to exploring the role of humanitarian diplomacy regarding social cohesion. Moreover, though Dayasiri (2022) has decided a mannequin of peace past the army victory in 2009, SRCs were not established during her research as well. Further, Ganeshalingam and Makasenan's (2023) study has examined the challenges in reconciliation in the broader sense but has not addressed the issues encountered by SRCs in social integration. Thus it is obvious that, though an extensive number of studies have examined various social integration and community sense initiatives by a spectrum of social entities; government, non-government, and international, a scarcity was identified regarding the impact of SRC projects on social integration. Hence, this research was conducted to address the research problem of what role the SRCs play in developing community sense and social integration among diverse populations. With an eye on this specific research problem, the study attempted to achieve the objectives of identifying specific mechanisms utilized by SRC to foster community sense and social integration, assessing their impact, identifying key challenges encountered throughout the projects, and subsequently suggesting any solutions to overcome them. Therefore, apart from filling the above-identified research gap, the present study will be significant in

1. Social Reconciliation Centre, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Sri Jayewardenepura,
Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

ar102303@fhss.sjp.ac.lk

executing necessary amendments to the working policy of the SRC and speeding up the journey toward positive peace and reconciliation. However, it should be emphasized that, the scope of this study is restricted to events organized by SRC at University of Sri Jayewardenepura, in the first half of 2024. Hence, events organized before and after this specific period, and by other universities were not examined.

Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the examined research area, the study employed a qualitative research design. Hence semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between July 8 to July 15, 2024. For interviewing purposes, a stratified sample comprised of thirty individuals who interacted with SRC activities was chosen. The sample comprised school teachers, members of elder associations, undergraduates, and SRC staff members. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with six professionals with expertise in social reconciliation, who contributed as resource personnel for SRC projects. To maintain ethical considerations of the study, informed consent from each individual before the interviews. Following the data collection via the above methodology, thematic analysis was performed to gain insights. Based on the research objectives, data were analysed under four thematic areas; conducted activities, their impact, challenges, and recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Apart from the publication of journal issues, and sharing awareness-raising posters, the study could identify six activities conducted by the SRC within the stipulated period. To begin with, two leadership camps have been conducted, one for eighty undergraduates in collaboration with the Special Task Force (STF), and the other for fifty-five primary prefects of a government school in Colombo. The latter has been conducted by a group of undergraduates who participated in the above-mentioned STF program. Moreover, SRC has conducted a recreational program for the members of an elders' association based in Colombo. That has also been organized by a group of undergraduates who received leadership training in the STF program. In addition, three webinars regarding social integration and peace-building have been conducted within the specified period. While, the first and second have focused on the legal and linguistic perspectives respectively, the third has highlighted the globalization factor in social integration.

With regard to the impact of these activities, the study could identify that leadership qualities have been enhanced in the target groups. Specially the participatory leadership style is emphasized, and was noted as a pivotal factor in fostering community sense and social integration. Since, it provides

a motivation for team players, this particular leadership style was observed as the key factor in social integration. Moreover, the study found that opportunities provided for networking with diverse populations from school children, and undergraduates to academics, military professionals and senior citizens have heightened community sense and social integration. Further, it was noted that the creativity of the individuals has also been enriched via the SRC activities, and has a positive contribution towards developing community sense and social integration. From organizing to concluding most of the SRC activities were handled by undergraduates who hold membership of the SRC. Hence, while developing their creativity, they have developed others' creativity by organizing the above activities.

Also, the study could identify four key challenges encountered in conducting such activities. Among them, the majority emphasized the lack of enthusiasm for organizing and participating in the activities as a key concern. In addition, the awkwardness displayed by certain individuals in interacting with strangers was also identified. Apart from these two, budget constraints along with inefficient time management were identified as key obstacles encountered.

Finally, the study found three possible solutions to overcome above mentioned challenges. The majority of the respondents suggested organizing more SRC activities to provide extended interactive opportunities. Moreover, making everyone aware regarding the importance of SRC activities in fostering community sense and social integration was proposed. In addition, the practical application of best practices in project management was also suggested.

Conclusion

As a final remark, above findings suggest the crucial role played by university SRCs in fostering community sense and social integration among diverse populations by organizing a spectrum of activities that promote social cohesion through dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective actions. Addressing the identified challenges via both short-term and long-term actions is required. Signing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with relevant institutions, promoting via public media networks, and providing compulsory course modules to the university curriculum regarding social integration will be truly productive. Since, SRCs represent a productive mechanism in social integration, it is recommended to implement this initiative in every higher education institution in the island. Apart from everything, conducting further research on the impact of SRC activities on social integration is highly emphasized.

Keywords: Community Sense, Challenges, Impact, Social Integration, Social Reconciliation Centre

References

- Commission Circular No. 10/ 2021. (2021). University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka. https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/2337_Social%20Reconciliation%20Centres%20Circular%202021.pdf
- Dayasiri, B.V.S. (2022). Achieving Holistic Peace Beyond a Military Victory: Case of Sri Lanka. *Journal of International Studies*, p.102. <https://ss.kln.ac.lk/depts/intlSt/media/attachments/2023/09/14/journal-of-international-studies-2022.pdf#page=117>
- Ganeshalingam, K.T. and Makasenana, V. (2023). Challenges Facing the Reconciliation Mechanism in Sri Lanka. <http://drr.vau.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/123456789/748/1K.%20T.%20Ganeshalingam.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Geethanjalee Mallawaarachchi, C. (2020). An Analysis of Education for Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka. <http://ir-lib.wilmina.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10775/3592/4/917001%20Chamila%20Doctoral%20Dissertation%20%28fulltext%29.pdf>
- Mallawaarachchi, C. (2023). Evaluation of Social Cohesion and Peace Programs in SRI LANKA (Special Feature). *島平和究*, 10, pp.113-138. file:///C:/Users/PABASARA/Downloads/CV_20240901_HPRJ10_113.pdf
- Wickramasinghe, T. (2021). status of reconciliation: a case study of Sarvodaya movement in building ethnic harmony through humanitarian diplomacy in Northern Province of Sri Lanka. http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ouslpqp/1971/ARTICLE_4.pdf?sequence=1