Putting in place a policy framework


The National Policy Framework for Social Integration explicitly takes a rights-based approach, identifying rights holders and their responsibilities, and duty bearers accountable for upholding these rights. The Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration is charged with conducting multistakeholder consultations to formulate an action plan for implementation. The National Youth Policy emphasizes the need to recognize the diversities in Sri Lankan society, and reiterates the values of inclusivity, non-discrimination and tolerance. The National Action Plan for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights has identified the need to establish a language policy and to promote cultural pluralism in relation to social integration.

Apart from progress reviews of the National Action Plan based on the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission Report, there is minimal documentation on advances under other policies, which makes it difficult to assess their progress. A major weakness is an emphasis on preparing and launching policies, with little follow-through to establish specific implementation mechanisms, allocate resources and adopt monitoring mechanisms. Some policies are more important than others: The government’s overall policy is detailed in the Mahinda Chinthana, the main basis for government programmes. The extent to which other policy documents have been incorporated into this one is unclear. Coherence across policies is inconsistent, aside from the notion of promoting the learning of Sinhala and Tamil,
which is mentioned in almost all of them. More systematic approaches and implementation of all policies will be crucial in the years to come.

The most comprehensive policies related to social integration and reconciliation are the National Action Plan based on the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission Report, and the National Policy Framework for Social Integration (box 6.1). The commission was established in May 2010 and its report handed to President Mahinda Rajapaksa in November 2011. The report was subsequently tabled in Parliament, and the Government formulated the National Action Plan according to its recommendations—the Cabinet approved the plan in July 2012. In 2014, a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution was passed reiterating the need to implement the constructive recommendations in the commission’s report, and calling on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to undertake a thorough investigation into alleged serious violations and abuses of human rights and related crimes by both parties in Sri Lanka during the period covered by the report.5

There are conflicting positions on progress in implementing the recommendations. While the Government has noted considerable advancement, civil society organizations have been more critical, pointing out, for instance, that there are discrepancies in the claims of progress, and a lack of initiative in implementing several key recommendations. These include strengthening the independence of public institutions and independent investigations of alleged violations of human rights abuses.4

What divides us, what keeps us together?

Social integration is an essential element in the quest for peaceful social relations. Societies emerging from civil wars find themselves polarized on a range of issues inhibiting collaboration and cooperation. Many civil wars have been fought on the basis of ethno-communal factors. It is rarely one factor that leads to conflict; usually multiple problems converge, including those related to identity, distribution of resources, and disputes about what is considered fair and just.5

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BOX 6.1: KEY ELEMENTS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

- Fostering an informed and integrated society founded on the pillars of ethics, education and empowerment.

- Strengthening the seven elements of the social integration process, which entail access to education, economic activities and employment, justice and legal resources, a safe and secure social environment, a safe and secure physical environment, and political participation, as well as a sense of belonging and responsibility.

- Ensuring individual well-being and quality of life, facilitating upward mobility for all, and empowering youth and women as change agents.

- Assuring consistency in building and promoting trust to nurture a strong sense of belonging within the nation.

Source: Secretary, Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, Commonwealth Youth Forum 2013.
Sri Lanka’s civil war has often been described as an ethnic conflict based primarily on questions of identity and belonging. Finding identity and meaning in life is an important human need, more so for youth struggling to find their place in society. As they wrestle with questions of identity, belonging and the meaning of life, ideologies that provide answers are extremely attractive to them, especially when these ideologies are perceived to provide solutions to conditions of injustice.

Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict has had a profound effect on youth not only in terms of the direct costs of war, but also in how nationalist ideologies have shaped their identities. As discussed in the chapter on political and civic engagement, youth have grown up in an environment where politics of identity based on ethnicity and religion dominated national discussions on what it means to be Sri Lankan. At the same time, nationalism provided the ideological and political space for youth to assert their rights, fight for social justice and protest against discrimination.

The emergence of ethnicity as one of the most important aspects of identity reflects the changes that Sri Lankan society has undergone. The influence on youth becomes apparent in a careful analysis of youth political mobilization. The 1971 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front) insurrection was based primarily on issues of class inequality; it attacked the prevailing system of privilege and elitism. The demands were for a more just, equal society based on meritocracy rather than social position. In contrast, by the late 1980s, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna mobilization was around issues of patriotism and threats to the ‘unitive nature of the motherland’. By then, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna had taken a firm anti-devolution position and become more strongly identified with Sinhalese nationalist politics.

Similarly, among Tamil youth, earlier militant movements were associated strongly with issues of social justice, including caste discrimination, and aligned with socialist ideologies. But after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took control, socialist ideologies became less influential, and Tamil nationalist ideology took precedence. Consequently, the past several decades have seen the rise of both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist positions. The defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009 saw a resurgence of Sinhalese nationalism and heightened sensitivities among minorities regarding their position in society.

Youth in the National Youth Survey 2013 showed a strong awareness of ethnic identity; 46 percent said that their sense of belonging to their ethnic identity intensified after the war. Young people also saw ethnicity or rather ethnic politics as deeply divisive in Sri Lankan society. When asked about the most divisive factors currently at work, 36 percent chose ethnicity as the major one (figure 6.1). This held true across all ethnic groups, except among Indian Tamil youth, who identified language.

Unfortunately, religion has now begun to emerge as a point of contention. Recent tensions between factions of Sinhalese Buddhist monks and the

![Figure 6.1: Youth identified major factors dividing Sri Lankan society](image-url)
Muslim community have led to confrontations and even violence. These have heightened religious sensitivities in parts of the country, which were evident in the National Youth Survey 2013. Among Moor respondents, 19 percent identified religion as the most divisive issue in Sri Lanka. In the Western Province, witness to much of the recent religious tension and the most diverse province, 22 percent said religion fragments society (figure 6.2).

Only considering identity-related factors such as religion and ethnicity as sources of social disintegration would be misleading, however. A closer analysis of the responses in the survey showed that youth also highlighted structural divisions around class, caste and power relations. These were often specific to particular communities or regions. For example, 19.7 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils from the Northern Province pointed to caste as the most divisive factor (table 6.1). Indian Tamil youth noted the rural-urban divide, while Sinhalese youth in the South identified class and politics.

Despite the preoccupation with ethnic politics during the last several years, other factors contributing to divisions underscore the importance of understanding how different elements come together to position people differently and hierarchically in society. While ethnicity is a fundamental source of stratification, the combination of ethnicity with factors such as class, caste and sector (rural, urban or estate) is what really determines a person’s position in life. In other words, even a person from a minority ethnic group can have the advantages of class, caste and political and/or social connections. Similarly, a person from the Sinhalese ethnic majority without the advantages of class and political connections could experience marginalization. The various

![Figure 6.2: Ideas about the most divisive factors varied by province](image)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1: Ideas about the most divisive factors varied by province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Province</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reason</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural/urban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not divided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

factors producing different forms of division and social exclusion therefore need to be fully considered in reconciliation and social integration efforts.

**Language remains a barrier**

Language has been a volatile issue in Sri Lanka since independence. The Sinhala Only Act in 1956 was a turning point in this debate, an attempt to give the Sinhala language its due place and displace the dominance of English. But it resulted in the politicization of language linked to ethnic identity, Sinhala being the native language of the majority Sinhalese, and discrimination against minority communities. For example, minority communities found it difficult to find employment in the public sector, an area they had previously dominated.

As the medium of instruction in education switched to vernacular languages, schools became separated based on whether they were Tamil or Sinhala language schools. Only a few larger, mainly private schools were able to provide instruction in both. The linguistic separation between ethnic communities became more entrenched with fewer opportunities to learn each other’s languages or to interact with each other. The Official Language Policy of Sri Lanka, enshrined in the Constitution, attempts to address this issue. It recognizes both Sinhala and Tamil as the national languages of Sri Lanka, while English serves as a Link Language. The Government has taken several initiatives accordingly, such as establishing a dedicated department under the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration to facilitate implementation of the constitutional provisions.

These initiatives need to be fully supported, as the National Youth Survey 2013 reflects several gaps. For example, Sri Lankan youth continue to be largely monolingual: 79 percent of Sri Lankan Tamil respondents assessed their Sinhala speaking skills as poor (figure 6.3). Indian Tamils were more confident, with 52 percent saying their Sinhala speaking skills were good, as did 42 percent of Moor youth. Ninety-seven percent of Sinhalese youth said their Tamil speaking skills were poor. Despite the Official Language Policy and concerted efforts to teach the national languages and English in schools, Sri Lankan youth continue to primarily feel comfortable only in their mother tongue.

The link between language competencies and interaction between ethnic groups is evident in the fact that Indian Tamil youth respondents, the most confident among the minorities in their Sinhala language skills, were the most likely to have friends from other ethnic groups; 85 percent said they had a close friend from a different community.

The confluence of multiple factors in causing exclusion and marginalization are apparent in analysing problems related to the English language. The inability to function in English is seen primarily, and in general terms, as a constraint in the job market. From a social integration point of
view, however, English can also be a polarizing factor, especially among youth who feel excluded or face discrimination due to their lack of fluency. Interviews with young people from all ethnic communities revealed that English is linked to the power of an elite class. The English-speaking minority, regardless of ethnic or religious identity, is seen as having privileges denied to those who speak only Sinhala and/or Tamil. Despite English being taught from grade 1 at school, most youth lack confidence in their English abilities. Those from certain socio-economic backgrounds end up with little hope of social mobility, including through better jobs in the private sector.14

That this lack of confidence is due to factors other than simply being able to master a different language is evident. English is linked with a certain upper-class lifestyle and cultural demeanour, which places many constraints on how youth approach it. The perception is that even if a person is able to learn the language, unless they also possess the social and cultural capital associated with it, the advantages of mastery will be denied. Lack of confidence in English language skills is thus as much a reflection of feelings of exclusion as an assessment of actual competency.

You must have the ability to come forward without being scared. It is the literate sector of the population who must come forward. We all learn the same thing. Once you think you are not as literate as others, you do not come forward. That should not happen. People don’t come forward because they don’t think they have the capacity. So they remain backward.

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

This perception needs to be seriously addressed, since it is a barrier to teaching and learning English. The difficulty lies in its deep roots in Sri Lanka’s socio-cultural context, reflecting an entrenched feature of colonial history.15 Despite Sinhala and now Tamil being considered national languages, there is no doubt about the continued influence of English. The language problem, in short, is highly complex.

Ensuring that people can function in a vernacular language of their choice while also having competence in the link language of English has been the official policy of successive recent governments. The current government has concerted efforts to promote all three languages. But the general population has yet to see necessary changes. Despite the department established under the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration to advance the language policy, financial and human resources need to be committed at least for the Bilingual Administrative Divisions that have been gazetted, and for critical service delivery units such as police stations, hospitals and schools. Initiatives identified in the draft 10 Year Action Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka could be expedited.

Figure 6.4: Youth said interaction among different groups has risen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Indian Tamils</th>
<th>Moor</th>
<th>Sinhala</th>
<th>Sri Lankan Tamil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>34.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>53.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interaction among ethnic groups has improved

Among all respondents to the National Youth Survey 2013, 72 percent said there was now more interaction among ethnic groups than previously (figure 6.4). For youth who had friends in other ethnic groups, 77 percent said that there was more interaction.

Sinhalese youth were the least likely to have friends from another ethnic group, with only about 46 percent saying that they had a friend from a different community. This compares to just over 59 percent of Moor youth and nearly 66 percent of Sri Lankan Tamil youth. These responses mark a significant improvement since the National Youth Survey of 1999/2000, where only 5 percent of Sinhalese youth, 14 percent of Sri Lankan Tamil youth and 22 percent of Muslim (Moor and Malay) youth had a friend from another ethnic group.16

Since the end of the war, a number of initiatives have encouraged interactions among youth as part of facilitating social integration. Several ministries, such as the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, and the Ministry of Education; international and local non-governmental organizations; United Nations entities; schools; and youth organizations, such as the Girl Guides Movement, have orchestrated youth exchanges among different parts of the country.17 Since the early 1990s, the education system has introduced changes in curricula and integration activities. These steps to build bridges, though small, clearly recognize the need for improved understanding among communities, but there is not enough evidence of their sustainability and impact.

Youth-led reconciliation efforts show how youth value interaction and building understanding (see box 6.2). These initiatives could do more to engage youth at different levels. Although they currently reach out to those at the grass-roots, they are conceptualized and led by youth from more cosmopolitan, urban backgrounds. The extent to which they impact a cross-section of youth could be better explored.

**BOX 6.2: YOUTH LEAD THE WAY TO RECONCILIATION**

"Hate has no place in Sri Lanka" – Mohamed Hisham, co-spokesperson, Rally for Unity

Rally for Unity is a network of youth volunteer organizations aimed at bringing ethnic harmony, reconciliation and peace to Sri Lanka, mainly through digital campaigns. "Hate has no place in Sri Lanka" was the theme of a rally held in Colombo in 2013, where youth were largely mobilized through networking on social media.

The rally aimed at spreading the message that everyone wants to live in peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. Leading up to the rally, a website circulated slogans and instructions on how to participate. Text messages (SMS) were sent to all volunteers in the network. Advertisements and various print and electronic media publicized the event.

More than 500 people took part, including politicians from across the political spectrum, professionals and volunteers. Youth volunteers uploaded videos online using their mobile phones. The day was heralded as a genuine success.

Another example of a youth organization is Sri Lanka Unites, led by young professionals in Sri Lanka and from diaspora communities. It works through Sri Lanka Unites clubs in various districts, organizing events in schools and communities to engage youth in debate and dialogue on issues of social integration. It also fosters exchanges among youth from different parts of the country.

The group's website states: "As the next generation moves into leadership, we, the youth of Sri Lanka hold the future of our country in our hands. In this critical period of transition for the country, we have the opportunity to replace a culture of divisiveness and conflict and be a voice for change; for hope and reconciliation. The Sri Lanka Unites movement represents this choice of our nation's youth, from ethnic and religious groups, from across the country, to rise up and provide a new voice."

Source: www.srilankaunites.org

Youth want to bridge differences

Among National Youth Survey 2013 respondents, 68.5 percent stated that young people were more aware now about the right to be treated equally and without discrimination. This is a positive signal,
since it shows that youth see equality as key to social integration and their role in promoting it. They also demonstrated awareness of how challenging it can be to bridge differences in a pluralistic society.

It is difficult to think positively about social integration. When people have language and religious problems, they only associate with those who have the same attitudes or knowledge. Poor people don’t mix with rich people. If a person with knowledge is poor, that person is not taken seriously. Even if you know it’s a wrong thing, people behave like that. Even if they know the right thing, they behave in that way because they listen to people who they think belong to their own group.

Young Woman, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

Respondents from all communities agreed on banning organizations inciting hate on the basis of ethnicity and religion. Youth also felt that political parties based on ethnic or religious identity should be forbidden.

Sri Lankan Tamil youth said that implementing the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission was a major part of improving social integration. Its report notes, among other issues, the importance of language, the de-politicization of public institutions, reinforcement of law and order without interference from political authorities, and initiatives to address the suspicion and mistrust between communities. While lauding the government’s commitment to infrastructure development after the end of the war, the report stresses ‘soft’ initiatives as well. More than 50 percent of National Youth Survey 2013 respondents agreed that strengthening development activities in areas lagging behind was important, but highlighted sustained interactions among groups.

Figure 6.5: The majority of youth agreed that infrastructure development fosters social integration

The government has focussed on infrastructure development as the primary tool for reconciliation and social integration, based on the premise that improving access to basic facilities and facilitating mobility would lead to communities feeling less isolated and excluded. By and large, survey respondents supported this notion, with 60 percent agreeing that infrastructure development helped increase social integration and reduce disparities between different parts of the country. Around 13 percent disagreed (figure 6.5). Notably, around a quarter of those surveyed said they had ‘no idea’. There were no significant differences among ethnic groups. Youth were divided when asked if the government is spending enough on assisting vulnerable communities: 39 percent said more could be done, while 37 percent were positive about the government’s role.

**BOX 6.3: COMMUNITIES MAKE MUSIC TOGETHER**

The Music Project was inspired by El Sistema of Venezuela, which uses music to build communities. The project attempts to create ‘orchestral communities’ between children in the North and South of Sri Lanka, working in the districts of Kurunegala and Mullaitivu. Children learn music as a part of their afterschool activities and recently performed in their first concert.

Source: www.musicprojects.lk
as among the other requirements for reconciliation (see boxes 6.3 and 6.4). Sri Lankan youth clearly want to move beyond identity politics and towards equitable development.

Youth from all communities need to understand the contents and importance of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission Report. The fact that Sri Lankan Tamil youth highlighted implementation while youth from other ethnic groups did not suggests that the latter may not understand the centrality of the war in the lives of the former. As noted in the report, being able to acknowledge and discuss the war, its consequences and its impact on all young people is integral to reconciliation and social integration.

**BOX 6.4: TURNING TO THE DIASPORA TO HEAL DIVISIONS**

Sri Lanka’s 26-year civil war ended in May 2009 with a military victory for the government. The war is over, but the task of securing long-term peace is just beginning. Rebuilding the economy and infrastructure is important. But so is healing divisions between people and creating equal economic opportunities, giving the chance for all Sri Lankans to play a role in their country’s future.

Communities living abroad—the so-called diaspora—can sometimes fuel violent conflict in the countries of their origin through their financial and ideological support to different parties to the war, and they can by the same token promote peace, reconciliation and development. In the case of the Sri Lankan conflict, some voices from all sections of the diaspora were seen as having contributed to polarisation between and within ethnic communities, hampering attempts to find alternative ways of addressing the issues.

In January 2011, International Alert along with the Royal Commonwealth Society, took a group of second-generation British Sri Lankans and two British parliamentarians to visit Sri Lanka. The group travelled across the island to meet with a cross-section of politicians and civil society representatives. This visit helped them improve their understanding of the complex realities on the ground and challenged their misconceptions. And it initiated an alternative dialogue in Sri Lanka itself on the potential post-war role the diaspora could play, an issue on which there had been little discussion thus far.

This was possible because post-war Sri Lanka offers new opportunities for people of all ethnic origins to get together to address their divisions. But the diaspora has been as badly divided by the conflict – if not as badly hurt – as the country itself. Before any dialogue can take place between them and Sri Lanka’s political and civil society, significant steps have to be taken for dialogue within the diaspora communities themselves.

To address this, Alert adopted a dual approach of working in Sri Lanka and in the UK, to improve understanding of the impact and significance of the diaspora on Sri Lanka’s post-war reconciliation and development. The initial aim was for the diaspora communities to improve their understanding and awareness of post-war issues to then engage in constructive dialogue with people in Sri Lanka, to identify and work on areas of common interest.

The starting point was therefore an extensive period of trust-building. Alert worked with community leaders and people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, and with civil society and politicians both in the UK and Sri Lanka to share their experiences of post-war realities. Opportunities were provided for groups to meet “the other”, to test out and challenge their perceptions in a safe, constructive environment. This process was underpinned by the first exchange visit in 2011.

Working with the One Text Initiative, a Sri Lankan-based research and dialogue group, Alert initiated a dialogue with young, first-term Sri Lankan parliamentarians on the significance and role of the diaspora in Sri Lanka’s conflict history and their potential in building a long-term peace. Sri Lankan politicians and civil society representatives visited the UK in December 2011 to meet with representatives from the Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese communities in the UK. The visit helped to confront the perceptions held in Sri Lanka of the diaspora and their interests. This week-long encounter led to considerably changed perceptions of the people involved, leading them to believe that the Sri Lankan communities abroad can play a strong peacebuilding role within Sri Lanka.

In future, Alert plans to build on this work, looking to consolidate the engagement with second-generation Sri Lankans in the UK and political actors in Sri Lanka, to strengthen activities that support economic and political reconciliation.

Other major components of reconciliation include the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants. Soon after the war, the then Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights prepared the National Framework Proposal for the Re-integration of Ex-combatants into Civilian Life in Sri Lanka. This identified several steps such as disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration.29 The Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, under the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Prison Reforms, was responsible for the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants who surrendered to the armed forces after the end of the war.

According to government reports, most ex-combatants have been rehabilitated and returned to their homes and communities.21 A major focus was on providing former combatants with education and skills,22 but their ability to use these skills depends to a large extent on how well their local communities have recovered economically and can generate employment opportunities. As experiences in other countries have shown, former combatants face many challenges when reintegrating. In Liberia, for instance, ex-combatants were feared by their communities, found it difficult to find gainful employment and had little support to rebuild their lives after demobilization.23 Families and communities as much as former combatants therefore require assistance to facilitate reintegration.24 Rehabilitation also needs to be closely linked to post-war reconciliation, since the underlying animosities that gave rise to conflict need to be eased so they do not re-emerge.

Society looks at us in the wrong way as people from rehabilitation centres frequently visit us for inquiries. Since we joined the armed groups at an early schooling age, we could not follow our education properly. Therefore there are no good job opportunities. Even though people like to give us jobs, they get discouraged due to the on-going inquiries about us. As we were frequently visited by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and police, people think that we are trouble makers.

The main problem we face is economic problems; we need financial assistance, guidance—there is no one to guide us to uplift our lives, to give us guidance on job opportunities and how to get some financial assistance needed for our jobs.

Focus Group Discussion with ex-combatants in the Northern Province

Schools and families: channels for engagement

Focus group discussions and the National Youth Survey 2013 revealed that youth have very definite ideas about what could further social integration and post-war reconciliation. They identified two important channels to engage youth: educational institutions and the family.

One of the causes of social disintegration, according to young people, was the selfish nature of human beings. Youth were highly critical of parents and families for encouraging selfishness, characterized by the pursuit of individual success and material well-being, which they considered barriers to social integration. They referred to an awareness of and sensitivity to other people as essential to ensuring that people bridge differences. In contrast, the pursuit of material well-being blinded people to the values and habits that might bring them together. Youth said they have high ideals about the kind of society they want to live in, but felt that adults and social institutions, in their pursuit of selfish interest, do not encourage these, and in fact contradict youth ideals.

Mothers and fathers run behind money. Although they provide every material comfort for their children, they are not integrated with their children. The bond between children and parents is weak. I go to homes to give tuition to children. Children talk about their daily things with me. They don’t have the opportunity to discuss these things with their parents. It is important to think about these things. Parents are educated and do good jobs and they provide their children with everything. But they are not really close to their children. They think if they give their children everything they will get to a good place. But that only develops one side of the children. One day these children will not have the capacity to even understand something about a person who is working for them. They do not have a sense of social integration to even understand something like that.

We tend to think only about ourselves in Sri Lanka. It is a kind of a selfish attitude. We are not living in an environment that teaches us to help everyone. We may help our family but not others.

Youth participants, Focus Group Discussion, Sabaragamuwa Province

Education is key in advancing reconciliation and social integration, as confirmed by youth, and
recognized in the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, the National Policy Framework for Social Integration and the National Youth Policy. Education is one of the three key pillars, along with ethics and empowerment, in the National Policy Framework for Social Integration. Its potential to both promote social integration, and reinforce stereotypes and divisions underlines the need to review curricula from the vantage point of reconciliation and social integration, particularly in Sri Lanka as a post-colonial state struggling to build a collective identity.

Sri Lankan governments since the 1990s have endorsed the link between education and social integration. The Education Reform proposals of 1997 explicitly included a component on “Values Education and National Integration,” towards ensuring that teaching and learning advanced a sense of justice and fair play, irrespective of differences of caste, creed and class. Since the 1990s, changes have been made to curricula, such as the introduction of civic education. In 2008, a national policy on social cohesion and peace education was prepared.

Extracurricular activities in schools have been initiated to build bridges between communities, generate dialogue and debate on social cohesion, and foster interaction. Language teaching has been an important intervention, with the strengthening of teaching both national languages, and English as the Link Language. Under the Higher Education for the 21st Century project, universities are implementing various programmes to promote social cohesion.

While the National Youth Survey 2013 showed positive changes in attitudes to social integration compared to previous surveys, youth still noted room for improvement. Recent events in the Southern Province, where Muslim communities came under attack, have underlined that radical extremist groups still can incite violence. This raises question about the effectiveness of various programmes and policies in actually changing attitudes and behaviours.

Exploring this issue can start with examining some of the contradictions in education between its more progressive elements and the less palatable outcomes of various policy interventions. Sri Lanka’s success in increasing access to education and making it a strong source of social and economic mobility cannot be denied. But the record in promoting understanding among different groups, pluralism and respect for diversity is more problematic.

The majority of schools remain segregated by language, stemming from the politics of colonial education, when British colonial governments, who had the most impact on the education system, established English language schools mainly run by missionaries. Sinhala and Tamil language schools made available to the masses were distinctly inferior. This dual system created an English-educated elite and a large number of others excluded from prestigious jobs and positions. Further, in response to the dominance of the Christian missionaries, growing Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim elites established their own schools. A consequence was relatively rigid separations in education based on language and religion even after independence.

According to the last School Census conducted in 2008, only around 5 percent of schools offer mixed medium instruction. This effectively means that school children learn in a strongly mono-cultural environment, with limited opportunities to be exposed to other cultures, languages and religions, except perhaps through an extracurricular activity, a lesson in a textbook or a special event. The most effective way of promoting understanding is through everyday exposure to and engagement with diversity, but this is not facilitated in the education system.

While it could be difficult to establish multicultural schools in areas where the population is largely from one ethnic community, even in highly diverse areas, such as the Western, Eastern and Central provinces, schools are largely segregated by medium of instruction. In higher education, not all subjects are offered in all three languages. Certain faculties, such as medical and engineering, teach only in English. Other disciplines, such as the arts, segregate students based on language of instruction. Ironically, the greatest student body
diversity today is in the few surviving, now privately run schools originally established by the Christian missionaries and among the rapidly growing international schools.

Efforts have been made to reform curricula, but actual changes need to be closely considered. The teaching of history, for example, has been criticized for focusing on a particular Sinhalese Buddhist idea of the nation. Several attempts to ensure that history textbooks are more reflective of the diversity and plurality of Sri Lankan society have not met with great success. Minority cultures are under-represented or depicted as those who came as invaders or visitors to the country. Teachers from minority communities have remained largely uninvolved in textbook preparation. Textbooks in other subject areas reflect similar issues.

The influx of private educational service providers at different levels has added another layer. Students who attend international schools and private higher educational institutes are taught in English and follow a different curriculum from the one in the national education system. They are basically prepared for examinations outside the country, such as the London O/Ls and A/Ls. Because they teach in English, these institutions cater to all ethnic groups, and have a far more diverse student population and much broader curriculum than the national system. But they also reproduce socio-economic inequalities. The privileges and advantages of those educated in English language schools in colonial times are now being reproduced in the international school system.

Previously, state universities provided space where all groups congregated. But the growth of private higher education has meant that state universities are now almost exclusively for those who come through the state education system and cannot afford private universities locally or abroad. While the establishment of private institutions is justified on the basis of expanding opportunities, the consequences in terms of dual educational structures with differing degrees of privileges mirroring broader inequalities have not been fully considered.

Contradictions in gender norms

Sri Lankan women have been agents of war and peace. The women’s wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam gained much prominence for its role in suicide bombings. Many of the women recruited to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were adolescent and young, and were restricted from maintaining any contact with their families or entering into marriage. Women also serve in the armed forces in various capacities. The situation of former female combatants who returned to often hostile communities and were forced to conform to ‘traditional’ female roles at odds with their militarized past has yet to be fully addressed.

Women have often been portrayed as the major victims of the war. For instance, the numbers of women-headed households and widows have increased; both issues have received considerable attention. In 2012, women headed 23 percent of households, or 1.2 million in total. The stigma associated with widowhood and remarriage has often placed these women, many of whom are quite young, under severe stress. Human rights organizations have also pointed to the vulnerabilities of displaced women.

Women have also been in the forefront of campaigning for peace. They organized a Mothers’ Front in the North and subsequently in the East to protest against alleged human rights violations. In the late 1980s, a Mothers’ Front in the South drew significant attention to disappearances during that period. Women’s civil society organizations actively advocated for peace and a negotiated end to the conflict.
The cultural role of women, as those primarily responsible for reproducing and nurturing the 'nation', 'culture' and 'tradition', has also meant that women who came before the public gaze were subject to surveillance and sometimes even ridicule and humiliation. In recent times, women at non-governmental organizations have been criticized for breaking traditions and accused of promiscuous behaviour. This new conservatism has reinforced the view that women should be confined to their 'traditional' roles. That is, that even when they participate in the public sphere, they should do so in conformity with the ideals of 'proper' womanhood, as chaste, virtuous and docile mothers, daughters and sisters, exerting their influence on their men folk without compromising on their femininity. Even within educational institutions, including universities, this ethos remains influential.

Policy perspectives: understanding all the issues

As a country emerging from many years of war, conflict and violence, Sri Lanka faces diverse challenges in managing post-war reconciliation and social integration. As discussed in this chapter, many initiatives are in place. A dedicated Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration is responsible for implementing a variety of policies and programmes, in collaboration with other ministries and government institutions working on education, women and child development, economic development, human rights, and so on. These moves provide a solid framework, but progress will depend as well on a careful, continued examination of the root causes of conflict, accompanied by appropriate responses.

Reconciliation and social integration need to be firmly grounded in principles of justice, equality and non-discrimination, and a recognition that many factors may combine to cause social division. So far, the focus of many policies and programmes has been on improving relations between ethnic communities, which are complex, shaped by the colonial period and post-colonial nation-building. Every ethnic group in Sri Lanka has a sense of grievance with regard to the sharing of resources and opportunities. During the colonial period, the majority Sinhalese felt a keen sense of discrimination and believed that colonial rulers favoured minority communities. Attempts to redress these feelings after independence resulted in the politicization and dominance of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the marginalization of ethnic minorities.

Some sources of conflict and grievance cut across ethnicity, however, such as language, the politics of patronage, class differences, gender, caste and religion. Policies and programmes now need to consider links among all of these issues. As discussed in the chapter on political participation, youth rebellions have erupted largely from feelings of exclusion and discrimination based on multiple factors. That these rebellions eventually morphed into nationalist movements indicates the political contingencies of a time when political parties mobilized voters around ethnic identity.

Education is key for promoting reconciliation and social integration among youth. But the very structure of the education system has not been conducive to these goals. It can even be described as a site that reproduces many factors preventing integration. For instance, the mono-cultural environment of most schools; the implicit and explicit messages contained in school textbooks; and the reproduction of social hierarchies through the distinction between state and private (and international) educational institutions have been inimical to reconciliation and social integration. In such a situation, reconciliation and social integration activities become an 'extra' or a 'special event' that does not have a lasting impact. The challenge is to ensure that values of mutual respect, tolerance and appreciation of diversity become part of the everyday experiences of Sri Lankan youth. This requires firstly the recognition of the consequences of all forms of nationalism and a commitment to values of pluralism.
The recent emergence of religious tensions in Sri Lanka highlights the critical nature of reconciliation and social integration, and sadly, the relative failure of efforts up to now. That a country bruised by over three decades of war is suddenly confronting the possibility of another source of tension is unfortunate to contemplate. What these events show in particular is that the root causes of grievances in different communities have not been sufficiently addressed. The continuing sense of grievance makes it possible for extremist and opportunistic groups to mobilize people against each other. The many factors engendering division, mistrust and suspicion call for greater attention.

Although Sri Lanka is generally regarded as a country that performs well on gender equality, cultural norms still restrict women’s participation, especially in the public sphere. The war affected women, especially those who are young, in various ways, underlining that reconciliation needs a strong gender focus. Women’s movements have been active at the grass-roots level on many issues. But recent gender-insensitive statements made by government officials on sexual- and gender-based violence and women’s roles in the public sphere, among other issues, have stirred much concern among women’s organizations. Sri Lanka’s gender equality gains need to be protected and extended, not squandered. A robust dialogue on how ‘culture’ is sometimes used to constrain women is necessary for meaningful movement forward.

The perspectives expressed by young people in the National Youth Survey 2013 and focus group discussions give hope for social integration. They appear to want a more altruistic, just society. Their grievance is with adults and the institutions aroundthem, which from their point of view are barriers to achieving that kind of society. With no lack of policy initiatives in this area, what is required now is an examination of how basic institutions, particularly in education, public administration, law enforcement and the justice system, reinforce inequality and hierarchy. An essential complement to transforming these institutions would be consideration of how the values of reconciliation and social integration, such as social justice, equity, non-discrimination and re