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Engaging IDPs in Sri Lanka: a Buddhist approach

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A Buddhist Sri Lankan NGO provides an example of how endogenous faith-based civil society organisations can help mobilise IDPs in owning and defining strategies for their own protection.

The rhetoric concerning protection of internally displaced people (IDPs) often focuses on top-down, international and/or state-led protection mechanisms. The 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and other more recent documents such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's 2010 Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons emphasise the international community's responsibility to promote 'protection' and 'durable solutions' principally by means of national programming, with the participation of additional actors, including IDPs, as appropriate. An emphasis on state-led IDP action agendas does not consider seriously that those most affected by displacement could serve as leaders in designing and implementing their reintegration efforts, including being actively included in the process of defining what concepts of 'protection' and 'durable solutions' mean.¹

An example of a faith-based NGO working to empower IDPs to take part in framing and organising themselves in addressing issues that concern them is the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka. In recent years, Sri Lanka has suffered from many events causing displacement – including the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, a long civil war and recent large economic development projects. Sarvodaya works through a small number of national units and hundreds of legally independent organisations, called Shramadana Societies, which operate at the village level to address post-conflict development concerns through a Buddhist spiritual framework of mindfulness based on the concepts of *sarvodaya* (awakening of all) and *shramadana* (sharing of labour).

The movement seeks to bring together politics, economics and faith in a development

approach grounded in village-level democratic participation, non-violence and a belief that diverse ethnic and religious groups can together improve the nation's quality of life. Sarvodaya works for and with Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu groups.

Power and protection

One of Sarvodaya's key initiatives is *Deshodaya*. *Deshodaya* is a Buddhist term that suggests spiritual liberation from individual and unequal socio-economic limitations in order to build human potential. The programme employs mindfulness and 'awakening' to define 'protection' and 'durable solutions' in ways that help villagers, especially individuals who have been disempowered by their displacement, to recognise the power dynamics at play in local, national and international arenas, how these affect their lives and how they can use this recognition to understand the dominant discourse that underlies the power dynamics (and change it).

Villagers are encouraged to think critically about power and how it is enacted at the international, national and local levels; to create regional, district and village-level *Deshodaya* forums and groups to lobby and work with the government and international organisations; and to promote individual and community-level action that generates a bottom-up understanding of peace, development, post-conflict reconciliation and, most importantly for displaced individuals, protection. National *Deshodaya* forums bring villagers together – including IDPs – to learn about national and international actors responsible for policies that affect their lives. Participants are encouraged to identify where they themselves can intervene and act with others in seeking

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change. Between the start of its community empowerment programme in early 2010 and May 2011, the initiative reached 500,000 individuals in 245 villages in Sri Lanka, many of which had large numbers of IDPs.²

Sarvodaya's 'political awakening' unit helps IDPs to register their group legally as a civil society organisation; these entities then become the mechanism through which displaced individuals at the village, district or regional level can come together to discuss and plan 'protective' action, while looking for opportunities for advocacy in national and international discussions. An example of forum-inspired IDP participation and advocacy concerning protection and durable solutions occurred in the eastern, war-affected district of Trincomalee, in which a Deshodaya unit successfully lobbied public transport authorities for additional services; adequate public transportation allowed returning IDPs to access the employment market and gain job security. The initiative also allowed children to enter schools in Trincomalee town and permitted families to reach better urban health-care facilities. Meanwhile, in Jaffna after the official end of the conflict, Deshodaya members joined together to promote protection for child IDP returnees by improving pre-school facilities and raising money for teachers' salaries. Similarly, in the western district of Puttalam, where there are many IDPs, a village-level Deshodaya group spoke in public forums to raise awareness of child protection issues faced by recently returned displaced families.

Deshodaya forums led by village leaders, including IDPs, have resulted in otherwise marginalised populations becoming recognised as participants and leaders in conversations concerning their protection. By creating forums in which IDPs assume responsibility for developing their own path forward, the Deshodaya groups are not pushing a faith-based protection agenda, nor are they arguing that government and international organisations should not be involved in protection for IDP communities. Rather, they are contending that displaced Sri Lankans of all faiths should have the right and the possibility to participate in protection programmes and to define and lead those initiatives in tandem with government, international and other civil society organisations. So, in addition to calling into question who is defining what protection means, IDPs are now also questioning how current protection initiatives are designed and implemented.

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1. See Nancy Fraser's 2010 *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* in which she provides a framework that endogenous faith-based NGOs can adopt to facilitate and catalyse a process of IDP agency.
2. Sarvodaya Shramadana Partner Coordination Unit's 2011 *Final Report: Community Empowerment for Peace, Reconciliation and Development (CEPRD)*.