THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM: SARVODAYA’S INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This article examines strategies to foster pluralism employed by a development non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the context of civil conflict. Through an examination of the development philosophy and Buddhist affiliation of Sarvodaya, a Sri Lankan NGO, it discusses both the accomplishments and limitations of the organisation’s philosophy in terms of engaging Sri Lanka’s multiple ethnic groups. The article distinguishes between inclusive and pluralistic approaches to development and peacebuilding, arguing that pluralism provides a better foundation from which to develop effective programmes in societies experiencing or transitioning from conflict. It highlights the internal and external challenges that Sarvodaya has faced in its efforts to develop true pluralism, and offers recommendations for overcoming them.

Introduction

Since 1981 Sri Lanka has been embroiled in a civil conflict between the Sinhalese-controlled government and the militant Tamil group, the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE). The origins of the conflict can be traced to British colonial governance structures, under which the Sinhalese felt that Tamils enjoyed a disproportionate percentage of government positions and had greater access to education. When the Sinhalese gained majority control of the government after British rule had ended in 1947, they developed governmental policies that sought to shift the balance in favour of Sinhalese. This led to the creation of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956. The Act attempted to make Sinhala the only official language of government and severely limited opportunities for university education and federal employment for Tamils. Sinhalese majoritarian nationalism has been termed ‘chauvinism’ (De Silva 1999) because of attempts to control not only language and access to higher education, but also development and land redistribution schemes.

In the post-colonial state, ethnic identities and alliances have been consolidated and manipulated by both the government and the LTTE to perpetuate a sense of inequity and support ongoing conflict. Despite several attempts at peace negotiations, including a negotiation process brokered by the Norwegian government in 2002 and 2003, the two groups have yet to negotiate an agreement that will lead to stability and peace, and 2005 has seen escalating violence, with targeted assassinations of both military and political figures by the LTTE. The tensions between...
the government and the LTTE have also impacted Sri Lanka’s Muslim population, which has been the target of violence in both LTTE and Sinhalese areas, and has been marginalised from political negotiations and discussions about power sharing and governance.2 Conditions of conflict and the sense of pervasive fear and mistrust they evoke make it difficult for NGOs to maintain normal operations, let alone undertake peacebuilding activities to help heal social wounds and redress power imbalances. These very real structural and ideological challenges discussed above provide a background in which efforts to address or change intra-organisational culture are particularly challenging; this must be kept in mind as Sarvodaya’s effort to engage minority groups is discussed below.

Many Sri Lankan NGOs work to address both development and conflict resolution from the grassroots in Sri Lanka, but no NGO is more active throughout the country than Sarvodaya. Founded in 1958, the organisation has initiated projects in thousands of villages across the country, covering health, sanitation, and construction of schools and wells to peace dialogues and cultural exchange programmes. Sarvodaya has attracted the interest of scholars and development practitioners because of its distinctive philosophy that defines development as transformation of both the individual and society. Grounded in Buddhist precepts of ethical behaviour and incorporating Buddhist concepts of spiritual growth, Sarvodaya’s development philosophy nevertheless seeks to engage Sri Lankans from all religious and ethnic backgrounds, presenting its philosophy as one that breaks down barriers between groups and supports ‘one human family’ without regard to racial, ethnic, or religious difference (Ariyaratne 1996:234).

In the diverse ethnic and religious environment of Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya’s Buddhist affiliation is of central importance to this case study. Sri Lanka’s population is made up of Sinhalese (74%), Tamil (18%), and Muslim (7%) ethnic groups (Muslims are both an ethnic and religious group), with very small populations of Veddha, an indigenous group, Burgher and Malay (less than 1% combined) (Swan 1999:8).3 Tamils are predominantly Hindu with a minority Christian population, although the LTTE is secular (Trawick 1999). The majority of Sinhalese are Buddhist, although there is a minority Sinhalese Christian population. Buddhism in Sri Lanka is often referred to as ‘Sinhalese Buddhism’, pointing to the role of religion in Sinhalese nationalism (Dharmadasa 1992; Little 1999). Sinhalese chauvinists have used the Sinhalese-Buddhist identity to support violence in various ways. Despite Buddhism’s philosophical commitment to non-violence, a small but influential minority of Buddhist monks has been involved in discriminatory political campaigns, supporting the Sinhala Only Act as well as endorsing and participating in acts of violence against Tamils (Dharmadasa 1992; Tambiah 1992). In the context of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, Sarvodaya’s claims to value diversity to engage all ethnic and religious groups must be rigorously and critically examined.

After briefly discussing Sarvodaya’s development philosophy, this article reviews some of the current theories of diversity and pluralism, including a discussion of the distinction between an inclusive as opposed to a pluralistic approach to religious and ethnic diversity (Eck 1993; Khuri 2003). It then discusses the impact of Sarvodaya’s universalistic, Buddhist philosophy on the organisation’s ability to engage all religious and ethnic groups, including the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil and Muslim minorities. The article contributes to a growing body of literature on religion and pluralism (Griffen 2005; Khuri 2003) and participates in an emergent discussion linking theories of pluralism to the practice of
development NGOs. It offers a critical examination of an NGO that seeks to meet the needs of diverse constituents but is constrained by its affiliation with the religious and ethnic majority in a country experiencing ethnic conflict. This case study provides a context for development workers and NGOs seeking to improve their own approaches to managing cultural and religious diversity.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka in 2002 and 2003, when the author worked with and studied Sarvodaya at its national headquarters in Moratuwa, south of the capital, Colombo, visiting district centres and villages throughout Sri Lanka. In-depth interviews were conducted in four villages in the Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts in the hill country of central Sri Lanka.

The hill country was selected as a research location because of its multi-ethnic population and the strength of the Sarvodaya district leadership, which helped to ensure that interviews could easily be arranged in local Sarvodaya villages. Individual villages were selected in consultation with Sarvodaya staff, based on the desire of the researcher to conduct interviews in villages with varying ethnic compositions. In total, 112 individual interviews and four group interviews were conducted in four villages: one Tamil community, one Sinhalese village, and two multi-ethnic villages. Fifty-five participants were female (49%) and 59 male (51%). Fifty-four of the participants identified as Sinhalese (48%), 39 Tamil (35%), and 19 Muslim (17%). Sarvodaya staff at the district level and at the national headquarters were also interviewed. Research was conducted with the assistance of a Tamil translator who was fluent in Sinhalese, Tamil and English.

Some of the limitations of this study are related to the nature of qualitative research, in which conclusions are based on a close examination of discourse and practice in one or a few locations. For an organisation like Sarvodaya, which uses the metaphor of ‘10,000 villages’ to describe the breadth of its work in villages across Sri Lanka, it would be difficult to conduct widespread qualitative research that would encompass the entire organisation. The conclusions reached about Sarvodaya’s approach to diversity are limited, being based on experience within a single district in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the author believes that the lessons learned from observation on a small scale are valuable. Although Sarvodaya’s practices vary from village to village and from district to district, local findings can contribute to an understanding of Sarvodaya’s development discourse and the way in which this discourse impacts engagement on the ground. Such an approach has been used by other researchers such as Joanna Macy, who wrote *Dharma and Development* (1983) after she had lived for several months in a Sarvodaya village in southern Sri Lanka. This article builds on previous studies, however, by emphasising interviews with village-level participants; a recent book on Sarvodaya (2004) written by George Bond was based on interviews conducted primarily with national and district level Sarvodaya staff. Through an intimate, local examination of Sarvodaya’s practices vis-a-vis diversity, this study uncovers the critical importance of vigilant self-criticism on the part of development NGOs operating in the context of conflict.
development initiatives, and organisational structure around the needs of each group can NGOs contribute effectively to peacebuilding and development.

**From Exclusivism to Deep Pluralism: A Review of Theoretical Approaches to Managing Diversity in Society**

Scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including religious studies, philosophy, education, and anthropology, have become increasingly interested in how societies can and should address diversity of religion, ethnicity, race, ability, gender and sexual preference, among other forms of identity and difference (Griffen 2005; Connolly 2005; Grant 1997; Greenhouse & Greenwood 1998). Khuri (2003:57) cites globalisation, immigration, rapid demographic change, and the fear of losing local culture and tradition as sources of a ‘global identity crisis’ that have led to an increasing focus on society and pluralism. Much of the discussion of pluralism currently resides in the fields of political philosophy, religious philosophy, and political science, rather than development literature. These disciplines have examined pluralism and tolerance as theoretical concepts, and have applied theories of pluralism to analyse how states manage diversity. Several of these concepts of pluralism are profiled below, and the distinction between inclusiveness and pluralism is then applied to Sarvodaya’s grassroots work in Sri Lanka.

**Inclusivism**

Inclusivism acknowledges the presence and truth of other religions, but seeks to interpret and experience religious plurality or diversity through the lens of one’s own religion.

Divinity scholar Diana Eck (1993) distinguishes three approaches to addressing religious diversity: ‘exclusivism’, ‘inclusivism’ and ‘pluralism’. The exclusivist response denies the validity of other forms of religious expression. Inclusivism acknowledges the presence and truth of other religions, but seeks to interpret and experience religious plurality or diversity through the lens of one’s own religion. Pluralism goes beyond this perspective to acknowledge that not only do multiple religions exist, but that we are stronger in our diversity than we are in our singularity.

Eck’s tripartite categorisation is only one of many ways of conceptualising responses to diversity. Others have focused specifically on the different forms that pluralism can take, distinguishing, for example, between ‘false’ and ‘true’ (or ‘authentic’) pluralism (Khuri 2003), ‘superficial’ (or ‘shallow’) and ‘deep’ pluralism (Griffen 2005), and ‘pluralism’ and ‘radical pluralism’ (Voice 2004). Khuri criticises what he calls ‘false’ pluralism, noting that states and organisations often operate within a framework that ‘predefines and delimits the range of values and choices’ and therefore is not truly pluralistic (Khuri 2003:65).

Griffin (2005:24) distinguishes between ‘identist’ pluralism and ‘differential’ pluralism. Identist pluralism holds that all religions are oriented towards the same religious object and the same end, or the same type of ‘salvation’; differential pluralism holds that different religions promote different ends. Both Khuri and Connolly point to the way in which a pluralistic approach can make decisive action on the part of the state or organisation more difficult. Connolly states that pluralism requires ‘the mobilisation of a majority assemblage rather than a unified nation’ (2005:9), which suggests a collaborative framework for decision-making. Khuri discusses pluralism as opening space for ‘significant differences in opinion, irrespective of one’s ethnic identity or socioeconomic standing’ (2003:60), suggesting that pluralism extends deeper than the level of religion or ethnic group to encompass creativity and difference at the individual level. Connolly concludes that despite
the challenges of developing pluralism, ‘pluralism provides the most humane and promising agenda to pursue, even as we encounter strong pressures against it’ (2005:10).

Although these discussions differ in how they define and discuss the various forms that pluralism can take, each offers distinct challenges to the notion that pluralism can be captured in a simple definition or can be translated easily into policy at the state or organisational level. At the same time, they suggest that organisations working in diverse societies – and particularly organisations engaged in peacebuilding or conflict resolution programmes – must pay close attention to the way that organisational philosophies define and structure participation in particular ways.

Pluralism connects to development through efforts that gained currency in the 1980s and 1990s to make development more participatory and accountable to the constituents it served (Jennings 2000). According to the theorists discussed above, deep pluralism requires loosening our knowledge claims to allow multiple truths, worldviews, or ‘salvations’ to co-exist and inform one another. In this sense, pluralism is key to development, for how can we expect true participation if we do not make equal space for the divergent worldviews, perspectives, or cultural realities of all participants in development programmes? In the Sri Lankan context, where the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority often makes claims to speak in the interest of the minority, an emphasis on pluralism is key to overcoming unequal relations and building capacity for peace. However, Sarvodaya’s strong Buddhist affiliation keeps it from being deeply pluralistic despite its attempts to incorporate other religions in its philosophy and practice.

The Importance of Religion in Sarvodaya’s Development Philosophy: Buddhism, Gandhi and ‘the Awakening of All’

Sarvodaya’s development philosophy has been documented extensively by Macy (1983) and more recently by Bond (2004), but a short introduction is necessary to understand the organisation’s relationship to Buddhism as well as the influence of other religious and spiritual traditions on its philosophy and practice. Sarvodaya’s work is rooted in the belief that culture, or a shared sense of traditions and beliefs, and spirituality, or an orientation towards a higher purpose and meaning, are basic human needs alongside food, housing, health care etc., and must be integrated into development work. Although Sarvodaya undertakes conventional development projects such as building wells, schools, roads, and more recently, making computer technology available at the village level, these projects are conducted in a way that emphasises certain moral and spiritual elements of behaviour which allow the individual to ‘awaken’ to his or her full potential.

Much of the moral, cultural, and spiritual foundations of the Sarvodaya philosophy are drawn from Buddhism. For example, the principles of social conduct that are taught at Sarvodaya society meetings are a reinterpretation of Buddhism’s Four Divine Abidings: metta (loving kindness), karuna (compassion), mudita (sympathetic joy), and uppeka (equanimity or developing a personality that is unshaken by praise or blame). The Four Divine Abidings are considered essential in awakening the individual personality (Bond
These principles, which are integral to Sarvodaya’s development model, are taught to Sarvodaya members from all religious backgrounds.

Despite an emphasis on Buddhist philosophy, Sarvodaya’s leadership has looked to non-Buddhist cultural and religious traditions to help develop some aspects of the organisation’s philosophy and methods. A.T. Ariyaratne, Sarvodaya’s founder and president, travelled to India to learn about Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence from Vinoba Bhave, one of Gandhi’s disciples. The name ‘Sarvodaya’ comes from the Gandhian term meaning ‘the welfare of all’, representing a society based on non-violence, self-reliance and truth. Ariyaratne gave this phrase a Buddhist reinterpretation to mean ‘the awakening of all’ (Ariyaratne 1996:vii).

Meetings and gatherings at the village, district, and national levels open with prayers from all different religions present, and district and regional centres often display religious symbols such as statues, posters and icons from various religions. Ariyaratne claims that Sarvodaya has always emphasised the religious rituals of minority groups in family gatherings and events, stating, ‘If Muslims are 15 in a crowd of 1,000 they do the Muslim prayer first. Then Buddhists go last, because they are the majority, followed by group meditation. That way we show the minority that we respect them’ (Interview, 2 June 2003). While such symbolic gestures are important, other, more structural aspects of Sarvodaya suggest limitations to this approach, despite the organisation’s efforts to be respectful and inclusive.

Barriers to Pluralism: Developing Cultural and Religious Understanding

Unlike some development organisations and arguably the development field at large, Sarvodaya undertakes development programmes which recognise the importance of cultural and spiritual expression and their links to personal and social development. Sarvodaya’s main technique for bringing ethnic and religious groups together is shramadana, or shared labour, which usually involves physical projects like constructing a road, a village school or community centre. ‘Through shramadana we come together. We drink tea from the same cup,’ a villager explained. Other Sarvodaya programmes that bring people together are peace and cultural initiatives in which religious and cultural differences are acknowledged, but which emphasise the oneness of Sri Lankan society and global humanity. Peace programmes always feature prayers and symbols from all religions present, but often use Buddhist meditation to engage participants in relating to and envisioning peace.

Several villagers explained that they chose to join Sarvodaya specifically because of the organisation’s emphasis on building relationships between the different ethnic and religious groups. Most villagers interviewed emphasised Sarvodaya’s willingness to ‘help’ people of all ethnic groups as evidence that the organisation did not favour any particular religion. A villager in a mixed ethnic village explained, ‘Sarvodaya helps all religions. When they were choosing families to build houses for in this village, first they built a Tamil house, then a Sinhalese house, and then a Muslim house. They don’t show any preferences.’

Although villagers and Sarvodaya workers were unanimous in saying that Sarvodaya is fair in its attempts to ‘help’ villagers of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, in practice Sarvodaya
programmes are not always conducted in a way that encourages equal participation of all groups. Although Sarvodaya’s large district-level gatherings usually involved participants from all three ethnic groups, at the village level Muslims were less likely to participate in religious and cultural programmes, or if they did participate it was mostly as spectators. Of the 19 Muslims interviewed, 10 said that they had attended Sarvodaya cultural events as audience members, but had not participated; the other nine had not attended the cultural events at all. When pressed as to why they chose not to participate, many responded that they were too busy with their livelihoods or that they participated in religious and cultural events at the mosque, but not in those of the village as a whole.

One of Sarvodaya’s primary village-level development initiatives is the construction of pre-schools and the provision of training and support for pre-school education. In multi-ethnic villages, this presents a challenge in terms of offering instruction for both Sinhalese and Tamil native speakers. In one multi-ethnic village, although there was significant interest from the Muslim community for a Tamil-medium pre-school, no Muslims were enrolled because the language of instruction was Sinhalese. Officially Sarvodaya pre-schools are supposed to recognise and celebrate all religious rituals and holidays. In this village, however, the emphasis of the pre-school was on Sinhalese culture. The teacher described the religious and cultural programme in the following way: ‘On Poya days we take trays of flowers to the temple. Every December we do Kandyan dances and Sinhalese songs.’ She explained that when Muslims were enrolled in the school, they participated in Sinhalese songs and cultural programmes.

Other interviews revealed that another issue for Muslims in this village was that of access to Sarvodaya infrastructure. A Muslim villager explained that he would be more likely to use the Sarvodaya village bank to start an account if it were closer to the Muslim area of the village, stating, ‘The Muslim village is in the middle – that side is Tamil, that side is Sinhalese. The pansila (Buddhist temple), bank, and pre-school are all on the up side (Sinhalese area). If there was a bank or pre-school on this side, Muslims would take more interest.’ The issue of village geography is a common challenge in Sarvodaya villages, partly due to close ties between Sarvodaya and the Buddhist sangha, or community of monks. Many of Sarvodaya’s village facilities are on parcels of land donated by monks living near the Buddhist temple, and therefore are often farther from areas where minorities live.

In addition, many Muslims at the village level and at the national headquarters voiced the opinion that the majority of Sarvodaya workers did not fully understand their religion and culture. A Muslim woman who worked at Sarvodaya’s headquarters felt that she had faced a great deal of misunderstanding about Muslim traditions in her work with Sarvodaya, particularly around her decision to cover her hair and her dietary restrictions. She explained, ‘Sometimes boys might see my neck and say, “Oh, you are a very beautiful lady, why are you covering yourself?” They don’t understand that this is not a barrier for me, it’s a source of protection for me’ (Interview, 29 April 2003).

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Sarvodaya’s senior leadership acknowledges that it has to do more work to understand how best to work with Muslims, but also emphasises that many of the barriers lie outside of Sarvodaya. Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, executive director of Sarvodaya, stated that he believed that Muslim culture was more ‘inward looking’ than Sinhalese and Tamil culture, and that this was the source of the difficulty in engaging Muslims culturally in
Sarvodaya’s work (Interview, 29 April 2003). A leader of a Muslim organisation that had collaborated with Sarvodaya voiced a similar opinion, stating, ‘Sarvodaya is not so successful in the Muslim community. They try to teach Sarvodaya philosophy. Our community, being conservative, doesn’t accept this. We should develop common programmes with an organisation like this that teach both Sarvodaya philosophy and Islam’ (Interview, 15 May 2003). Although this statement can be viewed as both a self-critique in its categorisation of the Muslim community as ‘conservative’ and a criticism of Sarvodaya’s ability to collaborate, it is also a commentary on Sarvodaya’s insistence that Buddhist philosophy is universal. Sarvodaya might have greater success engaging Muslims if the organisation allowed plural voices, philosophies, and world views to co-exist instead of presenting a unified philosophy emphasising oneness over particularity of religious expression.

Although these interviews revealed that Sarvodaya faces particular challenges in engaging Muslims, additional research into Sarvodaya’s village-level engagement of minorities could help to clarify the extent to which these challenges are rooted in Sarvodaya’s approach or whether they stem from a historical tendency of the Muslim community to keep their cultural and religious practices separate from participation in economic and political spheres (Ali 2003). Muslims have made a particular effort in recent years to participate in peace negotiations and power-sharing discussions. This might create an increased opportunity to deepen engagement as Muslims seek opportunities for collaboration and greater participation in development and peacebuilding initiatives. One way to address some of the challenges discussed above might be to provide diversity training for leadership staff at various levels (Sarvodaya headquarters, district centres, and village societies, for instance) to help build awareness of the perspectives of minorities and to demonstrate the ways that small interactions and small decisions – such as the decision to hold meetings at the village temple instead of a more neutral location – impact the ability of Sarvodaya to be truly pluralistic and responsive to minority needs.

The Politics of Language: Inequities between Sinhalese and Tamil Language Use

The use of language as a barrier to political participation was one of the roots of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, taking its most extreme form when President Bandaranaike created the Sinhala Only Act in 1956. In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese language has served to support the creation of Sinhalese unity (de Votta 2001). Whereas in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, the Sinhalese were divided between ‘low-country’ and ‘Kandyan’, a distinction based on geography and defined by style of dress and Sinhalese dialect, today the conflict has consolidated Sinhalese identity into a linguistically based monolithic group (Valentine 1996). Although contemporary language policies acknowledge the multi-lingual reality of Sri Lanka, Tamil and Sinhalese speakers are educated separately and have few incentives or opportunities to learn other languages.

At the village level, the politics of language was apparent in the interviews conducted. Nearly all Muslims interviewed spoke Sinhalese as a second language (89%), and some spoke English as a third language (28%). For Tamils the number of those who spoke
Sinhalese as a second language was also high (59%) with 23% reporting English as either a second or third language. As a group the Sinhalese were less likely to speak a second language. Only 22% spoke Tamil as a second or third language, and 28% spoke English as a second or third language (Interviews, February 2003 - June 2003). These statistics are linked to the history and population of the hill country region, in which the Sinhalese have been the majority group and in which the Tamils have traditionally made up the estate worker class. They are, however, indicative of a larger problem: broadly speaking, Tamil and Sinhalese know little of one another’s languages and have difficulty communicating across ethnic groups. Multi-ethnic areas have the greatest incidence of second and third language learning; in the predominantly Tamil districts in the North, many fewer Tamils speak Sinhalese than in the hill country. The same applies in the largely Sinhalese districts in the South.

Although Sarvodaya recognises the obvious need for Sri Lankans to be able to understand one another in order to resolve conflict, there are several areas in which the organisation may need to re-examine its relationship to language. Nearly all of Sarvodaya’s training at the headquarters level is conducted in Sinhalese, and – as observed on several occasions and confirmed through interviews – although training is translated, Tamil speakers generally sit at the back of the room to listen to the translation on headsets, and rarely participate in discussions or ask questions. According to one Tamil leader at Sarvodaya headquarters, ‘Tamil speakers have come for 20 years of training in Sinhalese and they don’t learn anything. Even if there is a translator, there is no opportunity for questions and no relating’ (Interview, 14 February 2003).

At a practical level, the language gap has led to a sense on the part of Tamil speakers that they do not enjoy the same status in decision-making about development priorities and projects as do Sinhalese speakers. The assumed predominance of the Sinhalese language has meant that Tamil speakers constantly listen and engage in development trainings and planning sessions in translation, one step removed from the immediacy of the discussion at hand. Tamil speakers who work at headquarters and know English as a second language recover some decision-making power, for much of the fundraising and project planning is done in English in consultation with the international NGO community in Colombo. The majority of native Tamil speakers within Sarvodaya, however, work at the district or village level, suggesting that the language gap is linked to inequities in the leadership structure, as discussed in detail below.

Sarvodaya has introduced crash courses in languages, but began with Sinhalese language classes for Tamil speakers, and has been slower to implement Tamil language classes, partly because of low demand. A Sarvodaya administrator explained, ‘Sinhalese think, “This is a Sinhalese country. Tamils should learn our language because we are the majority.”’

Sarvodaya could more effectively address the language problem in Sri Lanka by requiring that all Sarvodaya staff learn to speak a second language, by establishing a more effective language policy for Sarvodaya training (for example, alternating the language of instruction between Tamil and Sinhalese, or establishing break-out groups for discussion with a report back to the entire group), and by ensuring that all written communication is translated into both Tamil and Sinhalese.
The Majority Shall Lead? Addressing Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Leadership

Another barrier to achieving a truly integrated organisation lies in the predominance of Sinhalese leadership at Sarvodaya’s national headquarters. Although informal interviews suggest that village and district level Sarvodaya leadership largely reflects local demographics, at the national level much of the leadership is Sinhalese. All of the 26 department heads at the national headquarters listed in Sarvodaya’s 2000-2001 annual report were Sinhalese and only two members of the 24 staff leading Sarvodaya’s independent units were minorities (both Tamil). Since the report was published, staffing has changed somewhat (for example, a Muslim woman was appointed co-leader of Sarvodaya’s peace programme), but the report clearly indicates the need for a more inclusive leadership structure.

One aspect of the predominance of Sinhalese in national leadership roles in Sarvodaya relates to the organisation’s close historical ties to the Buddhist sangha and community of bhikkus, or Buddhist monks. Sarvodaya has worked closely with bhikkus for many years, establishing a formal advisory council of them and creating a training centre where monks are educated in Sarvodaya philosophy and community mobilising techniques (Bond 2004). In addition to the bhikku council, there is a Sarvodaya Executive Council which includes Catholic priests, but currently does not include either Muslim or Hindu leadership. Dr Vinya Ariyaratne discussed plans to restructure this council to make it more multi-ethnic and multi-religious, but felt that the nature of religious leadership is different for Hindus and Muslims than for Buddhists and Christians and that this has created barriers to participation, stating: ‘Imams and Hindu leaders are confined to the mosque or the shrine. Catholic priests and monks are involved in other spheres of life’ (Interview, 29 April 2003).

Ideally, village-level leadership of Sarvodaya societies should reflect the diversity of ethnic and religious groups present in the village, and should be drawn from all areas of the village. As one district coordinator explained, ‘If you have three communities, we ask villagers to select leaders from each. For example, the president might be Tamil, the treasurer Sinhalese, and secretary is Burgher. Each is from a different religious group.’ In practice, however, identifying and helping to build diverse leadership in village societies can be difficult. Even if Sarvodaya management emphasises the importance of diversity, it is up to the Sarvodaya district coordinators and divisional coordinators to ensure that this is practised at the village level. Many factors, including geography of the village, previously established patterns of leadership, and the daily routines of individuals and of specific ethnic and religious groups (for example, commuting to a garment factory or going to the mosque to pray at certain times of the day) impact the potential for involvement in Sarvodaya society activities and for creating a diverse leadership structure. In one research village, only two members of the 25-member Sarvodaya committee were Muslim, and Muslims did not hold any leadership positions in the society. A Muslim Sarvodaya member explained that this was because most Sarvodaya meetings were held on the ‘up side’ of the village where most of the Sinhalese lived rather than the ‘down side’ of the village where Muslims lived.

The leadership inequities have led to a somewhat top-down approach to development planning, as senior management at headquarters generates ideas and policy, and district-level leadership implements the projects. At the local level, Tamil leaders have significant autonomy and authority to implement development projects as they see fit, and although they are consulted in project planning for Sarvodaya’s major, multi-district projects, the final decision-making authority rests in the hands of the Sinhalese leadership at headquarters.
Addressing issues of diversity in leadership is complex, but there are steps Sarvodaya could take to encourage greater minority participation. A possible solution would be to require villages with ethnic and religious minorities to reserve leadership positions for the minority groups, which would increase the likelihood that some of the barriers to participation discussed above – such as the language medium of the Sarvodaya pre-school or the location of the Sarvodaya bank – would be addressed in Sarvodaya society meetings. Although national and district-level staff are largely aware of the need for balance and diversity in village leadership, as evidenced by the district coordinator’s remarks above, creating systems of accountability where leadership is regularly assessed and reported back to the national headquarters may also help increase minority participation. At the national level a clear priority should be to increase the number of minorities in senior leadership positions at Sarvodaya headquarters. Another goal might be to implement Dr Vinya Ariyaratne’s idea of increasing religious and ethnic diversity on the Sarvodaya Executive Council. Increasing the diversity at senior levels will introduce a new level of sensitivity to the experience of minorities in Sri Lanka, will create a greater commitment to language equality, and will allow Tamils and Muslims to feel that they have a greater voice in the development priorities and projects of the organisation. Pluralism at the leadership level also introduces a new diversity of ideas, experiences, and worldviews that can lead to greater creativity and insight in project planning and goal setting.

Universalism as Inclusivism: Sarvodaya’s Vision for ‘One Human Family’ in Sri Lankan Society

The distinction between inclusivism and pluralism discussed earlier, as well as the more nuanced discussion of different forms of pluralism, is useful in understanding Sarvodaya’s approach to religious and ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka. In particular, Sarvodaya’s assumption that Buddhist values are universal defines and limits the ways in which Tamils and Muslims participate in development and peacebuilding initiatives.

A report entitled Sarvodaya Among the Tamils, written in 1980, states, ‘Sarvodaya is for all. There is no particular brand of Sarvodaya for Sinhalese and another brand of Sarvodaya for Tamils and yet another brand for others. Sarvodaya is one and is common to all’ (1980:1). Although the report is dated, its discussion of Sarvodaya’s commitment to serving all ethnic groups is consistent with the organisation’s contemporary self-perception. Sarvodaya’s leadership maintains that Buddhism, which is credited as the main source of inspiration for Sarvodaya’s philosophy, is broad enough to encompass all religious ideals. As Ariyaratne (1996:234) states:

The non-Buddhist people have subscribed to the Sarvodaya philosophy of working for the well being or awakening of all from their religious perspectives. They participate as one human family in... [all of] Sarvodaya activities. This approach based on Buddhist teachings emphasises the oneness of human beings without any emphasis on factors that divide the community into fractions.
Because of its leadership’s insistence that Buddhism is a universal philosophy, offering the opportunity for all Sri Lankans to participate as ‘one human family’ in Sarvodaya’s activities, Sarvodaya can be characterised as inclusive and not deeply pluralistic. Sarvodaya’s inclusive approach has led to a number of accomplishments: it has engaged Buddhists and Muslims in development projects and in village societies, and has even developed support for its philosophy from Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. Interviews with Sarvodaya members of different ethnic and religious backgrounds in village societies and at headquarters revealed a broad belief in the inclusive nature of Buddhism. A Muslim woman working at Sarvodaya headquarters described her thoughts about Sarvodaya’s relationship with Buddhism in this way:

Actually, when I came [to Sarvodaya] I read all the books – it looks like a Buddhist philosophy. But when I understood about Sarvodaya after I had been here a while, I saw that all cultures are included in Buddhist philosophy and in Sarvodaya philosophy (Interview, 29 April 2003).

Despite Sarvodaya’s success in including majority and minority groups in its work, however, its inclusive philosophy has limitations. Because Sarvodaya’s philosophy is made explicit in society meetings, as discussed above, there is always the potential for language and terminology drawn from the majority religion to impede participation by adherents of other religions. Bond (2004) suggests that Sarvodaya is perceived differently by non-Buddhists (Christians, Muslims, and Hindus) inside and outside the organisation. Non-Buddhists employed by Sarvodaya tended to see the organisation as ecumenical and open to all religions, while Christians, Muslims and Tamil Hindus outside viewed it as Sinhalese Buddhist (Bond 2004:100). Interviews with Sarvodaya members and employees revealed differences of opinion as to whether Sarvodaya’s use of Buddhist language and terminology has created barriers to understanding and participation on the part of minority groups. In line with Sarvodaya’s inclusive approach, most Sinhalese Sarvodaya participants felt that the use of Buddhist terminology was acceptable because the same values – for example love, compassion, and kindness – can be found in other religions. Although some Tamil and Muslim members agreed with this perspective, several staff members who had worked closely with Sarvodaya’s leadership for a number of years felt that Sarvodaya could do a better job of incorporating the terminology of other religions, as well as explaining its Buddhist terminology. As one Muslim Sarvodaya worker explained, “We can say, “Tomorrow is bawanawa – come participate.” But they don’t know what is bawanawa – if we explain that it means meditation, they will participate. All religions have meditation. But there is a problem of understanding, since most of the terminology used is Buddhist.’

To the extent that Sarvodaya does incorporate pluralistic values in its philosophy, then, these can be said to be ‘identist’ values that mediate the ‘awakening’ process through Buddhist terminology, undermining the development of deep pluralism.

Although Sarvodaya has unquestionably contributed to the well being of Sri Lankans of all backgrounds through its development work, it has done so under the umbrella of a universalistic Buddhist philosophy that impedes the organisation’s ability to develop a truly pluralistic culture. Although Sarvodaya seeks to engage all Sri Lankans in its village-based development and peacebuilding programmes, an important first step on the road to pluralism, minority participants face challenges that often remain invisible to the organisation’s leadership, revealing and clarifying gaps between inclusivism and pluralism.
Conclusion

Many development theorists have written about NGOs as historical and political actors that can unintentionally support social systems of oppression in the larger society. This article presents a case study of how one organisation’s Buddhist affiliation impacts its ability to engage minority groups in Sri Lanka. Although Sarvodaya has worked hard to establish a development framework and create specific programmes that promote ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka, the organisation has not fully addressed the power relationships within its own structure that implicitly uphold the majority-minority relationships of Sri Lankan society at large. Sarvodaya’s inclusive – as opposed to pluralist – approach to its work with minority groups presents a barrier to deep engagement that hinders the organisation’s efforts at peacebuilding and participatory development.

Sarvodaya’s inclusive – as opposed to pluralist – approach to its work with minority groups presents a barrier to deep engagement that hinders the organisation’s efforts at peacebuilding and participatory development. Although an emphasis on unity, revealed through Sarvodaya’s ‘one human family’ approach, is not in and of itself a barrier to pluralism, Sarvodaya needs to develop a much greater capacity for critically analysing some of its own internal cultural practices before it can truly engage and empower Sri Lanka’s religious and ethnic diversity equally. As Grant (1997:25) notes:

Unity can be compatible with pluralist policy, provided the unity element is not seen simply as an automatic assimilation to the majority mode, but is conceived as something valid for the community as a whole; there may be such common ground, but the essential point is that it has been identified and thought through, not merely assumed.

This is not to suggest that a shift to a development philosophy and practice conducive to deep pluralism would be a simple task. Indeed, such an attempt would involve swimming upstream against prevailing cultural norms that have been promoted by both sides in Sri Lanka’s conflict. These norms are reflected in the majority role adopted unquestioningly by many Sinhalese, who may believe, for example, that it is natural for Tamils to learn Sinhala, but there is no need for a reciprocal movement to learn Tamil. The ability to be self-critical and identify negative values in one’s own culture is extremely challenging, as noted by Abu-Nimer (2001:693) in his discussion of the difficulty that participants in inter-religious workshops faced in identifying the ‘ethnocentric and exclusive’ values in their own religions. Additionally, as suggested by some of the scholars of pluralism mentioned in this article, deep pluralism is not a static condition or a clear end goal; rather, organisations seeking to adopt a pluralistic approach must constantly participate in open-ended dialogue with the different cultures, religions, and ethnicities they seek to engage. This is by no means an easy task for any organisation, but for NGOs operating in a situation of social conflict, it is particularly difficult. Still, despite the challenges and difficulties involved, Sarvodaya’s commitment to the idea of Buddhism as a universal philosophy must be critically examined before true pluralism can begin to develop.

Sarvodaya’s strategic plan articulates a vision of ‘a distinctive Sri Lankan national identity which accepts positive aspects of the growing global identity without losing its own character, and which still preserves and encourages individual and group uniqueness’, in which ‘the nation’s diverse religious and cultural influences would be reconciled and accepted’, and in which ‘members of all groups would speak each other’s language’ (LJSSS 2000:14). The author believes that the comments and suggestions above represent
strategies that could help the organisation achieve this vision. Even the very best organisations working to enact change at the grassroots level can easily overlook internal issues related to religious and ethnic diversity. It takes conscious effort and openness to change to move from an inclusive to a deeply pluralistic framework that will support peacebuilding at all levels of society and that will lead, in the words of Eck (1993:168), to ‘energetic engagement and dialogue with one another’. In countries experiencing ethnic and religious conflict, it is particularly important for grassroots organisations to systematically identify and seek to improve the ways in which they implicitly support the status quo of minority and majority power dynamics. A sensitive internal analysis, an openness to constructive criticism, and a willingness to change can help organisations operating in even the most complex political and social environments to build a strong, pluralistic culture that utilises diversity as a resource for social change.

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Endnotes

1 In September 2002 the LTTE dropped its demand for a separate state in peace negotiations with the Sri Lankan government. The negotiations, formally begun in February 2002, were interrupted in April 2003 when the LTTE withdrew because of the government’s handling of ‘critical issues’, including the continued presence of military and ‘high security zones’ in the Jaffna peninsula.

2 While Muslims have gained seats in Parliament and maintained a voice in politics since independence, they have been caught in the crossfire of the conflict, facing resentment and religious discrimination at the hands of chauvinistic Sinhalese and violence at the hands of the LTTE in the North and East as well as in some Sinhalese areas (Ali 2004). The most infamous examples are the LTTE’s expulsion of roughly 100,000 Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar provinces in October of 1990 and the massacre of more than 100 Muslims in a mosque in Eastern province in August of the same year (Ali 2004; McGilvray 1999).

3 The 2001 Sri Lankan census lists 81% Sinhalese, 9.3% Tamil, and 8% Muslim; this census, however, does not include large parts of the north-eastern region which is predominantly Tamil, including Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Batticaloa (Department of Census and Statistics 2001).

4 For many years development failed to take sufficient account of religion as both a source of meaning in people’s lives as well as a potential force for change. Recent literature has begun to reverse this trend and to examine the role of religion in development (Harper 2000; Eade 2002). However, little has been written about religious pluralism in a development context.

5 One of the language policies introduced after independence involved the separation of Tamil and Sinhalese speakers into different schools. Muslims, too, have separate schools supported by the federal government that follow the Muslim calendar and offer a special curriculum that incorporates Muslim history and culture. In some predominantly Sinhalese areas, Muslim families have chosen to send their children to Sinhalese-medium schools in order to gain fluency in Sinhalese language (Ali 2004).

6 *Poya* is a monthly Buddhist holiday to mark the full moon.
The Kandyan dance is a traditional Sinhalese dance form from a region which is known for its art and dance traditions.

Distinctions were made based on family surnames, which are generally indicative of ethnicity in Sri Lanka, although this method is not always reliable.

Independent units are incorporated separately, but are located near Sarvodaya headquarters in Moratuwa, share in Sarvodaya’s overall social vision and mission, and work under the broad framework of the ‘Sarvodaya Movement’.

References


