



ACTIVITY REPORT

Sri Lanka

Multi-stakeholder Dialogue on UPR implementation

22-24 August 2018



1. Introduction

On 22-24 August 2018, national UPR stakeholders participated in a series of follow-up activities in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Multi-stakeholder dialogue on UPR implementation, co-organised between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Civil Society Collective in Sri Lanka and *UPR Info*, brought together a cross-section of representatives from national and grassroots civil society organisations; government line ministries, Human Rights Commission (NHRI) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for a discussion on implementation of Sri Lanka's 3rd cycle UPR recommendations. On the previous day, civil society had convened for a preparatory meeting in which they updated their action strategy and suggested implementation plan as well as tailoring their approach for the dialogue. The events also encompassed a diplomatic briefing at which resident diplomats were informed about the outcomes of the multi-stakeholder discussion and next steps as well as a press conference. The purpose of the activities was to provide an incentive for inclusive and sustainable realisation of UPR recommendations in a context where civil society is recognised as a legitimate implementation partner.

The event was the culmination of a series of UPR activities undertaken by *UPR Info* and national partner organisations under the umbrella of the [In-country programme](#) for Sri Lanka (2017-2018).

2. Activity

2.1. Overview

On the first day, some 40 representatives from diverse CSOs and community organisations across Sri Lanka convened for a preparatory meeting ahead of the dialogue with the government. The aim was to fine-tune the thematic action strategies and corresponding implementation plans initially developed during the [Kandy workshop](#). To facilitate the task, attendees broke into their thematic working groups:

- Women's rights
- Rights of the Child
- Enforced Disappearances
- IDPs, Refugees and Returnees
- ESCR/ Plantation Community
- Freedom of expression/Association /Assembly
- Rights of the Disabled
- Sexual and Reproductive Rights
- Rule of Law

In the afternoon, Group Rapporteurs reported to plenary on the recommendations their respective group had prioritised to discuss with the government and reflected on how to tailor

their intervention strategies. The productive group work and energetic feedback session illustrated that CSOs were keen on positioning themselves as credible interlocutors and making the most of the interaction with the government.

The Multi-stakeholder Dialogue was opened by Mr. M.M Jaffeer, Additional Secretary/Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Jaffeer underscored the importance that the Government of Sri Lanka attaches to the UPR and highlighted their increased attention to the mechanism, referring to consultations with CSOs in the development of the National Report and the ongoing work of creating a National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up (NMRF). In line with the cooperative spirit of the UPR, he welcomed the unique opportunity presented by the workshop to bring together civil society and government line-ministries to identify practical solutions to joint implementation of UPR recommendations.

In the first session of the day, Ms. Nethmini Medwala, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offered the 75 participants an overview of the government's approach towards protection and promotion of human rights, and its strategy to implement 3rd cycle UPR recommendations. Ms. Medwala elaborated on the system in place for monitoring and implementing human rights recommendations, in which the National Human Rights Action Plan 2017-2021 and a NMRF constitute central building blocks. The establishment of the latter, she informed, is currently underway with the support of OHCHR. She emphasised that the government's human rights policy was underpinned by genuine willingness to interact with civil society organisations and that the realisation of human rights must be approached as a collective responsibility. Ms. Medwala stressed that the UPR process had offered many lessons learnt to the benefit of the government's responsibilities under the treaty body system.

The day continued with a presentation from Commissioner Ms. Ambika Satkunanathan, Human Rights Commission. In her intervention, Ms Satkunanathan discussed the role of the independent human rights body in the UPR process, and particularly its mandate to bridge national stakeholders in the implementation phase. She also addressed the different measures of support the Commission can extend to government and civil society organisations to optimise their engagement with the mechanism. Before lunch, Mr. Hans Fridlund, Programme Manager *UPR Info*, shared specific country-examples joint UPR implementation, referring to good practices including NMRFs; public databases; cooperation between national actors; mid-term reporting; and letters of cooperation.

The afternoon was devoted to practical group work. The thematic clusters from the preparatory day were joined by representatives from government line ministries working on the same area. The civil society-suggested implementation plans and action strategies served as a backdrop to the discussions. Government representatives provided input to progress indicators and deliberated on the range of actions necessary to implement recommendations. Conversations were conducted in a vibrant and positive spirit and proved the highlight of the week. Some issues were addressed in plenary as information was requested from other clusters. Several participants, from both government and civil society, testified that this was the first time that they engaged in a meaningful exchange with one another on human rights. The day was concluded with the adoption of a Letter of Cooperation in which participants committed to:

- ❖ Support participation of all relevant stakeholders in the implementation process of recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review, and other human rights bodies; and
- ❖ Hold annual multi-stakeholder meetings to assess implementation of UPR recommendations, and to identify solutions to obstacles.

On the final day, the *Civil Society Collective* and *UPR Info* organised a diplomatic briefing attended by Australia, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and OHCHR. The session commenced with a short briefing by *UPR Info* on Sri Lanka's UPR performance before voices from national civil society informed about the outcomes of the dialogue from the previous day. In a fruitful exchange, diplomats seized the opportunity to share their plans on how they will follow up on the recommendations they made to Sri Lanka and asked about current human rights challenges. The potential for synergy effects with human rights recommendations emanating from other UN human rights was also addressed.

A busy week concluded with a separate press briefing at which the *Civil Society Collective* and *UPR Info* briefed 15 media outlets on the UPR process, the activities which had taken place during the week and the pivotal role of journalists in the follow-up phase.

2.2. Achievements

The Multi-stakeholder dialogue on UPR implementation offered a launched a joint approach to implementation as well as it enhanced national ownership of the follow-up phase. That representatives from both civil society and government lauded the event as a landmark opportunity for increased cohesion amongst national actors amplified the commitment needed for a productive discussion. Comprehensive presentations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Human Rights Commission and CSOs along with the participation of OHCHR further contributed to an increased momentum.

The workshop succeeded in;

- ✓ Formalising collaboration between national actors in the process of implementing 3rd cycle UPR recommendations;
- ✓ Sharing good practices of cooperation in the UPR process between government and civil society by drawing on concrete country examples;
- ✓ Stressing the need for the establishment of a National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up as a critical tool for implementation of human rights recommendations;
- ✓ Creating an appetite among stakeholders for continuous follow-up activities including mid-term reporting in 2020;
- ✓ Ensuring gender balance amongst participants at the Multi-stakeholder dialogue on UPR Implementation (47% women; 53% men);
- ✓ Introducing grassroots organisation to their counterparts in the Government and the donor and diplomatic community;

- ✓ Informing the media about Sri Lanka's human rights commitments under the UPR and the role of journalists in the implementation process; and
- ✓ Adopting a Letter of Cooperation in which the Government of Sri Lanka and civil society actors commit to annual multi-stakeholder meetings to assess implementation.

2.3. Lessons learnt

Notwithstanding that participation of women in activities, and their contribution to presentations and panel discussions, have increased over the course of the activities that *UPR Info* have supported in Sri Lanka, additional efforts are required. Civil society groups, including grassroots organisations, should consider concrete measures to promote active participation of women in all parts of their human rights work, including involving them in decision making processes and leadership positions.

It will be useful to circulate training materials and relevant reports to participants ahead of future workshops. The role of Group Rapporteurs could be elevated to also include such tasks. A significant number of parliamentarians were invited to the Multi-stakeholder dialogue on UPR implementation but due to parliament being in session, they were not able to join. This approach must however be harnessed, and invitations should be extended to parliamentarians for upcoming events.

3. Way forward

It will be critical for the *Civil Society Collective in Sri Lanka* to formalise its structure and establish a secretariat. The creation of a functioning infrastructure will contribute to sustaining the UPR engagement of the coalition and increase its leverage *vis-à-vis* other stakeholders in the implementation process. To preserve its legitimacy, it will be of utmost importance that human rights groups working on various issues are included, that gender parity is achieved alongside representation from different communities and locations in Sri Lanka. The thematic working groups and Group Rapporteurs could constitute the backbone of the coalition as they have been active in the development of implementation plans and action strategies which provide guidance in the follow-up phase.

The government and civil society should remind each other of the commitment to conduct annual reviews of implementation levels as well as seeking consultations prior to developing mid-term reports.

4. Testimonies

The workshop demonstrated the need for regular dialogues between the civil society and other stakeholders, especially the state officials. It was also a great platform to understand the level of UPR knowledge among stakeholders and learn about the willingness of the government to implement supported recommendations. These insights were very helpful in order to strategize our future activities as civil society.

We will continue to closely monitor the next steps taken by the respective offices, especially the Office on Missing Persons and continue to communicate with all actors. Moreover, we will raise awareness among the victim communities about how they could utilise the UPR and recommendations to address their demands. In parallel we plan to share additional information with the officials who showed interest in learning and understanding more about the regional perspective.

Anushani Alagarajah, Senior Researcher
Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research



This was the first time a multi-stakeholder dialogue was conducted on the UPR in Sri Lanka. The event gave an opportunity to develop a partnership between civil society and government authorities which are responsible for implementation of UPR recommendations. We witnessed the approach of the government towards implementation of UPR recommendations which is an important aspect in working together. This was a new experience and will for sure assist CSOs to engage in follow-up activities with the government after the event. Another important element of this event was the ability to build groups of CSO members who work on the same issues as it will facilitate future collaboration.

The UPR process has built strong relations among a large number of CSOs in Sri Lanka and resulted in the creation of the Civil Society Collective. We intend to conduct annual follow-up meetings with the government in parallel to continue the thematic group work. In 2020 we expect to submit a mid-term report.

Priyalal Sirisena, Lawyer
Civil society collective in Sri Lanka



The coordination before and during the sessions and also arrangements made after the workshop such as the donor briefing is commendable. The participation of government was satisfactory. However, it would have been better if more high-level officials could have taken part during the interactive sessions. We noticed the absence of few key ministries. We strongly suggest the government to officially designate focal points who could take decisions on behalf of the government ministries. DOJF wishes to acknowledge the tremendous effort made by the leaders of the Civil Society Collective as well as UPR Info and for their role during the activity.

Sasanka Mendis, Programme Manager
Disability Organisations Joint Front (DOJF)



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Letter of Cooperation

Multi-stakeholder Dialogue on UPR Implementation

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's human rights record was reviewed for the third time on 15 November 2017 at the United Nations in Geneva, during the 28th session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review. At the review, 88 States made a total of 230 recommendations to Sri Lanka.

On 19 March 2017, the Human Rights Council's 37th session adopted Sri Lanka's Working Group Report on the Universal Periodic Review, and the Government accepted 177 of the received recommendations.

Within the UPR framework, cooperation is encouraged among all the stakeholders during the implementation of UPR recommendations, towards the advancement of human rights and freedoms. Therefore, the representatives from the Government of Sri Lanka and civil society present today came together for a dialogue and agreed on enhancing their mutual understanding and to discuss future collaboration for the implementation of UPR recommendations.

As a result of the dialogue, participants have agreed to pursue the following aims:

- ❖ Support participation of all relevant stakeholders in the implementation process of recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review, and other human rights bodies; and
- ❖ Hold annual multi-stakeholder meetings to assess implementation of UPR recommendations, and to identify solutions to obstacles.

Colombo, 23 August 2018



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