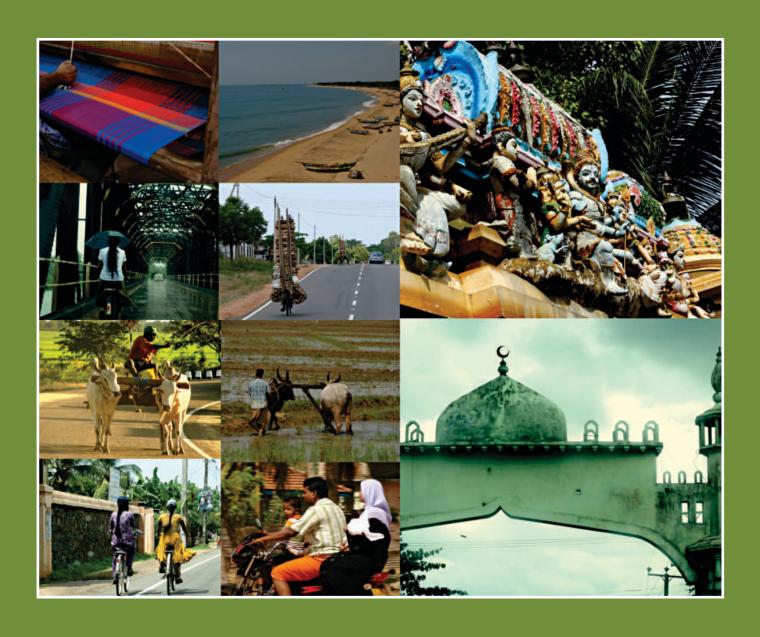**cepa**
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Ethnicity and reconciliation: The case of Batticaloa district

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Introduction

The end of the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, presents an opportunity for Sri Lankans to work together to move the country forward. The process of 'reconciliation' is seen as fundamental to make this happen. In its simplest form, reconciliation means re-establishing friendly relations, or settling a quarrel between two or more people. When we talk about social and political reconciliation there are varying definitions.

Staub and Pearlman (2001) and Staub and Bar-Tal (2003) define reconciliation as the mutual acceptance and changed psychological orientation of groups to each other. The conflicting groups are expected to recognise each others' humanity and develop a fresh, constructive relationship rather than define the future based on the past.

Reconciliation is not a stand-alone activity but a process with a goal. It is a *long-term* process with no quick-fixes in which pace cannot be dictated. It is a **deep** process involving changes in attitudes, aspirations, emotions and feeling, which cannot be rushed or imposed. It is also **a broad** process involving many people, including those who have suffered and those who have inflicted suffering (IIDEA, 2003).

Lederach, Kelly and Hamber (in Ramiah and Fonseka, 2006) developed a framework to understand the convergence of multiple processes that move a society to restoring fractured relationships and/or building new relationships in the context and/or aftermath of violence. The cornerstones of the framework are as follows:

- Acknowledging and dealing with the past,
- Building positive relationships,
- Significant cultural and attitudinal change,
- Substantial social, economic and political change to form an understanding of reconciliation.

Sri Lanka's civil war is largely seen as a conflict between the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (the LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government. In discussions on reconciliation, the fragile relationship between Tamil and Muslim communities is not always considered and this brief will explore the prospects of forging relationships between Tamils and Muslims, especially in the east.

This brief is based on a study conducted by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in the Batticoloa district of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, where Tamil and Muslim communities have a long history of balancing their differences and co-existing. The latest data from the Department of Census and Statistics (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012) shows that 72.6% of the population of Batticoloa are Sri Lankan Tamil, and 25.5% are Sri Lankan Moors. Sinhalese account for just 1.2% of the population. The study that formed the basis of this brief was a collaboration between CEPA, and the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE) at the University of Oxford and was carried out in 2010. Its objective was to gain an understanding of group based horizontal inequalities and their impact on development interventions and conflict in 2008-2009.

What created tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities?

The war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government led to the intensification of tensions that had been brewing for centuries between the Tamils and the Muslims. Since the 19th century, there have been debates as to whether Muslims are a separate ethnic group or a group that merely has a different religion. In 1885, Tamil leader Ponnambalam Ramanadan raised the issue of the ethnic identity of Muslims as a separate group that deserved separate representation[1]. McGilvray (2008) contends that an important characteristic of the eastern communities is the explicit interest of the Muslims to establish a non-Tamil identity or an identity based on the religion Islam which has shaped their ideas and beliefs, lifestyle and cultural norms. This was viewed negatively by the Tamil

community in the past, but was brought to the forefront when the conflict in Sri Lanka escalated.

In Sri Lanka's more recent history, Muslims supported the Sinhalese to gain political and commercial advantages over the Tamils, which made them vehemently oppose the LTTE demand for self-rule in the north and east (Imtiyaz 2008). The inclination of Muslim southern elites towards Sinhala political agendas is significant in this political economic context and seemed to have dominated the discourse and charted the history of events in the east. According to Ismail 1997, cited in Imtiyaz 2008 (p 408), *'Muslim political elites well before independence had succeeded in constructing an identity based on Islamic*

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[1] M. N. M. Kamil Asad, The Muslims of Sri Lanka under British Rule (New Delhi, 1993), p. 75. Cited in
http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/134_sri_lanka_s_muslims_caught_in_the_crossfire.pdf

faith to maintain a distinct group identity from the Tamils[2].
But evidence suggests that Tamil speaking Muslims in fact did support the Tamil cause in the earlier stages of the struggle. An International Crisis group report states that in the 1970s when the Tamil militant groups were mobilising, Muslim youth did in fact join them by taking up arms for a joint cause of a struggle against grievances of the minorities (International Crisis Group, 2007; Imtiyaz 2009, Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011).

In 1985, Muslim-Tamil relationships took a major turn for the worse, when a Tamil militant group attempted to extort money from Muslims in the east; this led to the first outbreak of serious communal fighting. The expulsion of Muslims from the north of Sri Lanka five years later in 1990 exacerbated the situation and in the east, violence against the Muslims increased with intermittent attacks on the Muslim community. An example of this violence was the killing of 103 Muslim men during Friday prayers in Kaththankudy in Batticaloa district. In 1990, in a two month period, it is estimated that 1,000 Muslims had been killed in the east by the LTTE. These acts of targeted violence resulted in Muslim youth either enrolling in the military or acting as informants to them.

The situation was further compounded by the tactics of the Sri Lankan government, who armed Muslim youth and involved them in vigilante activities against their Tamil neighbours, resulting in violent retaliations. The result of this sequence of events was the deepening of mistrust between the two communities. However, there are reports of humanitarian responses in the form of food and equipment from the Muslim community, led by mosque committees and Muslim businessmen, to support the large numbers of Internally Displaced Persons in 2007.

The east was 'liberated' in 2007 and Provincial Council elections were held in 2008. This and the end of war in the north in 2009, has changed the socio-political landscape of the Eastern Province considerably. The formation of the Tamil Peoples Liberation Tigers (TMVP - Thamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal) their political activities tinged with violence at times and their election victory has added to the tensions. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress has campaigned for the creation of a number of Muslim-majority town councils and administrative districts, which has led to the separation of former integrated or mixed divisions into two more ethnically homogenous ones, one for the Muslims and one for the Tamils such as in Kalmunai in the Batticaloa district. The International Crisis Group reported incidents of violence committed by armed groups in January 2007 in different parts of the Eastern Province, and the intimidation of Muslim businessmen. *Harthals*[3] from both groups demanded that the injustices committed by the different groups were addressed. The latter seemed to have succeeded in restoring some level of stability.

Is there any common ground to work from?

Whilst the two communities have been greatly divided during the conflict, Tamils and Muslims in the east speak a common language, share matrilineal clan structure and marriage patterns and similar customs and cultural practices. Historical socio-cultural interactions include inter-household visits, food exchanges and gift-giving relationships.

The acceptance and practice of a caste structure is one important cultural aspect that differentiates Tamils from Muslims. While the caste system for Hindus is articulated within a notion of untouchability (Silva et. al, 2009), the idea is inimical to Islam. However, Muslims in the Eastern Province, particularly Muslim landlords, seem to use the household services caste (*kutimai*) such as barbers, drummers and washermen. (McGilvray 2008) There also seemed to be a clear division of labour between the two communities with the Muslim community favouring business activities, and Tamils preferring to pursue education and formal sector jobs as a means of social mobility.

The CEPA/CRISE study showed that despite common features in culture and a common language, the two ethnic groups tend to interact within their own community. In the Eravur Pattu area of the Batticoloa District 44.7% of Tamils and 38.2% of Muslims stated that almost all their contacts were from their own ethnic group. More Muslims (56.9%) than Tamils (48.7%) stated that their perception of the other ethnicity has become more positive since the end of the war. This could be attributed to the cessation of violence between the two groups, and shows that there is room to leverage better relations between the two communities.

The traditional interactions that existed between the communities in the pursuit of livelihoods before the conflict have not changed. Farmers shared seeds,

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[2] http://temple.academia.edu/ARMImtiyaz/Papers/214574/The_Eastern_Muslims_of_Sri_Lanka_Special_Problems_and_Solutions
[3] The term *Harthal* refers to shutting down of businesses, shops, offices and schools with the objective of getting the attention of the decision makers to a certain demand.

technology and machinery for cultivation, and there was a high level of interaction at the various stages of paddy farming, such as cultivation, processing and marketing. In general, paddy lands are owned by Muslims while Tamils work in the land. But there are also Muslims who work in paddy lands owned by Tamils. Muslims in the Batticaloa district are predominantly engaged in the marketing aspect of paddy cultivation.

While the partnership in relation to livelihoods, generally seems to be equal and reciprocal, in some instances one community holds more power. For example, in the construction sector the contractors are mainly Sinhalese, the suppliers are Muslims and the labourers are Tamils. In the fishing sector of Batticaloa district, Muslims own large multi-day boats. Interestingly, a recent study done by CEPA concludes[4] that the conflict also shaped the interactions in the market, based on ethnicity. In the east, Muslims dominate the trade - buying and selling - because they were able to communicate in Tamil as well as Sinhalese, and as a result they enjoyed greater mobility through military checkpoints. CEPA's more recent work in selected areas of Batticoloa and Trincomalee, suggest that greater freedom of movement post war has led to more participation in economic activities for all three communities, Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese. Movement of labour for example can be a common ground for cooperation and coexistence.

What divides these communities?

The struggle for political power is one of the main dividers between the two communities. Power has been used inappropriately and insensitively creating increased vulnerabilities and tensions. A good example of the tensions caused as a result of politics was the appointment of a Tamil Chief Minister for the district in 2008, which led to the shooting of a Tamil politician. This shooting provoked violence between the communities. Political campaigns often use propaganda that highlights past wrongs of the ethnic groups thereby maintaining divisions between the communities and keeping the memories of past atrocities alive in people's minds. Jega (2002) argues that identity in itself is innocuous, but if used in a negative way to mobilise socio-political power to leverage limited resources, it can be extremely divisive. This is exactly what played out in the Eastern Province of Batticoloa; ethnic identity was used to leverage political support.

The other contentious issue is land. At present, large Muslim populations live in densely populated small land plots in the east. Kaththankudy in the Batticaloa district is one of the most densely populated Divisional Secretariat (DS) Divisions in Sri Lanka. As a result, most disputes arising between the Tamils and Muslims or Sinhalese and Muslims end up as a competition for limited land resources. On the continuously disputed borders of Kaththankudy and Arayampathi DS Divisions both Muslim and Tamil communities try to shift the boundaries and expand their territory by constructing community structures such as a Kovil or Mosque[5].

The ending of the war and return and resettlement of the internally displaced have also created tensions over the ownership of cultivable land, and some residential properties. Muslims in the east left the land during the war due to lack of access and the Tamils started using these lands, but now returning Muslim land owners are claiming their ownership. The current resettlement plan in the east does not seem to be considering these factors, and there is no proactive support from the government to resolve the land ownership related issues in the area.

Do perceptions play a role?

There is a compelling body of literature to suggest that perceptions are just as important as objective realities in effecting reconciliation (Stewart (ed.) 2008; Brass 1993; Diprose 2009, cited by Diprose, Abdul Cader and Thalayasingam 2010).

The quality, frequency and length of an interaction are important determining factors as to whether perceptions formed are positive or negative[6]. The CEPA/CRISE study showed that opportunities for formal or organised interactions between the two communities were low. The study further showed that the Tamil community in particular appeared to have fewer occasions to interact with members of the Muslim community. 49.3% of Tamils stated that all or nearly all of their work colleagues were from the same ethnic group as themselves. As can be seen in Table 1, only 28.9% of Muslims stated that this was their situation.

[4] Market study done for an International NGO
[5] Key Informant interview
[6] Varshney, A. 2002. Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Table 1.
How many people from your workplace come from the same ethnicity as you?

	Sri Lankan Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor
All or almost all	49.3	28.9
Greater than half	32.9	48.5
About half	9.3	17.2
Less than half	7.2	0.0
Almost none	1.3	5.4

(Source: Primary data CEPA-Oxford, 2009)

Table 2.
How many people from your social contacts come from the same ethnicity as you?

	Sri Lankan Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor
All or almost all	44.7	38.2
Greater than half	42.6	49.6
About half	8.9	4.1
Less than half	3.0	6.1
Almost none	0.8	2.0

(Source: Primary data, CEPA-Oxford, 2009)

From the data presented in Tables 1 and 2 it is clear that Muslims appear to have more opportunities to engage people outside of their community in both formal and informal settings, but their social interactions are less heterogeneous than their formal interactions.

What is not clear from the data is who they interact with outside their own group. Language is a limiting factor and as traders, the Muslim community tends to speak both Sinhala and Tamil, while Tamils largely communicate only in Tamil. Therefore, linguistic ability gives the Muslims an advantage in interacting outside their own group.

Table 3.
Your view of the other ethnicity has

	Sri Lankan Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor
Not changed	46.8	39.1
More negative	4.5	4.0
More positive	48.7	56.9

(Source: Primary data CEPA-Oxford, 2009)

In an effort to go beneath the veneer of politeness and also to test to what level people would be comfortable with in their intercommunity relations, the CEPA/CRISE study team asked the respondents if they would object to their

The CEPA/CRISE study also demonstrated that a similar trend could be identified in informal interactions. 44.7% of Tamils stated that all or almost all of their social contacts were from the same ethnicity as themselves, whilst only 33.2% of Muslims made the same statement (see Table 2 below for the summary of the data).

It would seem that the opportunity to interact with other ethnic groups on a more frequent basis has given members of the Muslim community better perceptions of the other ethnic group. 56.9% of Muslims compared to 48.7% of Tamils claim that their perception of the other ethnicity has become more positive (see Table 3 below for the data reported on this question). This positivity can also be attributed to the cessation of violence, which was a direct threat to lives and the relatively peaceful environment that is now widespread in the east.

Varshey (2002) suggests that higher levels of interaction lead to more positive perceptions of other ethnic groups. The CEPA/CRISE study appears to confirm this stance. If this is the case, then sustained efforts to improve interactions between the two communities could lead to better and more positive perceptions being created about each other. Thus, if perceptions play as vital a role as objective realities, these efforts would engender change in perceptions that would in turn lead to more cordial community relations.

daughter/sister/son/brother marrying someone from another ethnicity.

Even though Muslim respondents claimed to have higher rates of interaction (see Table 2) and also more positive perceptions (see Table 3) of the Tamil community, the vast majority of them (76.6% as opposed to 50% of Tamils) responded that they would object to an interethnic marriage in their family. Religion could be the main reason for members of the Muslim community being unfavourable to such unions.

Table 4. Summary of responses to the question: "would you object if your daughter/sister/son/brother is to marry someone from another ethnicity?"

	Would you object if your daughter/sister is to marry someone from another ethnicity?		Would you object if your son/brother is to marry someone from another ethnicity?	
	Sri Lankan Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor	Sri Lankan Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor
YES	50	23.4	50.4	23.4
NO	50	76.6	49.6	76.6

(Source: Primary data CEPA-Oxford, 2009)

Some ways forward

There are reportedly several organisations working to reconcile relations between the Eastern Province's three ethnic communities. There are organisations that work with clergy from all four religions practiced in Sri Lanka, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam; and others that work with different groups such as youth, fishermen or tradesmen. However, it appears that these efforts are not coordinated and often run in isolation. Better coordination and collaboration between these efforts would lead to stronger intercommunity relations and thus a stronger and more sustainable post-war reconciliation process.

The literature suggests that concentrated effort and time needs to be invested to rebuild trust in order to achieve positive interaction and reconciliation. The CEPA/CRISE study showed that greater interaction can lead to positive relationships, and it is important that the reconciliation process builds on this finding, by creating opportunities for interaction.

In particular, it is recommended that policy makers and practitioners encourage interaction between youth groups from both Muslim and Tamil communities. The Eastern Province has a generation of young people who have known nothing but war and conflict. Enabling these young women and men to interact in a multi-ethnic atmosphere could lead to their having a more positive attitude toward the 'other' and becoming 'agents of change' and 'future leaders' who can challenge the prejudices of the older generations.

It is also important that the media challenges some of the stereotypical perceptions and attitudes that lead to tension between the two groups. Since both Muslims and Tamils share a common language, and engage with the Tamil language media, there is an opportunity for that media to breakdown negative perceptions and attitudes.

The discourse suggests that reconciliation cannot take place without acknowledging and dealing with the past. In the specific situation discussed here, there is a high possibility that 'dealing with the past' or 'truth seeking' could result in 'opening old wounds', and refreshing past grievances that have become blurred. So truth seeking needs to be carried out sensitively and explored perhaps at a local level.

Potential challenges to the reconciliation process

It is not clear whether development plans for the east have considered the tensions that exist between the Tamils and Muslims. The risk of not considering this issue could result in upsetting the delicate peace that currently exists.

Certain government authorities view the reconciliation process with suspicion, thus all key actors in this field will need to actively seek to engage the authorities in the process. The buy-in of the government will be vital to the success of the process.

The number of actors involved in reconciliation need to coordinate their activities to ensure that efforts are not duplicated and that best practice is shared so as to maximise the chances of success.

Another complex area to focus on will be working with youth, as problems may present with mobilising them. Again caution will need to be exercised to avoid damaging the fragile equilibrium that exists.

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[7] Lederach et. al. in Ramiah, D.A. and Fonseka, D. (2006). Reconciliation and the peace process in Sri Lanka: frameworks, challenges and ways forward, Policy options for democratic reform. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm: Sweden.

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