

The Internet and Conflict Transformation in Sri Lanka

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The object of this paper is to give an overview of the impact of Internet and New Communications Technology in Track Two conflict transformation initiatives and NGO activity in Sri Lanka. The paper is not exhaustive, and much can be written on the subject. But what at the outset must be categorically stated is that ICT is not in itself a panacea for protracted ethno-political conflict. People create conflict, not technology. The peaceful and just resolution of conflict can at best be engendered and nurtured by ICT. In this light, it has to be remembered that the use of ICT by NGOs actively involved in conflict transformation processes in Sri Lanka have to be juxtaposed with their work in the field, where people-to-people contact set the agenda and foundation for future meetings online.

In general, the context of conflict resolution activities is being transformed by the easier and faster exchange of information made possible by the Internet. However, current theories of conflict resolution have not yet recognised the importance of these changes. Notwithstanding the general silence about this issue, the Internet has already changed the way that most peace and conflict resolution organisations operate. It is rare these days, even in Sri Lanka, to encounter a professional, voluntary or academic organisation engaged in conflict-related activities that does not make some use of the Internet, and have a strategy for the future that includes development of its use, even among organisations in areas where Internet access is problematic or sporadic. The applications of ICTs within these organisations fall into (at least) three categories. First, and most widespread, is email and other text communications. Second, the Web provides organisations with a medium for publishing and distributing large amounts

of information about their activities with much lower marginal costs than print media. Third, the Internet can be a powerful tool for gathering up-to-the-minute information.

It has to be remembered that in Sri Lanka, data communication facilities are limited to Colombo and its environs, the western province and the major provincial towns such as Kandy, Galle, Batticaloa, Ratnapura etc. Individual usage and to a great extent, access in the workplace, is tied heavily to social class and income. Internet access remains unaffordable for the majority of people, and cyber-cafes, though increasingly common, are still limited to urban areas. However, there are a few pilot projects currently being implemented to achieve island-wide coverage through VSAT technology.

For the last few years, the growth in Information and Communication Technologies in Sri Lanka has been rapid. At present, the number of websites that cater to the Sri Lankan diaspora as well as to the Sri Lankan public is on the rise with an emphasis on Sri Lankan content either in Sinhalese, Tamil or English. E-mail and Internet reached Sri Lanka at the end of eighties making her one of the first countries in Asia to use Internet.

And yet, the potential of the Internet for conflict transformation and resolution remains largely untapped in Sri Lanka, with a few notable exceptions. Sri Lanka still believes that the mere creation of website engenders the use of the Internet, and does not place an onus of educating the masses on how to best use the Internet. However, given these limitations, some NGOs are taking the lead in the creation of interactive website that provoke and stimulate online discussion and a sharing of viewpoints – an underpinning of classic conflict transformation.

One interesting example in Sri Lanka of an NGO using the Internet in the fulfilment of its mandate is the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR). Despite the availability of hardware and telecommunication facilities in Colombo and its suburbs not more than three women's NGOs in these areas had obtained email connectivity even by 1998. None had web connectivity. Consequently, CENWOR, with financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), initiated a project in 1998 to develop an electronic information network. Simultaneously,

CENWOR commenced the task of designing a web site, which also included information provided by the members. Training in the use of email was made available, technical support was given and the network members were regularly kept updated on the use of Internet based services. The web site was also up dated regularly. CENWOR also initiated a discussion list, which now has over one hundred subscribers. The CENWOR site is the only web site on Sri Lankan women and the discussion group the only feminist list in Sri Lanka.

The website of CENWOR (www.cenwor.lk) was conceived as one that would serve as an information source on Sri Lankan women. It is an interactive site and provides information on critical issues facing women, action taken by the government and other agencies on various issues, information of its network members, current events, a Notice Board, and an Opinion page. CENWOR programmes and activities, and publications are also included. The website has an integral discussion list to which one can subscribe to and contribute free of charge. The objective of the CENWOR initiative was to provide a communication platform transcending all types of boundaries to women and women's organisations striving to realise women's rights. It was expected that this initiative would have a good response given the cooperative endeavours within the NGO community. The project envisaged setting up communication links among the local, regional and international women's groups and individuals. Although initiated by CENWOR, it was to be a collaborative effort in achieving a common goal. Though much needs to be done, websites and discussion lists like CENWOR help the dissemination of viewpoints of particular importance and interest to women that in turn, inform and shape conflict transformation processes.

However, the CENWOR network is limited in membership and is more or less confined to those in urban centres. Network members still do not use even email as effectively as they should. There is tardiness in obtaining information on a regular basis and the email list subscribers are mostly recipients and not sufficiently active. The challenge for CENWOR in the future lies very much in animating online dialogue, where women's issues, inextricably entwined with conflict transformation and resolution, are discussed more openly. The *leitmotifs* of such online discussion could be then used to stimulate participants in real-world events.

Another interesting online experience is www.mandatethefuture.org. The project is designed to harness the power of Internet to the advantage of youth across the globe. Mandate the Future is a forum created and driven by youth. It gives them an opportunity to voice their views and concerns on global issues and address concerns and fears that in many cases affect communities and youth over vast geographical areas. The project seeks to involve youth in the policy making process and play a proactive role in shaping their future. Mandate the Future is the first online venture of Worldview International Foundation, a development organisation with an interest in ICT and development. For the Mandate the Future project, computer centres were set up and youth were encouraged to voice their opinion online. Mandate in its conduit of three sites organises discussions under seven broad categories - Poverty, Health (HIV/AIDS), Gender, Education, Peace and Democracy, Environment, and ICTs for Development. Every week MtF highlights new issues. Brief, multi-angled articles that stimulate debate and discussions are carried on www.ctrlaltesc.org or MtF's 'community area'. This is a highly interactive site powered by non-proprietary software. Approximately three thousand ICT disadvantaged youth in Sri Lanka participate on MtF through the Community Communication Centres established by WIF. The output of youth discussions at community level is the content-input for www.ctrlaltesc.org.

Mandate the Future plans to use the qualitative inputs in form of comments, stories and articles and the quantitative data generated through votes and polls on its sites to form the basis of MtF's advocacy efforts. Worldview and Mandate the Future envision creation of the 'Global MtF community' based on the merger of the grassroots and web based communities. Facilitated by multi-national and multi-lingual entities this shall be a nexus and a conduit of cross-cultural youth opinion. The project is now thinking of expanding operations into the North-East of the country, with the object of creating an online community of youth who engage creatively with problems facing them. This is of particular importance for conflict transformation since the mindsets of youth today inevitably shape the borderlines of conflict tomorrow.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) has always held the Internet to be an integral part of its mandate. Through it's website (www.cpalanka.org) CPA not only

informs the online community of future activities, but contrary to the practice of many other NGOs and websites in Sri Lanka, offers its research and policy papers and its most recent publications and reports for download free of charge. But it is the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) (http://www.cpalanka.org/election_moni.html) that brought the greatest amount of hits to the CPA website late last year. The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) comprises the CPA, the Free Media Movement (FMM) and the Coalition Against Political Violence. The CMEV web pages are also hosted on the main CPA website. During the General Election of 2001, the CPA website recorded approximately 1000 visitors per day for a week. The exposure of political violence by a policy of naming and shaming catapulted the CPA website as the primary source of election violence in Sri Lanka. Oneworld Asia also hosted the CMEV reports, which no doubt contributed to the increase in the number of hits. The CMEV was able to utilise the speed of the Internet to bring out multiple reports of election violence daily and helped identify the perpetrators of election malpractice before they could get away. Election violence easily informs and shapes the contours of ethno-political war, and the CMEV was able to influence those who were inimical to conflict transformation processes by highlighting their brutality and callousness.

One of the challenges for both CPA and CMEV was how best to incorporate ICT in the fulfilment of their mandate. Though much work needs to be done in order to buttress the work of CPA by ICT, the Conflict Resolution and Peace Unit of the CPA for instance, uses the Internet to disseminate information of Track Two conflict resolution events, most of which are conferences or workshops held under the Chatham House rule for a limited number of participants. In order to broaden our peace advocacy, the Conflict Resolution and Peace Unit is committed to using the Internet to disseminate the output of these events to a wider audience.

At present however, one of the major challenges CPA is facing is lack of web-server space to host our website. This space crunch translates into a problem with the fulfilment of our mandate, which requires that all documents are disseminated trilingually, in English, Tamil and Sinhala. Lacking the finances to host our site on a reliable server with greater space, CPA, as an interim measure, provides an extensive list of publications in all three languages, along with pictures of the front-cover of the

publication, so that users can then get in touch, either via email or telephone, and buy printed copies.

Despite these constraints, CPA is singular among NGOs in Sri Lanka in its use of ICT for Conflict Transformation. Other NGOs in Sri Lanka, while maintaining comprehensive websites, rarely disseminate information free of charge – at best, only giving a list of resources available for purchase from their physical office. Despite resource constraints, all of CPA's research papers, conference reports, survey findings *et al* are available online.

At present, and even more so in the future, the importance of Information Communications Technology cannot be ignored by government, civil society and NGOs in Sri Lanka. ICT by itself is an impotent tool. What animates it is a culture in which stakeholders use ICT to buttress and build confidence between communities, engender discussion and help in the dissemination of information regarding state-of-the-art conflict resolution techniques and events. There are no easy solutions for the peaceful settlement of protracted ethnic, but a realisation of the power of ICT can help efforts on the ground to bring a negotiated, just solution to war in Sri Lanka.

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