

Matara-Manna Inter-Cultural Peace Exchange

Workshop overview	
Participants	102 youth (53 from Mannar District, 49 from Matara District); Aged 16-25, with the majority 18-22 years old.
Facilitators	4
Duration	4 days
Language	Sinhala and Tamil, with translators
Host Families	41
Techniques used	Small and large group discussions, games, cultural presentations, family stays, Shramadana work camp, interreligious discussions, meetings with civic, military, and religious leaders.

On the evening of Saturday, June 26, Shanthi Sena youth from the Matara district collected onto a bus and began their travel north. Not long after the sun rose, they were shaken awake in their seats by broken, ravaged roads. Wiping the sleep from their eyes, they couldn't help but see signs of the recently concluded war from their windows. In addition to these scarred roads were areas cut clear of trees, power lines that had been toppled as if by a storm, and regular roadside bunkers still staffed by soldiers. Then, sprawling across the dusty side of the road, came the Menik Farm Internally Displaces Persons camp – home to many thousands of northern Sri Lankans who had been forced to leave their homes during the war. The sun-baked, quickly built village still remains, with families who are still waiting to return to their homes. By the time the Matara youth entered the town of Keeri in Mannar province, the exhausting bus journey was already far from their minds. Front and center was their mission for the next four days, which was to act as a bridge between long-separated regions of their country, and to discuss the steps necessary for peace. The price of failure was made clear to all before they even arrived.

Upon arriving in town, the youth were given a welcome surprise when they were met with the overwhelming generosity and hospitality of Mannar residents, who were realizing a long-held dream to reconnect with the rest of their country. Adults and youth lined the road to greet the arriving bus, dressed formally with lotus flowers to offer each guest. When they exited the bus, Matara youth were greeted by host families who would feed, house, and care for them like a second family during their stay, along with the Shanthi Sena youth of the Mannar district, who were no strangers to the years of conflict. The entire group collected for a brief orientation to the coming program, received Sinhala-Tamil language packets to help with introductions, then headed off to their homes. While conversations were often slow – only a handful of youth spoke both Tamil and Sinhalese – the language of trust and friendship was clear to all. Participants spent the rest of the night getting acquainted with one another, practicing the others' language, and learning about the others' lives.

On the morning of Monday the 28th, the group gathered with a number of civic and religious leaders – including Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian leaders – for a full opening ceremony. Prayers were shared by each faith tradition, and area residents offered a cultural presentation. The rest of the morning was spent in small group discussions, as youth from Mannar and Matara circled their chairs to discuss the causes and effects of both an ethnically divided and an ethnically harmonious Sri Lanka. Following this, they explored ways youth could work to support a lasting peace. Each group had a youth translator, giving them the rare opportunity to talk in depth about ethnic conflict with youth whose language they did not share. Later, the groups presented the outcomes of their discussion to the larger group. They were insightful, serious, and passionate about working for a peaceful Sri Lanka. “Sri Lanka is the best country in the world,” one participant said, to the agreement of those around him. “I want to do my part so that everyone – Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese – can live together peacefully.” Together, they discussed follow-up activities to increase the impact of the camp. Beyond sharing their experiences with friends and family back home, formal presentations would be held to explain the situation in Mannar province, as well as the kindness and hospitality of the people. Participants discussed awareness programs, leadership formations, and language classes. Matara youth discussed how they would convene meetings with civic and religious leaders in their area to tell about their trip, and to talk about the barriers for ethnic harmony that exist in their areas. It was clear that the youth saw themselves as leaders for conflict resolution in their districts, and this experience would strengthen their ability to bring ethnically diverse villages together in dialogue. Mannar youth discussed their desire to visit Matara, which until now had been just a name on the map.

As we talked, community members would frequently gather to watch the proceedings. This spontaneous audience would be a regular sight at each of the events – from Shramadana and peace discussions to games and cultural presentations, the workshops were public events, and their immediate impact spread beyond the youth themselves to everyone who witnessed youth from the south and north come to work together for reconciliation.

After a shared lunch, in which participants practiced the Sinhalese or Tamil they were learning with one another, they walked to the beach, where they spent the afternoon playing games. Here, the barriers of language, geographic distance, and years of war were forgotten. The youth ran barefoot through the sand, laughing and shouting like long-time friends, having fun together until the sun began to go down. In the evening, participants reconvened for the first of two cultural nights, in which youth from both districts shared religious and cultural songs from their area.

Later in the night, most youth stayed up late, energized with the excitement of new friends. For Mannar families, receiving Matara youth into their homes was a great joy, and they expressed their gladness with extraordinary generosity. For youth from the two districts, the larger importance of their trip for peace and reconciliation was mixed with an eagerness to make new friends, and to learn about young people from the other end of Sri Lanka.

On Tuesday, after gathering for breakfast at the home of a Keeri resident, the group travelled to nearby Madhu Church to share labor in Shramadana. The most important Catholic shrine on the island, the area is also an important holy site for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and non-Catholic Christians. The site

housed thousands of refugees during the war years, and eventually became an area of conflict and bloodshed. It was only in January of this year that restrictions in visiting the church were lifted, although signs still remain forbidding weapons in the church area, and offices for land-mine removal still remain on-site. To help prepare for the annual Feast of Madhu, to be held later in the week, participants broke into groups and covered the grounds – cleaning garbage-strewn fields, moving and organizing wood-piles, and preparing the land where pilgrims from around Sri Lanka would soon be staying. The youth had shared meals, games, sleeping areas, and ideas for peace – now they were coming together in common labor. In an act that was both symbolic and concrete, they showed that their work to mend their country would be done together.

Later in the day the group gathered on the newly cleaned lawn outside the church to share the teachings from their religions that emphasized peace and harmony, and to join in a short meditation. Afterwards we were welcomed into the church itself, where priests welcomed and thanked us, and talked about the importance and power of people of different faiths working together in common purpose. As the group left, we were encouraged to take a piece of earth along with us, in which to place our hopes for the future. The symbolism of this earth – holy to many faiths, contested by a brutal war, and now recently reclaimed by pilgrims and cleaned in Shramadana by Shanthy Sena youth – was clear to all. In our small, local actions, we were working to transform the entire island.

That evening, the community of Keeri and surrounding areas joined the participants for a grand cultural celebration. Circled around a high bonfire, Matara and Mannar youth showed off their cultures and their talents with traditional songs, dancing, and drama until late in the night. For many in both communities, this was their first exposure to the rich cultural traditions of the other side of the island, and everyone was proud to share their heritage.

On Wednesday morning the participants gathered together for the final time. They were asked to consider ways to expand on the workshop once it was over – to consider the causes and effects of ethnic conflict and harmony they had discussed on Monday, to share their experiences from the workshop with their villages, and to continue to keep in contact with their new friends. Goodbyes were long and tearful as pictures were taken, contact information was exchanged, and gratitude was expressed in both languages. It was clear to all that this camp represented the beginning of lifelong friendships, and ties were being formed that would be strengthened in the months and years to come. As Mannar youth returned to their homes, they felt reconnected with a part of their country that had felt so distant for so long, and were eager for their chance to travel south. And as Matara youth retraced their bus route, rumbling once more over the war-damaged highway, past the broken power lines, IDP camp, and bunkered soldiers, they knew they were part of this same struggle, and they were entrusted with carrying the seeds of peace along the road back south.