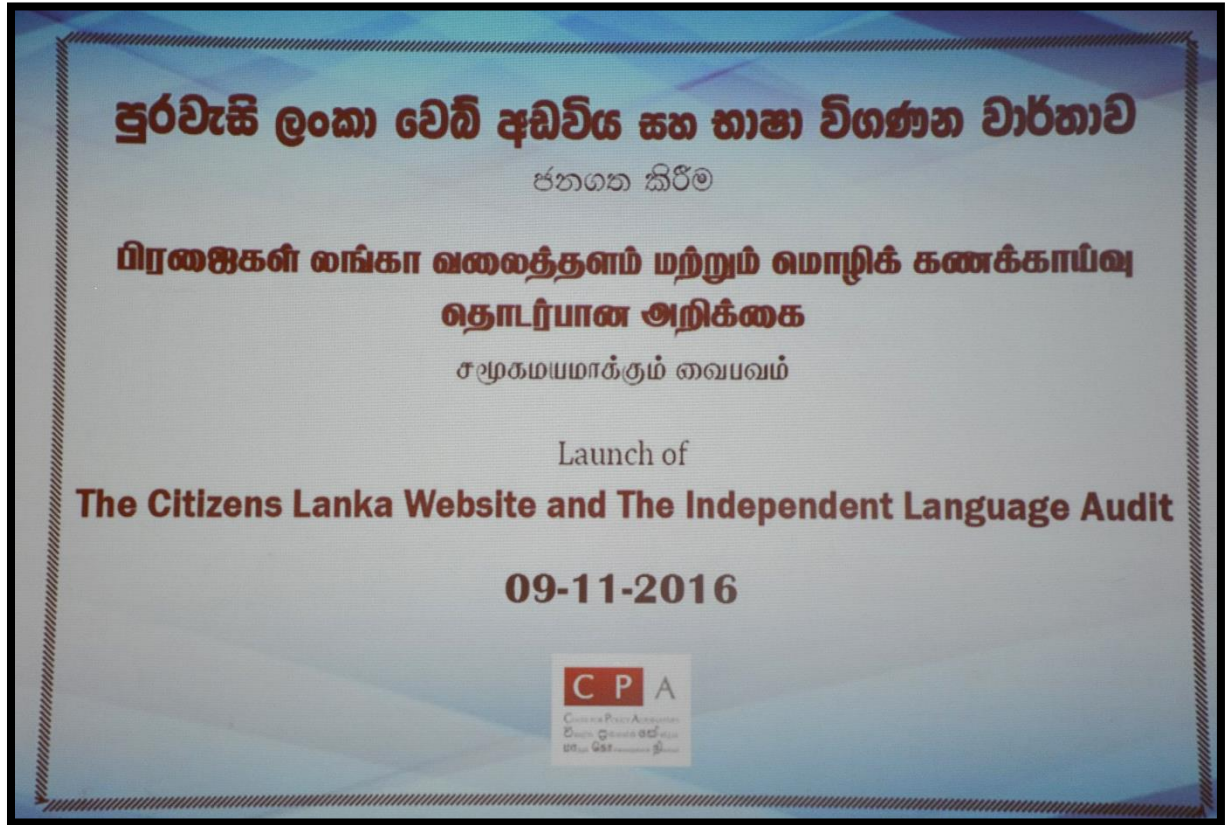


“LANGUAGE: UNITING HUMANITY” –

**LAUNCH OF THE CITIZENS LANKA
WEBSITE AND INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE
AUDIT**

CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES



09/11/2016

LAKSHMAN KADIRGAMAR INSTITUTE

Introduction

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) has been involved in Language Rights advocacy and the implementation of the Official Languages Policy (OLP) in Sri Lanka since 2011. This work has entailed a comprehensive independent language audit, coordinated among 54 DS Divisions in Sri Lanka, to ascertain the degree of OLP implementation in government institutions. It is the first of its kind conducted by an independent institution, and has provided many insights for further language rights advocacy in Sri Lanka, especially at a policy-making level.

Another initiative was the establishment of the Citizenslanka website - a website containing all the laws and related documents pertaining to language rights in Sri Lanka, which would be of considerable utility to the public, as it is also available to them in one easy-to-access website. The website is trilingual and all attempts were made to ensure that as many government documents are available on it in all three languages. The Citizenslanka website also serves as a platform for citizen activists to network and share human interest stories, launch petitions and host articles.

The Citizenslanka website and the Language Audit was launched at the “Language: Uniting Humanity” public event, held on the 9th of November, 2016 from 9.30 - 12.00, at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations: 24, Horton Place, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka. The event was attended by civil society activists, university students, media personnel, Ministry and Embassy representatives, and general enthusiasts. Hon. Mano Ganeshan; Minister of National Co-Existence, Dialogue, and Official Languages preceded over the event as Chief Guest, whilst honorary guests included H.E. Mrs. Joanne Doorneward; Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The event was compered by Lahiru Kithalagama and Saranya Sivasubramaniam of CPA.



Opening Remarks
Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

**Executive Director,
Centre for Policy Alternatives**



Dr. Saravanamuttu observed that the deficit of trust and confidence with regards to the institutions of state and government widens every year we fail to implement an official language policy. He stated that these observations were reinforced through his experience as the secretary of a consultation task force which went around this country to talk about transitional justice. He stated that there were few requests that were recurrent in the public consultations regardless of where in the country it was. Among these, insisting that the operational languages of those transitional justice mechanisms must be the local languages of the area was a key request. He further stated that consultations of the Constitutional Task force being carried out by locals in the local language(s) was highly commended by the general public of the area. According to Dr Saravanamuttu, the public were tremendously thankful for the trilingual approach as in previous instances their grievances were almost always lost in translation. He imparted his opinion on the need for a new constitution by quoting Avishai Margalit where he talks about civilised societies and decent societies, societies in which institutions do not humiliate citizens, and societies in which citizens do not humiliate each other. He observed that by extension, language is therefore very much at the core of this and it is the government's responsibility to make a conducive environment for such coexistence.

Lessons Learnt and Future of the Language Project

Lionel Guruge

Senior Researcher, Outreach Unit

Centre for Policy Alternatives



As lead coordinator of the campaign for language equality in CPA, Lionel Guruge summarised the work and initiatives taken by CPA for the past five years. He mentioned that the recommendation to respect and uphold language equality in Sri Lanka as a precursor to reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka was a predominant factor in the decision to campaign for the accurate implementation of the Official Languages Policy (OLP) in Sri Lanka that spanned five years and resulted in many positive and pioneering initiatives. He outlined the initial process of the program which was to create Language Societies in 15 selected Districts around Sri Lanka, comprising of enthusiastic citizens who themselves recommended actions that can be taken at a grassroots level to implement the OLP in their respective Districts. In this manner, many tangible results such as the bilingual name boards in public and private institutions and within schools was witnessed. On a national level, Guruge detailed how – by means of complaints, Supreme Court cases, and negotiations with relevant authorities – information on public transport services, National Identity cards, among others, were displayed in adherence to the OLP, whilst legislative reforms such as a number of Sri Lankan laws being unavailable in Sinhala and Tamil, as well as important information on Pharmaceutical products being unavailable in Sinhala and Tamil, are currently being pursued.

With this, Guruge also outlined the future plans with regard to the program to ensure language equality in Sri Lanka. With assistance from the Netherlands Embassy, he explained that the next phase would target national institutional reform – encompassing a detailed research conducted in all national Ministries and associated Departments regarding their adherence to the OLP. Research results will be analysed and action plans will be constructed in collaboration with relevant Ministry officials to mitigate issues. In tandem with this process, Educational reform to include a chapter on Language Rights in school curriculums will also be pursued. Guruge envisioned that these initiatives will support a seismic reform in the attitudes and actions of public officials which will contribute to the strengthening of Language Rights in Sri Lanka overall.

Launch of the Citizens Lanka Website



The Citizens Lanka Website was launched by Hon. Mano Ganeshan, following which a brief introduction of its content was given by Saranya Sivasubramaniam – Researcher at CPA.

She explained that the demand for the Website came from Citizen Council (CC) members who communicated to CPA that they would like to have a platform by which all CC members could sync and communicate with one another, as well as the need for a portal by which information relevant to citizens could be accessed. Hence, the objective of the website, she explained, was to link CC members but also a means by which citizens are represented and are given a platform to receive information and be informed about government initiatives. The main feature of the website was the attempt to provide all information in all three languages, which is exemplified by its Homepage which provides access to the website in all three languages. She then outlined the five major components of the website; being -

Citizens Councils – This section of the website provides information on the Citizen Council mechanism – an initiative of CPA, comprising of citizen democratic mechanisms at a grassroots level who campaign and advocate under five themes; Women and Children, Good Governance, Language and Culture, Youth, and the Environment. The work of Citizen Councils are all detailed in the website and will continue to be updated.

Lang Equality – This section provides information regarding the laws of Sri Lanka that support Language Equality, as well as the work CPA has conducted on it, along with Government institutions and Centres dedicated to this field.

Laws – This section of the website has made all attempts to ensure all laws and legislative enactments of Sri Lanka are made available in all three languages – however, the accepted practice for many years had been for laws to be written in English and subsequently translated to Sinhala and Tamil, (although many have failed to be translated) which is in direct violation of the Constitution.

Therefore, whatever laws available in all three languages are available on the website, and categorised in order of relevance.

Constitution making – The work conducted by CPA for Constitutional reforms including reports of the awareness sessions and discussions conducted in all Districts of Sri Lanka by CPA is available in this section, along with the PRC report, and other relevant material. Future initiatives of the Government with regard to Constitutional Reforms will also be updated in this section.

Resources – Circulars, Gazzettes, Government forms and applications are available in all three languages in this section, as well as Emergency numbers of relevant authorities could be found in this section.

Concluding her remarks, Sivasubramaniam mentioned that CPA hopes to branch out to social media platforms such as Face Book and Twitter to bring awareness to the website, and further information could be sort by contacting CPA.



Launch of the Independent Language Audit

The Language Audit was launched with first official copies given to Hon. Mano Ganesan, H.E. Joanne Doorneward, Attorney-at-Law S.G. Punchihewa, Official Language Commissioner Prof. Daya Edirisinghe, and renowned translator Sabapathy Sivagurunathan. Copies were also disseminated among CPA's District Coordinators who were directly engaged in the initiative.

Suresh Kumar, Overall Field Coordinator who actively partook in the process of the Audit, detailed its content.

He explained how the need to conduct a Language Audit arose during a Language Convention held in Jaffna in 2011, and given CPA's vast experience in the field, the decision to conduct this Audit was taken by the organization. The Audit was conducted in 35 Divisional Secretariats of 15 Districts in 7 Provinces; namely Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Kurunegala, Matale, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Colombo, Badulla, Ampara, Monaragala, Hambantota, and Batticaloa. The Audit took into account four categories – Display items, Administration documents, Service Providers, and the Mechanism and attitudes of the Institution. Sectors such as Government officers, School Principals, Police Stations, Hospital Police, Public places, Private Establishments, the Government and Private Sectors were included, rounding a total of 8655 personnel being interviewed on various topics of relevance. A number of recommendations/suggestions arose from this Audit, including the need for the Ministry of Official Languages to conduct awareness sessions on the programmes on the OLP to government officials, to ensure a sufficient number of translators are positioned in government establishments, etc.

Kumar observed that the main conclusion derived from the Audit was that while some DS Divisions adhered to the OLP, many did not, and that relevant officials must take necessary steps to rectify this.



Remarks by Attorney-at-Law S.G. Punchihewa
Member
Right to Information Commission
Advisor to the Language Rights programme



A supporter of Language Rights and author of “Language and Humanity”, Punchihewa briefly highlighted the work conducted by CPA since 2011 to strengthen Language Equality in Sri Lanka. He mentioned that during one of CPA’s field visits to Vavuniya they noticed the directions on buses were only in Sinhala, and that information on food items in markets of the Northern/North Eastern Provinces were only in Tamil whilst information on food items in the general South were only in Sinhala – all of which CPA pursued to rectify with the relevant authorities. He further stated that since 2011, CPA filed over 400 complaints to the Human Rights Commission on the violation of the OLP, and a few were examined, notably the violation of the OLP with regard to information displayed on money notes, which is predominantly in only Sinhala. He also mentioned the other successes CPA has had with regards to the implementation of the OLP in the National Identity cards etc. Punchihewa also did not fail to mention the grievances caused to citizens when their Language Rights have been violated – case studies included a young girl from the Northern Province who was sexually assaulted and whose mother took her to the Police Station to file a complaint, but due to the lack of a Tamil speaking officer at the station, the complaint was filed with incorrect information. Other case studies include a patient visiting a Hospital seeking medical treatment for an ailment in his chest receiving medication for his back due to a translation issue. Punchihewa surmised that such issues could be avoided in future and a path to meaningful reconciliation could be paved if Language Equality could be achieved in Sri Lanka.

**Remarks by H.E. Mrs. Joanne Doornewaard
Ambassador
Kingdom of the Netherlands**



H. E. Mrs Joanne Doornewaard, Ambassador of the Netherlands Embassy in Colombo began her remarks by stating that the Embassy is very pleased to support the Language Rights initiative considering its imminent contribution on reconciliation. She also shared her observations on how the Sri Lankan communities have been divided due to language barriers in the past and how it influenced an arm conflict. The project's necessity was highlighted given its role in elevating the language barrier and promoting minority languages. The importance of this was further highlighted in the current context of national reconciliation. Mrs Doorenewaard expanded on how the inability to properly implement the language law has furthered affected the gap between communities. In this respect, the CPA's involvement in language rights related issues was commendable and necessity. The Ambassador concluded her remarks by further thanking CPA for contributing to the reconciliation process as a civil society actor.

Keynote Address

Hon. Mano Ganesan

Minister

**National Co-Existence, Dialogue
and Official Languages**



The key note speech by Hon. Mano Ganesan opened with the fact that the law states that Sinhala and Tamil language both state languages whereas English is the link language. As a member of the steering committee for the new constitutional, he believes that both Sinhala and Tamil languages need to be given equal provisions and made state languages in the new constitution as well. The Minister stated that problem is in the implementation of these laws. He quotes the general public and stated that the minority is weary of how effective any new law would be considering that the implementation of the trilingual national policy was ineffective. The Minister elaborated on a few examples to expand on this inadequacies He stated that the implementation of the language policy is the prelude to the political solution to national reconciliation. For instance, he stated that all signboards in the country should be in all three languages and it should also be accurately displayed as well. According to the Minister, there are 19 registered ethnicities in this country and this should be a strength, not a weakness and must be treated as such.

The Minister stated his intention to outsource the 1956 hotline and create a complaint taking apparatus that is efficient and effective with the technical support from the private sector. He also stated the intention to employ professional translators in relevant government institutions. In addition, he highlighted on the importance of devolving power in order to address the ethnic tension in Sri Lanka.

Concluding Remarks were given by Ruwendi Wakwella of CPA during which time she thanked all those who attended as well as assisted the Language Audit and the Website from inception to launch. The event concluded at 11.45 a.m.