

PEOPLE'S FORUM INITIATIVE  
**CITIZENS MOBILIZED  
FOR CHANGE**



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# People's Forum Locations Map





## Overview

The People's Forum Initiative (PFI) allows an opportunity for Sri Lankan citizens to have a voice in shaping their own communities, to have ownership over the peace process, and to improve the governance of their country. Ordinary people—farmers and teachers, male and female, young and old, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—form community groups to plan and carry out solutions to the problems they are facing.

Established in 2004 as a way of engaging Sri Lankans in the national peace process, then used to bring relief to victims of that year's tsunami, PFI has grown to address a wide variety of social and economic problems. Forums develop action plans as diverse as the problems the communities face, including:

- Teaching community members about participating in Sri Lanka's democracy
- Running inter-ethnic understanding programs and language classes
- Building roads, schools, and irrigation systems
- Fighting domestic violence with counseling and education programs

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is raising funds to make this tool for locally driven development fully indigenous. With AED guidance in its first year, the newly formed People's Forum Federation will increase the power of the Forums to effect change on a nationwide scale. The People's Forums have the potential to transform the nation from the ground up: once their sustainability is ensured, they will be able to improve the lives of Sri Lankans for years to come.



The Dikwella People's Forum presents 25 bicycles with fish containers and 75 coir rope-making machines to those who lost the tools of their livelihoods in the tsunami.

## A Compelling Need

In 2008, the Government of Sri Lanka officially withdrew from the 2002 Cease-Fire Agreement. This decision was concurrent with a flare-up in violence, with increased attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and a renewed military campaign to reclaim control of the east and north.

Civilians have often been victims of attacks launched by both sides, and human rights abuses have sharply risen in the last year for all Sri Lankans—Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhalese. Sri Lanka citizens must also contend with spiraling inflation, the doubling of fuel prices over the last few years, and economic and administrative systems that tend to perpetuate inequity. And when a given ethnic or religious group appears to be favored by local politicians, communal tensions can explode.

Sri Lankan citizens now have an especially urgent need to raise their voices for peace and to take control of their own development. Many Sri Lankans do not feel empowered to create their own economic opportunities, to build better schools and hospitals, or to bring together communities divided by decades of ethnic conflict. There is an urgent need for citizen-driven, democratic change.

*“[Tamils and Sinhalese] live in parallel worlds. We have separated hospitals, houses, schools, and we will separate roads if we can. People’s Forums have a role to play in bringing us together.”*

—Female Tamil  
People’s Forum member



# The People's Forum Initiative: Mobilized for Change

Completely led and run by local community members, People's Forums currently mobilize citizens in 64 divisional secretariats across the country. Forums are guided by a steering committee that meets every month, with the whole Forum meeting at least once every three months.

People's Forums emphasize a bottom-up power structure. Any member can raise an issue of local or national concern, and high priority is given to the participation of women not merely as members but as leaders.

Participants collaborate to implement action plans for community change, funded by microgrants averaging \$2,500. To ensure the long-term success of their action plan activities, Forums strive to collaborate with local government, community groups, and the private sector.

*"The People's Forum is an asset for us. To do anything for our community we [usually] have to be dependent on the political leadership. The People's Forum gives us strength and encourages us to do something for our community. If we are alone we cannot do these things."*

—S. Kavithanjali, convener of  
Kalawanchikudy People's Forum  
Female, age 30

## What are People's Forums?

Forums are community groups that allow regular citizens to talk about the problems they are facing and to plan and carry out solutions. People's Forums are:

- In 64 locations across Sri Lanka
- Made up of 75-100 people each
- Led by local, elected community members
- Diverse and representative, with member ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and occupation reflecting the community at large
- Consensus-driven and consultative, teaching members about democratic participation
- Focused on concrete results, through action plans developed and executed by community members
- Dedicated to promoting peace, democracy, and good governance through their activities

## A History of Impact

The central contribution of People's Forums is that they teach regular Sri Lankans how to organize to solve the problems they feel are the most pressing in their communities. Here are some examples of recent successful projects:

- The Sainthamaruthu Forum stopped the embezzlement of public funds, quelling the growing unrest when police had made no response to the accusations of theft.
- The Kuchchavelli Forum empowered hundreds of Tamil families to fully integrate into society with a mobile legal service to provide marriage licenses, property deeds, birth certificates and diplomas to 210 families in areas where the conflict had made such services almost non-existent.
- For many people who lost their livelihood in the tsunami, People's Forums supplied masons and carpenters with tools, and widows with sewing machines and equipment for making coir rope, in places like Kaluwanchikudy and Katuwana.
- The Dikwella Forum renovated a rural hospital serving all ethnic groups, cleaning the unsanitary well and providing essential medical equipment.
- A health awareness clinic to educate the public about a recent outbreak of a deadly mosquito-borne fever, and to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds, was facilitated by the Kalmunai Muslim People's Forum.
- Lack of bilingualism among Sinhalese and Tamils is a common source of strife. Many Forums, including Elpitiya and Dewinuware, have introduced Tamil language classes for professionals and Buddhist monks in mostly Sinhalese areas, and Sinhalese classes in low-country plantations where Tamil is the main language.





# The People's Forum Federation: Toward a National Movement

In response to a strong demand from Forum members, the 64 individual groups are now connected by an overarching network operating at the national level: the **People's Forum Federation**.

The day-to-day administration of the People's Forums has been managed for AED by four local partner organizations: Anti-War Front, the Foundation for Co-Existence, National Peace Council, and Sarvodaya. In the next phase of development, the new Federation will assume management responsibility and the four partners will provide technical assistance. With training and grants, AED will empower the Federation to guide the People's Forum Initiative: starting new Forums, implementing action plans, training participants, providing strategic direction, monitoring and evaluating activities, and representing the movement to the national government and the public.

Interim leadership for the Federation has been established, and a constitution has been approved. These are important and exciting steps, but they are not enough. Continued capacity building and financial support are necessary to transfer complete ownership of the initiative to locals. AED has been raising funds to carry the initiative through this critical stage in its growth.

*"The local government minister now recognizes us – we no longer need an identity card to speak with him. Usually the general public is ignored, but the Forum is recognized and it has strength."*

—Convener of Ambalantota Forum

## Mission Statement of People's Forum Federation

- I) To encourage cooperation between Peoples Forums;
- II) To provide means for discussion and the exchange of ideas and experience through meetings, study visits, research projects, exchanges, publications and other methods of communication;
- III) To establish and maintain relationships with, and present and promote the views of Peoples Forum and their members to relevant stakeholders, including civil society, the state and the international community.



# The People's Forum Federation Activities

With AED guidance and support, the Federation will oversee the People's Forum Initiative in several ways:

## Establishing New Forums

- Ensuring that the initiative grows to benefit Sri Lankans in new communities, the Federation will establish at least 10 new Forums each year. The process of creating a new Forum begins when a site is selected for its relevance to the conflict; then a community profile is developed to gauge local interest and demographics; next, consultations with locals reveal community leaders; and finally, leaders are invited to an inaugural Forum, where ownership is transferred to the community.

## Implementing Action Plans

- The Federation will help the People's Forums carry out their most powerful tools for change: the citizen-driven, citizen-designed and citizen-implemented action plans. Grants for the action plans will average \$2,500, depending on need. AED and the Federation will assist Forums in making their proposals realistic and focused.

## Training Forum Members

- On a quarterly basis, the Federation will arrange trainings on the topics that are requested most by Forum members: advocacy, leadership, networking, monitoring and evaluation, project management, peacebuilding, and strategic communication. Trainings will be held in several locations around the island to make travel easier for participants.

## Providing Communications and Outreach

- The Federation will keep all Forums connected through a tri-lingual newsletter and website. It will also record action plan activities and interviews with participants. This archive of PFI impact will have several uses:
  - released to the media, it will advertise to Sri Lankans the power of civil society;
  - shown at PFI meetings, it will spread success stories and energize the movement;
  - presented to potential donors, it will demonstrate the effectiveness of the Forums.

## Management & Sustainability

AED is a 46-year-old independent, nongovernmental, U.S.-based organization committed to solving social problems worldwide. Specializing in building organizational capacity, we've been working in Sri Lanka for over 25 years, and we have supported the People's Forum Initiative since its inception in 2004. AED will provide training, technical assistance, salaries, and operations support to the newly created Federation, until it is ready to run itself.

AED realizes that funding from diverse private and non-governmental sources will be critical for PFI sustainability. We will instruct Federation staff in crafting and presenting their funding requests to international donors, as well as in approaching the private sector for financial support. In its first year, the Federation will develop materials to solicit additional funding and create a long-term plan for sustainability.



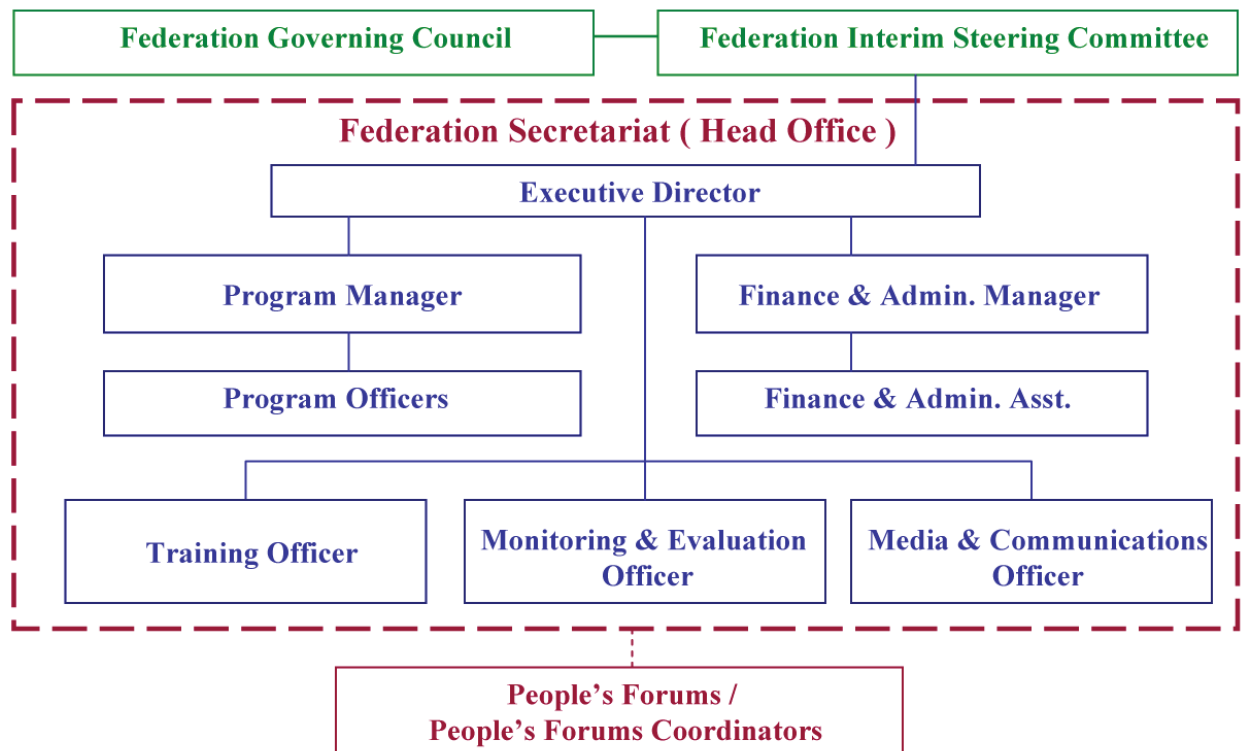
*“The support given by the People’s Forum has strengthened me economically and has given me much relief psychologically.”*

—A. B. Pahimah, Maradamunai village,  
female, recipient of People’s Forum assistance

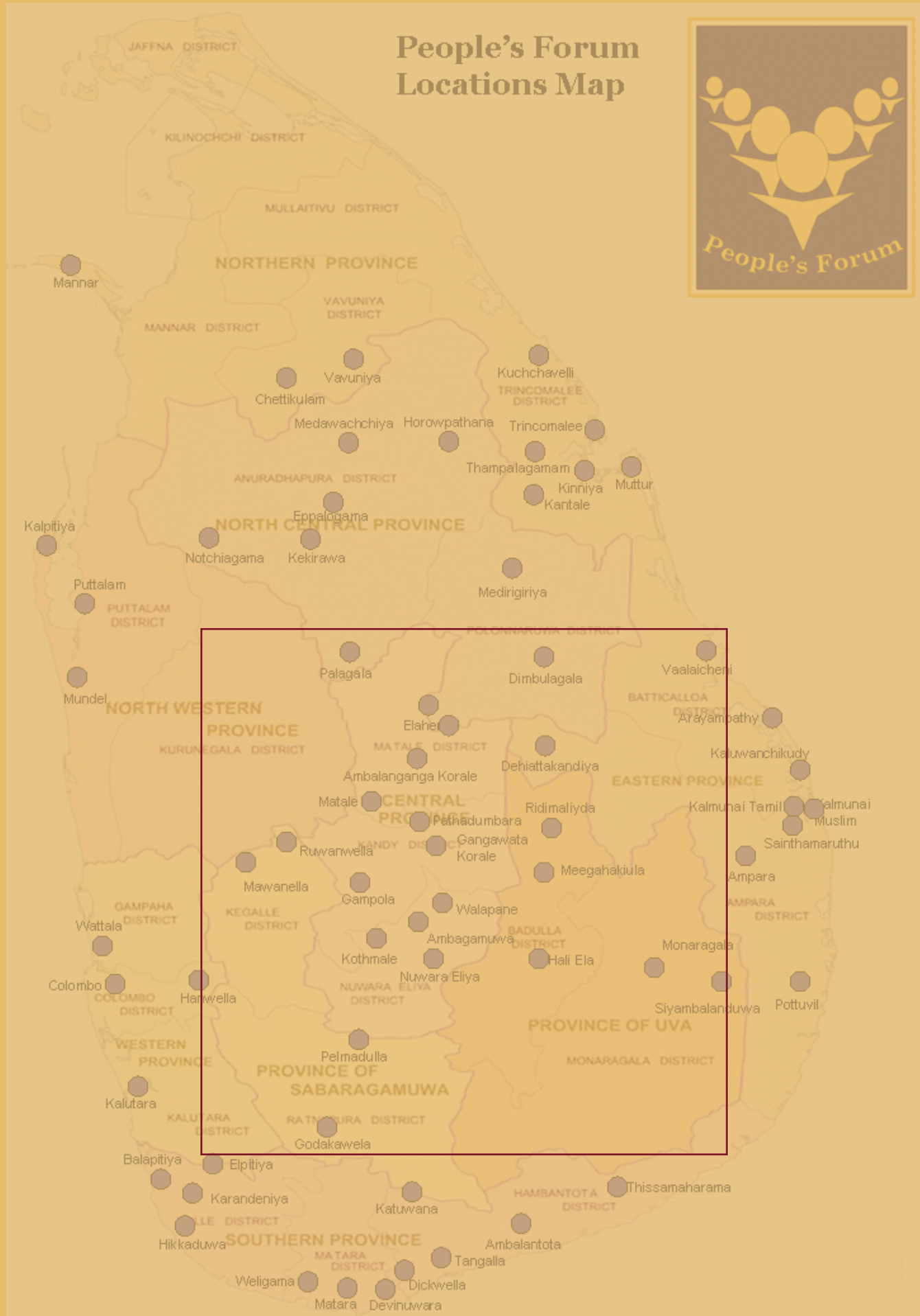
# Federation Secretariat

The Federation Secretariat will serve as the central management unit for the Federation. Led by an appointed executive director, it will carry out the policy decisions of stakeholders. The Secretariat will drive program design and assist action plan implementation, in addition to providing monitoring and evaluation, training, and media support. By mainstreaming the technical standards of all People's Forums and performing advocacy at regional and national levels of government, the Secretariat will play a vital role in the nationwide presence of the Federation.

## People's Forum Federation – Operational Structure









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