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# Understanding the Politics Of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Switzerland

Insights for the Swiss Federal Department of  
Foreign Affairs

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report is the result of a research project of the GMC commissioned by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It deals with the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's political engagement with the Tamil cause in Switzerland. The report aims to identify the key traits and means of political engagement of the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland in a post-2009 context. The power vacuum left by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) within the Tamil political scenario, both in Sri Lanka and abroad, opened the door for a number of new political organisations, which began to mushroom soon after 2009. This report seeks to understand the perceptions of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland of these 'new' organisations, as well as the true impact of their activities. The first part of the report provides an introduction by outlining the main findings from our empirical material against the background of a literature review on Tamil diaspora politics, both globally and specific to Switzerland. This helps frame the discussion and provides the key guiding ideas of the report. Thereafter, we have elaborated a succinct mapping of the 'new' transnational organisations operational in Switzerland. The second part of the report identifies key findings, further providing an analysis and explanation on the material collected. The final section focuses on a set of conclusions and recommendations for the reader.

**Key Words:** Sri Lanka, migration, Tamil diaspora, Switzerland, Tamil political organizations, transnationalism, reconciliation, peace consolidation, first generation, second generation.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This report, commissioned by the FDFA, deals with the Sri Lankan Tamil (hereinafter Tamil) diaspora's political engagement with the Tamil cause in Switzerland. The original idea of the report was to identify the needs and concerns of the Swiss Tamil community with a view to the FDFA's engagement. Eventually, the purpose of the report shifted towards identifying the key traits and means of political engagement of the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland in a post-2009 context. The FDFA sought to have fresh and direct insights into the Tamil diaspora community in Switzerland as part of an informed analysis on Sri Lanka.

The report explores the different views of the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland with regard to the Tamil cause. More specifically, it looks into the evolution and implications of the political mobilisation of the Tamil diaspora in a pre- and post-2009 context. The power vacuum left by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) within the Tamil political scenario, both in Sri Lanka and abroad, opened the door for a number of new political organisations, which began to mushroom soon after 2009. This report seeks to understand the perceptions of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora of these 'new' organisations, as well as the true impact of their activities.

More broadly, the report looks into the following questions relevant to the Swiss context against the background of a global Tamil diaspora: what characterises the political views of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland after 2009? Which organisations are currently active in Tamil politics in the country? How legitimate are they in the eyes of the Swiss Tamil diaspora? What is critical to Tamil diaspora politics in Switzerland?

### **1.1 Overview of main findings**

From the beginning, we were cautious of the use of the term 'diaspora'. Lumping the wide disparity of views among diaspora members under one banner appeared problematic. The bulk of interviewees that we spoke to confirmed our suspicion: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is very diverse. In fact, the existing divisions and lack of a unified vision among the Tamil polity was one of the few issues on which there was consensus among interviewees. This lack of cohesion within the community is related to the fact that diaspora members have, as of late, not become engaged in Tamil politics based on ideology but rather on personal agendas. In fact, networks and personal contacts have become crucial elements of engagement. Moreover, there is an important fluidity of political opinion.

The average level of information of the diaspora member on the political scenario in Sri Lanka turned out to be rather reduced and skewed based on age, personal background, migration history and recent travel to Sri Lanka. Confirming McDowell's (1996) thesis, it is not a coincidence that a large number of our interviewees originated from families that migrated to Switzerland during the 1980s. In other words, they belonged to families who were more

educated and upper caste, meaning that they enjoyed a greater status in the community. These were better informed about Tamil politics and showed an interest in engaging. Thus, while there were a few exceptions among recent migrants, there is a correlation between migration date, a higher degree of education and knowledge of/interest in Tamil politics among the bulk of Tamil diaspora members.

The role and influence that the LTTE – its network and front organisations – currently has on the Tamil diaspora's current socio-political reality remains an unanswered question. Additional research must be conducted on this topic in order to pin down the recent evolution of the LTTE's overseas structure and its ongoing activities, if at all. Few among the interviewees admitted to the centrality of the Tamil Tigers in Tamil diaspora politics, despite not being proscribed in Switzerland. Those that did raise the matter, however, were categorical about their continuing influence on the Tamil diaspora community, both in Switzerland and globally. It is hard to discern the truth from the so-called 'party line' on this topic, which can lead to very divergent and misleading impressions. Additional empirical work could help clarify contrasting views.

What was clear from the empirical material we collected is that the waning LTTE influence over diaspora politics has led to a sense of disarray among the Tamil community in Switzerland, particularly so among first-generation members. The flip side of a reduced coercion on the community by militant groups, including the Tamil Tigers, is that the scope of political opinion has broadened considerably and arguably too the space available for manoeuvre.

In addition, there is a growing and perceptible generational gap with regard to diaspora members' political views, as elaborated below. There are substantial differences in opinion between generations on the goals and means of the Tamil diaspora's engagement in Tamil politics. While there is an overall consensus between generations on the quest for a solution to Sri Lanka's ethno-political conflict through peaceful means, there are important discrepancies on the new transnational organisations' goals and means to achieve them.

The activities and real impact of the newly created Tamil diaspora organisations post-2009 remains marginal according to our findings. The links, activities and leadership of these new organisations were often unclear from the empirical material collected, which leads us to conclude that they lack clear objectives and the means to implement them. In addition, there is a high degree of infighting within the different organisations due to the predominance of personal agendas over ideological or organisational concerns. This reflects in an ongoing power struggle between the pre- and post-2009 leadership. It is not clear, however, how 'old' the old leadership is, nor how 'new' the new one is. The bulk of interviewees agreed about the lack of credibility and legitimacy of these organisations among the Tamil diaspora community.



We did not identify ideological differences among diaspora members as a key differentiation marker within the Tamil community, as opposed to their family's history of migration, legal status in Switzerland, socio-economic positioning in the host country or age. Yet several interviewees from the second generation highlighted the ongoing 'identity and cultural genocide' against Tamils in Sri Lanka as a crucial issue. A greater number of interviewees across generations identified the limited democratic space and power sharing arrangements in Sri Lanka as key variables to focus on beyond achieving an independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam. There was widespread support among the diaspora in favour of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) as the leading Tamil political force in Sri Lanka despite existing critics and the Tamil diaspora's weak link to the party. The TNA is currently perceived as the 'lesser of evils.'

As the drafting of the report was coming to an end, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) announced a ban on fifteen (excluding the LTTE) Tamil diaspora groups and a long list of individuals spread worldwide, based on their alleged links to the Tamil Tigers.<sup>1</sup> Some of these political organisations are operating in Switzerland, among other Western countries. The full implications of the GoSL ban are yet to be seen. Unfortunately, the ban took place once the research interviews had been finalised, so we were not able to gather empirical material on that particular matter. This would make a good starting point for future research on the challenges faced by Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora politics.

## **1.2 Structure of the report**

The structure of the report is straightforward. It is divided into four main sections. The first part provides an introduction by outlining the main findings from our empirical material against the background of a brief literature review on Tamil diaspora politics, both globally and specific to Switzerland. This helps frame the discussion and the key guiding ideas of the report. Thereafter, we have elaborated a succinct mapping of the 'new' transnational organisations operational in the country, considering that this was the initial aim of the report. The second part of the report identifies key findings, providing too an adequate analysis and explanation on the material collected. The final section focuses on a set of conclusions and recommendations for the reader.

## **1.3 The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora: pre- and post-2009**

The bulk of existing literature on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland is predominantly cultural, anthropological and sociological in character, exploring matters of the diaspora's identity. Part of the literature has been commissioned by the Swiss government, such as the report on Sri Lankan Tamil migrants by J. Moret, D. Efonayi and F. Stants (2007) from the University of Neuchâtel or the one about the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's

remittances to Sri Lanka by P. Gazagne (2012) from the Graduate Institute. Additional material has been produced academically with a strong focus on asylum issues, the integration of the Tamil community in Switzerland and development assistance to the homeland, such as the works by C. McDowell (1996, 2005), D. Lüthi (2005, 2007), C. Mathis (1997) and J. Wittek (2009). Several non-governmental organisations, such as Caritas, the Swiss Refugee Help organisation and Freiplatzaktion have also produced a number of reports on the situation of Tamil refugees in Switzerland.

McDowell (1996:117-139, 2005) is the most high profile author to have written on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland, providing interesting details on key migration phases up until the mid-1990s and the distinct nature of immigration during each phase. These range from the pioneer educated, lower-middle class, high-caste Vellala landowner Tamil families from the Jaffna Peninsula to the not-so-educated and lower-caste rural and urban immigrants. This goes to show the fluidity of the profile of Tamils seeking asylum in Switzerland; it did not remain static throughout time.

McDowell further identifies an important cleavage among Sri Lankan Tamils in Switzerland: immigrant population versus asylums seekers. In his view, 'relationships between these two population groups shaped the cultural, religious, economic, and political dynamics of Tamil settlement in Switzerland' (McDowell 2005:541). According to his field research, the so-called immigrants arrived during the 1980s, were more educated and upper-caste; '... they have officially given up their bid for asylum in exchange for a form of renewable residence' (McDowell 1996:227). They eventually did become established residents in Switzerland with long-term living perspectives. From a political standpoint, the bulk of these 'immigrants' were mid-aged men who did not support the idea of Eelam and refused to live under the rule of militant groups (McDowell 1996:254). They were opposed to the LTTE, had been members of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) during the seventies or of rival rebel groups such as Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) or EPDF (McDowell 2005, n.d.a:109.)

In contrast, the bulk of the so-called 'asylum seekers' arrived after 1989, were unable to integrate into the economy and continue to hold the status of asylum seeker with the possibility of being repatriated to Sri Lanka. This second category of migrants is less educated, comes from rural and urban areas in the North or East of Sri Lanka and has suffered the effects of the conflict on their day-to-day lives. Many among them were former LTTE members that fled either for fear of forced LTTE conscription or retaliation on the part of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (McDowell 1996:227, 2005). More interestingly, this floating population of asylum seekers, mostly single young men, had been hardened by the war and were keen to support the LTTE's politicisation and fundraising activities in Switzerland during

the nineties (McDowell 1996:254).

Conceptualising McDowell's contextual analysis, the time of migration, the means by which diaspora members gained residence in their host country and their integration into the host society can be identified as key markers of differentiation within the community (Orjuela and Sriskandarajah 2008). The research by McDowell, however, does not address what has by now become a key component of the Tamil community in Switzerland, the second generation. In fact, one of the key findings of our research is the existing disparity in the views and motivations behind the political mobilisation on the Tamil cause between the first and second generations. This point is elaborated in depth later in the report.

Considering the politicised nature of the Sri Lankan Tamil community and the asylum-prone nature of its migration to Switzerland, it is surprising that the bulk of the literature refers to the political impact of the diaspora on the homeland but ignores its political mobilisation in the host country. This gap in the literature is particularly striking in a post-2009 context. There is no analytical material available on this topic beyond the existing mapping undertaken by M. Stürzinger for the Berghof Foundation in 2002, only partly complemented by the study by J. Moret, D. Efiomayi and F. Stants (2007) from the University of Neuchâtel years later; hence the pertinence of this study. In contrast, there is substantial academic literature on the political mobilisation of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in other Western countries, prior to 2009, however. Well known are the works of Ø. Fuglerud (1999, 2001), C. Fair (2005, 2007), Gunaratna (2006), S. Nadarajah and D. Sriskandarajah (2005), C. Orjuela (2008), D. Sriskandarajah (2002, 2005) and S. Wayland (2004).

The year 2009 is considered a landmark year; it was then that the Tamil Tigers were militarily defeated, an event commonly defined as 'the end of the war'. Most experts on the Sri Lankan conflict, however, would agree that the roots of the conflict, even if no longer considered an armed conflict, remain intact. The bulk of the existing literature post-2009 is policy-related, including the reports by the International Crisis Group (2010) and the 2011 diaspora series by the Berghof Peace Support and the Centre for Just Peace and Democracy. The specifics of the pre- and post-2009 Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic context that frame this research are elaborated below.

### **1.3.1 The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora pre-2009**

The identity of the Tamil diaspora is historically linked to the politics of the ethno-political conflict in Sri Lanka. Orjuela and Sriskandarajah (2008:326) highlight how the diaspora experience of Tamils is shaped by their nationalist struggle and the politicisation of identity in the homeland. This does not mean that a high number among its members are actively involved in overtly political activities. In fact, our empirical findings corroborate that it is only a small portion among diaspora members that has historically been active in Tamil politics; yet

most Tamils abroad are somewhat aware of political developments in Sri Lanka. This politicisation is invariably tied to the LTTE's historical domination of Sri Lankan Tamil's struggle, both in Sri Lanka and transnationally. The LTTE also became the conduit through which the homeland-diaspora nexus could be manifested; the Tamil Tigers shaped the nature of the diasporic imaginary by creating a common identity in exile (Orjuela and Sriskandarajah 2008:331-2). Thus, the Tamil struggle has historically been equated to the LTTE. Being in favour of the Tamil struggle, however, does not equate to being pro-LTTE, as the wide disparity in political views among the interviewees suggested.

Part of the LTTE dominance has been exercised through co-option; the remainder through coercive measures that range from financial extortion to blatant blackmail (Becker 2006, Chalk 2008, Fair 2005). The coercive element of the Tamil Tigers' politics has shed serious doubts on the degree of popular support for the LTTE, both in Sri Lanka and abroad. A Sri Lankan Tamil academic from Northern Sri Lanka spoke of a declining legitimacy of the LTTE among the Tamil people in the North and East as far back as 2007. He eloquently framed it in the following terms: 'Increasing numbers of Tamils feel that they have "fallen out of the frying pan (the racist Sri Lankan state) into the fire (the demagogic de-facto sub-national state)"' (Sarvananthan 2007:1193). As the conflict hardened in Sri Lanka, the forced conscription by the Tamil Tigers of both men and women became an increasing threat and a push factor for Sri Lankan Tamils seeking asylum in Western countries.

Similar to the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, the genuine support for the LTTE is hard to gauge within the Tamil diaspora. This has partly to do with the fluidity of political opinion, as highlighted by an interviewee: 'In the diaspora, it is always difficult to say who is supporter of the LTTE or not; I think there is an important fluidity of political membership'.<sup>2</sup> It is historically also related to the fear of speaking out and publicly taking a position vis-à-vis the LTTE.

The Tamil Tigers established their first Front Organisation in London as early as 1984, thereafter developing a network of Front Organisations.<sup>3</sup> By 1996, the LTTE had divided its international operations into political representation and propaganda, arms procurement and fundraising, and had established a quasi-diplomatic network consisting of 38 offices worldwide (Davis 1996). Its International Secretariat was based in London and Paris till 2002 when it got transferred to the Wannai. During the 2002-06 peace process, the LTTE launched a reorganisation process of its transnational coordinating structure: prior to 2003, the organisation and coordination of its activities were loosely connected to the LTTE headquarters in the Wannai, Sri Lanka; post-2003, all of the LTTE's fundraising and lobbying activities were controlled, monitored and coordinated from the headquarters (Sarvendra 2011).

According to fieldwork interviews conducted by McDowell (1996:263-4) and Mathis (1997:79) during the nineties, there was outright intimidation against the Tamil community for them to contribute financially to the Tamil cause. Thus, even if the motivation was to assist Tamils who remained in Sri Lanka through relief work, not for the LTTE to purchase arms, the contributors had little choice, according to both authors. According to Solomon and Tan (2007), the LTTE outsourced its fundraising – including extortion - tasks within the community to ethnic Tamil gangs for a commission, in countries like France and the UK. The report by Human Rights Watch (Becker 2006) corroborates how intimidation, coercion and outright threats took place during the LTTE’s massive fundraising drive within the Tamil diaspora, against the backdrop of the return to war. This was allegedly the case in Canada, the UK and other parts of Europe, including Switzerland. The intimidation by LTTE supporters against diaspora members reduced the space available for alternative Tamil political voices.

The last phase of the war leading up to May 2009 showed an unprecedented unity and mobilisation capacity of the Tamil community worldwide: there was a global and public reaction against what was happening in the battlefield. Public demonstrations of support in favour of the Tamil struggle and against the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) reached an all-time high during this period. Even those Tamils that showed some dissent against the LTTE went out on the street. This included second-generation Tamils living in Western countries, who may not have been so actively engaged in Tamil diaspora politics till that point in time. The fear of a power vacuum and the loss of leverage that the military defeat of the LTTE would bring superseded the existing fault lines within the Tamil diaspora. As highlighted by an interviewee, ‘the outcry in 2009 was huge; it was an identity question’.<sup>4</sup>

### **1.3.2 The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora post-2009**

The role that the LTTE continues to play, or not, within Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora politics lies at the crux of the matter. While it is clear that the LTTE has lost its centrality in Tamil politics, including in the diaspora, interviewees had differing views on its continuing or diminishing influence on the Sri Lankan Tamil community abroad post-2009. In fact, the current leverage and coercion capacity of the LTTE among diaspora members remains a fundamental issue that requires additional in depth research.

Views differed substantially on the LTTE’s ongoing role. Certain interviewees noted that the Tamil Tigers’ influence has become insignificant. There was consensus, however, on the fact that the LTTE is still very active in organising cultural activities abroad, particularly Tamil language schools and sports days. According to expert reports, the LTTE’s international network and influence have not disappeared, despite its military defeat; they have become much less visible and decentralised, nonetheless.<sup>5</sup> According to Shanaka

Jayasekera, a Sri Lankan academic known for his work on the Tamil Tigers, there are active pro-LTTE lobby groups in a number of Western countries, including Switzerland, while some of the LTTE assets are believed to be in Eritrea. In his view, the current LTTE threat lies in its political lobbying against Sri Lanka via multiple groups espousing a common ideology, as opposed to a centralised LTTE structure.<sup>6</sup> Several interviewees noted how former LTTE representatives have reinvented themselves as members of the newly created transnational Tamil organisations. The implications of this are elaborated on later in the report.

The less tangible presence of the Tamil Tigers has also got to do with their widespread proscription in Western countries - with the exception of Switzerland and Norway -, which has hindered the group's overseas activities. A section of the Tamil diaspora, particularly within the second generation, is trying to fight the 2006 European Union (EU) ban on the Tamil Tigers since it has a strong impact on financial transactions from EU countries to Sri Lanka and diminishes the international legitimacy of the LTTE. According to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence and Urban Development (n.d.a.), the LTTE's global loss of leverage is also linked to the fact that its fundraising capability has decreased by 80 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Yet several interviewees noted how the Tamil diaspora continues to financially support the Tamil Tigers, certainly in the case of Singapore, Switzerland and the US.<sup>8</sup> The voluntary character or not of such support leads us back to the topic of extortion by the Tamil Tigers. Indirect references to extortion among interviewees gave the impression that the pressure by the LTTE in this regard is much less now, if it exists at all; yet this would have to be corroborated with additional research.

The idea of a unitary LTTE abroad is flawed, nonetheless. Shanaka Jayasekera highlighted how after 2009 the overseas pro-LTTE network splintered into four key factions, namely: the Nediyan faction (Oslo Group); Father Emmanuel's faction (London Group), which would later become the Global Tamil Forum (GTF); Rudrakumaran's faction (New York Group), which would become the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) and the Vinayagam faction (Brussels Group).<sup>9</sup> According to D.B.S. Jeyaraj, a well-known Sri Lankan Tamil journalist based in Canada, there are currently two broad factions within the overseas LTTE: (i) the Perinbananaygam Sivaparan alias 'Nediyan' faction, operating from Norway; (ii) the Segarampillai Vinayagamorthy alias 'Vinayagam' faction, operating from Germany and France.<sup>10</sup> According to one of our interviewees, however, there are three factions among the LTTE abroad.<sup>11</sup> He highlighted the two factions mentioned before and added that of Parithy, leader of the LTTE in France for many years, murdered in Paris in 2012. This disparity in accounts goes to show how factionalised the diaspora is in its support for the Tamil Tigers and how difficult it is to verify which is the current scenario.

In terms of political views, the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers has opened the door to an increased diversity and visibility in political opinions within the Tamil community abroad.

This disparity is somewhat reflected in the spectrum of Tamil political organisations that have mushroomed in a post-2009 context, certainly in terms of the discourse, if not in reality. In theory, the new political organisations have a new leadership and goals but a number of interviewees referred to them as a continuation of the Tamil Tigers in a new light. We elaborate more on this point later in the report when unpacking the challenges and true impact of the so-called 'new' transnational organisations.

While more political diversity is widely perceived as a positive development post-2009, the lack of a clear leadership and the multiple splits within the Tamil polity were recurrently flagged as issues of concern. The bulk of interviewees interpreted the absence of a leading force that mobilises Sri Lankan Tamils worldwide as a hindering factor towards gaining influence and creating a counterweight to the Sri Lankan government. In the words of an interviewee, 'there is a chaotic Tamil leadership with many splits and lots of internal issues: the political leadership is not unified'.<sup>12</sup> The political factionalisation within the Tamil diaspora combined with the lack of vision of the Tamil struggle hinders advancing the political goals of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

A collective Tamil political identity remains a binding factor, nonetheless. According to an internal evaluation report by the Berghof Peace Support and the Centre for Just Peace and Democracy on the Tamil diaspora - with an emphasis on the British case - the Tamil political identity 'was shaped by the collective consciousness of those people who identified with a common aspiration with respect to the relationship between the "Tamils" and the Sri Lankan state' (Vimalarajah *et al.* 2011:24). In addition, the homeland (Eelam), the ethnic and cultural identity (Tamil), the notion that the Tamils are an oppressed nation or a people with rights (national) and the idea of a collective or group (consciousness) are highlighted as key elements of a Tamil political identity. This conceptualisation of Tamil political identity can be extrapolated globally, including to the Swiss case.

From our interviews we gathered how the idea that the armed struggle has proved futile and the use of political - meaning non-violent - means is now the way forward has become prevalent. The military defeat of the Tamil Tigers has left scars among members of the Tamil diaspora, nonetheless. McDowell (n.d.a.) refers to the existing apathy and lack of political discussion within the Tamil diaspora's political space in a post-2009 context. The disaffection among first-generation diaspora members was perceptible from our interviews. It is remarkable that the Tamil diaspora has not sought any kind of collective introspective process on what went wrong with the Tamil struggle under the leadership of the Tamil Tigers. First-generation diaspora members seem to have entered a 'silence phase', as highlighted by a second-generation interviewee.<sup>13</sup> The long-lasting claim that the diaspora has been historically unaware of reality in the homeland could partly explain the lack of an overseas introspective process on why the Tamil Tigers failed. Several interviewees conceded to such

disconnect. They explained how diaspora members' comfortable lives in Western countries led them to an excessive focus on financial support for the LTTE with limited knowledge on the Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

In contrast to the first generation, second-generation diaspora members proved to be more empowered and politically active following the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009. In fact, the way the war ended and the global scope of the protests in 2009 encouraged the second generation to inform themselves on how and why the Tamil struggle started (Nandakumar 2011). The vacuum left by the Tamil Tigers and, by default, some of the traditional first-generation leaders within the diaspora, provided space for second-generation members to come into the picture. As explored later in the report, the relationship between generations of the diaspora is not an easy one, however.

A number of second-generation interviewees emphasised the human rights violations and the cultural genocide that is taking place against Tamils in Sri Lanka. Several among them even claimed that the Tamil community is becoming assimilated into the Sinhala Buddhist culture pervasive in the island nation. Taking the case of British Tamils as a reference, second and third generations of Tamils in other Western countries pursue a rights-based approach by demanding rights on behalf of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The bottom line is that 'we want for them the same rights as we have' (Vimalarajah *et al.* 2011:24). Several among second-generation diaspora members interviewed supported a new form of insurgency, ensuring that the means and potential for a resurgence of the armed struggle prevail. Such claims, however, were rare despite the fact that the diaspora often adopts a much more radical approach than the community back home.

In terms of recent political events in Sri Lanka, the Northern Provincial Council elections that took place in September 2013 were highlighted by most as a crucial development. The elections brought about the consolidation of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) as the leading Tamil political force in Sri Lanka. Yet some interviewees emphasised its rather symbolic character, considering that crucial police and land powers are not devolved; the GoSL has the power to dissolve it anytime after one year. An interviewee raised a crucial point: 'the Governor of the Province has more power than the Chief Minister. It is important that the GoSL accepts to delegate power to the Provincial Council'.<sup>14</sup> Such a degree of subtlety among diaspora members is rare since the bulk of diaspora members are superficially informed about political events in Sri Lanka.

Despite existing shortcomings, the overall perception among interviewees of the Northern Provincial Council election outcome was positive. The bulk of them thought that it was important to take advantage of the momentum. They saw it as a positive first step towards broadening the limited democratic space available in Sri Lanka. The significance of these elections was eloquently put by an interviewee: '... there are many different opinions



among Tamils but there is one opinion in terms of Tamils' aspirations on the fact that a political settlement can only happen through democratic means'.<sup>15</sup>

### **1.3.3 Specifics of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland**

In order to better understand the politics of the Tamil community in Switzerland, it is necessary to outline key migration flows into the country. According to the Swiss Federal Office for Migration (the State Secretariat for Migration – SME – after December 2014), the number of asylum claims by Sri Lankans – 90-95 per cent of whom were Tamils – peaked during the early 1990s, though asylum seekers have continued to trickle in thereafter, with another surge around the end of the war, namely between 2008 and 2010.<sup>16</sup> During early 1994, a tri-partite repatriation Agreement was signed between the Swiss and Sri Lankan governments regarding the return of rejected Sri Lankan asylum seekers from Switzerland. It was only reinforced from 2001 onwards. The rate of asylum status recognition for Sri Lankans remained at a low of 4 per cent from 1980 to 2004, which did not, however, seem to act as a deterrent for new migrants (Moret, Efonayi and Stants 2007:32). As of today, Switzerland is encouraging voluntary returns of Sri Lankan asylum seekers, particularly among recent arrivals. The current approach of the Swiss government has enhanced the existing tensions between members within the Tamil diaspora that have managed to achieve a permanent status in Switzerland, including Swiss citizenship, and those that are still on a legal limbo.

The Tamil diaspora in Switzerland is perceived as ideologically and intellectually mildly engaged in Tamil politics despite their key role as fundraising agents from 1991 onwards. It is perceived instead, as highlighted by Reeves (2007:138), as a high earning community compared to other Tamil diaspora groups in Europe. This feature has made it the 'LTTE's banker', in contrast to London and Paris, which have traditionally been the Tamil Tigers' political headquarters in the continent. The Swiss Tamil diaspora has traditionally provided extensive resources for the LTTE and other militant groups to tap into; these were mostly exploited by PLOTE till 1991. The arrival of Sathasivam Krishnakumar *alias* Kittu in Switzerland in September of 1991 accelerated the Tamil Tigers' fundraising and propaganda activities from Swiss soil. Kittu was for a long time the LTTE's second most senior commander and a close friend of Prabhakaran. He arrived in Switzerland after being expelled from London and refused entry in Paris.

During the nineties, the LTTE focussed on tapping into the Swiss Tamil diaspora's resources conscious of the increase in single Tamil young men without families or long-term prospects in Switzerland who could be more easily lured into participating in LTTE activities. It is estimated that 80 per cent of Tamils in Switzerland contributed regularly with donations to the LTTE, mostly with permanent payments discounted from their salaries (Mathis

1997:98-9). Additional fundraising took place via calls on Tamils for donations, either weekly or monthly, through a chain of 'People's Shops' in main Swiss cities or via sports and cultural events organised throughout the country (McDowell 1996:254, 257, 259, 264).

Paradoxically, despite the capacity to provide funding to LTTE activities in Sri Lanka, the bulk of Tamil migrants in Switzerland – particularly among the first generation – are poorly educated, speak little English and are too busy working to survive to engage in Tamil politics (Moret, Efionayi and Stants 2007:50-1). The lack of local language skills contrasts the case of English-speaking countries, which have traditionally attracted highly educated Tamils. In fact, there seems to have been a portion among Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora members in Switzerland who sought to migrate to Anglo-Saxon countries but did not make it, in the end. An indication of this can be found in the fact that when asked about why they came to Switzerland, several interviewees mentioned that this was not their end destination; the plan had been to migrate elsewhere but the conditions in which they migrated, often illegally, led them to get 'stranded' in Switzerland. This was not the case during the early stages of the Tamil asylum diaspora when professional and well-educated Tamils entered Switzerland but moved on to Britain where higher skilled employment opportunities were available (McDowell 1996:275).

Swiss asylum policies are considered to have encouraged unskilled workers' migration: the line between asylum seekers and economic migrants – or the right to asylum and the right to work – has become increasingly blurred. Employed and self-sufficient Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers who had been in the country for four or five years were allowed to give up their asylum-seeking status in exchange for a temporary, renewable residence permit (McDowell 1996:274). This meant that the motivation for emigration to Switzerland may not have always been solely political but also economic, which has further shaped the degree and nature of engagement in Tamil politics by diaspora members.

McDowell (1996:275) highlights how access to Swiss schools, the accumulation of Swiss francs and the acquisition of a more permanent status – beyond asylum – became key motives to seek to remain in Switzerland, particularly with a view to the second generation. Another specific feature of Tamils in Switzerland is that they are scattered throughout the country. Some interviewees saw this as a hindrance towards mobilising politically. On the flip side, others highlighted how it allows diaspora members more freedom vis-à-vis the community, while encouraging them to integrate locally.

A number of first-generation interviewees noted that holding Swiss citizenship influenced political mobilisation of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Switzerland. They specifically highlighted how the second generation was politically apathetic due to their foreign citizenship. Yet a high number among first-generation interviewees who have been in Switzerland for long conceded to having become Swiss citizens themselves. In addition, it

can be argued that holders of Swiss citizenship may feel more capable to act and speak out for the rights of the Tamil community without fear of reprisal from the GoSL or of having immigration problems with the Swiss authorities. In fact, as noted earlier in the report, Swiss Tamils are more prone to a rights-based approach based on their dual identity. Therefore, the notion that the second-generation is more apathetic politically-speaking based on their dual identity is irrelevant in our view.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

Aside from a brief literature review, the bulk of the report is based on empirical material collected throughout a number of interviews – qualitative in nature – undertaken with members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland. A total of 32 interviews were conducted in the German and French parts of the country between June 2013 and March 2014 with a slightly higher number of male interviewees. The bulk of the interviewees arrived in Switzerland during the 1980s and early 1990s; the exception were three interviewees who migrated after the year 2000.

The questions posed to interviewees were open-ended with a view to collecting a wide spectrum of insights, rich in subtleties. Questions were framed around the following key themes:

- Origins and personal life details of the interviewee, including personal engagement in Tamil politics
- Views on the ethnic conflict and politics in Sri Lanka
- Views on the Tamil diaspora
- Views on Tamil diaspora organisations
- Views on key sources of information for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora
- Views on the role of external actors

## **2. MAPPING OF TAMIL POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS POST-2009 IN SWITZERLAND**

This section looks at the different Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora organisations in Switzerland with an emphasis on the newly created organisations post-2009.

It is impossible not to start by briefly mentioning the LTTE, despite the ambivalence in views regarding its current activities in Switzerland. In parallel, the TGTE, the GTF and the National Country Councils (NCCs) have emerged as key players in Tamil transnational political activism after May 2009. While the TGTE and the SCET (the Swiss branch of the NCCs) have found a space in the Swiss Tamil diaspora's political scenario, the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) is not present in the country.

Generally, the views expressed by interviewees on the various organisations were rather negative; these new organisations seem to have lost the popularity that they enjoyed

at their inception. In addition to a lack of transparency and a sense of immobility on their part, the power issues within and between the different organisations (which prevents any communication and collaboration between them) have led to increased distrust towards them among members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. According to our interviewees, this is particularly the case of the TGTE and the SCET. Below we list the different organisations with relevant details about them, in order of importance in Switzerland and according to our empirical findings.

### ***Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)***

#### Structure:

- The LTTE has historically been and continues to be represented in Switzerland, where it is not proscribed as a terrorist organisation, unlike in other Western and certain Asian countries.
- It is uncertain how intact its network and structure remain.

#### Activities in Switzerland:

- According to certain accounts, fundraising by the Tamil Tigers continues in Switzerland but Tamil people increasingly ask questions about what they are going to do with it. Money is given to former LTTE cadres in Sri Lanka, to finance ways for them to escape to Australia, South Africa and Malaysia.<sup>17</sup> Ongoing fundraising activities are corroborated by the 'Sicherheit Schweiz Report' from 2012 (p. 29) but not mentioned in the 'Sicherheit Schweiz Report' from 2014, however.
- Currently there are LTTE activists in every canton that look after repaying loans/credits that they took out and that the LTTE was meant to repay for them but it did not happen after the military defeat.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) in Switzerland***

#### Structure:

- The TGTE in Switzerland has ten elected representatives (elected for 2 years). The first election took place in 2010, when 19 candidates contested the election, the second one followed during October 2013. There are currently only 9 elected members (due to the fact that only 9 candidates contested the election).  
[See [www.tamilelection.ch](http://www.tamilelection.ch) / <http://www.govthamileelam.org/index.php/mp-s-constituencies/switzerland>].
- The General Secretary of the cabinet is Mr. Murugiah Suhinthan, based in Geneva.

#### Activities in Switzerland:

- Unlike in other Western countries (e.g. Canada, Norway, UK or the US), the political lobby of the TGTE in Switzerland is not prominent; their political activism is weak.
- At its inception, the organisation arranged some meetings at the Bundeshaus with Swiss MPs, as well as with factions of parties at the regional level, in order to publicly explain the history of the war in Sri Lanka.
- They created an ID for Tamil Eelam that people could buy for 15 CHF.
- Two youth members got elected during the first election; their main divergence with the first generation was their commitment to undertake local initiatives in Switzerland, reaching out to the Swiss population. The first generation showed little interest in 'localising' the Tamil cause.
- There are currently no meetings organised in Switzerland, there was only one meeting organised at the beginning.
- The main activity is based on a monthly teleconference with all the TGTE parliamentarians spread across the world (resembling a parliament seating) combined with an annual meeting in the US. Discussions mainly concern how to reach self-determination.
- Ms. Rajinithi Sinnathamby, elected in Geneva in 2010, was appointed as the Minister of Tamil Arts and Heritage. Her responsibility was to document the demolition of Hindu temples, the renaming of places and the land grabbing taking place in the North and East.

#### Views of our interviewees in Switzerland:

- Little has been heard from them after the 2010 election. Nothing is happening in Switzerland compared with other countries such as the US, Canada and the UK.
- The elected TGTE representatives in Switzerland are perceived as unreliable, while the organisation's activities are seen as lacking clarity and transparency.
- Part of the critique towards the organisation has to do with its dichotomist way of thinking, which promotes separation and prevents relations with political stakeholders (among them the TNA) or any development activities in Sri Lanka.
- A second aspect of the critique is related to the lack of consensus within the TGTE, seen as a conflicting sum of personal agendas.

## **Swiss Council of Eelam Tamils (SCET)**

### Structure:

- The SCET currently has 31 elected representatives, elected in March 2010. [See [http://www.tamilelection.ch/french\\_new/index.html](http://www.tamilelection.ch/french_new/index.html)].
- There are currently two co-presidents: Mr. Akilan Arunakirinathan and Ms. Anna Annor.
- The organisation is composed of members from the first and second generations but the first generation has taken over gradually with the second generation adopting an insignificant role.
- Currently (and probably since 2011) malfunctioning or not functioning at all due to bad management and internal conflicts. The lack of involvement of one of the co-presidents, who is too busy with his own professional activities, combined with divergent personal agendas and objectives between the first and second generations have hindered the organisation's activities.
- The level of confrontation among members was such that they have stopped meeting regularly. The bulk of the second generation has left and currently only 8 members remain more or less involved.
- The same type of structure is operational for the National Country Councils in other European countries. The Norwegian Council appears to be the only one that is still active and functioning effectively.

### Activities in Switzerland:

- The organisation conducts activities on a national level.
- From its inception, they thought that the organisation's activities were complementary to those of the TGTE but the latter refused to have any communication, collaboration or joint activities with the SCET.
- The first generation is mainly involved in the organisation of traditional demonstrations.
- The second generation sought to get the organisation more involved in advocacy activities vis-à-vis the Swiss people. They tried to work on small, pragmatic and targeted projects through democratic and legal actions (e.g. a case brought at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, targeted demonstrations with Amnesty International against the return of Tamils to Sri Lanka in 2011...). Their aim is to foster deeper engagement with local institutions and work on integration-related projects that deal with the cultural development and the dual identity of Swiss Sri Lankan Tamils.
- Currently no planned projects, except the production of a game for children called 'Ethnopoly', with Q&A helping youngsters to learn about the history of Sri Lanka.

#### Views of our interviewees in Switzerland:

- The organisation is largely perceived as being pro-LTTE due to the dominance by the first generation and its separatist agenda.

#### ***Swiss Tamil Diaspora (Tamil Diaspora Schweiz)***

##### Structure:

- Launched in 2009 by a small group of young Tamils with the help of Mr. Lathan Suntharalingam (same status as the German Tamil Diaspora).
- The current president is Ms. Suganthiny Sivakumar, based in Biel.
- The objectives of the organisation are to allow the second generation to bring forward more professional and pragmatic solutions to the situation in Sri Lanka through local politics and an exchange with the Swiss population and institutions, particularly by engaging with the Swiss media.

##### Activities in Switzerland:

- In 2010, the organisation produced three editions of the newspaper 30 Minuten [See <http://www.30min.ch/>]. It was not only a way to communicate with the Swiss population, but also a means to gain the recognition from the first generation.
- The organisation helped organise the 1976 Vaddukoddai referendum from January 2010 [See [www.tamilelection.ch/makkalavai.html](http://www.tamilelection.ch/makkalavai.html)]. The voting for the referendum took place simultaneously throughout Europe.
- The organisation is no longer active since 2010.

#### ***Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO) Switzerland***

##### Structure:

- Organisation established in 2001 in Switzerland with the aim to assist young Swiss Sri Lankan Tamils in Switzerland with sociocultural and integration issues, intercultural exchanges and inform them of the grievances, abuses and rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka.
- Members must be between the ages of 15 and 30.
- The organisation was very active among the Swiss Sri Lankan Tamil youth until 2009 and the ulterior fall of the LTTE: the number of members fell from approximately 200 in 2004 to 5 in 2009, and is currently around 30.
- Mr. Thuvaragan Balachandran, based in Lugano, is the president since 2012.

#### Activities in Switzerland:

- The organisation provided humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami, it assisted in constructing a school and sent young Swiss Sri Lankan Tamils to Sri Lanka with a view to helping the Tamil community.
- The organisation currently edits a newspaper every 3 months and organises cultural events and sports competitions, such as dance events and football matches.
- They are also involved in lobbying, as well as in Tamil culture and teaching activities [For more see [www.tyo.ch](http://www.tyo.ch)].

#### ***Forum for Sri Lankan Diaspora in Switzerland***

##### Structure:

- Launched in 2009 in Zürich.
- The General-Secretary is Mr Kalamohan, based in Bern.
- The aim of the organisation is to work together with different-minded people. The organisation is composed of members belonging to PLOTE (15), as well as the TULF, TELO, EPRLF, EPDP and Sinhalese members.
- The organisation is allegedly sponsored by the GoSL.
- It currently has 90 members.

#### Activities in Switzerland:

- The organisation has undertaken humanitarian and development activities in Sri Lanka, e.g. it gathered funds to start a textile factory in Mullaitivu.
- It has had no activity for the last two years. Some cash sent to Sri Lanka went missing, which provoked a clash between its members.

#### ***Nalavalvu***

##### Structure:

- Formed by health workers in Switzerland who speak the Tamil language.
- Network of health organisations that provides assistance to first generation Tamils in Switzerland linked to health and integration issues.

##### Activities:

- The aim is to facilitate access to health of Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in the country, hereby furthering their integration.
- They undertake translation activities and provide advice to Sri Lankan Tamils in the country.



- They are a contact point for locals who would like to have information or advice about the Sri Lankan Tamil community in the country.
- They have organised information meetings on specific sicknesses and health issues that seem to be particularly problematic among the Tamil diaspora.
- They publish a regular magazine on relevant health issues in Tamil [For more see <http://www.nalavalvu.ch/ueberuns.html>].

### ***Sivaram Memorial Society***

#### Structure:

- The organisation is formed by a group of journalists.
- The organisation's president is currently Mr. Shan Thavarajah, based in Bern.

#### Activities:

- The organisation is engaged in organising trips and meetings for Sri Lankan politicians in Switzerland, providing the venue for discussions and sending reports on these meetings to the international media.
- They recently invited P. Ariyanaththiran, MP in Batticaloa, and S. Jeyanathamoorthy, Ex MP in Batticaloa and member of the TGTE, to come to Switzerland.

### ***TRO***

- The TRO exists in Switzerland but it was not purposefully mentioned by any of our interviewees, except one when asked specifically about it.
- We assume therefore that the organisation is currently not very active, partly because it too has suffered from intergenerational problems, with the second generation claiming that the organisation is dominated by the first generation. <sup>19</sup>

### ***Frontline Socialist Party (FLSP)***

- It is a Sri Lankan political party, funded in 2013, aiming to establish localised party offices, as well as to promote the 'samaurimai movement' or 'equal rights movement' in English.
- The party is in the process of setting up its network, it is currently still small-scale; its General Secretary, Premakumar Gunaratnam attended the organisation's second meeting in Switzerland held in January 2013.
- It is a spin-off of the JVP in Sri Lanka; they were the last ones to form a party of their own.

- The party attracts many alternative voices in Switzerland, the non-separatist, pro-united Sri Lanka factions, and it fights against racism and class bias, and in favour of equal rights.

### ***Tamil Literary Group (Nirmala Rajasingam & Rajeshkumar 'Raghavan' )***

#### Structure:

- London-based organisation with a very fluid structure: 100 members in the UK, 50-60 in France, 50-60 in Germany and approximately 30 in Switzerland.
- Many of their discussion forums are based in the UK.
- They have also built small networks with other groups in Sri Lanka, India and Europe, particularly in France, Germany and Norway. In addition, they have ties with civil society groups in Sri Lanka.

[Nirmala Rajasingam is a Sri Lankan Tamil author and activist who lives in London. She is a member of the steering committee of the organisation, an international network of progressive diaspora voices. She was the first woman to be detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in the early 1980s, survived the government-engineered Welikade prison massacre and was subsequently freed from prison by LTTE guerrillas. She left the LTTE as a result of the lack of internal democracy within the movement and its serious human-rights abuses. Nirmala is the sister of Rajani Thiranagama, founding member of the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) Jaffna, who was assassinated for her outspoken views.

Rajeshkumar 'Raghavan' works in the legal profession, providing legal support to Tamil refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, while staying in touch with pro-democracy initiatives in Sri Lanka. Raghavan spent most of his youth in charge of the LTTE before leaving in protest over authoritarianism and internecine killings in 1984.]

#### Activities:

- The aim of their network is to raise alternative voices, to create a culture of dialogue in Sri Lanka and among the diaspora, away from militant mind-sets. Through articles and books, they try to raise issues linked to gender, caste and other progressive issues.
- Their aim is to be able to speak openly about any societal and political issues, without fear of being beaten up.
- They are keen to establish links with Sinhalese and Muslim activists too.
- Up until now, they have not been very successful in attracting members in Switzerland, where they perceive the Tamil diaspora as less open to different points of view. Hence, they wonder what is the scope for alternative Sri Lankan Tamil democratic groups and organisations in Switzerland.

*Sri Lankan Tamil transnational organisations that are not present in Switzerland:*

### **Global Tamil Forum (GTF)**

The key absentee among the Sri Lankan Tamil transnational organisations in Switzerland is the Global Tamil Forum, also recently banned by the GoSL. A conglomerate of the British Tamil Forum in the UK, the United States Tamil Political Action Council (USTPAC) in the US, Canadian Tamil Congress from Canada and other organisations, it was formed in May 2009.<sup>20</sup> In several other European countries – Norway, France and Italy – the respective NCCs represent the country organisations at the GTF; this did not happen in Switzerland.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the origins and evolution of the GTF are not linked to the TGTE and the NCCs, as mentioned earlier.

The GTF has no proper branch in Switzerland and there seems to be limited awareness about it in Switzerland (part of our interviewees did know the GTF). Compared to the TGTE, the perception of the GTF seems better, partly due to the reputation of Father Emmanuel and partly because its goals seem more realistic. It has also focused on diplomatic channels of engagement. Thus, the GTF is considered as more reflected in terms of what can be done, without advocating for self-determination and an independent state.

### **3. FINDINGS: ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION**

Below we outline the key points pertaining to our findings.

*1. Since 2009, the end of the LTTE dominance over diaspora politics has led to a sense of scepticism and certain apathy among the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Switzerland.*

The majority among interviewees showed an ongoing support for an independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam via peaceful means; yet the notion in itself is increasingly perceived as unrealistic. For a moderate majority, the limited democratic space and power sharing arrangements in Sri Lanka have currently taken up the centre stage. However, there is also a radical minority that talks about an ongoing ‘identity and cultural genocide’ against Tamils. Notwithstanding, there is consensus on not wanting to lose lives anymore, as well as on the perception that while the LTTE has helped to defend their rights, it is now time to move on and learn from past mistakes.

The events of 2009 signaled to a clear shift from a diaspora interest in ideological and politicized engagement in Sri Lanka to a development-prone one. While the role of the diaspora in Switzerland has been largely financial, it has also historically had a strong ideological component, which now seems on the decrease. Those among diaspora members that currently want to get involved in development activities in Sri Lanka do not know which diaspora organisation they can really trust and engage with. The end of the war and of the

Tamil Tigers as a militant group has encouraged a new line of thinking, namely, that any political change can only come from inside Sri Lanka, via local political actors or institutional arrangements like the Northern Provincial Council. This view was sometimes highlighted by those sceptics towards the second generation and their alleged misinformation about the reality in the homeland. Followers of this approach believe that the role of the diaspora should be restricted to supporting economic development, reconstruction and humanitarian activities in Sri Lanka.

Tamil diaspora members now travel much more regularly to Sri Lanka. This has had a number of consequences. For one, it has shifted their concerns to more mundane matters such as their assets and properties in Sri Lanka, as well as their holidays in the homeland. It has also translated into somewhat of a 'reality check', whereby they have come to realise that despite the complex political situation, their relatives in Sri Lanka do not all face major security issues. As an interviewee succinctly put it: 'Now people keep quiet, because they are able to go to Sri Lanka. During their holidays, they can go without fear. Only people who were engaged are threatened or arrested'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, several interviewees highlighted how the real insecurity currently stems from intra-Tamil violence.

## *2. Political views of the diaspora are not ideologically focused, rather based on personal agendas and circumstances, beyond a common goal.*

There remains an overall sense of communal distrust among Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora members, partly related to Tamil culture, partly linked to the nature of Sri Lankan politics. In fact, it was surprising to see that despite the existing image of a close-knit community, a number of interviewees seemed rather disconnected from other diaspora members. Similarly, individual *versus* collective action seemed more prevalent than initially suspected, regardless of generations and the level of integration in Switzerland. There is a growing recognition – though not publicly acknowledged – that the Tamil diaspora has been manipulated to suit the interests of the Tamil leadership in Sri Lanka. The absence of a culture of dialogue among Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora still makes it very hard for them to freely express their opinions publicly.

First-generation Tamil diaspora members are generally better acquainted with domestic and transnational Tamil politics. Part of it has to do with them being born in Sri Lanka and growing up there. Yet informed views are often undistinguishable from sentimental and nostalgic feelings of their 'previous lives' in the homeland. For the first generation, a door remains open to potentially returning to Sri Lanka at an older age, even if it is an idealistic prospect. The idea of return and a lower degree of integration encourages the first generation to be closely committed to global Tamil politics. This contrasts with the second generation who has often never been to Sri Lanka and has no intention of settling

down there. Paradoxically, the first generation's pro-active engagement with the Tamil struggle has sometimes made them have less radical views and be less pro-LTTE.

According to our fieldwork, the second generation is still less mobilised politically than the first one. Political mobilisation within the second generation currently ranges from utter disinterest to an increasingly active participation in Tamil diaspora politics. As in the case of the first-generation diaspora members, their individual circumstances, socio-economic background and parental commitment to Tamil politics all have an influence. We sensed some confusion as to the priorities of second-generation diaspora members, which oscillated between their integration in Switzerland and their activism on Sri Lanka. Several interviewees perceived the second generation as a kind of 'lobby force' that supports reconstruction and development activities on the island nation with the inspiration of the Sri Lankan people.

As with the first generation, 2009 marked a substantial shift in the level and nature of political engagement of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils. When asked about an independent Tamil Eelam, the bulk of second-generation interviewees acknowledged that while this would be the ideal end goal, there were more pressing issues to deal with. These included the democratic deficit and discrimination against Tamils in Sri Lanka. The second generation showed an unprecedented interest in engaging with Swiss actors in an attempt to improve the situation of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Unlike first-generation Tamils, they were much less suspicious towards government authorities, certainly Swiss ones. Second-generation interviewees pointed to the idea of using Swiss channels to raise awareness on the Tamil cause and eventually increase the overall leverage of the Tamil diaspora.

There is a clear division in approach and agenda along generational lines, though also a wide disparity in views within each generation, respectively. Several second-generation members noted how they are in favour of pursuing a diplomatic pathway rather than the militant channel historically taken by the first generation. The use of UN-related and European institutions for advocacy and political purposes was flagged repeatedly by second-generation interviewees; these went beyond the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). An interviewee gave the examples of the International Criminal Court initiative against the Sri Lankan government, as well as the attempt to revoke the EU ban on the LTTE.<sup>23</sup>

### *3. The new Tamil transnational political organisations are suffering from a lack of credibility and legitimacy, their impact is marginal.*

There is pervasive distrust and overall scepticism within the diaspora towards institutionalised Tamil political organisations overseas. These organisations lack a vision and are perceived as not representing the diaspora's interests. Therefore, they are struggling to build trust among diaspora members. In addition, interviewees' knowledge of the new transnational Tamil political organisations turned out to be surprisingly vague. This may well

have to do with the incoherent nature of the organisations themselves or simply with a general lack of interest, despite the fact that some interviewees remain or had been politically engaged with them.

The Tamil political scenario abroad is full of splinter groups, much like in Sri Lanka, which makes it hard to lump views in ideological categories. For their part, the new transnational organisations come across as a grey zone where it is hard to identify their objectives and means to achieve them, as shown in the mapping section earlier. More importantly, they have failed to deliver and are not transparent. The lack of a common goal or vision undermines the different organisations' reputation, as well as the genuine impact of their activities. The April 2014 GoSL ban on these new organisations may further hinder their impact; this must be carefully evaluated in the future.

The power vacuum left by the Tamil Tigers has enhanced the quest for personal agendas and political power struggles within the respective leaderships of these organisations. The new transnational organisations seem sceptical about any development activities undertaken in Sri Lanka, despite this being considered the most pertinent need by a number of diaspora members. In addition, the fact that the so-called 'new' organisations are being run by former LTTE supporters sheds serious doubts on them. A number of interviewees pointed to the fact that it was the same people in a different setting.

One among the most obvious splits within the recently created transnational organisations was the generational one, as alluded to in the mapping of these organisations. This has led to a number of problems within the organisations where both generations are represented, such as the TGTE, the SCET or the TRO. Certain second-generation diaspora members were particularly critical of the first generation putting others down and creating jealousy among its members in pursuit of personal agendas and prestige. Moreover, in their view these organisations are frozen in an old way of thinking, as well as in a separatist mind-set. An interviewee eloquently noted: 'They speak well, but what do they actually do? They play with our parents' emotions. They fool them and make them dream about the possibility of coming back one day in an independent country.'<sup>24</sup>

Second-generation Tamils have further created their own organisations that are involved in lobbying and awareness activities vis-à-vis Swiss political parties and younger members of the Swiss Tamil community. Ultimately, the goal is to foster deeper engagement with local institutions, as well as to better inform second-generation Tamils about the war and the situation of the Tamil community on the island nation. Establishing a deeper relationship with Switzerland is an existential question for the second generation. According to our fieldwork, integration-related projects that deal with culture and the dual identity of Swiss Tamils are a priority; this, however, is of little interest to the first generation.

4. *In what concerns the LTTE presence abroad, its impact and activities, there were divergent views among diaspora members.*

How much power and influence does the LTTE as an organisation continue to yield abroad? This remains the white elephant in the room, as well as the most elusive issue in what concerns the Sri Lanka Tamil diaspora. Criticism against the Tamil Tigers is slowly becoming more perceptible, even if there has been no open discussion or public introspective process within the Sri Lankan Tamil community about what went wrong towards the end of the war. The secrecy around this topic makes it hard to gauge the genuine opinion of Tamil diaspora members on the matter.

While it is clear that the Tamil Tigers no longer exercise direct pressure on the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland, as raised by a number of interviewees, their current leverage is uncertain. In fact, the authors of this report got a different sense from the empirical material collected: for one of us, the Tamil Tigers currently hold very marginal, close to no coercive power as a political organisation in Switzerland. For the other, however, it is not so clear since several interviewees explicitly referred to the LTTE's ongoing fundraising and lobbying activities in Switzerland, albeit in a less visible manner. In light of this ambivalence, we consider that the Tamil Tigers' capacity to regroup and coerce has to be evaluated further.

5. *Despite existing critical views, the TNA is the political organisation that enjoys most support among the Tamil community, both in Sri Lanka and abroad. Yet the relationship between the TNA and the Tamil diaspora remains problematic.*

The bulk of interviewees highlighted the election victory of the TNA in the Northern Provincial Council elections as a meaningful event. The elections brought about the consolidation of the TNA as the leading Tamil political force in Sri Lanka; its significance as a key elected body and Tamil umbrella organisation is undeniable. However, several critics among diaspora members perceive it as unreliable and as having sold themselves to the GoSL. Other interviewees took an issue with the upper-caste composition of the TNA, which they saw as limiting their legitimacy in the eyes of the Tamil community as a whole. There are also doubts about the party's agenda and, most importantly, about their capacity to operationalise change by seizing development opportunities and any additional democratic space available.

Yet, the crucial hindrance for the TNA abroad lies in its complicated relationship with the diaspora. There are no institutional links between the recently created transnational organisations and key political stakeholders in Sri Lanka, such as the TNA. There is also a certain clash in objectives, such as in the case of the TGTE and the TNA: while the former seeks an independent Tamil Eelam, the latter advocates in favour of the devolution of power in a united Sri Lanka. Therefore, a key issue for the future is how to promote the TNA within

the international community, as well as within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Till now, contacts between the TNA and the diaspora have been limited to personal links but there is now a need to institutionalise these in some form.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Despite the fact that we interviewed politically active individuals, either currently active or in the past, we got the sense that the level of disengagement in Tamil politics in Switzerland is high. It is likely that this will grow, as the first generation, which is best informed, gets older and the second generation loses touch with the reality in the homeland. In fact, for the second generation, Switzerland is growingly becoming the homeland, hence the dilemma vis-à-vis their engagement in Sri Lankan Tamil politics. This potential disinterest renders a very different kind of diaspora to the heavily ideological and politicised one formed by the early Sri Lankan Tamil migrants to Switzerland.
2. Differences between generations within the Tamil diasporic community in Switzerland are clearly identifiable, despite individual agendas also coming to the fore. Therefore, it is crucial to keep in mind the generational gap in terms of their mind-set, priorities and interests. Many among the second generation have never been to Sri Lanka, which is telling with regards to their dependency on the first generation when it comes to Tamil politics. In contrast, they have a much more informed understanding of the Swiss socio-political context and have the means to utilise this to their advantage when advocating for the Tamil cause. Issues of Swiss Tamil identity and of integration in Switzerland are likely to go up on the agenda. It is also probable that the power struggle between generations will increase as the second and third generations gradually take over from the first one.
3. The overall level of trust within the Tamil community is low, both at a personal and at an institutionalised level. The absence of a culture of dialogue makes reaching a political consensus on common goals or objectives regarding the Tamil struggle particularly difficult. Moreover, the lack of an open discussion on what went wrong in the past leads to an underlying sense of suspicion between diaspora members, undermining the cohesion of the community. In addition, cleavage lines are increasingly less based on ideology and more on individual agendas. The power struggles following the end of the LTTE's domination have opened the space for new Tamil transnational organisations to come into the picture but they have also enhanced the existing divisions within the community. This has weakened the Tamil diaspora's global power of advocacy in favour of the Tamil cause vis-à-vis the international community.



4. The objectives, political agendas and impact of the recently created Tamil transnational organisations remain vague and unspecific. This has undermined their credibility and potential for action, leading to distrust by the community instead. Former LTTE supporters are perceived to have infiltrated these so-called 'new' organisations, which is frustrating for the second generation and sparks additional distrust among the first generation. The underlying suspicion towards these organisations renders their role and influence marginal, thus far. Additional research on the impact of the GoSL April 2014 ban on the newly created transnational organisations must be undertaken.
5. There is a disparity in views regarding the ongoing activities and leverage of the LTTE – particularly its network and front organisations – in Switzerland. The general sense is that the LTTE no longer has the capacity to coerce or take the lead of the Tamil political struggle. This does not mean, however, that they are no longer active in Switzerland. In fact, some interviewees referred to their continuing fundraising activities and their network in Switzerland. Whatever influence is left of the Tamil Tigers, fundraising and extortion matters remain sensitive and purposefully vague topics. Therefore, it has not been easy to gauge diaspora members' genuine opinion on this, though interviewees did feel more comfortable talking about the Tamil Tigers, generally, than about extortion specifically. Additional research must be conducted on both topics in order to fully understand the political reality of the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland.
6. The TNA was referred to as the Tamil political party in Sri Lanka that holds most legitimacy, despite not being completely free of criticism. The links between the TNA and the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, however, are weak, particularly in what concerns the 'new' transnational organisations. It is likely that much more could be achieved in favour of the Tamil cause should diaspora members foster tighter links with the TNA, particularly in light of the latter's election victory in the Northern Provincial Council.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Easwaran Rutnam, 'War on The Diaspora', Sunday Leader, 6 April 2014, online.
- <sup>2</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 9 September 2013, Zurich, Switzerland.
- <sup>3</sup> See 'Evolution of the Liberation Tamils of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) International Network', *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, Government of Sri Lanka, p.3., online.
- <sup>4</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 12 February 2014, Lucerne, Switzerland.
- <sup>5</sup> See Berghof Peace Support and Centre for Just Peace and Democracy series of reports on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora from 2011, online.
- <sup>6</sup> Shanika Sriyananda, 'Govt must renew counter-terrorism strategies – Shanaka Jayasekera', *Sunday Observer*, 20 March 2011, online.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Evolution of the Liberation Tamils of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) International Network', p.7, *op. cit.* in note 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Anonymous, author interviews, 28 June 2013 and 23 February 2014, Zurich, Switzerland.
- <sup>9</sup> Shanika Sriyananda, 'Govt must renew counter-terrorism strategies – Shanaka Jayasekera', *op. cit.* in note 6.
- <sup>10</sup> D.B.S. Jeyaraj, 'LTTE Chief Matheenthiran Alias Parithy Shot Dead in Paris', *Daily Mirror*, 10 November 2012, online.
- <sup>11</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 24 March 2014, Basel, Switzerland.
- <sup>12</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 9 September 2013, Zurich, Switzerland.
- <sup>13</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 25 June 2013, Lucerne, Switzerland.
- <sup>14</sup> Anonymous, author interviews, 27 June 2013 and 8 September 2013, Winterthur, Switzerland.
- <sup>15</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 23 February 2014, Zurich, Switzerland.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Asylgesuche 1986 bis 2014', Asylgesuche nach Nationen, Bundesamt für Migration (BFM), Switzerland, online.
- <sup>17</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 23 February 2014, Zurich, Switzerland.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Anonymous, e-mail interview, 16 October 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> The original name of the organisation was the World Tamil Forum. The initiative was launched in London during March 2009 but did not get the approval of the LTTE. Only once the LTTE was defeated in the battlefield, did it resurface as the Global Tamil Forum. For more, see Sarvendra (2011:21).
- <sup>21</sup> See *Ibid.*:22.
- <sup>22</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 29 January 2014, Bern, Switzerland.
- <sup>23</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 25 June 2013, Lucerne, Switzerland.
- <sup>24</sup> Anonymous, author interview, 10 September 2013, Biel/Bienne, Switzerland.