



AN OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF AID SRI LANKA

The Aid Sri Lanka Foundation (ASL) was started in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami by individuals on the ground who wanted to provide assistance to the survivors of the disaster.

A group of local and international volunteers applied their local knowledge, contacts and desire to help to provide emergency relief to those affected. With contacts established pre-tsunami and an understanding of how things work in Sri Lanka, the team were able to determine what was required and deliver it without the delays and costs involved in the red tape and procedures which plague some of the larger institutions. From day one there was a strong commitment to providing appropriate help in a fast and cost effective way.

With time the efforts in Sri Lanka moved from saving lives to rebuilding them. This shift was reflected in the work of the Charity which moved from relief to rehabilitation. The ethos established in the early days continued. Projects were small scale and community driven. By placing the beneficiaries at the heart of projects and using participatory methods we were able to ensure the goals were truly those of the community and that the results fully met their needs. In addition, working in this way gave ownership to the communities themselves. Again, work was limited to areas where trusted local contacts were established as this is an essential ingredient to successful work.

From the early days, commitment and hands on approach kept momentum going and costs down. Although we were keen to keep donors informed of what we were doing with their money supplying updates through the website rather than endless reports to donors allowed us to concentrate our time and resources on the projects themselves. We were also able to spend considerable time with the communities we worked with, establishing strong relationships, taking time to develop projects and altering them if requirements changed.

A total of £119,298 was raised and spent on emergency relief and numerous projects of rehabilitation and poverty alleviation. The report below outlines what was achieved with this money. Further details of projects can be found at www.aidsrilanka.org.

Mobile Medical Centres

With the expertise of local and international doctors, a mobile medical clinic toured the country providing much needed medical attention to survivors. The mobile clinic reached a large number of people, avoiding the trip to the overcrowded medial centres and thus permitting them to get on with the clean-up operation. As well as attending to the afflictions sustained during the tsunami itself, the doctors also tended to wounds caused in the clear up operations and the illnesses caused from the cramped and unsanitary living conditions.



Providing Survivors with Essentials



The team delivered basic food supplies, clothes and other essentials such as soap, mosquito nets and coils, mats, cooking pots and kerosene stoves to the people who had lost everything.

Water and Sanitation

Contaminated water sources were a major problem in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. In addition to affecting the water available for drinking and washing, the stagnant, dirty water was a breeding ground for mosquitoes and diseases. The team undertook several well and pool cleaning initiatives as well as cleaning existing toilets and installing new ones in camps.



Cleaning Up



In cash-for-work projects local people were provided with the necessary tools and paid to clear the rubble and debris. They cleaned the beaches, roads and public spaces. This work was essential for making the communities habitable and for decreasing the spread of disease. This type of initiative also gives the survivors something practical to do as well as providing them with an income. Research indicates that following a disaster, people benefit greatly from structure and focused activity. For the same reason, it is important for children to return to school as soon as possible. It provides a sense of normalcy in what is a chaotic and confusing situation. With many of the schools being used as camps, the Aid Sri Lanka team arranged projects to ensure the schools were clean and safe for the children to return to.

Temporary Housing in Moratuwa

Working with local agency Impakt Aid, we provided temporary shelters for the people living in “Tent Camp” in Moratuwa, just south of Colombo. Before the tsunami, shanty towns lined the railway and beaches here. The wave washed away these dwellings leaving virtually no evidence of their existence and their residents occupied numerous camps situated just inland from the coast road.

Six months on from the tsunami this camp was home to 98 families still living in 46 rotten and leaking tents. Sanitation was poor with stagnant water pits and only two toilets between 376 people. There were real problems with drainage on the land which became waterlogged during the rains and at times there was 2 ft of water inside the tents. Mould spores on the tents were causing respiratory problems amongst the residents, particularly the children.

The project provided each of the 98 families with their own shelter as well as communal cooking areas, additional toilets and a drainage system for the surface water. The wooden shelters were designed to keep the residents dry in the rain but also to protect against the heat of the sun. A ceiling height of ten feet and roofs of wood and tar-paper instead of the commonly used corrugated iron keep the residents cool in the midday sun.

Many of the men in the camp were working in saw mills or as carpenters before the tsunami. The residents were provided with the detailed plans, the tools and the materials and undertook the construction of the shelters themselves. They clearly had the skill and know-how required. The construction of the shelters took a record 7 days during which time the whole community worked together.



Assisting Women Entrepreneurs in Matara

Aid Sri Lanka carried out two livelihood projects in partnership with the Matara District Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Helping people return to work allows them to regain a routine, provide an income to support their families and rebuild their lives. However, such projects require significant fieldwork and long term involvement. ASL would not have been able to carry out such a project without a partner like MDWCCI who had pre-tsunami relationships with the beneficiaries, a team of skilled fieldworkers and a long term presence.

Bridal Preparation and String Hopper Sellers

The first project provided assistance to women whose micro-businesses in these two sectors had been destroyed by the tsunami. When the wave hit it washed away the equipment necessary for their business.

The 20 Bridal workers were provided with new kits as well as training in new techniques, marketing and bookkeeping. Within a month of the delivery of equipment all 20 beneficiaries were back in business.

String hoppers are rice noodles and a Sri Lankan staple. Equipment was provided to 60 women working in this sector. Again, within a month of receiving the equipment the women were all back in business and enjoying higher incomes than before the tsunami due to the superior nature of the new equipment.

Looms for Coir Workers

The second project with MDWCCI provided ten simple looms to coir workers in the area. Each loom is worked by a team of five and provided new employment opportunities as well as a way to expand the business of women already working with coir, producing value-added goods and accessing new markets.



Thal Aramba Montessori School

The village of Thal Aramba lies on Sri Lanka's south coast and was badly hit by the tsunami. Three private pre-schools in this village were completely destroyed. This project, funded by Travel Aid 50 and PATA saw the construction and equipment of a new building to enable the children of Thal Aramba to continue their pre-school education.

The new school on the grounds of the Siri Mihindu temple opened in December 2005 and provides high quality facilities for 135 children, allowing room for growth. In addition, playground facilities and recreational and educational materials were provided.

In order to support local enterprises local contractors were used for this project and Thal Aramba villagers hired for the unskilled labour, providing an income for those who may have lost their livelihoods in the tsunami.

The dedicated teachers, Miss Anoma and Miss Nilu were heavily involved in the project to ensure that the resulting facilities met their requirements. The children were also involved and designed the playground area and the colourful mural on the playground wall.

The teachers, parents and children of Thal Aramba were delighted with the results and a local education official declared it the "most beautiful school in the district." Regular site visits were made in the months following the opening to provide additional support and ensure there were no problems arising.



Women's Swimming Project, Weligama.

Despite living in such close proximity to the sea, most coastal Sri Lankans cannot swim. If the population had even basic swimming techniques such as being able to float or kick a short distance to safety, the death toll might have been significantly reduced. Up to 80% of those drowned were women and children, a result of cultural practices which keep them away from water. Not having experienced a body of water larger than a bathtub, they had no idea what to do when the sea came inland, so many floundered and drowned.

This project, led by British swim teacher Christina Fonfe, uses female teachers in a secluded pool to teach teenage girls and women to swim. To date the project has taught over 700 women to swim. As well as providing this life saving skill the swimming lessons have proved an extremely empowering and enjoyable for the participants.

In addition, from these women, six have been trained to international standards and qualified as swimming teachers, recognised by the STA. These instructors are now running classes themselves, allowing more women and girls to access this life saving skill as well as providing a source of income for the teachers.



This project continues with Christina Fonfe.
You can follow the progress at www.icanswimcanyou.org.

Village Coconut, Ahangama

Working with local NGOs Sewalanka and SEDCO a coir fibre extraction mill was established, providing employment and strengthening the local coir industry. While the coir industry is a major employer in the South, the low level technology and labour intensive methods used result in a poor quality product which is unsuitable for the higher end market. By bringing new processing methods, Village Coconut opens the high quality fibre market to the South.

Despite a wealth of coconut trees, Ahangama had little structured commercial activity around this valuable resource. This initiative seeks to address both the social and economic difficulties facing the local community and promote long-term economic growth in the area. Ahangama suffers from high unemployment and there were fears of tensions arising from the arrival of families resettled here after the tsunami.

This initiative employs members of resettled and existing communities and provides an opportunity for them to work together. In addition to employment at the mill itself, further jobs have been created through the collection and supply of coconut husks as well as other coir-related schemes.

In addition, the project links in with 7 community based organisations (CBO's). These CBOs, consisting of 300 tsunami affected families, were already working with SEDCO and had been offered a contract by the industry leader to purchase all their yarn. However, the poor quality fibre available locally previously inhibited the CBOs from meeting the company's requirements. The quality fibre provided by VC enables the CBOs to supply the company, earning these small producers a stable income, something which is rare among these workers.

Village Coconut will develop a training centre to assist other small businesses in the sector to improve their product and, in time, will establish an enterprise development fund to help locals develop business ideas.



Ekamutu Pre-School and Community Centre, Devinuwara

Ekamutu Welfare Society is a local welfare group set up in 1998 to provide for the needs of the local community. The society has grown to 785 members who each contribute a small amount each month. The Society then provides community services such as pre-school, cultural classes for unemployed youths and general support to its members. The majority of the members are fishermen and so were hit hard by the tsunami and damaged livelihoods have meant things have been tough for them and their families.

Since the tsunami the demand for the Society's services has increased and they were struggling to accommodate the growing numbers wishing to attend the pre-school and cultural classes. Indeed the lack of safe premises meant many of the parents were keeping their children away from the pre-school.

Through this project supported by funds raised by Pharpsyde, we provided a new hall for use by all Ekamutu's groups. This will secure the future of the pre-school and the classes which have been of considerable benefit to the members. Furthermore, the hall will serve as a village meeting place and a centre for the community.

Local workers and local materials were used in this project, keeping the costs low and the benefits within the community which was devastated by the Boxing Day tsunami. In support of the project Society members and their families assisted where they could, transporting material to and from the site, mixing cement and providing refreshments for the workers.



Ralapanwa Water Project

Ralapanawa is situated in a poor, rural area in Sri Lanka's dry zone. Receiving only one monsoon in the spring, water becomes scarce towards the end of the summer and severe shortages are common towards the end of the year. The families in this community live in poverty, surviving on small scale paddy and chena cultivation and the lack of water exacerbates an already difficult life.

In light of the local water shortages and the difficulties the school experiences during the dry season, the school planned to build a well on its land to provide water to the school and villagers. Funds were raised by the villagers and work commenced on the well. However, the contractors disappeared with the money after making the preliminary excavations, leaving a shallow hole. Aid Sri Lanka were asked to complete the work.

The well will provide water for 250 local families. Previously, the villagers travelled up to 3km to get water. The journeys were typically made on foot or bicycle. In addition to being time-consuming and physically strenuous, particularly during hot months, the area is home to wild elephants which are extremely dangerous.

It is not only the scarcity of rain water which is problematic in this area, but ground water is often of poor quality due to geological factors and irrigation practices. In the design of this project we enlisted the expertise of hydrologists, using the latest technology to identify the optimum location for drilling and the best well type, thus ensuring that the well yields the highest quality water possible.

The construction of the well was assisted by local villagers who were keen to participate in the project, overseen by technical experts. The experts also provided training to a team of villagers so that they could maintain the well and undertake any minor repairs themselves.



Kottagama School

Kottagama school, situated in a remote rural area in Sri Lanka's dry zone caters for 200 children from poor families. This project, funded by Sibford School provided much needed expansion and improvement to the facilities.

Government attention and financial assistance rarely venture this far off the beaten track. With a desperate need for extra teaching space, the parents collected funds for the construction of a new building housing three classrooms. Although parents had managed to start the building funds run out and they remained unusable.

Through providing the necessary materials we were able to complete the three additional classrooms, build much needed toilet facilities and undertake numerous repair works to existing buildings making the school a safe and enjoyable place to learn and play.

While it was sometimes necessary to employ skilled professionals such as masons and carpenters, much of the work was carried out by parents who were delighted to be able to make a difference to the way their children would learn.



St Sebastien's School

In this small project, support was given to undertake badly needed repairs to this pre-school. The roof in particular was in an appalling state, the old tiles being compared to poppadoms by one of the concerned parents. Much of the work was carried out by the dedicated parents who were keen to ensure their children had a safe environment in which to learn and play.



Siri Peracom School

Siri Peracom is a small village in Sri Lanka's rural Dry Zone. The local school had limited resources and the parents wanted to improve the facilities by providing a library. Most of the fathers work in small scale paddy farming and the mothers work in cashew nut farming. Their incomes are very small, leaving little money after the daily essentials are bought. Using whatever spare money they had the parents bought bricks and other building materials for the library and after nearly ten years had almost completed the shell of the building.

With funding from Sibford School in the UK this project provided the materials to complete the building work, furnish the rooms and purchase the books. Parents played a crucial role in the project undertaking much of the work. Where skilled labour was needed local craftsmen were used, keeping the benefits within the community

The books provided were a mixture of educational books from the school syllabus and story books for the children to read at their leisure.

It was inspiring to work with a community who had been working so hard to improve the facilities available for their children despite facing such difficult everyday circumstances. Parents, teachers and children were all delighted with the results.



Boat Project

Fishing is the principle livelihood in many of Sri Lanka's coastal communities. It is an industry which suffered significant losses from the tsunami with huge numbers of boats and nets being lost to the sea. This project provided replacement boats to a small collective of fishermen in Balapitya in the South West of the country.

Aruna Pre-School, Vitiyala

Vitiyala is a village inland from tsunami-affected Matara on the South Coast. It is a rural area where the villagers have a low income, usually employed in casual labour or small scale market trading. From our first visit to the school it was apparent that the small building was in need of some urgent attention.

The walls were like a patchwork of holes and cracks, the floor was similarly damaged, the roof leaked badly and the doors and windows were riddled termites. In addition, the toilet had been broken for some time and was unusable. There was also a severe lack of furniture and facilities.

Consulting with the teachers, children and parents a list of needs and priorities was made and the parents volunteered to help where they could. Having wanted to improve the facilities for a long time, given the opportunity they were all eager to help.

Extensive repair works were undertaken, new furniture was provided and educational and recreational equipment supplied.



Thiagoda Market Workers

When the tsunami hit Matara town the local market was in full swing. The wave washed away not only the produce but also the stallholders' equipment such as scales and bicycles. In Thiagoda, a poor rural area just inland from Matara, a large number of families rely on income from markets such as these. In this project we provided assistance to individual stallholders who had been struggling to re-establish their business after the tsunami. The needs of each was carefully assessed by local fieldworkers. The requirements varied from small grants to buy stock, to replacing a bike or cart which they need to take their goods to market. Relatively small contributions allowed stallholders to return to work and earn the money to support their families.

Samanala Pre-School

The first visit to Samanala Pre-School revealed a shabby building with few saving graces. Children's art work hung on the walls trying to cover the hundreds of holes but the walls still looked tired with dirty, chipped paint. The simple cement floor was so thin that in many places the dirt ground beneath was exposed. Twenty years ago the floor was probably smooth but had become rough and covered with cracks and holes. The state of the floor was terrible but since the school has only a handful of chairs, most of which are damaged, many of the children spent their lessons sitting on this floor.

The tiled roof leaked and in places the wooden rafters were completely rotten, at risk of collapsing in bad weather. The single toilet, accessed from the back of the building was damaged beyond repair.

The village suffers from poverty with most inhabitants undertaking casual work or small scale farming. There is a local poverty alleviation group looking at ways to improve the lives of the families here. This is just one of the community groups who use the pre-school for meetings. Like many schools in Sri Lanka, Samanala pre-school is very much the centre of the community and the residents found it symbolic that the building was in such dire condition.

Working with the local community and using the expertise of the carpenter living next door to the school and the hardworking and ever-smiling village mason this project undertook extensive remedial works to the existing building, providing a new floor, windows and doors as well as replacing most of the roof and building a new toilet which could be accessed without going outside. Once the structural work was done, new furniture, educational materials and toys were also supplied.

