

Class of 1978 Foundation Grant for Community Service
Project Report: Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Chiraddikulam, Sri Lanka
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Background

This summer I volunteered for Citizens Initiative (CI), a Trust Fund founded in 2009 by a group of individuals of various professions. Their purpose is to overcome public apathy to the consequences of the war in Sri Lanka that spanned nearly three decades. As they constantly emphasise in their appeal letters, their mandate is to build bridges between communities while uplifting vulnerable and marginalised populations in Sri Lanka. They work entirely on a volunteer basis, juggling this humanitarian work with their assorted occupations, and it was very rewarding to work alongside these energetic, empathetic individuals.

By the close of the war in late May 2009, approximately 300,000 Sri Lankan citizens were internally displaced in camps and hospitals in the north of Sri Lanka. Citizens Initiative volunteered at the ten-bed Infectious Diseases Hospital in the Vavuniya district that was serving nearly 2500 people, and also provided medicines and nutritional supplements to the hundreds who were in need. They also initiated recreational therapy programmes for children and youth in displacement camps in Menik Farm in the Vavuniya district. As most of those who were displaced have now been resettled in their former villages, CI has shifted its focus to assisting these returnee communities to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Work in Chiraddikulam

At present, CI is assigned the 47-family village of Chiraddikulam, located in the jungle in the Mullaitivu district in the northern region of the island. After working with CI for nearly three months, I began to realise just how difficult it is to access villages such as these, and how arduous the journey towards reconstruction and rehabilitation continues to be. Many of these people have been internally displaced for several years now, and are settling in their villages and resuming their livelihoods after a very long period of time. The villagers we are trying to assist at present are Tamils – members of Sri Lanka's largest ethnic minority – and view us from the south with distrust, not least because many of the volunteers for CI (including myself) are Sinhalese and of the ethnic majority. These villagers have lived in areas that were under the control of the LTTE, the radical separatist group defeated after thirty years of war, so it is actually quite difficult to tell where their sympathies lie. The government strictly regulates aid groups that attempt to assist these people, as international aid organisations have in the past been accused of using their access to abet the LTTE. Because of this red tape, progress is understandably slow.

Working with Chiraddikulam is further complicated by the fact that it is a *Mahaveera* village, or an LTTE Heroes village. This means that many of the villagers have family members who died in LTTE suicide missions, and have been recompensed by the LTTE with (I believe) a little land and money. The village headman, for example, had five daughters, one of whom has died in a suicide mission, another a trained suicide bomber who cannot be traced, and a third in rehab. Conversations with him led us to realise that few of these sacrifices were voluntary, however – many were coerced into agreeing with the aid of a persuasive AK-47.

General Duties at Citizens Initiative

Citizens Initiative relies largely on individual donations from family, friends and acquaintances. While the response has been heartening, it is of course impossible for the ordinary citizen to donate large sums of money and so the projects tackled so far have been small in scale. Although the money I received from the Class of 1978 Foundation was initially to be spent on necessities like water pumps and manual sprayers (essential for this small farming community to thrive) Citizens Initiative managed to pull together funds for these items and my money was instead used for the rebuilding of the community centre, a project on a much larger scale.

On speaking with the members of Citizens Initiative, I found that I could be most useful by acting almost as an informal secretary to these enterprising but harried professionals, who already had far too many projects on their plates. I attended their bi-weekly meetings and took notes, writing minutes and sending out reminders to the core group members to track their progress on projects. I also took notes at the meetings they had with potential donors (we met with representatives from USAid, AUSAid, The World Bank, the German Embassy and the Australian High Commission) and made a note of the kinds of funding they were willing to give and the projects they were willing to support, as well as following up on these.

We also met with representatives from the Shilpa Children's Trust, who put us in contact with a member of the Global Children's Fund (GCF), who funds projects aimed at children. Citizens Initiative applied for funding to support proposed projects to develop pre-schools and recreational therapy activities for the children of Chiraddikulam and other villages. Coordinating between members of the group, I gathered the information necessary to complete the online application for funds, assisted in editing the proposal and sent it to GCF. CI is still waiting to hear their decision, but feedback from GCF so far has been hopeful.

Citizens Initiative needed to create a formal document (including project proposals and budgets) that could be used when applying for funding in future. I compiled some of the budgets, while gathering together the rest of the budgets from the CI core group members. I also gathered together other necessary information and created a preliminary document which was a valuable resource as CI expanded its search for donors.

Additionally, I assisted the core group members of CI to brainstorm ideas for projects, including a proposal for a recreational therapy centre that CI hopes to implement gradually over the next few years.

Preparation for Chiraddikulam Visit

It costs about \$500 to make a trip there by hired van – we would not be able to take all the supplies that we do if we were to use public transport. Since this cuts into our budget significantly CI plans extensively before making such a trip and tries to complete several tasks during one visit. Visits are made roughly once a month for a few days, in part also because accommodation is extremely difficult to find, and we are compelled to impose upon the army unit overseeing the village for this purpose.

There were three major tasks to be completed during our trip in July – dispense seeds and technical knowhow on agriculture to the villagers, construct a playground out of discarded tyres and railway sleepers for the preschool children, and begin work on rebuilding the roof of the village community centre. Using my knowledge as an architecture student, I drew the plans for the community centre, compiled a preliminary budget, and drew rough plans of possible versions

of a playground (mostly based on guesswork as I had not visited the village yet, nor did I know the exact number or dimensions of the tyres and sleepers that were available). I also spent a long and interesting morning at the hardware store trying to explain to them what I needed to build a playground of tyres for a remote village in Mullaitivu. I used some of the funds from the Class of 1978 Foundation to obtain these materials, as well as the first set of materials I listed for the rebuilding of the community centre, including bricks, cement, roofing sheets and timber for ceiling rafters.

Visit to Chiraddikulam: July 26-27, 2010

We spent two full days in July implanting the programmes we had prepared. During the two days that we were in Chiraddikulam I jotted down notes and thoughts which I then expanded into a blog post when I returned home. I am including at the end of this report an edited version of this post, as it captures the way I was obliged to ponder about things I had scarcely given a single thought to before.

CI intended to visit the village once again in August with updates on the situation with livestock, poultry and bee-keeping for the families, as well as to hold a medical camp for the village, before I returned to university, but for various reasons they were unable to do so. I believe they made their next visit in September after my departure.

Additionally, the community centre was re-constructed over the course of the summer and has been now completed. It is scheduled for opening on the 16th of October, 2010. I will send the Class of 1978 Foundation pictures of the opening so that it will be possible to see the way the Foundation's generous award has been utilised. The building of the community centre symbolises the realisation of the first step of Citizens Initiative's mandate to build bridges between communities. While the community centre will be used primarily by the villagers themselves, CI hopes to establish similar centres in other villages to create a sense of equality. Additionally, CI hopes to establish sports and arts programmes between villages, as well as commence work on an arts and recreational therapy facility that will use experience gained from the building of the smaller community centres.

Future Work

At present, I continue to act as a liaison for CI here at Princeton. They are exploring the possibility of linking local schools in Sri Lanka with elementary schools in the US, to create dialogue across the continents. I will be assisting them by looking into possible linking with schools in the Princeton area, as well as preparing relevant documents for them.

Additionally, I hope to continue to give of my time as liaison for a year when I return to Sri Lanka upon graduation in 2011.

Re-discovering the Homeland: An Account of a Visit to Chiraddikulam

As we hurtle further into Mullaitivu, the surroundings begin to appear strangely wild. I am not sure whether it is because we are in the dry zone of the island – which gives the land a harsh and tight-lipped look – or whether it is because the terrain is so unfamiliar that I feel as though we are in a different country. Stones from the dirt road rattle against the van, and on either side of the path yellow tape feebly separates demined land from areas still riddled with ‘battas’ – a colloquial term for landmines. We see trees and a few roofless shells of buildings riddled with bullet holes. I try to imagine the realities of years gone by – some of the heaviest fighting this war has seen took place here – and wonder what it must have been like to have shells exploding around you as you ran for dear life. I can’t quite do it; the land looks too quiet. Perhaps my imagination has been too sheltered to make this leap. I realise that I find it a little odd to think about the fact that the war is no more. I have become so used to it, like static in the background, not overtly affecting my life yet always influencing it, that it is



Figure 1: The villagers inspect my playground plans

strange to think it really is over. I also realise that I am grateful that it ended at a period in my life when I am both old enough to understand how much it cost and young enough to contribute to the rebuilding of my island.

The adults (all three wildlife enthusiasts) animatedly discuss the possibility of seeing leopards, elephants, bears and cobras, and I realise that I am right – this *is* a wild Sri Lanka that I have seen precious little of. While I have certainly visited some of the island’s wildlife reserves in the past, I am forced to think about the challenges facing people who live and survive in uncomfortably close proximity to these animals.

As we rattle along, the sparse vegetation becomes denser, and we briefly travel through a forest. This area has been under LTTE control for possibly nearly the entire duration of the war. In some ways, perhaps it really is a different country. I wonder to myself what it must be like to be



Figure 2: I work with another volunteer to sort the tyres

living with radicals who believe that the only solution is a separate state, and what it must mean to now live in an era where that separate state is not going to become a reality.



Figure 3: The villagers and soldiers work together

After travelling since three in the morning, we arrive in Chiraddikulam at about 11.30am. Each cluster of villages of those who have been recently rehabilitated is overseen by a small army unit. We will be staying within their encampment, at Major Nilupul's lodging. It is tiny and sparse, although exceedingly neat, and consists of only a small sleeping area, a smaller bathing area, and two open balconies, overlooking a river. I am just beginning to discover that this tiny village is stuffed with incredible stories, and here is his:

Nilupul was shot by a sniper in 1991, at age 21, an easy target because of his height. A shot to the head or heart brings instantaneous death – the bullet hit him on the left side of his chest, puncturing his lung. Everyone thought, of course, that he was gone, until they saw him moving feebly. Upon rushing him to hospital, they discovered what he himself did not know – Nilupul has dextrocardia, a

congenital defect in which the heart is situated on the right side of the body. He relates the tale of this curious miracle to us with justifiable pride.

He refers to the army boys as 'lamai' or children. Looking at their faces, I think that this term of endearment may be disconcertingly apt. Many of them look as though they are barely out of their teens. They are probably my age, but I cannot conceive of myself or any of my friends in uniform, risking death, contributing to ending the war, and then living with rehabilitated villagers who quite likely sympathised with the separatists. It is a bizarre sequence of events to my mind, and again I am struck by how the life experiences of many of my country-people are poles apart from mine.

We walk over to the shady area where the playground is to be constructed, in sight of the roofless community centre that will soon be rebuilt to include a pre-school. We begin work by taping my playground plans to a tree, and inspecting the tyres we will be using to build it. The tyres are a little more decrepit than we had expected, and as I suspected, my tidy little plans will have to be hastily improvised upon. While we get off to an awkward start, things soon pick up as we gesticulate to the villagers, using the few words of Tamil that we know, while the army



Figure 4: The children are thrilled with the swings

boys fill in the gaps. Everyone sets to work with vigour, although the villagers are somewhat mystified by our revolutionary recycled building materials.

After lunch, the grounds become a hive of activity, and I manage to capture some absolutely heart-warming pictures of villagers and army personnel working industriously side by side to paint the tyres a motley assortment of colours. It is an almost utopian moment, and I dare to hope that Sri Lanka's wounds can heal. The tyres are decorated with stripes and zigzags and spots and begin to take on an



Figure 5: I attempt to diversify the red-and-yellow theme



Figure 6: One of the army boys on the swing

when there isn't even electricity for a drill one has to improvise, and can't expect things to end up as planned.) By evening, the playground is largely completed, except for the little playhouse we are constructing out of old railway sleepers. I burst with pride at how it has turned out, and the beautifully soft yellow evening light makes the picture I take of it look even lovelier. I note that our village

endearingly garish look. Three swings are set up on the neighbouring trees, and the smaller children scramble to swing on them almost immediately. (By the next day, some of the army boys throw any feelings of self-consciousness to the winds and are swinging away happily themselves.)

The villagers have a tendency to paint everything red and yellow – the colours of the LTTE – and we add as much blue and green and lilac to neutralise the colour scheme, although admittedly it begins to look a little garish. However, the villagers – especially the children – are far from troubled by this fact. By a series of happy accidents, the playground becomes three 'parts' – stacks of different heights, half-sunk rings to jump over or crawl through, and a wobbly-looking explosion in the middle. (It looked quite sophisticated in the picture I brought, but



Figure 7: The shell of the community centre to be re-built

volunteers are the army personnel and village boys, and the only females working on this project are, well, us. Towards the end of the day, however, two little girls shyly sidle up to observe us at work, and one joins in when tempted with a paintbrush.

As the day draws to a close, I am covered with paint, smell strongly of kerosene oil from when I have tried to remove said paint, and am ridiculously grubby and dusty. Allowing the village boys to paint my jeans different colours has not helped my dignity much, either. I discover that bliss is taking a shower in Nilupul's bathroom (this means dipping in to a large water canister with a small metal bowl and pouring the cold water on myself). Little tree frogs peer at me from the soap rack and the walls, and jump on to the flimsy shower curtain just as I am about to push it aside to exit the bathroom. As I shower, I am nervously convinced that I will either tread on one by accident, or scoop one up with my bowlful of water and pour Mr Frog on my head.



Figure 6: The villagers gather to hear the talk by Suresh

Tuesday is a much shorter day, considering that we have an eight-hour journey home. In the morning, we assist Suresh – the expert on regional agriculture who accompanied us to Chiraddikulam – to hand out seeds to various villagers, as well as compile lists of those who would like to keep livestock, poultry and bees (if we are able to obtain funding for these). We also complete constructing and painting a small playhouse, while Suresh gives the villagers small talk on various methods and practices, such as the use of organic compost and crop rotation. We also talk

to the villagers and army personnel who will be in charge of reconstructing the community centre, walking them through the plans we have brought and giving them the first set of materials we have obtained for its rebuilding.

After lunch, we head back to Colombo. I doze on and off on the long journey back, and wake up to find we are almost back home. Suddenly, 'civilisation' seems strange and unreal and I am strangely overwhelmed by the things I have always taken for granted – lights, electricity and the short, squat concrete jungle that is the capital. A mere two days in a very different part of my homeland has had the effect of not only making me feel like a stranger in my own island, but has me looking at my world with new eyes.