

Sri Lanka Trip Report – April 2006

By Sharon Jackson

Introductions - The tsunami and ActionAid's response

At 8.00am local time on the 26th December 2004, the tsunami struck around 70 percent of the Sri Lankan coastline with incredible force. Over 30,000 people died and half a million were left homeless. Few will forget the terrible images of a passenger train which was torn from its tracks by the waves, killing 1,800 people in this incident alone.

ActionAid did not work in Sri Lanka prior to this catastrophic event but, strongly encouraged by our Indian staff, we quickly realised that our lengthy experience of working in India meant that we were perfectly placed to respond. Our first staff reached the affected areas the day after the event. Now, working through 17 local partners, ActionAid is already helping over 33,000 people in seven affected districts. As a new organisation in the country this is a real achievement.

ActionAid works with the poorest of the poor in Sri Lanka – those who were disadvantaged even before the Tsunami happened and those most affected by the events of 26 December 2004; people who lost their families, homes and businesses and have been left with nothing. ActionAid is also playing a 'bridging' role. Rather than duplicating what other NGOs are doing we are plugging the gaps and ensuring that everyone is getting the support they need.

This report is a collection of findings, thoughts, feelings and impressions from my visit to see some of this work along the southern coast of Sri Lanka.

Mr Maudasa tells us what it was really like to get caught in the wave...

My project visit started in the south of Sri Lanka in an area around the coast known as Hambantota District. The golden sands and turquoise seas qualify this as a popular tourist destination, making it hard to believe what happened here less than 18 months ago. Mr Maudasa told me his version of events:

"I used to be a market trader on the beach front at Hambantota Town. I was working the day the wave came. My wife had just gone to get a cup of tea. I have always lived by the sea so it wasn't the sound of the wave that alerted me, but when I looked up and saw how high the boats on the sea had lifted up I realised something was wrong.



Mr Maudasa and his wife with his new wheelchair.

"I started to run straightaway but I think I only took about 14 steps before the wave hit me. I hear from reports that it was 10 metres high. I am a good seaman and a good swimmer but I could not swim in the wave. I grabbed for things as they passed, iron bars, furniture, bits of wood - anything to hang on to. Eventually the water began to drop slowly and I could see that I was being lowered into a room in the ruins of someone's house.

"When the water was gone I looked down and saw that my right leg had turned around and my foot was facing the wrong way. My left leg was gone completely. I shouted for an hour for someone to help me. People came but they daren't move me because of my legs. Eventually my wife found me and she got the police and they rescued me from the house. I spent over three months in the hospital. I cannot work as a market trader anymore."



Mr Maudasa's new shop

Mr Maudasa's story is typical of many you hear along the southern and eastern coast of Sri Lanka. It is with people like him that ActionAid is working. Now he lives in a new house on one of the 'estates' constructed since the tsunami. ActionAid partner organisation, Rakawe Development Foundation (RDP), has provided Mr Maudasa with a wheelchair so he can get around. They have also helped him to set up his own grocery shop, so that he can continue to do what he is good at. Now he provides a valuable service to other families who have been

forced to relocate and now struggle to make it into town. Proudly he proclaims,

"All of my neighbours use this shop. Please take a photograph, RDP provided all the goods on the shelves to help me start up. They built ramps in the house so I can use my chair to get around."

Business is booming for Mr Jayasena



Mr Jayasena used to work as a carpenter for a business in the town but sadly it was one of many that were destroyed on 26 December 2006. He was left without work or any means of income to support his wife and five children, particularly his teenage son who has leukaemia.

Through ActionAid partner, RDF, we were able to provide Mr Jayasena with his own wood-working machine and this has enabled him to set up his own business. Now he is busy making various items to meet the orders of his neighbours – in particular demand are windows and doors for all the new houses being built around his village.

A new home for Pradeepa Ramani

Pradeepa's family has always been incredibly poor. Even before the tsunami came they were living in house built of mud, something which is very rare in Sri Lanka. When the tsunami came, Pradeepa's husband, who is a fisherman, lost his livelihood and this made the family even poorer. ActionAid partner, RDF, was able to help by providing the



materials the family needed to build themselves a new home. It only took them three months and now Mr Ramani has returned to his fishing. Pradeepa tells me with a beaming smile, *"Now, even when we don't have food, at least we have shelter!"*

Mrs Pathmalatha and Mr Manjula tell us something of their loss....

So, in some kind of practical way, life goes on for those whose lives, homes and livelihoods were destroyed on 26th December 2004. But what about the trauma and distress that was caused? When my eyes met those of Mrs Pathmalatha, who lost her husband in the tsunami, I could see that both of us were welling-up. She told me how she is struggling with her oldest son who is missing his father greatly. And the words of another gentleman, Mr Manjula, will stay with me forever,

"I have lost everything. My whole family. My wife, my children and my mother. With the help of the NAF (ActionAid partner organisation) I have been able to re-build my business as a barber so I can at least continue to live. But business is not good; most of my customers are gone. I have no expectations now for my life - my only hope is to live peacefully."



Rupa Ranjini and many children show me how they are overcoming the trauma....

Although ActionAid cannot replace the people lost in the tsunami, we can provide support, counselling and other services which can help people to deal with their grief and overcome their fears. I hear from Rupa Ranjini of ActionAid Partner, the National Anti-war Foundation (NAF), that when the wave struck, people from the 'interior' of the island volunteered straight away to help and quickly made their way to the coast. Those affected found great comfort in this act of solidarity; an effort which the NAF was delighted to co-ordinate. Rupa also tells me that they sent many of the children who lost their parents to visit children in north Sri Lanka who lost their parents in the war. The opportunity to share stories and give each other support proved invaluable.

A thank you from those affected by the tsunami....

Despite the trauma of the past 16 months, people smile at you wherever you go. They always stop to chat and help you out wherever they can. They are willing to share their stories, even when the re-telling causes them distress. And when you ask if they would like to ask any questions they immediately request that you take a message home –

'please say thank you to everyone in the UK who has supported us'.

So life continues in the south of Sri Lanka and it is truly wonderful to see the vital and highly effective role that ActionAid has to play in that. On behalf of all the families that I met I would like to say a big thank you for supporting ActionAid's work. Please email me on Sharon.Jackson@actionaid.org if you would like to see the full report from my visit.