

ActionAid Sri Lanka House-building Challenge Project Visit – Hikkaduwa April 2006.

In April 2006, twenty supporters visited Sri Lanka and spent a week working alongside local builders to help replace three homes in the village of Wenamulla for families affected by the tsunami of 2004. Before the trip these supporters worked tirelessly to raise thousands of pounds for ActionAid's vital work around the world. On 8 April 2006, these supporters had the chance to see some of the work supported by ActionAid for themselves. This is the report of that visit.

Introduction

At 8.00 am 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.



Some of the devastation which is still visible in the Hikkaduwa District. Photos: Debbie Smart.

Working with 17 local partners ActionAid has reached over 33,000 people in seven affected districts in the first year. As a new organisation in the country this is a real achievement.

On 8 April 2006, we visited one of these partner organisations, the Siyath Foundation in the Hikkaduwa district of Sri Lanka, to find out more about their work and meet the people who are benefiting. The Siyath Foundation works with 3,500 families across over 100 villages.

Children's Activity Centre – Wenemulla



Photo: Sue Lawrence



Photo: Debbie Smart

On Saturday morning we had the unique opportunity to call in at the Children's Activity Centre which is benefiting the very children that we spent the week getting to

know (our building challenge took place in the same village!). We were welcomed by the children as they engaged in various drama and role play activities, complete with wonderful costumes and full stage make-up.

It was explained to us that the centre adopted a 'way of life' approach to teaching, making it more relevant to the children's lives. The centre has played a vital role in helping these children to overcome their grief and fears following the terrible events of 26 December 2004, when a 10 metre wave came crashing through their village, killing 62 of their neighbours and/or family members and destroying homes. Kala Peiris, Executive Director of Siyath, explained to us that whilst official statistics show a good quality of education in Sri Lanka, with literacy levels well-above 90% and class sizes being small (30 children per class), the reality for those in the poorest areas was actually very different. She told us that it was not unusual to find class sizes in excess of 100. Therefore this centre can provide a good space for children to further develop and build their confidence whilst having a great deal of fun.

The centre now works as an 'after-school' club which means that it serves the additional role of giving parents (especially mothers) the chance to have a few extra hours to do the work they need to get the family back on its feet. We were treated to a tour, where we found children making model carrots and a gallery of excellent drawings and paintings which largely featured the wave. Getting children to express their feelings about the tsunami through various forms of art (painting, songs, drama) has proved an effective form of counselling, along with encouraging children to play with water again.



Photo: Debbie Smart

Coir Yarn Collection

Initially as one large group at Wenemulla and later in two smaller groups at Kalupe and Pitiwella, we had the chance to visit various people involved with coir.

As Kala explained, Siyath has helped to establish and co-ordinate a 3000+ network of coir workers – these are women who work, often in family groups, spinning yarn out of coconut husks. Coir work is traditionally a women's activity which is native to this region of Sri Lanka. Historically these women have been exploited by middlemen who have forced low prices. With Siyath's support, these women have come together in their local areas over the last 26 years to get a better price for the fruits of their labour. This is either done via cooperatives, which fix the price of the coir, or it is done through adding value to the product and making the yarn into mats and other crafts, which can then be sold in the UK, USA and Germany through Fair Trade networks. There is also work to improve access to raw materials and encourage members to provide these for themselves (a case of backward and forward integration).

In a country where women are still not considered equal to men and are often the victims of domestic abuse, strengthening this industry has also helped to build women's confidence and the control that they can exert over their lives.

The production process



Spinning the yarn. Photo: Debbie Smart

between them they can produce 30kg of yarn per day. The real benefit of this work is that it can be carried out at home, allowing for childcare and other responsibilities, and often the children like to get involved too.

We learnt and saw how the coconuts are placed in cages in the black water that appears at the edges of the local lagoons. Apparently there is something in this water which allows a process to take place which separates the strands in the husks of the coconut. They are left in the lagoon for some time. When they are removed the coconut husk is separated fully by hitting it. Then the separated strands are spun into thread. Three people must work together on this process and

Many of the machines used to spin the yarn were lost or destroyed in the tsunami, which threatened the whole industry in the area and thousands of livelihoods. With ActionAid's support, the Siyath Foundation was able to respond and help to replace these at a cost of 4,500 rupees per machine (\$45/£30).

Once the yarn has been spun, it is taken to yarn collection points where it is graded and allocated a price. We were able to see this taking part at the Community Centre at Wenemulla, which ActionAid was able to fund and is where the women are now able to store the yarn ready for sale.

The end product

A trip to see women turning this yarn into a range of attractive mats was very interesting (and also provided much needed gift-buying opportunities for some of us!). We learned that depending on the design, it can take up to a day to produce each mat. The designs themselves are either their own or produced to meet the specific needs of their customers. Last year, the women produced a fantastic 15,000 items, many of which were exported at a price of \$2 per item. Sadly the women lost \$13,000 worth of mats in the tsunami, which were in a container ready to go abroad. It is to their great credit that they have picked themselves up and started all over again. If you would like to see more examples of the mats visit www.siyath.org.



Visit to Siyath Headquarters and presentation by Kala Peiris – Executive Director of the Siyath Foundation.



Kala gave a fantastic overview of the work of the Siyath Foundation and the people living in the area – her presentation is available to anyone who would like a copy. Everyone was particularly moved to hear that 75 of their own members were killed in the tsunami, the Siyath Foundation Headquarters was destroyed and all 3,500 families they worked with were affected. It was only the fortune of a last

minute decision that meant that Kala and her colleagues were not in the office at the point it was destroyed. None of their documents survived though and so, like the families they work with, they too had to pick themselves up and start again after 26 December 2004.

Vegetable Market

In the soaring heat of Saturday we visited the vegetable market at Wenemulla. This market has provided an invaluable service to those who were worst affected by the tsunami. By making subsidised vegetables available to families, it ensured that children had access to nutritious food and that families could retain their sense of dignity by not having to rely solely on food aid. It was also good for local vegetable gardeners to still have a market for their goods. As time has progressed and families are re-building their lives, the level of subsidy has been reduced and in time will be removed altogether.



*The vegetable market at Wenemulla.
Photo: Debbie Smart*

The Environment Centre at Patuwatha



This newly built centre is destined to provide a valuable education to the local community, particularly the children who come here to learn how to protect and preserve their environment and why this is important. The destruction of the coral reef around the coast of Sri Lanka has been nominated by many as one of the reasons the wave was so large when it hit the coastline and so environmental issues have been brought into sharp relief since December 2004. The idea of preserving life fits

well with a strongly Buddhist culture and the children we met all seemed keen to learn and engrossed in the books they were reading. Perhaps they were avoiding difficult questions from the strange visitors? Many of us were particularly impressed to see various published books on display which have been illustrated and written by the children and tell of their own experiences of the wave.

The end.....

It was a long and hot day for ActionAid's visitors to the Siyath Foundation but one which was wholly worthwhile. Indicative of work being carried out across the world, we were given an insight into how some of the funds raised by this challenge event might be used in some of ActionAid's priority areas to help some of the poorest families to transform their lives. We were also given the warmest welcome.

For up to date information about ActionAid's response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka, please visit our special information site at:
<http://tsunami.actionaid.org.uk/where/sri-lanka/>