

## Transforming Conflict in Sri Lanka: Coexistence as a Mean to Sustaining Development.

### *Personal Goals*

- ◆ Understand the working of a development NGO, its organizational structure, and how it handles the problems posed by the conflict
- ◆ Explore the connection between coexistence and economic development and how each of them contributes to and supplements the other
- ◆ Develop personal ties with local people and obtaining a more authentic insight into the conflict, the land, and people of Sri Lanka

### *Activities*

- ◆ Interviewed various Tamil and Sinhalese local leaders in villages at different stages about the nature of the development work done in their village, their conception of the conflict, and their perceived solutions
- ◆ Visited various communities and projects with Sewa Lanka

### *Key Dilemmas*

- ◆ How do I, as a Westerner, research and explore Sri Lanka without having made any concrete contribution to the people I was working with, or the villagers that hosted me?
- ◆ How development work compromises cultural proclivities within Sri Lankan society, such as the need to develop more efficient income generating projects vs. the importance of traditional agriculture, or addressing ethnic and religious inequalities vs. traditional undermining of gender issues
- ◆ How does one sustain development efforts that are constantly undermined by eruption of violence?

Sri Lanka



Colombo-office staff field trip to 'Singharaga' forest: I wrote in my diary, "more than anything else Sri Lanka is the land of gentle and kind people who are trying to live along the many bumpy and desolated roads of this island and be happy."

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### *Important Learnings*

- ◆ Development work, especially the work of Sewa Lanka, depends on the capacity to build self-confidence and trust, and restoring not only the economic livelihood of war-affected populations, but also their political, spiritual, and communal livelihood. A successful development program should first give rise to a strong local leadership capable of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the village, and then familiarize it with the necessary skills and ways to address these issues.
- ◆ Coexistence work at various stages of development work—especially by creating commercial and financial dependency between different ethnic groups around the county—has the potential to consolidate development efforts and render people less inclined to resort to violence in volatile times.



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*Elementary School: Everywhere one goes, from the big cities to the most remote villages, one encounters little children in white uniforms and blue ties going to school. Education is highly valued and is key to development work.*



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*Talking with the doyen (the translator on the right): "Now our village is considered 'developed.' It is the envy of all the rest of the villages around us. But all of a sudden no one is interested in our problems. We were given hope and encouragement, and we created some good infrastructure but the momentum has stopped. They say there is no more money for us, so obviously people are upset."*



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*A street banner commemorating the fifth anniversary of the first suicide bombing: Seeing the images of the suicide bombing, and how they were venerated and worshipped by the people in the rally, took this conflict, which wasn't mine and from which I remained so detached, and brought it down to a familiar hurting spot in my mind.*

# Sri Lanka

Some villages we visited were displaced two or three times and many people were quite reluctant to leave the refugee camp out of fear of further violence erupting. All around one can see abandoned paddy fields, water canals which lie in ruins, and crushed hats. This used to be the leading region in agricultural production; now they can hardly sustain themselves. Once established and consolidated, the community based organizations start to implement various development projects such as construction of wells and schools, repairing damaged roads, restoring an old water tank, or launching self-employment workshops. The whole process is a long and arduous one, and resembles physiotherapy: Sewa Lanka can guide, encourage, and help with the initial few steps, but the bottom line is it is up to the villagers. They must stand up and start walking. It starts with a lot of anger, chaos, and disbelief, but villages that pull themselves together show really impressive results and are making progress with their lives.

Brick Making is one of the many small enterprises that Sewa Lanka supports by providing the villagers micro-loans to start off on their own.

