

## NithiyaOli Project: an experience in participatory village development in Jaffna, Sri Lanka

### Introduction

In this essay I describe the experiences in working with people who are poor and in a desperate situation in a village in the parish of Navanthurai in Jaffna (see map), Sri Lanka. The village, about 60 huts in



all, is occupied by around 200 people of which about a third are under the age of 5. These are internally displaced people, the victims of the 20-year old war, who had returned home.

The aim of the project was to build a basic pre-school facility/a multi-purpose community centre, adjoining playground and help with tin roofing and gravel for the huts occupied by the villagers to stop the flooding. Beyond this immediate need, I saw their plight as a set of people who have become vulnerable, marginalised and somewhat dependent on the charity of others as they sought material help. I saw an opportunity to strengthen their position to become less vulnerable and more self-reliant in paving their own destiny. The challenge was how this can be achieved in the short four weeks I had. For this, I had to first win their trust and confidence and had to use every opportunity to establish an enabling environment – mechanisms for local empowerment and participation, accountability for their actions and social networks to name a few. As the project progressed, the villagers assumed ownership and control of the project and I had to deal with other issues that would strengthen the newly found determination among them. In this transformation of the villagers, I had to assume multiple roles, as a donor, a facilitator, a *conscience stirrer* and a friend.

### Historical antecedents

Who are these people? What is their history? How did they become poor? These were some the questions that came to mind on my first visit to the village in March 2005 as I searched for ways to work with them. The current snapshot of their village gave me the impression of desperateness. Like poor, displaced people in many parts of the developing world, the villagers have been forced to settle in environmentally, socially and economically marginal land - an ex-coconut estate now devoid of any trees, full of ridges and ditches, low-lying and flood prone with no running water, electricity and thatched huts that were hardly 10 feet by 10 feet. Living in such pathetic conditions, what would participation mean to these people?

Were they seeking hand-outs? Would they be ready to take up the project and build on it as a united village in the future?

The villagers were originally from Navanthurai, the parish they live in now. They were part of the once flourishing lagoon fisherfolk who had occupied the coastal area for generations, much before the arrival of the British some 200 years ago. They are renowned for their hard work, fierce independence as a community and for their long village festivities to celebrate life at every opportunity from birthdays, marriages to funerals. To see them in a plight of desperation was heart breaking. They are victims of the 20-year long war between Tamil Tigers<sup>1</sup> and government forces in the Jaffna peninsula. From 1995 to 2002 they had lived as refugees<sup>2</sup> in Vanni<sup>3</sup> and had returned home to Navanthurai when the peace accord was signed between the parties. The long displacement had taken its toll. They had lost their skills, their houses, equipment and social institutions. Their children now married and living in the village, had no access to education. Now, they worked as casual day labourers seeking any kind of work, from building labourers, fencers, to load bearers.

Their situation is rather precarious. When they returned to Navanthurai, they found themselves homeless and landless<sup>4</sup>. On the urging of the parish priest of the Catholic Church they occupied the site that is privately owned. While the government is trying to buy-out the land from the owners (who are long settled abroad) to settle the villagers, the process may take a few years. Until then the villagers can occupy, but they cannot build anything permanent, not even a toilet<sup>5</sup>. Being in this position, low-cost housing schemes for landless returnees were out of reach<sup>6</sup> for the villagers. Little help had been forthcoming from the church or their mother village council St Mary's<sup>7</sup>. Most of the international donors (UN and other NGOs) were focused on helping Tsunami victims (in the east coast of the peninsula, not the west where these people live). Many NGOs visited the village last December (during Tsunami), but they had never returned. The only help they get is the meagre weekly provision of essential food items of rice, sugar and wheat flour from the government.

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<sup>1</sup> Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the rebels who fought with the government forces for a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka since 1983.

<sup>2</sup> During the violent conflict to recapture Jaffna in 1995, an estimated 400,000 – 500,000 fled Jaffna overnight to seek safe haven in the Vanni region.

<sup>3</sup> A region spanning the north central region of the island and that which is controlled by Tamil Tigers up to now.

<sup>4</sup> It was a practice for the coastal fisher folks to build houses on the crown lands near the lagoon shore along the coast. Their houses were erased to the ground by the government forces to have a clear view of the coast for security reasons.

<sup>5</sup> At present, the women and young girls use the public toilet about 400 m away, while the men and young children use the lagoon across the road. The huts also have a temporary hole-in-the-ground toilet for use in the night.

<sup>6</sup> Though with political influence or the money to pay for corrupt officials the villagers can secure one.

<sup>7</sup> This is the largest and relatively well to do among the villages of the parish. In the past with their influence over the church, they had directed private donations to the parish their way and this has led to disputes.

Recognising their plight of helplessness, the villagers formed a Village Council (VC) in January this year in order to represent the needs and grievances of the villagers. The council is made up of eleven members elected from the village. Since formation, the VC had met with the GS (Grama Sevaka<sup>8</sup>), the political wing<sup>9</sup> of Tamil Tigers and members of parliament to canvass for basic facilities in the land, such as toilet, water and electricity.

## **The needs of the villagers: Whose needs?**

It is against this backdrop and at this juncture that I had visited the village in March of this year. The purpose of my visit was to find a suitable project for the Environmental Internship unit to complete the graduate course I was pursuing in Monash University, and to satisfy my longing to work on a project to help the poor, especially in Jaffna where I originally hail from. While I had considered other projects, the desperate situation of the villagers and the opportunity to work with them attracted me a lot. The local parish priest introduced me to the village and requested help for constructing an all-weather access road in the middle of the village. The villagers seemed to confirm this, though at that time I did not fully understand the power of the parish priest in community affairs and the deference of the villagers to him.

On my return, I secured the funds for building the road from Eternal Light Charity Foundation - an incorporated Australian charity that is largely made up of migrants from Sri Lanka who had settled in Australia. The Foundation provided an amount of \$5000 towards building the road, though with a proviso to spend the funds as I saw fit. I had to meet my own expenses for travel, meals and accommodation. To this I readily agreed for I was keen to help the poor villagers to rebuild their lives. The inclusion of the proviso was on my insistence, since I suspected that the real needs of the villagers may be different from what the priest had requested. I had no way to confirm this before my departure as my only contact was the priest.

On this visit (in August/September), I was eager to first confirm the villagers' need for an access road. Recognising the role of the VC as elected representative of the village, I requested a meeting directly with the committee. Contrary to the priest who had requested a road, VC was clear as for their needs.

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<sup>8</sup> Local government officer of a suburb who was the first point of contact for people and who was responsible for arranging relief

<sup>9</sup> The LLTE not being in control of Jaffna has members of the political wing. Apart from keeping up the awareness of their struggle, they play an important role in the lives of the people from resolving local disputes to attending complaints from the public on matters of policing (the police force is mostly confined to their barracks). They also help in representing the needs of the poor and others to the government as well as to others, such as the members of parliament.

Villagers' priorities, as expressed by the VC, were to build a pre-school/community centre (the UNHCR<sup>10</sup> had promised to help establish a pre-school once a venue had been constructed.), adjoining playground, tin roofing sheets and gravel (to elevate the floor) for their huts. The villagers' expressed needs apparently struck a fine balance between public gains of having a pre-school to help educate the children in the village and private gains of making their huts livable. I agreed to fund the purchase of the materials. In order to encourage their contribution, participation and ownership, I insisted that the villagers should volunteer their skills and labour in the construction of the centre and in rebuilding the roofing and flooring of their huts.

Before proceeding, I had to confirm the legality of constructing the community centre. I met with the highest government decision maker on these matters (District Secretary<sup>11</sup>, DS) using my position of influence as a foreign donor. My representation seemed to provide the credibility and urgency as he agreed to the construction, though it had to be a wooden structure with tin roof. I used the opportunity to advance the case for a toilet and the DS promised to get one constructed near the village in the next budget. VC members who accompanied me were happy and enthusiastic about the outcome. I realised that this introduction had given them the needed connection with the DS to represent their case in the future, which I encouraged them to exploit.

## **Construction begins – villagers assume control**

I realised the importance of starting the project early. The villagers wanted to keep up their enthusiasm as this would be their first time to receive any help to develop their village. Also, it would be test for participation as both I and the villagers got involved in the construction, and this would also help to further the trust they had in me. So, I personally<sup>12</sup> purchased and delivered the materials for constructing the pre-school. When the first materials were delivered, the volunteers mobilised by the VC were waiting to unload it and start construction with unmatched enthusiasm.

But, the enthusiasm seemed to wane after two days, as there were no volunteers working on the job, and the regulars<sup>13</sup> have gone in search of paid work. Discussing the situation with the VC, the VC came to an agreement with the villagers to split their wages with the regulars. But, the employment situation in the village was not good. Only the men worked and even then most were able to get paid work only for part

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<sup>10</sup> The work of UNHCR in Jaffna peninsula is focused on helping poor villages to embark on self-help schemes. While most of their work is in villages targeted by the government, in this case it was the personal interest taken by the field officer who had accidentally discovered the village.

<sup>11</sup> The district secretary of Jaffna was the next higher level bureaucrat to whom the 148 GSs reported and who had the final discretion on the budget.

<sup>12</sup> As it was the first of the gifts as a donor, the recipients expect you to personally buy it rather than provide the money (a cultural practice).

<sup>13</sup> About 6-8 volunteered regularly as they were keen to get the community built.

of the week. Their employment network was limited to the adjoining suburbs, though work was available in others. The system worked through recommendations by word of mouth. Through my own network<sup>14</sup>, I managed to arrange short-term paid jobs for some of the villagers.

This episode showed that while the villagers were keen to build the community centre, their problems were immediate, such as finding employment, feeding the families etc. It showed that their problems were multi-dimensional and addressing one need, however important, can upset the fine balance they had in leading a *normal* life. There were signs of the villagers cooperatively sharing the burden and the VC adopting strategies to mix individual gains and public good in a way that would help the villagers.

As the project progressed it became clear that it would transform the community in more positive ways than I originally expected. The community centre with an adjoining playground became a real and symbolic centre of the village. The pre-school building has changed the landscape and it was becoming a place where the kids played and parents relaxed away from their tiny huts in the afternoons. The villagers used it as a place to hold meetings and for women to engage in light-hearted gossip. It was also a place to hold night study (I had bought them a kerosene pressure lamp), training for the women (normally, it was held in the community centre in an adjoining village and it was difficult to attend) and the villagers were keen to start the pre-school. The community centre had transformed the village to become a centre of community activity, in contrast to the previous atmosphere of a set of squatters who mostly kept to themselves.

At this stage, the VC decided to issue the tin roofing sheets for the huts. I had given the responsibility to the VC, but they insisted I stay to personally hand over the sheets (it was a cultural practice for the donor to personally handover the gift to the recipient). But, once again there was a problem that needed to be resolved collectively. Some of the villagers had put up huts to stake a claim on the tin sheets and this was proving to be difficult as the older residents were against issuing sheets to the new comers. The VC acted strongly (to my pleasant surprise) to draft an individual agreement that had to be signed and witnessed by each recipient. In essence, the conditions stipulated that if villagers were to leave or did not occupy the huts for more than three months for reasons other than work or health, the roofing sheets would be forfeited and became a property of the village to be distributed to others. They also collected Rs. 400 (full wage was Rs. 500) for each day of voluntary work not attended by the recipients, as they felt that the levy would be fair on the volunteers. The funds were to be used towards the expenses for the opening ceremony. These events amply demonstrated the VC's strengthening resolve to make and take ownership of their own decisions, and I realised it was time for me to step aside.

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<sup>14</sup> Using family connections and "social status" of my ancestors.

By now, I had immersed myself on the project and sensed that the villagers had started treating me like a trusted friend, an insider, as they joked with me and shared their feelings and gossip. My advantage of speaking the language and understanding the cultural traits became critical in this immersion. There were the women who had awakened to the possibility of earning some cash income, especially after the awareness training by UNHCR. They had formed a women's group and wanted a small rotating capital (~\$50) to start village-based cottage industries. But, the women in majority, who had young children, were unsure as to how well they would cope with other household chores. I recognised their need for more time to think it over as I felt that it would be inappropriate timing for me to thrust something else, however good it may be, since it can bring about other problems such as family issues. Nevertheless, after my return, they had decided to start palmyra cottage industries in the village and it was funded by me personally.

Reducing flooding on the land was another issue. The VC drew up a plan to mobilise volunteers (having done this successfully for this project) to build trenches to drain rainwater and use the earth to build the needed road. This would be done when the rains set in as it would be easier to dig. Also, it would please the priest<sup>15</sup>. While I understood the total spiritual dependence of the villagers, this was one matter that the villagers have to deal with. Being not a catholic or a member of the parish, I had minimum influence on him. But, I hoped that with the newly found confidence and the will to act unitedly, the villagers would become more assertive in their relationship with the priest.

## **Opening ceremony – coming together**

The VC insisted on having an opening ceremony for the pre-school/community centre. It was to be celebrated and announced to their neighbourhood as it was the traditional practice of the community. This could be an event to get the important players in the lives of the villagers - priest, the members of parliament, UNHCR, TRRO, Tamil Tigers, GS, St Mary's council and some local charity groups, to meet together to patch up the differences and strengthen the relationships. I accompanied the VC to hand out personal invitations as I suspected that the position of the villagers (being poor and marginalised) would not impress on the invitees the need to attend. My presence may have made a difference. It was also an opportunity to connect the VC with the invitees.

The opening ceremony was well attended and speaker after speaker spoke in praise of the establishment of a pre-school and the need for more development projects. The villagers had managed to invite the

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<sup>15</sup> I had a lengthy conversation with the priest about the access road. His plans for building one was to complement the houses he planned to build in the village. But, he did not have the funds. Trying to convince him of the immediate needs brought about an unpleasant argument. He was indeed a difficult man to deal with.

priest. There was an air of jubilant confidence on the face of the villagers as they dressed for the occasion, decorated the building and made savouries for the invitees. There were songs after the speeches and the villagers staged a play on the playground after the ceremony. It was also an opportunity to improve their relationship with St Mary's council (their mother council) and strengthen the relationship with the local parliamentarians.

## **Some lessons on participation**

I ask myself what this project was all about. It did provide help to build basic facilities and give a helping hand to the villagers. More than this, its focus has been in building a foundation, a small one at that, for the villagers to build their lives on. But has this been effective? The answer has to be, yes it has. In the short four weeks, I could sense a change in attitude in the villagers. At first, they were hesitant and seemed all confused about their priorities in life. They wanted some material help with their immediate needs. Being their first time in receiving such help, and being marginalised without much help or social networks to rely on, they were unsure of how it will help them in the long run. But, this has changed. What were the important factors that contributed to this transformation? I list a few below.

### ***Participation and trust***

Participation can have many meanings, but its final meaning in the context of this project in my view has to be collective empowerment of the villagers, especially seen the work of the VC. By this, they had to assume collective control of their own destiny, make their own decisions, assess their position and embark on actions to gain a socio-economic status that they seek. To do this, being poor and marginalised, they need a foundation to develop.

The kind of participation, however, has to be tailored in line with their economic, social and psychological well-being. In this respect, the first and foremost is choosing the correct entry-point. That is, the level of participation or the level of mutual dependence of the donor and the beneficiary for the project to succeed. In this case, the villagers were in a poor socio-economic status. But, their outlook, the inner strength to succeed, having been successful before in their lives, was such that hand outs would be most inappropriate. I had to work on this strength. To do this, I had to endure hours of conversation which I enjoyed to get to know where they were coming from and the problems they were facing. I used little of the mapping tools except for collecting statistics or explaining issues. I did ask them to draw a map of their *future village* to know how they saw the village developing. I used this vision to encourage them and strengthen their resolve to develop the village.

But, the process would not have been successful if not for the VC. While they were hesitant to act on their own at the start, with a little encouragement they acted decisively and had been an effective intermediary

between me and the villagers. In this role, they not only acted as a two-way conduit between me and the villagers, but had the role of encouraging the villagers to participate and to focus on needs that would help improve the collective socio-economic status of the village. The VC, in particular the President, Secretary and the Treasurer whom I had taken into my confidence early in the project, had become the Champions of the project and of the village as this role extended to their dealings with UNHCR, the church, Tamil Tigers et al.

The intention at all times was to facilitate in order to put the VC in control to make decisions, pursue activities and follow-ups, while intervening appropriately without explicitly making their dependence on donation (on me) obvious. I had to be deliberate in my attempts at getting participation going. But, once trust and friendship had been formed, the benefits were mutual. In this respect, being conversant in the Tamil language and cultural background became critical.

### ***Building awareness and social networks***

The villagers, being focussed on their own day-to-day problems, had seldom thought about the future or the possibilities that existed. Building the pre-school suddenly seemed to expand the possibilities. Possibilities of educating their children, a village-based training and employment for the women, collectively sharing resources such as fishing nets, carpentry and building tools that they could not afford to buy individually (they had built a safe room as part of the centre). As I found, expanding such awareness of the possibilities, in the case of the poor, is mostly a result of them focussing on public good or that which can be shared, such as the pre-school.

But, this awareness of possibilities and how to exploit them has to be encouraged and nourished by improving their social networks. Being marginalised, most of these people had tried to influence or rather beg for attention and help from whomever they can connect with. This weakness had been recognised early in the project and had been strengthened at every opportunity. It has also been an education for the villagers as to how they themselves can embark on expanding their social networks.

Another issue I had to confront was that of making them institutionalised dependents. They did depend on me to strengthen their social networks and links with UN agencies, government officials, politicians and others to seek more opportunities. Once I had made and strengthened the contacts, I had to deliberately leave them to follow up. I did do this in couple of instances whence I would advise them and leave it to them to convey a request or negotiate.

On the bigger picture, the project has had an impact for the villagers to take the lead to improve their own socio-economic status. Their social networks and relationships with critical actors who influence their present lives have been strengthened and mended. The people as well as the landscape of the village had

been transformed. They are more cooperative and focussed on developing the village. This transformation is perhaps reflected when they renamed the village from that of *PallamPitti* (ditches and ridges) to *NithiyaOli* (Eternal Light) and elevated the status of the VC to *Eternal light economic development council*. As I prepared to take their leave, the villagers handed over a hand-written letter promising to endeavour to be like *NithiyaOli* – ever glowing and never to extinguish, and I realised that they were on the road to empowerment.

## The village



## The people



## Constructing the pre-school/community centre



## Constructing the pre-school/community centre



## Constructing the pre-school/community centre



## Opening ceremony – coming together

