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INTER-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION PROJECT

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LEADS, Sri Lanka

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FOES, FRIENDS, FAMILY

The guns have been silent, the fear of explosions has passed, and the uncertainty of tomorrow is no more. For Vasantharani the trauma of who next in her family will fall prey to the on-going war is no more. “Yes, the conflict is no more, but why am I living with the fear of rejection? My childhood dream of building a nest for myself to live peacefully some day, having children of my own who will be playing in the garden without being called by the derogatory version of our ethnic tag, only seems a far cry. What happened to that beautiful dream I had as a child whilst I was playing with my dolls in our cadjan thatched house? Would there be anyone who will want to love me & care for me? Someone with whom I can share my life and have children to call my own? But then, I am a Tamil¹, I am displaced, I have all my belongings in one bag and I have been scarred by the scorching sun; so how could I be special to anyone?” she asks herself.

She remembers the days when she lived happily in Kokkuthuduwai, playing with her friends under the *cadju* tree with the play house her father built for her younger sister and her to play in. She recounts, “Coming home after school we used to run to ‘our house’, and on many occasions I was the mother cooking in my pots and pans my favourite food of *dosai* and *idly*² ! One day, my dream home was shattered with loud noises and my dad screaming “take your belongings & run to the jungles” ... The fear on my father’s face which I had never seen before, still haunts me. He made us walk, I am not sure for how many hours, but it seemed days.”

“Vasantharani” I jerk back to reality when I hear “Vasantharani, meet Sutharshini” says another lady. “Oh, her name sounds like my name and she is 27 years old, like me, but she is Sinhalese and she is married to Kitsri who is 30 years old and works in the military. I remember the words of my dad ‘don’t trust: the soldiers are Sinhalese’”.

She says that the journey by bus, to the training programme, passing by palmyra and *cadju* trees, reminded her of the journey they made to the transit camp in Vavuniya; as her father said, ‘we will be safe in Vavuniya as we are all together amongst Tamils’. “I did not understand the difference of being Tamil or Sinhalese. The soldiers who were walking around are Sinhalese and ‘therefore, we cannot trust them’, my father explained.” She recalls thinking to herself, ““They are dressed differently because they are soldiers, and they talk differently as they are Sinhalese, but otherwise they look like us! Why would they want to hurt us because we speak Tamil?’ I did not understand, but I hated every Sinhalese person, as there was no more doll’s house , no more real house, no more school friends and no more happy face when dad comes home after work.

¹ The ethnic minority of Sri Lanka

² Local food

Today, Vasantharani travelled in a bus with her friends to meet a group of ladies from Janakapura who are Sinhalese,³ as LEADS have arranged for fifteen of them to be involved in a project, where they will be trained to make bags and slippers from leather. When the representatives from LEADS asked what she would like to make, she chose to make slippers. When we asked her why she chose slippers, she replies, “As I remember walking on the sand and the heat burning my feet, I remember the pretty slippers I had, which broke as I was running to the jungle!”

“The representatives from LEADS and the Community Based Organization tell us that all 30 of us ladies from the Tamil village of Kokkuthuduwai and the Sinhala village of Janakapura are going to be learning together to make various products from palmyra and leather, which in turn will be marketed through the value chain created by LEADS. We were instructed that since all of us are new to this, we need to support each other in the process of learning. Again, whilst I was physically present, my mind was wrapped in its own world of how can I trust a Sinhalese person, how can I reply to a Sinhalese person and how can I work together with a Sinhalese person as I don’t understand her language? Am I making a mistake by wanting to learn something new? Wonder what my other fourteen friends from Kokkuthuduwai are thinking? Is it only me who is feeling different? The questions seemed endless, making my heart to skip a beat in fear. I quelled my fears with the decision: let me be by myself and learn to make slippers fast so that I do not have to go through the agony of six months training! I felt a sense of relief. I did my best to absorb all that was being said in the training. I was finding it hard to understand, as every word being spoken is translated, but my determination to learn overcomes every fear since my first pair of slippers will be for my mother! A sudden surge of adrenaline made me have a song in my heart.”

Vasantharani tells us her experience on that first day at lunch time. The beginning of a chain reaction: “Soon it is afternoon and time for our lunch break, and I sat along with Sutharshini. I noticed her unwrapping the banana leaf, and I see some strange type of food: it looks like the string hoppers we have (*a traditional Sri Lankan flour based substitute for rice*) but it is a different variety. Sutharshini, noticing my look of bewilderment, offers me half of hers, and says ‘lavariya’ (*the Sinhala name for a sweetened version of string hoppers*). I am hesitant, but accept it: how could string hoppers be wrapped up as a different type of food? this looks similar to the string hoppers we have but this is lavariya? Oh, it dawns on me that I need to offer her something from me. But, how could I? What would she think of my *idly*? I love my idly dipped in chutney: how could I ask her, a Sinhalese, to dip into my chutney? We smile at each other and that is the first time that I smiled with a Sinhalese person. We did enjoy our lunch together and that gave me the courage to think “yes, I am going to follow the entire course conducted by LEADS”.

“Days went by, and since the first meal Sutharshini and I shared, eating our food together became a regular occurrence. I would begin to secretly prepare something special to take, knowing Sutharshini will like it. My thoughts are racing as to what would my mother or sister say if I mentioned that I am preparing food for my Sinhalese friend. Will they think I am being a traitor by befriending a Sinhalese? But, for now, this is my secret. I am not sure what Sutharshini’s thoughts of me would be, but I do know she too enjoyed bringing traditional Sinhalese sweetmeats of *kavum* and *kokis* to share with me.”

The training conducted by LEADS was not limited to vocational training, but during the programme we had times of sharing our experiences. Sutharshini shared the fear she had of losing her husband in the conflict by a Tamil person. Each one of the ladies had a story which many times brought tears to the eyes of the other women with the realization, “it is not just me or my community who is hurt

³ The majority community of Sri Lanka

by this conflict but it is with the other community too.” As much as sharing their experiences was therapy, the Inter-Community Reconciliation Project enabled the communities to learn each other’s languages at least somewhat, and also expanded their awareness in the culinary world by learning to make delicacies of the other community. As months went by, the women realized that ‘learning a livelihood’ was not just a project activity, but a life-changing process that reached beyond the boundaries of a skill to touch the very core of their being as fellow human beings.

Vasantharani says, “My dream of ‘building a nest’ continues and not all of my questions have been answered, but the bitterness I had towards the Sinhalese has gone, giving me a renewed hope that someday very soon my dream will come true !” ©



The traditional Sinhala & Tamil New Year celebrations held in April 2015 organized by LEADS saw both communities coming together:

The cheer continues with the Tug of War!

SRI LANKA

In 2009, Sri Lanka saw the end of a 30-year civil conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils, the two main ethnic groups in the country. The Tamil separatist rebels and the Sri Lankan armed forces battled over many years, and thousands of militia and civilians were lost in the conflict. Thousands were displaced from their homes and were living in refugee shelters. Despite the official end of the war, Sri Lanka is still on a path of reconciliation, recovery and rehabilitation. With an entire generation of children being born into a situation of knowing only of a divided Sri Lanka, it is still a slow process as we all learn that we are all children of Mother Lanka, united under one flag.

Yes, we can rejoice as the thirty-year conflict is no more; but is the absence of war the beginning of peace?

LEADS

LEADS (Lanka Evangelical Alliance Development Service), has been actively involved in carrying out interventions in Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons; Integrated Community Development; Child Protection – specifically prevention & therapy of sexual child abuse; Drug Dependent & Prison Inmate Rehabilitation; Community Peace Building; and Relief Operations work in several districts in Sri Lanka. Presently our work covers 13 districts through residential Coordinating Officers.

The mission of LEADS is:

'To be a compassionate, educative and active Christian resource agency partnering with other like-minded organizations to develop & implement appropriate, innovative and integrated programmes of care for the neglected, vulnerable and disadvantaged to enable a better quality of life, alleviate human suffering, and promote peace and human wholeness with dignity.'

Nature and description of work

LEADS works within a diverse array of projects and programs. It carries its mission through various programmes that can be broadly categorised into three areas.

A. Child Focussed Community Development and Community Empowerment:

"By the communities for the communities" is the philosophy that LEADS follows as we guide communities towards discovering their own potential in seeking their own solutions through participatory development in achieving self-sufficiency.

B. The **Rehabilitative and Restorative Ministry** to the Marginalised is founded upon the perspective that true service involves service to *"the least"* in our societies. In this, we minister to individuals with disabilities, victims of substance abuse & Sexual Child Abuse, Prisoners & Ex-convicts.

C. *"When you needed a neighbour we were there..."* **Relief & Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)** is carried out on two levels. To provide Emergency Assistance to groups of people seriously affected by natural or man-made disasters.

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