

A SRI LANKAN JOURNAL 2005

Introduction

In the past year the world has become accustomed to disasters of one sort or another. Quite obviously the worst ones are those produced by nature but in the last year we have witnessed man made tragedies that were unfortunately very close to home.

When reading the journalistic accounts of these events one could be forgiven for believing that the situation is quite hopeless and individuals and communities are either slow or incapable of responding. My own experience in the last 10 years ranging from Bosnia through Lebanon to the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan and now in Sri Lanka has lead me to believe that there is often another – rarely told – story of generosity and courage that does not satisfy the voyeuristic needs of the daily news and therefore it is downplayed. The donors to IDEALS have contributed to the story of hope and reconstruction that occurred after one of these overwhelming catastrophes.

Between January and April 2005 IDEALS was presented with nearly £40,000. Those who made these donations often did so without knowing me but having heard an account of our previous work in other parts of the world from others. We decided that this generously given resource should be distributed directly to individuals in the stricken area and that so called administration fees would be reduced to the bare minimum. I am happy to record that there were effectively no administration fees if by this one considers salaries and daily expenses for individuals who were working in the area. In fact the total amount taken from the donated fund for essential things such as transport and fees for interpreters etc, amounted to no more than £67 (see calculation at the end of the financial section). Flights to and from Sri Lanka by the Trustees, taxis between Tangalle and Colombo and any hotel bills “came out of pocket” and were not taken from the Tsunami fund.

On our first visit to Sri Lanka with a group from University College London I met Philip Woods who had volunteered to work with another Charity and was seeking help for Tangalle As a result of Philip’s local knowledge I was introduced to the Chairman of the local Chamber of Commerce Ranjith Muthumala. Ranjith had immediately responded to the Tsunami striking the small town of Tangalle. He used his taxis to transport injured to the hospitals and the vital but unglamorous task of taking the dead to the undertakers. He worked ceaselessly and tirelessly along with other members of the community such as Priyantha Kumarasinghe.

When I first met them they were feeling desperate about the future because they knew that they could not expect much sympathy from the government in Colombo. Tangalle is a town on the border between the Tamils and Singhalese, and an area that is not “politically important. The information given to me is that there has been little distribution of the massive international donations to the area.

When talking to various donors their view was that they would like to see this money given to people who could help to restore the commercial life of the town and thus allow people to become independent and indeed to help each other. I hope the story that I tell demonstrates that we tried to adhere to this request and, I believe, came close to satisfying it. The people of southern Sri Lanka are independent and hardy and anxious to stand on their own feet. The worst way of using this money would have been to hand out small monetary gifts with no specific use or purpose. It would have quickly disappeared with nothing to show for it.

A DESCRIPTION OF TANGALLE

Tangalle is largely centred on a lagoon close to the beach. Much of it is at sea level with a gentle slope upwards. It is hoped that the following photographs will trace the path of the Tsunami from the lagoon to the town centre with the horizontal blue lines delineating the level of the wave as it struck the town.



1. LAGOON



2.VIEW FROM BRIDGE AND HEIGHT OF WAVE



3. BRIDGE AND DIRECTION OF WAVE



4. HEIGHT OF FINAL WATER LEVEL



5. AT BEACH LEVEL



6. HEIGHT OF FINAL WATER LEVEL

As can be seen from the photographs, not only were the properties close to the beach destroyed as one would expect, but also the shops in the centre of the town were crushed and flooded. The local jeweller pointing to the final level which the water reached shows that it is not surprising that there were numerous fatalities. One simple and terrifying fact is that one cubic meter of water travelling at that speed weighs one ton!

The sight of Europeans who have travelled thousands of miles to swim and lie on the beach often perplexes Sri Lankans because for generations the local people have had a healthy respect for the sea. Interestingly enough when talking to them it is obvious that deep in the psyche is awareness – perhaps brought about by stories that have been told down the years – that the sea can strike treacherously and suddenly. Despite this, for the vast majority of the time the sea is regarded as a friend that provides wealth and security and one of the major industries in southern Sri Lanka is fishing. Despite its potential for violence the local population think of the sea in much the same way as westerners regard a factory. A manifestation of this is demonstrated by the variety of methods of fishing and the boats that are used.



**POLE FISHING.....
SURELY THE MOST UNCOMFORTABLE WAY OF FISHING EVER
DESIGNED. THE CATCH IS SOLD DIRECTLY TO THE “MIDDLE MAN”
WAITING ON THE BEACH**

MORE CONVENTIONAL, BUT STILL UNCOMFORTABLE, METHODS OF FISHING



THE FISHERMEN'S TALES

Pradeep Priyantha had always wanted to be a fisherman but in any event it was the best option available for him. As a child he had watched his relatives bring home the catch but in particular he had always wanted to work on the large ocean going trawlers that sailed from Tangalle and fished the Indian Ocean for as much as a month at a time. It had been his dream to eventually own and skipper one of these vessels.



AN EXAMPLE OF THE TANGALLE OCEAN TRAWLERS

Pradeep was not the sort who was content to leave his dreams inside his head; he first began to work on one of the smaller boats and saved his money to eventually buy his own small craft. The smallest boats were traditionally carved out of a log and of a catamaran form. The lower, bulbous portion is where the fish is kept while the small crew work from the narrow, upper part. It was long hard work but he saved and eventually obtained a larger boat, then bought a small piece of land, which increased in value, and over a period of 15 years he saved enough to be able to buy his own ocean going trawler.

He took delivery of it in mid December 2004 and exactly 15 days later it was wrecked along with all its equipment and nets. All that he owned was in that boat and he, his family and seven other fishermen with their families were destitute.

When we heard his story we realised that this was the sort of man who should be given every support. The generosity of the donors allowed us to immediately place a deposit with a shipyard many miles northwards along the coast and once the construction began Pradeep travelled every day by bus (three hours in each direction) to maintain an involvement in the building.



AN EXAMPLE OF THE POWER OF THE TSUNAMI AND ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF PRADEEP'S BOAT

On my return in August I had hoped to see the new trawler on the water but, because of the Tsunami, the yard is busy with orders. I am sure that if there were such a thing as health and safety laws applicable in that part of Sri Lanka then no one would be allowed on the premises, but nevertheless they seem to manage and produce the vessels to a high standard.



THE FISHING TRAWLER “IDEALS UK” DURING CONSTRUCTION AND THE PURCHASE OF NAVIGATION EQUIPMENT BY SKIPPER PRADEEP AND PHIL WOODS. THE BOAT HAS BEEN NAMED “IDEALS UK”



THE LAST PAYMENT FOR THE TRAWLER

At the time of dictating this journal I believe that the launching is imminent. It will of course depend on the weather and very importantly on the horoscopes of the captain and crew!

From this remarkable donation eight families – totalling nearly 100 people – will now have a regular income and their futures are assured. In addition, the

skipper has agreed to provide enough fish for a daily meal at the local Blind and Deaf School in Tangalle. This demonstrates the value of supporting a substantial business venture and how it will not only enhance the lives of its employees and improve the local economy but it has also assisted another section of the community.



PRIYANTHA (GENERAL FACTOTUM FOR IDEALS) **PRADEEP** (THE SKIPPER) **THE BOAT BUILDERS** (THEY'RE AS YOUNG AS THEY LOOK!) **RANJITH** (LOCAL HERO)

Priyanka Hemamal is a young man who was thriving at his business of running a small taxi firm and a fishing boat. These three-wheeled taxis known as tuc tucs are an essential part of the economy of the community. Priyanka's tuc tuc was badly damaged by the flood and his fishing boat was destroyed. He had little reasonable means of support even though his wife was working part time. In addition, three others partners and employees were put out of work because of the disaster. We were able to repair the three-wheeled taxi while providing a new fishing boat and he is now progressing well with his life back on course.



THE BOAT WE DIDN'T BUY BECAUSE IT WAS IN A BAD STATE OF REPAIR. PRIYANKA WAS DISAPPOINTED BUT THESE BOATS TRAVEL FAR OUT TO THE SHIPPING LANES AND WE DECIDED THAT WE HAD A DUTY OF CARE TO ENSURE THAT ANY PURCHASE WOULD BE SAFE FOR THIS YOUNG MAN. WE HAD NO DOUBT THAT THE IDEALS DONORS WOULD AGREE WITH THIS POLICY

There were vast numbers of requests for nets. Thirteen fishermen were given brand new nets and happily collected them all on the same day from the supplier and another group of fishermen who worked inshore by spreading their net around and pulling into the beach had their large net replaced. In total we provided three fishing boats plus the ocean going trawler. These purchases, along with the nets themselves, made a considerable contribution to re-establishing the fishing industry in Tangalle and the locality.

The fisherman who collected their nets on the same day were all dispossessed and living in temporary camps – see photograph for an example – and had no means to re-establish their own homes because of the lack of equipment for their boats. Without this donation their future was very uncertain.

TEMPORARY HOMES – BUT HOW TEMPORARY?

DESPITE ITS APPEARANCE IT IS STILL “QUITE GOOD”.



THE TALE OF THE DISPOSSESSED

The damage to housing was enormous and many were moved into temporary accommodation of tents. From tents, transfer to individual housing has been fairly efficient but one Tamil group are still living in a converted warehouse with the individual family units separated by a combination of cardboard and plywood.

The sense of helplessness of these people was enormous and was made much worse by the fact that they had also lost their means of self-support. It was to these individuals that we gave direct grants for the re-establishment of their working lives. Unfortunately we were not successful in all our attempts to help as this story recounts

A failure

During a visit by Dr Eamon McCoy and I in May we discovered the plight of Tamil refugees living in appalling conditions in a warehouse. It was obvious that they needed re-housing as quickly as possible but there was no money either to purchase the land or build houses. The Tamil refugee site is a completely inadequate converted warehouse with plywood and cardboard partitions separating 29 families. The men are working and the children attend a local school.

While the site has the advantage of having the solid walls of the warehouse the refugees, who are entirely of the Tamil persuasion as opposed to Sinhalese, are living in makeshift plywood and cardboard constructions within the warehouse itself. As the photographs show, the amount of space for each family is extremely limited, there are very poor cooking facilities and the toilets are totally inadequate with only one running water supply.





THE PHOTOGRAPHS SHOW THE ACCOMMODATION IN THE WAREHOUSE AND THE SOLE TOILET AND WATER FACILITIES IN THE CAMP. FROM THIS IT CAN BE SEEN HOW THE RATHER INADEQUATE FIRST CAMP CAN BE DESCRIBED AS (RELATIVELY) “QUITE GOOD”.

As a charity we had hoped to become involved in this problem and initially gave an undertaking to both purchase the land and “*Somehow find the money for the housing*”. Unfortunately, the scheme went awry. Perhaps the main reason was that we could not obtain permission for purchase of the land but also because of substantial variations in the estimated costs of building the houses. With time running out it became obvious that the £6,000 that was set aside for purchase of the land would have to be devoted to other activities. Since that time, the land has been purchased by a charity and donated to the local council but unfortunately the houses have not been built because there is no money to do so and there is still a considerable uncertainty about their cost. IDEALS intends to continue to monitor the situation and if a definite figure for the house building can be offered – at the moment it is currently running at £18,000 - £20,000 – then we will seek donations to try and alleviate the day to day suffering of these unfortunate people.

We have, however, been successful in helping individual dispossessed families or individuals. One of the letters we received was from a delightful girl who wrote (unedited):

“Due to Tsunami we have faced lots of problems. My father is a fisherman but his all fishing equipment are destroyed. I have two sisters. Now I am school Grade 2 but we have no money even go to class. My father is now patient so we have not way of income. My mother makes sweets and sells for our lives but equipment lost. Due to Tsunami we are faced terrible problems. Now we live our grandmother’s garden house. It has no doors. So I beg your kind consideration about this and please help me by giving your helping hand for our education.”

On receipt of this letter, which was approximately 10 days old, I decided to visit the family. I was accompanied by Dr Eamon McCoy, an IDEALS Trustee who arrived from England that day. Initially we interviewed the girl's mother. She confirmed that her husband had been unable to work since before the Tsunami and therefore his professional rehabilitation was not part of our remit. She also confirmed that her sweet making equipment had been completely destroyed, their house had been wrecked and they had now built accommodation in her mother's garden. This house was open to the weather and with the monsoons coming she was extremely worried. She was also concerned about the possibility of snakes entering the house because there were no doors.



The facilities were minimal and they had to use the toilet in the adjacent house. Running water was also obtained from that house and there is no water piping in or out of the new accommodation. There is a rather dangerous light lead that runs from the adjacent house. This new structure accommodated six children and three adults. In addition, attached to it at the back, is another newly constructed unit in which lives a distant relative with his wife and child. He was a fisherman and was separately applying for restoration of his boat and nets but had not done so yet because he had not even realised there was a possibility of being considered. Grants were given to assist the family and the fisherman.

SMALL INDUSTRIES

One of the major requests was for the women to be provided with sewing machines. The manufacture and repair of clothing and furnishings is a significant cottage industry. Each request was carefully checked and altogether eight, rather expensive, sewing machines were purchased either for individuals or for small shops.

The other important use of our resources was to restock shops in which the goods had been totally destroyed. It was particularly important to re-establish grocery shops because there was a massive inflation for all forms of produce

including ordinary groceries. This applied to the fishing industry and also to day-to-day household goods.

As can be seen from the list of expenditure, other businesses such as the rice mill, jewellers shop and two undertakers were among the commercial enterprises that were re-established with the funds donated to IDEALS.

One of the most attractive investments was the purchase of a bullock and a calf for a young woman who had been dispossessed from her home and was living with relatives. With some difficulty the calf and its mother were photographed when I visited in August. This will provide milk both for consumption and sale and also for buffalo curd production. It was a very small price to pay to give this young woman her independence.



**CHOOSING THE
WATER BUFFALO**



MOTHER AND SON

The effects of re-establishing these community commercial activities cannot be emphasised enough. With the opening of shops and the return of work, the sense of isolation that the individuals felt was reduced dramatically. Inflation was initially rife but reduced by natural market forces as goods appeared in the shops. As always, inflation of the prices of ordinary household necessities played into the hands of the racketeers and loan sharks and

affected the poorest most of all. At one time the price of fish – a staple part of the diet – had increased by 50% but reduced as the boats returned to the sea in reasonable numbers. Over the months that I returned to Tangalle I could see the town begin to thrive. The social and economic importance of these small businesses has perhaps been forgotten in the west where visiting hypermarkets by car is the normal method of shopping.

HOUSING

Assistance with housing was also an important part of the work undertaken. As the list of donations is reviewed it can be seen that there are several examples of the use of the donations for the refurbishment of houses and in some cases a large contribution to rebuilding.



Very often accommodation was provided, or obtained by building with any available material, but had no equipment and the purchase of cookers plus the use of generators for electricity has been a vital part of our contribution to the community.

One particular example of this was a destitute lady who lived in a one-roomed mud shack that could only be reached after walking along a tortuous and frequently dividing path that itself lead off from a minor road in Tangalle. The lady, who is 65 and suffering from visual impairment, had depended on her son to support her. Unfortunately this young man lost his arm in the Tsunami and has been unable to work since.



NOTICE THE MUD WALLS AND THE LACK OF BASIC FACILITIES UNTIL THE COOKER WAS PROVIDED. THE MOSQUITO NET IS ESSENTIAL.

When Philip Woods and Ranjith discovered this lady she was quite literally starving and totally dependent on support from her equally impoverished neighbours. Groceries were purchased and a cooker was installed with a gas container. The photograph shows her meagre possessions. She had no mattress to sleep on and no chairs. These have been provided for her and when Philip and I delivered them she was beside herself with happiness.

Arrangements were made for this lady to be taken to a medical centre in Tangalle for assessment of her eyes– I suspect she has severe cataracts – and on the day of writing this I received information that she needed surgery. The cost is 5000 rupees per eye (£30) but despite being told that the fee would be paid she has declined because of fear. We will keep trying to assist her and perhaps she will eventually agree to this treatment.

Mrs Sophie's story is not uncommon and indeed there are people across the generations who had suffered greatly but whose way of life has been helped in an incalculable way by the generosity of the donors. We believe that spending some of the money on relieving individual personal hardship by the provision of household equipment, reconstruction of buildings and generally making life more comfortable was a reasonable and humane use of these resources.

THE SCHOOL'S TALES

We became involved in Tangalle because of the story of the Deaf and Blind School. When first visiting it, it was obvious that a considerable amount had to be done. The first and vital need was to provide an adequate diet for the children who were living on banana mash with very little protein; they were victims of the inflation in fish prices. A donation of £2500 was handed over to Ranjith during a trip in February and he transferred this to the Principal



DONATION OF £2500 FROM IDEALS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN FOOD FOR CHILDREN IN THE BLIND SCHOOL BEING HANDED OVER BY A LOCAL BRITISH RESIDENT, ALISON THOMAS, AND RANJITH MUTHUMALA

In addition, the kitchens were hazardous to the cooks and dangerous from the perspective of contaminating the food. Your donations permitted the reconstruction of the kitchen and also for work on the contaminated well in the grounds



KITCHENS BEFORE



**TWO VIEWS
OF THE NEW
KITCHEN
(NOTE THE
VENTILATION!)
Dr EAMON
MCCOY IS
CASTING AN
EXPERT (?)
EYE OVER THE
BASIC CURRY
MIX FULL OF
CHILLIES! THE
UNIT NOW
SUPPLIES
TWO MEALS A
DAY FOR
OVER 40
CHILDREN**



As well as the kitchens, great improvements can be seen in the pathways and water supply as a result of the investment from IDEALS.

A visitor to the blind school will see that they now have running water for their toilets and for washing; the well is covered and as can be seen from the photograph there is a high level tank, which although looking rather grotty from the outside is, I am assured, working very well, giving good water pressure as a result of the pumps that we have had installed.



THE ARROWS POINT TO THE NEW DEEP AQUIFER PUMPS (Red) AND THE HIGH LEVEL WATER TANKS (Blue) FOR TOILETS AND CLEANING.



NEW TOILETS WITH NEW PATH THAT IS ESSENTIAL IN MONSOON AND ALSO REDUCES CHANCES OF SNAKE BITES IN THE BLIND CHILDREN.

In addition, the general debris and clutter around the school has been cleaned up and the deaf school is having a coat of paint.

Another school that was clearly in trouble was the local primary school. The main wall was about to collapse and if it had done so when the children were lined up then there is no doubt that there would at least have been serious injuries and possibly even fatalities.



The reconstruction of this wall was presented to me as an urgent requirement because the local council had no money to undertake this work. The school had to be used and the children were placed at risk whenever they passed the wall. It is on a busy road and the vibration of buses and lorries was continually undermining the structure.

The wall was completed in a short time and this is I believe largely due to the careful supervision given by Ranjith Muthumala and excellent general factotum, Priyantha Kumarasinghe. It is amazing to think that the cost of all

Priyantha's activities – which involved travelling to the boat builder's yard as well as detailed assessment of each object – was no more than £5 per day.

HAMBANTOTA HOSPITAL

I first visited Hambantota Hospital in January, about a fortnight after the Tsunami had struck. It was filled with patients and although no damage was actually done by the water it was obvious that this was a hospital in need of refurbishment.

An assessment was made of the hospital requirements by Phil Woods and it was decided that with the somewhat limited resources at our disposal we should redecorate the wards and also fully rewire them.

The morale of patients in hospital and hence their recovery is dependent on many factors but studies have shown that poor lighting and unsightly decorations can have an adverse effect. We believed that this work would benefit both the patients and staff.



BEFORE

There can be no doubt that many of the fittings were dangerous and some just did not work at all. The work of painting and decorating involved the use of unemployed local men and the rewiring is in the process of being undertaken without fee by a local electrician.

SUMMARY

It is often said that donations such as yours are not fully exploited by the recipient charities. There is some truth in this and paradoxically the greater the disaster the larger the response by donors and with this the administration escalates. It is also sometimes difficult to know *“Where to begin”* but we were fortunate in having the voluntary services of Philip and Imogen Woods, Ranjith Muthumala, Priyantha Kumarasinghe and many others in the town of Tangalle. This allowed us to focus our activities in a relatively small area and pick out both the individuals and projects that would yield immediate results from our investment.

Administrative costs – if they could be so described – have been very small. In fact the only money that has been spent apart from direct donation has been on essential activities such as the use of an interpreter or transport for those who have volunteered their services. No money was spent on expensive meals or wheels as practised by many aid organisations around the world.

At the end of eight months I am left with a feeling of optimism combined with gratitude that so many people felt moved to make a donation and others worked hard to make sure that our efforts could be really effective.

As you read through the detailed account of the work that has been done you should be proud that it was your money that allowed these projects and they came about because YOU felt moved to make it happen.

It would be easy and inappropriate to wax lyrical and at length over your generosity but I do not have the skills to do so. I hope, however, that I am allowed a – slightly edited – quotation from George Eliot’s *“Middlemarch”* when she summarises the life of her heroine Dorothea:-

“Her full nature spent itself in channels which had no great name in the world. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is owing to the number who lived, faithfully, a hidden life”.

We will never be able to fully assess the good that has come from your “hidden” kindness but I am grateful and proud to have been allowed to be part of this tremendous venture.



John P Beavis MB FRCS DMCC

January to September 2005