

Tsunami relief – 'j4u' style

"Anna, what can we do about the tsunami? There must be lots of children who are grieving like we were when we came to jigsaw!" – j4u children asked Anna Davies – founder/director of 'j4u' in January 2005.

The tsunami tragedy had touched us all, young and old. The enormity of it. The indescribable violence. The totally arbitrary nature of who lived and who was swept away. What can young people here in the UK do in such an instance?

Through a mutual friend an opportunity did present itself. The Epiphany Trust, an international charity of many years experience and who had worked for many years in Sri Lanka became the vehicle of possibility. Epiphany Trust were assisting Liverpool City Council with their 'Hands across the Sea' relief project to Sri Lanka. **Immediately following the disaster Liverpool City had identified itself with the people of Galle, one of Sri Lanka's biggest seaports on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka. Galle is one of Sri Lanka's biggest seaports and was very badly hit by the tidal wave, in a host of ways.**

Galle's international cricket ground was swamped and more than 500 local businesses, 2000 homes and 5,000 people perished. Tens of thousands were made homeless, income generating machinery was destroyed and the financial infrastructure of the town was left in ruin. There is no insurance for these things in Sri Lanka.

A local witness to the tragic event told us: "Me and some of the other men were having drinks and chatting. It was a bank holiday on the 26th Dec. a full moon day [important in the Buddhist calendar]. A boy ran into my house, he shouted, "A big wave is coming, quick, look!" We ignored him, but he shouted more and was very scared looking. We went outside to see. The boy pointed to the left and sure enough there was a huge wave coming right at us. We ran to the right, only to see another huge wave rising in front of us. We were all swept up in the water and some of us gripped whatever came close to our hands, trees, roofs, each other. Those who held on to things survived, those who held onto people, however precious, died."

A nine-year-old girl said, "I saw the wave coming over the houses, I clung to a tree and held on very tight. My family are all gone, I live with another family now."

The little girl would not let go of the tree for 12 hours afterwards; she was so frightened.

In a sense it is fair to say that half the country is still frightened and in the grip of the tsunami. Many dragged bodies from the sea, animals, people and children, all broken. Whole populations are still traumatised by what has happened and it has changed the culture of the country. In the stories told in our 'loss and trauma' workshops, the evidence was raw and irrefutable. The predominant response to visitors is to define themselves in terms of the tragedy, how they perceive it, and its effects on them and their family.

Their first action is to request money or gifts to help put their homes and businesses in order. Sri Lankans are the most compliant people, patient, artistic and cheerful. I felt often they expected a refusal to their request which in turn only confirmed their impossible need. It fixed them in their loss. There is undoubtedly a great need for

'loss and trauma' work to be done with all age groups, particularly for the older men. For these people it is their work or trade that defines them in the community, amongst their fellows. Their house and home defines them in front of their family. In many cases they have lost both 'definitions'.

Indeed the men have to live with the day-to-day realisation that they've lost working lifetime's acquisition. They know that even if they work 24/7 they can never build it all back again – even if they had the strength and the necessary resources. This loss has a wider implication, which we in Britain probably would not be aware of. Most Sri Lankans live a 'hand to mouth' existence, they get up each morning and look for enough work or produce to turn into money in that day so that the family can eat in the evening. A successful family eat well and have enough for breakfast the next day a failing family starves or eats only intermittently. The tsunami took their tools, their transport and their resources.

Another chronic resource issue is for the local government. Because of the low incomes few people pay local taxes. Historically a local authority makes its money, for roads, sewers, street lights, the whole local infrastructure, by franchising local people to run businesses on their behalf; providing them with accommodation, premises, tools and facilities. Over thirty such businesses, almost all there was in Galle, ceased to exist on December 26th, reducing the local council's income to almost nil. A further complication for people in Galle is that the area is a stronghold of the national opposition party UNP and so.... You have guessed it! Federal funding from Colombo has been almost non-existent so far, ten months on.

In conclusion: I fell in love with Sri Lanka, like Marco Polo who called it "the most perfect island in the World" and like George Bernard Shaw who referred to Ceylon as "the most beautiful country in the World". Like a lover might for his loved one, when I think of it now, I have a pang of conscience. I have done so little to help them since my return home. The children need support to get to school, many cannot afford even the £25 per year to equip their children with clothing, shoes and materials [see www.educateachildproject.org] they also need after-school activities, both sporting and creative and 'loss and trauma' work to enable them to move on from the tragedy of Boxing Day 2004. Indeed all ages do!

The people need urgent support to gain restoration, self-respect, social justice for their families and communities and a new sense of purpose to rebuild. Here again fairly simple counselling work could make a huge difference [see www.jigsaw4u.org.uk]. Jigsaw want to staff and commission a property they have been given in Galle to operate a 'loss and trauma' training and advocacy centre. The men and women need basic tools, equipment and to rent workspaces to begin to move forward again, to trade and recover/repair their individual definitions. Relatively modest amounts of money and twinning with similar businesses and artisans, to donate tools and spare gear in the UK could make a huge difference very quickly to the situation. Epiphany Trust and LCC's 'Hands Across the Sea' could be the 'star gate portal' for this kind of initiative.

My last story is of the day we took a bundle of old cricket bats into a refugee camp south of Galle. It took just ten minutes to get a very serious game of cricket going amongst the rubble and rutted foundations of houses swept away by the wave. The children and young people had the kind of natural ability, instant teamwork and huge

enthusiasm that I remembered had been said of West Indian youth in the 1940's and 50's. We were to witness a miracle, because the kit released a wave of energy and enthusiasm, every big, as powerful and as full of optimism as the tsunami was cruel and indiscriminate.

My dream for the area is in two parts. One: to help get a really serious cricket competition going for these children between the many 'part camps part villages' around the southern coast. This would bring huge energy and interest to the area and get the communities, who chronically lack leadership and community cohesion, gathering together in a simple but creative cause. Two? Ah yes! Two: to see some of those boys from the camps playing for Sri Lanka against England at the Oval on a hot summer's day in 10 years time!

We will be back dear friends. That's a promise.

Stuart MacPherson – **SRI LANKA LIVES !** – September 2005.