

Childrens' clubs: new ways of working with conflict-displaced children in Sri Lanka

by Jason Hart

This article is based upon research conducted early in 2002 in the Batticaloa and Ampara Districts of eastern Sri Lanka, a rural region which has witnessed nearly two decades of inter-ethnic conflict.

Whole villages have been forced to flee, often taking refuge only a few kilometres away. As fighting subsides or shifts location, villagers return to rebuild their homes and lives amidst the violence which often continues around them.

Save the Children Norway (SCN) have maintained a presence in eastern Sri Lanka throughout the conflict.¹ Together with local partner organisations, SCN has sought to involve children as participants in their programmes rather than as mere recipients of services and protection measures. Achieving this aim has not been easy in a volatile and insecure environment in which children have often been particular targets for

harassment, conscription and exploitation by armed forces. Nevertheless, the efforts of SCN and its partners have led to the creation of some impressive programmes in which young people in the age group 12-18 have taken responsibility for their own activities.

Children's participation

The right of children to participate in all decisions concerning their lives is a fundamental element of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child² (CRC) and is made explicit in Article 12. However, in situations of conflict and displacement it has not normally been the case that humanitarian agencies have encouraged the young to become full participants in the design,

implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programme activities. This may be due to a range of factors that include lack of appropriate staff training and assumptions about the limitations of children's abilities. In the conditions created by conflict and displacement, it is also particularly likely that fears for children's safety lead to a more paternalistic approach in which adults take full responsibility on behalf of the young.

In recent years, however, a number of agencies in places as far apart as Liberia, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Kosovo have begun to pursue participatory activities with conflict-affected and displaced children. Aside from the encouragement for this provided by the CRC, there is a growing understanding among academics and practitioners that children are not simply victims who must be protected or rehabilitated but are also actors who, even in the midst of widespread violence and upheaval, may have a valuable role to play in their societies. Moreover, engagement in meaningful social action, as a group, is increasingly perceived as a way to promote personal development and a sense of efficacy in the otherwise disempowering conditions created by conflict and displacement.

The programmes

In 1999 SCN, together with a local partner organisation ESCO (Eastern Self-Reliant and Community Awakening Organisation), embarked on a pilot project with children in a small village called Sivanthivu in Batticaloa District. The project was intended to provide an opportunity for the young people of Sivanthivu to engage in the development of their own lives and that of the community. At the



same time, it would be a learning opportunity for SCN and ESCO and a chance to develop a model for work with other war-affected rural communities.

Sivanthivu itself is in a vulnerable location: a one kilometre square island situated between the forces of the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 1990 the population of the village – approximately 300 families – was displaced by fighting. Most took refuge in a school building in the nearby town of Valachchenai, returning a year later to find their homes burned down. Since that time the village has been shelled and a number of residents, including the young, have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by military personnel. The unstable political environment has clearly impeded development and, more than ten years after the return, Sivanthivu still lacks electricity and has very limited water and sanitation facilities.

During their regular visits to the village to support a project with widows, ESCO staff began to engage in discussion with adolescents. Lacking previous exposure to outsiders, the young people were keen to talk to the visitors and share their frustration at the lack of recreational and educational opportunities. This led ESCO, with SCN support, to start working with them. Through a series of talks, ESCO staff encouraged the adolescents to identify, and suggest how to meet, their priority needs. A formal group was established: the Vivehananda Children Development Club. Its achievements to date include the following:

- The expansion of schooling in the village (previously grades 1-5 only) to include grades 6-9, through construction of a new building and eliciting the agreement of the local director of education to provide extra teachers.
- The re-instatement of bus services connecting Sivanthivu to the nearest town, previously stopped by order of the local army commander. This was achieved through advocacy efforts by the club members in collaboration with ESCO and the national NGO consortium.

- The construction of a building for club activities which not only provides a space for meetings, play and cultural activities for village children aged 5-18 but also houses a small library and vocational training initiatives aimed particularly at school drop-outs.
- The accumulation of funds for the longer-term support of the club and its activities through the savings of club members to complement \$1,000 won in an international competition for youth action.³

Today the Vivehananda Children Development Club stands as a model of participatory programming with children in eastern Sri Lanka. The achievements of this club have encouraged SCN to pursue further projects in other villages, both directly and through local partners. Various difficulties have been encountered in this work, however. Some of these are directly related to the political environment: severe constraints on agency mobility imposed by the Sri Lankan Army⁴ and fear of forced recruitment – both of staff and children – by the LTTE. Other problems include the lack of capacity or enthusiasm of some local agencies to work in this way, and opposition from family or community members to children's involvement.

Replication and adaption

In spite of these difficulties, at least three similar projects have since emerged. These include a club established and run by 12-18 year olds in a mixed Muslim-Tamil village in Ampara District where deep-seated tensions linger as a consequence of intercommunal violence and displacement of the Tamil population in the early 1990s. Similar activities have also been initiated in a Sinhalese village lying close to territory held by the Tamil Tigers and subject to sporadic attack by them. This village has experienced periods of great insecurity during which residents have chosen to hide in the nearby jungle at night and return to their homes only at day-break. Two projects initiated in the LTTE-controlled areas have had mixed success. One was suspended largely due to fear of forcible recruitment of children and agency staff. The other project involves three clubs specifical-

ly for separated children. The agency responsible temporarily stopped activities when recruitment was at its height. During this time many of the older members, especially males, fled to government-controlled areas. However, once the situation appeared to calm down the local agency resumed work.

Each of these more recent projects has drawn upon the experience in Sivanthivu but adapted activities to suit the local circumstances and meet needs identified by children. Thus, for example, in the mixed Muslim-Tamil village the adolescent members of the Child Action Group have focused their efforts particularly on cultural and educational activities and have built solid bonds of trust and respect across the lines of ethnicity which still divide many adults.

In one of the three clubs for separated children in the LTTE-controlled area, participants decided to support peers living in households unable to meet their basic nutritional needs. Each member agreed to save a small quantity of rice from their daily diet. At regular intervals participants bring the accumulated amount to their club meeting and together select a child from amongst their own number or from the community whose household will be given a donation of rice.

While the activities themselves may vary between the different projects, strong similarities exist in terms of the role of the agency staff. In all cases one or more fieldworkers are employed to work with the groups of adolescents on a daily basis. These are generally young people in their twenties, often from the local area. All have received extensive training (by SCN and its partners) aimed at sensitising them to the situation of conflict-affected and displaced children and the many daily challenges they face. They have also been trained to work in a manner which encourages and facilitates, rather than directs, activities. In a society where children are generally expected to obey the instruction of parents, teachers and community leaders, this is largely unfamiliar.

In their work at the village level, the field staff support the children's activities in a quiet manner. According to participants in the

various projects, they provide advice when decisions have to be made or when a particular problem arises. According to one group of adolescents, the agency staff may assume a role similar to that of parent, teacher or friend depending on the situation and in response to the needs expressed. However, the participants themselves take responsibility for decision making and for implementation of plans.

A further vital task of the staff is to build trust amongst parents and other adults. Activities such as these are unprecedented in the lives of their communities. Not only are young people taking initiative but they are doing so in groups, the composition of which might normally be discouraged by their elders due to considerations of gender, ethnicity or social status. By visiting parents and community leaders on a regular basis and talking with them about their concerns, field-workers have been able to open up and protect the space for young people's participation.

The benefits of participatory activities

Working on projects that involve young people in a meaningful way is not an easy option. Although responsibility for much of the day-to-day running of activities may be taken by participants, this does not mean reduced workload and costs for agencies. On the contrary, ongoing support and monitoring of activities are essential to ensure the security and well-



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people to take positive action in order to develop their lives and their communities. When asked whether they might prefer to relinquish responsibilities and leave adults to run the clubs, participants insisted that this would be a bad idea. Their comments included the following: "You can't always depend on adults." "We want to decide - we can do what we like." "In other clubs [run by adults] the children come one hour late. Here they come half an hour early."

In addition to the dynamism manifest in activities, the benefits of this

In addition to this personal confidence, children also reported the confidence that they had developed in their effectiveness as a group. In many of the projects, participants had undertaken activities that were unprecedented in the life of the community such as organising an anti-alcohol campaign or celebratory village events. At first this had caused them anxiety and doubt but, through executing their plans and achieving some success, their confidence had grown, encouraging them to undertake new challenges.

Although not noted explicitly by children, it is clear to outside observers that participants have benefitted immeasurably in terms of their psycho-emotional well-being. No studies have been conducted in Sri Lanka which clearly demonstrate the difference participatory programmes have made in this regard. However, all agency staff expressed the conviction that profound changes have been achieved over the course of programme life. In part, this may be attributed to the action of bringing children together and facilitating the building of close relationships of trust and co-operation in a situation where conflict and displacement have fractured many social networks. In addition, the opportunity for children

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being of participants as they take action that often challenges the status quo. Furthermore, the capacity of the older participants to provide effective leadership has to be built steadily and consistently through training initiatives. In order to justify the effort required there must be clear benefits from such an approach. The young people in the various projects described a range of ways in which they were benefiting. In the first place, the programmes were clearly progressing successfully, encouraging young

approach extend to the personal development of participants. In all locations visited, the participants spoke at length about the increased confidence they now had in themselves and their abilities as a direct consequence of their participation. Girls in particular described how the activities had given them the opportunity to overcome shyness and restrictive social norms. They were now confident about speaking in public and felt much more comfortable socialising with boys.

to explore their potential and realise their efficacy as individuals and as a group – in short, to become empowered – has significant psychosocial benefits.

The effects of these activities have also been felt in various positive ways by their communities at large. In the mixed Tamil-Muslim village, for example, the Child Action Group supports the funeral and wedding ceremonies

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of villagers, across lines of ethnicity. In the Sinhala border village children are planning a tree-planting campaign in order to provide shelter and to protect the local environment. Aside from the contributions of the Vivehananda Children Development Club already discussed, the members also organise the monthly shramadana (communal volunteer) activities and provide refreshments for participants, and have created cultural performances for the entertainment of the whole village. The principal of the local school claims to rely on club members to assist him with sports events and other activities for his students. Participants in the separated children project in the LTTE-controlled area requested First Aid training. Due to the severe lack of health facilities and the obstacles to accessing clinics under government control, these children wanted to be able to deal with common but potentially serious conditions such as snakebite. The agency responded by inviting the local Red Cross to conduct a 3-day training, the first they had offered to under 18 year olds. The trainees are now keen to apply their new skills for the benefit of fellow villagers.

There is evidence to suggest that this industriousness and community spirit on the part of children may mobilise adults towards community-oriented action. For example, in Sivanthivu the same school principal reported that, prior to the establishment of the club, only five to six parents came regularly to the meetings of the Student Development Society, intended as a forum for support of the school and their children's education. However, as the club became active, attendance

jumped and there are now around 150 parents involved. A general mood of apathy has given way to concern about ways in which the village may be developed.

It is too early to discern clearly how children's activities in the other projects may influence adult community members. The biggest challenge reported by participants is alcoholism. While its causes are no doubt numerous, a significant exacerbating factor appears to

be the conflict itself which has destroyed so many precious lives, homes and livelihoods. Building on initial successes and enabling individuals and communities to overcome the despondency fuelling alcoholism will not be an easy or quick process. However, the clear example of children transcending their own suffering and organising themselves to develop their lives and villages must surely provide inspiration and encouragement to their elders over the longer term.

Concluding remarks

In situations of conflict and displacement, international humanitarian agencies have traditionally focused on protection of the young and provision of services by themselves and their local partners. Working to encourage participation, in such a context, may appear to be a luxury or even a distraction. However, giving children a genuine opportunity to participate may prove a highly effective strategy. Not only are the capabilities of the young to protect themselves and support their own development enhanced but confidence in their capacity to deal with the many challenges of life in such unstable conditions is built.

At the time of writing, a ceasefire is in place in Sri Lanka which will, hopefully, lead to a secure peace. In the estimation of agency staff, if violence returns and, with it, further displacement, the young people involved in these projects will be well equipped to cope and may play an important role in supporting other children and their communities. The evidence from these few small projects in eastern Sri

Lanka suggests participation is invaluable to ensure the longer-term protection of the young.

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1. For details of SCN's work in Sri Lanka see: www.savethechildren.lk/

2. See www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm

3. See www.takingitglobal.org/action/yiaa-2001.html

4. This situation has eased considerably since the ceasefire in December 2001 and subsequent signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE in February 2002.

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