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Staff Help Tsunami Victims Rebuild Their Lives

March 29, 2005—Three months after the devastating tsunami that struck countries bordering the Indian Ocean, reconstruction is moving ahead in projects large and small. One example of a small-scale effort came with Bank Group staff who took time out from a retreat in Sri Lanka to assist a community. Radha Singla, a Junior Professional Associate working with the Finance and Private Sector Development (SASFP) team in South Asia, has put together this account of how staff helped tsunami victims rebuild their lives .

On December 26th, 2004, the tsunami hit Kosgoda. The village, about 80 kilometers south of Colombo, is well known for its sea turtle hatchery and has a large population of fishermen who live close to the sea. The tsunami, though, made many of them homeless, including Wilbert Mendez. When the tsunami hit, his boats were lost, his nets were dilapidated, and his home was destroyed.



Destroyed school building in Kosgoda. More than two months after the tsunami hit, little has changed.

On the other end of the world, a busy bunch of staff in the South Asia Finance and Private Sector Development unit (SASFP) were preparing for their annual business retreat in Sri Lanka. When the extent of the devastation became known, however, our plans changed somewhat. We were to participate in some hands-on volunteering activity for post-tsunami reconstruction. We were going to rebuild Wilbert Mendez his home and volunteer at the camps in the area.



Staff hard at work on the Wilbert Mendez house.

Association's "5-H" program (Health, Hygiene, Homes, Human Values, and Harmony in Diversity) had gained recognition all over the world and we were to help them in kick-starting this new Kosgoda homes venture.

With the SASFP group split into three groups of ten each: two groups worked on constructing Mendez's house while the third visited neighboring camps and schools. This was important since we had brought over 1,000 "beanie babies" to the site, mostly donated by a Girl Scout charity in Virginia.

The construction site for Mendez's new home was about a kilometer away from the ocean. "Look! The water went up to over 14 feet here. There is still garbage hanging from one of the branches there," said one of the residents in the area. Amazed, each of us realized what these families had seen and found ourselves knee high in mud, bricks, gravel, and sand with a new sense of purpose.

Taking stock and getting organized

On March 2 at 9:00 a.m., a jet-lagged but enthusiastic 30-person SASFP army found itself in the middle of tsunami-struck Kosgoda. While some of us were "skilled laborers", the only experience most of us had was that of dialing the plumber's number every time the pipe leaked. And we could tell that the heat was not going to help.

We met our mentors for the day: some exceptionally committed staff from the International Association for Human Values (IAHV), a grassroots organization which has provided tremendous support to rehabilitation activities in Tsunami hit area in Sri Lanka. The

Rebuilding more than houses

The IAHV mission is to deal with external needs and sustainable rehabilitation program. It pays special care, however, to the one issue that needs most addressing: stress-relief programs to build human capacity. "More than anything, it is the human spirit that has been most affected" says Elfie, a Swiss hotel owner who has been living in Sri Lanka for the last fifteen years. "After the tsunami hit, my hotel was lying submerged in dirt and water for the following two weeks. I could not find a single laborer to help me with repair work and getting things back in order. There is utter hopelessness and denial for what has happened."



Staff builders (l. to r.): Samuel Maimbo Munzele (Financial Sector Specialist), Marjorie Espiritu (Program Assistant), Malini Narnoli (STT), Kareem Aziz (Consultant), Arif Ahmad Weenarin (Research Analyst), Neeraj Verma (Financial Specialist), and Lulitanonda, Ismail Radwan (Senior Private Sector Development Specialist).



Children at Revatha School with beannie babies from Virginia Girl Scouts

Professional with the group, says "I was impressed with the way the IAHV works to empower local communities come together to rebuild their own livelihoods, rather than wait helplessly for sparse international assistance. This experience has been extremely inspiring and something that I would strongly encourage other Bank Group staff to contribute towards."

In one of the camps we visited, Balepitiya, we were faced with a reality check. Camp residents asked "Where is the aid? We get a grant for free rations for 32 weeks but every time we go to collect it, they tear off two coupons instead of one. We are being cheated". The irony of the situation was that the government officer was present there when the complaint was being made and he left the premise on the pretext of a call and never returned. As an action step amongst us, we promised to follow up on this situation by sending a letter to the responsible Ministry of Social Affairs. It is essential that this blatant corruption reaches the ears of the government.



Children with their drawings and finger art.

Following the Balepitiya encounter, another one awaited us at Revatha, one of the schools we visited. This one, however, hit not the head but the heart. Upon entering the premises, we were struck at the pace with which the education system had picked up in Sri Lanka. However, a closer look at the children's faces behind their white uniforms revealed the hurt buried within. After attending school in a well-functioning concrete building, most of these children went back to plastic tents in camps for shelter. Here, we organized a finger painting and art competition. Most of the pictures drawn by these children, between the ages of six and eight, were of dead bodies floating in water, people drowning, and vivid destruction caused by a torrential ocean.

Simon Bell, SASFP Manager, said "these images and impressions will remain with me for a long time to come."

Another group saw similar images in another camp at Pattarajagham. Here too, children took to expressing themselves on paper. It was ironic to see them draw pictures of death and destruction with vigorous excitement. "Children have retained the trauma within. We adults cry and let go. Kids really don't know what to do. My son is scared of even looking at water" said Saachi at Pattarajagham camp.

There were some heavy hearts at the end of the day. We had seen enthusiasm, desperation, laughter, and tears all within the same day. However, there was one person whose hopes had been lit again, Wilbert Mendez. "I had wanted to see my house standing again. It is a dream come true". It had taken commitment, good team work, and \$2,500 in personal contributions from the team to make this difference in Wilbert's life. A small cost for a man's dreams.



End of the day cooling off (l. to r.): Juan Costain (Lead Financial Sector Specialist) and Margaret Murray (Office Administrator).

For the rest of us, there was the silent hush as the bus made its way back to the hotel. Joe Pernia, SASFP Director, summed up the day saying "we had just experienced what could be best termed as food

for the soul. It was satisfying and uplifting to see the kids forget for a moment their recent trauma and for the fishermen and their families to know that they are not alone in a dark moment of their lives. We will carry impressions from the day for a while to come."

Another 27 families in Kosgoda await their turn to have a new house. In case you or your department are interested in sharing our experience and contributing to the Kosgoda Homes project, please contact [Deepa Menon](#) at the Bank Group, or Madhu Kadari at madhu@jahv.org

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