

A Children-Centered Approach to Social Change

LAST YEAR, IDSC PROFESSOR JUDE Fernando and his colleagues in Sri Lanka established the Alfa Children and Youth Training Institute in Sri Lanka (ACUIS), a non-governmental organization (NGO) to assist children and youth affected by the Southeast Asian Tsunami of 2004. ACUIS resulted from the lessons Fernando learned while working with tsunami victims and conducting participant observer research on humanitarian assistance provided by existing NGOs in the region. He found many of these organizations rarely invest much time and resources for creating a viable learning environment conducive for long-term formal education and vocational training facilities that would lead to sustainable employment and resettlement for the displaced children and youth. Fernando felt that a fundamental pre-requisite for improving the quality of life for children is a viable learning environment that would complement the services provided by the public school system. By using an experimental child-centered rights-based approach to social change, Fernando hopes to combine academic research with practical projects aimed toward positive social change.

Nearly 50 direct beneficiaries of this project belong to a small ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. Originally they migrated from Andhra Pradesh, India and speak Telegu language. For many years they earned their livelihood as traveling gypsies, providing manual labor and producing and selling small-scale household items. Most of the community lived well below the poverty line due to their lack of a sustainable livelihood. After they settled in Negombo, a coastal fishing town in the Western province of Sri Lanka, the majority of them abandoned their traditional livelihood in light of creating a new one, using local fishing resources. Their social marginalization and integration with the larger society under the prevailing inter-ethnic politics forced them, especially the younger generation, to ignore their language and culture. This transition created highly gendered patterns of the division of labor within both the community and the fishing industry. Women, in particular, are often forced to engage in trade-related activities that will keep them away from home for



Students at the Alfa Children and Youth Training Institute in Sri Lanka learn how to use the computer.

long periods of time. This, in turn, created a burden of responsibility on the children, particularly the female children, to assume domestic duties while they are still very young. Male children often opted to help their fathers in the fishing industry and therefore, had to forgo an education.

The lack of education of the parents as well as their absenteeism due to assuming domestic responsibilities and entering into a labor market during their childhood deprived them of a necessary environment conducive for formal education. It was made worse by the fact that local school teachers often did not take these children seriously due to social stigmatization and their poor academic performance. The vicious cycle of poverty, social exclusion, and lack of opportunities led to very high school drop-out rates among them.

The tsunami brought new challenges, as well as opportunities for social change. Following the tragedy, the entire community lived in refugee camps for more than a year. During this period volunteers started an education center. The regular attendance of these children at educational and recreational programs led to a renewal and enthusiasm for education among both the children and their parents.

ACUIS was started to maintain the momentum of this renewed interest in education and to facilitate the resettlement process. Its main objective is to create an off-school learning environment for the children of this community that will

improve their performance in the formal schools. It also intends to provide vocational training so that they may obtain employment after graduation. Because it's a long-term project, ACUIS intends to overcome one of the main limitations of NGOs—providing short-term assistance that lasts only one or two years. ACUIS is also working closely with Good Neighbors Sri Lanka, a South Korean NGO. Its country director is Seung Lee (IDSC/MA '07).

Currently ACUIS is in the process of exploring several research issues pertaining to resettlement communities in post-disaster situations. Fernando and his colleagues are involved in several research projects using participation observer methods: benefits and limitations of children-centered approach to social change, formation, implementation, and performance-evaluation of NGOs, patterns social change in small ethnic minorities affected by tsunami, and challenges in resettlement and integration.

Fernando notes, "The experience learned from this practitioner-scholar project is instrumental in the courses I teach on NGO management and humanitarian assistance at Clark and Yale Universities. This is one example of IDCE's commitment to the scholar-practitioner model of learning. Everything I learned in the field, I'm bringing into the classroom and what I learn from my students from different countries is taken back to the field. For me this is praxis."