

**UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM  
4th ANNUAL REPORT TO THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN SCHOOL  
SOCIETY,**

**AUGUST 2011**

**'COMMUNE-e-LEARNING AS A BASIS FOR CLOSER INTEGRATION OF  
RURAL COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA'**

*Context and Background*

The award received from the British and Foreign School Society was to support a three year 'Phase 2' of Durham University's Project Sri Lanka. This was the subject of a presentation at the Annual General Meeting of the Society in London in May 2009.

This Project began with a tsunami tragedy that devastated lives and livelihoods. So it is based upon and emerged out of the very real needs of human society. From these beginnings it has evolved into a complex programme of partnerships which make a major contribution to student experience as well as academic endeavours within the university. It was decided from the outset that young people should lie at the heart of Project Sri Lanka. Durham students play a central role in fund-raising each year; their money enabling the provision of a community building which serves as a school for the youngest children in a tsunami devastated community.

*Outline Chronology*

In 2006 the first selected cohort of Durham volunteer undergraduate students spent 9 weeks of the summer vacation in our first adopted village of Palana West which lies on the south coast of Sri Lanka. They opened the first Durham community building/school in this village in July 2006.

In 2007 a second student group raised the funding for and opened the second community building/school in the village of Rassandeniya. For nine weeks they worked as volunteers there engaging in community development activities and teaching, whilst some of the 2006 group returned to Palana West.

In 2008, a third community building/school was opened in Gandarawatte village and the 15 undergraduates who had financed this spent nine weeks there whilst some from the two previous years returned to Palana and Rassandeniya.

In 2009 a fourth south coast community building/school was opened in Hiththatiya and twinned with the inland village of Ihalagalagama in accordance with the first year of the British and Foreign School Society grant and partnership – as detailed in the 2009 report.

Then, in 2010, a fifth south coast community building/school was opened in Kirelawela and twinned with the inland village of Puwakgahawela in accordance with the second year of the British and Foreign School Society grant and partnership – as detailed below.

In 2011 the sixth coastal community building/school was opened in Aththudawa and the third and final inland building was opened in Pambahina in accordance with the final year of the British and Foreign School Society grant and partnership.

### ***Provisions***

The Project as a whole provides 4 essential ingredients necessary for post-disaster revitalisation of stricken rural communities. These are:

- provision of physical structures and equipment – we provide community buildings which serve as schools for the very young; also appropriate equipment for them and for assisting with income generation and revitalising small businesses within the community
- human, emotional and spiritual support – through our regular student volunteer placements and also university staff visits.
- intellectual and academic support for reconstruction and revitalisation of communities – through academic exchanges in partnership with the local universities in Sri Lanka
- financial support for the education of bereaved children

This community-based Project unites people of varying ethnic and religious backgrounds in our Sri Lankan villages – Sinhalese, Tamil, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu; and it is about so much more than donating money. All funds raised are channelled into initiatives that are backed up with personal associations, visits, and academic underpinning. It is an ‘all-inclusive’ project, intended to be long-term in nature.

### ***The British and Foreign School Society Grant and its crucial role within the Project***

This award has enabled the Project’s ‘Phase 2’ within the above outline chronology to be completed. This second phase has aimed to address two identified ‘divides’ which exist in Sri Lanka. The first of these divisions is between poor coastal communities, many of which were decimated by the tsunami, and extremely poor inland villages, which are just as much in need of support for development. These lie in the ‘forgotten lands’ of interior Sri Lanka. Many such villages have no meeting place, no school for the young and no central facilities. They have not received the publicity and external support granted to the plight of tsunami villages, yet have their own urgent humanitarian needs.

The second division may be termed the ‘digital divide’. Rural communities throughout Sri Lanka are isolated in the absence of any proper information communication system such as is found in the major towns and cities of the island.

So, our mission in Phase 2 has been to address these two society divides. This has so far been achieved by establishing 6 community learning centres (2 being built each year in each of the three years of the grant) which incorporate ICT opportunities as well as basic educational facilities for the young and other community facilities. These community learning centres have been constructed in 6 villages with clearly identified needs – 3 on the tsunami south coast of Sri Lanka and 3 inland in hill-country tea growing areas of the Sabaragamuwa Province.

We have established and continue to work upon an official ‘twinning link’ between the coastal village and the inland village in each year – brought about by student presence and activities; also by visits from Durham staff and the work of the local Sarvodaya societies. (Sarvodaya is the non-governmental ‘grassroots’ organisation with whom we are partnered in Sri Lanka in the village adoption process.)

Furthermore, we have established a partnership with the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka which is enabling Durham and Sabaragamuwa students to work together on community development activities and also with staff on the concept of creating a ‘University Village’.

The British and Foreign School Society has provided ‘matched funding’ for that being raised by the students and Durham University for the three years of the second phase of the project. This has enabled us to adopt the two villages (one coastal and one in Sabaragamuwa) in each of the years 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 as identified in the above outline chronology.

### ***Progress achieved through this grant from February 2008 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011***

In February 2008, a village had already been identified in the south of Sri Lanka to benefit from the provision of a community building to be constructed in 2008-2009 and opened by Durham students in July 2009. This is the village of Hiththatiya, near the town of Matara in the Southern Province.

As soon as the support of the Society was known, steps were taken to identify an appropriate inland village in the Sabaragamuwa Province which was to be the first interior community to benefit from these developments.

This was the village of Ihalagalagama.

The total population of Ihalagalagama is around 950 people in 275 families. There are approximately 30 young children who are now benefitting from the provision of a school for the early years of education. Villagers are generally of Sinhalese ethnic background. Many are unemployed. Those who do work are associated with nearby small tea plantations.

The village is located on a hilltop, reached by a narrow, winding, largely unsurfaced track. It takes some 35-40 minutes to reach Ihalagalagama by vehicle from the main road which runs below the hillside.

The village has panoramic views across tea-clad hillsides and the largely unoccupied slopes of this part of the Sabaragamuwa Province. Residents occupy small houses

scattered on the borders of the approach road, some a good distance below the village 'centre' at the top of the hillside.

The village has no shops in this gathering area and had no facilities other than a simple, small building in bad state of repair which has traditionally functioned as a school, and a Buddhist temple. We planned to construct a new community building/school on what was open, uncultivated ground at the extremity of this area.

In February 2008, the Project Director and Associate Director visited Ihalagalagama for the first time and, having met the village elders, people of the community and local Sarvodaya officers, agreed that the British and Foreign School Society and the University of Durham would provide the new building and equipment; also that students would work in this community throughout the summer of 2009 when the building would be completed for use.

Money to enable commencement of the work was transferred in March 2008 to the Head Office Bank account of Sarvodaya, the organisation as mentioned which was to organise and oversee the construction of the building.

In July 2008 a second visit was made to Ihalagalagama by the Project Director and Associate Director accompanied on this occasion by the Vice Chancellor of the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka who is most keen to work in partnership on community development and support activities.

The 'Foundation Stone' of the building was dutifully laid by the Project Director in a ceremony conducted on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2008 at an 'auspicious moment' in time that morning. The Associate Director laid the second stone and an agreement was reached for building work to commence forthwith. The stones were laid in a trench cut into the already cleared ground where foundations were to be installed.

The ceremonial occasion continued with speeches of gratitude from villagers and Sarvodaya personnel; speeches by the Project Directors and by the Vice Chancellor of Sabaragamuwa. The young children then performed well-rehearsed songs and dances, dressed in their 'very best' costumes. This happy event concluded with the serving of traditional foods including milk rice, oil cakes, bananas, stuffed leaves, sesame sweets and sweet tea.

The official opening ceremony of the Ihalagalagama building was held on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009, attended by the Project Director, the Associate Director and officers of Sarvodaya. Once again the ceremony was graced by traditional music, singing, dancing and speeches of sincere gratitude.

The first team of Durham University undergraduates – 8 students reading for degrees in Sports and Sports Sciences – then spent 8 weeks of their summer vacation in July and August 2009 in Ihalagalagama. They lived in accommodation on the main campus of the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka and visited Ihalagalagama on a daily basis to engage in teaching in the new building, sports coaching and general 'community development and support' activities.

They dutifully engaged in 'twinning activities' with our 2009 south coast village of Hiththatiya by visiting and establishing appropriate community links with the 12 Durham undergraduate students supporting the Hiththatiya community. Students on the Hiththatiya placement made a reciprocal visit to Ihalagalagama.

Meanwhile, the inland village to be the focus of the Durham University/British and Foreign School Society partnership for the second year of our joint project - 2009 to 2010 was identified.

In February 2009 the Project Director and Associate Director visited the village of Puwakgahawela, also in the Sabaragamuwa Province. This village with a population some 750 inhabitants shares the characteristics of Ihalagalagama. Villagers are predominantly of Sinhalese background with some Tamils. Many are unemployed. Some are poorly paid workers in small local tea plantations or in other agricultural activities. The community has no central facilities and is urgently in need of support and development.

In July 2009 a traditional ceremony, as described above, was conducted for the laying of the 'Foundation Stone' for the new building. Work on the foundations commenced shortly after this event. It was duly opened in January 2010 in another splendid traditional ceremony attended by the Project Director, the Associate Director and the Vice Chancellor of the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka.

The second cohort of Durham students to be associated with our partnership 'adopted' this as their home and place of work in July/August 2010. Once again this was a team of undergraduates reading for degrees in Sports and Sports Sciences.

Puwakgahawela is very close to the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (around 5 miles away) and is some 35 minutes drive from Ihalagalagama. So, in 2010 we had the very positive step forward of establishing a 'University Village' in Puwakgahawela whilst also continuing the all-important on-going activities in Ihalagalagama.

The development of this concept of a University Village is central to these endeavours and it was extremely rewarding to have Durham students, Sabaragamuwa students and staff from both institutions working as a team to support community development activities and basic education.

This location was duly twinned with the village of Kirelawela on the south coast of Sri Lanka, the 'adopted' home of the coastal team of mixed background undergraduate students during the summer of 2010. As in the previous year, reciprocal visits were used to embed the links between these two communities.

Whilst such developments were taking place, the village which is to be our third and final inland community was identified. This is the village of Pambahina, situated very close to the Sabaragamuwa University.

As with Ihalagalagama and Puwakgahawela, this place is inhabited by peoples of mixed ethnicity and mixed religions, primarily Buddhist people of Sinhalese

background. Many residents are unemployed. There is acute poverty in the place and until our intervention, had no community facilities or school for the young.

In July 2010 the Project Director once again attended a beautiful traditional ceremony for laying of the Foundation stone for our 3<sup>rd</sup> community building to be sited in this place.

Pambahinna was the adopted home of our 2011 cohort of students who were based at the Sabaragamuwa University and who, with great success, continued the Puwakgahawela tradition of enabling it to become a University village.

The final south coast village is the community of Aththudawa near to the town of Matara. This was initially visited for planning purposes by the Project Director in July and October 2010. The Foundation Stone for the building in this village was laid in January 2011 and the school was opened by the 2011 cohort of 'south coast' undergraduates in July 2011. The Project Director visited once again as part of our on-going evaluation of the whole project in July 2011.

Thus the entire construction and student support programme has gone entirely according to plan.

### ***Conclusion and evaluation***

This whole programme has gone extremely well and according to plan. All 'BFSS community buildings' have been completed on schedule as have the matched University buildings. Durham University students have had tremendously successful summers in all three years – in Ihalagalagama in 2009, Puwakgahawela in 2010 and Pambahinna in 2011. In each year they have continued programmes in villages of the previous years thus assuring continuity and sustainability of our endeavours.

At the Annual General Meeting of the British and Foreign School Society I was asked to comment on the educational benefits deriving from this project. During the review being undertaken of the work of the British and Foreign School society I emphasised the importance of evaluation of grant-giving. I have argued that evaluation is absolutely essential and that this should derive not only from the grant holder but also from the communities in receipt of 'benefits'.

We have taken this process this process extremely seriously and to this subject we now turn.

### ***How evaluation has been undertaken***

We believe that an evaluation process is essential in a project of this nature. Such process, if it to be robust and worthwhile needs to include not only the grant-holder's report on impact, but also corroborative evidence from individuals and communities that the grant was intended to benefit. Finally, it should include an independent statement – an impartial view from a non-stakeholder.

In order to achieve this, Project Sri Lanka has enabled the Director and other associated staff to visit the communities we are supporting on a regular basis during

the period of the grant (3 times a year). Such personal involvement has given good insights into the impact of our donations from the point of view of the grant-holder.

Secondly, we have engaged local people in our villages to conduct semi-structured interviews with people of all ages in the communities to research the true feelings of the people on the impact of our endeavours. So, we have corroborative evidence from within the communities.

Thirdly, we have asked every student to write a detailed confidential evaluation statement at the end of their visit. A great deal of interesting and informative information has been provided by these volunteers' accounts of their actions and their impacts.

Fourthly, the student team living at Sabaragamuwa and working in the 2011 village of Pambahinna designed and conducted formal 'examinations' with the pupils there in order to assess what they had learnt as a result of the students' teaching. This has been an exciting development which has provided new experiences for the students as well as confirming academic progress of the pupils.

Finally, we invited impartial non-stakeholders in Sri Lanka to share their views on our project and its impacts.

Here we present a 'snapshot' of findings from these various sources.

#### ***Impact of our work as perceived by the local children***

In general the children are unanimously complimentary and enthusiastic about the work and impact of volunteer students and the new buildings:

"They are really good at teaching us English"

"Now we have a place where I can come and learn and I will always come here"

"I enjoy every lesson here because I remember things. I learn words, games and dances. I have so many memories of new things I would not have learnt without this place"

"Now I can say sentences with words. I will always remember what you teach me"

#### ***Impact as perceived by the local teachers***

Teachers were hugely enthusiastic about the work and achievements of this project. No teacher criticised any aspect of what had been done in the classroom.

"The children love to be with them (the volunteers). There is a great change when they are here. We are very satisfied."

"For our children it is so difficult for them to learn grammar of English, but you teach this so well."

“They are very lacking in English speaking, so you help them a great deal with speaking activities. You can explain the words and explain them in a good way so the children will always remember.”

“They do not have stress when you work with them. You teach in simple but effective ways and they will always remember what you have said to them.”

“Some students were afraid to speak English but not now. This place has changed their lives. Their behaviour has changed a lot too. You get maximum participation and attention from the children in this good place.”

“We also learn from your unity with the children. I try to copy your ways of teaching.”

“Because of you I am also improving my English and now I know I can teach better.”

“Through you I learn your ways of putting words into proper sentences. Now I can teach more effectively.”

#### ***Impact as perceived by the community members in general***

Parents and community members strongly reinforce the positive views (in independent interviews) expressed by the children and teachers.

“My children love coming here and to these classes. English is made easier to learn and I am very happy. With English men and women can get jobs like the army, and bank, and work in companies. There is no job for those without English.”

“Now my daughter has the ability to form sentences. The teamwork and the teaching and the change in our lives will always be remembered.”

“The children in this village understand new English words every day. They learn from the white Aunties and Uncles.”

“My daughter now plays the violin because of all this.”

“Now the children make sentences and conversations in school and outside of school. They have a better chance of jobs. They have the motivation to speak. They gave us this.”

“They try to build a good nation here with this project. They are well-wishers. Before they came there was no school, no computers, no playground, no sports. They are much more successful well-wishers than others.”

“They have changed the lives of our school children, given good impressions that will be remembered for ever.”

“The project has given both knowledge and service.”



“The significance of the ‘life-long’ effect of the volunteers on all community members is clear.

### ***Impact as perceived by the student volunteers***

The Durham participants have identified considerable gains by the local communities. These include direct educational impact and also personal, social and cultural gains. In particular, evaluations have revealed:

- Children and adults have gained a much greater understanding of English language – pronunciation, vocabulary, phrases etc
- Children and adults have gained much greater confidence in speaking English. They are now able to laugh and make jokes whilst communicating informally in the English language
- We have opened the eyes of many local people about Western culture. They now have a much greater knowledge of our culture, customs, traditions and general ways of life.
- We have enabled the children to gain interests and aspirations for the future.
- We have helped people to feel valued; to have a sense of worth and meaning.
- There is a greater sense of community cohesion now that the building is in place – achieved through having the pre-school, afternoon activities for youths, classes for the elders, banking and computing facilities etc.
- Having the community centre has enabled the resolving of community disputes
- There seems to be more open-mindedness amongst community members and collective responsibility for the welfare of community members.
- We have improved levels of health and fitness; also improved skills and techniques in playing sports and games. We have encouraged people to engage in sports at higher levels and shown them that they can achieve more than they had anticipated.
- Generally people now seem to have a far greater enthusiasm for learning
- “People whose lives we have touched will never be the same”.

In addition, the class examinations designed and conducted by the students at Pambahinna revealed that all of the core aims of the teaching had been met and key concepts had been grasped by the pupils, so they acquired quantitative evidence of success.

### ***Impact derived from interviews by an independent evaluator***

*Question: How has the new building changed the village?*

*Response: “ ...earlier there was no building...a small old place at the Temple with less facilities. Now all are new. New building is very important. New equipments, new books, desks, toys, pencils, even a computer”*

“ In first two days, less students. Now 60-70 students. All want to come to the activities. The building is full with students. So it changed their enthusiasm.”

“ Students learn 25-30 new words a day. This is good. We do coordination in translating. Small kids have their own plays and lessons. They are very interested. Adults also come. Their response is very good. We now can play badminton and football.”

*Question: Have the village people enjoyed the Durham students?*

*Response* “They have not shown any dislike of them at all. They (the students) give lessons and artwork and they converse with the villagers and say ‘thank you very much’ and ‘your meals are delicious.’

“People didn’t have much understanding. Now they have understood. Parents bring their children happily here.”

“We talk with people far away. Now we know they are our friends.”

*Question: What else have the people learnt from them?*

*Response:* “Good manners for kids. How to behave. Discipline. They teach them everything. They learn words, then how to write letters, then body parts, and they teach songs and dancing.”

“The villagers like their neatness, way they talk, eat...people appreciate it and they learn a lot.”

*Question: do you think the village has been changed for ever?*

*Response:* “Yes. No community centre was in this village before. No computer was here.”

“Now we can see that behaviour has changed. Students have learnt how to share. They do not quarrel when they play. English students show them education and manners.”

“I learn so much. I learn words. They give us qualities for future.”

*From the 2010 evaluations we add the following:*

“Because the building is used regularly for classes, now many more people come to this centre. Parents come as well as the children”

“Because of the building many many people have benefitted. People have learnt words of English and good health habits”

“It is good to have classes with computers because now we can increase our knowledge”

“All of the children who went to classes far away are now coming to this building. The children of our village now have the freedom to come here. The building is used for sewing classes and other training programmes as well as the school”

“More people now come here. As a result of their visiting and learning more people have started to deposit and save money”

“Earlier people did not bother about sending their children to school. Now they are sending the children and they are learning English and some of the women are even saving which is very good”

***Impact statements from impartial senior officers in Sri Lanka***

“The quality of interventions has been truly world class and has demonstrated how universities can join forces to provide relevant services to needy rural communities. With the firm network of contacts that has been established and the partnerships that have been built we are confident that this project will sustain into the future.”  
(Director of the British Council)

“This is the most valuable and original long term university and student related project my organization has been involved in. I believe it to have global originality.”  
(Executive Director, Sarvodaya Shramadana)

“This is an extraordinary project.....children are now learning to speak English without any inhibitions. Teachers have improved their teaching skills; people in the communities have learnt different vocational skills and improved their mathematical knowledge. For the, Project Sri Lanka was a God sent.” (Former District Governor, Rotary Sri Lanka)

***Future planning for added value***

As a result of additional fund-raising by our students and contributions from external donors, we are now engaged in an intensive programme of refresher training for the teachers in our village schools/buildings accompanied by a lengthy course in the learning of the English language. These programmes commenced in January 2011 and continue. We shall do everything possible to sustain these.

Clearly they are of significance as they should provide considerable added value to what we are already achieving in the various communities. If the teachers can achieved enhanced levels of spoken and written English they will be able to derive yet greater benefit from the annual presence of our students.

We end on an extremely positive note which is that the charitably giving aspect of Project Sri Lanka has now been established as an Independent Registered Charity, thus enabling future fund-raising to ensure that all that has been achieved in our building programme and volunteer teaching/teacher training programmes can be sustained well into the future.

We are deeply grateful to the British and Foreign School Society for supporting one of the major developments in the work of Project Sri Lanka, and are delighted to

report that Project Sri Lanka will ensure that all that has been achieved through the Society's grant will be well taken care of in the years to come.

With most sincere thanks to the society,

*Professor Joy A. Palmer-Cooper*  
*Project Sri Lanka Director and Chair of Trustees*  
*August 2011*