



Sahana Sri Lanka provides livelihood support to female-headed households

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At 22 she built a village Today, her focus is on reconciliation

“When we genuinely help people with pure feelings and sincere intentions, many wonders and exceptional opportunities come along the way, enabling greater achievements” says Indira Kithsiri, founder of the Non-governmental organization Sahana Sri Lanka.

THARINDU VISHWANATH¹
PROPOSED BY OMAR BAWA, CMO OF GOODWALL

“You need to be truly passionate and optimistic, have entrepreneurial spirit and faith, demonstrate a high level of empathy and always remain humble to achieve greater heights, make a difference in people’s lives and become a source of inspiration for others,” said Indira with sparkling eyes. Following the 2004 Tsunami, she founded Sahana Sri Lanka, a Swiss NGO that aims to increase the education level and improve the living conditions of disadvantaged children and women around the world.

The opening ceremony of the new community was held on 18th July, 2005 in Hiniduma, a rural village located in the south of Sri Lanka. The wind was blowing and the sun was shining brightly. Children were running across the new playground and smiles were on everyone’s faces. Surrounding villagers had brought traditional sweets to welcome ten Tsunami-affected

families who had lost their houses six months earlier. Notable distinguished personalities were also present. But among everyone, the highlight was a fair skinned Swiss lady, yet bearing the familiar features of a Sri Lankan, clad in a green sari. Her eyes showed signs of both present victory and future plans for many more noble endeavours. Her name was Indira, a woman who struck me with her passion to make this world a better place.

It was in February 2005 that I first met with Indira to help her translate a text into Sinhala. At that time, she was selecting vulnerable families and children in refugee camps. I was mesmerised by the efforts of this young girl, then only 22. “Why are you interested in helping us?” I asked her. She smiled at me and said, “Tharindu, we all have our own aspirations in life to feel fully accomplished. For me it is about helping people in need and to see their lives in better conditions; I chose to come to Sri Lanka because of my origins”.



Together with James, a Canadian volunteer whom she had met at the immigration office in Colombo, she worked to construct an entire community of permanent houses in Hiniduma with funds raised in Switzerland and Canada. They struggled to speak the local language, yet James and Indira found a way to deeply immerse themselves in the local culture. Indira's warmth towards the children was evident in the way she spoke to them in broken Sinhala: 'Hiniduma yanna kamathiy' (do you like settling in Hiniduma?)

A year later, with my help, she recruited teachers and started classes for children of the village. "Children in Hiniduma should be taken out of their boundaries. They have set mental and geographical barriers. They have to realise their potential and capitalize on their inner strengths to reach the next level. We should encourage and guide them on their journey." This is the message Indira conveyed to all the staff to be passed on to all children who quickly became eager to learn more.

In time, Isuru Sampath, a shy boy from a local tea estate, became active and was eventually appointed leader of the

community. Today he works a stable job in a supermarket in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. Imanthi, a very enthusiastic young girl, took every opportunity to learn and study. She was not afraid to raise questions and hence became a member of the leaders' group. As a result of her efforts, she entered university. "I didn't imagine I could make it. But with Sahana Sri Lanka classes, I gained the confidence and the knowledge," she said with tears of joy. These are only two examples of success stories amongst many others.

After five years, as children and parents alike realised it was time for them to stand on their own feet; the community was able to reach its independence. Yet Indira wanted to support the ones who needed further help. In 2011, she acquired a seven-acre tea plantation, profit from which was used to finance educational and healthcare projects in other regions of the country. This innovative self-sustaining solution allowed her to envisage new types of collaboration with other NGOs. Moreover, by allowing Sinhalese tea pickers from the South to support Northern Tamil communities, she had imagined a great initiative that would be a step towards post-war reconciliation between the two ethnic groups of the country.

Later on, in 2014, Indira's NGO entered into a partnership with Terre des hommes (Tdh) to carry out a livelihood project supporting women affected by the consequences of the war in Northern areas. Indira strongly believes that local partnerships can provide win-win solutions ensuring long-term sustainability, transfer of knowledge, and greater impact on the ground. "Support from Sahana Sri Lanka has

allowed Tdh to help particularly vulnerable female-headed households in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. The integration of livelihood support into our work has provided the opportunity to identify and respond to individuals whose acute vulnerability exposes them to the dangers of exploitation. The project has proven that even a small intervention at the individual level can contribute to significant outcomes," said Geoff Cordell, Country Representative of Tdh Sri Lanka.

Alongside managing Sahana Sri Lanka, Indira graduated from Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne in 2010, where she received the Social Responsibility Award. Today, she works for the World Economic Forum in Geneva as "Community Associate for India and South Asia". "The Forum offers me exceptional learning opportunities which truly inspire me, allowing me to bring another dimension to the work I achieve on the ground. It is also an immense privilege to interact with outstanding individuals sharing similar values and concerned by the same mission, to improve the state of the world." ■

¹ Author of "Time of Reality" Rojak

For more information on Sahana Sri Lanka, please visit www.sahana-srilanka.org