

My Experience with Shanthi Sena at the Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Peer-Training Program in Trincomalee (Shorter, more “personal” version)

To reach Trincomalee from Colombo you must cross Sri Lanka from the southwest to the northeast, passing mountains and rice paddies, through villages and small towns, from one coast to another. At a certain point in the trip, signs of the recently-ended war become more apparent -- bunkers appear at regular intervals along the highway, each with its own pair of armed soldiers, standing in wait, ready for an enemy they hope will never reappear. You may see a billboard encouraging peace, a mud-spattered UNHRC truck, a young man on crutches. But slowly, optimism is returning to the region; a smooth new road symbolizes the renewed connection this region feels with the rest of the country, people feel freer to move about, and fishing boats crowd the shore to access waters the war had made inaccessible.

It was here that we traveled on June 1st for a three and a half day peer-leader training of Shanthi Sena youth. Our team consisted of experts in grassroots organizing, community education, and reproductive health. Shanthi Sena, Sarvodaya’s “Peace Brigade,” partnered with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and a local private consultant for the training. At the request and direction of village leaders and the Shanthi Sena peer educators, our goal was to facilitate discussion and training on HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness, sexual reproductive health and family planning, women’s empowerment and sexual stereotypes, as well as an additional hodge-podge of issues concerning sexual health and family life in the villages. Our goal wasn’t so much to teach a UNFPA-designed curriculum as it was to provide education and leadership training resources to community leaders who had *already* identified certain issues they faced in their villages. Throughout the workshop, we would be continually reminded of the way issues overlapped, and the difficulty of treating any single issue -- such as reproductive health -- in a vacuum.

The group of facilitators were impressively knowledgeable about their work – they clearly had a passion for it, and collaborated to make the workshop continually interesting and challenging for the participants. In addition to lectures, they used games, art, PowerPoint, theatre, music, informal discussions, hands-on practice, role playing, small groups to educate the participants. They were friendly toward me, and always eager to explain their approach, or to translate a particularly funny thing a participant had said. Given the nature of the topic, laughter was a regular and important way to break the tension.

While I spent much of my time at the Trincomalee center observing the peer-educator program, my inability to understand more than the occasional Sinhala word made it difficult to spend an entire day in the workshop. Fortunately, Sarvodaya staff at the Trincomalee site were happy to show me the facilities, and to spend hours with me discussing Sarvodaya’s work in the area, needs for development, and prospects for a lasting peace. The Trincomalee site houses a variety of vocational training classes, along with a preschool and young adult education classes offered to youth who were unable to go to school during the war years. Other offices, such as a community development office working in partnership with Oxfam, helped me to understand just how interconnected all of these projects were. Poverty, jobs training, female empowerment, health, education, stronger families, and a general sense that villages are able to direct their own course – Sarvodaya is in a position to weave all of these areas together,

effectively organizing the efforts of many different international partners to remain attentive to the village-level needs of Sri Lankans.

Shrewdly considering ways to make their operations more sustainable, Sarvodaya's Trincomalee facilities contain top-notch guesthouse and dining facilities that rent their services to INGO's and other groups holding conferences, trainings, and gatherings. Additionally, they plan to expand these facilities in the future, making them open to development tourism, and possibly even general tourism. Their position on a beautiful and undeveloped portion of the beach makes this a likely prospect, and an excellent way to gain some financial security for their programs.

I was fortunate enough to spend part of the third day in Trincomalee itself, roaming the town, visiting beaches, and even making the trek up the seaside cliff to Koneswaram temple, one of the holiest Hindu temples in the country. The prevalence of INGO offices in town was glaring, and public infrastructure was modest, but now that the war is over Trincomalee's citizens are optimistic. After a long cloister, their beautiful town, filled with religious history and spanning some of the most gorgeous beaches in Sri Lanka, is finally being reintroduced to the rest of the country, and to the world.

On Friday evening, participants gathered on the beach for a training in "guerilla theatre" -- brief and engaging performances to practice more creative and dramatic methods for educating their villages. The schedule, thus far, had been grueling, with long hours and a great deal of information, but the participants remained enthusiastic. The beach was a great place to spend the evening; huddled around fishing boats or sitting in the sand, the participants worked in four groups to design their shows. Then, beneath a high lamp, we formed a half circle in which the groups showed off what they had learned, and their talents for communicating it. There were some great song writers in the group, and some talented actors, too. After the presentations, the energy spilled into the evening hours as we continued to sing and dance, marching through the sand back to the Trincomalee center, optimistic for the work days ahead.

On the final, half-day of the workshop, participants developed action plans for educating their villages. Then, after a long round of photos and goodbyes, we left the Sarvodaya compound in a variety of vehicles -- a Sarvodaya van, a United Nations truck, and municipal busses heading off to eleven different villages. This was an experience in tremendous resilience, integration, and hope. Despite being crippled by a long war, a devastating tsunami, and the poverty and dysfunction these tragedies left in their wake, the young people were ready and motivated to move forward, and to find ways to solve their own communities' problems. And together, at this crucial juncture in Sri Lanka's history, projects like this offer a tremendous amount of hope that the peace will gain the justice and the social empowerment necessary to be a lasting peace.

As we re-crossed the island, back to the southwest, I was hopeful that the regular military bunkers could eventually be taken down, and that, in the distant villages we saw tucked against mountainsides and covered in trees, a sense of empowerment and community was growing. And our work was one small contribution.

My Experience with Shanthi Sena at the Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Peer-Training Program in Trincomalee (Longer, more “official” version).

To reach Trincomalee from Colombo you must cross Sri Lanka from the southwest to the northeast, passing mountains and rice paddies, through villages and small towns, from one coast to another. At a certain point in the trip, signs of the recently-ended war become more apparent -- bunkers appear at regular intervals along the highway, each with its own pair of armed soldiers, standing in wait, ready for an enemy they hope will never reappear. You may see a billboard encouraging peace, a mud-spattered UNHRC truck, a young man on crutches. But slowly, optimism is returning to the region; a smooth new road symbolizes the renewed connection this region feels with the rest of the country, people feel freer to move about, and fishing boats crowd the shore to access waters the war had made inaccessible.

It was here that we travelled on June 1st for a three and a half day peer-leader training of Shanthi Sena youth. Our team consisted of experts in grassroots organizing, community education, and reproductive health. Shanthi Sena, Sarvodaya’s “Peace Brigade,” partnered with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and a local private consultant for the training. At the request and direction of village leaders and the Shanthi Sena peer educators, our goal was to facilitate discussion and training on HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness, sexual reproductive health and family planning, women’s empowerment and sexual stereotypes, as well as an additional hodge-podge of issues concerning sexual health and family life in the villages. Throughout the workshops, we would be continually reminded of the way issues overlapped, and the difficulty of treating any single issue -- such as reproductive health -- in a vacuum.

We spent our first evening reviewing questionnaires the participants had received and filled out before the workshop. The questionnaires asked the participants to express their understanding of the problems their villages faced, along with the reasons for those problems and their solutions. These brief response papers were enormously important for us, because they organized the program in the coming days.

On Wednesday, June 2nd, we met the participants. These were 27 young leaders, aged 18-25, representing eleven villages in the area. From the start, it was clear that they were enthusiastic to learn, and possessed the leadership abilities necessary to the task. After opening with some activities to get them comfortable and engaged as a group, we spent the morning elaborating on the issues brought up in their response papers, encouraging members of each village to further articulate the problems facing their communities. It was clear from the start that the success of this workshop -- and its further outcome in each of their villages -- depended on the engagement and input of each participant. Fortunately, they were up for the task.

The issues they faced in their villages were astoundingly broad. These included abortion, early marriage, early pregnancy, lack of adult role models, sexual myths and poor sexual education, runaway youth, forced marriages, gender inequality, and divorce. After this, the general field of reproductive health was introduced, with “body mapping” activities where the participants drew bodies and sexual “zones” of the opposite sex. Using games, art, and PowerPoint presentations, facilitators spent the rest of the day exploring issues relating to the reproductive system, covering many areas participants may have missed in their schooling.

The goal of the first day was to begin to address and overturn the local stereotypes, myths, and barriers relating to sexual and reproductive health that cause problems in participants' communities. With the high engagement of participants and the expertise of facilitators, we were successful in meeting this goal.

The second day of the program used PowerPoint, art, hands-on activities, and small group work to address family planning methods and birth control, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and cultural stereotypes surrounding virginity and sexual pleasure. Participants formed six groups, and created six different "virginity models" using pens, paper, and tape in order to begin a discussion around the anatomy and the cultural issues surrounding virginity. Later, in learning about birth control and "safe sex", participants passed around birth control pills, Norplant implants, loop contraceptives, the "morning after pill", and condoms, while discussing their relative merits and accessibility.

I was able to spend the afternoon with a man named Terrance, an English-speaking Sarvodaya staff member who was my guide to the wider work of the Trincomalee facilities. The Sarvodaya Trincomalee compound houses extensive vocational training facilities -- 17 classes, with 25 students each, are currently operating. The courses are comprised of youth aged 18-24 who have been especially affected by the war, the 2004 tsunami, poverty, or who live in a female-headed household. They teach skills such as computer hardware, English and computer software, carpentry, industrial sewing, tailoring, cosmetics, motorcycle repair, and more. Students spend six months taking classes and another three months in on-the-job training before receiving their diplomas. Sarvodaya has agreements with a number of private-sector employers to provide on-the-job training, and possibly continuing employment, to students. Others may become self-employed, using Sarvodaya's assistance in procuring funds or micro-loans for the necessary tools. Still others use their newly acquired skills to find a job abroad.

Beyond the vocational center, the Trincomalee site houses offices that plan community development programs in the region in cooperation with Oxfam, a preschool for local youth, a school program for older youth whose early studies were interrupted by the war, and general regional offices, out of which Sarvodaya's wider work is based. It was here that the deeply interconnected nature of our work, and the unique value of Sarvodaya, was clearest. As we spoke with Shanthi Sena youth about women's disempowerment and the family strife caused by poverty, other programs were working on just these issues. And by training knowledgeable youth to act as village leaders and educators, Shanthi Sena was supporting the work of these other offices by creating men and women who were strong and mutually supportive leaders, with the knowledge to create stronger families and more resilient communities. While a multitude of partner organizations lent their support, creating the possibility of confusion and redundancy on the ground, Sarvodaya remained the organizing local vehicle, insuring that the programs were efficient, integrated, and in close contact with the particular needs and abilities of each village.

Shrewdly considering ways to make their operations more sustainable, Sarvodaya's Trincomalee facilities contain top-notch guesthouse and dining facilities that rent their services to INGO's and other groups holding conferences, trainings, and gatherings. Additionally, they plan to expand these facilities in the future, making them open to development tourism, and possibly even general tourism. Their

position on a beautiful and undeveloped portion of the beach makes this a likely prospect, and an excellent way to gain some financial security for their programs.

During the evening, participants gathered on the beach to discuss cultural prejudices that were acting as barriers to their communities' empowerment. The discussion lasted long into the evening, as participants were eager to wrestle with these challenging topics.

On the third day, the workshop addressed further cultural stereotypes surrounding HIV. Issues related to abortion, teen pregnancy, and sexuality were also addressed. Later in the day, participants split into four groups, each assigned with giving a brief presentation on one of the following areas: HIV/AIDS and cultural stereotypes; male and female reproductive systems and safe sex; STI transmission and safe sex; virginity and sexual satisfaction. In this way, participants were able to practice ways of educating their peers, while putting their new knowledge into their own words.

I was fortunate enough to spend part of the day in Trincomalee itself, roaming the town, visiting beaches, and even making the trek up the seaside cliff to Koneswaram temple, one of the holiest Hindu temples in the country. The prevalence of INGO offices in town was glaring, and public infrastructure was modest, but now that the war is over Trincomalee's citizens are optimistic. After a long cloister, their beautiful town, filled with religious history and spanning some of the most gorgeous beaches in Sri Lanka, is finally being reintroduced to the rest of the country, and to the world.

On Friday evening, participants gathered on the beach for a training in "guerilla theatre" -- brief and engaging performances to practice more creative and dramatic methods for educating their villages. Continuing to work in their four assigned groups, participants addressed their given topics using humor, audience participation, memorable lines, sound effects, song and dance, and other dramatic techniques. They showed a wide range of talent, and put on quite a show.

On the final, half-day of the workshop, participants developed action plans for educating their villages. After first getting community leaders on board, participants were encouraged to locate other youth leaders to connect with, along with the various social spheres and activities in which they could share their new knowledge. Participants divided into four groups to develop action plans for a variety of situations they might face in their particular villages. They then communicated their strategies to the wider group, receiving further suggestions and feedback from facilitators. Finally, looking at their answers to the original questionnaire regarding the solutions to their villages' problems, participants were able to see how far they had come in just a few days on being able to understand and address the issues in their communities surrounding sexual reproductive health. The program closed with final evaluations (APPENDIX B), the conferring of diplomas and "resource bags" by the UNFPA.

After a long round of photos and goodbyes, we left the Sarvodaya compound in a variety of vehicles -- a Sarvodaya van, a United Nations truck, and municipal busses heading off to eleven different villages. This was an experience in tremendous resilience, integration, and hope. Despite being crippled by a long war, a devastating tsunami, and the poverty and dysfunction these tragedies left in their wake, the young people were ready and motivated to move forward, and to find ways to solve their own communities' problems. Truly, we just offered the facilitation and resources for work undertaken by the

villagers themselves. With Sarvodaya's long-time village presence and the grassroots organizing work it has already done, a blizzard of local and global partner organizations were able to offer their own services and expertise in a remarkably seamless and integrated manner. And together, at this crucial juncture in Sri Lanka's history, projects like this offer a tremendous amount of hope that the peace will gain the justice and the social empowerment necessary to be a lasting peace.