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**Working Paper 11**

**Operationalising Peacebuilding and Conflict  
Reduction**

**Case Study: Oxfam in Sri Lanka**

**Simon Harris and Nick Lewer**

**August 2002**



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## **Case Study: Oxfam in Sri Lanka**

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# Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b>	iv
<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
<b>2. A Growing Interest in Peacebuilding and Conflict Reduction</b>	1
2.1 DFID and Oxfam in Sri Lanka	2
2.2 Linking The Levels	4
<b>3. Oxfam in Sri Lanka</b>	6
3.1 Oxfam - Corporate Perspectives on a Conflict Reduction Approach.	6
3.2 Oxfam - Operational Experience in Sri Lanka.	7
3.3 Perceptions of Oxfam in Sri Lanka.	9
<b>4. Oxfam - Conflict Reduction Programme</b>	10
4.1 The Assessment Phase.	10
4.2 Developing a Conceptual Framework.	12
4.3 Conflict Reduction Programme Components.	13
4.3.1 Training – Staff and Partners	13
4.3.2 Conflict Reduction Team Building	15
4.3.3 Research Bursaries	15
4.3.4 District Advisory Groups	17
4.3.5 Media Programme	18
4.3.6 Networking and Co-ordination	19
4.3.7 Monitoring and Evaluation	19
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	20
5.1 Lessons Learnt	20
5.2 Impact	22
5.3 Two Examples Associated With The RBP	23
5.3.1 ‘Cricket Stumps Conflict’	23
5.3.2 ‘Bonding Labour in The Hills’	24
<b>6. Postscript</b>	26
<b>Appendices</b>	30
<b>References and Further Reading</b>	35

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The observations, views and interpretations expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam.

Responsibility for the content of Working Papers rests with the authors alone.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CBO	Community Based Organisation
CHA	Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies
CHAD	Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (DFID)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department For International Development (UK)
DS	District Secretary
EO	Education Officer
GA	Government Agent
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RBP	Relationship Building Programme
WUSC	World University Service of Canada

## **1. Introduction**

Should an international humanitarian relief and development organisation working with people affected by violent conflict proactively engage with issues of conflict reduction and peacebuilding? What might such a programme look like? What resources would be required and what organisational changes would be necessary? What challenges would have to be met?

In 1998 these were the questions facing Oxfam GB in Sri Lanka. Today, Oxfam's work incorporates a conflict reduction and peacebuilding perspective through its 'Relationship Building Programme'. This programme aims to add value, sustainability and impact to the emergency relief, rehabilitation and development programmes of Oxfam and its partners.

The paper will begin by tracing the growing interest in peacebuilding and conflict reduction in Sri Lanka, and initiatives by humanitarian agencies and donors to mainstream such approaches into their work. Crucial to this is conflict analysis, and an integration of research, policy and operational elements into agencies strategic planning. The second section will focus on the work of Oxfam in Sri Lanka as a micro-study, examining how Oxfam progressed in operationalising these concepts. The history and development of Oxfam's Conflict Reduction Programme (CRP) [which was later renamed the Relationship Building Programme (RBP)] will be described. The last section of the paper will comment on the impact of Oxfam's approach, and look at future challenges and opportunities faced by Oxfam and other humanitarian agencies in conflict reduction and peacebuilding.

Oxfam is not the only agency engaged in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities in Sri Lanka. An increasing number of projects are being undertaken by both Sri Lankan and foreign organisations (Lewer & William, 2002). There is also a growing literature on peacebuilding stories and case studies (ECCP, 1999; Mathews, 2001). This paper will add to the literature by discussing how one humanitarian agency (Oxfam in Sri Lanka) has explicitly attempted to integrate and mainstream a conflict reduction and peacebuilding approach throughout its operations.

For a deeper understanding of the conflicts in Sri Lanka, and attempts to resolve it, readers are referred to the extensive narratives on the subject.

## **2. A Growing Interest in Peacebuilding and Conflict Reduction**

During the 1990s there was an upsurge of interest in peacebuilding and conflict reduction, and humanitarian agencies began to seriously engage with the concept that relief and development initiatives can have an impact on, and be influenced by, the conflict dynamics within which they operate. Researchers, donors and humanitarian agencies acknowledged that where violent conflict

exists, it is a key reason for poverty and underdevelopment (Anderson, 1999; Bradbury, 1995; Bush, 1999; Chalker, 1996; DAC, 1997; Duffield, 1997; Dutch Interchurch Aid, 1993; Heinrich, 1997; Lewer, 1999; O'Reilly, 1998; Reychler, 2001; Short, 1999). The 'Band Aid' approach of the past needed to be supplanted by more proactive interventions which tackled the dynamics and causes of conflict, as well as just trying to deliver emergency relief and 'traditional' development work. Major donors and governments wanted to understand more clearly the effects that their interventions have on conflict reduction – for example the World Bank made 'peace and social harmony' an integrative objective for its initiatives. In Sri Lanka during this period there were a number of foreign funded action research and training initiatives in progress related to peacebuilding and conflict reduction. These included the: 'Do No Harm' – Local Capacities for Peace' initiative (Anderson, 1999); the DFID funded 'Complex Political Emergencies: From Relief Work to Sustainable Development' and 'NGOs and Peacebuilding' (Goodhand & Lewer, 1999; Goodhand, Hulme & Lewer, 2000; Goodhand, Hulme & Lewer, 2001); an OECD/DAC Research Study (Bush, 1999); GTZ and Heidelberg South Asia Institute 'Local Capacities and Conflict Management in Sri Lanka' (South Asia Institute, 2000), and; the Life and Peace Institute from Sweden working with Sri Lankan Inter-Religious Peace Foundation ( *New Routes*, No.1-2, 2000)

## **2.1 Department For International Development and Oxfam in Sri Lanka**

DFID and Oxfam in Sri Lanka began to work more closely together to design strategies to enable aid and relief to be delivered more effectively in conflict affected areas, so that it was more 'conflict sensitive', and with a conflict prevention perspective. Oxfam-Sri Lanka has put time and resources into exploring and developing a more systematic approach to reducing the impact of the violent conflict on its work. In September 1998, responding to the targets of the UK White Paper on International Development and incorporating the British Government policy statement on *Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance* (1997), DFID hosted a series of meetings in Colombo to discuss the development of their new country strategy paper. As one of DFID's main partners in Sri Lanka, Oxfam participated in a number of these meetings and actively raised issues of conflict sensitive programming and peacebuilding impact. Published in September 1999, DFID's country strategy paper made a commitment to 'explore whether there are further ways in which the UK might help efforts to promote inter-communal reconciliation in Sri Lanka' (DFID, 1999). Oxfam and DFID agreed that the Relief and Rehabilitation project had the purpose of enabling primary and secondary stakeholders to cope better with a chronic conflict environment. These terms were defined as follows (Oxfam, July 1999):

*Coping better:*

- An improved capacity amongst primary (beneficiaries) and secondary (community and government structures) stakeholders in Oxfam programme areas to address the social, economic, physical and emotional challenges resulting from a chronic conflict environment.
- An improved capacity amongst primary and secondary stakeholders to contribute to a reduction in the level of conflict in programme areas.

*Chronic conflict environment* are:

- All areas and forms of current or potential violent conflict from the micro (individual and community) to the macro (regional and national) level.

It was within this context that Oxfam in Sri Lanka made conflict reduction and peacebuilding a core strategic theme. *Conflict reduction* was understood as a process to ‘enhance the capacity of people, in Oxfam areas of operation, to contribute to the prevention, mitigation and reduction of violent conflict’. Such activities were to link in with Oxfam GB’s global eight Strategic Change Objectives (SCOs)<sup>1</sup>, particularly:

SCO 3.0: Right to Life and Security, *and within SCO 3.0,*

SCO 3.2: Fewer people suffer violence, fear of insecurity, or forced displacement, as a result of personal or communal violence, or armed conflict.

That this approach was timely can be seen, for example, in relation to (a) the DFID Departmental Report 2000, and; (b) the discussions around the DFID *White Paper II – Globalisation and Development*. In these DFID documents the linkage between poverty and conflict is continually stressed, and the place for development programmes to help strengthen and build regional and national capacities for dispute resolution and conflict management acknowledged. Chapter 6 of the *DFID Departmental Report* <sup>2</sup> lists the following strategies for conflict reduction: supporting the promotion of social cohesiveness and inclusion; supporting the improvement of the international mechanisms for settling disputes and preventing conflict; assisting in the limitation of the means of waging war; supporting a security sector reform; promoting the protection of human rights in conflict situations; supporting post-conflict peace building.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Change Objectives (SCO’s) were introduced by Oxfam GB in 2000 / 01 as part of their organizational change process. SCO’s represent Oxfam GB’s overarching global objectives through which country programme objectives are aligned.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.dfid.gov.uk/public/news/dr2000\\_chap6.pdf](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/public/news/dr2000_chap6.pdf).

**BOX 1**  
**OXFAM**

The history of Oxfam is well documented (Milford, 1965; Whitaker, 1983; Black, 1992), and knowledge of this general historical background and the types of programming over the years helps understanding of how the work in Sri Lanka has developed (Boyden & Pratt, 1988). From its formation in 1942 with the objective of ‘the relief of suffering arising as a result of war or any other cause’, during the 1960s OXFAM became increasingly involved in development work, tackling the roots of famine and poverty. OXFAM’s campaign during that period was *Freedom From Hunger* with the maxim ‘Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime’. OXFAM also used a quote from Julius Nyerere ‘Development brings freedom provided it is development of the people. But people cannot be developed, they can only develop themselves’. In September 1997 OXFAM launched the *Cut Conflict Campaign* which had four main elements: curbing the arms trade; bringing war criminals to justice; upholding the rights of refugees, and; promoting peace building. In 1998 OXFAM had an income of £98 million.

## **2.2 Linking The Levels in Sri Lanka**

Donors, including DFID, were interested in extending development cooperation to include supporting dialogue and communication between groups, with a greater involvement of civil society. Key to such a process was seen to be involvement, participation and partnership between civil society groups, the Government and other interested parties. To help further this the World Bank sponsored the development of a *Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation Framework* in Sri Lanka to be undertaken by the Sri Lankan Government in order to:

...provide common direction and basis for effective assistance to conflict-affected communities through formulation of policies, strategies, mechanisms and guidelines. (World Bank, 2000)

## BOX 2

### FRAMEWORK FOR RELIEF, REHABILITATION AND RECONCILIATION (3R's)

In July 1999 the Sri Lankan Government began a collaborative initiative (supported technically by the World Bank, UNDP Royal Netherlands Embassy and other agencies), the 3Rs Framework, to bring enhanced coherence and consultation between civil society, the donor community and the government. The objectives of the framework were to help strengthen Sri Lanka's capacity to: (1) ensure basic needs of people affected by conflict; (2) rebuild productive lives; (3) facilitate reconciliation and partnership across ethnic lines. The main components of this framework were four Working Groups looking at: Aid Modalities; Institution Building and Donor Coordination; Reconciliation and Peacebuilding; Programmatic Priorities. Key to this process was a series of district level and sectorial or thematic workshops to listen to the voice of local people and communities. The workshops aimed to identify problems and concerns affecting districts; concepts and expressions about local and national conflict; understandings of peace, inter-cultural and ethnic relationships, and community building initiatives; appraisals of relief, rehabilitation and development methods (looking and good and bad practice); to recommend strategies, procedures and methods to strengthen agency work – including the role that could be played by the workshop participants themselves. The reports and findings of these workshops were then fed back to the Working Groups. A Steering Committee reviewed the recommendations made by each Working Group, and had the responsibility of finalising the 3R Framework in an action agenda for implementation and submitting it for Government approval.

#### INPUTS FROM

#### MECHANISMS

CIVIL SOCIETY	District Workshops (eg: CBOs, NGOs, local civil service, activists)
SOCIAL CAPITAL	Sectoral Workshops (eg: the media, education sector, ex-combatants, business
SOCIAL FABRIC	leaders)
GOVERNMENT	Consultation Workshops (Ministries, Military, Civil Service)
INTERNATIONAL	Consultations, Networking, Information Exchange.
COMMUNITY	(eg: Donors, INGOs, UN, World Bank, Diplomats)
SPECIALISTS	Consultants, Research Institutes
	(eg: ICES, International Consultants)

*Sources: The Framework for Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation: A Progress Report, 3R's Working Group December 2000; District Workshops To Establish A Framework For Relief, Reconciliation and Reconstruction. Summary of the First Round Workshop Reports (Draft), CHA, June, 2000; National Framework for Relief, Rehabilitation, and Reconciliation. Government of Sri Lanka, Development Forum, Colombo 2002; and other reports and documents from WUSC and CIDA.*

Oxfam was involved in the consultative rounds that contributed to developing the terms of reference for this initiative.

### **3. Oxfam in Sri Lanka**

Oxfam's developments in community based approaches to peacebuilding and conflict reduction have emerged within this context of intense international and local debates relating to the appropriateness of humanitarian agency involvement in this field. Oxfam's history, position and profile in Sri Lanka, together with its close working relationships with its local partners and other stakeholders, have also informed and influenced the shape of these new programme directions. The following section examines the significance of these contextual influences.

#### **3.1 Oxfam – Corporate Perspectives on a Conflict Reduction Approach**

How did corporate Oxfam GB contribute to operationalising conflict reduction and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka? Although Oxfam GB is active in most of the countries around the world where poverty, suffering and violent conflict co-exist, in common with many other humanitarian agencies, internal organisational and policy tensions exist over the role and appropriateness of its involvement in peacebuilding and conflict reduction. The majority of Oxfam's work on peace and conflict issues has an international lobbying focus, such as through its campaigns against landmines, the proliferation of small arms, or, through advocating for structural changes at the macro-political level - constitutional reforms, negotiated peace settlements, and international economic policies towards aid conditionality. Despite Oxfam's wealth of experience in emergency response and grass roots development, the potential for enhancing the sustainability and impact of such work through the incorporation of localised peacebuilding and conflict reduction sensitive approaches appear, until recently, to have been largely overlooked at an institutional or policy level.

Frequently raised concerns regarding peacebuilding and conflict reduction work in emergency and development programmes include that of excessive time investment against attributive results (this relates to the difficulty in establishing indicators for assessing and evaluating impact and effectiveness), and the availability of skilled personnel and dedicated organisational resources. However, it is perhaps the lack of widely available evidence to demonstrate the utility of such approaches, and indeed even lack of clarity on what such an approach should look like, that have been the most significant barriers to institutional acceptance within Oxfam. Initiatives from country programmes such as that in Sri Lanka have started to inform the development of conflict reduction and peacebuilding impact assessment guidelines and tools for analysis within Oxfam's Policy Unit.

The period in which the Sri Lanka team developed its work on conflict reduction and peace building coincided with dramatic changes in the organisation's global approach as well as a period of rapid

management changes. Between 1998 and 2001 Oxfam GB embarked on a process of corporate review and organisational transformation. The most significant impact of this on the Sri Lanka programme was the location of conflict reduction as a core strategic change objective for Oxfam GB globally. Oxfam's corporate acknowledgement of the importance of peace building and conflict reduction as an essential component of good development practice helped to convince those within the Sri Lanka team who had been sceptical or apprehensive of the programme developing in such a direction.

The period 1996 to 2001 saw five changes at the post of Country Representative for Oxfam GB in Sri Lanka. Despite the lack of strategic continuity that this threatened, opportunities were created that helped support the development of Oxfam's conflict sensitive perspective, by enabling other senior management staff and field officers to have a greater role in shaping the strategic content of the programme.

### **3.2 Oxfam – Operational Experience in Sri Lanka**

Since the late 1960s Oxfam has supported development and relief activities in Sri Lanka, and it is this long association with the country that has helped shape the development of the conflict reduction and relationship building programme. Initially programmes were managed through the Asia Desk at the Oxfam Oxford HQ, and later through a field office in Bangalore, India. Prior to 1986 Oxfam's work in Sri Lanka focused on supporting the emergence of new local development oriented NGO's. These included Sarvodaya, whose national programme today embraced a wide and influential range of relief, development and human rights activities, and Satyodaya who became a significant civil society actor engaged in assisting the development of Sri Lanka's estate sector communities.

In 1986, responding to the increased humanitarian needs of people affected by an escalation of violent conflict between the LTTE and Government forces, Oxfam established its first country office in Sri Lanka.

This was clearly seen as an emergency response measure and care was exercised not to get involved in any long term (beyond 18 months) with projects or counterparts. The intention was clearly to close the office once the worst would be over (van Brabant, 1996).

During the ten years between 1986 and 1996, Oxfam established a large portfolio of projects working both operationally and in partnership with local NGO's throughout the country. While not formerly structured within a coherent strategic framework, Oxfam's programmatic approach during this period comprised the following thematic and geographic areas:

*LTTE controlled northern Vanni region:* Emergency relief provision of non-food relief items (NFRI), shelter and water/sanitation for displaced and resident conflict affected communities.

*Puttalam and Trincomalee Districts:* Rehabilitation work amongst the displaced / relocated communities in welfare camps and resettlement villages.

*Central Highlands Estate Sector, Trincomalee, Hambantota and Moneragala Districts:* Poverty alleviation and community empowerment through social and economic development activities such as group formation, leadership training, social mobilisation and micro-credit/finance.

Although characterised by reactive interventions to sudden displacements, and a large number of somewhat ad hoc and short term ‘micro project’ initiatives, Oxfam’s work with conflict affected communities during these years helped establish a body of knowledge, experience and grass-roots credibility. This close relationship with conflict affected communities and local service partners helped when Oxfam began to implement a conflict sensitive perspective throughout its programme.

By November 1994, Oxfam realised that its involvement in areas affected by conflict required a longer-term perspective (Plastow, 1997), and work began on developing a five-year strategic framework. Finalised in July 1996, this framework included Oxfam’s first attempt at a contextual assessment of the conflict in Sri Lanka. In a section entitled *Working ‘In’ and ‘On’ Conflict in Sri Lanka* Oxfam’s traditional involvement in emergency relief and rehabilitation was re-articulated, with a focus on poverty alleviation and livelihoods. Emphasising greater community participation, the core elements of this approach included: research on the dynamics of poverty in conflict; improved emergency preparedness and response systems within a framework of inter-agency co-operation, and; the emergence of a call for Oxfam to develop a ‘clear moral position’ (van Brabant, 1996) for its work. Whilst analysing the complex macro-level dimensions of the conflict, the framework did not explicitly recognise the importance that micro-level conflict analysis could have in helping understand and increase the peacebuilding and conflict reduction impact of relief, rehabilitation and development projects.

In April 1997, Oxfam entered into a four-year funding relationship with DFID for a ‘Relief and Rehabilitation Programme’. Although this programme did not incorporate conflict reduction and peacebuilding at the outset, DFID’s flexibility and their own growing commitment to conflict reduction, helped establish a donor relationship that was to be supportive of Oxfam’s developments in this field.

### **3.3 Perceptions of Oxfam in Sri Lanka**

How was Oxfam perceived in Sri Lanka and what implications did this have for working on peace and conflict issues?

In common with many international aid agencies operating in Sri Lanka, Oxfam occupies a precarious position in both the public and political consciousness. Oxfam's raison d'être is the response to humanitarian need whilst implementing a mandate to help relieve poverty and suffering irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. With a few exceptions, this locates their programmes in those areas and communities that are both the most conflict and poverty affected, and because of this most of Oxfam's target constituencies have been Tamil people from the north, east or estate sectors.

However, the majority population in Sri Lanka is Sinhalese, and after almost two decades of conflict against the separatist aspirations of the LTTE, there is little popular sympathy or support in the south for NGOs and other organisations working predominately with Tamil communities. INGOs working in the north and east have often been the target of vilification by the Sri Lankan press and public figures during certain critical junctures for the nation (see Appendix 1). Occasionally this has been expressed through direct violence towards international NGOs such as the grenade attacks against the Colombo offices of Save the Children UK and Norway in early 2001, and against Oxfam in February 2001. On both occasions national media coverage was linked to international involvement ('interference') in Sri Lankan affairs – the Norwegian facilitated peace process at the time of the SCF attack; and the British government debate on proscribing the LTTE in the case of the attack on Oxfam.

Oxfam's profile in Sri Lanka has, however, been assuaged by its continued commitment to maintaining a programme presence, albeit limited, in the south as well as in the north and east. That the programme is able to point to its work with both Sinhalese and Moslem communities in addition to its major focus in Tamil dominated areas has been important in arguing Oxfam's ethnic impartiality.

A key challenge for Oxfam's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict reduction was that the label for its work would not be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Because the terms 'peace' and 'conflict reduction' were considered contentious in Sri Lanka's political discourse it was felt within the Oxfam team and by partner agencies that a more neutral programme label was required which more clearly reflected the nature of the approach and the term 'relationship building' resulted.

## 4. Oxfam - Conflict Reduction Programme

The following sections look at the evolution of the Relationship Building Programme. As we shall see, the term 'Approach' was thought to be more appropriate than 'Programme' to describe what was envisaged to be mainstreamed and cross-cutting theme engaging all Oxfam Sri Lanka's work.

I joined Oxfam's Sri Lanka programme as a Co-ordinator in 1996 soon after graduating in Peace and Development Studies at Bradford University. Although excited by the challenges of the community development work with which the Oxfam programme was involved I was always frustrated by the organisations' lack of engagement with peace building issues in a country where the relationship between violent conflict and the people's continued poverty and suffering was so apparent. Between 1996 and 1998, I was able to develop through Oxfam further contacts with local and international academics and practitioners sensitive to the potential role of humanitarian agencies in contributing to peace building. During this period a number of peace and conflict related research studies were taking place in Sri Lanka and Oxfam's primary donor DFID was seriously appraising its position on the linkages between conflict reduction and humanitarian assistance. By the summer of 1998 Oxfam was looking towards a mid-term review of its DFID funded programme the following year. Having responsibility for co-ordinating the initial development of this review process seemed the ideal opportunity to critically examine whether Oxfam could indeed have a role to play in peace building and conflict reduction in Sri Lanka.

(Simon Harris - Oxfam Programme Manager and Acting Country Representative 1996-2001)

### 4.1 The Assessment Phase

In December 1998 Oxfam commissioned an independent assessment of the peacebuilding and conflict reduction impact of its current programme, and opportunities for future initiatives. (Goodhand, Lewer, and Simeon, 1998). The assessment looked at Oxfam's work throughout the country, consulting with programme staff, partners, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. Local and international agencies working in Sri Lanka and key local informants from peace, development and human rights disciplines were also approached for their views and comments. The team was asked to be as speculative as possible in the examining the possibilities for Oxfam's future work and not to be limited by its current programme interests (see Box 3 for key findings from this report).

### BOX 3

#### PEACEBUILDING ASSESSMENT

- With *good preparation and training*, programme officers can be continually alert to simple, and non-controversial, ideas and openings which promote peaceful and constructive dialogue between and within the communities with whom they work. A ‘humility of approach’ is needed, and it is important that peace builders from outside ‘put themselves in the shoes’ of the ‘beneficiaries’.
- The targeting of peace building work could:
  - (a) be ‘*bolted-on*’ to existing or new economic, development and relief programmes
  - (b) *stand alone*, but have effect in enhancing other OXFAM work
  - (c) fully *integrated and mainstreamed* into new programmes and projects (as a *cross-cutting theme*)
- Quite different programmes may be required in the different regions of Sri Lanka. Many activities fall within the remit of peace building and OXFAM should look at what understanding, programmes, resources, experience and skills it possesses. The *appropriate level of intervention* should be carefully analysed - micro, meso or macro- including any political associations which may be perceived by the actors.
- Before any peace building intervention a thorough *conflict analysis and mapping* exercise should be undertaken in the area involved.
- Peace building should be seen as a *process* and part of an integrated long term strategy. Donors should allow for funding cycles which are longer than at present.
- OXFAM should identify *peace indicators* to help assess the progress of peace building programmes. Indicators could include factors such as leadership, village organisations, social relationships (within and outside of communities), media activity, and economic activity (trade, diversity of livelihoods, small businesses). Building on existing baseline studies, longer term tracking studies of communities should be commissioned to watch how peace building indicators are affected by social and conflictual influences.
- If OXFAM takes up peace building as a sphere of activity, a regular programme of *lessons learnt* workshops should be scheduled to which other agencies, donors and academics should be invited.
- It should be an absolute requirement that those most directly affected in peace building initiatives (the local people) are fully involved at the very beginning in planning and designing peace building. Early programme research should include understanding what the local understanding of the concept of peace is. Peacebuilding processes should *proceed at a pace determined by the people, and not to the agendas of donors and implementing NGOs*.
- *Transparency* is an important factor, so that peacebuilding is not seen as a threat or challenge to existing power structures. A slow careful approach is required.
- The success of peace building processes depends on the commitment of the staff. *Staff should decide collectively that this is a valuable process*, which falls within their mandate, and which they all support.
- There needs to be a *conversation* between OXFAM policy at HQ level, and those at country (Sri Lanka) level, so that there is compatibility of approach, mutual support and institutional learning.
- OXFAM has to ask what the *normative values* are upon which it thinks a healthy society should be built.
- OXFAM should *network and co-ordinate* with other donors and agencies who are involved in, or are developing, peace building initiatives to ensure that interventions are complementary and contingent.

**Source:** Goodhand, J & Lewer, N & Simeon, D. *Oxfam-Sri Lanka Peacebuilding Consultancy*, Oxfam, Colombo, November 1998.

*How can you work in a context like this and ignore the peace question and not participate in a broader debate?* [Oxfam Staff]

*By centralising peace in programmes we are addressing an ethical gap. OXFAM should be looking more closely at this whole issue, after all we are working in a country which is in the midst of violent conflict.*[Oxfam Staff]

## **4.2 Developing a Conceptual Framework**

The findings and recommendations from the assessment report contributed to Oxfam's strategy planning process that took place between January and April 1999. Encompassing the entire programme the aim of this process was to streamline Oxfam's programme into a number of distinct, yet inter-related sub-programmes. Although discussion within the senior management team reflected many of the reservations relating to the appropriateness of peacebuilding activities being undertaken by development and relief agencies, there was a broad endorsement of the principle that Oxfam in Sri Lanka could, and should, engage actively with these issues in its programme. This process resulted in a rationale statement for Oxfam's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict reduction work. This statement noted that:

As an NGO working with people affected by violent conflict, and accepting that such conflict prevents sustainable development, Oxfam in Sri Lanka believe that it has a responsibility to help bring about the conditions for a just, equitable and sustainable peace. It aimed to contribute to this by supporting the activities and initiatives of people and organisations aimed at preventing, mitigating and positively transforming violent conflict. (Harris, 1999)

Three objectives for Oxfam's *Conflict Reduction Programme* were identified:

**(1) To improve the conflict reduction and peacebuilding skills of people and organisations.**

This component of the programme aimed to respond to identified gaps in knowledge, skills and understanding amongst Oxfam personnel, partner NGO staff, other INGOs, local and national government personnel, on issues of conflict, conflict reduction and peace building. Specifically, it aimed to build *conflict analysis* skills and the capacity to design, implement, monitor and evaluate projects incorporating a conflict analysis perspective. The application of such a perspective would, it was hoped, enhance the conflict reduction and peacebuilding potential and impact of projects. The

deliverables of this programme component would be the identification of training needs and the development of appropriate formal and informal training activities to meet those needs.

**(2) To help develop greater trust and understanding between and within communities.**

This aspect of the programme focused on the challenge of developing non-violent relationships, trust, respect and understanding within and between communities. Oxfam's notion of community in this regard encompassed a range of social groupings including host and internally displaced communities (IDPs); heterogeneous mixed ethnic (Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim) communities, and; homogenous mono-ethnic communities who would likely need to interact with other groups in the future. The type of activities envisaged under this programme included support for innovative small community based projects that could have a conflict reduction or peacebuilding impact. This experimental approach enabled Oxfam to explore a wide range of peace related initiatives and stimulate the interest of programme staff and partners in this field. A further element of this programme, and one which was highly popular with Oxfam's partner agencies, brought together local CBOs and NGOs from different parts of the country for shared learning and exchange.

**(3) To influence policy changes that would contribute to building peace and reducing conflict.**

Within a national perspective of humanitarian assistance, Oxfam GB is a relatively minor actor in Sri Lanka. For Oxfam's developments in peacebuilding and conflict reduction to be effective and sustainable beyond the sphere and influence of its local partner agencies, vertical and horizontal integration in both conceptual understanding and practice would be required. 'Vertical integration' in this context refers to influencing the policies and practices of significant government and non-governmental actors at district, provincial and national levels; whereas 'horizontal integration' aims to inform other local agencies and international organisations working at a community level.

These broad objectives were further developed to form a new and integral part of Oxfam's revised DFID funded *Relief and Rehabilitation Programme* for the period April 1999 to March 2001. The following section looks in more detail at the specific activities and developments undertaken by Oxfam's conflict reduction programme during this period.

### **4.3 Conflict Reduction Programme Components**

#### **4.3.1 Training – Staff and Partners**

The first year of the programme was primarily devoted to building up the capacity and competencies of staff. Oxfam's programme staff participated in training workshops and seminars which

familiarised them with wide range of concepts and working practices. These included training sessions from the Quaker Peace and Service (QPS) team in Sri Lanka, the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) at Bradford University, participation in ‘Do No Harm’ programmes conducted by Local Capacities for Peace, and an intensive one week residential programme for the entire programme team with Responding to Conflict (RTC) in Birmingham, U.K. This residential course gave the Oxfam team the opportunity to explore conflict reduction issues with other practitioners from around the world. Through participation on the RTC course, Oxfam also sought to strengthen relationships with its main donor, DFID, whose representative in Sri Lanka along with two members of DFID’s London based Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (CHAD) also attended the RTC course. Such linkages are vital for the development of programmes in this field. As a ‘risk-taking’ venture for humanitarian NGO’s, conflict work requires donors who understand and engage in the concepts and practice of such initiatives. The close working relationship with DFID provided Oxfam with both the confidence and necessary critical appraisal to develop their programme.

One of the concerns expressed by Oxfam’s programme staff was how to address the challenge of engaging the interest and support of partner agencies in developing a conflict sensitive perspective within their work. Oxfam’s approach aimed to connect the development of its own staff with that of its partner organisations through a series of practical workshops. Large combined workshops (Oxfam staff and partners) would be followed up by smaller re-enforcing and refresher training sessions ‘on-site’ with partner organisations. A series of three linked workshops were planned for staff and Oxfam’s local partners.<sup>3</sup>

- I Introduction to Analytic Tools
- II From Analysis to Strategy
- III Monitoring and Evaluation

The intention was not to offer a prescriptive model for conflict sensitive programming, and emphasis was placed on an *elicitive training approach*, drawing from and building on the experiences of the participants, and guiding them through a range of analytical and practical tools. The first workshop, entitled *Tools for Analysis: Conflict Reduction Skills for NGOs* <sup>4</sup>, took place in March 2000 at Habarana, with the objective of giving participants from Oxfam’s partner NGOs an introduction to both the theoretical knowledge and practical skills associated with conflict reduction and

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<sup>3</sup> The workshops content drew heavily from *Working With Conflict. Skills and Strategies for Action* (Fisher et al, 2000). Although it was hoped to train all staff and partners, security considerations meant that those from the north and east had separate workshops.

<sup>4</sup> The workshop programme was planned and facilitated by Oxfam’s Conflict Reduction Programme development and training advisors, Oxfam staff members, and external trainers from Thirupthiya (formerly Quaker Peace and Service in Sri Lanka) and Suriya (a womens’ NGO based in Batticaloa).

peacebuilding. Fundamental was an understanding of the meaning and nature of peace and conflict from individual and organisational perspectives.

#### **Questions at the First Workshop**

- What is 'conflict'? What do you understand by 'peace'?
- How does conflict impact on development and humanitarian assistance projects?
- How do these projects affect conflict?
- What are the advantages of improving an understanding of conflict?
- What tools can be used to help understand conflict better?
- How can these tools be practically applied?

The second and third workshops developed the range of analytical tools, reported back on experience in using them in the field, facilitated cross-programming opportunities, and began to design a monitoring and evaluation tool.

#### **4.3.2 Conflict Reduction Team Building**

Whilst the initial impetus for the development of Oxfam's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict reduction came from its country management team, it soon became apparent that the process would require the involvement of new staff focusing on programme and partner capacity building and support. The development of a conflict reduction programme team took place in two phases. The first phase involved the recruitment of two part-time consultants.

*Programme Development Advisor* (Dr Nick Lewer) who would support both the Oxfam management and staff in the conceptual development of the programme, lead on the introduction of impact assessment indicators and provide an ongoing evaluation of programme progress and needs.

*Programme Training Advisor* (Richard Smith) who had been involved with the initial RTC training led on developing analysis and impact assessment tools training programmes for staff and partners.

The second phase involved the appointment of two Sri Lankan staff (one Sinhalese and one Tamil) to lead on peace and conflict related issues full time and further develop internal organisational capacity.

#### **4.3.3 Research Bursaries**

What usually happens is people come and do their research and at the end make some vague recommendations from their theories and concepts. But [with the Oxfam bursaries] from the start we have engaged with peoples real problems and their practical solutions (Aruna Dayaratne, August 2001)

The concept behind the twelve annual Oxfam Research Bursaries was to provide opportunities for full-time community research (with practical application) in conflict related issues. The focus on local research would contribute to Oxfam's objectives of accessing those most directly affected by poverty and conflict (at all levels), and of their 'right to say', that is giving another voice to those people who are not usually consulted about issues which directly affect them. It was agreed that research results were to benefit local people, encourage research and analysis amongst organisations and individuals who the researchers work with, and in the end help Oxfam (and other NGOs) design programmes and projects which are more finely tuned to the needs of beneficiaries. As one local NGO worker stated this approach to research, starting from the local level:

.....would be of real importance for us, and not just more outsiders coming here, getting information for their research papers, and going. We don't usually get anything from it.

After lengthy consultations a process was agreed on. The bursaries would be for one year, full-time<sup>5</sup>. Preference would be given to applicants from outside of Colombo, and 'non-academic' candidates would be encouraged to apply. 'Non-traditional' proposals such as the use of the recording of oral traditions or music, research into drama, and investigations of community conflict resolution approaches would be encouraged. It was stressed that applicants did not need to have academic, written skills to present their research but could chose a medium and language most appropriate for themselves. Suggestions for research topics included: tracing the history and development of local organisations; investigating local dispute resolution mechanisms; detailing the structure of the non-government sector – what resources are coming in from donors, who they are, who their partners are, and where it is being spent; disputes between NGOs and GoSL, and between NGOs; land and water disputes; youth unemployment – how can business link with NGOs; reviewing local action research undertaken by undergraduates; designing management processes for CBOs and LNGOs; relationships between donors and funders; a role for the arts in conflict resolution, and; post-conflict peacebuilding. Research proposals would be selected by a panel consisting of an Oxfam representative, an academic, and an independent assessor. A research methodology training session was planned for the beginning of the research period, and close supervision<sup>6</sup> and advice be provided for the researchers at a local level. All the research projects would be presented at an end of year conference, and also disseminated back into the local communities. This was an ambitious programme which would generate considerable management workload for the responsible Oxfam RBP officer.

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<sup>5</sup> They would be worth 10,000 rupees per month. Payments would be incremental and subject to progress

#### **4.3.4. District Advisory Groups (DAGs)**

The purpose of DAGs was to establish district level forum through which Oxfam could share information and consult with local administrators, community leaders and other stakeholders on development issues and problems associated with local development initiatives within the context of the RB approach. They would be informal, occasional meetings, with a small number of invited participants. It was explained that DAGs would not act as a way of ‘unfairly’ accessing Oxfam for funding project proposals. Rather discussions were to be at a more general level. Views were mixed about the possible pool of participants. Options included:

A DAG drawn from the grass-root community level. Everybody consulted thought that the community level consultations were most important, so that the grass-roots have a voice, and that it was not just ‘*the usual crowd*’ who were consulted. Perhaps different groups for young and old?

Middle range actors such as: local NGO and CBO leaders, police inspectors, educational officers, agricultural officers, business people, local military commanders.

Separate, more formal ‘lunch meetings’ to be held with District Secretaries and Government Agents. It was suggested that the Oxfam Country Representative could occasionally also meet M.P.’s/other political actors within whose ‘constituency’ Oxfam work was located.

Appropriate participants could be identified at each level for a ‘joint meeting’ once a year

It was thought that there should be a ‘pool’ of possible participants, so that not necessarily same people would be at each meeting. Issues could be discussed at each level, and then fed back to the others by Oxfam staff.

#### **BOX 4**

##### **WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

What such groups as the proposed DAGs are actually called was repeatedly raised.

*In our culture people will immediately think of a DAG as a rigid structure with a President, Secretary, Treasurer etc. It will soon become hierarchical and controlled. Ordinary people will be afraid to speak.*

<sup>6</sup> Supervisors/mentors for the bursary holders came from Sabaragamuwa University, Eastern University, Colombo University, Women’s Educational Research Centre (WERC) and the Centre for Economic and Poverty Analysis (CEPA).

It was decided that a more appropriate name for DAGs could be **Community Consultations (CCs)** to try and change the 'ethos and image of such meetings. Some felt that CC participants should have some knowledge of community development work so that they could make useful comments. Programme officers were to meet as many potential participants as possible. Concern was voiced that the CCs could become a way in which people could just sit and '*criticise, moan and generally complain*' about Oxfam, and more particularly, the local partners. Or it could just produce endless lists of needs. The structure and facilitation of the meetings would need to be carefully thought through.

#### **4.3.5. Media Programme**

This component recognised that there was a great deal of grass roots peace building work taking place throughout Sri Lanka but little public awareness. Oxfam aimed to commission the production of a documentary on community peace building initiatives. Dubbed into three languages, English, Tamil and Sinhala, the aim of the documentary would be as a training tool to demonstrate to community based organisations the range of peace related experiences that were being developed in other parts of the country, forge linkages, and stimulate activity. The documentary could also serve as an awareness-raising vehicle if televised on one of the national stations. However, at the time of writing this element of the Oxfam programme was still at a conceptual stage.

Significantly more progress was made by Oxfam's partner agencies in the media field. *Value Education Home*, a small NGO based in Battaramulla (a suburb of Colombo) with strong links to the Catholic organisation – Centre for Society and Religion – approached Oxfam with an innovative range of proposals for promoting a pro-peace culture by engaging the public through a range of popular media strategies. With the support of Oxfam funding, participation in Oxfam training programmes, and collaborative discussions over the programme content, *Value Education Home* implemented the following projects:

The writing and recording of pro-peace songs in Sinhala and Tamil by popular artists. The songs were performed in public and received wide radio airing. Additionally, the cassettes were distributed to long-distance bus drivers and played regularly on routes between Colombo and the conflict affected areas of the north and east.

A one-episode peace related tele-drama was scripted, filmed and shown on national television. This paved the way for a more ambitious multi-part bi-lingual tele-drama on the theme of inter-ethnic harmony which was in the process of production at the time of writing.

The training of youth groups from different communities around the country on skills for leadership and the development of peace-related inter-communal cultural activities such as community theatre and musical events.

Whilst the impact of these activities have yet to be evaluated, Oxfam's support for such programmes demonstrates its willingness to invest in innovative peace related activities of partner organisations. The flexibility of Oxfam in providing support outside the traditional forms of relief and development activity enabled it to build upon the relationship established through the training programmes by encouraging the pro-peace creativity of its partners.

#### **4.3.6. *Networking and Co-Ordination***

A series of *Interagency Workshops* were planned to: share and review Oxfam's progress with other INGOs; to provide a forum for networking with colleagues in other organisations working in the peacebuilding area, and; to carry out a mapping exercise of participating agencies and their activities.

#### **4.3.7. *Monitoring and Evaluation***<sup>7</sup>

The development of a conflict sensitive approach to programming presents agencies with many complex challenges. These include internal and external political sensitivities, the setting of appropriate and realistic objectives, and the identification of meaningful indicators to help measure the impact of these approaches. As Bush notes:

...the integration of peace and conflict concerns into our development thinking calls for the construction of the conceptual and evaluation tools that may be applied to the full range of development activities. (Bush, 1998)

Oxfam's Relationship Building Programme (RBP) posed particular problems when designing monitoring and evaluation tools because it is difficult to 'quantify'. Much of the change Oxfam was trying to effect is long term, may not be obvious immediately, and can be about peoples perceptions and 'feelings' to do with security and 'peacefulness'. Such things are expressed differently, depending on who we are, where we live, and our own experience of violence, conflict and peace. It is also difficult to 'attribute' whether a change is directly as a result of a peacebuilding intervention, such as 'relationship building'.

What Oxfam GB in Sri Lanka has tried to do is to 'mainstream' their relationship building programme. Mainstreaming strategies have been employed by NGOs in the past to incorporate a number of objectives and themes into their work. This includes for instance participation, gender, environmental sustainability, security policies, and rights based approaches. In essence it is about incorporating a particular perspective or approach into an agency's thinking and practice. These issues are thought to be of sufficient importance as to be 'cross cutting' and cannot be adequately addressed simply though a 'bolt on' project. If mainstreaming is successful the issue becomes part of

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<sup>7</sup> The authors plan a further publication focussing on monitoring and evaluation, and peace and conflict impact assessment.

the organisational consciousness; it is automatically incorporated into thinking, policy and practice (Goodhand & Lewer, 2001).

Underpinning the Oxfam methodology for M&E is a participatory approach. The concept of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is not new (Estrella, 2000; Cracknell, 2000), and builds on many years of participatory action research (PAR) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA). In this approach all stakeholders (especially the so-called beneficiaries) participate in the design and implementation of M&E processes. For this to be an effective process there has to be trust between the evaluators and an honest approach and transparency regarding issues such as power disparities by all those engaged in the PM&E. The key questions for Oxfam are: what works, for whom, and in what circumstances? It is important not only to understand what happens after a project has been implemented, but why people involved react in different ways during the course of the project (Cracknell, 2000). A workshop to develop the M&E of the RBP was planned for August 2001.

## 5. Conclusions

The Conflict Reduction/Relationship Building Programme has been an innovative, experimental and creative approach by Oxfam-Sri Lanka to working 'on' conflict issue whilst being 'in' conflict situations. By early 2001 Oxfam staff had further refined what they understood to be the core objectives of their Relationship Building Programme, contained in a 'Statement of Purpose' which read:

The *Relationship Building Programme* of Oxfam GB in Sri Lanka is an integrated approach that works with organisations and communities in order:

- To improve relationships and build supporting links within and between communities and other organisations by promoting trust, confidence and mutual understanding
- To empower and support people to manage, understand, and transform tense or difficult situations into positive outcomes
- To build situation analysis and resolution skills of staff and partners

### 5.1 Lessons Learnt <sup>8</sup>

- To avoid misunderstanding, the terminology associated with such an approach is vital. Since conflict and peace are such value laden concepts, misinterpretation is common. At a fundamental level this is reflected, for example, in how Sinhala, Tamil and English translate and understand the very terms.

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview of lessons learned and peacebuilding experience in general see: Galama, A & van Tongeren, P (Eds). *Towards Better Peacebuilding Practice. On Lessons Learned, Evaluation Practices and Aid and Conflict*. European Centre for Conflict Prevention, Utrecht, 2002.

- Care and attention is needed with respect to internal staff dynamics. Staff are also representative of the ‘wider’ ethnic communities political perspectives, and as such they mirror tensions and concerns about the conflict situation within the rest of Sri Lankan society. This impacts on their own perceptions of what constitutes a ‘peaceful and just’ society, and how Oxfam should engage in relationship building.
- *People will expect more from a Sri Lankan than an ex-patriate in way of explanations about why they should become involved in peace work. Tamils will ask exactly how are the Sinhalese suffering compared with us, and Sinhalese will ask, why do you want to work with the Tamils? As Sri Lankans we are in it. We’re not outsiders*
- It is vital that if this approach is to be sustainable: it must not be perceived to be externally driven by donors but:
  - have roots in community reality;
  - be ‘owned’ by Oxfam staff , and;
  - it must be seen as a long term process, not as a short term project or programme.
- Integrating and mainstreaming the RB approach with development and relief projects

*Taking relationship building as a stand alone project is not going to work. It should be through tangible development inputs, but not losing sight of the relationship focus (Oxfam Sri Lanka Staff).*

- Build coalitions within Oxfam partners. Include all local actors (military and civilian) from the beginning. This keeps the process transparent and inclusive.
- Network and share training, experience and information with other interested organisations.
- There is a need to develop further codes of conduct and accountability for this work (ICRC, 1996; International Alert, 1999; Stockton, 2000).
- Build a better interactive dialogue with corporate Oxfam, so that lessons learned can be shared and a closer fit with SCOs achieved. To further understanding between the different programmes with Oxfam.

*We’ve been bombarded with competing visions and missions....no wonder we are confused because OXFAM itself doesn’t know where it’s going. There are so many different initiatives within OXFAM, it’s difficult to reconcile them all [Oxfam Sri Lanka Staff member]*

*...the rationale for humanitarian intervention is strictly limited and should remain so ... particularly with regards to impartiality....we distribute according to need and if we don't the whole thing becomes hi-jacked..... having criteria overlaid is very dangerous...the Geneva Conventions are not concerned with peace. [Oxford Emergencies Department staff member)*

## **5.2 Impact**

OXFAM accepts that it is a relatively minor actor in Sri Lanka and our impact upon the structures that support the perpetuation of violent conflict is likely to be limited. However, in the areas where we work amongst the most marginalised, poverty and conflict affected communities, OXFAM has a potentially significant role to play.<sup>9</sup>

- There are problems of replication and scaling up, because of the context specificity of projects. However process lessons can be learnt, and experience shared between project locations. Where and how to work, for example cleared/uncleared areas, north and east, west and south require different approaches depending on peoples experience of violence and the political environment.
- Horizontal Impacts and Vertical Impacts

Short	awareness raising, skills training, better analytic capacity, reducing violence, giving a voice to local people, enhanced project design.
Medium	post-conflict reconstruction and regeneration (Pugh, 2001), cross-programming, inter-agency co-operation, education.
Long	contributing to peace processes at national level, promoting and strengthening short and medium term impacts.

- On linkages and national level impact for grass-roots work:

*You don't need to have national level advocacy campaigns because [in Sri Lanka] local is almost national. Everything is so interlinked you don't have to go through a great process to get to the higher levels. [Oxfam Staff Member].*

- Promoting social capital
  - \* bridging - through cross-programming, exchange visits, trade arrangements, and open discussion and analysis.
  - \* bonding – through improved project design, micro-credit schemes, and team building.

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<sup>9</sup> *Draft-OXFAM Strategic Aim-Conflict Reduction and Peacebuilding Rationale Statement. OXFAM, Colombo, April 1999.*

*The relationship programme is good development practice that contributes to equity, sustainability and the effective management of projects [Oxfam Sri Lanka Staff]*

*We are dealing with concrete situations instead of just models and theories. We may be able to develop our own models which may be more appropriate to Sri Lanka [Oxfam Sri Lanka Staff]*

- Changes in staff attitudes and behaviour within Oxfam and its partners

*I am also changing and learning in the process [Oxfam Sri Lanka Staff]*

### **5.3 Two examples associated with Oxfam’s RBP**

#### **5.3.1 ‘Cricket Stumps Conflict’**

##### **‘Cricket Stumps Conflict’**

##### **Oxfam and MSPSS working in Kirinda**

MSPSS (an Oxfam partner) is a small collective of paddy farmers, fisher-folk and street vendors from the southern Moslem and Sinhala coastal village of Kirinda, located in the Hambantota District. Oxfam had been supporting MSPSS in the development of a revolving loan scheme to assist poor families in and around Kirinda.

Following Oxfam’s partner training in Habarana, MSPSS, who had no previous experience of engaging with conflict related issues, attempted to find a non-violent solution to Kirinda’s increasing ethnic tensions. These were emerging as a result of growing unemployment, restricted livelihood opportunities and community perceptions of an ethnic recruitment bias. Sporadic violence between Moslem and Sinhalese youth brought back fears of past inter-ethnic communal riots in the area.

MSPSS conducted a conflict mapping exercise of their village and noted that despite the tensions a number of potential non-violent connectors existed between Moslem and Sinhalese youth. Sri Lanka’s national passion for cricket was regarded as a common interest that could be strategically utilised to help overcome the divisions between these youths.

MSPSS, with support from Oxfam, established a process for the organisation of a local cricket tournament. A sports club comprising of Sinhalese and Moslem youths was formed and organised the logistical arrangements for the tournament. Together, youths from both communities were involved in purchasing equipment, clearing the pitch, and arranging refreshments. By insisting that each team comprised of players drawn from both groups it was thought that this would minimise the risk of inter-ethnic competition over-spilling into violence. Other

teams from local army and navy bases were enlisted to play against Kirinda's mixed teams and also afforded the event some degree of impartial external security.

The cricket match received enthusiastic support from the entire Kirinda community and provided the catalyst for developing further confidence building measures between the Sinhalese and Moslems, as well as opportunities for addressing the underlying issue of unemployment. During the following Moslem religious festival of Haji, the Sinhalese were invited to take part in the celebrations. As Oxfam Programme Officer Aruna Dayaratne commented:

[In other parts of the country] Moslems don't invite Sinhalese for their Haji festival, but in Kirinda these things are happening.

MSPSS also entered into negotiation with other donors regarding the possibilities of establishing a vocational training programme for the Kirinda youths. A test for the strength of inter-communal relationships in Kirinda came in the wake of the Sinhala-Moslem Mawanella riots of May 2001.

*There were rumblings of violence all over following the incident but in Kirinda they could talk to each other.* [Aruna Dayaratne – Oxfam Programme Officer]

**Source:** Harris, S. 'Cricket Stumps Conflict', *Oxfam News*, Summer 2001, p.7.

### 5.3.2 *Bonding Labour in the Hills*

#### **Bonding Labour in the Hills**

#### **Old suspicions between Sinhala villagers and Tamil estate workers crumble under this 'unity project' of UFDF and Oxfam**

**By Ruth Sutton**

The scene is one of tranquil beauty. Dense green vegetation stretches as far as the eye can see. Here, in the hill country around Badulla, the Uva Farmers' Development Foundation, with funding from Oxfam, has pioneered a project that has proved to be a catalyst for remarkable change.

It's a project about unity and relationship building between the Tamil estate community (from the Keenasena division of Keenakelaya estate) and the Sinhala villagers. It's about people working to help themselves and each other to attain a better standard of living.

Still in its infancy, this 18-month-old project started with the concept of shramadana, and the recognition that anyone, though poor in material terms, has something to offer the other community - such as labour, skills, knowledge, and through this, friendship and understanding.

"The relationship (prior to this scheme) between the village and the estate was a very destructive one," says Premadasa Bodinayake, chairman of the UFDF, Jangulla. "The only contact that existed was between the men,

and it was of a negative nature. The estate men would come into the village on pay day to buy the liquor brewed by the villagers. The only other contact was through trade and here too there were disputes often."

The Uva Farmers' Development Foundation had been working with the villagers of Udawela for many years, as well as with the estate workers of Keenakelaya. Under this project, the UFDF is providing support and a forum for problem solving in matters requiring mediation while Oxfam's role is one of neutral assistance, offering training and financial support.

Volunteers from each community were initially selected to mobilize families and individuals to work in each other's fields, learn about each other's trades, and to engage in common work for mutual benefit, such as building a road shortcut from the estate to the village. At first it was a very slow process to encourage people to share their ideas and work together, but with the pressing need to solve common problems such as access to the town, environmental concerns and protection of the water sources, the generations-old suspicion began to crumble.

Subramaniam, a Tamil estate worker with "green fingers" says his role with the shramadana campaign began when he worked in the paddy fields of Udawela .

His efforts have been rewarded not only with a successful crop, but with the hand of friendship across a divide. He has now been given his own garden in the village, and he cultivates his own, and his Sinhala co-workers' crops side by side with the villagers.

At first the shramadana was just about getting the job done and those involved would go back to their respective homes after the day's labour.

But as trust has grown, the communities are eating together, discussing problems and getting together in small groups to apply for loans.

Oxfam and the UFDF give grants to small groups of combined Tamil and Sinhala families to set up businesses, buy cattle or invest in seeds or transport.

These mixed savings groups also contribute to a common fund which can be drawn on for instant financial aid, should one of the members request help in a medical emergency. Even non-members can approach the groups for a loan, and together with the UFDF the poorest people from both communities are finding a voice and strength in their unity through these schemes.

Periasami and his wife Sandraleela are part of one of these "small groups" comprising four Tamil and two Sinhala families. With the loan, they have bought a cow, constructed a shed, and share in the rearing and feeding of the animal.

The milk brings Periasami an extra 500 rupees income per month, but more importantly, he has invested in a cross community project that all parties have an interest in maintaining.

This subsequently sows the seeds of co-operation and understanding. " Now we can live without fear," he says.

"It is a long and difficult process to bring people together and eradicate the prejudices," comments Bodinayake. "Children absorb the attitudes of the parents, and integration at the youngest possible age is essential to overcome the prejudices." To this end a mixed race pre-school has been set up, led by the women from the two "sides". Not only does this provide a place for the children to play with each other in a safe environment, but the process of starting up the pre-school has been a vehicle for the women - many for the first time- to meet other women from the two communities.

"The children are starting to grow up together," comments Pushparaj, a Tamil estate worker married to a Sinhala village woman, "and as a result of this, as well as the shared work, we are living like friends. The children came together, and now for everything we get together."

This positive contact has led to shared workshops on nutrition, health care and finance as well as women's groups. These enable women to become members of the small loan groups in their own right. It is an evident trend - the shared work and relationship building is empowering the women of both communities to mobilise against the scourge of alcoholism, a voice, participation and a hand in their destinies.

The focus of the philosophy behind shramadana is the impetus for change, but obviously there is a long way to go. Oxfam has started to introduce the idea of conflict mapping, sharing of problems and training in negotiation skills, and the UFDF has taken this to village level.

As a result, the initiative for a recent resurfacing project of the road to the town came from the joint community members. They organized a meeting with Thirupadhi, the local Pradeshiya Sabha member, who secured the funds to repair the road with common labour.

The future for sustainable development and peace is not an easy one to secure. "There are forces whose interests are better served by keeping the communities divided and fighting," says Thirupadhi, "but my work is to unite them." He states emphatically, "If we can address this issue, we can build this community together."

**Source:** Ruth Sutton. *The Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), 29 July 2001.

## 6. Postscript

This paper has dealt primarily with the conceptual and initial operational development of Oxfam's peacebuilding and conflict reduction initiatives through the *Relationship Building Programme* (RBP) in Sri Lanka. Whilst it was not within the remit of this paper to evaluate the programmes' progress to date – although such an undertaking would certainly provide an interesting and indeed necessary corollary – some comment into Oxfam's current RBP approach is useful.

In September 2001 Oxfam organised a one-day workshop with a small group of staff, partner agency representatives and selected academics/practitioners to explore the strategic development of its Relationship Building Programme. The key issues/ideas and recommendations from this workshop were <sup>10</sup>:

- Programme flexibility is essential to maintain meaning and credibility with partners in different operating contexts.
- To develop a pilot project in one area with a more radical approach to interacting with the underlying systems and structures.
- Develop advocacy options linking grass roots level conditions with macro issues.
- Highlight the experience of the victims of war as a way of changing attitudes towards conflict.
- Address war more directly.

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<sup>10</sup> "Minutes of the one-day meeting to assist in shaping Oxfam's future programme development", (Internal Document), Oxfam GB, September 2001.

- Develop training programme to incorporate non-Oxfam partners but be mindful not to over emphasis the use of conflict sensitive tools.
- Examine the possibilities of working with soldiers and police.

As of July 2002, Oxfam's Relationship Building Programme had six components <sup>11</sup>. These are:

- 1) Advocacy
- 2) Linkages
- 3) Peace Building Projects
- 4) Monitoring and Evaluation
- 5) Programme Integration
- 6) Research Bursaries

**Advocacy:** Oxfam's corporate global strategy stresses the importance of drawing advocacy messages from development activities that will contribute towards policy and practice changes of the government and other key stakeholders. Whilst the Oxfam's RBP appears to have numerable advocacy related opportunities, further investigation is required to determine whether these opportunities have been utilised effectively and strategically in addressing specific advocacy objectives.

**Linkages:** This component of the programme facilitates exchanges between Oxfam project partners in different parts of the country. Linkage events have helped create opportunities for dialogue between communities. An example of this has been exchange visits linking local development oriented NGO's and their constituents in the southern district of Hambantota with the Ampara District in the East. During the Ampara leg of the exchange, the Sinhalese and Moslem visitors from Hambantota engaged in frank but cordial discussions with LTTE representatives and Tamil villagers.

The return visit to Hambantota hoped to tackle village level enmity towards Tamils, and attempted to challenge ethnic stereotypes and prejudices through an exchange schedule specifically designed to maximise opportunities for inter-communal dialogue. These activities included guiding the visiting party of Tamils through a Sinhalese village, meeting people in their homes, and a trip to a local hot water spring where both groups and Oxfam staff engaged in an amicable water-fight!

Such exchanges, be they critical dialogue or playful interaction, have the potential of beginning an attitudinal change amongst the participants, so that negative images of each other begin to be dismantled. A television documentary based on the linkage programme was commissioned by Oxfam as a community record and training tool. It is currently being edited and is likely to be screened on national television in Sri Lanka.

**Peace Building Projects:** Oxfam has a portfolio of five project partners engaged specifically in peace related activities. These are:

- **The Butterfly Garden:** Oxfam supported a series of drama based peace and reconciliation programmes conducted in Colombo schools by The Butterfly Garden from Batticaloa.
- **Ahimsa:** Oxfam supports approximately 10% of Ahimsa's costs for their programme of community based training developing the capacities for practical peace initiatives amongst NGO's and conflict affected communities.
- **Kalmunai Peace Foundation:** Support for community based peace related social mobilisation initiatives in Batticaloa District.
- **Pottuvil Peace Foundation:** as above in Ampara District.
- **Value Education Home:** The production of a teledrama with a specific reconciliation theme.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** A pilot project based in Trincomalee brings together four Oxfam project partners to collaborate in the design of monitoring and evaluation tools, such as impact indicators. This process aims to strengthen the methodological tools used to promote the integration of peacebuilding, development and gender related activities of the project partners. The design process itself is also intended to have a relationship building outcome. Each of the local NGO's in this pilot represents a specific constituency - two are Tamil, one Moslem, and one Sinhalese. It is anticipated that through shared learning during the production and ownership of common monitoring and evaluation methodologies, linkages between these organisations and the communities that they represent will be strengthened.

**Programme Integration:** This component of the RBP aims to incorporate peacebuilding and conflict reduction into all of Oxfam's activities. However, as of July 2002 this still needs to be fully implemented, is not yet being routinely practised across the entire Oxfam country programme. A process that assesses the potential peace and conflict impact of each project proposal, and engages with the partner in developing peace related outcomes, has yet to be systematically introduced.

**Research Bursaries:** Of the original ten bursaries awarded eight have been completed<sup>12</sup>. These are:

- *Sinhala Muslim Conflict: a case study from the Western Province* by Inoka Priyadarshini. Examines critical factors in the construction of Sinhala and Moslem

<sup>11</sup> Authors notes from series of discussions with Oxfam programme staff during 2002.

<sup>12</sup> *Sri Lankan Youth Studies on Conflict: The Oxfam Research Bursary Conference* (Agenda Document), Oxfam GB, Sri Lanka 2002.

communal identities and their relationship to inter-communal conflict and opportunities for peace building.

- *Nationalism and Conflict in a Multi Ethnic Society: a case study from Kandy* by Nirmala de Silva. This explores communal perceptions of the 'other', identifies the conflict typologies that occur in a multi-ethnic setting and examines potential conflict reduction strategies.
- *Economy and Conflict: a case study from Batticaloa* by Mamankem Romesh. Investigates the roots of tensions between the Tamil and Moslem fishing communities in Batticaloa.
- *Root Causes of Conflict Among IDP's in Welfare Camps: a case study from a welfare camp in Mannar* by Mary Manjula Croose. Focuses on the health and living conditions of welfare camp residents as key determinants of camp conflicts.
- *The Consumption of Illicit Liquor (Kassippu) and its Conflict Impact: a case study from Balangoda* by Ranjith Bogoda. Explores a range of conflict related community impacts related to this common practice.
- *Socio Economic Factors Behind Conflict Against Self: Suicide – a case study from Tanamalwilla* by Renuka Jayasundera. This studies a disturbing trend amongst rural youth.
- *Use of New Technology and Conflict in the Fishing Community: a case study of a fishing community in Ambalangoda* by Thushara Galahage. Uncovers the impact of tensions between small scale and commercial fishing.
- *Economic Impact of the War on Families of Soldiers* by Madivi Ekanayake. Explores an issue that relates closely to what is likely to be one of Sri Lanka's most difficult post-conflict challenges – demobilisation.

These research papers will be presented to a wider audience at a conference entitled *Sri Lankan Youth Studies on Conflict: The Oxfam Research Bursary Conference*, in August 2002.

Finally, it should be noted that the political context in which Oxfam's Relationship Building Programme operates today, is considerably different to that which informed the development of this initiative in 1998. A change of political leadership, a continuing ceasefire between the Government forces and the LTTE, the re-opening of a land route to Jaffna, the prospects of peace talks, and promises of new international donor investment for reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation has dramatically altered the environment for peace building and conflict transformation. Although these recent changes will present new opportunities and challenges for development and peace work in Sri Lanka, the experiences gained by Oxfam through the *Relationship Building Programme* should provide a useful platform for engaging with the issues associated with an emerging peace.

## APPENDIX 1

### *'Foreign Devils or Knights in Shining Armour?' The NGO Forum Incident (1995)*

A series of events which occurred during November 1995 illustrate many of the areas of contention and relationship problems which arise between external NGOs and sections of the host community in Sri Lanka.

Matters flared up prompted by the activities of the NGO Forum on Sri Lanka (made up of external donor agencies and their Sri Lankan partners), which had arranged to hold its annual consultation at the holiday resort of Bentota, fifty miles south of Colombo. Prior to this meeting, for which the organisers thought they had the necessary permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see *The Island* 19/11/95, p.9; INFORM, 1995), the Forum circulated various preparatory papers including one labelled 'Supporting Document No.2: Human Rights' (INFORM, 1995). This paper was noticed by a group based in the UK called 'The Sri Lanka Expatriates Association in the UK' who wrote a letter to the Sri Lankan High Commission raising objections to the tone of this document, and to the NGO Forum itself. They claimed that the meeting was part of 'an orchestrated disinformation campaign carried out by international wings of the LTTE terrorist movement aided and abetted by some NGO groups to undermine the attempt being made to establish the writ of the Government in terrorist controlled areas in Sri Lanka' (*The Island*, 15/11/95) - at this time Operation Riviresa, which eventually was to lead to the capture of Jaffna by the Sinhalese Army, was in full swing. The expatriate group particularly took exception to the view expressed in the paper that 'despite many recent comments that things were improving, the human rights situation in the country remains a matter of grave concern' and also to the claim that Tamils who were displaced in the Jaffna Peninsular were not receiving adequate aid from the government. These claims by the FORUM were having the effect of tarnishing Sri Lanka's image abroad. Lakshman Kadirgamar, the Foreign Minister later agreed with these views in a statement given in Parliament (24/11/95) when he said 'the discussion paper....on human rights contains many statements which are not acceptable, which are not polite, which is not a way a foreign organisation of this kind should deal with matters in our country'. It was pointed out by the London expatriates and the Sri Lankan press that the FORUM shared offices with the British Refugee Council described as an organisation which 'acts on behalf of Sri Lankan Tamils in Britain and Europe' and receives funding from Tamil voluntary groups worldwide (*Divayina*, 16/11/95). It was also thought that the FORUM meeting would be critical of the governments policy that all NGOs who wanted to assist displaced persons in the North would have to channel their aid through GOSL state machinery, and would not be permitted to handle relief programmes independently (*Daily News*, 14/11/95).

This story was picked up by the Sri Lankan press and articles appeared claiming that the ‘pro-LTTE’ FORUM meeting would be also calling for the GOSL to call off Operation Riviresa. In the highly charged atmosphere of Colombo at that time a hostile crowd of some 500 people quickly gathered outside the hotel on the morning of 14 November (The Ven. Bengamuve Nalaka Thera of the *Deshapremi Bikshu Peramuna* said they led the protest against the convention because they were of the view that most of the European NGOs were sympathisers of the LTTE and were supporting the terrorists against the Government (*Sunday Observer*, 19/11/95). Also see *Anti-NGO Sentiments in Sri Lanka*, Peace Brigades International-Sri Lanka, Special Report, December 1995), and violence erupted when some journalists and foreign participants were assaulted as they were trying to enter the meeting. After the police had stated that they could no longer guarantee the safety of the participants the meeting was abandoned. A further attempt on the 16 November was made to convene the FORUM at another venue, but this also had to be called off after a radio station broadcast the address and encouraged people to demonstrate, and with the arrival of the police who declared the meeting illegal since they claimed it had not received official permission. The same radio station also gave out the names of the hotels where foreign participants were staying, and at one of them a crowd broke in, but fortunately did not manage to find them. A Sri Lankan human rights organisation, INFORM, was also targeted by the radio station when the FORUM core group convened a meeting there to discuss the events of the preceding days. Their premises were threatened by a crowd of anti-NGO protesters and in an attempt to defuse the situation an MP and a Deputy-Minister went to the scene to talk with the protesters and the FORUM organisers, and the Prime-Minister sent a personal representative to apologise for what had happened. Despite a statement of regret from the GOSL which: ‘deplored any forms or manifestations of violence against freedom of expression and reiterating commitment to upholding the right not only of organisations but of individuals to express their views on matters of public interest’, the Chair of the Forum listed three consequences which the GOSL should urgently address These were:

1. At a time of great volatility in the life of a nation, a mob had besieged and prevented a non-violent, private meeting from taking place, intimidated its participants and inflicted injuries and damage. The police, army and government had been unable to intervene effectively to stop this. This was a deeply worrying signal at the time.
2. The national news media had repeatedly printed and broadcast totally inaccurate and defamatory information in the full knowledge that it was false and would inflame the situation. This had been done despite being provided with correct information by the FORUM and direct contact with senior executives in all the major media.
3. The population had been given the impression that the NGO community working in the best interests of Sri Lanka, both in the country and abroad, was anti-government and, worse, pro-terrorist. This had sent shock waves through the entire NGO community and could have grave consequences

both within Sri Lanka and abroad. It was a stigma that must be urgently and publicly removed. (INFORM, 1995a).

The behaviour of the NGO FORUM exemplified, for some, the high-handed way in which foreign NGOs acted, expecting the GOSL to act according to their dictates - 'No visitor would be so boorish as to tell his host what he should do' (*Daily News*, 16/11/95). Buddhist organisations called for closer monitoring of foreign NGOs. The FORUM episode had been characterised by poor communications between the relevant Ministries and the FORUM, misunderstandings, misconceptions, a hostile media which appeared to be deliberately whipping up anti-NGO sentiments and, perhaps, some insensitivity on the content and timing of the FORUM meeting. It also demonstrated the power and influence of expatriate organisations. Relations between foreign donors, NGOs and the GOSL were seriously damaged.

*Source: Goodhand, Hulme & Lewer, 2001.*

## APPENDIX 2

### NGO Mainstreaming in Conflict Reduction and Peacebuilding in Practice – Oxfam in Sri Lanka

Oxfam in Sri Lanka has made conflict reduction, peacebuilding and conflict prevention a core strategic theme. Such activities link in with Oxfam GB's eight Strategic Change Objectives (SCOs), particularly SCO 3: *Right to Life and Security*, and within this SCO 3.2: *Fewer people suffer violence, fear of insecurity, or forced displacement, as a result of personal or communal violence, or armed conflict*. That this approach is timely can be seen, for example, in relation to (a) the *DFID Departmental Report 2000*, and; (b) the discussions around the *DFID White Paper II – Globalisation and Development*. The linkage between poverty and conflict is continually stressed, and the place for development programmes to help strengthen and build regional and national capacities for dispute resolution and conflict management acknowledged. Chapter 6 of the *DFID Departmental Report*<sup>13</sup> lists the following strategies for conflict reduction: supporting the promotion of social cohesiveness and inclusion; supporting the improvement of the international mechanisms for settling disputes and preventing conflict; assisting in the limitation of the means of waging war; supporting a security sector reform; promoting the the protection of human rights in conflict situations; supporting post-conflict peacebuilding.

Over the last few years Oxfam GB in Sri Lanka have been trying to integrate and mainstream what they now call a Relationship Building Programme (developed from the initial Conflict Reduction Programme) as a cross-cutting theme to all their work. *Staff believe that they can make a positive difference to the quality of humanitarian assistance, sustainable development and the peaceful transformation of community conflict dynamics by working with others to find innovative, transparent and accountable ways of challenging violent conflict that perpetuates poverty and stops sustainable development*. The various elements are outlined below.

#### **National Government Level**

DFID Policy

Greater understanding of working for peace

#### **HQ Level**

Strategic Change Objectives

Peace and Conflict Analysis: Standards, Procedures and Supporting Methodology

Internal Learning Group on Conflict

Oxfam Conflict Workshops

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.dfid.gov.uk/public/news/dr2000\\_chap6.pdf](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/public/news/dr2000_chap6.pdf).

Greater understanding of working for peace

### **In-Country Office Level**

Sri Lanka Strategy Plan - Relationship Building (Conflict Reduction) Programme

Log Frame Analysis.

Close working and consultation relationship with funders.

Involvement in Framework for Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (3Rs)

Appointment of dedicated staff to CR Programme – regular liaison with partners.

Inter-Agency Networking.

Staff Training and Discussion.

Conflict Analysis.

Local Research Bursaries.

Monitoring and Evaluation - developing Indicators.

Appointment of Programme Advisors – Development and Training.

Greater understanding of working for peace

### **Oxfam's Sri Lankan Partners**

Consultation –and involvement in training workshops.

Cross-Programming – regular visits and exchanges between projects

Conflict Analysis.

Funding for CP work.

Conflict Management Committees – eg: Watsan projects.

Monitoring and Evaluation – developing indicators.

Impact Assessment

Greater understanding of working for peace

### **'Beneficiaries'**

Training.

Enhanced dialogue and communication.

Reduction in experience of violence.

Development and aid projects more suited to daily reality.

Greater understanding of working for peace.

Mainstreaming presents Oxfam with considerable strategic, policy and operational challenges at both organisational and individual levels. For example the 'conflict' situation and peoples experience is quite different in the various regions of Sri Lanka. Also, there is considerable resistance from some sections of the Sri Lankan political community to a change in mandate and strategy from development and relief agencies into conflict related issues.

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