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It took me exactly fourteen hours to reach Colombo airport from Islamabad but the Sri Lankans having advanced the local standard time by an hour, a couple of months ago, showed my time of arrival an hour and half past midnight. Fortunately, the security restrictions having been relaxed slightly, the Thomas Cook car picked me up from the airport, instead of two miles away in the parking lot, as it did on my last arrival. After a few hours rest at the Airport Garden Hotel, I left for Kandy by car where Dayaratne greeted me to take me to our first meeting with community organization at Happawara in Hanguranketha division.

On the request of the Maldavian UNDP Country Office I had aborted my visit to Maldives from July 16 to 22 and was most grateful to Asoka for accommodating this last minute change in my itinerary of bringing the visit to Sri Lanka forward by a week. However, Abdullall Rasheed kindly came to see me on the plane, during the stopover at Male, en route Colombo. On return from Pakistan, after the training course, the Maldavian team was fully prepared to implement the workplan but due to certain delays in the Ministry in approving the workplan, Abdullah Rasheed had to stay back in Male, who informed me of the resolution of the difficulties now. Abdullah Rasheed is now planning to proceed to Noonu Atoll to join rest of his team, who are already there. He hopes to make up for the lost time as everything now seems to be in place and assured me of showing substantial progress on the ground on my rescheduled visit to Maldives in October.

The visit to Happawara reminded me of my initial dialogues in Northern Areas, with the difference that in Sri Lanka there was total support of the government machinery to the programme. On arrival we were met by the District Secretary Mr. Hattiararchchi, the Divisional Secretary Mr. Dissanayake and a host of functionaries from other departments. Another very encouraging development was presence of over 100 villagers both men and women. There are eight societies in the village and an effort was now being made under RAS/96/600 to bring them together to tackle common problems collectively. The village activists, both men and women, spoke of the deficiencies of the past in making organizations effective. One important reason was lack of follow-up by the organizing agencies and failure of the members to take interest in the affairs of the organization. They identified their priority problem as lack of irrigation water, knowledge of modern cultural practices, expertise in marketing etc. etc. The 108 households of the village had taken up community projects worth Rs.10,000 under the Samurdhi grant benefitting the 15 most impoverished families in the village. 11 farming families have also taken seed production under technical guidance of the Agriculture Department and were hoping to spread it widely, if successful.

Mr. Dissanayake, the Divisional Secretary introduced the Departmental officials, attending the meeting, representing Irrigation, Agrarian Services, Agriculture, Agro-Economic Research, Agricultural Instructor,

Barra representative, Family Planning, inland Fisheries, Mahaweli Authority and others. He spoke of the contribution of the community to their upliftment in the past and how the old traditions have been given up in favour of dependence on outside help. He emphasized that the salvation of the villagers lay in group action and not on individual activity. He referred to his recent visit to Pakistan and how he saw people, who had very meagre resources compared to what people in Sri Lanka have, achieve productivity and overcome problems through organization. He explained that under RAS/96/600 taking advantage of our past experience, we would like to demonstrate the advantages of social mobilization in reducing poverty. We plan to foster village support organizations with similar support at Divisional, District, Provincial and Country level to assault poverty. Happawara being the most isolated and poorest of the villages in Hanguranketha Division has specially been selected for initiating the RAS/96/600 experimentation and demonstration, but the success of the approach is dependent on peoples' willingness to accept a partnership with RAS/96/600 and fulfil their obligations of the partnership. Mr. Dissanayake asked for a categorical assurance from the people of their willingness to organize, to select genuine leaders of their own, to generate capital of their own, to undertake implementation and maintenance of projects identified by them as their priority needs and to acquire knowledge and skills through a human resource development programme. In case of their inability to do so, the Divisional Secretary made it clear that RAS/96/600 would be taken to some other village. The villagers expressed their full willingness to forge a partnership with RAS/96/600.

I explained the salient features of RAS/96/600 strategy which is based on the assumption of rural peoples willingness to solve their own problems. To help them do so, RAS/96/600 as a support organization, would provide social guidance to enable rural poor to organize, themselves, chose their leaders and identify their priority needs; provide them technical assistance to meet their priority needs and facilitate access to resources either through a credit line or linkage with government programmes and other institutions. I reiterated Mr. Dissanayake's statement that in case of their unwillingness to fulfil their obligations of partnership, RAS/96/600 would like to initiate the experiment in some other villages. There was a resounding affirmation of willingness on part of the audience.

The District Secretary, Mr. Hettiarachchi, expressed happiness that RAS/96/600 was exhorting people to do things instead of total dependence on outside help. He urged the formation of a village organization to undertake holistic development of the village. The existing societies may continue doing whatever they are currently engaged in, but for overall development of the village, an umbrella organization is essential. He assured of District administration's full support to RAS/96/600. The following day Mr. Hettiarachchi entertained us to a sumptuous dinner at his official residence at Nuwara Eliya.

The next day Dr. Asoka Kasturiarachchi, having arrived from Colombo at night, also joined us when we visited Makuruppa village, where at RAS/96/600 initiative 20 women were trained in paper making, who have started earning a handsome income from the venture after three months. One of the women, Vamta Dayalata, became so good that Sri Lanka Handicrafts Council engaged her as a master trainer. We saw the process of paper making including the primitive equipment being used by the master trainer. This was all filmed by a UN TV Team which was touring the island.

At Kundrakana more than 60 men and women belonging to three groups held a dialogue for securing a seed capital of Rs.150,000 to modernize the paper making equipment. There was some discussion about the desirability of having two centres instead of one. The repayment of seed capital was also discussed. Vanita offered to pay Rs.3,000 per month from the income she would earn while others felt somewhat uncertain. However, an instalment of Rs.700 per month per 20 members was considered reasonable. However, we left it to the groups and their leaders to sort out these issues and more importantly the procurement of equipment for the unit and its management before RAS/96/600 could consider their request. The most redeeming feature of this project was that it had brought Samurdhi as well as Jansaviya groups together. On request of the TV team, I gave a brief interview about RAS/96/600, before proceeding to Walapone.

At village Theripeha in Walapone Division, it was a scene out of my early years of AKRSP. Hundreds of men and women had gathered to greet us, although we were two hours late. Their priority need was a link road which was going to benefit 485 households residing in 4 Grama Sevaka Divisions. Currently they were paying Rs.75 per 50 kg bag as labour charges. Asoka underscored the importance of organization without which no agency can help them. The eight Samurdhi Nyamakas were very active and enthusiastic in advocating the cause of the villagers. However, Asoka urged upon them the need for setting up grassroots organizations encompassing all the beneficiaries, which would enable drawing up of terms of partnership between villagers and RAS/96/600 consisting of survey of the link road, cost estimates, implementation and maintenance mechanism, obligations of generating their own capital and drawing up development plan of all the villages. He gave them a month to organize and the audience nominated about 12-16 representatives to collaborate with the engineer and the social organizer in surveying the project.

We were very late for our next meeting at Eraula, yet about a dozen representatives of the village, including a monk, greeted us on arrival. They had identified the rehabilitation and renovation of a late nineteenth century anicut as their priority need, which was going to benefit 100 households of two villages. The two Samurdhi Nyamakas were also active here. Asoka urged upon them the need to organize themselves at the grassroots by revamping the existing organizations and Dayaratne promised to get the anicut survey vetted by the organizations and follow it with drawing up the terms of partnership, spelling out clear obligations of village organizations and RAS/96/600, for implementation and maintenance of the project and the future planning and development of the two villages.

Sri Lanka had been experiencing extensive electricity loadshedding because of lack of rains. On the third day of my visit, rains came with a vengeance but we went through, along with the Governor of Uva, Mr. Ananda Dissanayake, the ceremonies of ground breaking of a water supply scheme at Kirindiwela (for which the Governor had arranged Rs.200,000) and handing over improved heifers to selected farmers and distribution of a collection of fruit and forest trees to some activists.

The Divisional Secretary Kothmale, Mr. Abeykoon said that although UNDP has been in existence for long but this was the first time it was becoming a byword at the grassroots. He said RAS/96/600 has helped us in realizing limitations of our past efforts. There were 15,000 families in Kothmale Division but in the past we have been able to organize only 5,000. His effort is now to organize all the households and not only to link them with RAS/96/600 but with

all government development programmes and other development agencies. He planned to distribute 100 heifers to bring about breed improvement, by the end of the year. The water supply scheme was going to benefit 338 families. A distribution of 30,000 plants was planned by the end of the year. He urged the people do what was within their competence. Referring to his recent visit to Northern Areas of Pakistan, he said we couldn't believe what people have done there and despite low literacy rate, everyone contributed to the welfare of the community mainly because the community organized itself.

The Samurdhi Nyamaka lauded the approach of RAS/96/600 which teaches people not to expect everything free and advocates a development partnership.

In my brief speech, I expressed happiness at the collaboration between Government/NGOs/RAS/96/600 which augurs very well for efforts to reduce poverty.

Dr. Asoka Kasturiarachchi appreciated the speeches of Divisional Secretary and the Samurdhi Nyamaka and explained that RAS/96/600 came to Kothmale because of the existence of the NGO Janasakthe. He however, urged the people of Kothmale to derive maximum benefit from the programme by getting organized quickly as there was already criticism that Kothmale was not the poorest area deserving a programme like RAS/96/600.

The Governor said he had no hesitation in accepting the invitation to come to this function because everyone in this programme is committed to poverty reduction. There is no party politics in the programme. Everyone is being helped whether it is Samurdhi or Janasaviya both are helping people. He also offered the management of the Mahaweli Livestock Farm to the Programme for better management and increased benefit to the people of Kothmale.

Mrs. Agalawatte, the Chairman of Janasakthe thanked everyone and expressed her happiness at Samurdhi/Janasakthe and RAS/96/600 working hand in hand together.

At Weerapura, after the departure of the Governor to Badulla, we attended another ground breaking ceremony for a water supply scheme. Asoka, in his speech, explained that the objective of RAS/96/600 was not the construction of a scheme but fostering a community organization for reducing poverty by strengthening the self help capability of the people. He urged to make Janasakthe the strongest organization in the area by forging collaboration with Samurdhi and Government.

I urged upon the audience the need to strengthen their grassroots organization otherwise their water supply project will meet the same fate as the one implemented by the Water Board six years ago. Because people were not involved and consulted, despite a heavy expenditure of over Rupees three million, there is no supply of water. It was, therefore, important to work out the terms of partnership between the community organizations and RAS/96/600 before embarking on implementation of a project. I also clarified to them that RAS/96/600 was a Government of Sri Lanka programme being implemented with the assistance of UNDP Country Office and a field unit headed by the NPC and its success mainly depended on the communities, who had to take full responsibility for implementation of the programme. Here also the Gram Savaka and the Samurdhi workers were present.

The transformation in the Sri Lankan RAS/96/600 that I noticed this time, pleased me beyond measure. The noticeable features were the emphasis on grassroots organization of both men and women, fostering of leadership from amongst the communities, collaboration between grassroots NGOs, active participation of Samurdhi Nyamakass, total support of the government agencies and positive contribution of United Nations Volunteers (UNV). I see tremendous potential and a great future for RAS/96/600 in Sri Lanka if the Programme continues to progress in the direction it is going. The use of UNVs could be a very good example for other SAARC countries to follow.

The relationship between the Country Office and RAS/96/600 field team leaves nothing to be desired - thanks to the sensitive support and guidance being provided by Asoka Kasturiarachchi and the able helmsmanship of RAS/96/600 by the NPC Dayaratne and dedication and commitment of the field staff. The support of the District and Divisional Secretaries to RAS/96/600 would go a long way in making a success of the programme.

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- Mr. Arve Ofstad, Resident Representative, UNDP Colombo.
 - Mr. M.H.S. Dayaratne, NPC RAS/96/600 c/o UNDP Colombo.
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