



Walkway temporarily stalled due to rising flood waters from the school playground

Monthly Report – Jeremy Liyanage

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Priorities

- Staff cohesion and effectiveness – prevention of ‘fall over’
- Governance: registration of Bridging Lanka, financial systems
- Urban improvements
- English language programs
- Donkey management and welfare

Staff cohesion

Trinco trip – In response to divisive issues among the staff team, the first task on arrival at Mannar was to organise a team building weekend. In just a couple of days Saya and Aneil (volunteers from Melbourne and Calgary respectively) assisted me to put together a program. A two and a half day intensive team building effort with our staff team was held and I am grateful that we have emerged a stronger team. Each team member gave amazing commitment and concentration, exploring each other’s strengths as well as the frustration each causes the team. A platform for greater honesty and giving robust feedback in a caring and constructive way was established.

Governance

Registration – a five month ordeal has ended with Bridging Lanka now officially registered in Sri Lanka! Our proper title is Bridging Lanka (Guarantee) Limited, Registration No: GL 2311. Upon my arrival, it took daily contact with the person responsible for three weeks and changes to our objects before approval was granted. The Government Agent is happy that the registration has finally come through. Hopefully this will give us the legitimacy that we have craved for the past 18 months.

Bank accounts – similarly a six month process has come to an end with the Mannarin Marumalarchi (renaissance of Mannar) Trust account being finally opened. A Trust account attracts a lot of scrutiny and again it was daily pressure on the bank that finally produced the result. The next challenge is to open a bona fide Bridging Lanka account.

Urban improvements

Santhipuram housing and drainage project – Saya Lorback, volunteer engineer from Melbourne spent five weeks re-engaging with and coordinating the Santhipuram project. Positive discussions were held with the director of the Disaster Management Centre who encouraged us to submit an application for funds to the Sri Lankan government for detailed design and construction of drainage works here. Now that the rainy season is in full swing we see the pain that local people endure as their houses flood.

Raised walkway – one of the projects underway is the construction of a raised 100 metre walkway from the Santhipuram primary school building to the outside toilets. Usually the children have to wade through flood waters and mud to reach the toilets. Have you ever tried concreting in wet weather and rising flood waters? Saya has coordinated the projects valiantly and under trying circumstances and was joined by Graham Burgdorf from Brisbane. Graham is highly experienced, adaptive and committed. He goes onsite twice a day to supervise the team of masons and labourers. Graham is the former Manager, Parks, Moreton Bay Regional Council.

Children's park – we are also doing the design work for a children's park, parts of which also go under water. Rebecca, Landscape Architect stationed in Melbourne has been the virtual support to Saya and Graham on this project.

English language program

After-school English language program – the session was attracting about three students each day. Thanks to the drive and inspiration of Aneil Rajaram, volunteer from Canada and the dedication of Quily, one of our Bridging Lanka staff, about 15 to 20 now turn up. The program is stimulating and varied and the result has been a growing confidence and ability of otherwise shy students to speak and write English.

English conversation – an English language conversation circle for interested adults is also giving local professionals, including teachers, a chance to talk English and increase their vocabulary and confidence. To promote the importance of learning English to the people of Mannar, they are preparing to perform a piece of street theatre.

Language Perfect – slow to get off the ground, this online program will be given a boost through the involvement of Eero Piirisalu, a volunteer from Estonia. Eero will help establish the program and train a local person to set it up as a business. Bridging Lanka was given 500 free licences and \$1,500 from Language Perfect (a New Zealand-based company) to set up this online language resource.

Donkey management and welfare

Donkey orphanage and clinic – Sumangala Jayathelake, architect, and his apprentice, Dimitri visited the property before starting to design the clinic facility. Sumangala is undertaking this task pro bono and we are privileged to have such a renowned architect work involved. A video has just been completed by Freeman Trebelcock (Melbourne) which will be used in a Pozible crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for the construction of the facility.

Donkey taming – Aneil and Kelvin, a Bridging Lanka staff member have been busy with taming donkeys. The habit of running away from humans has now been transformed into a number of donkeys allowing us to hand feed, stroke and groom them.

Donkey feeding program – the daily feeding program continues unabated due to the great dedication of Robin Suseelen, a Bridging Lanka staff. Significant amounts of food are being recycled daily from the garment factory as well as the vegetable vendors in town.

Funky donkey – Maxim Garments, Ratmalana, has printed the first batch of 200 t-shirts and is now sewing the garments. These should be ready in two weeks' time. Animal Aid Abroad (Perth) was so impressed with the design that we are now negotiating for our graphic designer, Sameera Rajapaksa to also design them a t-shirt.

Business development

'Manna' Women's Catering Company - the war widows' food company is progressing well with some big orders coming in. Women are starting to earn profit. We have had discussions with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) who will provide equipment and training for the women. BL worker, Robin, and the Women's Development Officer (WDO) from the Manthai West Secretariat have made concerted efforts to make this business a profitable concern.

Rice mill – because of the poor yield of paddy due to two years of drought, we have loaned Rs 100,000 for them to purchase paddy for milling. The mill continues to function well but under-production. UNDP visited the mill and was impressed by the facility. UNDP has agreed to provide par-boiling training and equipment for 20 workers. Robin continues to have a close and constructive relationship with the management committee.

Fishing business – the returned asylum seeker we are supporting to rebuild a livelihood has bought nets and outboard motor and the boat arrives in a few days' time. Robin is supporting him to establish his fishing business. Saya will soon launch a Pozible crowdfunding campaign to offset our expenses for this project.

Current and upcoming volunteers

- **Aneil Rajaram:** negotiated for a Canadian to volunteer in Mannar for 2 months. Aneil will be involved in the implementation of the Santhipuram project and the English for All program;
- **Saya Lorback:** Saya, an engineer, is undertaking a return visit to Mannar for five weeks to participate in the implementation of the Santhipuram drainage and housing project;
- **Dr Paul Yates:** Paul works as a research fellow and consultant geriatrician with the Departments of Nuclear Medicine and Aged Care Services, Austin Health and specialises in ageing and dementia. Paul will conduct preliminary research into issues of ageing in Mannar.
- **Graham Burgdorf:** will head the Santhipuram team tasked with commencing implementation of urban improvement projects for a six week stint;
- **Eero Piirisalu:** following in the tradition of volunteers from Estonia, Eero will join us for two months and will be involved in the Santhipuram, donkey-related projects and English language program;
- **Mario Mendonca:** Mario will be visiting Bridging Lanka's projects to gain a better insight into its operations. Mario has agreed to provide strategic financial advice to us.
- **Sophie Dunn:** a final year medical student from Melbourne University will offer health services to Mannar residents under the supervision of a private health organisation

- **Viola weber:** another final year medical student from Germany and friend of Sophie's wants to undertake health related work.

Other news

- **International Finance Corporation:** MOU is currently being developed between IFC and Bridging Lanka; IFC has tasked BL to design tourism board signs which complies to government signage
- **Australian High Commission:** met with the High Commissioner and updated her on our projects. HE Robyn Mudie is sending a team today to check out our operation in Mannar
- **Initiatives of Change:** met with members of IofC Sri Lanka to negotiate the conducting of a *Life Matters* workshop that links personal morality and ethics with world-changing efforts based on Gandhi's dictum, "be the change you want to see in the world." Initial positive response. The proposal will be taken to the next meeting for formal support.

Jeremy Liyanage
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