

Retrospective 2020-21

Bridging Lanka Annual Report



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our mission

Connecting hearts across divides

Bridging ethnic, religious and geographic divides through people-inspired action

table of contents

Message from the Chairperson	4
About Bridging Lanka	5
Operational context	6
10 years of bridge-building	8
Sustainable livelihoods	10
Holistic education	12
Environmental health	14
Urban improvement	18
Social cohesion	20
Animal welfare	23
Responsible tourism	26
Nurturing youth	27
Bridging Lanka staff team	31
Australian & Sri Lankan directors	32



message from the chairperson

In 2020 we celebrated the tenth year of Bridging Lanka's existence and support of the Mannar community. In February, at our Melbourne Symposium in Melbourne we reconnected with supporters and past volunteers as we looked back at achievements of the last decade and explored future opportunities.

But conditions changed quickly in 2020 as the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic caused huge disruption in people's lives and for not-for-profit organisations like Bridging Lanka. Despite these challenges, Jeremy Liyanage and his team continued to deliver and expand their work in Mannar and Digana, Kandy district.

People across Sri Lanka suffered periods of extended lockdown and curfew, making it difficult to earn a living and survive. Early in the pandemic, the government asked Bridging Lanka to distribute food to families without jobs and livelihood. This became a massive effort of raising funds, procuring dry rations, packaging, and distributing food parcels to hundreds of families in Mannar and Digana. We are immensely proud of the Bridging Lanka team and local volunteers for their support of struggling people during this time.

The pandemic meant we could not recruit new volunteers in 2020-21. But just prior to the pandemic Abhinayan (Abs) Kugendran was selected by Australian Volunteers International (AVI) to volunteer with BL for 12 months. But Coronavirus saw the return of all AVI volunteers to Australia. Months later, Abs returned to Mannar under his own resources to volunteer with us again. What perseverance!

The Australian Board and supporters raised funds for Bridging Lanka's work. Our online *Touching Hearts Lending Hands* campaign at the end of 2020 raised \$15,610 for young women and men, providing them with personal and financial support to pursue their life goals. This effort built on our 2019 *Fighting Fit* campaign which raised \$16,845 to build a gym for fitness, yoga and dance instruction. This complemented grant funding received from DFAT. Delivery of these programs continues in 2021.

In addition to our Executive Director, Jeremy, I would like to mention the dedication of fellow Board Members – Shyama Fuad, Siraj Perera, Lindy Drew-Tsang (Secretary), Prabakaran Ponnuthurai, and new comers, Lara Jeyaretnam and Abs Kugendran (Treasurer) who bring new skills and enthusiasm to the Board. We said farewell to Jane Hope (Treasurer) and Luke Chandler who we thank for their dedicated work. We also appreciate Ranjit Bhagwandas' support and advice throughout 2021.

A strength of Jeremy's work is building projects that create local employment and capacity. So as projects mature, they are transferred to community management. The first was IT Platform (est. 2014) to train and employ young people in IT skills. Management of IT Platform transferred to co-founder Kamal Raj in 2017 and continues to provide local services and support the career development of young women and men. The next project to adopt this approach is the Donkey Clinic and Education Centre which provides a veterinary rescue service for injured donkeys, local employment, tourism, and an education hub. Now financially sustainable, management has been transferred to co-founder, Alhathir Shahul Hameethu.

We are taking a positive outlook for the years ahead – looking beyond Coronavirus disruptions. Our task as the Australian Board is to continue to support Jeremy and his team - particularly by raising funds to directly support community projects and by continuing to build a strong supporter base in Australia.

Finally, on behalf of the Australian Board, I would like to thank our supporters in Australia and internationally for their ongoing financial and moral support. Without your care Bridging Lanka cannot continue to make a difference in the lives of families and individuals in Sri Lanka.

about bridging lanka



vision

A unified, peaceful and prosperous Sri Lankan community both 'in country' and abroad.

mission

Connecting hearts across divides

Bridging ethnic, religious and geographic divides through people-inspired action

Bridging Lanka links Sri Lankans and non-Sri Lankans by harnessing their expertise and resources to benefit vulnerable people in Sri Lanka - for livelihood support, environmental health, social cohesion, nurturing youth, urban improvement, animal welfare and responsible tourism.

objectives

1. To respond to social, economic and environmental issues in the lagging regions of Sri Lanka;
2. To act as a credible knowledge, business and investment link between Sri Lankans abroad and nation-building opportunities in Sri Lanka;
3. To work towards improved communal relations through constructive engagement between overseas Sri Lankans and the Government and polity of Sri Lanka;
4. To explore a Sri Lankan approach to diversity management that affirms the notion of a religious and ethnically-cohesive nation;
5. To pursue the relief of poverty, suffering, sickness, disability, helplessness and distress by accessing resources through ethical means.

principles

Open hearted – a global and united diaspora, demonstrating their heart connection to Sri Lanka by working for the peace and prosperity of the country

Reconciled – an acknowledgement of the collective pain, dispossession and trauma caused by past and present conflicts and a commitment to journeying together

Cohesive – the right of every Sri Lankan citizen, regardless of ethnicity, culture or religion, to enjoy equal opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the social, cultural, environmental and economic life of the nation.



ground to a halt

Come mid-March and the whole of Sri Lanka came under lockdown. Shops and businesses closed. The only movement on the streets were hungry dogs or scavenging donkeys. Police and military presence ensured compliance with stringent measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19. Overnight a deep paranoia against anyone not of one's village descended like a cloud. All foreigners visiting Mannar were branded as Covid-19 carriers so they escaped as soon as able. A whole district willingly accepted the massive debilitating consequences of lockdowns and curfews in order to safeguard their lives.

Bridging Lanka's work grounded to a halt - all education classes suspended until further notice; planned certificate awards ceremony for successful computer studies students, postponed; the doors of the DCEC closed to its financial lifeline – tourists; the shutters of Café Arokkiya were rolled down placing grave financial strain on its working widows; all glorious plans made in Colombo only days before were abandoned as all means of public and private travel were suspended. There would also be no tenth anniversary celebrations this year. A vibrant community and a busy organisation had become momentarily paralysed. We began searching to find antidotes to despair - in alternative acts.

game changer

In mid-March the Covid phenomenon struck without warning and plunged Sri Lanka and indeed the world into a downward spiral. For an organisation like Bridging Lanka whose raison e'tre was based on 'connecting hearts across divides', how was such a mission going to be possible under stringent curfew conditions, social distancing edicts and nation-wide lockdowns?

Regrouping to be responsive

We were not going to let anything detract us from progressing our district development work. With persistence we managed to obtain official passes enabling us to carry out a hastily conceived strategy to remain active and relevant.

A three pronged approach emerged: (a) tend to the basic needs of the most vulnerable in the areas in which we work, (b) continue to support our small scale paddy and vegetable farmers to address ongoing food scarcity, and (c) explore how to provide a safety net for young people with no access to schooling or jobs.

The staggering impact

By the end of March, two weeks after the initial lockdown, 17,066 families in Mannar, consisting of 52,869 members and reliant on daily wages for their survival, were literally starving without food.

Government's plea

The authorities approached Bridging Lanka to help feed destitute families. Even so we had to gain approval from the police, Government Agent, the Disaster Management Centre, Divisional Secretariat, Grama Niladhari, Rural Development Society, Women's Rural Development Society and the Public Health Inspector.

An appeal was made to our Australian-based supporters who responded with empathic generosity. They too were being



traumatised by Covid's impact and this on the back of the devastating bushfires across Australia that destroyed lives and environment.

Rojan, Bridging Lanka manager, bore the brunt - getting curfew passes by standing in line outside the police station for hours in the burning sun, negotiating the many military and police blockades and checkpoints; being patient with each authority following different procedures made 'on the run'.

We provided dry food ration packs that included rice, roti flour, chick peas, dry fish, cooking oil, tea, sugar, onions, potatoes and biscuits and averaged 11 kilos each.

In total we helped feed 951 vulnerable families in 61 villages in all five divisions of Mannar.



Members of our Kunchukulam youth committee help package up dry food rations



Across Mannar District queues for our food rations were long

10 years of 'bridge-building'

Just before Covid hit.... Our tenth anniversary celebration in Melbourne, Australia, featured a photo retrospective, a lunch to show our gratitude to the hundreds of volunteers who had joined us in Mannar, our annual general meeting and a symposium with four speakers reflecting on the future of international development work.



Tenth Anniversary Symposium

We intermingled, ate together, engaged in discussion and shared memories spanning the ten years. Bridging Lanka has been resolute to its mission of bridging ethnic, religious and geographic divides through people-inspired action. It has been a journey of the heart connecting Sri Lankans and non-Sri Lankans across the globe for the betterment of marginalised people in Sri Lanka, primarily in Mannar district. We are most grateful for the many who have trekked with us and contributed in their own unique ways to our daring vision.



Annual face to face time

Bridging Lanka directors travelled from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Mannar for the annual directors' meeting – an indication of their dedication. At the annual meeting Jeremy outlined Bridging Lanka's theme for the next five years – 'holding'.

In the past ten years a number of operational centres have been established – the Donkey Clinic & Education Centre (Mannar Division), Café Arokkiya (Manthai West Division), Donkey Assisted Therapy Centre (Nanattan Division), Youth Empowerment Hub (Madhu Division) and of course the office in Mannar Town.

Bridging Lanka's next five year challenge is to 'hold' these communities and its people in deeper and more enduring ways. A major group that needed special 'holding' was the cohort of vulnerable young people - directionless and given over to drugs, alcohol and depression.



Communications ever since...



sustainable livelihoods

In Sri Lanka the loss of jobs and incomes due to the pandemic was severe. While workers in almost every sector were affected, day labourers who make up about 70% of the workforce were most affected. In Mannar the situation was dire. The bright start to our major livelihood initiative, Café Arokkiya, ended abruptly as the café doors were closed for months, disrupting women's lives and livelihoods.

Cuisine Queens

The year started strong for Café Arokkiya. Large food orders kept coming - one, a dinner for 200 guests of MP Rishad Bathiudeen - kept coming. MP Rishad spoke glowingly about the meal and even took time to write highly complimentary remarks in our café guest book. With larger orders the Bridging Lanka staff helped out. Everything was on the up and up. Then disaster.

Closed shop

For weeks the doors of Café Arokkiya remained firmly shut. To help the widows who run the business, we provided them with generous dry ration food packs and a living stipend. It was a sad and difficult time as lost valuable momentum we could ill afford. Eventually lockdowns were lifted and the women returned to work.

Addressing volatility

It has been so hard to maintain a stable group of workers at the café. These women live in precarious situations and under constantly changing circumstances. Of late we have lost and gained women.

The women leave for many reasons - an ageing mother develops a debilitating illness, requiring full time support; a petty fight escalates between two café women and ending with one leaving; our hardest worker has a heart attack and is hospitalised; an abusive husband prohibits his wife from working at the café.



Rojan, BL manager, and Kumanan our up and coming counsellor meet with the women regularly to ease tensions, introduce systems and ensure the café moves toward financial sustainability.

Café Arokkiya has now directly helped 21 mainly widows keep a roof over their heads, food on the table and children at school.

We are working toward providing nutritious and tasty fare as we move closer to being totally organic. Our hopes of attracting and growing the tourist market were dashed this year due to the regular lockdowns.

So far 21 women have worked either in the kitchen or in the café. Much training has been provided as well as personal support when their lives hit hard patches.



Rojan and Kumanan create space for the women to air their grievances



A full Café Arokkiya with happy customers



Dishing Up Organic Rice

A truly momentous occasion was when our first bushels of organic rice, grown as a result of our organic paddy trial in Adampan, were now being served to our Café Arokkiya customers. Two traditional varieties of paddy – were grown successfully - Kuruluthuda and Batapola El. Here, Sulaika proudly shows off Batapola El, a type of red rice high in protein, iron and zinc which strengthens the immune system.



This paddy was grown by Paulraj and milled by Sasipavan, owner of the grinding mill we helped to establish in 2014. Also, we are sourcing some of our vegetables from local organic growers and fresh milk from local cow herders.



One-stop-shopping

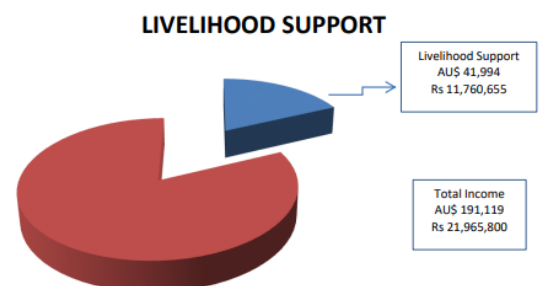
A year before, five young men from Kunchukulam approached Bridging Lanka about setting up a multi-trade business. They all had different tradie skills but the work was intermittent and locals didn't want to pay the going rate for their services. They needed money, largely to support their financially struggling families in this remote part of Kunchukulam.

Enter the 'one-stop-shop' idea - young people with vocational qualifications are supported to establish a one-stop tradies shop, then to support other young people as apprentices, those with tradie quals but without experience. Finally the guys kicked into action – carpentry, aluminium work, plumbing, electrical and mechanics were the first cabs off the rank.



Merchandising business

Young jobless women were trained in tailoring and supported to establish a business making souvenirs and merchandise for hotels, guest houses, hotels and other places frequented by tourists. Visitors to the Donkey Clinic would purchase tote bags, cushion covers, and tea towels all with donkey emblems. Through this enterprise young women developed a skill and a livelihood.



holistic education

The Covid spectre disrupted all education throughout the country. The near-total closures of schools for months on end have impacted students, teachers and parents, carrying high social and economic costs. The big challenges we witnessed were interrupted learning and the loss of a school goer's study discipline and for working parents, the inability to adequately supervise children thus leading to risky behaviours including increased negative peer pressure and substance abuse. Our English, ICT, donkey assisted therapy and vocational education plans were abandoned for much of the year.

Promising start hits a snag

Another three batches of ICT students were eager to get job-ready in Kunchukulam, Adampan and Thailankudiyiruppu. On offer were three certificates, well regarded in the market place: (a) *Computer Application Assistant*: Microsoft Package of 60 sessions; (b) *Hardware Technician* networking and installations; (c) *Computer Graphic Designer* (Photoshop).

The provision of nationally recognised certification from the International Academy of Professional Studies, Vavuniya was a draw card. Two months of intensive training ended abruptly due to Covid and did not resume due to Covid's unpredictability.

A principal's lament

The pandemic has crushed an already dysfunctional education reality in rural areas. Uneducated parents cannot be role models for their children. Only a highly motivated student can progress.

"Corona took students and parents away from education. Students were free for three months so now dislike school. They blame the disease for not coming to school," he bemoaned.

The government offered TV based classes but in rural parts there is no coverage and no alternative education resources. Important exams were delayed.



Donkey Assisted Therapy

As a result of twice-weekly donkey assisted therapy (DAT) we have witnessed unimaginable life skill development in young people with a disability. Both parents and teachers have attested to the positive changes.

DAT commenced in late January 2020 and ended in early March – coinciding with school closures. Six months later DAT recommenced for only one week before ceasing for the remainder of the year due to Covid – a waste of a highly effective therapy!

Switched Off

Well attended English, computer and IT classes in multiple locations – in Kunchukulam, Adampan and Thailankudiyiruppu ceased for much of the year too.



ICT classes in Café Arokkiya's education room



Frank discussion with a principal about Covid's effect on education



Impersonal, inferior zoom

The significantly inadequate 'zoom' platform offered to both high school and university students have had the effect of dumbing down education and collapsing scholastic discipline.

More responsible parents who steered their children away from

smart phone ownership had to acquiesce so their children could join zoom classes.

But the reality was that the smart phone was used instead to engage with social media and online games activity, partner-trawling and porn watching – definitely not education.

Belated awarding ceremony

With the spectre of corona still looming large and the government decree to suspend all education classes indefinitely, it was decided to have a private awards ceremony for the eighteen students who had already completed their six months of MS Office training. A discreet ceremony compliant with social distancing protocols was held at the Youth Empowerment Hub in Kunchukulam. The parish priest, as the special guest, led the prayers prior to nationally recognised certificates being awarded.



Donkey Therapy Suspended

For much of 2021, the highly effective Donkey Assisted Therapy (DAT) sessions went into abeyance. Young people like *Diron* who progressed markedly in life skills development through DAT, has missed out.

Diron has an intellectual disability. He is well liked and an incessant talker. But his special gift is his ever-present

humour. He turns everything into a comedy, making everyone laugh and the DAT sessions more lively.

Diron changed from being supremely stubborn, disobedient to teachers and indifferent to donkeys to being kind-hearted toward both donkeys and people as a result of the DAT sessions. At one session his face was beaming as he touched and hugged the donkey.

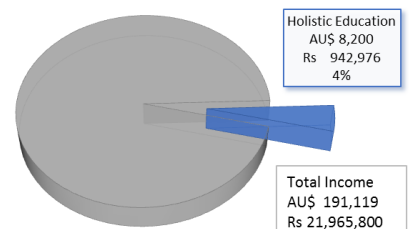


Donkey Therapy Resumes

After an absence of many months due to Covid, our Donkey Assisted Therapy (DAT) sessions for differently abled young people,

recommended. As the prolonged lockdowns impacted on students' discipline more generally with them forgetting much of their studies, we thought the DAT kids too could have lost their ability to relate closely with donkeys or the valuable life skills already learnt. Totally not the case! The kids rushed to the donkeys, embracing them like long lost friends. "We've missed them!" one boy shouted. Immediately they set about feeding, grooming and walking the donkeys with pure love, refusing to go back to school. Their emphatic responses demonstrated just how close a bond had developed between the children and donkeys.

HOLISTIC EDUCATION



environmental health

Globally, every minute, 26 acres of forests are cut down. By 2030, only 10% may remain. More than 12 million people die each year because they live or work in unhealthy environments. The issues are monumental.

In a focused and localised way, Bridging Lanka responds to ecological issues affecting Mannar's people and habitat, with an eye on mitigating negative impacts for future generations – preserving Mannar's rich biodiversity, investing in 'natural capital' both environmental and human and opposing unhealthy profit-driven developments.

2020-21 held its unique challenges – the fight to save Mannar from mineral sand mining, rapid deforestation, a growing incidence of chronic kidney disease and most importantly, addressing the Covid hit on the human immune system. Our commitment to 'organic' only increased!

Promising organic paddy trials

Trial organic paddy cultivation in Adampan and Kunchukulam continues. At harvest time, 5 of our 6 participating farmers decided to reintroduce more resilient varieties of paddy planted historically and prior to the introduction of agro-chemical-dependent GMO strains.

The result? Thuyansan from Thenudayan harvested 709 kg of Kuruluthuda seed. In Kallikulam, Paulraj's yield was 136 kg of Batapola El and in Kunchukulam, Amalathas harvested 247 kg of Gonabaru seeds.

Two farmers kept their seed for the next harvest and one farmer had already sold his entire crop. Normally a farmer gets Rs 4,000 for a bushel of paddy. This time they earned Rs 6,000 for their organic produce.



Now to compare yields

Sasipavan a farmer from Adampan farmer experimented with chemical and non-chemical cultivation. The field with chemicals produced 21.5 bushels of paddy while the field with organic products yielded 21 bushels. Based on these results, other farmers have decided to go organic in the next paddy season and will trial more traditional varieties of paddy.



A new crop we are promoting in Mannar – highly nutritious and considered a super food – organic turkey berries!

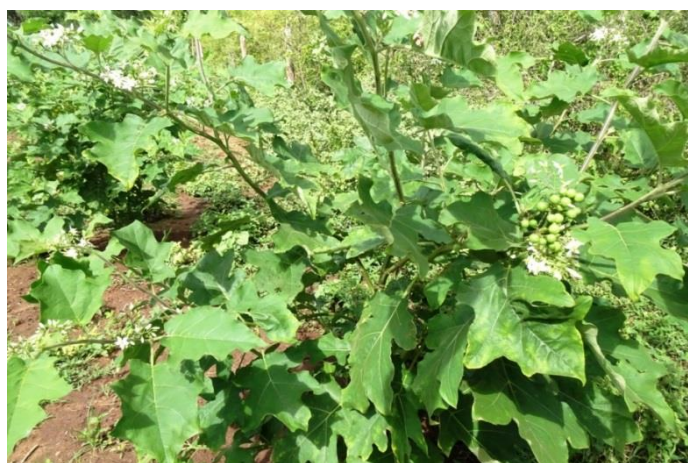


Organic' is catching on

Over 800 punnets of turkeyberry plants were distributed to farmers in Kunchukulam, Periyamurippu, Murunkan and Thailankudiyiruppu. All farmers were also issued with organic fertilizer and pesticide. They followed closely our instructions and ended up with a bumper crop.

These farmers have caught onto the benefits of 'organics' and have now expanded to growing organic peanuts and vegetables. From the first harvests, some farmers increased their monthly income significantly from the sale of organic turkeyberries. Two farmers who planted 300 plants each reaped close to Rs 70,000 for the month. A stunning return!

Seeing our other farmers successfully growing organic paddy has inspired others. Transitioning local farmers to organic cultivation is also part of our preventative strategy against fatal chronic kidney disease of multifactorial origin (CKD-mfo).



Reforestation a must!

Six BL staff visited the Forestry Training Centre at Belipola to learn the 'analog' forestry approach. This will be used to reforest northern parts of Wilpattu Forest, denuded by illegal sand and gravel mining and felling of trees. It is a 12 principle scientific approach to growing forests in a reduced time period.

Sand Mining Mannar – scenario of irreversible destruction

Mannar residents facing annihilation

Startling news hit Mannar's organisations that Australia-based mining company, Titanium Sands Ltd, intended to mine 48 million tonnes of mineral sands from fragile Mannar Island.

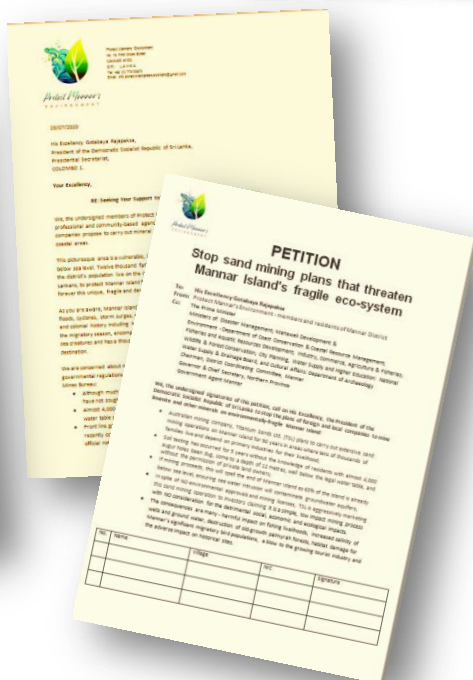
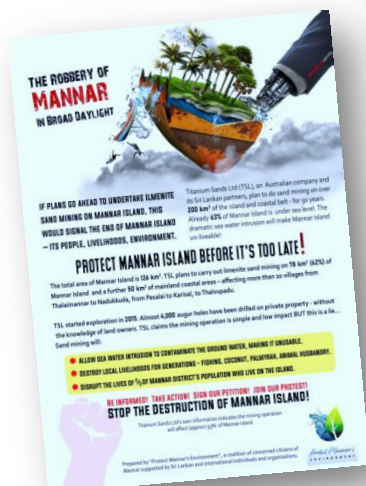
Unbeknown to the local authorities or the district's inhabitants, secretive exploration has continued from 2015.

To date, TSL's exploratory activities confirmed that much of the island contained high grade commercial quantities of ilmenite sand used in the production of titanium, a metal in high demand in the automotive, aerospace, military, medical and technology industries.



A future nightmare

The consequences are many. Mannar Island is a low-lying, coastal area (already 63% below sea level) where tens of thousands of people live and depend on fishing and agriculture for their livelihood. The impact of sand mining will ensure sea water intrusion and harm vital fishing grounds, increase salinity of wells and ground water, destroy old-growth palmyrah forests, damage the habitat of Mannar's significant migratory bird populations and devastate the growing tourist industry.



Firing up a community

Bridging Lanka spearheaded a movement to stop TSL's aggressive operation. Twenty-one community and religious representatives joined to form an umbrella group, Protect Mannar's Environment. The first action was a letter to the President of Sri Lanka seeking his intervention. Bridging Lanka developed powerpoint presentations, posters and leaflets for community awareness. An online petition attracted thousands of signatures.

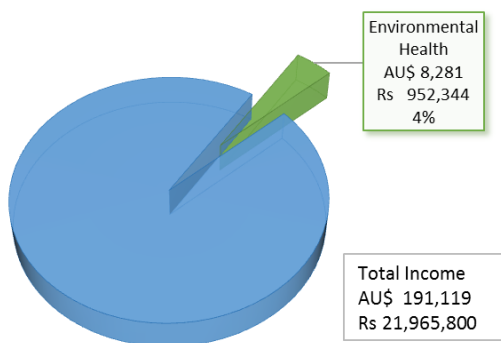


Widespread Protests

Public protests were organised by the Mannar Citizen's Committee. Reaching out to the Greens Party in Australia resulted in Senator Rice, Deputy Australian Greens Whip, raising the Mannar mining issue in the Australian parliament and recorded in Hansard: Human Rights; 12 November 2020; Page: 111; (17:37)



ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH



urban improvement

The challenge of urban planning and infrastructure development in a resource-poor context just got more complex with the Covid phenomenon. No plans could be made as the curfews and lockdowns were unpredictable, and extended at will. Only toward the end of 2020 was some certainty established and limited urban improvement work possible.



Flood season approaches

Back in 2011, Bridging Lanka first highlighted the issue of the kulams (lagoons) of Mannar being illegally encroached and filled for new housing and roads, thus leading to severe urban flooding.

Our project to protect and rehabilitate the kulams hit many

snags, coming against vested interests. However we had some success in protecting the larger kulams. This month the dire fortunes of Mannar's kulams took a turn for the better.

A new Divisional Secretary of Mannar and a new Assistant Commissioner of Agrarian

Development (under whose purveys are the kulams), together with the Mannar chapter of the Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka and Bridging Lanka joined forces to re-tackle this issue before the annual wet season descended in all its fury.



Welcomed take over

The Divisionary Secretary and the Institute of Engineers invited Bridging Lanka to deliver a presentation on the Mannar kulams and share our report on kulam management we wrote a few years ago. This provided the basis for renewed kulam protection - this time without BL driving the response.

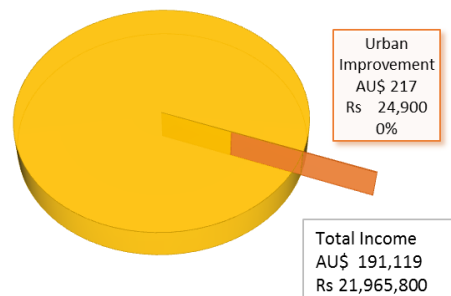


A pre-emptive strike

The new Divisional Secretary demonstrated his vow to protect the remaining kulams on Mannar Island by spending a whole Sunday revisiting the 26 kulams (lagoons) Bridging Lanka had identified and reported on five years earlier. Accompanied by other senior staff, some from the Assistant Commissioner Agrarian Development office, notes were recorded of remedial steps to protect and rehabilitate the most strategic kulams before the wet season descended.



URBAN IMPROVEMENT



social cohesion

Social Cohesion in areas where social anxiety and cultural division separates communities, we strive toward creating the conditions and programs that lead towards tolerance and community harmony. We work with all factions, acknowledging their pain, searching for common ground and embracing a cohesive vision.



Red tape blues

Following the communal violence of 2018 centered on Digana in Kandy district, we commenced a long-term reconciliation strategy to bridge the chasm between Buddhists and Muslims.

To 'do any good' in Sri Lanka involves following strict government procedures and gaining official approvals at every juncture. We had already supplied copious amounts of documentation to the Government Agent to support our application to work in Kandy district.

It took nine months and involved multiple visits, scores of phone calls, additional documentation and a meeting with the NGO Secretariat in Colombo.

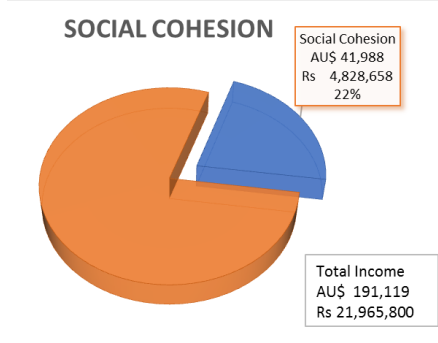
The wait impacted us. We lost good people along the way. The difficulties with Covid compounded our frustration. After appealing strongly to the Kandy district NGO Coordinator to facilitate the approval process, it was finally granted.

During the long wait we continued to meet informally with our Youth Nation Digana youth desirous of change.



Skills for community service

Group members identified two priority issues for action – the burgeoning drug problem and inter-religious division that sparked the Digana violence of 2018. In preparation, we ran a skills training module, Know Your Local Community. The aim was to teach young people practical social service skills to undertake interviews, focus groups and agency visits, develop a community profile and carry out a community needs analysis. It also involved learning micro skills of communication, planning, facilitation and reporting.





Nuts & bolts of reconciliation

Youth Nation Digana (YND) members' first training session, focused on 'interviewing skills' – face to face, phone, email and focus group. Participants learnt how to conduct effective interviews with local community and religious groups. The follow up session concentrated on developing questions to ask the chief monk at the Sri Rajawalukaramaya Buddhist temple in Digana.

YND members put theory into practice and interviewed the chief monk who

answered their questions in an honest and open way, even if the answers were critical of the Muslim community, from which most of our youth came.

He raised issues that, in his opinion, created conflict between the Sinhala-Buddhist and Muslim communities - whether Sharia law should be permitted when a 'one country one law' already exists; Muslims being the main drug dealers who were ruining youth; the social isolationist tendencies of Muslims, and Muslims establishing their own

political parties instead of joining broad-based national ones.

After the interview most of the youngsters deemed it a fantastic experience. For many, this was their first meeting with a Buddhist monk. Initially they were anxious and nervous about talking face to face with a senior clergy of the majority community but the monk's amicable style won them over – a small but significant step towards positive inter-religious relations.



Muslim Youth Create Bridges

Our Youth Nation Digana (YND) group comprises mostly Muslim young people. In their recent strategic planning session, they identified the urgent need to extend their membership to include Sinhala and Tamil members. Nasmy, our YND Coordinator, decided to invite his university's automotive engineering batch mates, mostly Sinhalese, to study for their exams at the YND office. Such simple initiatives help to normalise relations between the ethno-religious communities.



Shock & devastation

On Tuesday 28th April, our beloved Buddhist monk, Peraketiya Thero, from Ambala, Kandy District, passed away. Bridging Lanka had worked very closely to help reconcile the deep rift in relations between Buddhists and Muslims following the communal violence of 2018 in Kandy district centred on Digana.

The Thero embodied the highest consciousness of the Buddha. His willingness to work with us to bring Buddha consciousness of oneness, unity and love and his beauty of spirit cannot be forgotten. How can we live and work without this man? We miss him so much and the world will be so much worse off without his serene spirit and deep insight to inspire us.



A Life-changing Moment by Mayuran

This month I experienced a very important moment in my life. Although I had never seen or met a Buddhist monk, I feared them and was angry with them for two reasons. From an early age I had the impression that Sinhala Buddhists hated Tamils. Also I saw images in papers and TV of Buddhist monks being violent.

Fortunately, as part of our Towards Religious Harmony project, I had the opportunity to meet Buddhist monks when we visited the Buddhist temple in Ambala, Kandy district.

When I first arrived at the monastery and met the senior monk, my level of fear rose sharply. Then I met the little monks. They were so cute. I felt happy around them. Even though I didn't know the Sinhala language, my friend interpreted for me.

Soon my fear melted away. That experience helped me to see Buddhist monks and Sinhalese people in a different light. Through this experience I realised that my fear was baseless.

Facing 21st century issues

Following conversations with moulavis and other Muslim clerics at a recent forum in Sri Lanka, many raised their challenges on how to help their followers grapple with and integrate their Islamic faith with 21st century issues and context. Bridging Lanka responded by asking Dave Andrews, author and international speaker, to address the issues that Moulavis raised as concerns in a recent forum. The result? A four module workshop series, Moulavis in Leadership:

- Being Muslim in the modern world
- Engaging the modern world as Muslims
- Reading the Qur'an in modern times
- Developing partnerships in the modern world.



The director of the Department of Muslim Religious & Cultural Affairs wishes to use the 'Moulavis in Leadership' series to train Moulavis across Sri Lanka. The modules were developed, trialled and finalised thanks to the Australian Government that funded our Towards Religious Harmony project through the Direct Aid Program.

animal welfare

As “animals are sentient beings that are conscious, feel pain, and experience emotions” we are committed to ensuring that the animals in our custody are free from pain, injury and disease, adequately cared for and that animal-human conflicts are mediated and addressed.



We're loving our donkeys!

Our serious commitment to the welfare of Mannar's animals – feral donkeys and street dogs and cats – continues unabated.

Surprisingly the animal rescue and welfare aspects of Bridging Lanka's work was not affected by Covid restrictions as there is a softness shown towards animals by the civil administration and military forces so blockages are easily cleared.

However the severe drop in tourist numbers has adversely impacted on donations received for the welfare work of the Donkey Clinic & Education Centre (DCEC).

For 2020, altogether 78 rescued donkeys were treated for road and train accidents, donkey fights, falls into open drains, ripped-off hoofs and other mishaps to necks, legs, tails, stomachs, ears and faces. Also casualties sustained by pregnant jennys during birthing

added to the number of donkeys lost to too severe an injury.

The DCEC staff team has matured in their clinical skills and more adept at body score checks, cleaning and treating wounds, handling donkeys under the supervision of the local vet and keeping updated records.

The DCEC is now viewed as a sanctum for donkeys and a source of livelihood for locals.

AAA's global reach

Animal Aid's reach has extended to Mannar for the last seven years. Perth-based AAA's support of our donkey operations: the Donkey Clinic and its resident vet, Dr. Vincent, and the Donkey Rescue Service and rescue team who are called upon at all hours of the day or night to relieve the suffering of these equines.

Three Years On

In its third year of operation, the DCEC is seen as one of the prime tourist attractions by many local and international visitors, and despite the fatalities of street donkeys on the increase, the DCEC provides a service for the capture, nurturance, healing and release of Mannar's unique donkeys.

2020 was a year filled with chaos, challenges and the need for skilled navigation. The pandemic saw a sizable fall in visitor numbers. Of 1,167 tourists, a mere 106 were from overseas – a total reversal from previous years. The second quarter in 2020 saw no visitors. Border closures and restricted movement within districts and towns hampered local tourists.

Vision being realised

For three years Alhathir Shahul Hameed, DCEC's very capable manager, has developed the DCEC into an effective multipurpose facility encompassing a clinic with trained staff, a responsive animal rescue service, an empowering education centre for both local children and foreign veterinary students and a premium tourist attraction that helps sustain the whole operation.



Annual donkey pongal

This year's Kaluthai (Donkey) Pongal Festival was huge just before Covid! We've muscled into the traditional four-day celebration to highjack the third day, "Mattu Pongal" to celebrate our donkeys instead of the usual cattle that play a vital role in these farming communities.

The Mattu festival day is also a special occasion when the landlord and the peasant, rich and poor, old and young, all dine together in a spirit of solidarity without the restraints of caste and creed. Isn't that what Bridging Lanka is committed to with a passion?

This year the Kaluthai Pongal event attracted even great local support from the surrounding Hindu, Muslim and Catholic villages. They turned up in large numbers with ethnic and religious demarcations relaxed and animal-human divides bridged as a result of this donkey-centred event.



Road & Rail Carnage

During lockdown periods mega vehicles like tipper trucks and excavators for the erection of wind turbines for electricity generation and major roadworks plied the empty roads regardless, proving fatal for Mannar's donkeys.

Due to Covid, the trains stopped for months. Soon the donkeys commandeered the tracks. Alas as

rail services resumed, the number of donkey deaths escalated.

Bridging Lanka erected Donkey SLOW signs across Mannar to encourage drivers to take care when seeing a donkey on the road and even spoke to railway staff who agreed to slow train speeds in critical areas, yet fatalities rose.



Locals and military forces have now become our eyes and ears when reporting donkey injuries and accidents. Showing care for donkeys is now more evident through the reporting of incidents and gestures of kindness such as providing food and water.



The donkey welfare team at the Donkey Clinic and Education Centre, Thailankudiyiruppu, and the Donkey Assisted Therapy Centre, Murunkan



Hendro – A Legacy

Last year AAA purchased land for a centre where thousands of feral street dogs and cats could be treated, vaccinated against rabies, sterilised and found good homes.

Thanks to generous donors, Sylvia Bettis-Heijne and sister, Annemieke, two acres of land was secured. The sisters requested the centre be named after their father, Hendro (aka Fritz), a businessman in Sri Lanka. His legacy will help many of Mannar’s feral animals.

The land has been cleared, staff hired and architectural plans developed for the Hendro Animal Rescue Centre (HARC) by local architect Wathmi Fernando. A



Hitting the streets

In September, a trial sterilization and rabies prevention program was instigated to coincide with Rabies Prevention month. Free vet services were offered over a weekend.

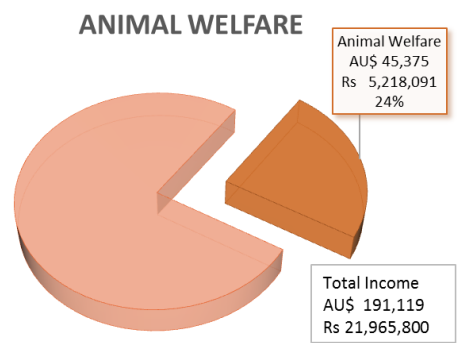
With the support of the Director of Health Services, vets from Animal Production & Health and vets and dog catchers from Colombo, 97 dogs were vaccinated against rabies, and 51 dogs and 4 cats were sterilized. Both stray and domestic animals were treated.

This is part of a significant goal to reduce the number of street dogs and lower the incidence of rabies in Mannar district.

This program organised by Visakha Tillekeratne, a Bridging Lanka director, is a forerunner to those which will operate from the proposed Hendro Animal Rescue Centre (HARC). Current estimates put the street dog population of Mannar at almost 6,000!



contractor has been engaged, concrete blocks made and internal roadworks completed in readiness for kennel construction.



responsible tourism

Tourism, the second largest foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka has taken yet another body blow. Expected 3.5-4 million tourist arrivals and USD 5 billion in earnings for 2020 are now a pipe dream.



What to Do?

At the ripe old age of 21, when Bridging Lanka helped young Jerad set up the Kunchukulam Forest Retreat Guesthouse, our hopes were high. Many groups from overseas as well as Sri Lanka visited, stayed and enjoyed the attractions of forests, rivers and village life.

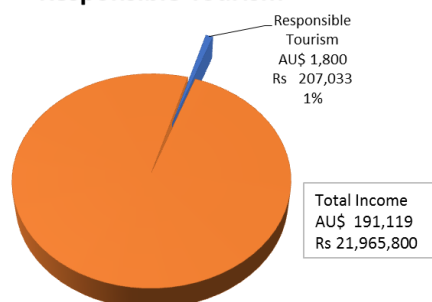
Our unique categories of tourism attracted diverse customers, both local and international, from school groups to professionals wishing to face a challenge. Volun-tourism, edu-tourism, reflexive-tourism, challenge-tourism and adventure tourism were the options were on offer.

Then the series of disasters, one major one each year and all beyond his control, put a stop to a promising social enterprise offering employment to Kunchukulam's young people.

The 2018 Digana civic meltdown, the April 2019 Easter bombings and the March Covid pandemic have all but grounded foreign travel and severely curtailed local movement. Bridging Lanka's promising suite of tourist experiences have followed suit with little patronage.

During the frequent Covid lockdowns the guesthouse and the adjacent Youth Empowerment Hub were commandeered by Bridging Lanka. Its staff team escaped the stifling housebound reality of urban Mannar to work in natural environs conducive to more inspirational work.

Responsible Tourism



nurturing youth

In Sri Lanka the population of youth aged 15 to 29 years is estimated at 4.8 million, which makes up more than 23 per cent of the total population. Like youth globally, Sri Lankan youth have often been the focus of public attention for the 'wrong' reasons. It is because we, as a society, often fail to provide a home life conducive to healthy growth, an education system that prepares them for the challenges of a complex global economic system.

A troublesome way ahead

Eleven focus group discussions (FGD) later and our worst fears were realised. From all but one FDG the number one youth issue highlighted was the steep and rapid uptake of drugs amongst young males. We conducted six youth focus groups - three with young women and three with young men.

Five additional FGDs were held with parents. They were held in urban, semi-rural and rural settings. Drugs was seen as the culmination of other life events that had gone awry.

The issues were legion – a failed education resulting in increasing school drop outs, 'future paralysis' for youth with no job prospects, dysfunctional home life with exposure to addicted fathers and elder brothers, and exposure to anti-social visual stimuli glorifying violence, drugs and alcohol, sexual aggression and the humiliation of women.

Many of these social ills were directly attributed to smart phone technology and the influence of social media. To address these entrenched social concerns we are grateful to the Australian Government for providing financial support for our endeavours.



Head Strong to Fighting Fit

Bridging Lanka directors met staff of the Australian government's Headspace youth centres in Melbourne, an early intervention and support agency for young people aged 12 to 25 years of age experiencing life challenges. Currently 111 Headspace centres operate throughout Australia.

As part of Bridging Lanka's new platform, *Nurturing Youth*, we wished to develop an 'Inner Gym Workout' program to strengthen the inner moral and ethical fibre of Mannar's young people as a deterrent to growing alienation and addictions.

Like the Headspace program, Bridging Lanka wished to address youth issues encompassing mental and physical health, alcohol and drug prevention, vocational education and career development – the start of conceptualising our Fighting Fit program.



Covid – A silver lining

How could we use four to ten day lockdowns to our advantage? A group of Mannar's young people aged between 15 and 23 years who wanted to kick harmful habits lived together for the lockdown periods. They learned life skills of cooking and cleaning at the Bridging Lanka office, masonry and landscaping at Kunchukulam and organic cultivation and composting at Adampan.

We also had theory and heart-to-heart sessions on topics including dealing with anger, the dangers of social media and developing one's higher self. For those times smart phones were confiscated and the result was more meaningful communication. These occasions helped to conceptualise our Intensive Nurturing phase of our Fighting Fit program



Fighting Fit suite of programs

A multi-layered approach was conceptualised and delivered starting with activity on the physical realm through the accredited training of young men to be **Fitness Trainers** and young women introduced to **Zumba Dance and Yoga**. Mental resilience was developed through a series of nine interactive workshops entitled, **Inner Gym Workout** and the training of young females and males with a helping outlook to develop basic counselling skills so that they

could support their peers and family members as they faced challenging life circumstances through **Peer Counselling**. The **Career Development** initiative, although not funded, was pursued in a small way as this was an important component of the overall intervention. Finally a **Better Parenting** series of workshops to improve the parent-child dynamic was developed and commenced.



Basic Yoga Training by 'Yal Thavamaiyum' from Jaffna on tools of inner transformation of body, mind and soul for 20 women



18 females who participated in 16 Zumba dance sessions said, "The energetic dance to music was fun and motivated a greater commitment to a regular exercise routine."



10 young males undertook training in Colombo and attained professional fitness trainer status in Sri Lanka



Gym Opening & Gateway to Health

In August the Australian Deputy High Commissioner, Her Excellency, Victoria Coakley did the honours of officially opening of our first Powerhouse Gym & Fitness Centre in Adampan. In inimitable Aussie style Ms Coakley spread warmth and expressed genuine support for our efforts.

In addition to the usual gym experience, our trained fitness workers connected closely with the growing number of young customers who confided about personal struggles – romantic, body-image related, economic and livelihood based. Inner gym workout sessions were conducted in the nearby Café Arokkiya education room.





FIT FOR LIFE
A fight for the body and soul of Mannar's youth
Research Report
Jeremy A Liyanage
November, 2021



Research-based programming

A deeper piece of research on local youth issues was conducted. The report, ***Fit for Life: Fighting for the body and soul of Mannar's youth*** helped to ground the proposed activities and provide greater insight and direction for the implementation of the various activities.

In addition, and as a result of the research findings, an additional plank was added to the Fighting Fit project – a residential program, ***Intensive Nurturing***, for those young people who were serious about kicking debilitating alcohol and drug dependence and toxic violent behaviour patterns. This too was largely an unfunded but necessary activity.

The Bridging Lanka board ran a separate crowdfunding campaign, ***Touching Hearts & Lending Hands*** to cover the basic costs of this initiative.

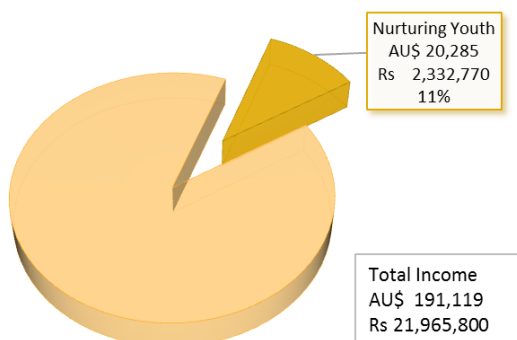


Touching Hearts ... Lending Hands

3 females and 3 males are supported to achieve educational and career goals. We contribute towards educational, medical and living expenses. In addition, Touching Hearts supports a group of young people in a share house model commit to intensive personal development and kicking addictive habits.



NURTURING YOUTH



Working with children and parents

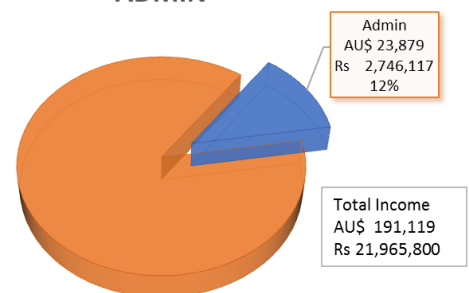
To ground our future work with children and parents, Seema Omar from Colombo offered us a six week 'journey of creative introversion' for our staff team via Zoom. With a MA in Applied Psychology and expertise in didactic development psychotherapy,

Seema introduced staff to creative ways to work with children and parents. Sessions centred on our five senses, developing mindfulness, safe space alertness and Dan Siegal's wheel of awareness (being attentive to sensations, mind images, feelings and thoughts). Several free-flowing and creative exercises brought home self-realisation in a different way. This fresh, interactive approach was instructive.

bridging lanka staff team



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Steve Dunn, Town Planner

Abs Kugendran, Engineer

Siraj Perera, Civil Engineer

Jane Hope, Business Consultant

Lindy Drew-Tsang, Diversity Manager



Shyama Fuad, Psychologist



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Jeremy Liyanage, Social Planner

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Retrospective 2020-21



Bridging Lanka Annual Report

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