



The Right Action at the Right Time

Jesuit Refugee Service
Sri Lanka





A family takes shelter in a church in northern Sri Lanka in 2009.

JRS area coordinators used to travel by bike to the villages, visit families, identify their needs, and report them. Then we all used to visit the villages to decide what to do. We need to go to the people, where others do not go. This was our motto.

Sr Lakshmi Fernando, JRS Vavuniya Coordinator

Table of contents

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Historical Overview</i>	
What is JRS Doing to Help the People of Sri Lanka?	7
<i>The Strengths of JRS Sri Lanka</i>	
A Strong Sense of Mission	16
Going Where the Need is Greatest	22
Capacity Building	28
Education: Raising the Standard	34
Inclusivity	40
Working with Others	46
<i>The Last Word</i>	50

Introduction

It is with mixed feelings that I write this introduction: of inevitable sadness about the departure of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) from Sri Lanka after decades of presence there; but also with a deep sense of gratitude at what has been achieved during this time, and of hope that the work started is not over.

In the historical overview of JRS in Sri Lanka, which follows this introduction, it emerges clearly that JRS made an entry on this island, back in the eighties, thanks to the local Jesuits. We remember and are inspired by our fellow Jesuits of the Sri Lanka Province who pioneered the work of JRS, serving at the frontiers of conflict and violence alongside courageous co-workers, closely accompanying the people. It is to the Province that we now hand back the baton, with gratitude and confidence as they take the mission forward, keeping the legacy of JRS alive.

The decision of JRS to withdraw was taken in 2013, with the hoped-for end in sight that the Sri Lanka Province would take over the remaining JRS programmes. Given its magnitude and potential implications, a discernment committee was set up to reconsider this decision. The committee subsequently endorsed the decision and, in December 2016, the Sri Lanka Province committed to carry forward the JRS mission. A transition team was put in place with the specific role of paving the way for the smooth transfer of the remaining JRS works in January 2017.

In the first of many expressions of gratitude, I thank the Sri Lanka Provincials, Fr Dexter Gray and his predecessor, Fr Jeyaraj Rasiah, for their readiness to continue and build on the JRS ministry. Sincere thanks also go to each member of the discernment committee: Frs Anthony da Silva, Anton Pieris, Aloysius Irudayam, and Milroy Fernando, who helped us not only to reach what we believe to be the most fitting decision – *the right action at the right time*, but also supported us in taking concrete steps towards the transition.

As the time of handover approached, we decided to embark on an exercise to draw out the

JRS strengths during our journey here. To this end, focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted with Jesuits, members of other religious congregations, and lay persons who formed part of the JRS Sri Lankan family over the years. What emerged was an enduring sense of belonging to JRS and of loyalty to its mission *to accompany, serve, and advocate* for people forcibly displaced by civil war and natural disaster.

It is the words of those who belonged to JRS Sri Lanka that we draw on in the rest of this booklet. Indeed, our most compelling discovery was that they were the greatest strength of JRS, with their resilience and their willingness to serve, despite the daunting risks involved. I extend heartfelt thanks to each and every one of them. It is not possible to name all, but I do wish to pay tribute to each Jesuit who contributed to the JRS Sri Lanka mission over the years.

From the Sri Lanka Province: Initially, Fr Peter Kurukula Aratchi assisted by Fr Rohanta Nissanka, who were followed by Frs Sebastian Maria Anthony, Joseph Antony Pillai, Kamal Andradi, Joel Kulanayagam, and Elil Rajendram. Frs Gabriel Alfreds, John Joseph Mary, Yogeswaran Veerasan, Henry Miller, and John L. Daniel served as co-workers. From India: Frs Vinny Joseph, Joseph Victor Pitchai, Irudayaraj Divyanandam, and Alex Yagoo. Apart from these Jesuits who served in Sri Lanka, I express my sincere gratitude to former JRS South Asia Directors, each of whom nurtured the JRS mission over the years: Frs Vincent Mookan, Chinnappan Amalraj, Paramasivam S. Amalraj, and Louis Prakash; and also the International Directors: Frs Dieter Scholz, Mark Raper, Lluís Magrina, Peter Balleis, and Thomas Smolich.

JRS Sri Lanka emerged from the creative efforts and direction taken by the Jesuits who contributed to its growth over the years. One of the Sri Lankan Jesuits who served with JRS said: “*Various JRS directors focused on different issues.*” He made mention specifically of emergency support and advocacy to start with, and later a focus on education and development. This progression that he described reflects well JRS’ strategy of engagement: entering promptly into an emergency situation, accompanying and seeking to meet the greatest needs of forcibly displaced people; then gradually shifting focus to strengthen

their resilience with services that build self-reliance and capacity of individuals and communities to take leadership and work for a better future, and to live with dignity in the midst of traumatic circumstances. Thus, especially in cases of protracted displacement, JRS shifts gear from emergency interventions to investing in sustainable solutions, depending on the needs discerned together with the people we serve.

As I write this, the beautiful prayer attributed to the Archbishop of San Salvador, Blessed Oscar Romero, comes to mind:

*“This is what we are about:
we plant seeds that one day will grow,
we water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay the foundations that will need future development.”*

JRS has planted seeds and now hands over to the Sri Lanka Province to water them, and to build on the foundations already laid.

Despite all its challenges, the time of transition has been a season of grace, of mutual support and guidance. Heartfelt thanks to the dedicated Transition Team of Frs Benedict Saverimuthu, Alexis Prem Kumar, Alex Yagoo, and Mr Thiranjala Weerasinghe for steering the course, preparing for the handing over and revisioning the journey ahead. Although JRS now takes a step back, we remain present in spirit, in the lives of the people who have been our heart and hands on this journey, and in the lives of those we have served.

We leave behind a core team of persons who are steadfastly committed to our shared mission, and are willing to go the extra mile to build a country that respects the dignity of all, and that seeks justice and lasting peace. JRS stands with the Jesuits of Sri Lanka, in solidarity and support, as they launch out into the deep with faith and audacity towards the goal of *Peace Building Through Reconciliation and Justice in Sri Lanka*.

Stan Fernandes SJ
JRS South Asia Regional Director

June 29, 2017

Historical Overview



An impromptu camp in and around a church in Mannar, northern Sri Lanka, in 2009.

At the time the news about Sri Lanka did not go out of the country. I used to visit all the war-affected areas, get information, and disseminate it to the outside world through JRS. When JRS spoke in the UN or in forums abroad, it was accepted as a credible witness. We were very thorough, details were clear, and we had people working in the field.

***Fr Antony Pillai Joseph, JRS Sri Lanka Coordinator
(1989-1992; 2000-2002)***

What is JRS Doing to Help the People of Sri Lanka?



Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, 1995.

“Although almost paralysed, it was clear that Fr Arrupe wanted to ask me a question but could not find the words, so Br Bandera, the infirmarian, brought him paper and pencil. With his left hand, Fr Arrupe shakily drew a map of India, then the droplet shape of the island next to it. By pointing to the island, clearly, he was asking me, ‘What is JRS doing to help the people of Sri Lanka?’”

Fr Mark Raper, then Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Asia Pacific, remembers how Fr Pedro Arrupe asked him this compelling question when they met at the Jesuit Curia in Rome back in the 1980s. It was hardly surprising that the former Jesuit General and founder of JRS, then incapacitated by a stroke, felt strongly about Sri Lanka. The island was engulfed by a brutal civil war that pitted ethnic groups against one another. Thousands of people were displaced, mostly within Sri Lanka itself, with many also fleeing to India and, if they could afford to, further afield.

JRS went to Sri Lanka to reach out to people affected by the war, which was ultimately fought between rebels claiming to represent the Tamil minority, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the armed forces, which were dominated by the Sinhalese majority. The Muslims, who are considered as an ethnic group, the third largest, in Sri Lanka, were involved and affected throughout the conflict.

JRS started to get involved in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, when chronic episodes of communal violence, separatist guerrilla tactics, and army abuses were transmuting into full-scale war. The entry point in these troubled times was the Sri Lankan Jesuit Province and, for the first two decades, it was largely the local Jesuits who represented JRS with the support of some lay people, undertaking this mission as best they could alongside their many other works. Initial interventions were low-key and took place in Trincomalee in the east. The epicentre of the war was always the northeast, the territory claimed by the Tamils as their rightful homeland, although the LTTE was guilty of several attacks in other parts of the country too.

Much of the work in the early years consisted of either emergency aid relief or hands-on human rights work. JRS supported individual Jesuits, who used their parishes as a base from which to deliver food and medicine to people displaced by the war and living in so-called 'welfare centres' set up by the government. Further, the Jesuits lobbied the armed forces for the release of people who were arrested on suspicion of being Tamil rebels. Such initiatives were undertaken not only by those designated as JRS contact persons or coordinators. Fr Anthony Pillai, who served twice as JRS Coordinator, said: "*In a sense,*



Emergency relief was provided by JRS throughout its years in Sri Lanka.

every Jesuit at that time was a JRS man, finding food, finding shelter, doing advocacy to take fellows out of detention and working for people who were struggling through the war.” The Jesuits in Sri Lanka risked their very lives in this dangerous mission. Fr Eugene Herbert disappeared on 15 August 1990, together with his driver, while on a peace mission to the eastern city of Batticaloa.

The JRS involvement delivered not only moral and material support but also a platform from where the Jesuits could tell the rest of the world about the abuses and violence they were witnessing with their own eyes. Fr Anthony Pillai said: *“At the time the news about Sri Lanka did not go out of the country. I used to visit all the war-affected areas, get information, and disseminate it to the outside world through JRS. When JRS spoke in the UN or in forums abroad, it was accepted as a credible witness. We were very thorough, details were clear, and we had people working in the field.”*

In 1995, JRS supported two Jesuits who were dispatched by the Sri Lankan Province to the rebel-held Vanni region in the north. Fr Peter Kurukula Aratchi, who was Provincial at the time, recalls: *“When we had the province assembly, all the Jesuits agreed and said that we must get involved in the war-affected Vanni area. I did not know whom to send. Fathers Joel and Daniel were ready to go.”*

For years, the two Jesuits accompanied the people, sharing the privations and the terror of bombardments that were the daily lot of civilians there. They also ran modest projects of nutrition for children, tailoring classes for women, construction of shelters, and emergency relief. At the same time, the human rights work expanded, with a Jesuit lawyer visiting Tamils who were thrown into prisons in the south after being arbitrarily arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).



Fr PS Amalraj, former JRS South Asia Director, notes the concerns of displaced people in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, during the war.

Meanwhile, JRS was also accompanying Sri Lankan refugees in more than 100 camps across the length and breadth of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, offering them education, pastoral, and psychosocial services. Here, too, JRS was following in the footsteps of the Jesuits, who for years had welcomed boatloads of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka that washed up on India's shores.

The year 2002 was a promising time in Sri Lanka, a time when the government and the LTTE signed one of many ceasefires, thus extending hope for lasting peace. This is when JRS started to grow as a non-governmental organisation, branching out into humanitarian

activities to serve displaced people in the war zones, especially education and livelihood projects. JRS was able to expand thanks to solid collaboration with local dioceses and religious congregations. As the ceasefire lasted year after year, JRS steadily built a network of local teams that spanned dozens of towns and villages across the northeast, in both army and rebel-held areas.

This wide presence meant that JRS was able to respond swiftly and effectively when the Tsunami struck Sri Lanka in 2004, killing more than 35,000 people in the island's coastal areas and destroying the homes and livelihoods of an untold number. JRS immediately plunged into large-scale aid relief in affected areas in the northeast.

JRS persisted in its operations even as Sri Lanka started to slide back into civil war with the gradual crumbling of the ceasefire accord. This loyalty was not without a cost: on 25 September 2007, Fr Packiaranjith, a 40-year-old priest from Mannar Diocese and JRS Coordinator in northern Sri Lanka, was killed when a claymore mine destroyed his vehicle as he travelled through rebel-held territory to deliver aid to displaced people and orphans.

Although staff members were recruited from all of Sri Lanka's major ethnic groups, most of them were Tamils who came from the places where JRS operated, so they suffered in their flesh the consequences of the renewed savage warfare. In 2009, during the so-called 'final phase' of the war, thousands of Tamils trapped in the war zone were slaughtered in the fighting. Those who managed to escape from the rebel-held territory were detained in overcrowded 'welfare centres' in miserable conditions, until the authorities deemed that they did not pose a threat to the rest of the country. The number of displaced people thus detained reached an estimated 300,000. JRS managed to gain access to a handful of centres where staff distributed food and organised education, and kept the morale and hope of the detainees alive. Indeed, JRS was already in the centres – some of its staff from the rebel-held areas found themselves imprisoned behind those barbed-wire fences!

In the post-war scenario, JRS continued to provide education and livelihood services, as well as psychosocial support, to thousands of people, and helped those who were returning home. An innovative step was the launch of a higher education project, blending onsite and online learning, in northern Sri Lanka. Eventually the decision was taken to start withdrawing gradually; programmes were wound down, and those remaining, namely preschools and the higher education project, were handed over to the Jesuit province in mid-2017. Meanwhile, JRS continues its programmes for Sri Lankan refugees, who live in camps scattered across Tamil Nadu and who face challenging prospects for their future.



Learning English in northern Sri Lanka.

The Strengths of JRS Sri Lanka



So near and yet so far: displaced in northern Sri Lanka in 2009.

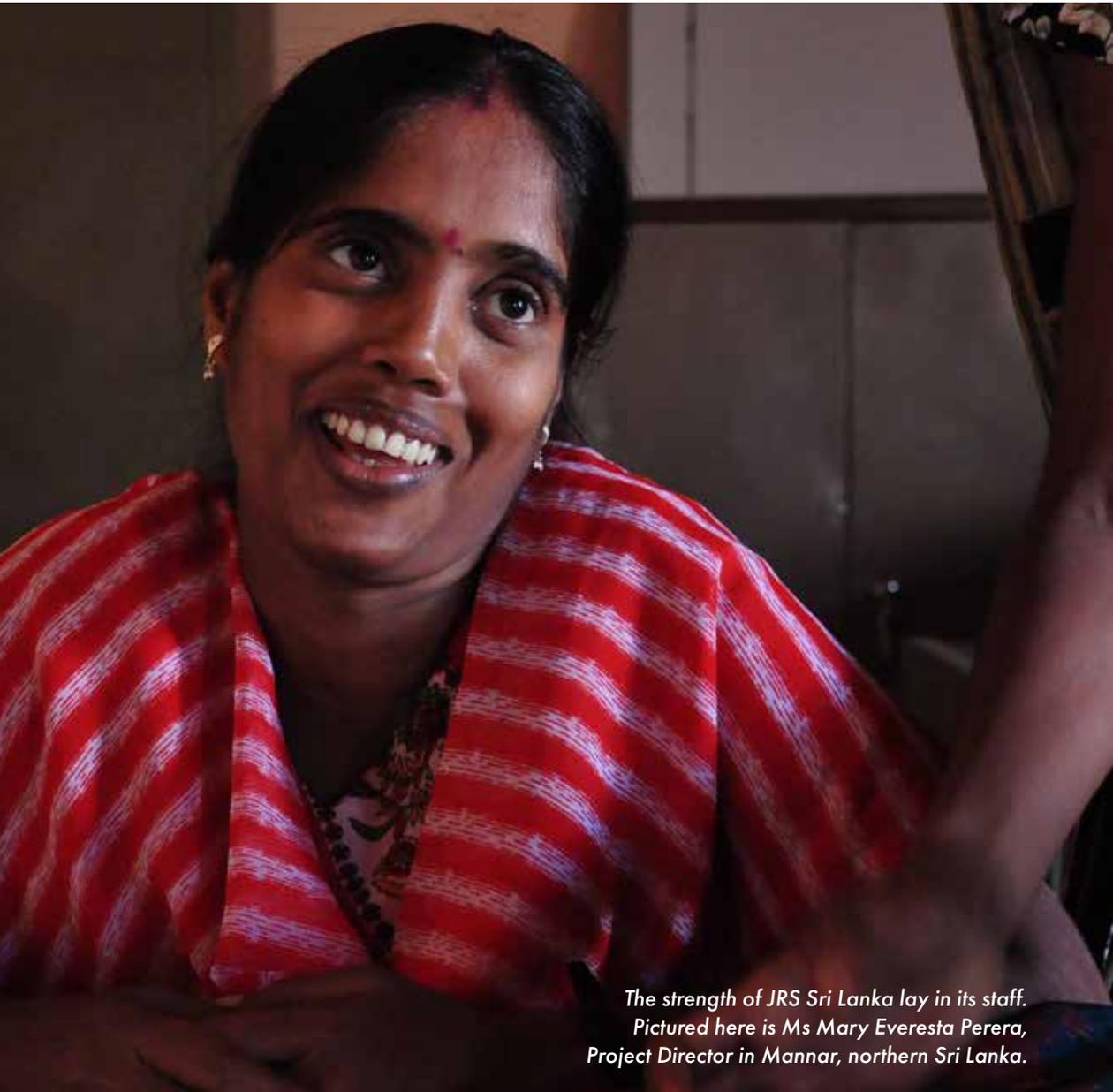
Our main focus was to go where no one else could go and where the most vulnerable people live.

Mr Ashley Fernando,
JRS Sri Lanka Programmes Officer

A Strong Sense of Mission

A strong sense of mission guided the actions of those who were involved in JRS Sri Lanka over the years, who came from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. In the early years, access to displaced people was possible thanks to the personal presence, practical advice, and connections of the Jesuits in war-affected areas. The Jesuits' sense of mission to help their people translated into concrete actions to do what was urgently needed in the present.

In later years, when JRS expanded across the northeast, members of other religious congregations, diocesan priests, and lay people who joined or collaborated with our teams showed a similar determination. The conviction that they were serving their people, so sorely tried by war and injustice, gave the mostly Tamil staff a strong sense of motivation and of ownership of the programmes they implemented. The Jesuits who led the JRS teams encouraged their love for what they did, and most outdid themselves in their eagerness to serve, and in the pride that they took in their work. They persevered at considerable risk when times turned violent.



*The strength of JRS Sri Lanka lay in its staff.
Pictured here is Ms Mary Everesta Perera,
Project Director in Mannar, northern Sri Lanka.*

A common sight across the north and east of Sri Lanka during the war.



I was JRS contact person from 1980 to 1988. I was the Jesuit superior in Trincomalee for most of that time. People were very affected by war and violence. Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims were displaced. The Jesuits had two parishes there. At the beginning, we did welfare work and then the work of human rights. We looked after immediate needs, such as food and medicine, of the people in welfare centres. The Jesuit residence was the office of the Citizenship Committee. When people were detained, we contacted the armed forces and got them released. Everyday 200 to 300 people would come to get their people released from the detention centres. Once the armed forces organised a huge meeting. I was present. Something told me within 'Get up... Get up.' I got up and said, 'Atrocities, you are committing.' They all got upset with me. Some of them asked me afterwards, 'Why did you say that?' I said, 'I said what I had to say at that time.'

**Fr Peter Kurukula Aratchi,
first contact person for JRS Sri Lanka (1980 – 1988)**

I was not belonging to the war zone but I chose to go there. I went willingly. We were even prepared to die. Fr Daniel and myself were staying amidst the people. We gave our contact addresses to each other so that our relatives could be informed at any emergency.

**Fr Joel Kulanayagam,
who volunteered to go to the rebel-held Vanni region**

I was not a full time JRS person. I was a pathfinder for JRS. Since I had accompanied the refugees to India and knew the importance of this work, I used to help and support JRS. Whenever JRS people from abroad visited, I would take them to the interior and introduce them to the people.

Fr Joseph Mary, eastern Sri Lanka

Fr Vinny Joseph, the JRS Sri Lanka Director, insisted that I must have the right attitude and courage to do the mission. He used to meet us once a month after asking us to write our experiences, our likes and dislikes in the mission. Based on these experiences, he would discuss with us individually, and orient us to move in the right direction. His life inspired us. Since he cared for us very dearly, we showed the same care to the people in our mission. We were trained to serve in JRS with passion. It was not a job; it was our commitment to people.

Mr Senthil Ruban, JRS Vavuniya Education Coordinator

My staff used to tell me, 'Sister, sometime, you are in the kitchen, some other time in the office, sometime in the hospital and some other time in the field. You are everywhere.'

This is possible because you see the pain of the people and you love them. When I saw the pain of the people, I felt that our people are suffering and I felt that pain within.

Sr Lakshmi Fernando, JRS Vavuniya Coordinator

It was a huge struggle to transport relief materials to resettlement areas. In one place, we had to unload and reload the materials at a border between the army and the LTTE. Life was at risk. Mostly I travelled alone. Sometimes I travelled with my staff. I would be very careful when I took them along. I valued their life. Once, when we were distributing relief materials in Vaharai area, the fight started. With generosity and courage, our staff risked their life and worked during the wartime.

Mr Ignatius Jeeva, JRS Batticaloa Coordinator



Generations displaced.

Going Where the Need is Greatest

The sense of mission that marked JRS Sri Lanka was manifested in timely decisions to go where others did not go, and to help vulnerable groups whose urgent needs were not catered to by others. In fact, this is one of the major criteria underpinning the mission of JRS as a global organisation: to go where the need is greatest.

In the early years, the Jesuits had access to places closed to others, for example prisons and army camps, because their cassock afforded them a degree of protection. The JRS teams that followed in later years were instructed to seek out those who were most in need, and their efforts led to the implementation of education and humanitarian aid projects in neglected towns and villages in the northeast, including several in rebel-held areas.

This keen attention to implementing what one coordinator called “*the right action in the right place at the right time*” meant that JRS did not overlap with other humanitarian organisations and that it could capitalize on its presence in remote underserved areas to meet new needs, for example those created by the 2004 Tsunami. It also meant that JRS earned a hard-won reputation for steadfastness.

During the last terrible phase of Sri Lanka’s civil war and its aftermath, JRS was credited with heading straight for a very specific area of greatest need: the ‘welfare centres’ that the government set up to detain Tamils who fled fighting in the last pockets of rebel-held territory, then known as ‘uncleared’ areas.

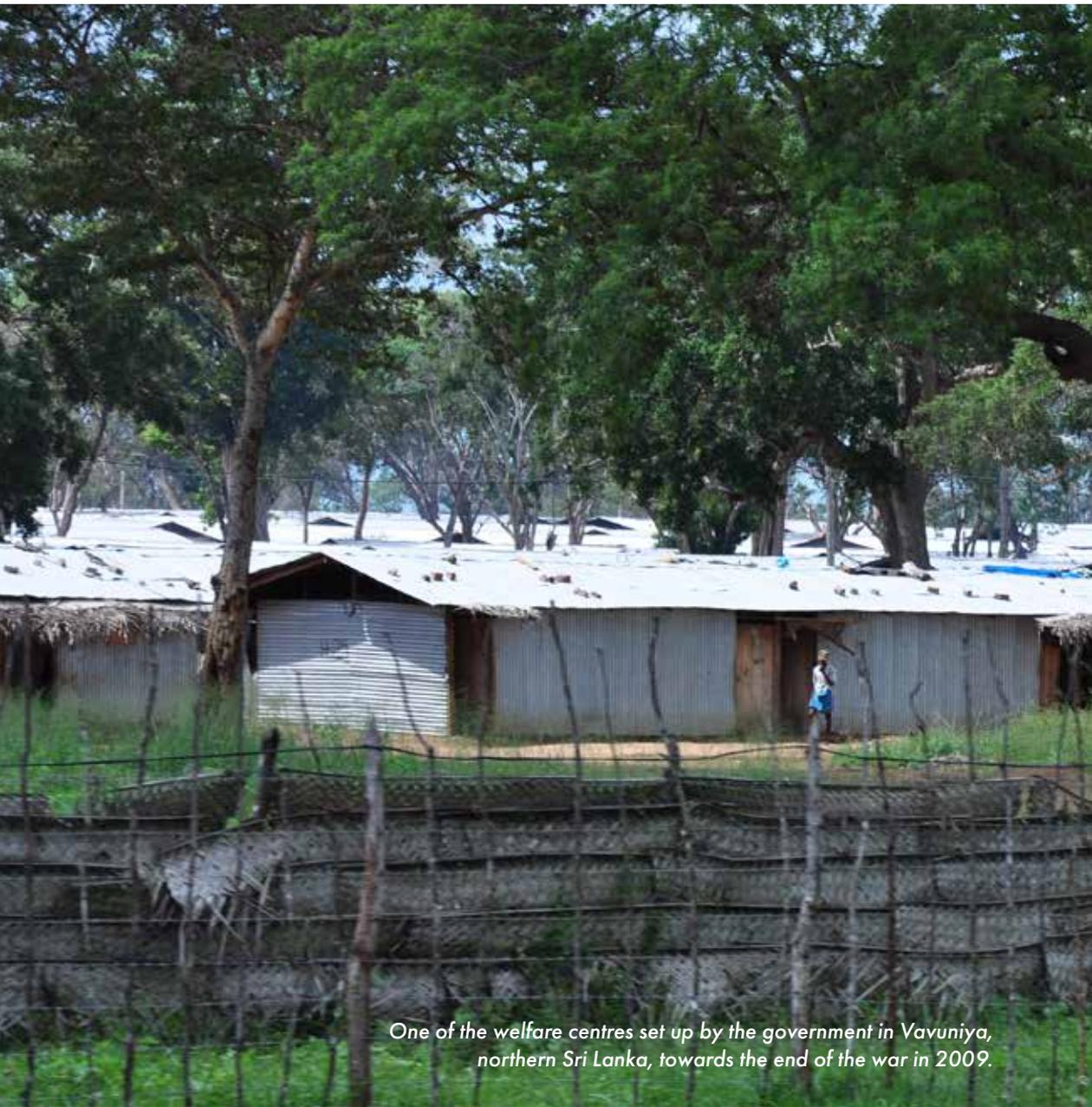
The decisions of how and where to serve were not without ethical considerations and did not meet the approval of all in such fraught situations as civil war and natural disaster. The guiding line of JRS was to serve people in need while steering clear of political entanglement.

We did not work where there was no need of our intervention. Sometimes, people themselves would approach us, knowing JRS through our interventions in the neighbouring villages. Fr Vinny had given the instruction, 'you reach out to the place where nobody has reached and to the people who are in greater need.' So, we gave preference to those who were more marginalised. During the last phase of war, the army was running the welfare centre Zone 1. We worked in Zone 1 with all the difficulties. Other NGOs refused to work there since it was fully managed by the army. In our NGO consortium meeting, many criticised us for working there. They wanted all the camps to come under civilian administration. We agreed in principle but we told them: 'This is emergency relief. We cannot wait until the change takes place. We do not serve the army but the people. When people are in need, is it right to say no due to the politics?' Later others joined JRS since the army refused to hand over the camp to civilian administration.

Mr Senthil Ruban, JRS Vavuniya Education Coordinator



Fr Joel, former JRS Sri Lanka Director, meets with families in a settlement for displaced people in northern Sri Lanka in 2009.



One of the welfare centres set up by the government in Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka, towards the end of the war in 2009.



In 2008, people were brought from the 'uncleared' to 'cleared' area, that is, from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya. The first batch was brought to the welfare centre called Manik Farm. JRS became a member of the NGO consortium. Thank God I had the opportunity and privilege to enter those places. Feeding the people was the first need. We used to cook overnight, prepare parcels, and distribute to the people. First it was 1000, 2000, then 50,000, 100,000 and finally 300,000. When we could not manage to give cooked food, we gave dry rations. JRS had many teachers and all came voluntarily to help. In this way, we were able to meet the people's needs. We also started education in Manik Farm. We distributed uniforms, just to give students this identity, even in the camps. We identified the teachers, claimed salaries for them from the government, and helped them to prepare for scholarship and other exams.

Meanwhile Vavuniya Hospital was overflowing with patients who had fled the war in the 'uncleared' areas. Some had no hands, no legs; they were bleeding and crying. Even now I get the images of them. We offered to help in one ward. We gave soup, sheets, and clothes.

Our girls in the life-skills centre were sewing day and night. The whole JRS family was fully involved in this operation. Nobody asked for payment.

Their service was for free.

Sr Lakshmi Fernando, JRS Vavuniya Coordinator

Some villages were in high security zones. People were living in fear and other NGOs were also nervous to work in these areas. There were not enough teachers, even in the primary school. We went there with courage since there was greater need. Since we worked in these areas in very difficult times, still today the people remember us and contact us.

**Sr Remoshini Fernando,
Director, Residential Life-Skills Training Centre,
JRS Jaffna**

Before, during the war, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (the LTTE humanitarian branch) used to run the preschools. When the war was over, there was no more LTTE so we kept on teaching by ourselves, under the trees. We did not go in search of JRS; JRS came in search of us, discovered us and brought the preschools under its umbrella, giving us support and a structure.

JRS preschool teachers





A thirst to learn: carrying mats for seating in class in eastern Sri Lanka in 2009.

Capacity Building

The teams working for JRS Sri Lanka benefited from regular capacity building and supervision that was reflected in a sense of belonging and in confidence and creativity in the implementation of programmes. Training was underpinned by reflection on the mission of JRS, which was “*explained and owned,*” with a focus on values such as “*love, forgiveness, appreciation, listening, and sharing.*” The principle of accountability was constantly emphasised.

Attention to mission was coupled with participatory training in basic counselling plus the development of skills needed for each task. For example, those who ran self-help groups for widows had training in leadership and group dynamics; programme coordinators learned about the project cycle; teachers had training in pedagogy and the basics of child psychology. All the teams were supported, monitored, and given feedback.

Beyond such regular training, at one stage of its existence, JRS Sri Lanka focused on building the capacity of young women, some of whom would later go on to become JRS teachers or coordinators in their towns and villages. In close collaboration with selected female religious congregations, JRS developed a six-month residential training programme in life-skills, leadership, and other facets of personality development, as well as the customary focus on mission. Training in livelihood skills was given too.

Something that emerged clearly is that the staff benefited from and appreciated not only the opportunity to receive regular training but also the close accompaniment offered by JRS to them and to their families. Time and again, they insisted that they belonged to “*one JRS family*”.



A creative take on capacity building for JRS Sri Lanka teachers.



JRS offered the opportunity for integral development to war-affected young women from northeast Sri Lanka.

We recruited staff members like teachers from our life-skills centres, where we trained the girls and motivated them for life. From these people, we saw leaders emerge and we selected the best ones for staff. They went back to their villages as our staff, and would train others. In this way, we had a great network in almost all Tamil areas so we could go anywhere, no problem, even in LTTE areas. They knew that we were doing some kind of leadership training. I think it is what we gave in those six months of training in life-skills, in the JRS mission and vision, especially accompaniment, and in personality development, that made the staff so attached to JRS.

***Fr Vinny Joseph,
JRS Sri Lanka Director (2002 – 2007)***

Once a month our teachers and other staff came together for training. The resource persons were from the Jesuits and the government. Counselling and teaching methods were major areas of focus in our trainings. In our time, the teachers were not much qualified. They had not even completed their Ordinary Level. So, the trainings were very helpful for them.

Mr Ignatius Jeeva, JRS Batticaloa Coordinator

We selected staff from the villages themselves and, once in three months, Fr Vinny gave training. We gave assurance that we were with them in their struggle. This assurance made them loyal to the mission with dedication to serve better. We all felt that we belonged to one JRS family. All would attend the joyful and sorrowful events that took place in their families.

Mr Senthil Ruban, JRS Vavuniya Education Coordinator

I learnt to be very frugal in spending JRS money, owing to Fr Vinny's training and guidance. He taught me to realize that JRS money belonged to the people. So, we were resolved to do what we said, and to say what we did. That was how I grew up.

Mr Antony Amalan, JRS Mullaitivu Coordinator

JRS gave us ample opportunities to develop our own creative skills and the freedom to reach out to people making full use of our potential.

**Ms Kathikaman Anat Jasmine,
JRS Vavuniya Self-Help Groups Coordinator**



Education: Raising the Standard

Mentioned time and again was the constant focus on education, which suffered a mortal blow in the northeast during years of war and consequent under-development and displacement: *“JRS decided to focus on education and has been consistent in this from the start.”* Practical and moral support gave an important boost to under-served communities, expressed in a range of services including preschools, evening tuition centres, computer classes, livelihood programmes, and other initiatives giving preferential attention to the most vulnerable. Actually, many of those who attended JRS tuition centres went on to work for JRS as preschool teachers or in other capacities.

Implementing education activities, JRS took care to devise initiatives that did not replicate what others were doing and that met the unique needs of those displaced in a war or post-war situation. This discerning approach went far beyond the provision of uniforms, school supplies, and food to needy students. Since the teachers in the war zones tended to be poorly trained, JRS prioritised training programmes and supported local schools by placing teachers when numbers were insufficient. Evening tuition centres gave struggling students a space to study other than the crowded homes that had become theirs in displacement. The teachers encouraged the students to persevere as they sought to concentrate on their schooling in such difficult circumstances. Training in tailoring and a sewing machine offered an income to young women who had to drop out of school, and who were vulnerable to recruitment by the rebels or to early marriage to avert this risk. Many of the young women actually asked for residential training, which is how the successful six-month programme was developed.



Sitting for exams in displacement in northern Sri Lanka in 2009.



Before JRS came to our village in Batticaloa, the area was very poor in education, now it has really come forward thanks to JRS. I am an example of this, I come from a village where we never saw anyone's name in print and then my name appeared in 2002 in the students' magazine. I was a student of the evening tuition centre at the time; seeing my name really gave me a boost and motivated me to do more.

***Ms Ravichchanthiran Saththiyabam,
JRS Batticaloa Preschool Teacher***



During the years of war, we had no proper teacher training in Mullaitivu, we had not learnt how to teach. So, the training given by JRS helped a lot. Now we teachers can be independent because JRS has given us the strength to stand alone. JRS has really built our capacity, increasing our confidence, and we are sure we will continue to work.

JRS preschool teachers

Day training did not yield the expected positive results. Some students were not regular and their minds were not focused. With their consultation, we made the training residential, which had many advantages. They could spend quality time together, learning from each other as a group. Solidarity was established among them. JRS could give trainings like leadership, personality development, farming, natural medicine and counselling depending on their needs.

**Sr Remoshini Fernando,
Director, Residential Life-Skills Training Centre, JRS Jaffna**

In our time education was a huge challenge. Buses were not frequent at all. Safety was an issue. That is the reason we started the evening coaching centres in remote villages. I also worked as a JRS teacher and a few of my students are studying in the university now. This gives me joy.

**Ms Kathikaman Anat Jasmine,
JRS Vavuniya Self-Help Groups Coordinator**



We ran evening coaching centres because the children lacked facilities at home. They did not have electricity. They did not have proper space to concentrate on their studies. And they lacked motivation because they were displaced. It took them time to understand the new school. Our role was to help students with their homework, to explain subjects they did not understand, and to bring out their talents and skills.

During the weekends, students used to come together. We also reached their parents, holding meetings once a month.

Mr Senthil Ruban, JRS Vavuniya Education Coordinator

Inclusivity

Most staff members of JRS Sri Lanka were Tamil, in keeping with the reality that the majority of people affected by the war came from this ethnic group, whose presence was predominant in the war zones of the northeast. It is worth noting here that Tamils do not share a common language with the Sinhalese, although most Muslims speak Tamil, especially in the northeast.

In the context of the island's "ethnic problem", as it has often been referred to by Sri Lankans themselves, the staff of JRS felt that they belonged to an inclusive organisation, which translated its values into action by helping and accepting all in need regardless of creed or ethnic background. They were impressed that JRS did not favour those of like Christian faith, that staff from diverse faith backgrounds were recruited, and that all faiths were celebrated in the programmes. The staff felt that they belonged not just to a team but rather to "*one JRS family*", and they aspired to the same spirit of solidarity, refusing to discriminate amongst their students and fellow teachers on grounds of ethnicity, religion, caste, economic status or anything else. This is, they said, what they learned from the actions and the training of JRS.

This was particularly impressive because the majority of JRS staff had a strong sense of mission to serve their "*own*" people, that is, fellow Tamils. However, they also wanted to serve others and not to discriminate against them – a desire that appears to have grown gradually stronger following the end of the war in 2009. This is a considerable achievement in a country torn apart by civil conflict that was rooted in perceived and real discrimination based on ethnicity and faith.

The faith-based inspiration of JRS gave a strong impetus to Sri Lankans from diverse backgrounds to come together and to work for the good of those who were most in need. The Jesuits held overall responsibility for the teams and passed on the spirit of JRS by sharing its sources of inspiration. A much-loved role model for the JRS Sri Lanka teams,

never mind their faith background, was Fr Pedro Arrupe, the founder of the Jesuit Refugee Service and former Superior General of the Society of Jesus.



An activity for children organised by the JRS higher learning programme in Vavuniya.

Pictured above is one facilitator, Mr Stephen Danstan, and overleaf is another facilitator, Mr Kanthavanesan Kavivarnan.



What we felt was that our people were suffering, JRS was committed to serve them, and we would serve them in whatever way we could. In JRS you have Jesuits, religious, and the lay belonging to various faiths. And so JRS spirituality incorporates all those elements. Personally speaking, I love Fr Arrupe. We were given a booklet about him and we read and reflected personally and collectively. Every Monday we had a staff meeting and we used to have reflection sessions about what we were doing. The majority of my staff were Hindu and not many Catholics. I never felt that they belonged to another religion. They also talked about Fr Arrupe. The JRS Sri Lanka Director used to visit us and motivate us. As a sister, I kept the fire burning to serve.

Sr Lakshmi Fernando, JRS Vavuniya Coordinator

JRS taught us not to discriminate. How? Pedro Arrupe founded JRS and he was Christian. If he said JRS was only for Christians, then you would not be helping us now. So we must follow his example. Even where others hesitate to go, we should go because of the spirit of Arrupe, who told us to reach those places where no one else goes.

**Ms Ravichchanthiran Saththiyabam,
JRS Batticaloa Preschool Teacher**

Inclusivity

JRS took us to Vavuniya for training and we had all religions and ethnic groups there and they treated us all equally. All our functions start with two or three prayers each, even if there is only one person representing one faith. JRS taught us this – to treat everyone equally.

JRS preschool teachers

During the war, I didn't think of other ethnic groups, only that I must do something for my people. Towards the end of the war, I went to Vavuniya, from Mullaitivu, and I saw a different reality. I now understand differently, my mindset has changed, there are good people in other groups and I want to serve them too. While working in Vavuniya, I had the opportunity to work among Sinhalese and Muslims. That gave me immense joy. Being with them brought many positive changes in me and broadened my perspectives. I realized they were also human beings and they also had children who were very good.

Mr Antony Amalan, JRS Mullaitivu Coordinator

A photograph showing a group of students in a classroom. They are sitting at desks, looking intently at computer monitors. The students are of various ethnicities and are dressed in school uniforms. The atmosphere is one of intense concentration and learning.

Intense concentration at one of the higher learning centres set up by JRS together with Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL) in northern Sri Lanka.



Celebrating together.

We had one Sinhala field staff to take care of the needs of the Sinhala community. We had women's groups and evening coaching centres in the Sinhala area in Vavuniya. Due to poverty, Sinhala men joined the army and police and if they were killed during the war, the women became helpless. When we had big gatherings, women and children from all the ethnic groups used to come together."

***Ms Kathikaman Anat Jasmine,
JRS Vavuniya Self-Help Groups Coordinator***

Working with Others

JRS Sri Lanka would have been unable to achieve as much as it did were it not for close collaboration with the local Catholic bishops and dioceses, with religious congregations, and with other humanitarian organisations, both national and international. It was by approaching diocesan priests and sisters that JRS got to know about areas, communities, and individuals that were in great need. And it was by working with congregations of religious sisters that JRS could offer residential training courses for so many young women. The support of the local Church was felt in other ways too, such as the offer of space and buildings to run programmes, and sometimes the placement of priests and sisters with JRS. Indeed, one such priest, Fr Packiaranjith from Mannar, was killed in the line of fire while on duty for JRS (see also page 13).

Sri Lanka was an easy place to communicate without phone or anything: communication was possible through sisters and diocesan priests. Once we started going to towns and villages, we would stay with priests in their parishes, talk to them and tell them about our networking.

Sisters were coordinators of many life-skills centres for the girls.

**Fr Vinny Joseph,
JRS Sri Lanka Director (2002 – 2007)**

When my Provincial, of the Good Shepherd Congregation, sent me to Jaffna, it was not clear what I needed to do there. I had plans but lacked financial resources. JRS readily supported my plans. I did not feel that JRS is some other organisation where I have a job.

On the contrary I felt the JRS is my own organisation where I can do a lot for people who are in need.

**Sr Remoshini Fernando,
Director, Residential Life-Skills Training Centre,
JRS Jaffna**

JRS Sri Lanka locally mobilised several partners and donors to support people. JRS did not immediately start any new work in the community but built on what they found. Community participation was the key.

**Mr Ashley Fernando,
JRS Sri Lanka Programmes Officer**





Listening attentively to the needs of people displaced in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, during the war.



The Last Word...



... goes to one of our veterans, Mr Antony Amalan, who worked with JRS first in Tamil Nadu, where he lived for years as a refugee, and then in northern Sri Lanka, where he returned to his native place of Mullaitivu in rebel-held territory.

In 1990, five years after my arrival in Tamil Nadu, my family was shifted from Mandapam Camp to Dindigul. That was where I was sighted and noticed by Fr Vinny Joseph. I don't understand, until today, how or why I attracted his attention. I had not been to the university; I don't know any language other than Tamil. But he called me and asked me if I was willing to work with him. That is how I joined JRS.

Fr Vinny mentored me. Prior to joining JRS, I was selfish, preoccupied with the welfare of only my own family, relatives, and friends. But I underwent a change of heart after joining JRS. Thus, I see JRS as God's gift to me; it has carved me and shaped me into a better person.

Even as I worked with Fr Vinny, I encountered many difficulties and hardships. I was a refugee, and any movement out of the camp was not that easy. Amid difficulties, there were experiences that brought me joy. I had the God-given privilege of meeting my people from the districts of the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka.

Accompanying Fr Vinny or Sr Maggie, I visited almost 98 camps in Tamil Nadu. People used to discuss the issue of caste among themselves. But I was not caste-minded; nor did I experience any caste discrimination. A memorable experience was that I used to eat with every family. And all of them became dearer to me and close to my heart. Moreover, it was like the blind leading the blind: I was a refugee myself and I was serving my fellow refugees. And this was a very new and unique experience to me.

Even as I worked with and for my people, I had a dormant desire to go back to my homeland. Fr Vinny had already moved to Sri Lanka and he was asking if I planned to return. I said 'yes' but I had to bide my time on account of my family. At last, I decided to register for repatriation. It was Fr Vinny who recruited me for JRS work in Tamil Nadu and again it was he who gave me work back in Sri Lanka, in Mullaitivu.

After my return to Sri Lanka, I had to face difficulties that I least expected. I lost my daughter. I had big plans to celebrate her coming of age, but when we reached our native village, we found our house in a state of disrepair. We had to stay in my sister-in-law's house, as our house was being gradually repaired and rebuilt. Alas, just three days before the scheduled date of the celebration, we lost my daughter during the 2004 Tsunami! The sea swallowed her up! I don't know how I endured this agony. However, I must admit that my work fetched me a lot of comfort and solace.

Eventually war broke out again. We had no telephone or any kind of such facility then. We could communicate with the JRS Sri Lanka Director only twice or thrice a month. The war was intense; there was indiscriminate bombing and shelling. Whenever I left my house, my wife would come to see me off with tearful eyes – unsure of what might befall us. Those days we had to accompany the people even as they took refuge in the trenches. The war continued and so did our work.

Finally, we had to go to a welfare centre. The ones who comforted me most then were the Jesuits Peter Balleis and PS Amalraj. They urged me to continue JRS work in the camps. And so, I started to work behind barbed wire fences.

Later, I was commissioned to work in the resettlement areas. That wasn't easy. Transportation of goods was blocked by the army at checkpoints. We had to construct 32 preschools and engaged in manual labour ourselves, loading and unloading things. I used to tell my staff: "Five years from now, we will see the fruit of all our labour; we'll be standing outside the buildings and joyfully watching the computer courses or tailoring courses or preschool education going on inside." Today we do admire the beauty of our buildings. Our footprints cannot be erased, though unseen; the monumental works of JRS cannot be forgotten.



Credits

Photographers:

Kathleen Ambre, Peter Balleis SJ, Don Doll SJ, John Mezsia SJ, all for JRS.

Design:

Matthew Urpani

Publisher:

JRS South Asia
C/O Indian Social Institute
10 Institutional Area, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003
India

Cover photo: Children enjoy an activity organised by JRS higher education students in a village in northern Sri Lanka.
(Kathleen Ambre/JRS)

jrssa.org