

ThriveWell: Nurturing Communities through Safe Water and Health Empowerment

Divulapatana, Sri Lanka

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Background: In 1983, Sri Lanka became the battleground for a prolonged ethnic civil war lasting 26 years, fueled by longstanding tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations. This narrative illuminates the lives of Sinhalese minorities in Batticaloa, revealing a community grappling with the legacy of conflict. Diulapathana (dee-oo-la-pa-tha-na), a village in a war-torn area, remains obscure on maps, situated in a rural zone deeply affected by echoes of historical conflicts and adversities.

Issue: Fifteen years post-war, the Sinhalese's struggle for peace persists- their lives are marked by a scarcity of basic necessities, including food, electricity, medicine, and safe water. Visits to their community revealed to me that home transcends a mere location for the Sinhalese people; it embodies their history, a terrain blessed with the footprints of ancestors who once walked the same earth. This land is an integral part of their identity, and they continue to fight for decades to safeguard it. For them, peace signifies a stable community where prosperity thrives, witnessing their children grow to carry forward their stories. I want to play a part in helping them achieve their peace: a reliable source of water and education to carry on the principles of personal health.

Solution: In Sri Lanka, religious leaders, particularly monks, often represent villages independently of political power. In Diulapathana, head monk Ampitiya Sumanarathana Thero assumes a significant leadership role in the community. His profound influence is evident through the Maduru-oya Right Bank Farmers Protecting Organization, where, for over 30 years, he has gained the villagers' trust due to his unwavering dedication and strength in advocating for villagers' rights. During the war, he offered refuge in his temple, where people sought camaraderie, and he continues this compassionate tradition even today. His genuine passion led us to select this organization as our ideal project partner. Chandana Jayasinghe, the organization's secretary, will work with us, playing a pivotal role in budgeting and advocating for the needs of the villagers. We highly appreciate his insights, given his decades-long connection to the village, providing a profound understanding of its dynamics as he actively addresses the village's persistent legal and political challenges, contributing valuable expertise to our collaborative efforts.

Currently, villagers rely on makeshift holes for water, but the lack of depth leads toxic fertilizers to mix with the soil. Although they filter it through cloth, harsh chemicals persist without expensive technology; this is their only recourse in a resource-poor, dry zone. As a result of constrained medical resources, health concerns and cases of chronic kidney disease persist untreated. The plan was to focus on prevention. Initially considering a rainwater system, discussions with university professors revealed its impracticality for low-income families. After exploring alternatives with Sri Lankan water sustainability researchers and our community partner, we collectively discussed options and settled on tube wells as an ideal solution. This technology involves drilled pipes reaching aquifers, allowing access to natural groundwater beneath the surface. A quality water source is found due to the natural filtration of water moving beneath the ground, and an easy-to-use hand pump draws water from underground and brings it to the surface through a nozzle.

Seven tube wells are to be built strategically throughout the village with the expertise of a local company, *Shoring & Building Contractors*, specializing in building wells. Anticipating that tube wells have drilling location limitations, discussions with our community partner confirmed the presence of underground water, evident from a past examination of an abandoned tube well due to cost constraints. Anticipating the demand from 1,600+ residents of Diulapathana, we plan to construct stable huts made of steel to shield residents from rain and harsh sunlight while they collect water. To enhance convenience for villagers in this initiative, concrete benches near each well prioritize the comfort of the substantial elderly population and diligent hardworking laborers who come to collect water. Huts will be constructed by the same tube well company, and benches will be pre-ordered and installed by them. Metal instructional boards at each station will feature images demonstrating the correct usage of tube wells and water-boiling methods, serving as a secondary step to promote cleaner and safer water practices. We aim for active community involvement in developing and distributing instructional materials and encouraging residents to participate in decorating and designing the boards. To implement a comprehensive awareness campaign, we will distribute informative flyers to educate the community about the improved water system.

Wells will be assigned based on population density, with seven maintenance leaders overseeing upkeep. A positive aspect of this water system is its low maintenance, and if issues occur, villagers will report to their leader, who informs Chandana. Repair funds are solely collected by him from affected families for fairness, as nearby wells can be used during repairs. Our confidence in this system comes from

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discussions with Chandana and collaborative decision-making with villagers on ways to sustain the wells.

Community Outreach: In response to concerns raised by Chandana about a lack of health knowledge, my partner Shamila Pavulu, who is based in the US and maintains close ties with the village organization, and I will collaboratively create a comprehensive education program with the expert advice from Dr. Ridma Ranwala, who has prior experience guest speaking on the importance of health practices. She will collaborate with Shamila and me to develop materials in Sinhala, our language as well as the villagers, and guide us in conducting public demonstrations on boiling water, handwashing, and other essential practices, ensuring that culturally appropriate education is effectively shared. Although unable to accompany us to the village, Dr. Ranwala will be available via phone to address any questions that Shamila and I may be unable to answer for the villagers, providing valuable expert support.

Poya Day, a national holiday, is when villagers traditionally gather at the temple, and with the monk's guidance, Shamila and I will actively participate in rituals and ceremonies, joining their cultural practices to demonstrate respect and appreciation as we recognize the necessity for a deeper understanding before launching educational initiatives in the village. In preparation, the monk will send prior announcements to family heads, urging their presence. He will compile a list, grouping families based on availability throughout June and July for informational sessions, exclusively held at the temple due to its capacity for accommodating large groups. To address scheduling constraints, we will organize flexible 'in-person house sessions' for those unavailable on Poya Day or unable to attend temple gatherings.

The project will unfold in three phases: Planning, Education, and Empowerment. Each phase involves collaboration with local partners, experts, and community leaders with public awareness campaigns, community involvement in instructional materials, and tailored educational programs. Our goal is to teach effective resource utilization, ensuring lasting positive changes even after we leave.

Phase 1 - Planning:

May 6-13: Partner with Dr. Ranwala to create a health program and design Sinhala flyers for outreach and brochures for sessions on oral hygiene, cooking with water, handwashing, sanitation, waste management, well usage, and water boiling. Coordinate with the *Shoring & Building Contractors* for drilling locations.

May 24: Poya day; meet villagers and coordinate info sessions based on availability.

Phase 2- Education:

June 1-10: Drill for water and distribute flyers to 560+ families and common areas with community help.

June 11-26: Build huts; Host public gatherings to introduce the tube well project, share health information, and guide water usage. Transition residents from ground holes to the tube system through public demonstrations on daily oral hygiene and handwashing. Discourage using ground hole water for cooking due to harmful chemicals and teach proper boiling methods for safer water use.

June 27-July 14: Install benches, start 'in-person house sessions' for those unable to attend gatherings, and open sessions to other villagers by providing sign-up sheets for those needing extra assistance or clarification, such as by demonstrating water boiling techniques in their kitchens.

Phase 3- Empowerment:

July 15-22: Collaborate with local artists, who generously volunteered upon hearing about the project, to create instruction boards reflecting the community's culture.

July 23-31: Hold public demonstrations near wells post-completion to inform villagers about the system.

After July 31: Through visits and organizational contacts, we will maintain communication with villagers for post-project system monitoring and assess community satisfaction.

Sustainability & Outcomes: In Diulapathana, safe water scarcity has not only jeopardized the health of its 1,600+ residents but has been a silent contributor to chronic kidney diseases and preventable deaths. The absence of medical resources amplifies the impact, leaving the community vulnerable. With your support, this project becomes a lifeline, ensuring over a thousand individuals access safe water. This isn't just about addressing a basic need; it's about preventing diseases, saving lives, and empowering a community to envision a future unshackled by health crises. The focus is on providing a fundamental resource - a reliable source of water- and implementing an education program to impart the value of personal health, thus fostering a sustainable and empowered community for the future. Project ThriveWell is the catalyst for transformative change, promising a healthier, more resilient Diulapathana where dreams can flourish without the looming threat of preventable ailments. I appreciate your consideration and hope we embark on a journey together towards achieving peace for Diulapathana.