



# SHARING SMILES II

## FAMILY GROUP HOME PROJECT.

### MENCAFEP

#### MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN & FAMILIES EDUCATIONAL PROJECT.

A Project Sponsored by Terre des Hommes – Netherlands.

PROJECT CODE NUMBER 014H.

[www.mencafepsrilanka.com](http://www.mencafepsrilanka.com)

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#### UP IN THE MOUNTAINS AND DOWN AT THE WAR FRONT.

MENCAFEP's work area has a mountainous and steeply dissected hilly terrain with the highest peak of 8,128ft. The average rainfall varies from 220/300 inches. Temperature in the District is the coldest with an annual mean of 59 degrees F. The main forms of land use in the area are tea, paddy, vegetables, tobacco, minor export crops, forestry and pasture.

Nearly 70% of the rural households in the District are below the official poverty line. Other welfare indices like literacy rate, school attendance, health services, infant mortality rate, percentage of urban population employed show that Nuwara Eliya District compares very unfavourably with other Districts.

MENCAFEP's area represents all ethnic groups in country and the population estimate is about one million. The crude population density is 600 per square mile. Only about 5% of the population is urban others live in villages and plantations. Nearly 50% of the population is Indian Tamils who are predominantly estate labourers.

In Batticaloa District heavy fighting between the Government security forces<sup>1</sup> and the LTTE<sup>2</sup>, which occurred in the Eastern Province in the late 1980's and the 1990's. Has given way to a peace process that has lasted for over two years, although at the time of writing there is some concern, as the LTTE have suspended their participation in the peace talks, a general election is taking place and there is a serious split with in the LTTE. In the conflict area itself the Government forces control the urban areas and main highways, apart from the Wannai District, which the LTTE controls completely. While the LTTE controls large swathes of the countryside and operates in the towns and villages during darkness.

It is estimated that 100,000+ people have lost their lives due to the conflict.

Over the last few years the situation has changed, from dealing with large numbers of internally displaced families through relief work (although the majority are still internally displaced). To trying to create some form of stability in peoples lives, in uncertain and violent circumstances. The population living in the urban areas in the past have faced travel restrictions, round-ups, cordon searches, detention and humiliation from the Government security forces. While those living in the LTTE controlled areas face intimidation, fines and the levying of LTTE taxes and charges. In addition children (some as young as 10 years) and young adults have in recent times faced forced recruitment from LTTE cadres.

In the past few years, defence expenditure in Sri Lanka was close to double the total spent on Education and Health. Also, 55% of children in Sri Lanka are afraid of the country's future. Just before the cease-fire, over two years ago now, a survey suggested that one in three children said they were constantly reminded of the war. A recent survey by SCF UK would suggest that the same ratio of children (one in three) is very concerned that the country will return to war.

During the 80's and 90's an unspecified number of children had become separated from their parents and immediate families. This was due to death, arrest, disappearance and/or displacement. These children tended to end up in institutional care. Unfortunately, this still is the trend in Sri Lanka.

Some children have remained with a single parent or extended family since the death or disappearance of their parent/parents. Facing economic hardships, traumatised by war and the loss of family. Single parents and extended family find it very difficult to cope, with any additional burdens such as taking care of children.

Children in these situations are at risk and do face among other problems, under nourishment, in certain area's malnutrition. Along with the possibility of being placed in institutional care and/or being conscripted into armed conflict.

MENCAFEP is extremely concerned, with the problem of children and their families affected by armed conflict. Along with children that are at risk through dire poverty and abandonment. In particular those children who are removed from their home environment, or who are in danger of being removed from their natural community and family surroundings, to be placed in institutional care. Children have already faced severe traumas of losing a parent/parents and removal of children from their natural communities. Placement in institutional care not only causes additional stress to children, but also alienates them from their communities.

Potentially, assimilation of institutionalised children, traumatised by war experiences and/or abuse in all it's forms, into society gets more difficult the older the child gets. MENCAFEP believes that children traumatised by the conflict and/or abuse in Sri Lanka will have a better chance of leading a more 'normal' life, if they remain in their natural environment. This effort can be greatly helped by the care and participation of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sri Lanka army is the biggest army in South Asia and is proportionately higher than India in terms of population. Around 12 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product is given over to funding the military. This figure significantly increases when other types of security are taken into account (private security of buildings and people, the security provided to politicians and senior civil servants, etc.). *Sunday Times 7 February 1999, Colombo.*

<sup>2</sup> The LTTE is one of the world's most effective and deadliest of guerrilla movements. *Sunday Times 7 February 1999, Colombo.*



**We are family!**

**MISSION STATEMENT.**

**To address the physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs of children at risk in Nuwara Eliya District.**

**Aims and objectives:**

- To provide and develop a home environment for children at risk in Nuwara Eliya District.
- Parent/parents, carers, teachers and community members continue to be trained and encouraged in how to develop and implement activities, to assure quality and sustainability of the childcare activities initiated under this project.
- MENCAFEP to try and reunify children with extended family and/or continue to support a child until he/she reaches an independent living status or family does not require assistance anymore.
- MENCAFEP reports reflect that children's/young persons basic needs are being met in the FGH.
- Monthly children's meetings to discuss and resolve FGH issues with MENCAFEP staff / Housemothers. Meetings to be recorded and chaired on a rotation basis by members of the FGH.
- Every child receives prompt and appropriate medical care when necessary.
- FGH's are clean and hygienic.
- Monthly evaluations and day-to-day discussions by MENCAFEP staff, and the child when needed, in the FGH's indicate that children are well taken care of.
- At the end of the three year funding cycle, as many children as possible to be reunified with family/relatives.

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE (HOW IT ALL BEGAN AND AS IT IS TODAY).**

In 1986, Tdh-Lausanne-Switzerland began working with children affected by the civil war in the Eastern Province. Some 50 displaced and abandoned children were brought to a large Tdh children's home, in Nuwara Eliya between 1986 to 1991. The children ranged in age from under 3 to 12 years. However, by early 1992 Tdh was beginning to question the validity of its institutionalised children's home approach, and was keen to explore other options.

In 1993, Tdh commissioned Chris Stubbs, Co-Founder of MENCAFEP to review the children's home approach. Examining the possibilities of developing a more community-based approach to its work, with abandoned and *at risk* children. Chris recommended that wherever possible, the children who had come from Trincomalee and Batticaloa Districts in the Eastern Province. Should be re-united with their extended families in these localities. And if this was not immediately possible, that small family group homes (FGH) be established in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, to care for the children. While a tracing programme was established to assist in re-uniting them with their extended families.

In February 1993, Tdh embraced Chris recommendations and made an innovative policy change. Away from large institutional childcare, to that of developing and supporting a policy of rehabilitating children, in their local communities. Over a period of 24 months three family group homes were established in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Nuwara Eliya. The large Nuwara Eliya Children's Home was closed down and a pragmatic community-based family support approach was adopted. The initial objective of the family group home approach was to provide a halfway house. While the tracing and rehabilitation support services, identified and worked with the children and their relatives. To bring about a re-unification of the family. For those children with no suitable extended family, or whose trauma and other personal circumstances, made it difficult for them to be fully rehabilitated into a family situation. The Family Group Home provides a secure and caring environment, until these individuals are able to attain independent living status.

With support from Tdh-Netherlands, MENCAFEP took over the Family Group Homes in March 2000. As Tdh-Lausanne-Switzerland wanted it to be taken over by a Sri Lankan NGO. Over the past two and a half years, MENCAFEP has evolved this innovative model. As a halfway approach between that of institutionalised childcare and re-integrating abandoned, orphaned, disabled and displaced children with their relatives, back in their local communities. This community-based approach makes use of two key services:

- Community-based Family Support Services (tracing, outreach work, and limited family financial support).
- Family Group Homes (rented houses and gardens of a modest standard in well-established local neighbourhoods, run by a house parent backed up by counselling and guidance work).

Because each child's (or young adult's) situation develops differently, the staffs overseeing the family group homes keeps each case under regular review. This has meant that some children and young adults have moved. From living in a family group home to being re-united with their extended family. Some young adults, who moved to independent living situations and have had to return to the family group home. This client-based approach has meant that each child and young adult has received individualised high quality attention from the staff.

The Family Group Homes and the Community-based Family Support Services operates 2 community-based homes. One of which is a Family Group Homes (FGH) for children and young adults (3 to 22 years), and one is a Working Girls House (WGH) for young women aged 18 to 24 years. Over the years, due to the success of the project of reuniting children with extended families and young adults moving on to an independent living situation, That the Family Group Homes in Trincomalee and Batticaloa established in 1993. Have served their purpose and due to all the children/young adults moving on have been closed. The Working Boys House in Nuwara Eliya established in 1997 is on hold at the moment; due to some external factors affecting its functioning. It is hoped that within the next year to get it functioning again.

Totals of 16 children and young adults are cared for and supported under this project at the moment, from an original number of 50+ children/young people. Of whom 13 are in Family Group Home, 2 in the Working Girls House and 1 in the community-based Family Support Service. The beneficiaries comprise 6 males and 10 females. Six of the beneficiaries have disabilities. Four of these children/young people with disabilities have been abandoned and are cared for in the Nuwara Eliya family home. In addition to those suffering from disability a number of the children/young people have been severely traumatised and have received specialist counselling.



**Sarath, Ayesha, Suganthi and Mahinda four of the abandoned young people in the Family Group Home.**

#### **A LOOK INSIDE THE FAMILY GROUP – THE CHILDREN/YOUNG PEOPLE.**

The children and young adults in the two community-based homes, consider that they are well cared for, provided with good guidance and counselling. All Family Group Home members say that the FGH approach has provided them with a supportive family atmosphere, allowing them to build strong sibling and friendship bonds.

Family Group Home members recognise that all the staff involved with them, are both approachable and dedicated to helping them with their problems. Staffs has a strong commitment to assisting them to get a good start in their adult lives, through ensuring that all family members achieved the most out of their schooling, vocational training and any work placements.

Problems between family members are resolved through discussion, either between the individuals using an older family member or through the house parent. The older children often play a leading role through, trying to sort out the disagreement before it needs to be taken to the house parent. Difficulties between the family members and the house parents are resolved at the monthly FGH group meeting. All staff and children in the FGH attend this meeting. Family members and house parents all consider the monthly meetings to be an important means of resolving difficulties, taking responsibility for their own lives and ensuring the smooth running of the home.



**At play and getting ready to work (school) Dinesh and Vije.**

All family members contribute equally to the running of the home. Household chores such as cleaning, ironing, cooking, marketing and gardening are divided fairly amongst family members, depending upon their age and capabilities. The sharing of domestic chores helps to avoid disputes; the older able family members take care of those with special needs. All the young adults considered that they had gained useful life skills through the way in which domestic work is organised in the homes. In addition both males and females considered that they would continue to apply the principles of equality of domestic work in their future married lives.

All family members recognised that the FGH model has allowed them to develop both strong sibling relationships and friendship bonds between each other. Many of the older children and young adults like living with younger children, as it gives them a sense of being part of a family. Those who had left the homes either for independent living situations or been re-united with their families, often keep in contact through occasional visits, letters or by word of mouth. All the older family home members were aware that the FGH system would care for them, until such a point in time that they were able to go onto independent living situations.



**Thanks to the Family Group Home we have a future to look forward too.**



**Me and my shadow – good friends – Mahinda and Sarath.**

## **A LOOK INSIDE THE FAMILY GROUP HOME – THE STAFF.**

In the Nuwara Eliya Children's Home (1986 - 1993) the children were provided with all sorts of facilities like a Western Guesthouse. They were not encouraged to take decisions or responsibility for their lives. There were more than fifty children resident in one location. None of the older children were involved in the domestic chores, and none were able to be in contact with their relatives in the East of Sri Lanka. They were isolated from their extended families for more than seven years. For these families there was great uncertainty about how the children were growing and developing. The large number of children and the way, in which activities were managed primarily as one large group, also weakened relationships between siblings. There was little integration into the local community. The ratio of staff to children was low; rules and regulations were used as a means of managing the home.

The Family Group Home approach contrasts with the above situation. It creates a one-to-one relationship between the house parent and each child/young adult. The setting is a domestic house, less formal and smaller than an institutionalised approach, thus allowing sibling relationships to develop. This has created strong bonds between siblings as well as strong friendships between non-family members.

The children in the FGH have to take responsibility and learn domestic life skills such as cooking, cleaning, gardening and marketing. In the homes children are encouraged to visit and stay with their relatives (if any), during school holidays, relatives are also encouraged to visit the homes.

The homes are in small neighbourhoods, and the children attend the local schools, temples and churches thus becoming part of a community.

The Housemothers recruited by MENCAFEP are primarily older women, who have already raised a family. None are trained social workers. Their life skills in raising families, as well as other skills in sewing, mat weaving, and vegetable growing, etc., have enabled them to pass on practical skills to the children and young adults. They have been the key to the homes' successes, and MENCAFEP has in turn helped some house parents to sort-out their own personal family difficulties. This has proved to strengthen the commitment of house parents.

In Family Group Homes the house parents and other staff play a caring, loving and parental role. As children reach young adulthood they provide advice, guidance and acceptance of their decisions. This is in contrast to the institutionalised approach taken in other children's homes in Sri Lanka. Which do not skill-up the children to be a part of the wider community. The approach to supporting young adults has required the house parent and MENCAFEP senior staff to work as a team.

**Sisters, Shanthi and Banu Sharing a Smile?**

## NEW INITIATIVES.

MENCAFEP is developing an organised programme of health education, first aid, safe sex education and drug and alcohol awareness for the young adults in its care. The present informal arrangement is not sufficiently rigorous and too much is left to traditional views. This does not adequately take account of the rapid societal changes taking place in Sri Lanka, lifestyles and attitudes. UNICEF's *Facts for Life* will be used as a starting point. As this booklet is available in Tamil and Sinhalese. This will be backed up by awareness training and guidance sessions for the young adults. Trained MENCAFEP staff members, with the help of a health educator, will provide this.

MENCAFEP is aware that this unique community-based childcare approach requires to be documented through an illustrated case study booklet and a short professionally made documentary video. The staff working in the FGH project and community-based family support services, the children, young adults living in FGH homes and former family members should all be encouraged to document their experiences and perceptions of living in the family group homes, independent living situations and with extended family. MENCAFEP hopes to make this a reality over the next year.

### UNIQUE – WHAT DO WE MEAN BY UNIQUE?

In a country like Sri Lanka that has just stopped fighting itself after nearly 20 years; and where everything seems split or divided down ethnic lines. Separate schools for Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim children; separate parts of the country for Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities.

- **The Family Group Home Project has Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim children/young people living side by side as brothers and sisters.**
- **The Family Group Home Project has disabled and able children/young people living side by side as brothers and sisters.**
- **That's what we mean by unique.**



**Sharing Smiles with the MENCAFEP Family Group Home.**

Ranji and Chris Stubbs.  
MENCAFEP.  
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