One hundred and one Sri Lankan nights: PIA’s Tsunami reconstruction planning support project

Sam Kernaghan, an environmental planner from PB in Sydney, recently spent 4 months volunteering in Sri Lanka as part of PIA’s Tsunami Reconstruction Planning Support Project. Sam spent most of his time in Colombo working with the National Physical Planning Department developing the first National Spatial Plan for Sri Lanka.

The ‘Call to Prayer’ from the local mosque at 5:30am wakes me up, but I manage to snooze until about 6 when the local fish man goes by screaming “Maaaa-looooo… Maaaa-looooo…” at the top of his lungs, the bread van trundles past playing a scratchy rendition of ‘greensleeves’, and the dogs next door begin their “who can bark the loudest competition”...

Yep, it’s the start of another normal day in Colombo. Its already 28 degrees, humidity is around 90%, the sun is out and there is a beautiful blue sky. I roll out of my mosquito net and into the cold shower (no need for hot water here), wondering what crazy planning challenges await me today.

After a quick breakfast, I wander down our dirt lane to the main road, avoiding puddles from last night’s rain, and past the cows grazing on the grassy edges. If Parliament is sitting (our apartment is just off the main road between the Presidents house and the Parliament) the lane is comfortingly guarded by a couple of khaki clad gentleman from the Sri Lankan army, holding rather large machine guns. They generally look very solemn but often break into a big smile and say good morning, all the while keeping their eyes on the passing traffic and the lane behind them.

So what were we doing there?

So what were a bunch of volunteer Australian planners doing in Sri Lanka nearly 18 months after the 2004 Tsunami? With a diverse range of skills, experience, motivations and expectation our first few weeks were spent asking exactly that.

In responding to the Tsunami, Sri Lanka considered 3 approaches to decreasing vulnerability to a future ocean based threat:

1. **Engineering solution** – there was little or no damage in areas where either sea walls had been built, or large sand dunes remained, as these structures absorbed the power of the wave. One response was therefore to build a Sri Lankan version of Hadrian’s wall around the coast to protect the country. Apart from not being particularly aesthetically pleasing and costing a lot of money, this was not considered a particularly good long term solution to the problem (apologies to all those engineers hoping to get involved in a project that could be seen from space...).

2. **Early warning systems and evacuation procedures** – The use of sirens and well established evacuation routes to higher ground have been successfully introduced in a number of countries as a way of addressing tidal wave threats (E.g Hawaii). However as was demonstrated in during the 2004 Tsunami, Sri Lanka is located particularly close to probable earthquake epicentres, and the first wave hit less than an hour after the quake.

3. **Planning** – the first step by the Sri Lanka Government was to propose a ‘no building line’ which ranged from 100m to 300m from the coast. This was both a response to the Tsunami devastation on the coast, and an attempt to reclaim the coastal areas for public space and environmental reasons. The tourism and fishing sectors have unsurprisingly not responded well to these restrictions, nor have the local people who have lived right on the coast for generations. So taking the longer term view, the Sri Lankan Government is proposing to progressively shift economic and social
infrastructure (roads, rail, schools, hospitals etc) away from vulnerable areas, and further restructure towns along the coast to concentrate both population density and activity centres (commercial and retail) away from vulnerable zones.

This was where we came in...

The work

Work wise, we were involved in both regional and detailed planning projects. While Steve Mary and Liz were working on the Tsunami affected village of Hambantota, myself and Wendy were involved developing a National Spatial Plan for Sri Lanka. Wendy’s experience developing the South-East Queensland Regional Plan, and my dabbling with the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy certainly held us in good stead, particularly as we weren’t expecting to be directing national land use planning in Sri Lanka. Having not prepared a plan of this scale before, the local Sri Lankan planning team was pretty keen to get the most out of us while we were there (and they certainly did their best). Getting approval for the plan from the Ministerial Advisory Committee, after many late nights and heated discussions, was a big achievement for the team. Preparing a national plan is a rare opportunity, certainly from an Australian perspective anyway, and one that we were very excited to be involved in. The irony that the Federal Government was funding planning in Sri Lanka through AusAid was not lost on us.

Language

One of the challenges of the project was definitely language... and not only our lack of Sinhala or Tamil speaking ability. Most of the Sri Lankans we worked with spoke great English, but it was the different use of planning terminology that caused some problems, both between Australian and Sri Lankan’s, but also between volunteers from different Australian states. We found to our amazement that Australian’s use planning words, such as structure plan, at different levels of detail and in different contexts. Establishing an understanding of how each state uses planning terminology was an unexpected hurdle, but one of a long list that we managed to navigate in our 4 months working and living in Sri Lanka.

Close

Like a book end to my day, the 10:30pm “Call to prayer” from the mosque signaled time to re-enter my mosquito net cocoon and contemplate another ‘normal’ Colombo day... I kept a diary of my experiences but I don't think anyone would believe it! The relative normality of Sydney town is proving to be kind of hard to settle back into after this...

If you are interested in finding out more about Sam’s trip, go to http://srilankaplanningproject.blogspot.com/