Rebuilding Hambantota After the Tsunami.

By Steve Dunn

Mohamed Yehir is excited and motivated when he talks about plans for the future of Hambantota. Yehir, as we got to know him, is the Assistant Director of the Urban Development Authority (UDA) for the Hambantota office and together with his staff is involved daily in the planning and re-building of the town. For Yehir, Hambantota is his hometown and where he grew up, went to school and where he played in the local cricket team; it’s where he lives with his wife and three children. As well as being his job, this is his community and his enthusiasm and practical approach to problem solving stands out.

Hambantota is a township of approximately 10,000 people located on the southern coast of Sri Lanka about seven hours by bus from Colombo. A large part of the livelihood of local people is derived from fishing, salt harvesting from the local lagoon and other small-scale industries. Hambantota also provides trade in goods and services for the surrounding agricultural region, which produces rice, fruit, vegetables, livestock and dairy. On Boxing Day 2004, Hambantota suffered heavy loss of life and property from the Tsunami and has been in a healing and re-building phase since then. Despite the enormous emergency and rebuilding effort, which has taken place over the past two and a half years, the damage to lives and buildings is still visible and the Tsunami remains a significant event in the lives and minds of people living there.

PIA is working in partnership with the Institute of Town Planners in Sri Lanka on a post-Tsunami reconstruction program focussing on collaboration in national strategic planning, local planning (e.g. Hambantota), capacity building and hazard mapping. Two members of the first group of Australian planners who took part in this project in late 2006 had the opportunity to be part of the Sri Lankan team working on the National Physical Plan for Sri Lanka; others worked in Hambantota; and all had a role in local capacity building. In Hambantota, we saw first hand the practical approach taken by planners working in regional areas, such as Yehir and his staff, in dealing with local issues and projects.

Yehir assigned two of his planning assistants, B.G.I. Rahini and J.K.P. Prabashini, to work with us and they passed on much of their local knowledge and enthusiasm to the Australians. They were keen to get to know the Australian volunteers and shared their humour and sense of fun in their work. As you would find with planners working in a regional office in Australia, the planners working in the Hambantota office were “hands on”, spending time in the field dealing with local people and being directly involved in the implementation of key UDA planning projects. For example, this meant relocating market stallholders from...
the temporary market on the foreshore into a new purpose built market building and removing damaged foreshore buildings, sometimes confronting opposition from those who did not want to see them go. It also meant supervising construction of the new market building and making sure it was ready for opening by the President in November 2006.

After the Tsunami, the UDA decided to restrict rebuilding of houses within the vulnerable foreshore area of Hambantota. Removal of buildings from the vulnerable foreshore area and establishment of a foreshore reserve (and future beach park) are part of the UDA’s plan for the future of Hambantota. This is consistent with national planning objectives to locate new housing away from the coast and establish new settlements in safer locations. The planners in the UDA have taken the opportunity to act on earlier plans to establish a new town further inland from the coast and have directed international donors to the new town location. After the devastation of the Tsunami, international aid in the form of new housing has helped to bring the new town into reality.

In the short period since the Tsunami, Siribopura new town has been established 3km north of Hambantota, made up of approximately 2000 new houses and road infrastructure in estates funded by a range of overseas aid agencies. Of necessity, this construction has happened rapidly and there is now a need to plan for the provision of supporting infrastructure to service the community living at Siribopura. Plans include the future provision of an administrative centre, commercial centre, transport hub, schools, community centres and other facilities. In essence, plans are for this area to evolve over time into a complete town and community in its own right. The UDA staff are supervising the construction of two main roads, which will improve the connections between the new town and the original Hambantota township and to the highways connecting to the towns of Kataragama and Tangalle. UDA staff have worked incredibly hard since the devastation of the Tsunami in both emergency relief and rebuilding. The building of the Siribopura new town has allowed Yehir and his planning staff to direct homeless and relocated families into new housing, providing them with new shelter and hope.

To manage this larger urban area, the national Government is considering expanding the boundary of the Hambantota Urban Council area so that it takes in the new town and the area around one of the local lagoons (Karagama Lewaya) where a future shipping port is planned. This will mean additional responsibilities for the Municipal Council, as it will need to service communities from both the existing and new townships.

The National Physical Plan for Sri Lanka seeks to balance the protection of productive agricultural areas, vulnerable land areas and areas of ecological significance with the need to promote economic and regional development. For
Hambantota, the national plans are for the town to develop over time, through investment in infrastructure and industry, to become a growth centre for employment and population for the southern region of Sri Lanka. Major infrastructure projects under consideration include an international shipping port at Hambantota and for a major airport at Weerawila, northeast of Hambantota. It is hoped that investment into these projects will create new employment opportunities and encourage population growth in Hambantota. If these infrastructure projects proceed as envisaged, it is hoped that they will generate investment in related industries such as shipping, tourism, and construction and support the local agricultural economy.

The vision for Hambantota is for it to evolve from its current function as a district capital - to an expansion in size to include the Siribopura new town - and then as a growth centre for economic development and population in the southern region. For the Australian planners these huge visionary plans were a reminder to us of the importance of having a powerful vision for the future, particularly after a significant natural disaster.

Meanwhile, some of the UDA’s current plans for Hambantota are to create a foreshore reserve and beach park in the location where the Tsunami caused its damage. As town planners and members of the local community, Yehir and his staff can see the immediate benefits these works will bring for the people living in the town. Preparation has already commenced with the construction of the new market building and new fishing harbour and the removal of dilapidated buildings on the foreshore. These improvements have been planned for several years and the UDA and Urban Council are to be congratulated for progressing towards their completion. These improvements connect the town to the beach, open up views from the town to the ocean and will provide valuable facilities for recreation and leisure as well as a place for the fishermen.

As Australian planners we were impressed by the work done by the UDA planners and international aid agencies in the establishment of the Siribopura new town and the approach taken by Yehir and his staff in the relocation of families to the new town area and their planning for the revitalisation of the Hambantota foreshore. This approach has applied national planning objectives for protecting the vulnerable foreshore areas, locating new housing away from the coast, and at the same time meeting local community objectives. While a lot has already been achieved in Hambantota and Siribopura, there is still much to do and the work continues. As volunteers working in Hambantota we spent time understanding the issues at hand, basic context setting, and getting to know local planners and their processes. The second group of PIA volunteers is now in Hambantota working with Yehir and other local planners on an urban design framework for the town and involving the community in consultation about the future of the town. A third group of PIA volunteers is preparing to leave in May this year and will continue the project working with local planners.
(Steve Dunn is Director of City Development at Knox City Council in Victoria. In late 2006, Steve was a member of the first group of PIA volunteers as part of the Post Tsunami Reconstructing Planning Support Project, collaboration between PIA and the Institute of Town Planners in Sri Lanka. Other members were Wendy Downes, Mary Hoffmann, Liz Patterson and Sam Kernaghan.)