



The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

Vinya Ariyaratne

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka was started in 1958 by Dr A.T. Ariyaratne (photo left), at that time a young science teacher in Colombo. Presently, Sarvodaya is Sri Lanka's largest and most broadly embedded multi-ethnic and multi-religious people's organisation, with a network covering about 15,000 villages. This article outlines the methodology of the movement, which successfully combines tradition, culture and spirituality for sustainable development of rural communities.

The early beginnings of the movement were holiday work camps in villages that Ariyaratne organised with the help of his students. The participating students were asked to live with the poor villagers in their huts, share their meals and work. The students helped the villagers dig roads and wells, plant trees, and with other activities. They learnt first hand the problems and concerns of the poor villagers, their hopes and fears, and the constraints they faced. The students learnt the meaning of *shramadana* - 'the giving of one's time and labour as a gift', which is part of the culture and tradition of Buddhism, the main religion in Sri Lanka.

An awakening process for all

Within a few years the shramadana idea of working in poor villages spread to hundreds of schools, and thousands of school children participated in weekend village camps, contributing their labour for development activities that the villagers had identified. In these early years of his pioneering work, Ariyaratne also visited India to learn about the philosophy and work of Mahatma Gandhi. He was much influenced by Vinoba Bhave, one of the followers of Gandhi, and his Sarvodaya Bhoodan

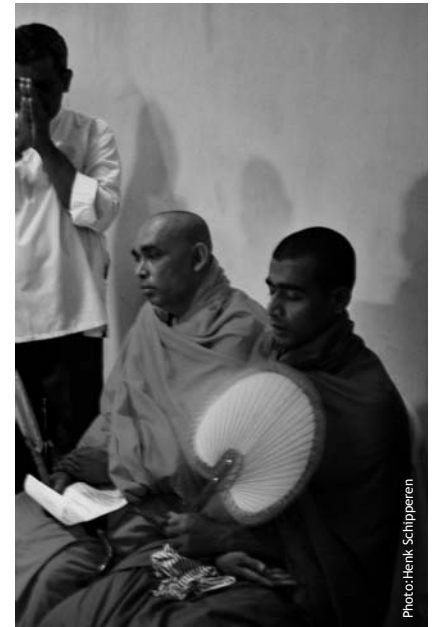
movement - *sarvodaya* meaning 'the welfare of all', and '*bhoo*dan' meaning the 'gift of land'. Vinoba Bhave walked from village to village, holding meetings and persuading the richer farmers to donate a part of their land as gift to the landless and the poor. After his India visit, Ariyaratne renamed his movement the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

In the Sarvodaya movement we see development as an 'awakening process for all', which has to begin with every individual, and is then extended to the family, the country, the nation and the world. The awakening must be an integrated whole where spiritual, moral, cultural, social, political and economic aspects of life are included.

Development, in the first place, is in your heart and in your mind. Various Buddhist concepts are used within the development activities (see box 1).

Role of Buddhist monks

The *bhikku*, or Buddhist monks, play a key role in the Sarvodaya Movement. When a new village is to be introduced to Sarvodaya Shramadana, often it is the *bhikku* who approaches the villagers, and organises the public meeting to discuss their situation. These



Buddhist monks during a village meeting of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement.

meetings are generally organised in the premises of the Temple, and the Temple courtyard is used for community cooking and eating. The *bhikku* then play an important role in launching Sarvodaya activities and in creating the right atmosphere. They use religious stories and religious terms familiar to the community to convey Buddha's ideas of self-reliance and of compassion.

Even though Sarvodaya's philosophy is derived from Buddhism, its practice is extremely inclusive and non-Buddhist communities do not perceive it as a religious organisation. We have non-Buddhist workers large numbers of who interpret the philosophy and action within their own experience and worldview. We encourage them to follow the spiritual foundations of whatever religion they belong to. By being inclusive, multi-religious and multi-ethnic in its approach, Sarvodaya is the only development organisation in the country that cuts across all such divisions, and promotes self-development of the rural communities.

Box 1 Buddhist concepts used within the development activities

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement shows how religion and spirituality can serve as a basic resource in development. Development is connected to one's 'awakening' and inner growth, leading to social and economic changes. The following Buddhist concepts are used in this work:

- *Dana* or 'the giving of alms' was further interpreted to include 'giving of one's time and skills and energy for the good of the community'. Giving in any form is encouraged: for example the rich farmer is encouraged to donate his land for road building; a skilled worker is encouraged to donate his skills.
- *Karuna* or 'compassion' which implies facing our anger and hatred.
- *Priyavachan* or 'pleasant speech' to promote respect and a sense of equality.
- *Samanatmatha* or 'social equality'. Ariyaratne started his movement in a poor outcaste village reminding the villagers that discrimination is a moral outrage, rejected by Buddha himself.
- *Arthacharya* or 'constructive work'. In the Shramadana camps labour is shared, and all involved are awakened to their potential of self-reliance.
- *Muditha* or 'joy in the joy of others'.
- *Upekha* or 'equanimity': doing one's duty without being concerned about the result - success or failure.

Changed concept of poverty

A great effort has been made to change the conceptual and psychological aspects of society by addressing the subjects of poverty, sustainable life styles, war and violence. This is done through community capacity building, early childhood development programmes, disaster management, development education, biodiversity and environment conservation, and other special projects according to the needs of villagers.

We do not believe that poverty can be eradicated in isolation. The 'poor' are rich in some respects, while the 'affluent' are poor in other respects. To deal with poverty it is not only important to empower the poor, but also to empower the affluent spiritually. The economically well-off are often indifferent to the needs of others. We aim to make them aware of their inner spirituality in order to enable them to contribute to societal development, by sharing their financial and other resources with the poor. That is why our development programmes include both poor people and the economically well-off.

This approach has not resulted in conflict, but rather in mutual understanding and increased co-operation. The affluent are now contributing considerably to village development and have publicly demonstrated the change in their spiritual life. It is an 'awakening of all', a win-win situation for all involved.

Holistic needs assessment

In discussion with the people, Sarvodaya has identified ten basic

Box 2 Development methodology: the five evolutionary stages of a village

- Stage 1: Organisation of an introductory *shramadana* camp for the village, during which the situation is analysed together and potentials and needs identified;
- Stage 2: Establishment of various groups (children's, youngsters', mothers' and farmers' groups), construction of a child development centre, and training of staff;
- Stage 3: Programme for meeting the basic needs and setting up institutions - including the founding of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Society, which is responsible for the village's development initiatives;
- Stage 4: Measures to produce income and employment; establishment of complete self-reliance and self-financing;
- Stage 5: Support for other village communities.

needs: (1) a clean and beautiful environment; (2) clean drinking water; (3) minimal supplies of clothing; (4) adequate and balanced nutrition, (5) simple housing; (6) basic health care; (7) basic communication facilities; (8) a minimal supply of energy; (9) holistic education; and (10) the satisfaction of intellectual, spiritual and cultural needs.

This list illustrates Sarvodaya's comprehensive approach to social development. It highlights not only economic and social needs, but also educational, spiritual, moral and cultural requirements. It is not sufficient to simply meet their food, housing or health requirements in isolation. The poor need a total package. The foundation of this concept is enormous respect for the poor. They may be illiterate and poorly dressed, but it is a gross mistake to think that they are not educated. They may not be educated in the narrow conventional sense, but they have acquired wisdom through living in their environment. They have a good idea of what they want. We believe that the poor should decide what needs to be

done to improve their quality of life.

Methodology followed

We concentrate first on what the people in the villages do by themselves to improve their situation. They may need more labour to accomplish a chosen task, such as improving road access, in which case we speak to adjoining communities who may send volunteers to help them. If they lack equipment, we supply it or borrow from somewhere. If they lack skills, we train them. In each case we support what they have decided upon.

The programme is adjusted to the specific social, cultural and religious conditions in each region. At the same time, all of the villages go through five stages of evolution or awakening (see box 2). It takes about 3 to 5 years from stage 1 to 5.

The services provided by Sarvodaya in this process are training, guidance and if donor funds are available, partial support to build a village pre-school, community health centre and other infrastructural facilities. The approach is designed in such a way that nine villages are grouped around a pioneering village that has already reached the fifth stage. These villages cooperate, and the groups of ten are linked to one another in turn at the district and national levels, so as to be able to implement common projects.

Sometimes villages slide back due to change in village leadership and other factors. One of the fundamental principles is also to promote development at the pace decided by the people themselves, and for the process to be 'organic' rather than strictly adhering to these stages.

Village development activities

The first activities that are carried out jointly unify the village community in its development efforts. Streets are built, wells are repaired, and information about the village's general needs is collected on a participatory basis. Further activities include training in management, leadership and organisa-



Opening of a home for handicapped women and children in Matara. The house was donated by a well-off community member.





Teenage mothers learn a profession supported by a volunteer.

tional development. In addition, based on local needs, there are seminars for capacity building and other support activities.

All of these activities are accompanied by meditative reflection on the problems to be solved and the solutions to be developed. Reflection opens up deeper insights and hidden relationships, encouraging a receptive attitude; listening and thinking become tools for discovery. A harmonious relationship between receptiveness and sensitive activity reduces the risk that overlooked, underestimated or neglected matters might give rise to counter forces that could later disturb the efforts.

At stage 3, the village forms an independent legal entity, or Shramadana Society, which has the freedom to decide which other organisations they would like to establish links with. Many villages have linked up with governmental and non-governmental programmes to fulfil their basic needs. Sarvodaya often identifies such opportunities for the village societies, by sending regular information dispatches and by establishing rural telecentres.

Economic empowerment

Sarvodaya Economic Empowerment Development Services (SEEDS) is the department responsible for building the economic capacity of the poorest groups within the communities. Its aim is to stimulate an attitude of entrepreneurship, innovation, thrift and sustainable development. For this, saving and credit services are provided for starting a small enterprise or livelihood improvement. It also includes non-financial services such as business coun-

selling, training in technical skills and market information.

Outstanding are its network of Sarvodaya Village Development Banks, staffed largely by local women. Loans are provided, for example for solar home systems and micro-hydro-electricity projects. Training is given in agricultural production, agricultural processing, production of various industrial products, and computer technology. Resource centres provide the necessary information. A trade fair is organised annually to support the small-enterprise development.

Dialogue between generations

A factor vital to success is the explicit support to two groups: youngsters and elderly people. In addition, the dialogue between these groups is very much encouraged. This is based on the conviction that development requires both the creativity and energy of young people and the wisdom of older people.

Young people are increasingly involved in the activities and given the corresponding responsibilities. This strengthens their identification with the village and their motivation to be engaged in the development efforts. It is mainly young people who are trained to become organisers for village development, and members of the 'peace corps'. At the same time they receive information in the fields of health (sexuality, drugs, suicide prevention), communication, (internet, library access) and environmental protection, while cultural and sporting events are also organised.

In view of the civil war in Sri Lanka, which has come to a temporary - and hopefully permanent - stop, Sarvodaya's efforts in the field of peace education,

conflict resolution and conflict prevention are highly relevant. Here, too, the emphasis is on children and young people. Discussions are organised on peace and faith between villagers and religious communities. The youngsters from the 'peace corps' are involved in conflict resolution and prevention activities in the villages.

Political influence

The Sarvodaya movement has been able to integrate spiritual revival, social change and economic development. It has helped restore a person's sense of pride and self-esteem, as well as that of the village community. The earlier feeling of humiliation and of powerlessness vanishes with the collective sense that is generated.

More than 50,000 new and existing rural enterprises have been supported and numerous new technologies have been developed. These services are provided to about 6 million members representing every race, religion and caste in Sri Lanka. In addition, with the involvement of nearly 15,000 villages, certain social and political influence is taking place at the national level. The Sarvodaya model has, in fact, already influenced national policy strategies in certain areas, such as health and education.

There are now about 3000 Shramadana Societies which are carrying out economic programmes, including community savings banks. In recent years a greater emphasis has been placed on linking up with markets, on business management and on research to improve the effectiveness of the work.

Nevertheless, this modernisation does not imply that Sarvodaya is moving away from the philosophy of the founder of this movement. Dr A.T. Ariyaratne's genius lies in utilising the dormant Buddhist philosophy and supporting numerous local initiatives. In this way Buddhist tradition, culture and spirituality stand at the basis of empowering rural communities for endogenous development.

References

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Sarvodaya Headquarters
No 98, Rawatawatta Road,
Moratuwa, Sri Lanka
E-mail: vinya.ariyaratne@gmail.com
Website: www.sarvodaya.org and
www.seeds.lk