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Press Release

Swiss assistance for children of Plantation communities

“A real building instead of a dilapidated shack gives the child a new attitude, a new spirit of attending a real school and changes their attitude to learning. It’s a feeling of importance of belonging.....” says a Pre-school teacher from the PREDO¹ Project.

The Bogawantalawa and Morar Pre-schools built by the Plantation Rural Education and Development Organization (PREDO) and funded by SDC, were inaugurated on the 02nd of August 2009. Up to now, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Sri Lanka has supported the construction of 9 preschools for underprivileged children of the Plantation Communities. The two new Pre-schools are located in the Nuwara Eliya District in the Central province in Sri Lanka, a major tea plantation area.

The Bogawantalawa Pre-school, which hosts 27 students, also has a toys library, the first of its kind in the plantation sector. For the poor people, having toys for their children is a dream. Modern toys are too much of a luxury for these children and thus PREDO proposed the idea of a “toys library”. The Morar Pre-school hosts 38 students, but more than 200 children stand to benefit from this as the building would be used as a center for children club activities.

The daily wage of a plantation worker is just Rs.290/- per day (they are the lowest paid workers in Sri Lanka). Given these circumstances, it is noteworthy to mention that every worker in both plantations, irrespective of whether he or she is a parent or not, contributed one day wages towards the building cost. In addition, all the unskilled work has been done on a voluntary basis. A notable feature of PREDO’s development work is that it ensures a maximum participation of the beneficiaries and the civil society. As a consequence, their end results are always double the original investment. SDC allocated Rs. 0.5 million for the Morar Pre-school and the value after completion is well over 1 million. The Bogawantalawa Pre-school was designed as a pre-school with a toys library and while SDC allocated Rs. 1 million, at completion it is valued at more than 3 million.

In addition to the toys library the Bogawantalawa Pre-school will have a children’s book library, a computer training centre and also a conference hall. Thus a simple pre-school building has now turned into a multi purpose training centre. Overall about 1000 children and about 3000 adults will benefit from these features. In addition, this building will stand as a centre to build friendship and brotherhood among the children of all communities. Though mostly used by the Tamil children from the Plantation community, Sinhala children from the surrounding villages will also have the opportunity to use and benefit from the centre.

¹ PREDO - Plantation Rural Education and Development Organization

Background information

PREDO is an organization registered with the Social Service Department and working towards the improvement of the living conditions of the plantation workers and rural people. It has been recognized by the Central Provincial Council as a “Best performing” NGO in the plantation sector, for its work with children, early child development, gender promotion, conflict transformation and peace building. A member of many networks in the sector and at the national level, PREDO has been in partnership with SDC since June 2007.

When they began this programme considering the plight of these less privileged children, the only objective of PREDO was to ensure the right of pre-school education to the children. Thus the majority of the 130 pre-schools run by PREDO are housed either in temporary or semi-permanent buildings. With encouragement of the community, PREDO approached SDC for funding for pre-schools to be housed in proper buildings. Realizing that this was an opportunity to help the people help themselves by harnessing their own resources, SDC agreed to support them.

Though Sri Lanka boasts 94% of literacy, comparatively only about 0.1% of plantation children ever enter University. A lack of good schools, severe shortage of teachers, poor transport facilities coupled with a lack of awareness and interest among parents result in poor standards of education in the plantation sector as a whole. Female children are particularly neglected as not being important for education.

While there is already a shortage of teachers in the schools of the plantation areas, the shortage of trained primary and special subject teachers is worse. Recently collected statistics show that there are about 80'000 children below the age of 5 years in the plantation areas, and only about 10'000 to 15'000 among them attend the crèches run by the plantations supported by the PLANTATION HOUSING SOCIAL WELFARE TRUST (TRUST), now known as ‘PLANTATION HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CENTRE.’ It must be noted that the crèches cater to the children whose age range from 3 months to 5 years and that they don't have the facilities that would make the crèches a “Child development Centre”. For these reasons even the children who attend the crèches do not get the opportunity for pre-school education.

As the State does not recognise pre-school as an essential component for education, neither the parents nor the management of the plantations consider pre-schooling important. NGOs like PREDO started pre-schools in the plantations amidst strong opposition by the plantation management. There is a dire need for advocacy for the importance of pre-schooling. Through much awareness and a direction from small organizations like PREDO and the community, the plantation managements are now beginning to see reason, but there is still a lot of advocacy work to be done.

In addition to the above, one of the serious problems that affects the plantation children is that they are being employed as domestic workers and minor employees in many parts of the country and they are completely deprived of education. Child abuses, child right violations discrimination on ethnic bases are some of the serious issues encountered by them while these and other issues lead to wide spread frustration among the youth in the plantations and they become easy prey for potential trouble makers. In the words of the Chairman of PREDO Michael Joachim, if we employ a child for work we are buying the child; and no child should be bought or sold!