



Why? and How can the project help the young girls and boys?

Birgitte Refslund Sørensen
Associate professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Copenhagen

The armed conflict in Sri Lanka has come to an end, but for many youths in the former zones of conflict, peace presents a number of new challenges as they strive to create a safe and secure everyday life and a promising future. In addition to living in an environment that is itself marked by decades of war and is in need of reconstruction, many of them have also been exposed to some traumatizing experiences. These may include:

- Killed, wounded or disappeared family members, friends and acquaintances
- Insecurity and fear due to checkpoints, mines, cordon and search operations
- Armed attacks or bombings of their community
- Participation in war activities, forced or voluntarily
- Physical or psychological assaults and violence against themselves and others
- Discrimination, humiliation and injustice
- Flight and exile in camps or with family and friends
- Interrupted schooling
- Subverted social norms: increasing violence, social problems, hatred and mistrust, and lack of role models

It is essential, not only for youths themselves, but for the entire society, that they get a chance to contend with these experiences, to find hope and trust in a better future, and finally that they get the necessary skills and resources to do so. THE LIGHT OF LIFE is a psycho-social project that takes upon itself this important task and helps a group of young people in Mannar with the aid of creative and artistic work, cultural events, training in conflict management, excursions, conversations and group discussions, small income generating activities, etc. We know from similar initiatives in Sri Lanka and other war-torn societies that psycho-social work like this can help young people to:

- Address and work with stressing feelings like fear, anger, guilt, and learn to accept and control these
- Get an opportunity to experience joy, happiness and fun with others
- Create a framework with routines and through this a more predictable and secure everyday
- Recreate trust in other people, so they dare establish social relations and participate in social groups and communities
- Develop new social competencies
- Make it possible to initiate or finish an education or training
- To get a job or initiate income-generating activities

Recovery from the experiences of armed conflict is a long-term process, but with time and good guidance these adolescents can get the good life they deserve, and even serve a valuable function as role models for others.