



PROMOTING YOUTH AS ACTIVE CITIZENS IN THE HILL COUNTRY OF SRI LANKA

Children & Youth Case Study Series

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Introduction

The lush, green landscape of Sri Lanka's Hill Country is the cradle of the world-renowned Ceylon tea empire. But these verdant hills are also home to the country's most impoverished population. Known as Hill Country or Plantation Tamils, they are the mainspring of the country's most prized export, the labor force that has worked Sri Lanka's tea plantations for generations, and they have existed on the fringes of Sri Lankan civil society for decades.

Since its inception over a century ago, Ceylon tea has been indivisibly linked with its logo: a fierce lion brandishing a sword, the same image that appears on the Sri Lankan flag.ⁱ It is said that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once remarked, "...the tea fields of Ceylon are as true a monument to courage as is the lion at Waterloo."ⁱⁱ The courageous beast is a fitting representation of the region, particularly of the people who call it home.



A TAMIL FAMILY IN HILL COUNTRY, SRI LANKA

Brought to the island as indentured laborers, Hill Country Tamils faced bitter recrimination by the Sinhalese majority in the shadow of Sri Lanka's independence in 1948. Perceived favoritism and protection by the British during their rule sparked resentment and assertive nationalism among the Sinhalese who reacted by excluding the Plantation population from the nations' citizenship act later that year.ⁱⁱⁱ A document that represented the national identity of the Sri Lankan people, its calculated exclusion of the Hill Country people legally shaped the social hostility that would characterize Sri Lanka's troubled future.

Ethnic tensions between the Tamil minority and Sinhalese majority smoldered for years (generations). Fueled by a series of widely-held myths that ethnic and religious minorities were untrustworthy, alien invaders and glorified by a zealous patriotism,^{iv} the friction persisted for three decades and would indelibly stain the fabric of Sri Lankan society.^v In 2009, the hostilities gave way to unsteady peace.^{vi}

Though they were granted citizenship in 1988,^{vii} Hill Country Tamils emerged from a dark stretch of history to a bleak reality: poor overall health, limited access to education, and widespread poverty hampered any constructive progress. Sinhala had been adopted as the nation's official language, functionally excluding Plantation Tamils from all political processes including voting.^{viii} Bureaucratic barriers denied economic and social justice and currently the Tamil population remains Sri Lanka's most economically and civically disadvantaged minority.

Today, 32% of the estate population lives under the poverty line and lack of access to nutrition, healthcare, education, water, and sanitation are daily challenges.^{ix} Voiceless for decades in what has become their homeland, Plantation Tamil youth inherited the disenfranchised reality of previous generations while facing challenges of their own.

This dynamic has created a culture of dependency that intensifies civic apathy; despite the struggles of their plantation society, Hill Country Tamil youth feel powerless to help. But the potential for a peaceful future for the Hill Country people can only be realized if those youth take action.

Search for Common Ground's Approach

"The youths are the pillars of the community. They have the strength to support the elders and children."

Shanmuganathan, Tamil School Principal

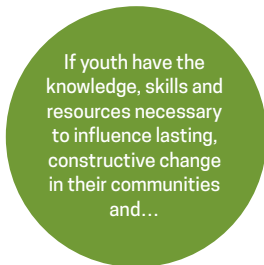
The world's leading conflict transformation organization, Search for Common Ground maintains offices in 35 countries across the globe, creating sustainable peace by connecting community engagement, productive dialogue, and multimedia initiatives to create lasting social change in conflict-affected communities. SFCG established a presence in Sri Lanka in the wake of the country's civil war with the aim of transforming the country's fading ethnic hostility into active progress.

Sri Lanka's Hill Country Tamil youth felt defeated and invisible. But SFCG believes the grim reality of the Plantation Tamil population need not be the birthright of its young people. As SFCG has demonstrated through 32 years of experience implementing youth-driven programs around the world, a region's

youth has the power to effect positive transformation, acting as catalysts for an increasingly aware, civically engaged, and empowered community.

SFCG Sri Lanka designed and implemented a program rooted in three interconnected theories of change aimed at enriching the reality of Tamil youth, shattering the persistent atmosphere of civic apathy through education and leadership and achieving a lasting, positive impact in the community.

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE THEORY



HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTION THEORY



PUBLIC ATTITUDES THEORY



The goal of the “Promoting Active Citizenship” (PAC) project, the pilot program of SFCG Sri Lanka,^x is a transformed Hill Country culture in which young people are equipped and inspired to address their community’s challenges by initiating productive dialogue and building relationships with decision makers, actively engaging in the community and advocating for their rights and the rights of their people.

Engaging Tamil Girls

Though the Hill Country Tamils have existed on the fringes of Sri Lankan society for generations, within the community is a further oppressed and marginalized group: its women. SFCG’s inclusion of Tamil girls in the PAC project was groundbreaking, countering an entrenched culture of gender disparity and patriarchal norms.

Though Plantation Tamil women comprise almost half of the labor force on the tea plantations, they have very little influence in decision making.^{xi} Until recently, though they worked alongside one another, men often collected their wives’ and daughters’ paychecks. Because of this dynamic, SFCG project officers spoke to the parents of female participants, allaying their trepidation and therefore enabling increased involvement by Hill Country girls.

Plantation Tamil girls gained self-awareness and confidence through their participation in the program. The program helped them strengthen their capacity to voice concerns, turn ideas into actions, and become positive community leaders

Young women and girls were more reticent in the presence of their male peers. During the course of the PAC, many young women conveyed that they had gained the confidence to speak out publicly, empowered by the belief that their ideas and opinions were no less valid than their male counterparts. Today, Nishantini is pursuing her vision of creating a charity cattle farm so that she can donate its proceeds to aid those within her community.

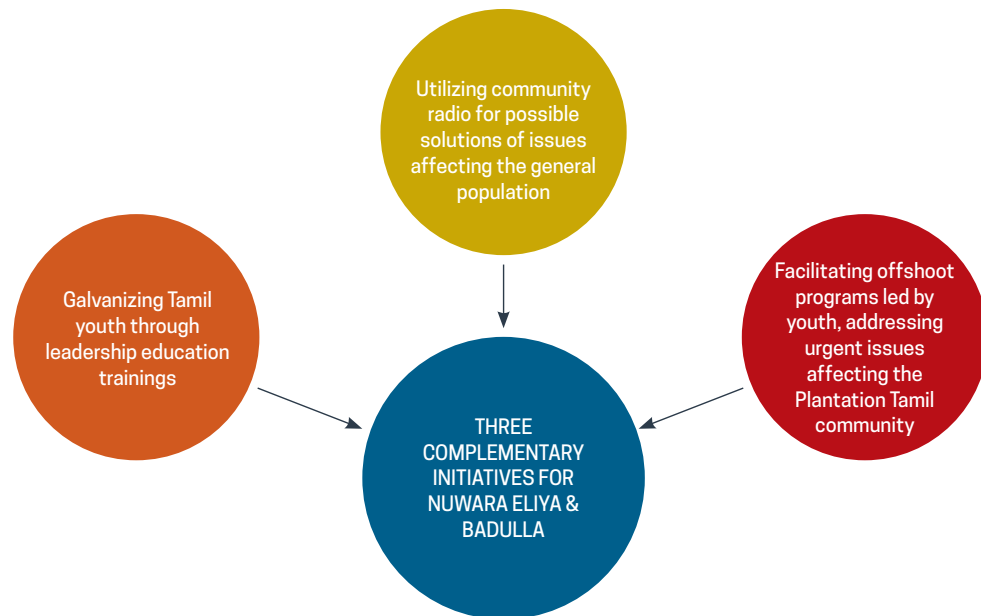
“Before the SFCG workshops, I lived in a box. Now I see that there are other ways and I am able to leave the box.”

Nishantini, a female youth leader



GIRLS PARTICIPATE IN LEADERSHIP TRAININGS.

Implementing a Strategy for the Hill Country Youth Leadership Project



SFCG FOCUSED PAC PROJECT IN THE NUWARA ELIYA AND BADULLA DISTRICTS

These three interconnected activity streams aimed to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of Hill Country Tamil youth and the broader community, empowering youth leaders as positive change agents toward a community more fully invested in civic life. To achieve its mission, the program engaged a range of community members: over 300 Tamil youth as well as plantation estate management staff, union leaders, police officers, government officials, business community members, and district-level educational officers.

Forming Youth Leadership Trainings: Empowerment through Education and Dialogue

With the objective of empowering the first civically engaged Hill Country generation, the PAC's youth leadership trainings incorporated 50 male and female youth participants across 10 estates. Essential to the success of the program was its representative diversity: in addition to gender balance, participants were selected from across community micro-classes (families of laborers, supervisors, management, and government), multiple localities, and diverse education levels.

SFCG Sri Lanka sought to provide a forum for Plantation Tamil youth to gain what generations before them lacked: the knowledge and skills to make their voices heard and positively influence their future. Leadership trainings emphasized education and practical application with a core focus on civic and political rights. Participants also learned conflict analysis, leadership, analytic,



YOUTH ENJOY TEAMBUILDING DURING BADULLA LEADERSHIP TRAINING

A YOUTH TRAINING EXERCISE

bookkeeping, and project planning skills. By integrating rights issues and individual and community empowerment, young people were able to create a space in their communities' civic discourse and represent their interests in political spheres.

Also central to the leadership trainings were issues with immediate relevance to community members. Due to language discrimination the Tamil community had been rendered almost literally voiceless. The implications of this dynamic were far-reaching, but manifested in one very tangible way: the completion and submission process of government-issued identification papers. Required to access any government service including pension payments or even enroll children in school, language and bureaucratic obstacles prevented many Hill Country Tamils from basic civic services.

Through the trainings, youth became aware of their language rights, learning that they could speak Tamil with local government authorities who often spoke only Sinhala but are also legally required to work in Tamil. The program curriculum clearly outlined the process of submitting the documents and inspired a group of young leaders to take this knowledge to their community's most vulnerable members. The trainings animated a core of young people with social awareness, a strong team work ethic, and the skills and confidence to address problems constructively. Youth who completed the trainings were seen as role models among their peers and the skills they gained also enabled them to design and execute community action projects that tackled urgent community needs.

Radio for Active Citizenship: Multimedia

In order to understand their rights and how to advocate for them, Hill Country youth had to develop a new skill set in the leadership training program. In order to become community leaders, they needed a forum to amplify their voices to engage the broader Tamil community. A key focus of SFCG's approach to conflict transformation involves the rich potential and broad reach of multimedia. In the rural context of Sri Lanka's plantation country, the most widely accessible means of multimedia is radio.

Accordingly, through partnership with the local Power Foundation, the radio element of the PAC project provided a creative space for youth to express their concerns and ideas as community representatives, interacting and fostering dialogue with key decision makers. For the first time ever, Hill Country youth had a public platform for expression.



PUBLIC PLATFORM FOR EXPRESSION FOR HILL COUNTRY YOUTH

Framed in soap opera style as a love story, the radio drama incorporated social, political, and economic issues affecting the plantation community, weaving them into the plot, including language issues, civic rights, money management, and employment and education concerns. The drama also addressed socially taboo issues of alcoholism, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.



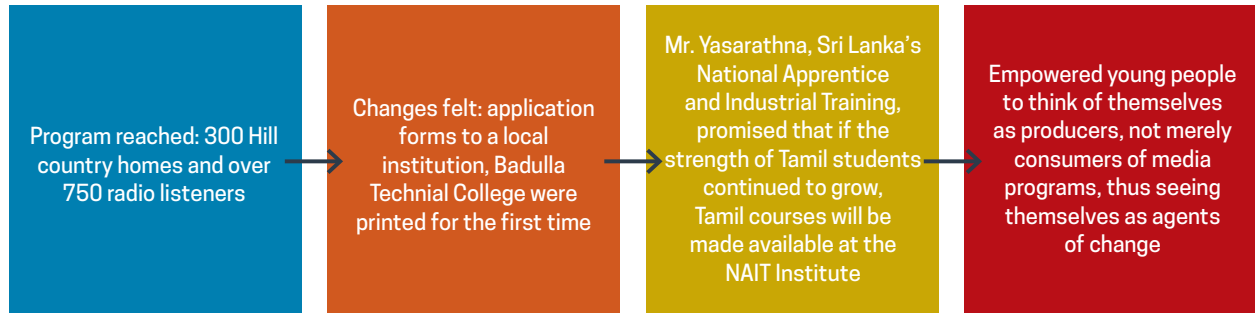
TAMIL YOUTH PARTICIPATE IN A COLLABORATIVE MEDIA

A symptom of the culture's gender discrimination, domestic violence has become so normalized in Tamil society, as one youth member explained, "a man hitting his wife is like a tradition." The radio drama directly addressed gender-based violence as well as alcoholism, a significant contributing factor, by presenting them in a creative, character-driven way. Listeners were able to identify with these real-life issues while simultaneously learning how to address the problems constructively as the stories unfolded.

Recorded in front of a live audience, the radio talk show was eagerly received both by youth participants as well as listeners throughout the plantation community. Popular because of the relevant topics it addressed, the show also

facilitated direct communication between plantation workers and government officials on issues such as obtaining legal documents, access to trust fund and pension fund payments, and labor laws. The show became a forum for community members to communicate their concerns directly to local authorities who were obliged not only to listen but respond constructively. Youth participants also felt empowered to voice sensitive concerns including a sense of feeling socially ostracized and discriminated against by older Tamil generations and feelings of youth potential being ignored.

The media component of SFCG's PAC project served as a creative outlet for youth and a valuable tool for promoting social cohesion and productive dialogue. The radio program boosted participants' confidence while creating a buzz around the issues the shows addressed. Young people also said it was empowering to hear their regional Tamil dialect on the airwaves, a language which was otherwise



SOCIETAL SHIFT AFTER RADIO FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

considered too colloquial or inferior to be broadcast publicly. The radio shows also directly impacted local stakeholders and government authorities, improving communication between them and community representatives.

This shift was meaningful in a community where dependency syndrome is the heritage of the plantation management system, a clear indicator of positive attitudinal change.

Community Action Projects funded by Seed Grants: Community

Pivotal to the success of the PAC program, its third element facilitated concrete youth engagement by providing youth with freedom and resources to enact the skills and values they gained in leadership trainings through self-directed community action projects. Funded through seed grants of \$300-\$400 USD each, 9 regional youth groups took action based on perceived urgencies within their communities. All of the projects were implemented in partnership with government officials, thus helping to build inter-generational dialogues and long-term relationships that constructively engaged youth and local stakeholders who never before had collaborative contact. In this way, the seed grant ventures strengthened social cohesion, fostering relationships while addressing issues of immediate consequence in the Plantation community:

“We previously thought plantation youth were lazy and not interested in their education. However, the talk shows being aired are giving us new information [on youth issues].”
Mr. Kumarasiri, Government Agent

Mobile service assistance to elderly and underprivileged Plantation Tamils to access government services.

- Often illiterate, navigating the process of completing paperwork and providing documentation to state authorities was daunting for many.
- Middlemen known as “brokers” capitalized on the opportunity, offer assistance with the paperwork and pocketing as much as 50% of the workers’ pension funds as payment, which meant grave losses to already poor and elderly workers.
- A total of 200 applications for birth certificates and ID cards submitted - 77 people received documentation and hundreds more learned how to secure the documentation themselves

A youth group leader declared: “We youth club members helped elderly people who were vulnerable to exploitation from brokers by filing EFP and ETF documents free of charge and ‘putting the brokers out of business!’”^{xii}

Awareness campaigns to address growing dropout rates and increase knowledge of labor laws.

- Interviews with community members suggested that the value of education was not a priority for many and parents often encouraged children to prioritize work over school.
- After dropping out, teenagers often move to the capital of Colombo where they re exploited as child laborers or work for very low wages under inadequate conditions.
- When they lose their jobs, these youth return to a plantation community that perceives them as failures and with little education, they are worse off than before.

Other seed grant projects addressed social issues such as youth unemployment and school dropout rates. Empowered with the education they received through leadership trainings, youth were able to address these growing social issues effectively. As one 11-year-old youth group participant described: “I worked in a grocery shop after dropping out of school. I never knew how important it is to study until I joined this group. Now, I am determined to go back to school.”

Job fair to address growing concern of youth unemployment.

- One of the most pressing concerns identified by plantation youth was the need for decent livelihoods.
- In this spirit, one youth group used seed grant funds to hold a job fair to address the economic concerns faced by Tamil youth.
- The event invited private sector employers, recruitment agencies, and plantation youth and the result was a successful model with the potential to be replicated in other estates.

Training initiative tackling taboo subject of domestic violence.

- The pervasive culture of gender discrimination in Tamil society immediately contributes to the issue of gender-based violence in the community.
- One youth program tackled the issue with a domestic violence training initiative aimed at educating participants, how to address it constructively, and the resources available to victims.

Lasting Transformations

One indirect influence of the youth group projects was the improved image of Tamil young people (in the eyes of mainstream society?). Previously considered more of a nuisance than a force for good in the community these projects helped to change overall perceptions and lessen tensions. These tensions were a hindrance to positive collaboration between these two groups who ultimately depend on one another. As Karunahavan, a youth group participant noted, “We are living under the estate management. We can’t challenge the management; we have to work with them.” Youth engagement with community members through their independent seed grant projects simultaneously served the community while transforming their image and facilitating strong working relationship between youth and community stakeholders.

“The relationship is very close. The management are inviting us to their meetings, listening to us, and giving us priority.”

Thiyago, youth participant

Another youth group member, Thavamalar noted: “Before the project, we had no contact with the management,” but evidence of the transformed relationship between youth and estate management is clear. Siraj, a youth club president confided to SFCG representatives that he and his companions were reluctant to submit their seed grant proposal, afraid it would be rebuffed by plantation management. To their surprise, the proposal was not only approved, but their youth group was also granted full support on other projects including the building of a regional preschool. From his experience, Siraj conveyed his belief that the culture of dependence among plantation youth on estate management can be reduced. The relationships forged during the community action projects continue into today.

Challenges Faced by SFCG

High Turnover among Youth Participants

- Hill Country youth have greater financial aspirations than previous generations but, due to social stigma stemming from its association with indentured labor, tend to spurn the plantation economy that sustains their parents.
- As a result, youth often seek employment outside the region and the project struggled to maintain cohesive participation.
- With turnover as high as 30%, the PAC program experienced a lack of continuity between sessions as leadership skills left the region along with participants.

Radio Production Teams overloaded with responsibilities

- The Radio Production Teams had to juggle field visits, monitoring programs, editing content, and producing the final output.
- Suffered issues with time management while juggling selecting content, script writing, recording, and editing.
- Experienced technical difficulties: poor signal strength and mechanical disturbances limited the reach of radio programming.
- To compensate for regional reception failings, show content was copied onto CDs and distributed to youth groups.
- SFCG provided community groups with sound systems to broadcast the program at community meeting locations such as temples and schools.

Challenges Faced by SFCG (cont'd)

Geographic considerations

- Project locations were selected based on youth group availability and partner presence as opposed to physical proximity.
- Access to remote areas was also compromised due to difficult terrain and poor road conditions.

Gender participation

- Active participation of female trainees in class session faded in the presence of male colleagues.
- Continuing to enroll boys and girls in programs together will promote a gender-balanced youth culture but SFCG could offer additional trainings in female-only focus group settings.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

SFCG Sri Lanka's pilot project was groundbreaking at the individual level and community level, as activities transformed civic relationships and strengthened social cohesion. At its heart were the program's youth, the inspiration and initiative that drove the PAC project to successful completion demonstrating that, when empowered by education, youth can accomplish extraordinary things.

Marked by decades of struggle and oppression, the Hill Country Tamil legacy is a sad reality of many estate workers today. However, Tamil youth refuse to accept this grim inheritance. By allowing youth to express themselves and drive the project, the PAC program was able to achieve its goal of increasing civic involvement and empowerment within Tamil communities. Youth-driven programming was the key; the local knowledge and empathy of Tamil youth created projects that ideally suited their plantation communities.

The impact of SFCG's Hill Country youth initiative forever altered the landscape of life in the Plantation communities influenced by the program. A theme that has long been a guiding principle of SFCG programs across the globe, the PAC project further illustrated the transformative potential of an empowered young generation.

Endnotes

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