

The diligent workers of OMI

As well known, North of Sri Lanka suffered from years of civil war and still there is a lot of poverty and deprivation. One of the organisations, which are working on the reconstruction with and between the needy people, is OMI, the abbreviation of 'Oblates of Mary Immaculate'. The 'Fathers' are mainly active in the countryside. They work on community building, they teach children and adults, they support small farmers and they exploit agricultural land themselves.

After an introduction by Jaffna Province Superior Very Rev. Fr. Edwin we visited a series of initiatives, which have been realised last years with support of our Dutch partner organisation Havonos and Dutch charity 'Wild Geese'. The projects are still in progress:

- The 'Youth Education Centre' near Jaffna: three years ago constructed for further education to (unemployed) youngsters. Against small compensation they get lessons in technical skills, computer use and English.

Also drama and music are practised, part of trauma recovery. The interest of young people is big. At the moment extra classrooms are constructed, with donations from Havonos and SEHH. The building was nearly completed and... 'within the budget, Director Father Philip proudly states.



With Fathers Philip and Seeger



Classrooms nearly completed

- Learn/work farm in Iyakachchi (near Elephant pass): a real farm with animals and cultivation of crops. Cows deliver milk; pigs continue to grow and become fat; chickens lay eggs and are slaughtered. Women from the surrounding, often widows, work and learn how to set up a small business at home. At the same time there are workshops and courses.

Children get extra lessons, soon also on computer. This education costs money, but OMI-Father Avalin ensures, after one year the farm will make sufficient money to cover the cost of the whole centre.

Learn/work farm in Iyakachchi: a showpiece of the Oblates





Cowshed, with in the middle Fr. Avalin



School children playing after their evening classes

'Sieco-Centre' in Mullikulam: a community home, called after the founders Sieni and Cor Schouten of Havonos. The centre is located tens of kilometres away from cities. It only can be reached through miserable sand roads, full of pits. The building offers the village people room for courses, workshops, gatherings and special events.

OMI Father Harance is managing the centre. He also cultivates about 5 acres of land with just planted palm and banana trees. His ambition is to grow vegetables. Therefor he needs an irrigation system. The just deepened well is already there.

Last year Havonos and SEHH bought a Pick up for this centre, which is used for transporting crops from farmers to the city (where they get better yield) and for bringing children to school in rainy season. In cases of urgency it also operates as ambulance. The only motorised transport in the surrounding!



Sieco-Centre in operation: education to young ladies



New Pick up

Pre-school in Mulankavil: the existing school is out-dated and too small. OMI has a plan for a new building. Havonos and SEHH are willing to contribute and they will ask the Dutch Wild Geese to share.

OMI-Father Seeger mentioned they also want to cultivate their surrounding land of 20 acres, now still partly fallow.

He is thinking at creating a 'model farm', which can be of significance for surrounding farmers. This ambition seems to us quite a job, for which you need a lot of knowledge and skills.

Perhaps Government can facilitate such ambitious initiative?



Well and already cultivated land behind Centre



Fr. Harance shows desired vegetable: eggplant

- A new OMI-location in a village with for us unpronounceable name Thrachanarmaruthamadhu (so we say T-madhu): the just appointed Father Vasanthan has plans for constructing classrooms, including computer room and living room for teacher.

As he told, population in this area will grow. People remain and Government is intending to build housing schemes by providing land and budget to people who want to settle. Reconstruction of countryside. OMI notices the need for community building and extra education. New plans for T-madhu will arrive!

- Girls Home 'St Anna' in Mankulam: under inspiring guidance of Sister Chrisani (Good Shepherd) about 40 girls are residing here. Earlier they were most orphans, nowadays children from families with severe social problems. With help from Havonos and SEHH the kitchen and sanitary were renewed. During our visit we could admire the results. The home is neatly again!



New showers with well and water tank



Sr. Chrisani shows the innovations



De trip along the OMI-centres provided a nice overview of the progress reached last years. But there are sorrows too. Up to now certainly not all disadvantaged people are involved, active participation could be better and should be stimulated further.

Besides this social issue, people suffer from failed harvest, due to extreme droughts and sudden abundant rainfall. Here you really notice effects of climate change.

There is a need of specific measures on water management to meet these challenges. An opportunity for experiments on OMI-farms? The efforts and enthusiasm of OMI-Fathers is as great as ever.... and work inspiring. Certainly worthwhile to continue our support!

Caritas Sri Lanka

This time we also became acquainted with another aid organisation, namely Caritas, the executive arm of Roman Catholic Church.

Their focus lies on fighting against poverty and bringing back human dignity, without ethnic distinction and religious origin. They operate on all fields of life, for instance from economic existence to health care. We saw them busy with education to adults and production of prostheses for handicapped. So, in assistance to needy it's a professional player of size. Of course Caritas Father Anton gave us some suggestions for relief...



Fr. Anton (Caritas) explains the need for prostheses



Fr. Avalin, Annemieke and Marjolein from Rockids and Fr Seger discuss computer education in Iyakachchi

Rockids

Our contact with Caritas came through Marjolein Meijer, during some years active in North with her Dutch organisation Rockids. As ICT-specialist she enthusiastically promotes computer education in backward areas. Now she is involved in a computer project in Iyakachchi. Soon the construction of a special classroom will start, with financial contribution of Havonos, SEHH and Wild Geese. In the meantime Marjolein organises the program 'Train the ICT-trainers': Sri Lankan teachers get a professional training in The Netherlands.

At the same time Rockids has an eye for more coherent aid programs and from that point of view they consider Caritas and OMI as appropriate partners. SEHH, Havonos and Rockids will discuss the opportunities of more cooperation.

Look back

The journey was valuable. For our relations it's always stimulating showing their progress and exploring new perspectives. After all those visits we always return home with a huge bag filled with plans and good intentions. We will discuss everything in our SEHH Board and we will consult our partner Havonos. Anyway we can move forward another year!

Lydia van der Kieft - Piet Houtenbos

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More information on our Foundation SEHH you find on www.sehh.nl (with English homepage); and for Foundation Havonos see www.havonos.nl