



5. THE DEPARTMENT IN COLOMBO

Organisation of the Mission
Implementation of directly managed projects
Dialoguing with the implementing partner
Administrative management in Colombo
Civil service volunteers

The Mission Structure in Colombo was the key point to all the work done by Italian Civil Protection in Sri Lanka, a physical and human extension of the Department which for almost three years served as an integrated office, even though it was thousands of kilometres away.

More than 140 people went to Colombo from Italy to work at the Mission: Department officials and technicians, cooperation experts, professionals, guys and girls from the civil service. Many stayed for months in Sri Lanka, others took turns in scheduled shifts, and still others stayed for brief periods, just long enough to make their special skills available. All were welcomed with a smile and by the helpful availability of the Mission's Sri Lankan associates: Kamal Gunaratne Kospela Wattage Don, Ernst Patrick Perera, Jayasinghe Chandradasa, Melanie Martil Dolphine Anastasia, Mangalika N. Chandrasekera, Wasanthie Watuntantrige, Rawani Muhandiramge Dona Dilushika, Iroshani Kotigalage Perera, Carmel Mary Caldera and finally Rienzie Warnakulasooriya and his group of tireless drivers.

5.1 ORGANISATION OF THE MISSION STRUCTURE

Work at the Colombo office was very similar to that of other typical coordinating and management offices that Civil Protection sets up locally when there is an emergency: frenetic work with no limits on hours, regulated more by outside deadlines and events than by a work schedule worked out on a drawing board, with miscellaneous intersecting skills and tasks, all needed to achieve the goals set. In Colombo, the challenge to be won was really complicated. In Rome it was quickly decided to follow the rules of administra-



tive law, to operate according to standards for the use of public funds (even though most of those managed by the Department are not public), to work only with the local market, working in absolute transparency and always in agreement with the local authorities, and to not waste time. But in Colombo these decisions had to be “translated into Sri Lanka”, i.e., made compatible with Sri Lanka, starting with an explanation of

the meaning and objectives of our work for our local contacts, so that we could then begin the patient and intense work of exploring the laws, customs, structure and costs of the various works, market conditions that changed because of the conditions created by the presence of so many donors, the government’s intentions and guidelines which often meddled in sector regulations, changing them greatly and creating the need to revise and adapt choices or decisions already made. Typical in this regard was the matter of the buffer zone along the coast where the authorities, for reasons of safety and prevention, prohibited the reconstruction of houses, schools and other structures. The extent of this area was subject to various successive decisions. Initially it was supposed to be two hundred meters wide all along the coast, but soon it was realised that such a scope was impractical in various places, where populated areas were right in front of the ocean with lagoons behind them. In subsequent versions of the buffer zone measure, the original measurement was retained for the eastern area of the island and reduced to a hundred meters in the south, but later the government decided on more varied modifications according to the specific place, while in many cases the local authorities ended up authorising reconstruction in the very same sites destroyed by the tsunami. Many projects included in the Programme were directly impacted by these regulatory changes. There were three main work sectors that involved the Mission Structure: implementation of directly managed projects, dialogue with implementing partner, and administrative and accounting management.

5.2 DIRECT IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS

Some of the staff monitored and implemented directly the projects, especially relating to the design and construction of schools and hospitals. Anyone working in this sector has to deal first with the choices made by the Sri Lankan Ministries of Education and Health regarding reconstruction of school complexes and hospitals, which were put into actual instruction manuals to be used by the international operators, and with the complex bureaucratic procedures in the area of proposals and designs for each building, which were discussed locally with authorities, school principals, health directors, community representatives and the final users. At the Thotagamuwa school the design was discussed even in classrooms: the children did their “homework” by drawing the changes they wanted to ask for, including raising the floor for a series of classrooms in order to “keep them safe from the sea”. In this case, it was possible to make them happy, but this dialogue is made difficult by the need to set limits and say no to many requests which, we knew, would only be rejected at a higher level, when it came time to resubmit the case, a necessary check-and-approval circuit throughout the system of central and local authorities interested in the project. The decision made in Rome to follow the instructions of the Sri Lankan authorities and a general criterion of sustainability of choices relating to any kind of construction was in any case very helpful, especially in the health and educational field. The practical consequence of this decision was for example elimination of air conditioning from the design of schools and hospitals, the resizing of the standards for medical and school equipment, and the adoption of construction materials and modules then widely used in Sri Lanka even though they



had been abandoned in Italy long ago. Rejection of air conditioning for the new facilities, which many people in Italy thought a rash decision not corresponding to a criterion of full respect for the needs of the final users, was not only a good choice but also essential for ensuring the use of the completed construction: the cost of electricity necessary for the air conditioners would in many facilities have eaten up more than 50% of the annual budget available for all operating expenses. The same criterion of sustainability was used to select – in agreement with the local managers – supplies, furnishings and equipment for the facilities, which were all purchased on the island so as to support the economy and make it easy to find parts. The Department's design work did however respect self-imposed minimal criteria in the selection of materials, for example avoiding the use of Eternit roofs and insulation, still accepted in Sri Lanka but objectively harmful. The same line was followed by the NGOs in the construction and rehabilitation of final housing. Once the design phase was completed, we found ourselves facing the next problem, that of conducting local tenders to select the firms to be contracted for the construction work, setting up a precise contract with each of them, with the technical specifications, a forecast of completion times, the cost of the works, terms of delivery and payment. In Sri Lanka there is a registry of construction companies deemed suitable by the authorities for constructing public buildings. We made use of this to identify those to be invited to the tender: experience was to teach us that in Sri Lanka too, as often happens, the criteria for making up this





type of list do not always ensure completely reliable results. In the end, however, all the works were contracted out, often more than once, because some companies gave up on work sites already under way, often in the disrupted areas in the eastern part of the island. This led to the final phase of the work, for architects, engineers and administrators who monitored the directly implemented projects. These months were dedicated to watching over the work sites, discussing with the contractors and labourers, helping them when possible to speed up the supplies, to modify projects in progress to deal with the unexpected unavailability of materials to be replaced with others more easily found, to meet deadlines, extending them when the environment made it objectively impossible to meet them, and making the instalment payments when everything went according to plan. The

last two experts who remained to the very last to complete the Department's projects returned to Italy in late August 2007, after the last school was turned over to the local authorities and people of Koddaikallar, on the 15th of August.

5.3 DIALOGUING WITH IMPLEMENTING PARTNER

The work of the NGOs and other partners, and the development of their projects represented the Mission Structure's second area of involvement, with staff permanently assigned to monitor the projects and initiatives all over the island. The Mission Structure's activity in this area took the form of many days of travel for on-site inspections,

holding meetings on every problem of general interest for all those involved in reconstruction on the island, detailed analysis of the reports and proposals for reformulation of projects, so as to provide precise answers and reduce waiting times for the proponent NGOs. This constant dialogue with the implementing partner, as the NGOs and their partners were called in some official documents, made it possible to modify all the projects being carried out, adjusting their content, resizing or in some way expanding the list of activities called for, often revising the schedule of deadlines and final deliveries. The result was positive, since all the projects concluded with the agreed-upon objectives having been reached. In only one case, which involved an NGO put in a difficult situation by events far from Sri Lanka, was it necessary to enforce the guarantees subscribed at the start of the work.

5.4 ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT IN COLOMBO

The Mission Structure's third line of work was administrative and accounting management of the Programme, performed by personnel from the Department's administrative office who managed daily communications between Rome and Colombo, the supply of cash on hand, Mission expenses and those of the personnel missions and payment flows formalised in Rome and transferred to Sri Lanka. In Colombo, administrative personnel played an essential and irreplaceable role, providing the information needed to operate both to the companies in charge of monitoring the Programme's progress and to the audit commission and the reporting working party, and to the Department's own administration, which was constantly able to avoid delays in paying suppliers and partners. The Sri Lanka Programme, for which we are presenting the report here, has no outstanding administrative or accounting behind, thanks to a computerised management system that enabled the Colombo office to talk to Rome while both were looking at the same video screen. Without this setup, and especially without the staff who supported this activity every day, the flexible and modular management of the projects, the constant adaptation to the situation, the constructive dialogue with partners and locals, and the work of the Trustees Committee and the donors' representatives, who were always allowed to express their opinions based on scrupulously updated information, would not have been possible. It is because of close attention to these administrative and accounting aspects, often misin-

terpreted or considered useless wastes of bureaucratic time, that Programme management was never interrupted because of a need to “get a handle” on spending: each project was endowed with specific financial coverage, based on the most accurate forecasts available at every moment, which was revised if and when the project was rediscussed and redesigned in its objectives. The criterion followed was prudence and common sense: the figures indicated, both for the share attributed to resources deriving from donations and the share attributed to the costs incurred directly by the Department, always took into account the maximum spending amounts foreseeable as part of estimates deemed reasonable. For this reason, when each project was closed, operating funds were often left over due to the discrepancy between what the companies invoiced and the sums that could have been spent within the reasonable range. For that matter, that is precisely what tenders are for, when they produce a virtuous competition among possible suppliers of the same goods and services.

For this same reason, in the final version of the summary table of the General Programme of projects, it was decided to lower the share attributed to the Department from the precautionary level of approximately six million Euros, which had remained unchanged for almost all 2006, to the share of real costs of approximately four and one-half million Euros, which was achieved primarily by sharply curtailing Mission Structure’s staff starting in mid-2005, when all projects were under way and we had gone beyond the peak of human resources required in the investigative and start-up phase.

Also attributable to the presence in Sri Lanka of administrative personnel was the feasibility of the latest idea regarding checking the correctness of the work, which the Department shared with the Trustees, the working party and the Audit Commission. This involved submitting the work completed for each project to examination by an acceptance commission, carried out using the same parameters and criteria as any acceptance testing of a public work in Italy, before making the final payment and formally closing out the accounting.

5.5 CIVIL SERVICE VOLUNTEERS

While these were the three main work areas of the Colombo Mission Structure, it should be recalled that hours and hours of commitment were required from the personnel there, to greet

journalists and visitors, to assist the Italian authorities visiting the island, to maintain contact with the international donors and agencies present in Sri Lanka, to prepare official travel and missions, to welcome personnel from the organisations responsible for monitoring and audit, to be available for providing information even by telephone to contacts who had difficulty remembering the time difference between Italy and Colombo.

Finally, we should also consider the presence at the Mission Structure of some civil service volunteers sent to Sri Lanka under a project approved by the Italian National Civil Service Office, designed by the head of the Department as a way to share with ten young Italians interested in international cooperation and humanitarian aid the opportunities for experience and growth offered by a unique programme like the one run in Sri Lanka. The nine volunteers – seven girls and two boys – who managed to get past the initial impact of the country’s reality – one girl decided after a few days to drop out – lent their services in part at the Department’s operational sites and in part with NGOs and other Department’s implementing partner within the Programme.

Their presence was significant, managed with extraordinary willingness and skill, positive enough to lead the department to recruit two of them for the Mission Structure in Colombo, and to publish a separate volume coming out together with this Report of their testimonies, accompanied by comments of authorities, experts, friends and managers of the Department who followed their adventure with friendship and passion.

