

## The early phases of the Programme

**ROBERTO FEDELI**

Coordinator of the temporary Mission in Colombo until June 2005

I have been dealing with emergencies, mainly in developing countries, for many years. I had seen floods, earthquakes, landslides and hurricanes, but this was the first time I found myself dealing with the damage caused by a tsunami. When I arrived, what I found was quite different. The calm, flat sea looked like something on a postcard from some tropical country. Three days before, that sea had brought so much destruction and so many deaths. It seemed impossible. For the first 500-

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1,000 meters from the shore, there was only rubble. The rescue teams were still finding bodies. Everywhere. In the wells, in hotels, under the mud, trapped between vehicles. The survivors were wandering around like zombies, trying to find their belongings.

I went to the Matara hospital to see what they needed. The building had suffered little damage. There were people everywhere. At the entrance, a tight cluster of people stood in front of a monitor showing photos of the bodies found. The director greeted me on the second floor, in a small and terribly crowded room. He seemed

very tired, but he was very kind. He gave me a long list of urgently needed drugs and asked me if I could get them. Our cargo had already arrived at the Colombo airport. That same day I managed to get him the drugs that were on the list.

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I was handed endless lists of schools, health-care facilities, hospitals and public buildings. At the Education Ministry, the planning director gave me all the legislation on school building construction in Sri Lanka. It was imperative to follow their standards. If we had done otherwise, we would have created additional problems for them. The same thing happened at the Health Ministry and the Infrastructure Ministry. We wanted to start immediately with design and construction, but it wasn't so easy. The authorities had prohibited reconstruction for several hundred meters from the shore. It was almost impossible to find public-domain land near populated areas. The government had no funds to buy land from private owners. Had we done that, we would have created an inflationary trend that would have caused further harm, especially for the poor. This phase was very delicate. On the one hand, there was a strong desire to help and start reconstruction immediately, and on the other, we needed to understand the context and respect the country's rules and regulations.

We began an endless series of consultations with the central government, the regions and provinces of Sri Lanka. They were all very cooperative and did everything possible to assign land to us for reconstruction. Civil Protection's technical staff began

the design work with their local counterparts, following the applicable legislation. In a short time the first calls for tenders went out. The first construction sites opened.

The reconstruction machine was under way.

### Thanks and blessings “in the name of the Italian people”

**LUIGI GRANDI**

Coordinator of the temporary Mission in Colombo as of June 2006

When I was asked to coordinate the Mission in Sri Lanka in July 2006, the project programme had already been set up with projects assigned to implementing partners as well as directly managed. Some emergency planes had already been completed successfully, but all the reconstruction projects were under way.

I found myself catapulted into a workplace that struck me at the time as atypical. I had an impression of almost complete anarchy: the Mission staff greeted me kindly, and then they disappeared into their offices, behind their computers, on the telephone, apparently without taking orders from anyone, and for every question that cropped up, questions that any office manager would normally resolve alone, e-mails, telephone calls and faxes immediately went out to Rome. A few days were sufficient to wipe out that initial impression of confusion: everyone involved in Colombo knew perfectly well what they were doing and what the objectives were that had to be reached as quickly as possible, whereas the constant, almost circular communication with the Department in Rome was attributable not to an individual desire to lead but to the decision-making mechanism set up and organised

to operate in Sri Lanka, in which local decisions at all levels were immediately shared with the Department in Rome and with those who were involved for the duration of the operation in managing the administrative control, monitoring and assessment of what was being done. To make this machine run at its best, it was enough to coordinate everyone's efforts, ensuring that every individual commitment, every phone call, every e-mail, every field mission was useful for the Mission as a whole, to save time and effort. I dedicated a major share of my time to this objective, getting the Mission's three operational nuclei to interact. The first group followed the work of the NGOs and other

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implementing partners, cooperating with them to quickly find shared solutions to every problem. The second team, consisting of architects and engineers, worked on setting up all the directly implemented projects. The third section of the Colombo Mission consisted of Department personnel responsible for administration. By coordinating everyone's work, we saved precious time: those who went out on a mission

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returned with information useful for the other groups; communications with Rome became more organic and focused; the most important issues to be dealt with became clearer, as did critical issues. In this way I was always able to have a clear picture of deadlines, steps to be taken, people to meet with, and the solutions that had to be found quickly so as not to slow down the programme. The most serious problems were caused by the civil war, as 11 of the 14 schools that the Department built, as well as the hospital built from the ground up in Kinniya, were in the eastern part of the country, where the clashes between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers were the harshest and longest. The project managers went up and down the coast monitoring the progress of the works undertaken by the local construction companies after award of the contracts, with constant missions despite the difficulties of travel (over six hours to travel 300 km, when everything went well). Many of the problems encountered by the local firms – procurement of construction materials, delays in completion, problems finding manpower in the Tamil areas – were resolved only through the commitment of the Mission's experts. The constant sharing of problems, with at least weekly joint meetings, and constant contact with the Department enabled us to bring home results that I would term at least unlikely, both in terms of completion times and in resolving unforeseen problems and difficulties. For example, in managing contracts we had to deal with a civil lawsuit with a construction company that we considered non-performing: we had the satisfaction of getting a judgment from the Colombo court that ordered the company to compensate us for the damages suffered because of its conduct. Anyone

who works in other countries knows that it does not often happen that a foreigner, even if there for humanitarian reasons, wins a decision from a local court.

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The most delicate part of my work was constantly managing the network of relationships with people in the Sri Lankan government and the various central agencies that played major decision-making roles for the success of our programme, especially the Health and Education ministers and their associates, and the heads of the Finance Ministry, who had ultimate responsibility for decisions relating to our spending not being subject to the Sri Lankan equivalent of VAT. Not to mention the constant relationship with the Italian embassy in Colombo, to ensure that our representatives were always aware of the initiatives we were undertaking. I

had very little time left over, just the minimum necessary to figure out what we were doing, to dedicate to “public relations” with the international agencies and NGOs from other countries in Sri Lanka, and to participate in the many interminable meetings held for coordinating purposes. Perhaps more active participation in these activities might have given greater visibility to our work, but I am convinced that I made the right decision in preferring to use my time in much more operational efforts.

Now that the Project Programme, approved in January 2005 by the Trustees Committee, has reached a positive conclusion, I feel like an actor who, involved in playing his part full-time in a tour that lasted more than a year, finds himself for the first time trying to sum things up with the curtain down and the lights turned off. What I am feeling is extraordinary: I had the good fortune to participate in an adventure that put an Italian company on the international stage, a company that met its commitments through to the end, turning over to the tsunami victims everything that had been promised to them, that worked without a pause to bring to a close in less than three years an ambitious programme with absolutely concrete achievements. We did everything, faced difficulties and fatigue, right to the end. We did more than so many other donor countries; we concluded our commitment while other international donors at times completed decidedly smaller shares than what they had committed to doing. What I feel is something between haughtiness and pride, for having gone around Sri Lanka with the Italian flag attached to the car so we would be recognised, and wearing the Civil Protection vest to every official completion ceremony. But mostly my conscience is clear; I am pleased to tell

of what I did and what I saw together with so many Italian colleagues who were there with me in Sri Lanka. We had funds to spend to help the victims of the tsunami; they were funds generously offered by an entire country, our country, by an entire people, my people: we did it meticulously and consciously, so as not to waste even one Euro or one gram of the trust in us that we felt from Italy. I am pleased to convey to all those who donated resources to help people and families in a country as far away as Sri Lanka, and to the many Italians who in various ways worked with us, the endless thanks, smiles, handshakes, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian blessings that I was able to collect, especially during the ceremonies closing out our projects and turning over to the beneficiaries what we had built and achieved, but also whenever I went back to the places where we had worked to check on them one last time. Your donations became homes, boats, microloans, hospitals and schools, but most of all they became looks, eyes, thoughts and words that express something as simple and powerful as a thank-you. An incredible transformation, rare in our times.

### At the Sri Lanka construction sites

**BARBARA REGGI**

Architect of the Mission in Sri Lanka

I left Rome on September 5, 2005, and arrived in Colombo the following morning. That was the perfectly normal start of what was to have been just a job but which turned into a two-year adventure.

I call it an “adventure” because it was the experience of a lifetime, more than a job, that grew and developed day after day, established right from the start in its essential

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aspects but still waiting to be constructed and moulded based on the infinite needs emerging out of daily life in the field. On more than one occasion I have turned back to reflect on and marvel at the early days when, out of the multitude of intentions, commitments made, objectives to be reached, and practical elements to be organised and managed; we succeeded in creating an orderly system with solid rules that enabled all of us, as members of the Sri Lanka Mission, to bring to term the results we had set for ourselves, and to do so successfully.

I believe that I also contributed to that first phase of organising components and creating models and procedures, and I think I can say that laying solid rails between which we moved throughout the entire mission kept us from losing our way and enabled us to reach the realisation of such a vast programme.

As project manager for the directly managed projects in the south first and later in the east, I was there for all phases of construction, dealing with professionals, businessmen and local authorities, workers and beneficiaries.

I found myself in direct contact with a people I did not know and whom I first observed carefully, learning to interact with them and figuring out the best way to reach a common objective, like the construction of homes, schools and hospitals.

And so there were frequent meetings with local architects and engineers who – to promote the local economy – had been assigned to design the buildings, to revise or modify the designs in the wake of changed needs among the beneficiaries or to comply with laws and construction regulations that were still unknown to us or that had changed as we were working.

Throughout the project approval process – validation of the designs, approval of the coastal authorities and, in the case of the Cultural Properties Ministry, obtaining construction permits and compliance certificates for the works done and various other documents for execution of the works according to local legislation – the authorities, except in a few cases, proved quite cooperative, albeit with constant requests.

In terms of the bureaucracy, I encountered the greatest difficulties in the eastern part of the island, an area traditionally less accustomed than the south to construction development, given the social and political events that have raged there for so long.

The relationship with the Sri Lankan construction

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companies put me in close contact with the local situation, since I had to interact with managers and workers in companies of all types, in terms of importance, economic scale, technical preparation and business skills: the idleness and confusion, combined with the certainty of result, of a public firm like CECB, involved primarily in building hospitals; the versatility and ingenuity, which made it possible to deal easily with the unforeseen, of large private companies like the Sierra group, which has managers and technicians who are strongly oriented towards achieving the best result; the “familiarity” and genuineness of small individual companies headed by entrepreneurs for whom a handshake is still equal in importance to agreements in

writing. The greatest difficulties were associated with meeting completion times and maintaining a good quality standard.

The areas where I worked had a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, and it seemed to me that one of the factors in happy coexistence was respect by all for the holidays of each group. If there is a Buddhist festival, the Muslims also refrain from work, and this does not help with getting a reliable picture of business days. If you add to this the clashes between the government forces and the Tamil Tigers – the armed extremist wing of the LTTE – and the “hartal” – general strikes called locally as protests – and a certain fatalistic attitude that considers putting things off until tomorrow to be the most normal and acceptable response to any new problem, you get an idea of how many opportunities workers had to literally abandon the work sites, causing delays in the established construction programme. Political and social tensions, which grew substantially after mid-2005, often led to reprisals among the various ethnic groups, even directed at workers who were forced either to leave the work site or remain locked in for days on end under threat of violence. Another consequence of the growing level of conflict was an increase in run-ins with armed men as we went around the towns on the country’s east coast. More than once I found myself dealing with requests for construction machinery and equipment from the not well identified members of this or that political faction, or from men in the military or police who wanted the same things to keep them from ending up in “the wrong hands”. They all showed up Kalashnikov in hand at the work site making requests that I always refused, asking them to allow us to continue our work in peace, since it

was their children, their families and themselves who were benefitting from it.

The armed men always went away then, taking their leave with a polite smile... strange contradictions that always left me speechless.

The post-tsunami construction boom, especially in the areas of the south where the Sri Lankan government had decided to concentrate the construction

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development, created a substantial influx of manpower, leaving other areas bereft, with a significant increase in labour costs. In addition, once they saw the sharp increase in demand, many of the unemployed suddenly became construction workers, leading to a veritable collapse in labour quality.

In Sri Lanka most of the work force recruited by the construction companies is managed by “captains” and does not constitute a steady presence at construction sites, since they are wooed away every so often by a higher bidder. It is therefore easy to understand how difficult it can be to keep workers on the job and to have reliable, skilled labour. This phenomenon leads to problems for owners who, to ensure progress and good quality in the work without incurring contractual penalties, found themselves forced to raise workers’ pay, reducing their own profit margin, and this created endless problems for me as well, since I had to ensure

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a result while keeping quality high, the prices established in the contract constant, and the delivery date certain.

Another problem I had to deal with was a widespread attitude of approximation, according to which most activities are started but not carried through to the end by site workers and managers, who often decide unexpectedly to start something else. The most effective treatment for this haphazard approach on the site is visual checks, but that is not always possible. I therefore tried to communicate to them the importance of completing each thing first before going on to the next: often I called together the workers at the site to make them aware of this, introducing concepts of order, consequentiality and planning, using the simplest words and examples I could find. In the end the company managers themselves called the workers to meetings and told them about the importance of continuing with this approach to their job. And this was one of my greatest satisfactions, because I had the impression that I had managed to convey to those people something that could ensure good results for them over time. Who knows? Perhaps those businessmen are still giving "lessons" at the work site...

I did not always manage to make myself heard, especially with one company which, employing Muslims in a Muslim area, had difficulty acknowledging a woman in a managerial role. In that case, I really struggled to be obeyed, and at times I thought I would be unable to meet the established deadlines. But even then, the most difficult works were successfully completed, albeit not without some dissatisfaction on my part over some things that were not done with greater care.

As is well known, being a woman is not an advantage in a profession that has always, all over the world, been primarily a man's, especially in a management position. They often questioned me about that, but I have to say that, during the period I worked in Sri Lanka, I rarely paused in my work in that country over the problem of gender: I simply did my job, almost forgetting I was a woman, always trying to give my utmost with commitment and professionalism. I simply felt I was a human being who worked and I encountered no substantial differences in treatment compared to my male colleagues: if in fact certain working relationships were difficult for me, they often were for them as well. I would like to end my account by acknowledging the inaugurations of the donated buildings, arranged by the principles in the case of schools, by the health directors in the case of hospitals, and by the beneficiary citizens in the case of houses. I knew the turnover ceremony would be an important moment when the labours of everyone who had contributed to completing the building would take on a definitive value during a party that, in Sri Lanka, represents a sort of "social birth" for the new building, its coming to light and making itself known to the entire community.

On those occasions, my task was to coordinate many different forces, heterogeneous and independent from one another: the workers who worked down to the finishing touches; the suppliers of furnishings and equipment who unloaded their goods from the trucks; the principals and health Directors who, at the head of an array of students and hospital staff, worked hard to clean up the newly constructed buildings and furnish them. The beneficiaries always went to great pains to arrange for the participation of the local authorities,

and sometimes of some minister – including the Health Minister, Mr. Siripala De Silva, who often attended our inaugurations and delivered speeches praising and thanking the Italian people for their donations – and the highest local religious authorities, mainly Buddhist monks, for the customary blessing. Finally, there were so many discussions and rehearsals to organise the dances, songs and all ritual phases of the ceremony, and the meetings and talks to draw up the often long list of speeches and talks.

Those decisive and frenetic hours leading up to the “big moment”, which I experienced with a lump in my throat, always seemed to me inadequate to imagine that, as if by magic, the countless parts to the whole puzzle would fall into place, giving life to splendid spectacles of popular celebration of the completion of construction, of giving and taking possession of the new buildings, of the start of their new life, which will remain for a very long time in the hearts of those who took part in them. And in my heart, forever.

