

100 Projects for Peace: Healthy Community Curry Kitchen

Anne Gleason
Washington and Lee University
gleasona@wlu.edu

Overview

The Healthy Community Curry Kitchen is a weekly dinner provided free of cost to an impoverished community in Sri Lanka. My inspiration for this project stems from experiences working in a public hospital in Sri Lanka in the summer of 2005. As I fell in love with the Sri Lankan people and way of life, I also witnessed the intense conflict between Sinhalese, Muslim, and Tamil people as well as the widespread effects of malnutrition. Today, UNICEF reports that around 30% of Sri Lankan children and 25% of women are affected by malnutrition, the war continues, there are vast disparities between coastal/urban and rural areas, and many families struggle to provide adequate food for their children.

Based on the premise that all Sri Lankans have a right to both healthy bodies and healthy communities, the Curry Kitchen takes a multifaceted approach to promoting peace. For the purposes of this project, peace is defined as a sense of wellness, both social and physical, in which stressors on the community, family, and individual are reduced and healthy growth is facilitated.

The Curry Kitchen's specific aims are 1) improving community solidarity, 2) reducing food insecurity, and 3) improving nutrition by providing health education. Additionally, this project will help reduce disparities between urban/coastal and rural communities.

Goals

Community Solidarity

While many Sri Lankans come together for religious festivals, the Curry Kitchen will provide a secular meeting point and facilitate open interaction between neighbors. During the meals, community members will be encouraged to discuss common goals and community members will work together to improve conditions for the community as a whole.

While the project will be supervised by myself and local authorities, the Curry Kitchen will be run exclusively by community members and health education will be provided by both community members and health professionals who work within the community.

Reducing Food Insecurity

On the most basic level, the Curry Kitchen will provide one reliable, complete meal each week for families in the community. Also, community members will be given the opportunity to supplement their income by preparing the food and cleaning after the meal. Each week, ten community members will be paid 355LKR (\$3.29USD) to prepare each meal. This wage is based on the current GDP per capita (\$1,200 as reported by the US Department of State) divided by 365 days per year; this is expected to be generous given high rates of unemployment and low daily wages in Sri Lanka.

Improving Nutrition by Providing Health Education

According to UNICEF, the most prevalent micronutrient deficiencies affecting children and women in Sri Lanka are iodine, iron, and vitamin A deficiencies. Both iodine and iron deficiencies impair childhood cognitive functioning and can lead to mental retardation; vitamin A deficiencies impair immune system functioning and may cause blindness. Together, these three constitute an enormous public health challenge.

The Curry Kitchen will address these specific deficiencies by serving foods rich in iodine, iron, and vitamin A which are commonly used in Sri Lankan cooking and can be

accessed by the community. Such foods include fish (iodine), chick peas, beets, meat (iron), and carrots, mangoes, and eggs (vitamin A). Additionally, at each meal, information about the importance of proper nutrition, consequences of malnutrition, and advice on how to provide nutritious food for the family will be provided.

Location and Practicalities

There are vast disparities in income, health, education, and standards of living between urban coastal and rural communities. Therefore, the Curry Kitchen will be established in a rural community in Kalutara District which has not received adequate funding to institute government nutrition projects. Dr. Sanjeewa Kalaratna, Medical Officer of Planning for the Deputy Director of Health in Kalutara District, will identify an appropriate community based on available facilities, lack of government funding, income, and both social and nutritional needs.

The Curry Kitchen will be held in a local school where the kitchen equipment will be used to provide daily government funded lunches to students. All equipment and non-perishable food items will be securely stored at the school; perishable foods will be purchased fresh each week. Supervision of the funds will be entrusted to local, non-governmental contacts such as Mrs. Ligaya Kaluarachchi, Desk Officer for Projects Abroad in Sri Lanka and my most trusted advocate.

Timeline

February-June, 2007: Confirm location; establish contacts in community

Late June, 2007: I arrive in Sri Lanka and begin working with the community

Week 1: Initial meetings with community members; kitchen equipment purchased

Week 2: Continuing discussions with community members; food purchased

Week 3: Healthy Community Curry Kitchen Grand Opening

Week 4: First community organized Curry Kitchen; evaluation and needs assessment

Ongoing: Fundraising events in US.

Sustainability

Given the enthusiasm and dedication of Mrs. Kaluarachchi and Dr. Kalaratna, local administrative support will exist for the duration of the project.

The \$10,000 grant is expected to cover all the necessary kitchen equipment as well as food and staffing for one year. Because the operation will be entirely turned over to the community, it is expected to be sustainable as long as there are funds for staffing and food (\$7,570/year). Additional funding may be available through the local government and I will plan fundraisers and seek other funding sources to sustain the project.

Expected Outcomes

The Healthy Community Curry Kitchen is expected to become a regular, well attended community event in which invaluable personal ties are created between community members. The reliable, complete meal and health education are expected to reduce stress on families—particularly breadwinners—and improve physical health for women and children. While it will take more than one meal per week to improve nutrition, the Curry Kitchen will instigate positive changes in health for the community as a whole and the men, women, and children residing therein.