

From A to Z: A Student's Informal Field Guide to Sarvodaya and Sri Lanka



This guide has been adapted from a handbook written for UW-Madison School of Social work students by Colleen Roark Condon as part of her Wisconsin Idea Fellowship in 2004. Colleen first visited Sri Lanka in 2003, then returned in the summer of 2004 to help pave the way for others.

In 2005, while still an undergraduate, she coordinated tsunami relief efforts on behalf of Sarvodaya USA, helping raise millions of dollars, send scores of volunteers and promote the “5 Rs”—relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, reconciliation and reawakening—for hundreds of thousands of people in Sri Lanka.



Table of Contents

<u>I. Introduction</u>	<u>2</u>
The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement	2
Preparing for the Trip	6
Rules: Do's and Don'ts	6
<u>2. From A to Z</u>	<u>8</u>
About Our Host Country	8
Advice from Sarvodaya International Unit Staff	17
Guidance from Sarvodaya's Past International Volunteers	18
Staying at Sarvodaya Headquarters in Moratuwa	20
Ways to Remain Emotionally, and Spiritually Happy in Sri Lanka	21
How to Stay Physically Healthy in Sri Lanka	22
Regrets that Past Volunteers Believe You Can Learn From	23
Difficulties Volunteers Have Experienced and How They Can Be Dealt With	23
Volunteers' Favorite Aspects and Happiest, Most Fulfilling Memories	25
<u>A Few Words from the Author of this Handbook</u>	<u>26</u>

Introduction

This handbook will deepen your understanding of the country and nationwide movement you are preparing to visit. Designed to answer many questions you may have, it offers essential tips and directions for a memorable, successful and safe experience in the field.

The "field," however, is home to our hosts. We travel to be part of their culture for a very short time; to serve and to learn lessons we can apply in our own lives.

That's why you will find information here not only about the culture and geography of Sri Lanka, but also about life in the movement and the villages it serves. Our goal is to help you know more about what you bring to this experience as well, so you can adapt to conditions quite different from Madison, Wisconsin. We welcome your thoughts and look forward to discussing this with you. There is much to learn.

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement

Sarvodaya is Sri Lanka's largest and most embedded community development organization. Sarvodaya means "the awakening and well-being of all." This people's empowerment movement has been working since 1958 to achieve this vision. Sarvodaya USA tells Americans that Sarvodaya means *share yourself for the good of all*. The movement's name expresses their deepest philosophy:

reaching the common good through sharing what you have to offer. But Sarvodaya is not just philosophy. It is action. It is real. It is in the villages and of the people of Sri Lanka.

As of 2005, Sarvodaya's empowerment and community development programs covered a network of people in 15,000 villages, 34 district offices, more than 100,000 mobilized youth, and the country's largest micro-credit organization with a cumulative loan portfolio of



billions of Sri Lankan Rupees. Their welfare service programs served over 1000 orphaned children, teenage mothers, and elders. Sarvodaya's 4,335 pre-schools served over 98,000 children.

This network allowed Sarvodaya to respond immediately to the tsunami crisis and serve throughout the country in 340 relief camps. Sarvodaya trucks, volunteers, and supplies were the first to many areas where neither the government nor other organizations had the ability to deliver relief. Sri Lankans rated Sarvodaya above all other organizations in responding to the tsunami. It also won recognition from Transparency International and the UN HABITAT Scroll of Honour Award. Each year, visitors come from throughout the world to the Sarvodaya headquarters in Moratuwa to district centers and villages. Some may stay for days, others for months.

Preparing for the Trip

You'll have a lot to do to ease your own mind as well as your family's, and to get ready for this program. We'll start with very practical advice. Much of this is easy, but there's a lot to learn. Words to the wise: *start now*.

Seek health care advice

Regardless of your individual health needs, you should make an appointment with a travel nurse. You can make a free appointment with a travel nurse at University Health Services by calling 608.265.5600 or see their web page about travel check-ups:

www.uhs.wisc.edu/display_story.jsp?id=108&cat_id=32. You can receive the appropriate vaccinations and prescriptions. Take a short medical history and list of your past vaccinations (with dates) to your appointment.

If possible, do some research and read this handbook, before going to your appointment. This will enable you to be an active patient, asking for what you think is best for you and rejecting what is not. For example, people who are prone to bacterial infections, such as strep throat, may want to ask for a prescription of a general antibiotic, just in case. If you are prone to other things, you may want to ask if there are preventative measures you can take.

Talk to the nurse about any health problems you are having. It is best to deal with all health problems before you leave for Sri Lanka, as the health care system there might be difficult

to navigate and the different environment may exacerbate any problems if left ignored. The travel nurse will give you related health literature.

Buy gifts.

You may want to buy small gifts for people you meet in Sri Lanka, especially because Sri Lankans will give you gifts before you leave. Although you will be able to find gifts to give in Sri Lanka, some people prefer to give gifts from their native country. Some ideas are: nice soaps, shampoos, conditioners, stationary, American candy, or coffee table books. These are all things which are culturally appropriate and rather expensive in Sri Lanka. Also, you may meet children who you wish to give things to and story books, coloring books, markers, or toys are fine gifts. Feel free to be creative, but remember to be culturally sensitive.

Get financially organized.

Go to your bank to get traveler's checks and tell your banker your plans. They might have financial information or suggestions which could be helpful while you are in Sri Lanka. Make sure you plan ahead for paying any necessary bills while in Sri Lanka (although you will have internet, telephone, and mailing access). Plan to bring at least \$100 in cash with you on the trip.

Gather things that explain who you are.

Visual aids such as photographs of your family, friends, or home, postcards of your hometown or of UW-Madison, or objects that represent your culture are great ways to explain to people who you are, even if you don't speak the same language. These also can be great icebreakers and conversation starters.

Start packing...or at least thinking about it.

The following packing checklist below supplements information you will probably receive from the Study Abroad office.

You have read about the following items elsewhere, but whatever you do- don't forget these essentials!

- ☐ This handbook!
- ☐ All of your emergency and identification papers!
- ☐ All of your contact information lists.

Also remember:

- ☐ The gifts you bought for your future Sri Lankan friends.
- ☐ Photos of your family, friends, home, the UW, and the U.S.
- ☐ Umbrella

- ☐ Bandanas, headbands, rubber bands, and/or handkerchiefs. Although you can find them in Sri Lanka, they come in very handy when sweating so much.
- ☐ Sandals- if you didn't wear them before, you will now! Men sometimes wear closed shoes to work but for women, closed shoes are unusual. Cheap sandals are prevalent in Sri Lanka as well, unless you are a large size.
- ☐ Tampons- they are rarely, if ever, found outside of Colombo and are hard to find even in Colombo. They are expensive and usually only the thin kind. Pads are common and not hard to find at all.
- ☐ Mosquito repellent. Your travel nurse will recommend the kind to buy for Sri Lanka. Check that you are not allergic to the brand before arriving in Sri Lanka.
- ☐ Specific toiletries, if you are particular about your brand. Some brands can be quite expensive in Sri Lanka.
- ☐ Sweater or thin jacket- you will need something warm for the central highlands, and the airplanes can be freezing!
- ☐ Summer hat- although baseball type caps are available.
- ☐ Bras and underwear can be hard to find if you not a small size.
- ☐ Soap to hand-wash your clothes.

Do not bother bringing (save your money or your suitcase space):

- ☐ Mosquito net- they are really cheap in Sri Lanka.
- ☐ Warm clothing- no more than one or two pieces.
- ☐ Laptop computer. We will only need a limited number of these. Access to power will be limited and the chances of damaging your computer are fairly high.
- ☐ Travel adapter. They are cheap in Sri Lanka.
- ☐ Alcohol and drugs! There are serious penalties for possession of drugs in Sri Lanka, possibly the death penalty. Alcohol is strictly prohibited at Sarvodaya headquarters.

“Listen to yourself. Learning is finding out what you already know. Doing is demonstrating that you know it. Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as you. You are all learners, doers, and teachers.”

-Richard Bach

Rules: The Do's and Don'ts of Sarvodaya

Sarvodaya policies, staff, and leadership will tell you there are very few rules while working or living at Sarvodaya. The few strict and non-negotiable rules they have are:

1. No smoking, drinking, or illegal drugs on Sarvodaya premises (this includes hostels) or at Sarvodaya functions.
2. No eating meat on Sarvodaya premises (this does *not* include fish).

However, there are many cultural and organizational rules and norms which international volunteers are strongly encouraged to follow. Abiding by the “dos and don'ts” which Sarvodaya staff and international volunteers have compiled, will prevent problems, offensive or dangerous situations, and tension between Sarvodaya staff, Sri Lankans, and international volunteers.

DO

- Laugh!
- Persevere!
- Be a problem-solver.
- Be independent and dependent at the same time. Be able to not have a lot of guidance or hand-holding in some areas, but be willing to work with others and receive help from others frequently.
- Be unassuming, respectful, open-minded and conscientious.
- Entertain multiple points of view and see many perspectives.
- Be able to handle ambiguity and confusion.
- Smile. It's the universal greeting and will be appreciated in Sri Lanka!
- Be grateful.
- Be patient.
- Acknowledge and validate your feelings. Your Sri Lanka experience can be stressful, but if you validate your feelings and hang in there, you will pull through and things will get better! Feelings can change quickly in these situations.
- Be prepared for culture shock when you get to Sri Lanka and when you return to the U.S. (although not everyone experiences culture shock).
- Be aware that you are volunteering on an Asian tropical island with two dominant cultures, a recent civil war and extremes of wealth and poverty that you have never seen before. Experience this not as a “problem” but as the reality that much of the world faces. Allow this to affect you, allow the Sri Lankan, Sarvodaya experience to evolve you.
- Learn some Sinhala and Tamil.
- Think about what skills or resources you can share with your Sri Lankan hosts before you leave the U.S.
- Record what you do during your time at Sarvodaya.
- Use mosquito nets while you sleep!
- Wear conservative clothing.

- Be aware of what you say and to whom. Sarvodaya is a tight community, and you never know who will find out what you have said.
- Take seriously cautions about pick-pocketing and other forms of stealing.
- As Dr. Ariyaratne tells people, “send loving-kindness to others”.
- Keep Sri Lankan culture in mind in your actions and work. Be aware of the culture you come from, and try not to impose that culture on Sri Lankans or Sarvodaya.
- Take little gifts to give when you leave because people will give you gifts.
- Try to keep in touch with Sarvodaya and the village people you meet.
- Try to have experiences with both Sinhala and Tamil people.

<p>DON'T</p>

- Panic.
- Worry! (Most people are willing to overlook a foreigner's mistakes.)
- Be hot-headed or arrogant.
- Be finicky, high-maintenance, or picky.
- Side with people or isolate yourself from the Sarvodaya family since Sri Lankan culture is focused on and centered around families.
- Implement or change things without permission.
- Be a burden, create more problems or work for your hosts, be too demanding, or bossy.
- Feel obligated to do something you are not comfortable with.
- Look at the people of Sri Lanka solely as poor and in need of charity. The aim of Sarvodaya is to promote long term sustainability and independence, not to make people dependent on help.
- Force your work ethic on others or demand efficiency from people.
- Think your problems are unique.
- Go to isolated places with a man alone (if you are female) where you cannot or do not know how to get away.
- Be too flirty in public (or private if you don't want an advance made).
- Come back to headquarters obviously drunk or on drugs.

From A to Z

“Marco Polo considered Sri Lanka the finest island of its size in all the world, and you'll likely agree after exploring the country's fabled delights.”

– Lonely Planet

About Our Host Country

Like any country in the world, Sri Lanka has a long, complex history and situation composed of a matrix of parts. The people who live there now are likely to be much more aware of their thousands of years of history than we are about that of North America. In the context of that deep knowledge, our two weeks or so on their beautiful island are brief, indeed.

Many Sri Lankans will interpret your knowledge and understanding of Sri Lanka and their culture as a sign of respect. Any time you spend in preparation for the trip is likely to have a significant impact on your ability to fully appreciate what Serendib (the island's original name) has to offer. So have fun reading!

Arts

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Attractions

See http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka, <http://www.srilankatourism.org/> and <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Banking and financial

The currency of Sri Lanka is the Sri Lankan rupee. With inflation, the exchange rates fluctuate with time. For an up-to-date currency conversion, see <http://www.srilankatourism.org/curconv.htm>. One Sri Lankan rupee is worth about 110 cents.

You will need to convert your dollars into rupees when you reach the airport. There are many bank windows to choose from. Traveler's checks will get a better exchange rate than cash. Generally, banks will charge a standard fee for converting money.

In Sri Lanka, banks and ATMs are widespread, except in rural areas. There are numerous banks and ATMs near Sarvodaya headquarters. ATMs usually operate during daytime hours. Most ATMs in main cities, such as Colombo and Kandy, will take international cards. Most ATMs near Sarvodaya headquarters in Moratuwa will not take

international cards. So, if you can't get to Colombo for a period of time, you will have to use cash, traveler's checks (often accepted, but not everywhere), a credit card, or cash a traveler's check at a bank.

Credit cards are widely accepted by shops in Sri Lanka, even in Moratuwa, but all stores will not take a credit card. In some cases, shops might add a surcharge to the price of the merchandise. This is not acceptable, and the card company should be contacted so that corrective action can be taken.

Banking hours are from 9 am to 3 pm on weekdays. Some private banks have evening hours. Having a local card will save you big hassles if you lose your card or have bank issues, but is not at all necessary for daily life in Sri Lanka.

You can find more information at: www.srilankatourism.org/banks.asp and

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka/money.htm

Business

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Clothing

Cotton clothes are best because Sri Lanka is **VERY HOT and HUMID!** Office wear should be nice, comfortable, and not too tight or revealing. Sri Lankans almost always wear very well-ironed clothes, and the hostel matrons have irons that you can ask to borrow.

When dressing for any type of Sarvodaya work, meetings, visiting Sarvodaya offices, or attending Sarvodaya functions, **males** can wear nice slacks and collared or nice shirts. Most types of shoes or sandals are fine.

Females can wear blouses or nice shirts and tailored trousers or long skirts (below knee length). Although females will most likely not be harshly criticized for wearing pants, some people might tell you that wearing pants is not appropriate. Females should not reveal the shoulders, chest, knees, stomach, or back. Always wear a bra. Any type of shoe or sandal is fine. High heels are not appropriate.

For casual wear, when not at a Sarvodaya function or at work, most anything is ok, unless it is tight or reveals the knees, the shoulders, the stomach, or the back. Especially if females are traveling in public transport or around Sarvodaya headquarters, revealing any of these parts of the body will lead to rather unpleasant encounters. When you are not sure what to wear, it is safe to dress like you would for the office.

If working in the fields, you will be able to wear casual slacks, t-shirts, etc. Males can wear shorts, but females should still not wear shorts or shirts that show too much of the

shoulders, chest, or back. Simultaneously, it is even hotter in the fields, so you should wear your coolest clothes.

There are a wide variety of quality clothes available in Sri Lanka for VERY cheap prices, and you can stock up once you arrive. (For example, you can buy pants, skirts, and shirts for around five dollars; of course there is a range of prices).

Bring a bathing suit just in case you decide to visit a tourist beach or hotel pool. There are limited places you can find a bathing suit in Sri Lanka (although in Colombo it is not that hard if you are small and thin). If you are female, be careful before jumping into a bathing suit, as it is offensive to do so everywhere except specific places. For example, if you go to a beach on a Sarvodaya field trip and your coworkers say they are going swimming, you probably will be expected to go in your clothes, if at all. Changing into a bathing suit could be offensive or be an “invitation” for criticism, extreme staring, or unpleasant encounters.

Cultural Sensitivity, Taboos, and Customs

Social

Try to use your right hand when eating, paying people, or receiving something from someone. Your left hand is considered unclean by many people in Sri Lanka.

Do not insist on paying for yourself when out with Sri Lankan colleagues or friends. If you want to pay a bill then do it discreetly or say, “please, I'll get this one.” Pushing payment of your own money rather than your hosts or fellow guests, even if it's done out of generosity, is likely to be insulting to a Sri Lankan. At the same time, all Sarvodaya employees are paid very little.

However do not make the assumption that all are poor, even though some are. So, at least offering to pick up bills is a nice and appropriate thing to do. Just be sure to respect others' wishes. Going Dutch is generally a foreign concept in Sri Lanka, and it is more common for each friend or college to take turns paying the whole bill.

Most Sri Lankans are rather curious, extremely friendly, and helpful. You might find total strangers asking you a lot of really personal questions. It usually is because they are genuinely interested in you and your background. Be prepared to answer at your discretion or laugh them off. In some areas foreigners are still quite a novelty, so expect to attract some interest. Even in places where there are foreigners on a regular basis, you can still expect to attract a lot of attention.

Many Sri Lankans, particularly in the villages, will ask for your address (in the U.S.), so they can write to you. This is a common part of getting to know each other and should not be interpreted as threatening. Most people who ask for your address will not actually write to you, but some might.

Sri Lankans are very hospitable and you may be invited to visit their homes. When you visit they will generally offer you tea (or sometimes another drink), many times without asking. If they do not ask, it is polite to always take what they give you and take a couple of sips even if you do not want it. Most Sri Lankans will also offer you food, regardless of the time of day. It is polite to at least try to take at least a little of whatever they offer.

When invited to a meal, Sri Lankans would be thrilled to see you eating with your fingers. There will most likely be a lot of advice on how to do it. Although cutlery will be available most places, rural villages may not have any. If you are nervous about eating with your fingers, you might want to practice before going.

The hosts will always ask you to serve yourself more and more. If you can eat second or third helpings, it is considered a compliment to the host. However, you can refuse politely. It is useful to know how to say you are full in a variety of ways in Sinhala and Tamil if you are traveling to the North or East. You most likely will use these phrases many, many times.

The 'Yes or No Nod' is also uniquely Sri Lankan. You will probably have a difficult time understanding which nod means 'yes' and which means 'no' because they look similar. Spend some time identifying the difference!

Many westerners experience Sri Lankans to be much less likely to speak directly and bluntly about negative things. Sri Lankans might be very hesitant to say 'no' directly or tell you that you cannot do something. Instead some people might tell you to just wait a little while or give you a more ambiguous answer.

Tipping is at your discretion. There is a 10% service charge at most restaurants and bars. Any tips are welcome; 10% or less of the amount of the bill is ok.

Religious

You should always make it a point to remove your shoes and headgear, unless your head covering is of a religious nature, when you visit temples and kovils. You should also be well covered and do not expose your shoulders, stomach, or legs when visiting shrines.

When taking photographs of statues of the Lord Buddha, you should not sit or stand on statues, and avoid taking photographs with the statues if possible.

The Buddhist monks are very noticeable in their bright robes. Treat them with respect and do not shake hands with them. If a monk comes on the bus and all the seats are taken, stand up to give him your seat.

If you are female, never touch a monk, and do not talk to a monk if he does not talk to you. If a monk does speak to a female, she can feel free to respond and make conversation about respectful topics and ask questions about Buddhism. If you are female, even if a Buddhist monk asks you for something, you should not give it to him directly; you should pass it to a male to give it to the monk if possible. If you are female never sit next to a monk. If the person next to you on a bus gets up to give a monk the seat, females should move as well.

Work-related

At work, be patient and observe for a while. You will find that people in most offices are not afraid to laugh- a lot! Most people who work for Sarvodaya, regardless of their position, want to have fun in the office.

Productivity is not the sole or main objective in work. Caring for your coworkers, forming relationships, and having fun are all very important on the job. You could be asked what you earn, your religion, if you have a boyfriend or girlfriend or even to sing in front of the office! People will most likely just want to be friendly. Of course, how much people talk to you will also depend on how busy the particular office or person is; so don't take it personally if some people are not asking you many questions.

At Sarvodaya, you will be instructed to call most people by their first name, plus one of the words for brother or sister. If a male named Ravi is younger than you, call him Ravi Mali (younger brother). If Ravi is older than you, call him Ravi Ayya (older brother). If a female named Udani is younger than you, call her Udani Nangi (younger sister). If Udani is older than you, call her Udani Akka (older sister).

Outside of Sarvodaya, not all Sri Lankans go by this rule of calling each other brother and sister, although some do. If other people call someone Mr./Miss/Madam/Chairman/Sir, you should as well. When talking to an older person use Mr./Mrs./Miss, unless asked to do otherwise. Older people might be insulted if they are not properly addressed. Mostly, people will introduce themselves by their first name and ask you to use it.

Gender and sexuality-related

It is generally not accepted for women to wear revealing clothing- especially anything that shows the chest, legs, stomach, or shoulders.

Males and females generally interact less closely, freely, and frequently than in the U.S. However, in work settings, you will most likely have to interact with members of the other gender. Males and females generally do not touch each other in public, and males and females who are not romantically involved generally do not touch each other at all.

Males touch males more often and more freely than in the U.S. Two males holding hands or having arms around one another in Sri Lanka is quite common and does not

imply that they are romantically involved. Females also touch each other freely in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan culture is less sexually liberal and open than the U.S. It is not considered respectable by most people to talk about things of a sexual nature. It will not be accepted in Sarvodaya to have members of the opposite gender in your room with a closed door, unless you are married to that person. Homosexuality is not generally talked about or accepted by society in Sri Lanka. But it is as common as anywhere else.

Communication

Sarvodaya's communication office is located near the front gates of Sarvodaya headquarters. You can make international and local calls from these phones for a fee. You can also fax documents. The phones are located in booths that are not sound proof, and people may listen to your calls.

You can also make international calls from privately owned communication shops, which exist in Moratuwa, Colombo, and most large towns. They will have large signs publicizing international calling rates.

Internet facilities with a good connection are available at the IT Unit at headquarters for a reasonable charge. E-mail access is limited outside of Colombo and the Sarvodaya headquarters, although there are occasionally internet cafes in towns and some district centers have the internet.

Current events

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and www.dailynews.lk.

Economy

See <http://www.srilankatourism.org/economy.htm> and www.slembassyusa.org.

Education

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Environment

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and <http://www.srilankatourism.org>.

Ethnic groups

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

FAQS

See <http://www.srilankatourism.org/faq.asp>.

Food

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>. If you are particularly sensitive, particular, or allergic to some foods, you may want to seriously look into and think about this aspect of Sri Lanka.

Geography

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Health Issues

See www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka/facts.htm For hospital listings, see <http://www.srilankatourism.org/health.htm>

Your appointment with the travel nurse should also give you good information for preventing and managing health issues. If you get sick in Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya staff may take you to a local doctor in Moratuwa.

Heritage

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and <http://www.srilankatourism.org/culture.htm>.

History

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>,
http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka/history.htm,
and
<http://www.srilankatourism.org/culture.htm>.

Holidays

Because of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnicity and multi-religious culture, it has one of the highest number of holidays of any country in the world. Thus, there are many days out of the year when no one is working at Sarvodaya or in stores.

The full moon day (Poya) of each month is a day that many or most Sarvodaya workers leave headquarters to celebrate with their village. These could be the most interesting experiences you have in Sri Lanka! During some Poya days and the days surrounding them, literally everyone will leave headquarters.

The exact dates of Sri Lanka's Poya days change from year to year, as they depend on lunar or solar phases. See http://www.srilankatourism.org/events_festivals.asp for exact dates. Also, see http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka/facts.htm#event for more information.

Hygiene

Most people, especially people who are not from extremely hot and humid environments, will sweat a lot in Sri Lanka. People will not think it is unusual if you shower multiple times a day. Most Sri Lankans do not wear make-up, but it is not considered disrespectful to do so. It is likely women wearing make-up will receive some comments about it.

Toilet facilities in villages, even in urban situations, can be less sophisticated than you are used to. Be prepared for outdoor facilities in the villages. Sometimes all you will find are two footprints on the outside of a hole that is open to a latrine; an out house. The smell and general cleanliness can leave a lot to be desired.

Carry a roll of toilet paper with you always, because the custom is often to have only a bucket with water to wash yourself after using the “facilities.” The floor and available water may be quite unhygienic, too. So always carry wet towelettes or handwashing solution.

International relations

See www.slembassyusa.org.

Language

Sinhala and Tamil are the two national languages of Sri Lanka. Sinhala is spoken by 74% of the population; Tamil is spoken by 18% of the population (mostly in the North and East); other languages are spoken by 8% of the population. About 10% of the population can speak English, and it is commonly used in the government and in business.

In Moratuwa, as in much of the South of Sri Lanka, most people speak Sinhala and no other language. However, most people in Sri Lanka, regardless of location, know at least *a little bit* of English. Some words, such as hello, are part of almost all Sri Lankan’s normal vocabulary.

Sarvodaya staff in Sri Lanka highly recommend that international volunteers have at least basic Sinhala knowledge. In Sarvodaya headquarters, almost everyone speaks Sinhala. Few people in Sarvodaya speak English fluently. Even fewer people can write fluently in English. However, many people will be able to communicate a small amount in English. Many people at Sarvodaya know more English than they seem to at first. If you continue to try to speak in both English and Sinhala, they might show you they know much more English than it appears. So keep trying to communicate!

Although many past volunteers have lived in Sri Lanka and worked at Sarvodaya knowing minimal Sinhala, you will truly reap the benefits if you try to learn as much as you can. For example, if you go to meetings, field trips, conferences, or presentations, the more Sinhala you know, the more you will learn! Also, the more Sinhala you know, the more people you can interact with and learn from, especially low-income and less educated people.

Literature

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>

NGOS

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>

Political

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>, www.slembassyusa.org, and Sri Lankan and international newspapers.

Population

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Religions

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and <http://www.srilankatourism.org>.

Resources and services for travelers

See <http://www.srilankatourism.org/>.

Social issues

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/>.

Statistics

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and <http://www.srilankatourism.org/factfile.htm>.

Tourism

See <http://www.lankalibrary.com/> and <http://www.srilankatourism.org>.

For basic information, see:

http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/indian_subcontinent/sri_lanka/get.htm#around.

Almost all transportation for this field experience will be provided by Sarvodaya. At other times, the following information may be helpful:

For traveling around Moratuwa and the surrounding areas (such as Mount Lavinia and Colombo), you can walk many places and take buses, taxis (which you must call to order before), and three-wheelers (a.k.a. trishaws or tuk tuks, the motorized vehicles on three wheels which you will see all around on the streets, which you can hail or hop into like cabs in big U.S. cities). Three-wheelers are sometimes less expensive than taxis, and sometimes taxis are less expensive. If using three-wheelers, decide on the amount to be paid prior to getting in, otherwise the drivers will likely try to make you pay a lot.

Virtual tours

See <http://www.srilankatourism.org>.

Volunteers

You are bound to meet other international volunteers. just keep your eyes and ears open! Don't be scared to ask Sarvodaya's international division or other staff whether they know of any other international volunteers around Moratuwa or Sarvodaya. Besides usually being very interesting people, international volunteers can usually be very helpful and supportive, especially when you need someone to listen to your struggles or when you need an English speaking companion (if they speak English).

Warnings and Safety

Keep your identification papers very safe and carry them with you. If you lose your passport, the Consular Office can issue you a temporary one, but this can lead to a lot of hassle.

Young women, especially foreign-looking women and those traveling alone in public transport, get verbally harassed by men a lot. Some men may try to offer you money to sleep with you. Sometimes they make inappropriate gestures and some might try to touch or grope you (very rarely). Non South Asian-looking women in particular may be stereotyped in sexualized ways since they are portrayed in pornography (which exists throughout the country) and South Asian women are typically not.

The best thing to do to minimize this is to dress modestly and do not travel alone at night. Certainly, walking alone at night is a very big risk, which even Sri Lankan women do not do. Try to avoid being alone in private places with men, even if is during the day. Even if the man seems safe, if others see you alone with a man, it could start rumors or create problems. You should especially try to never be alone with a married man, although this may not always be possible since you might work with married men.

Read the information provided in the beginning of your passport; it is important safety information! Go to <http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/> to read more warnings and safety tips.

Advice from Sarvodaya International Unit Staff:

"Since our beginning, Sarvodaya has hosted thousands of visitors and friends. Welcoming you is a natural part of Sri Lankan culture. Because you come with an interest in learning and sharing through Sarvodaya, you are especially welcome. We wish to honor your sacrifice and commitment, and hope that you easily sense the *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *muditha* (joy at the happiness of others) and *uppekka* (equanimity) at the core of the Sarvodaya Movement.

Intercultural communication, climate, economic and political life in Sri Lanka sometimes make life more difficult than anticipated for visitors. That is to be expected. As with any volunteer or employment situation, proper training and understanding are keys to success. That is why we strongly encourage you to prepare as thoroughly as possible for your stay, and be prepared for experiences you may never have had before. "

“Sri Lanka is a largely Buddhist society with relatively conservative social values. Volunteers should be sensitive to Sri Lanka cultural values and should reflect this sensitivity in dress and conduct.

Guidance from Sarvodaya’s Past International Volunteers

This is what past volunteers wanted students to know before deciding to do a field placement within Sarvodaya. These different perspectives come from individuals who have spent weeks, months or years working with the movement. You may agree or disagree, depending on your personality and experience.

From Sharif Abdullah

“The most important issues for volunteers are: Do you have experience being immersed as a minority in a culture that is fundamentally different from your own? Do you have experience in an environment and an ecology that is fundamentally different from your own? Do you have experience being immersed in a situation where you do not speak the language being spoken all around you? If you answered “yes”, you should have little difficulty fitting into life as a Sarvodaya volunteer in Sri Lanka. If you answered “no” to any or all of the questions, you may have significant challenges in fitting in.

Please understand that all of the challenges are YOURS. You have entered someone else’s reality. Prepare yourself to adjust, rather than complain about why they don’t do things in ways you have convinced yourself are “normal”.

The following six factors are not barriers, but different aspects of the experience to keep in mind. These are the factors that I list when talking to the Portland State University students regarding an internship in Sri Lanka:

- the tropical experience
- the Asian experience
- the conflict zone experience
- experience in poverty/underclass communities
- experience with BEING a minority, and
- experience in holding multiple points of view.

Many people, including people who have been to other countries, have no experience with being a minority. Staying at Western hotels, traveling with packs of similar-looking/acting people, does not prepare one for a real minority experience. They will get that experience from a Sarvodaya internship (if you are not of Sri Lankan descent).”

From Rick Brooks:

“It would help if you know certain things **about yourself**--- what you are good at and not so good at; what your strong likes and dislikes are; whether you like to be organized and logical so much that you will not be able to tolerate things not working out as planned.

Can you fend for yourself and others? Can you figure things out? Are you resilient?
Can you bounce back from adversity to make the most of a situation?

If you have not traveled in developing countries before, you should know that you will often be in very, very close proximity to many people most of the time--more people than you are accustomed to; more noise, pollution, smells, garbage, and traffic than you are used to.

Know your own body, especially how you deal with foods and perspiration. Be aware that you may be in many situations where the circumstances for personal hygiene are not ideal. At worst, you will be nauseated and extremely uncomfortable, or maybe just embarrassed. Accept the fact that perspiring is healthy and can keep you cool.

Ceremony, ritual and formality may seem much more important in Sri Lanka than where you came from. While Americans favor informality, being too casual can be inappropriate with people you don't know well.

How do you feel about punctuality and time management? Read this:
<https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/rsbrooks/truthmatter>

From Rebecca Arnot Owen:

"Sometimes it's nice to go to a new place without having read tons about it; it makes the whole learning experience more wholesome. However, I agree that there are certain things that people should be aware of beforehand. I think it is important that girls thinking about volunteering should consider gender constraints. This is not necessarily entirely negative, it makes you appreciate the freedom you have at home, well as making you realize your own ability to adapt and cope.

Most importantly, I think people should consider their reasons for wanting to volunteer. It is important to be honest with yourself; you are going to be miles away from home and from those you are familiar with. Going into this half-heartedly or doing it solely for personal advancement could be a mistake."

From Kamal Kapadia:

"When the tsunami hit, people around the world thought, "we'll send money, we'll go volunteer, and things can be fixed." I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but not everything can be fixed, and nothing will be fixed in a hurry. Also, as some things are fixed, new problems will arise."

From Ellen Furnari:

"I think people need to have some of their conceptions about Sarvodaya challenged. While they do great work, they are a very normally imperfect organization with lots of challenges and flaws. Some of the people they meet will be fully moved by the mission,

and to some it is just a job. It is not the idealized organization of many books, but a living, breathing, evolving organism.”

From Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky:

Sri Lankans are unlikely to tell someone 'no', 'stop', or 'bad idea'. The same suggestion applies for work already completed. If it is not being used by the organization or referenced, it was likely something that was not wanted (even if you feel it was needed). Be sensitive, watch the reactions of those you are working with, and follow your intuition. “

From Colleen Condon:

“You may not be able to be as independent as you are at home; you may feel smothered or like your individual space, or your privacy may disappear. You may have to always tell others where you are or when you will return. You may have people telling you what you can and cannot do.

You may feel like you only want to be helpful, respectful, or not a problem. Yet, you might not know how to do that because of ignorance, misunderstandings, and mixed messages. You must be able to cope with the fact that you don’t know how to do the right or best thing for the organization or for individuals, at least at first. You will probably have to accept the fact that if you go into a public space, people will probably stare at you much more than where you come from. This is especially true if you are not of South Asian descent, but I have known volunteers of South Asian descent who were not raised in Sri Lanka, who also were stared at a lot.”

It is imperative that volunteers keep in mind the “big picture” and Sarvodaya’s larger situation when proposing improvements. Since Sarvodaya is such a large and holistic organization, leadership and decision makers act and plan for the common good for all of Sarvodaya- not just for specific divisions or projects. Sarvodaya has strategic, long-term plans which all programs and projects should contribute to. The organization has many responsibilities, priorities, and projects which one individual, especially a student from another country, might not be able to see or understand.

Staying at Sarvodaya Headquarters in Moratuwa

You will be assigned to a room in a headquarters hostel. Most rooms have one or more single beds with mosquito nets, a desk, a chair, and an overhead fan, places to hang laundry to dry, and a mirror. A small towel, pillow, and sheets are provided. Bedding is thin and made from coarse cotton (bring your own if you are particular). There are no washing machines. Most people do their own laundry, but you can ask the hostel matron to organize laundry services, and she will for a fee. If you need new sheets, towels, toilet paper, hot water, or an iron, please inform the Hostel Matron.

Sarvodaya staff and volunteers usually eat at the headquarters canteen (like a cafeteria). Rice, dahl and curries are usually served and eaten with the fingers. Bottled

water, yogurt, ice cream, cookies, and crackers are sold at the canteen throughout the day and at many stores in Moratuwa. Supermarkets, pharmacies and small restaurants are also located near the headquarters.

The canteen hours are:

Breakfast	7:30-8:30am
Morning Tea	10.0-10.30am
Lunch	12.30-1.30pm
Afternoon Tea	3.00-3.30pm
Dinner	7.30-8.30pm

Headquarters gates close around 11pm or 12am. Do not come or go after that time. Sarvodaya staff may prefer you to not come or go after dark. If you would like to invite outside visitors to the complex, please be sensitive to other residents – keep loud noise and music to a minimum. Also be sensitive if your guests are of the opposite sex.

To see pictures of and read very interesting descriptions of Moratuwa, go to www.wherewelive.net There are even profiles of some Sarvodaya staff members on this website! See a profile of a more rural Sri Lankan village and its people (including some Sarvodaya participants) at the same website.

Suggestions About Ways to Remain Emotionally, Mentally, and Spiritually Healthy in Sri Lanka

“I didn't find it too emotionally taxing. I obviously encountered difficulties. Don't take yourself too seriously. Things are bound to go wrong, and if you see the funnier side, life is much easier. People in Sarvodaya are very willing to talk, help, and keep you company, don't be shy to seek the company of others. They have experience with former volunteers, and they know how to deal with it! Also, keep observing your actions and how people react to things you say or do. In being self-reflective, you are more likely to fit in.” --Rebecca Arnot Owen

“I would associate myself with other volunteers, surely, but not with those volunteers who are disaffected or complaining continually. It is common for folks to be negative when they are going through culture shock. Do not get sucked into that vibe, if you can help it, even if you feel you should help the complaining individual. Be positive. Associate with and be helpful to individuals in the Sarvodaya organization. Go to the peace center and meditate. Do not focus on ‘home’ continually or on contacting home. If you are totally wiped out with negativity, go somewhere else; take a break. In the alternative, go to a temple.”

--Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky

“See if you can take in your experiences in a different way. Assume that things might well not work out as planned, and if they do, great! Be open to seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching very different things. Take pleasure in perceiving the

world differently. Figure out ways you can get accustomed to long ceremonies where you don't understand anything.” --Rick Brooks

Suggestions About How to Stay Physically Healthy in Sri Lanka

“Only drink bottled or boiled AND filtered water if at all possible. Bottled soda and tea is ok. I found the food at the Sarvodaya canteen often made me feel sick, but mostly I think that was because it was too spicy! Bring basic first aid things with you -- Pepto-Bismol, band aids, antibiotic cream, aspirin, Iomitol. Use a mosquito net. Use sun block and be careful about getting sunburned. Drink lots of water; you can't believe how much you are sweating. Always carry water with you; you may not find bottled or boiled and filtered water where you are going.” --Ellen Furnari

“Wash your hands a lot. If you are prone to motion sickness, carry car-sickness medicines and take them before you travel on Sri Lankan roads. Because of the heat, traffic, and style of driving, you are much more likely to get motion sickness than in other places.” --Rick Brooks

“I have traveled a lot, and never once had any health problems in Sri Lanka. However, I didn't eat from street vendors and avoided the water. I drank hot tea with lots of sugar. I didn't chew beetle.” -Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky

“I have been to Sri Lanka twice and was sick during both trips. I was extremely sick in Sri Lanka the second time I went. I think three things would have prevented this: more sleep, antibacterial hand gel, and some kind of physical activity. This may seem like common sense, but I was so eager to do everything that I got very little sleep the first weeks I was there. I stayed up almost all night a few days before I got sick because I was told that a report I was working on was due in a few days, but I wanted to leave for a trip into the field the next day. So, I got someone to let me stay in the computer lab all night long, and I think that made me susceptible to illness. I **really** paid the price. Looking back, nothing was worth getting as sick as I did.

I frequently am sleep-deprived in the U.S., so I did not think it would affect me. But in Sri Lanka, as soon as I was sleep-deprived, my immune system was susceptible to all types of things my body was not used to fighting off.

Secondly, I don't think there is any hot water at Sarvodaya, and I often did not have access to antibacterial soap or any soap at all. I have never used antibacterial hand gel, but if I were to go back, I would carry antibacterial hand gel around with me everywhere! Thirdly, if I were to go back, I would do some kind of physical activity in my room at least every other day, such as yoga, Pilates, or strength exercises. As a woman working at the computer most of the day, I rarely even walked around because of my job and because it was unpleasant with all of the sexual comments as I walked down the street.

You will most likely be offered things that you are advised by U.S. doctors and nurses not to consume, such as water that is not boiled, fruits or vegetables that are not cooked or in a peel, etc. I would advise you to not consume those things as much as you can, although I often ate things I should not have out of courtesy and respect for people. Sometimes people can be very insistent that you take it, and it can be rude to refuse it. Try telling that person you are allergic or that it will make you sick. Learn the Sinhala and Tamil words for expressing this.

Also, my legs, arms, feet, and hands swelled up for almost the whole time I was there. It wasn't a problem, it was just weird. And I, and every foreigner I spoke to almost, had digesting and intestinal problems at some point, if not frequently. You may need to buy medicine for your stomach, and if you have a sensitive stomach or particular medicine you like, you may want to buy it before arriving in Sri Lanka." --Colleen Roark Condon

To quote one student on a similar field trip in Asia, "Get used to the fact that you will spend a lot of time thinking about and worrying about...your poop." Because of all the rice and your anxiety about using outdoor facilities, you may get constipated. So it might be smart to have some dried apricots or mangoes along. Or you may get diarrhea, so having access to Pepto Bismol or lomotil could be crucial.

Regrets That Past Volunteers Believe You Can Learn From

"I regret not getting away from Sarvodaya for some time in my initial visits. Sarvodaya is an amazing organization and really does cover the entire island. However, there are non-Sarvodaya points of view that I think are valid. I would have gotten more involved in the urban scene in my initial visits. I regret not keeping up with some of the contacts that I made through Sarvodaya. Some of the volunteers from other countries are really interesting." --Sharif Abdulla

I wish I had learned more Sinhala. Believe me, there is a very good chance that once you visit villages, you will wish so badly you knew Sinhala so that you could talk to someone! It can seem very silly to travel to the other side of the world, only to arrive in a place where you can't talk to anyone! At the same time, I knew little Sinhala the whole time, and I still learned a lot and had a great experience." --Colleen Roark Condon

Difficulties Past Volunteers Experienced and How They Can Be Dealt With

"I worried that I was not doing enough work, and people at Sarvodaya thought I was a lazy bum. I soon learned that that was not the case (oh, the joys of having paranoias learned from a capitalist world). The work ethic is different than I experienced in England. People will not be upset if you sit back and relax. I did get a little frustrated at times because the pace of life is so much slower, but that's really not something I should complain about!

“My biggest problems related to formality and informality--when to dress like a professional, when to be comfortable in my informal clothes, when to treat people with more ceremony, etc. Sri Lankans are willing to forgive our cultural ignorance but I have always felt it would be nicer if visitors like me could be more competent. A lot of that would go along with knowing how to speak Sinhala.

After the first few weeks or couple months, one is less a guest or visitor and more of a participant in the culture. That means that some of the forgiveness and hospitality to which visitors become accustomed to may go away. The strangeness and newness wears off on both sides of the equation. Things you and others could tolerate may become less tolerable. You will be expected to know more about cultural rules, cues, taboos, and everyday patterns of behavior.

Know that since the tsunami, many foreigners have shown up in Sri Lanka unprepared or with attitudes and intentions that didn't fit so well with Sri Lankans. So, by virtue of the fact that you are clearly non-Sri Lankan, you are likely to be perceived in the category of "American," for better or for worse. Most people can't escape it. Impressions that Sri Lankans may have of you will be shaped by their experiences with others from the U.S. and other countries. Keep your eyes and ears and mind open to the comfort level and values of your hosts and colleagues. That will help a lot.

If you put yourself at the service of the greater cause, you will feel appreciated. If you can suspend your judgment and focus on relationships as much as tasks, you will find that your service is worthwhile.” –Rick Brooks

“Sarvodaya does too much with too few people, in often disorganized ways. And this is an American judgment! They are truly rooted in their own culture and accepting them as they are, while finding ways to make suggestions when asked is a good thing. A van was arranged to pick me up and return me home on the days that I worked. It almost never came on time nor was ready to leave on time. A few days it never came. I spent a lot of time waiting to be moved, like a parcel. But such is life there.” –Ellen Furnari

“The best advice I ever heard for an international volunteer came from a man who worked in the Early Childhood Development Unit. He would say to me “don’t panic!” In other words, “chill out” or “no worries”. If you have laid back attitudes of equanimity (one of Sarvodaya’s fundamental values), you will enjoy yourself more and be more of a help and less of a burden for Sarvodaya.

Buddhika also told me a story of a village girl who was mesmerized by a volunteer’s jewelry. The moral of the story was how the volunteer had not thought of how the jewelry would affect the children, and the village girl walked away from that situation feeling inadequate, not as special or beautiful as the international volunteer (who was a white American), and wanting more jewelry, which she might never be able to afford because of her impoverished situation.

Thus, be mindful of how you appear and the affects it has on others because some people, especially children and youth, will look to you as a role model. I often was aware of how I looked because many Sri Lankan people, especially men, view women who appear to be from other countries. I had to just accept and learn from judgments about me because there was no way to change my body, skin, and gender.

Another difficulty I experienced in Sri Lanka was eating. If you are a person who loves to eat lots and lots of food, particularly very spicy food similar to Indian cuisine, than you may be in for the time of your life. If you are not, you may have some difficulties. I thought I was a person who loved to eat, and I loved spicy Indian food. But I was not prepared for how much people wanted me to eat. Especially when I went into villages. Part of the reason I felt so full all of the time was because I was not used to telling people I did not want to eat anymore. When people asked me to have more, I wanted to be polite, and I ate more. But, as time went on, I got the hang of trying to express politely that I simply was too full to eat anything else. It was difficult for me because I felt I was not doing the most polite and respectful thing by not eating, but I tried to aim for a healthy balance between politeness and respecting my own limits.

This lesson and goal of balance can also be applied to many other aspects and parts of experiencing Sri Lanka. Balancing your own boundaries, health, and happiness, with showing respect for Sri Lankans was a goal I strived for in a variety of ways.”--Colleen Roark Condon

Volunteers’ Favorite Aspects and Happiest, Most Fulfilling Memories

“Oh, the list is endless. Not being treated as a tourist. The most incredible acts of kindness. Learning so much. Being invited into people’s homes. Managing to find a common sense of humour with little in common in background and language limitations. Crying because I had to leave Kumari Akka behind (the head of the hostel)! Meeting other volunteers. Going to temple with Vele Akka (the head of the international hostel).” —Rebecca Arnot Owen

“My happiest experiences with Sarvodaya all occurred while in the villages. It is the village experience that makes Sarvodaya meaningful and makes the visits worthwhile.” -
—Sharif Abdulla

“I liked being appreciated and needed, being valued even if I didn't think I deserved it. Mostly, though, I appreciated the grace and hospitality of my Sri Lankan hosts and colleagues. In the Shramadana camps it was wonderful to work with people of all ages and backgrounds in such a positive way and to know we were all in the activity together.” --Rick Brooks

“Traveling in the field with Ari (founder and president) or Vinya (executive director). You won’t probably have these experiences, but you can approximate them by befriending Sri Lankans. Look at life through their eyes. Go to a wedding or a funeral. Make dinner.

Take the bus. I would especially participate in religious activities. Miracles happen all of the time in Sri Lanka.” --Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky

“Sitting on the deck of the international hostel watching the rain. Trips into villages for Sarvodaya activities and projects. Laughing with the people who worked in my office. Experiencing an office atmosphere so different than offices I have experienced in the U.S. Visiting different Sarvodaya offices to interview and learn from them. Living with a village family. Going to the botanical gardens (this is a must!). Going to temple and praying with Vela akka, the woman who runs the international hostel. Meditating in Vishva Niketan and getting spiritual lessons from the meditation teacher there. Meeting and spending time with the other international visitors and volunteers. Being dressed up in a sari by the women I worked with.” --Colleen Roark Condon

A Few Words from the Author of this Handbook

At the time of traveling to Sri Lanka to research field placements and write this handbook, I was a human being with a limited perspective based on my experiences, personal history, and identity. Please keep in mind that although I tried to include as many perspectives as possible, I write from my own limited perspective of a 21-year-old white, heterosexual, middle-class female from Wisconsin, USA. I apologize if I excluded or ignored any perspectives or needs.

I wrote this handbook because I learned of the healing power of Sarvodaya’s work for myself and the transformational power of Sarvodaya’s programs on real villages when I traveled to Sri Lanka to see Sarvodaya in action in 2003. I felt deep within myself that much of what I needed to learn, this movement could teach me. But I had no idea how deeply this education would transform my life. My experience deepened my understanding of what it means for people to live amidst a strong sense of community and the meaning of

Sarvodaya’s motto: we build the road and the road builds us. I shared my labor with Sarvodaya, but Sarvodaya gave me more strength, healing, and inspiration, than I could have ever given to them. Although I went to Sri Lanka to help impoverished people in a developing country, I ended up learning from the Sarvodaya volunteers and employees and the Sri Lankan people more than anything else. Through trying to help the people of Sri Lanka build up their communities, my knowledge, skills, commitment, and understanding were built up in much greater ways.

After reading and talking about social change, empowerment, and human services in social work classrooms for two years, I saw Sarvodaya workers creating social change. I saw individual and collective empowerment in action through Sarvodaya, and their workers effectively addressing the needs of the Sri Lankan people. After seeing Sarvodaya’s in action, I understood how one organization’s model of empowerment could produce such positive outcomes for individuals and communities. Their

philosophy and attitudes combined with their education, organization, and physically empowering methods (such as building wells and schools) cause economic situations and mental and physical health to improve. When Sarvodaya combines its physical aid and social services with its ability to organize and mobilize people to start acting for change, hope resonates through the person and the community, beginning a cycle of empowerment and betterment for all. Real improvement for the people of Sri Lanka is the result.

After experiencing the power and wisdom of Sarvodaya's work, I came back to Madison filled with aspirations about the applications for the social work program. From that experience, more than anything else, I learned that I had so much more to learn from this movement than I could possibly learn in two weeks. I learned that people from my community and university could gain and learn so much from this exemplary organization. I wanted to make this learning and sharing experience possible for UW students and not let it end with me.

Some UW staff members and I believed that a partnership between the School of Social Work and Sarvodaya, creating social work field placements in Sri Lanka, would be an ideal way for students to learn what field work is designed to teach them- whether it is helping individuals and families or organizing communities and services. Sarvodaya has proven to be successful at all levels of social work and their effective methods will serve as appropriate and valuable teaching tools.

In addition, students could expand their worldview, cultural awareness, and diversity education (which are also goals of the Global Health Initiative by working in a country and culture so different from their own. I have witnessed the importance of stepping outside of your culture and viewing the world from other perspectives time and time again. Indeed, in our globalizing world, understanding other countries and cultures is necessary for peace, unity, and positive social change. I believe that other students will be impacted in similar ways, empowering many others to create a more just society.

Sarvodaya's needs were deep and great when I lived in Sri Lanka the summer of 2004, but their current needs are so much greater. Even though national surveys indicate Sri Lankans rate Sarvodaya as number one in responding to the tsunami and the organization has accomplished nothing short of miracles in the wake of the disaster, their organizational capacity could reach the levels that the tsunami demanded. The movement could not keep up with all of the destruction the tsunami caused. The country's civil war added to the immense challenge.

In 2011, students of global health and many other disciplines at the UW-Madison can be a great support and added resource to this movement. In return, Sarvodaya can teach us a great deal about ourselves and the way we live. By the time you return from this experience, I hope you will agree: A mutually supportive relationship between the University and the Sarvodaya movement can benefit people throughout the world.