



SUCCESS STORY

Counseling Helps Widows, Children Cope

Counseling program helps widows cope, kids go back to school



Photo: Wholistic Health Center

Young girls in their best saris participate in a counseling program at the Wholistic Health Center in war-torn Kopai.

"Everybody is very happy with the results — the parents, the school principal, and we at the center, of course. I don't know what the future holds for children if they don't go to school," said Father Damian, who helps war widows cope with trauma and young dropouts return to school.

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Sri Lanka's protracted conflict has left more than 25,000 widowed heads of households in northern Sri Lanka's Jaffna district. In Kopai alone, there are 1,300 war widows and nearly 10,000 war-affected family members. Thousands more have

been displaced from their homes by "high security" zones, and two camps for displaced people still remain, rendering Kopai among the poorest parts of the country.

With help from USAID, Father Damian Soosaipillai, a Catholic priest and clinical psychologist at the Jaffna teaching hospital, is running a health center that uses counseling to help families traumatized by war and displacement restart their lives. Among its main goals are keeping children from these families in school and getting dropouts to return.

"Children drop out of school because of poverty, a lack of supplies, poor family environments, and undernourishment," Father Damian said. "Absence of basic reading, writing, and thinking skills perpetuates the cycle of poverty in the district." Initially, dropouts avoided meeting the center's staff. But weekly gatherings, with a free lunch, began to attract mothers for trauma counseling and up to 100 children at a time. "At group meetings for mothers, we don't address the trauma alone," he said. "We take up issues like education. We try to sensitize them and empower them by explaining that basic education is necessary for their children."

Following traumatic events, children are sometimes unable to learn or show clinging or aggressive behavior, leading to high dropout rates. Since USAID began funding the program in 2004, about 35 school-age dropouts, or 20 percent of the area's estimated dropouts, have returned to the Sirupddy Government Mix School in Kopai. The program targets mainly female heads of households who suffer any number of symptoms including grief and depression, intrusive memories, recurring nightmares, and sleep disorders. In 2004, the program benefited about 1,400 children and 500 mothers.