

**Learning from Failure**

**Why Due Diligence is Important**

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The Sunshine Charity was founded in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami primarily to take care of children affected by the devastation through the establishment of a day care centre in Sambalthivu, Trincomalee District, Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. Today, the children attending the Sunshine Day Care Centre include orphaned and vulnerable children and those affected by poverty. This then was the principal objective of the Charity’s mandate – to take care of children.

Gaining recognition through endorsements and the media, both electronic and print, the Charity was riding high. Encouraged with more giving by both local and international donors, our work expanded. Increased funding allowed us to invest in setting-up a playground, purchase educational toys, build a library, provide uniforms and arrange outings for the children. We also improved on the health and nutrition of the children which became a core area of our work. We next introduced regular medical clinics, the provision of pharmaceutical drugs and worming treatment, sandals to prevent worm infection and many creative opportunities to stimulate the children.

Looking back on the numerous projects implemented we, the trustees together with the community we served, the care givers and the different partner organizations we worked with, were proud of the achievements. We were moving forward. With many of the day care centres closed due to the lack of funding, the Sunshine Day Care Centre was still in operation and how!

It was around the sixth year of operation that we met with our first failure. Though our chief aim was to take care of children and our work was intended with and for children, our ambitions for widening the scope of work without giving thought to the primary objective and not conducting the vital due diligence allowed us to fail forward.

Our story began during a field visit to Trincomalee when we met Rohini, the mother of one of our children at a meeting with mothers. “I would like to have my own home-garden but I am a bit scared as I have no knowledge of keeping accounts. We only have bananas growing. It would be good if we can grow some vegetables, especially as our house has water on tap. The income can help the family immensely,” she said. Our emotions got the better of us and. With a head-on approach we decided to initiate a livelihood programme for the mothers of our children. Establishing home gardens would generate the much needed income and keep aside some home grown vegetables for the family, we thought.

Fast tracking our new idea, we went a step further. We built a home garden on the day care centre compound. Though we thought a Kid’s Garden would be an innovative programme for the children and generate some money for the day care centre, we were to learn a bitter lesson from the experiment. It was not only “water on tap” that was necessary but more-so some basic knowledge and above all passion for home gardening which the mothers of our children did not have. None of the members of staff or the care givers were really interested in the programme either and had even less knowledge on agricultural practices. The children were helpless. We had not conducted the proper due diligence and more importantly, by introducing a livelihood programme, we had gone out of the organization’s primary objective which was to take care of children.

The Sunshine Charity has been invited to participate in numerous programmes from partnering with elder’s homes, providing infrastructural support to existing projects, partnering with IT projects for youth etc., We do feel privileged but we will not make the same mistake by going out of the organization’s mandate. Another success of the fail forward experiment was that we realized our mistake early enough to avoid investing too much time and funds. We took responsibility.

The lesson learnt is that work can expand but we need to focus on the primary objective of the organization and the organization’s mission. The experience also helped us to improve our work. We have widened our scope of work to grow at a national level and not confine ourselves only locally through a day care centre – and yet continue serving children.