

## SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH CARE REFORM PROCESS IN SRI LANKA THROUGH INNOVATIVE METHODOLOGIES



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In Sri Lanka, innovative mental health care policies have been adopted in the last years, focused to decentralization and community mental health services. WHO supported the Government of Sri Lanka in this reform process, mobilizing English experts from the International Network of democratic psychiatry, inspired by the innovative experiences realized in Italy. In 1978, the Italian Ministry of Health promulgated the psychiatric reform law (*Legge 180*), that made radical changes to the old concept of mental health care, transforming the mental hospitals in territorial services.

In Sri Lanka, many significant goals have been achieved, but much remains to do. In the South-eastern Uva Province, one of the target areas of the UNDP ART GOLD Sri Lanka Programme, local authorities and Mental Health care professionals are interested in implementing new strategies for mental disease in their territory and health Institutions.



In this contest, following the request of the Chief Secretary of the Uva Province, Mr P.B. Amarasekara, the UNDP ART Programme and the Italian Region of Umbria, through FELCOS (Umbrian Fund of Local Governments for Decentralized Cooperation and Sustainable Human Development), have initiated a collaboration in support of the Sri Lankan mental health care reform process.

From 25th October to 2nd November 2009, a delegation of experts from Umbria visited the Uva Province for a first decentralized cooperation mission. The Italian delegation

was composed by: Antonia Tamantini, Board Director of Mental Health Department of the Local Health Agency (ASL) 3; Anna Toni, Responsible for social services of ASL 3; Teresa La Ferla, researcher of Perugia's University, Mental Hospital of ASL 3.



During the first days of mission, work meetings have been held in Colombo with the Directorate of Mental Health of the Ministry of Health and Food, the World Health Organization and the UNDP Sri Lanka Country Office. In Colombo, the delegation also visited the National Institute of Mental Health, a public hospital run by the Ministry of Health and Food.

Following this activity at the national level, the delegation visited the Uva Province where meetings, visits and workshops were organized in order to get a better understanding of the local situation. After a welcome meeting in Badulla with the Provincial Authorities, the Governor of Uva Province and the Chief Secretary, the following local Institutions have been visited by the Umbria region delegation: Psychiatric Unit of the General Hospital of Badulla (where a work meeting was organized with the director of the Hospital, the Psychiatric Consultant and the team of the Unit); Children Rehabilitation Centre of Keppetipola; Provincial Ayurvedic Hospital of Diyathalawa; Rehabilitation Centre of Meedumpitiya; Community Resource Centre of Wellawaya Monaragala.

A final Workshop on Mental Health was organized, aimed at exchanging ideas information and experience on a new decentralized and de-institutionalized approach to Mental Health Services. The discussions also brought to the identification of potential further collaboration activities between Italian and Sri Lankan partners.



The Uva Province's local authorities and Mental Health personnel fully supported the mission: the Provincial Secretary of Health accompanied the Italian delegation during the activities and confirmed the great interest in the implementation of MH cooperation activities.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the meetings held in Colombo, a representative from the Ministry of Health and Food also joined the mission in Uva.

At the end of the mission, the participants concluded that although Uva is one of the poorest Provinces in Sri Lanka, the MH care reform process presents great potentiality. The Italian experts underlined the innovative approach towards MH services and the motivation and



commitment of the health personnel working in the sector, despite the few financial resources available.

As a concrete mission follow up, ART GOLD Sri Lanka created a forum on Mental Health cooperation on its website. The platform can be used by all stakeholders to exchange documents and discuss on MH issues and partnership opportunities. The Italian experts will follow up with a workshop in Umbria to inform the regional actors about the mission results and to define future cooperation opportunities. A mission from Sri Lanka to Umbria will be organized, to strengthen the cooperation activity and to get a better understanding of the MH care system in Italy. A Letter of Intention on the agreed areas of cooperation on Mental Health Care will be elaborated and signed by Umbria Region and Uva Province.

