

Stories from the field

Reconstructing Conflict Damaged Homes in the East of Sri Lanka Thamotharam Vairamuththu and Neelavathi from Batticaloa District

The “Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing” project is a housing recovery initiative providing support to returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Funded primarily through a Grant of € 11.8 million by the European Union (EU), it is built on the previous EU investment in reconstruction in housing through the North East Housing Reconstruction Programme (NEHRP) and the “Support to Conflict Affected People through Housing” project. Additional donors include the Australian Government (Australian AID) and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).



Jointly implemented by UN-Habitat and SDC, the project provides cash grants and technical support to home owners to reconstruct and repair their conflict damaged houses in the districts of Mullaitivu, Mannar and Killinochchi in the North and Batticaloa in the East.



Mr.Thamotharam Vairamuththu and his wife Neelavathi from Batticaloa district recently commenced reconstructing their conflict damaged home with funding from the project. 55 year old Thamotharam Vairamuththu is a farmer from Sinnathuraichenai village in Eravur Pattu DS division. Vairamuththu and his wife, 53 year old Neelavathi have five children. Four of their children are married and live in their own homes while their youngest daughter, 22 year old Kalaivani lives with them. Vairamuththu is engaged in traditional Chena (slash and burn) cultivation, one of the main forms of livelihood in the village. In order to supplement his income, Vairamuththu also works as an agricultural labourer, earning a total income of LKR.7,000 –10,000 per month. Neelavathi supports the cultivation activities by weeding and watering the vegetable plots.

Vairamuththu’s family were displaced several times during the thirty year conflict. In April 2006, with the intensification of the conflict in the Eastern Province, the family were compelled to move to Siththandy village in Eravur Pattu DS Division in Batticaloa where they lived for nearly four years with their eldest daughter.

Vairamuththu recalls many hardships faced in sharing limited living space with the daughter’s family. During this time, he was unable to engage in cultivation and their home garden was abandoned. The family finally returned to their village in August 2010. However, they found their house completely destroyed and their

garden overgrown. Lacking financial resources or savings of their own to rebuild a permanent home, Vairamuththu constructed a temporary shelter with tin sheets, tent material and some concrete blocks.

Since returning to the village, Vairamuththu, together with his family, has commenced cultivating vegetables using the slash and burn method of cultivation. The crops include maize, sweet yam and vegetables which he says is sufficient for the family's daily consumption.

Although they have adequate land for cultivation, the family is severely constrained by the scarcity of water and by the damage caused to the crops by wild elephants. The human-elephant conflict in the area is causing serious problems to the Vairamuththu family. "Conflict with wild elephants has become a serious problem. We cannot sleep peacefully at home. When elephants come to our compound, we light fires and make loud noises to chase them. Sometimes, we spend the night on top of a tree in a makeshift hut. We need better protection from wild elephants" Neelavathi said.



In May 2013, Vairamuththu and Neelavathi were selected for housing assistance by the project "Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing" which is supporting returnees with house construction and repair. In September 2013, the first grant instalment of Rs.100,000 was provided to commence foundation work. Vairamuththu and his wife purchased building materials at economical rates through bulk procurement by joining forces with other members of the Village Rehabilitation Committee (VRC). The VRCs, established by the project, provide support to housing beneficiaries and help vulnerable families such as elderly or

female-headed home owners.

The lack of potable water is a serious challenge faced by the family. "We do not have water for drinking, cooking, bathing or for constructing the house. We collect water from distant locations since the existing spring has dried up. For construction work, we collect water from a small pond located about 2 Km from our house. It is difficult to bring 40 -50 litres of water by bicycle. I can carry only 10 litres of water on my own. I collect water daily from this well. We do not have sanitation facilities at the moment. But we will be constructing a toilet for the new house with funding from the project" Neelavathi said.

UN-Habitat is providing guidance on the entire construction process including the selection of a suitable house plan, purchasing quality building materials and obtaining planning approvals. In the spirit of the home owner driven process, Vairamuththu and Neelavathi are providing unskilled labour support to the masons so that the grant amount can be maximised. Their house will be 550 square feet, consisting of 2 bedrooms, living room, kitchen and a toilet. The family is hopeful of completing the house by February 2014.

"We sincerely thank the donors for their support and generosity towards us. My husband and I are both providing our labour towards constructing the house. We hope that this permanent house will give us safety and better protection especially from the elephants" Neelavathi said. The project will provide a total cash grant of LKR.550,000 in four instalments for the reconstruction of the house.

The project "Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka" is contributing to a sustainable solution for the returnee families with the specific objective of improving the living conditions and social cohesion of displaced people, returnees and their host communities in the North and East through the facilitation of permanent housing. Implemented in the districts of Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar and Batticaloa from 2013 – 2015, the project is assisting 4,350 home owners to reconstruct homes through a home owner driven process.