

## Stories from the field

### A New Beginning for Returnee Families in the North of Sri Lanka: Mr. M Nelson, Selvanagar GN Division, Killinochchi District



Mr. Nelson and his family outside their newly repaired home in Selvanagar village.

The “Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing” project is a 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 grants to assisting uprooted people through reconstruction such as the North East Housing Reconstruction Programme (NEHRP) and the “Support to Conflict Affected People through Housing” project. Partner donors include the Australian Government and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Jointly implemented by UN-Habitat and SDC, the project provides cash grants and technical support to homeowners 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. Muniyaandi Nelson and his wife Mrs. Nelson Aavudayammah are project beneficiaries from Selvanagar village in Karachchi DS Division in Killinochchi District who recently completed repairing their conflict damaged home.

43 year old Nelson hails from Mugamalai village in Killinochchi district. He had moved to Uriyan over 10 years ago. Nelson’s wife, Aavudayammah was born in Colombo District. The couple married in 1990 and had five children, two sons, Joseph Raj and Jarmilan and daughters Varmila, Vanteena and Tharanika. The three middle children attend school in Killinochchi while the eldest son, Joseph Raj is training to be a tailor in Colombo. The youngest is yet to start preschool. Nelson’s 74 year old mother, Mrs. M. Ranjitham also lives with the family. Nelson is the chief breadwinner, working as a lab assistant at the Killinochchi central college, the same occupation he was engaged in



prior to their displacement. Aavudayammah supplements the household income through earnings from their small poultry and cattle farm. The couple earn about LKR 24,000 per month.

In early 2009, Nelson’s family was compelled to evacuate their home with thousands of other families, eventually arriving in Menik Farm Internally Displaced Persons camp in Vavuniya district in April, where they lived close to a year. When the Government of Sri Lanka’s resettlement programme commenced, the family returned home to Selvanagar in April 2010.



Nelson and Aavudayammah with their youngest daughter

Selvanagar village, like hundreds of others in the North, was badly affected by the three decades of conflict. Most of the houses and community infrastructure had been damaged or completely destroyed. Nelson’s house roof was completely destroyed, with many of the doors and windows badly damaged. Luckily for the family, the foundation of the house and some of the walls remained intact. However, they lacked the financial resources to repair their house and lived in a temporary shelter for nearly three and half years hoping to accumulate savings to repair their home.

When the *Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas in Sri Lanka* project commenced in the village, Mr Nelson was among the homeowners selected for housing repair assistance. The project provided a financial grant of LKR.250,000 in three instalments. As the housing intervention followed a “homeowner driven process”, Nelson and his wife were responsible for repairing their own house with technical assistance from UN-Habitat. With the first instalment of LKR. 100,000, the couple started construction work by raising the foundation and undertaking work on the superstructure.

While the family contributed their own labour towards construction activities, they hired a mason and carpenter for all skilled construction work. The family also saved some costs by producing their own cement blocks using a block making mould provided by UN-Habitat. They also assisted the carpenter by treating timber rafters with wood preservative and the mason by fetching water and building materials.



Aavudayammah in her new indoor kitchen serving lunch for the family.

Several structural improvements have been made to the existing house during the repair process. The foundation of the house had been raised by one foot, thereby ensuring that the house is safe from seasonal flooding during the monsoon rains. Roof bands have been installed to safeguard the roof during high winds and cyclones.

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Nelson's children studying in the living room.

The repair of the house took Nelson five months and the family moved back to their home in July 2014. Their newly repaired house is approx. 550 square feet with two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and toilet. Their earlier house was approximately 400 square feet with one secure, lockable room and a sitting room and bed room with a half wall. The roof had been clad in asbestos sheets. The newly repaired house incorporates several improvements. The size of the house has been increased by 150 square feet, giving the young family more space. It also includes an indoor kitchen with a smoke free chimney and storage for kitchen utensils and groceries. Nelson has also successfully obtained an electricity connection to the house. As the

family were keen to make further improvements including the addition of a verandah at a later date, they contributed their own funds through a bank loan.

Having moved back to their permanent home, Nelson and Aavudayammah are happy that the family has proper protection from the elements and that they are now able to lead normal lives after years of hardship. "This housing grant is a gift for us to realise our dream of owning a permanent home where we can live peacefully. It has given our family privacy and security. My daughters are much happier now. We have security with the lockable rooms as well as space for our children to study" Nelson said.

The children are happy with the additional space and use the living room as the main area for their school work. Mrs. Nelson is delighted with her functional kitchen which is more spacious and comfortable than their previous makeshift outdoor kitchen. The family is now concentrating on their daily life and engaging in the small home garden and farm.

The 'Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka' project contributes 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 and community infrastructure. Implemented in the districts of Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar and Batticaloa from 2013 – 2015, the project is assisting 4,600 families to reconstruct their houses through a homeowner driven process.



Aavudayammah inspecting produce in her home garden.