

The Government of Australia Supports Disaster Risk Reduction Initiatives in Kalmunai Town, in Partnership with UN-Habitat

20 January 2014, Kalmunai, Sri Lanka. Throughout the recent past, an increase in localized disasters in Sri Lanka has resulted in the need for improved disaster preparedness and response capacity at the Local Government level. Responding to this need, the *Disaster Resilient City Development Strategies for Sri Lankan Cities Project*, funded by the Government of Australia, was implemented by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) to establish sustainable, disaster resilient and healthy cities in disaster prone, lagging regions of the country. Kalmunai, one of four cities selected for assistance, successfully demonstrated its commitment towards making the city disaster resilient by including an innovative flood-risk mitigation pilot project.

Kalmunai Municipality, with a total population of 99,634, was chosen for support by the project in March 2012. Located in the Eastern Province, the town was selected due to its vulnerability to multiple disasters such as storm surges, cyclones, tsunami and flooding, its declaration as an urban development area and its lack of a Development and Land Use Plan. Implemented by UN-Habitat in collaboration with the Kalmunai Municipal Council, University of Moratuwa, Urban Development Authority and the Ministry of Disaster Management, the main aim of the project was to set Kalmunai on the path to becoming a sustainable, disaster resilient and healthy city.

While the key output for Kalmunai was the development of a Disaster Risk Reduction and Preparedness Plan, the project also provided funds to implement a Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) pilot project to enhance the town's resilience to disasters. In keeping with the consultative, community-centred approach followed by UN-Habitat, Kalmunai residents and the Municipal Council were responsible for the selection of the pilot project. Following extensive stakeholder consultations with active participation by community members, the city selected a drainage project in one of the flood prone areas of the city.



Community members engaged in constructing the drain at Udayar road.

Udayar Road is 1.5 km long and is located in the centre of Kalmunai town in a key residential area. The road and the surrounding neighbourhood have been subject to severe flooding for the past 15 years, affecting the lives of nearly 200 families. The flooding of the area had been exacerbated due to the lack of a proper drainage system to discharge flood waters to a coastal water-body and the Indian Ocean.

The Udayar Road area was also identified as a priority location requiring flood control in the *Drainage Master Plan* of Kalmunai Municipal Council that was developed as part of the project. The need for proper drainage was also emphasised by community members at stakeholder consultations, conducted to gain input from local knowledge. Discussing the project methodology, Mr. S. Nagalingam, President of the "Kalmunai 2" Rural Development Society (RDS), stated "thanks to the community participatory approach adopted by UN-Habitat, we were able to communicate the key challenges and hazards faced by our community to the city's decision makers."

The specific objectives of the Udayar Road pilot project included the reduction of flood risk, enhancing the resilience of the community and improving the general environment while reducing health risks associated with stagnant water.

Commencing in February 2013, the project consisted of the construction of a partially covered culvert of approximately 250m in length to discharge water into a coastal water-body referred to as "Thona".

A community-managed implementation approach was used to construct the drain. Construction was undertaken by RDS under the guidance of the Kalmunai Municipal Engineer in close coordination with the UN-Habitat project team. This consultative approach ensured ownership of the project by the community from the outset. The Kalmunai Municipal Council (MC), as the implementing agency for the pilot project, developed a solid rapport with the community, which also contributed to the project’s success.

The drain was designed by the Kalmunai Municipal Engineer and the construction was undertaken by the RDS. The Municipal Engineer supervised the construction work and ensured that quality building materials were used for all construction activities. Funds for the pilot initiative were released by UN-Habitat to Kalmunai MC based on the physical and financial progress of work while the Kalmunai MC in turn made payments to the RDS on a “measure and pay” basis.



With the completion of the drain in May 2013, the community members were less apprehensive about the onset of the monsoon rains. They were confident that the rainy season would not bring the damage and displacement experienced in previous years. Mr. T. Subraminiam, a resident of Udayar Road, stated “I have lived in this area for 15 years and flooding had become a way of life. Each flood caused damage and even displacement. I was closely involved in the construction of the drain. I was happy to work for the community knowing that this will solve our flooding problem. Now I want the rains to commence so that we can test our drain!”



The completed drain with concrete slabs for reinforcement

With the onset of the monsoon rains in the East in December, it has been heartening to note that the drain is functioning well. The success of this pilot project has resulted in the Kalmunai Municipal Council acknowledging the value of the Drainage Master Plan. The Kalmunai MC is now planning to initiate other small-scale drainage projects in critical locations in the city. The Kalmunai MC officials will continue to work closely with the community to implement these infrastructure projects.

Municipal Engineer, Mr. A. J. A. H. Jowski, stated “through this project we were able to prepare a Drainage Master Plan for Kalmunai. This is a major achievement. The Udayar Road drainage system is a vital solution for flood control in Kalmunai Town and an example of actual

implementation and construction as per the Drainage Master Plan.”

The ‘Disaster Resilient City Development Strategies for Sri Lankan Cities’ project was implemented in the cities of Ratnapura, Balangoda, Batticaloa and Kalmunai from 2012-2013. The Government of Australia, provided US\$ 1,000,000 funding for this project. The second phase of this project, also funded by the Government of Australia, is currently underway in the cities of Vavuniya, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Akkaraipattu.