

Stories from the field

Empowering Female Headed Homeowners to Reconstruct their Damaged Homes

Ms. Jeyakumar Jeevakala, Uriyan GN Division, Killinochchi District



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 builds on the previous EU grants to assisting uprooted people including the North East Housing Reconstruction Programme (NEHRP) and the “Support to Conflict Affected People through Housing” project. Additional donors include the Australian Government and the 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.

32 year old female-headed homeowner, Ms. Jeyakumar Jeevakala from Killinochchi district, recently completed reconstructing her damaged house with financial assistance from the project. She lives in her new home with her eight year old son Krishanthan and five year old daughter Krishanthini who are attending primary school and preschool in Killinochchi.

A resident of Uriyan village, Jeevakala married Sinnathamby Jeyakumar in December 2006 and had two children. Similar to thousands of other families, the thirty year conflict adversely impacted their lives, with the couple facing multiple displacements, the worst being in 2009. After experiencing much hardship in locations such as Suthanthirapuram, Pokkanai and Mullivaikkal where heavy fighting was in progress, the family was finally relocated

to Menik Farm Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Vavuniya District in May 2009. They lived in Menik Farm for about a year, returning home in April 2010 with the resumption of the resettlement programme by the Government.



Jeevakala and her children near their temporary shelter.

Uriyan village, similar to hundreds of others in the North of Sri Lanka, had been badly affected with much of the infrastructure and housing of the village destroyed or badly damaged. When Jeevakala and Jeyakumar returned, they found their house damaged beyond repair. As the couple lacked financial resources to rebuild another house, they constructed a temporary shelter with tin sheets, cadjan and salvaged cement blocks, hoping to collect some money to rebuild a permanent home someday.

Jeyakumar earned a living as a toddy tapper, tapping from Palmyrah trees that grow abundantly in the Northern Province. Unfortunately, in 2010, Jeyakumar died in a tragic accident while climbing a Palmyrah tree. Jeevakala was left to look after the two little children as the sole

breadwinner of the family. She started work as a casual labourer, undertaking agricultural work during the “Maha” cultivation season. With little savings and a monthly income of about LKR.12,000, Jeevakala had little hope of rebuilding their home, as most of her earnings were spent on daily consumption.

When the *Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas in Sri Lanka* project commenced in Killinochchi in 2013, priority for beneficiary selection was given to vulnerable beneficiaries including female headed homeowners, elderly people and families with members with disabilities. In May 2014, Jeevakala was selected by the project. She was provided a financial grant of LKR.550,000 in four instalments to reconstruct the damaged house. As the project followed a “homeowner driven process” of construction, Jeevakala was responsible for managing the reconstruction process with technical support from UN-Habitat.

With the first instalment of LKR.100,000, she started clearing the site and laid the foundation for the new house on an auspicious day in accordance with the Hindu calendar. While Jeevakala contributed her own labour towards construction activities, she hired a mason and carpenter for all skilled construction work. The Uriyan Village Rehabilitation Committee, established by the project to help beneficiary families to rebuild, assisted Jeevakala with the reconstruction through bulk purchase of building materials such as sand and cement, significantly reducing costs.



The house at foundation level.

Through dedication and careful monitoring of construction work, Jeevakala was successful in completing her house within four months. The family moved to their new home in September 2014.



When the main construction was complete, Jeevakala hired a group of local painters who were living with disabilities to undertake the finishing touches to the house including varnishing and painting the doors and windows. Disaster risk reduction features have been incorporated into the house construction including raising the foundation of the house in order to ensure safety from seasonal flooding during the monsoon rains.

With the support of her family, neighbours and the Village Reconstruction Committee, Jeevakala managed to overcome the many challenges she faced. While scarcity of water is a major problem in the North due to months of severe drought, she was fortunate to have access to fresh water through her tube well. She has also contributed some of her own savings towards the house construction.

Having moved back to their permanent home, Jeevakala is very happy that the family has proper protection from the elements. "I contributed a lot of labour support towards the house construction. All the excavation work for the foundation was done by me. UN-Habitat staff visited the construction site regularly and provided a lot of support especially in selecting the house design and good quality building materials. I am so happy that I managed to complete the house during such a short time period. Now, I am hoping to extend the house with a front veranda so that the children will have more space to play. We sincerely thank the donors for their generous support."



The family has access to fresh water from their tube well.

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. This is achieved through the facilitation of permanent housing and community infrastructure.



Jeevakala and the children in their newly constructed home.

Implemented in the districts of Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar and Batticaloa from 2013 –2015, the project is assisting 4,600 families to reconstruct their houses.