

Getting Hambantota Back on its Feet

It is easy to spot the new houses coming up in Uddhakandara, Hambantota. Flowers wrapped in coconut leaves are perched atop bamboo poles at four corners of each plot where construction has started. "It is a local practice to ward off evil spirits," informs MW Gunapala, a 63-year-old farmer, who lost his home and hope in the tsunami. Today, Gunapala is back on his feet, keeping a watchful eye over evil spirits and the workers building his new home — one among 200-odd being built with Italian assistance. Gunapala's home will be the product of labour and love of a motley group: four skilled masons, Gunapala's relatives and enthusiastic students from the local technical college, such as 33-year-old Jayantha Jayasinghe, who hope to gain practical experience. The initiative to train local youth in masonry, as the demand for skilled construction labour surges, stems from an innovative arrangement between UN-HABITAT, German Aid Agency GTZ and a local technical college. The Hambantota tsunami recovery effort also has the support of the Asian Development Bank which is pitching in to help ease the perennial problem of water in this arid area.



Hambantota resident Gunapala's daughter-in-law Ajantha helping construction workers at the site where the family's new home is coming up.

Challenges, Opportunities & The Way Ahead

Despite the tangible successes, the tsunami recovery projects face many challenges. While the humanitarian emergency operations have been generously funded, many other areas — such as critical infrastructure, shelter, restoration of livelihoods and capacity-building — remain under-funded. Changing policy regulations about land use (the imposition of a buffer zone) has been a major issue, slowing construction and changing resettlement needs. Soaring prices of construction material and escalating labour costs are other serious concerns.

Another key challenge is the reconstruction of homes in the conflict-affected pockets of the North East. In Killinochchi, for example, even before the tsunami, there were over 3000 families who had lost their houses and property due to the protracted ethnic conflict in the area. The fishing

communities in this district, one of the poorest in Sri Lanka, tried to start afresh after the 2002 Cease-Fire (between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE). Then came the tsunami, which damaged nearly 5,500 houses and exacerbated the housing crisis. "UN-HABITAT started work in April 2005 in Killinochchi with 43 families. Each family is currently being assisted to build a 500 sq feet house. Though many agencies promised permanent shelter to the displaced in Killinochchi, the UN-HABITAT project is the only one which has got off the ground," says K Shanmugalingam, UN-HABITAT city manager in Killinochchi. Community mobilisation has been a key challenge in this area with large numbers of displaced families. But a new community development council has been formed and things are moving, says Shanmugalingam.

Houses are for people. In the year ahead, the construction of houses will be over. But rejuvenated community development councils are already planning the next stage: restoring livelihoods. Many poor fishing families who lived in shacks now own homes made of brick and mortar. They have electricity connections, bank accounts and a new mind-set. "I used to live in a one-room hut. I cooked, slept, did everything in that place. Now I live in a house. I never believed it would happen but it has. My new home is not yet complete but it is much bigger than what I had. There is space for the children to study," says tsunami survivor Salma, whose new home is coming up in Rizvi nagar, Kattankudi. With a new home and a new start, has come aspiration. The challenge and the opportunity for UN-HABITAT and its partners is to sustain this sense of well-being and to spark the social recovery still in a nascent form.

Ideas are already taking shape among different communities: about income generating schemes, thrift societies, interest free loans and many others. Having been through years of conflict and the country's biggest natural disaster, those who have survived are tempered, much like the process used to strengthen steel. But there is hope in the country where people are not only rebuilding their own lives but their lives together as communities.



Completed House in Walauwatta, Galle.

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