

Stories from the Field

Building Blocks for a Brighter Tomorrow: Reconstruction of the Selvanagar Village Preschool in Killinochchi District, Northern Sri Lanka



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 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 home owners to reconstruct and repair their conflict damaged houses. In addition to housing, the project is also supporting the reconstruction of essential community infrastructure facilities such as community centres, internal roads and preschools to support resettled families to resume normal life in their villages. Overall, this project is supporting the reconstruction of 12 preschools in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Selvanagar village in the Karachchi DS Division of Killinochchi district was severely affected by the three decades of conflict in Sri Lanka. The conflict had caused significant damage and destruction to the environment, infrastructure, and economy of the village affecting the lives of over 800 families who had faced multiple displacements and hardships. When the residents of Selvanagar returned, they found most of the village infrastructure including housing and community assets such as schools, wells and community buildings badly damaged or destroyed beyond repair. The village preschool was among the many community assets that had been badly damaged. The lack of access to basic services resulted in some of the families migrating to townships that had better infrastructure facilities, particularly for children’s education.



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The small building where the preschool was previously located.

As most of the families in the village were conflict affected returnees lacking their own financial resources, they were unable to support the construction of a new preschool building. This resulted in lessons being conducted in a temporary building. This building also doubled as the village youth club and had very basic facilities, consisting of one small classroom with little educational or play equipment and no access to proper sanitation facilities or a kitchen to prepare the children’s mid-day meal.

When this project commenced in Selvanagar in 2013, a Settlement Improvement Planning workshop was conducted by UN-Habitat and the community members to identify the main issues affecting their daily lives and to collectively identify solutions. During the workshop, community members identified the construction of a preschool and a community drinking water well as priority needs of the village. Both these small scale, but vital, infrastructure activities were then selected for funding by the project. As the project follows a participatory process of reconstruction, the construction of the preschool was contracted to the Selvanagar Rural Development Society (RDS) following a rigorous selection process by UN-Habitat.

The construction of the preschool was undertaken through a grant provided in four instalments to the RDS based on the physical progress of work. Skilled construction workers were hired and the construction materials purchased by the RDS. Technical assistance on construction activities including the architectural design of the preschool, preparation of the bill of quantities, advice on building materials and procurement of skilled labour was provided by UN-Habitat, along with special training on sustainable construction and disaster risk reduction methods for the RDS and artisans.



Newly constructed preschool building in Selvanagar

The construction of the Selvanagar preschool was completed on 22nd September 2014, within 10 months. The new preschool is approx. 1,070 square feet consisting of a large class room, teachers’ room, kitchen and two toilets. Several environmentally friendly technologies have been incorporated into the construction of this building. Fair-faced blockwork has been used to build the preschool walls while pre-cast concrete door and window frames have been used instead of timber frames. These measures have significantly reduced the cost of construction while contributing towards environmental sustainability. Several eco-friendly construction practices such as re-using construction debris and proper storage of building materials has been practiced by the RDS during the construction. Community members have been actively involved in this intervention by participating in shramadana campaigns to clear the area for

construction and soil filling for the foundation. The careful monitoring of the construction work and bulk procurement of building materials by the members of the RDS has contributed towards the timely completion.



Mr. Julian, Selvanagar RDS Secretary

The RDS Secretary, Mr. M. Julian, expressed his appreciation regarding the newly constructed preschool. He stated “Children need special attention and care to recover from the psychological effects of the conflict. This newly constructed preschool is an ideal place for our children to learn and play with their friends in a safe and comfortable environment. It is also close to their homes. Our sincere gratitude goes to the donors for their financial support”.

The new preschool is now full of laughter and chatter of little children, with over 43 children from Selvanagar now in attendance. The children and their parents are delighted to have a brand new building with brightly painted walls, furniture and play equipment.

The Preschool Teacher, Mrs. Malliga, is confident that the new preschool will attract many more children in the future. “We faced many difficulties in conducting preschool activities due to the lack of space and facilities. The children had to go home in the middle of lessons to use the toilet as the preschool building had no sanitation facilities. Now the children as well as the parents are very happy with the new building. We are also very pleased with the separate teacher’s room and kitchen. Fresh and hygienic food is prepared daily in the kitchen for all the children while we use the teacher’s room to plan the lessons and to keep our records and equipment safely. I am sure more pre-schoolers from neighbouring villages will also join our preschool from next year. “



Before and after: the preschool children in their temporary building (left) and now in the newly reconstructed preschool classroom (right).

The Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing Project is being implemented from January 2013 to June 2015 in the districts of Killinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar in the North and Batticaloa in the East. The project will support the reconstruction of 4,600 houses and a number of infrastructure initiatives including 12 preschools, 14 community centres, 20 wells, and the rehabilitation of approximately 32 km of internal access roads.