

# A Home of Our Own

REBUILDING HOUSES IN THE  
NORTH OF SRI LANKA



**Australian  
Aid** 

**UN HABITAT**  
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

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## FOREWORD



It gives me great pleasure to introduce this publication entitled *A Home of our Own: Rebuilding Houses in the North of Sri Lanka* which documents the partnership between the Government of Australia and UN-Habitat in post conflict housing reconstruction for returning war affected families in Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

In May 2009, more than three decades of conflict in Sri Lanka came to an end. While the entire country had suffered as a result, Northern and Eastern districts had been devastated. Families had been displaced on multiple occasions, often being forced to leave their homes for many years. When people eventually returned, most of their houses had been either badly damaged or completely destroyed. As the majority of people affected were relatively poor and with marginal incomes, they were unable to absorb major financial shocks, such as the loss of their livelihoods and houses.

Recognising the urgent need to facilitate people's return to habitable homes, UN-Habitat initiated discussions with the Government of Australia who swiftly responded with a contribution of an initial AU\$3 million through AusAID, followed soon after by a further AU\$7 million towards the reconstruction and repair of damaged and destroyed housing. The result of this joint effort

between AusAID and UN-Habitat has been assistance to 3,785 returnee families to reconstruct or repair their damaged houses in the districts of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Killinochchi under the 'Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in Northern Sri Lanka' Project.

This housing construction project contributed to a sustainable solution for the returnees with the specific objective of improving the living conditions and social cohesion of displaced people, returnees and their host communities. Using a "home owner driven process" it empowered families to act on their own behalf by providing support to become strong and active community members through a series of widely tested community development activities and processes.

This publication is a pictorial representation of the AusAID - UN-Habitat partnership spanning 18 months of project implementation. It documents the journey of the returning, conflict affected families who showed remarkable resilience and were instrumental in their own recovery. This publication would serve as a valuable resource and advocacy tool for countries that wish to implement post disaster housing programmes using a participatory, people's process of reconstruction.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka, the Ministry of Resettlement, the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement & Security – Northern Province and the District Administrators of the Northern Province for the support provided to the post-conflict recovery process. The support provided by the Government of Australia in funding this unique housing recovery programme is gratefully acknowledged.

**Joan Clos**

United Nations Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme



Proud home owner, Mrs. Kokeeleswary in Vavuniya North walks along the pathway of her house.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





# INTRODUCTION

Over a period spanning three decades, Sri Lanka experienced a civil war that affected the lives and destroyed the assets of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. By the end of the conflict in May 2009, over 160,000 houses had been damaged or destroyed and more than 330,000 people displaced.

Through funding and assistance from the Australian Government (AusAID), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) established one of the first, and at the time the largest, post-war programmes to address the housing needs of the returning IDPs. With funding of A\$10 million, the “Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka” project assisted a total of 3,785 vulnerable families in Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts. Within a period of 18 months from January 2010, 1,110 families had rebuilt their destroyed homes, and another 2,675 families had repaired theirs, with grant payments and technical support provided by the project.

The project was innovative and challenged the accepted linear approach to post-disaster shelter recovery. The project vision challenged the necessity to move through the various stages of recovery: emergency shelter to transitional shelter, and only then to a more durable solution. The project set out to test an alternative paradigm which would enable families to participate in the reconstruction of their lives and houses and move to a durable solution at a much earlier stage within the recovery spectrum.

Following a ‘home-owner driven’ methodology, the project provided assistance to beneficiaries to take responsibility for the design and construction of their homes. Placing people at the centre of the decision making process is the primary step in recovery. The psychological and social impacts of involving the people in the process and providing a home to restore dignity and security are immeasurable.

An objective selection and community consultation process was applied to ensure that the most vulnerable families in the most effected villages were selected for assistance. Local Government officials supported the selection of the villages, and the beneficiary lists were finalized in a participatory process involving the families. The project prioritized assisting female-headed households and families with large numbers of children, the disabled and the elderly.

The empowerment of women was a primary objective and was achieved through their engagement in the community level decision making process. Women were also encouraged to actively participate in the construction process, providing opportunities for development of leadership and organisational skills and the potential for new livelihoods.

The project design allowed for the introduction of benefits in addition to the housing programme for the families and communities including livelihoods training and initiatives, awareness programmes,

small scale infrastructure, collection of social data, environmental initiatives and linking communities requiring specialist assistance with specialist agencies. Through the platform established by this project, families received assistance far beyond permanent housing.

The project was innovative in its development and execution. The AusAID / UN-Habitat partnership has provided enormous benefits to a large group of families in a short timeframe and has provided the framework for future shelter-related projects in the North and East of Sri Lanka and in other disaster-affected communities around the globe.

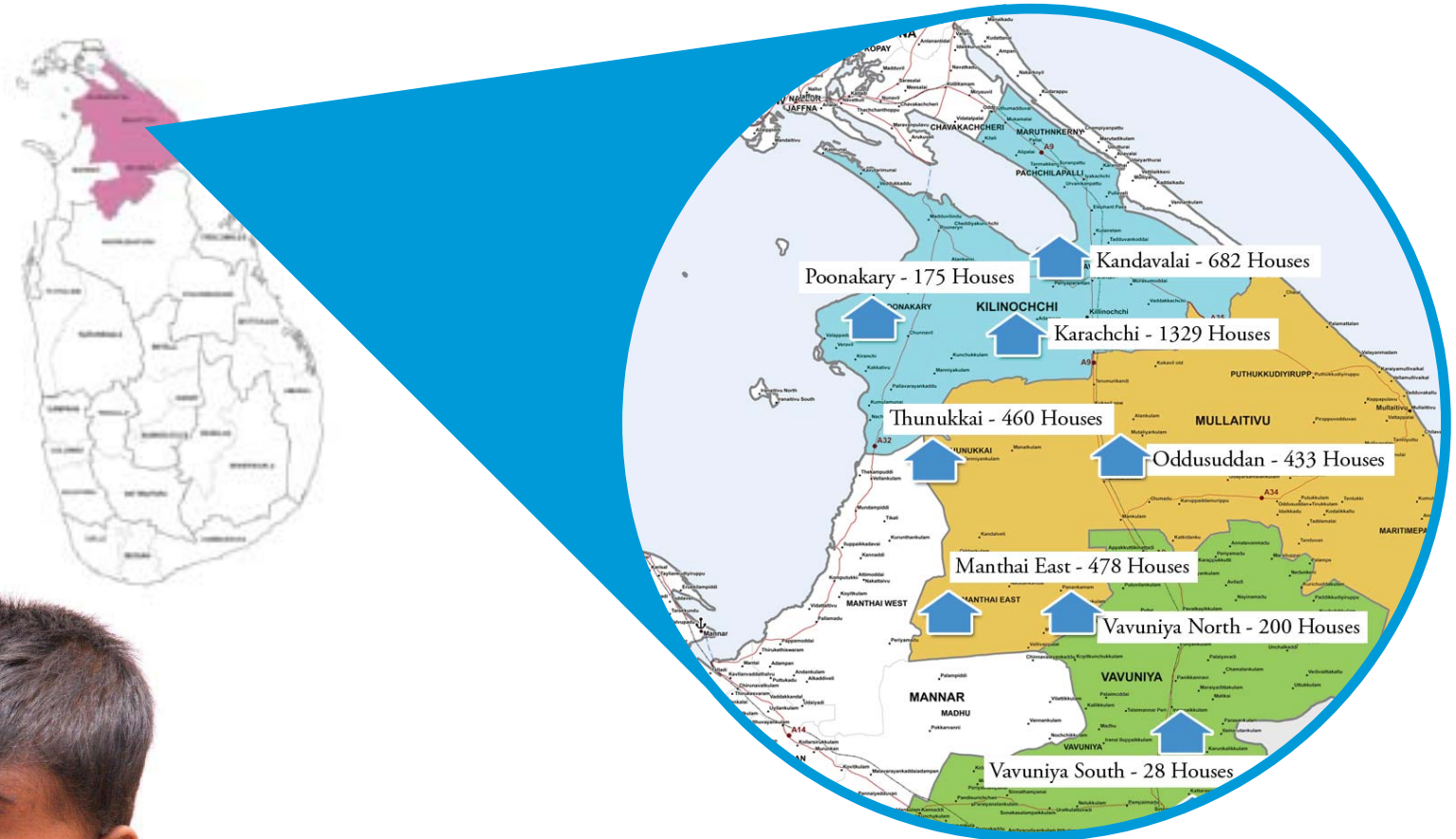
The partnership between AusAID and UN-Habitat was extremely successful. Communication was effective, with ample opportunities for questions, explanations, discussions and review. AusAID’s vision in seeing the possibilities for such a project and supporting UN-Habitat to deliver has been recognized as a very important catalytic step in the recovery of the North.

This publication is a photographic journey of the 18 month project which showcases the rebuilding process of the returning IDPs. It spans from their return to places of origin, commencement of house construction and the gradual return to normal civic life in their new permanent houses.

# PROJECT LOCATION

The project targeted the most vulnerable families across the conflict affected districts of Killinochchi, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu in Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

This resulted in a wide geographical spread of beneficiaries which, whilst presenting logistical challenges, meant that the most vulnerable families were assisted. The map indicates the eight Divisional Secretariat (DS) Divisions reached.





## PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY





## Returning Home



© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe

Three decades of civil war displaced more than a million people from Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. The final stages of the conflict saw intense fighting in the North and heavy damage to a wide range of infrastructure, particularly houses, water supply, public buildings, and health and education facilities. Estimates suggest that 160,000 houses were damaged or destroyed as a result of the years of fighting.

By October 2009, there were more than 330,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and the majority of these remained in camps in Vavuniya. In November 2009, the Government began an accelerated resettlement programme to enable families to return to their homes, or at least to their districts of origin. Thus began the return of tens of thousands of IDPs.

The families who returned, found their houses either badly damaged or completely destroyed thereby rendering them homeless. As most returning families did not have the financial resources to rebuild their homes, they lived in makeshift shelters made of tent material, cadjan and tin sheets.



**DAMAGED HOUSES  
IN THE NORTHERN  
PROVINCE:**

It is estimated that  
over 160,000 houses  
were damaged in the  
Northern Province  
during the conflict.

© UN-Habitat / David  
Evans / Laxman Perera /  
Charmalee Jayasinghe







While many houses were completely destroyed, many others remained standing, often without roofs, windows or doors, requiring major repairs or full reconstruction to bring them back to use.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





Returning IDP families had to restart their lives having lost housing, livelihoods and other assets.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe / Nipuna Kumbalathara







The harsh reality of temporary shelter: makeshift shelters made of cadjan, tin sheets and tent material formed the temporary homes of returnee families. Families lived in these shelters for months, until permanent houses were built. © UN-Habitat / Nipuna Kumbalathara





Temporary shelters of returning families were often made out of tin sheets, tent material and cadjan.

© UN-Habitat / Nipuna Kumbalathara



Children of returning families had no facilities to study in their makeshift shelters: Mrs. Premakumar Saraswathi's daughter, Manusa does her homework in their back yard. Providing permanent shelter also improved the ability of children to study.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





Displaced families who returned to their villages had to start all over again as their houses had been damaged during the conflict. They occupied temporary shelters as they had no financial resources to rebuild the damaged homes. © UN-Habitat / Nipuna Kumbalathara

## Rebuilding Permanent Homes

The 'Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka' project focused on supporting families to repair and rebuild damaged houses as quickly as possible. Initial assessments confirmed that while many houses were completely destroyed many others remained standing, often without roofs, windows or doors. Rather than investing resources on temporary or transitional shelter arrangements, UN-Habitat moved directly to a sustainable and durable housing solution for the vulnerable families, focusing on more than 80 villages in the worst effected districts of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Killinochchi.

Using a "home owner driven" approach, the project assisted families to actively take charge of their own recovery. The families took responsibility for the planning and implementation of the design and construction of their houses. Their early involvement in the process ensured that the end result was a 'home' that reflected their own aspirations. By procuring materials and labour locally the funds remained within their communities and families contributing what they could, including their own labour, towards the construction process.







**WORKING TOGETHER:**  
Community members with  
construction skills help  
neighbours to re-construct  
their houses.

© UN-Habitat / Laxman Perera  
/ Charmalee Jayasinghe







Women were empowered to engage in the home owner driven construction process.

Right: A homeowner speaks proudly of leading the reconstruction process of her own home.

Below: A female home owner supervises her house construction in Kallaru village, Killinochchi district.

© UN-Habitat / Nipuna Kumbalathara / Charmalee Jayasinghe







**PEOPLE'S PROCESS:**  
The project ensured that the communities were consulted throughout the implementation process through regular mass meetings. Women's active participation at community meetings was encouraged with women elected to more than 50% of office-bearer positions in Village Rehabilitation Committees.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe / G. Shivalingam





Housing construction progress in Puliyankulam North, Vavuniya district. The family's temporary shelter is next to the house.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



Mrs. Ananthan Luxmy supervises her house construction in the village of Kallaru, Killinochchi district. As her husband Ananthan is a fisherman, she was the primary "project manager" of the construction process. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





UN-Habitat team visiting Mr. Theiventhiran's house during construction to discuss progress. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe

Seven year old  
Menan - eldest son  
of home owner Mr.  
Theiventhiran.





**CONSTRUCTION AT A GLANCE:** Construction activities in progress in a village in Killinochchi (Top), and along the A9 Road (bottom), Northern Province © UN-Habitat / Laxman Perera

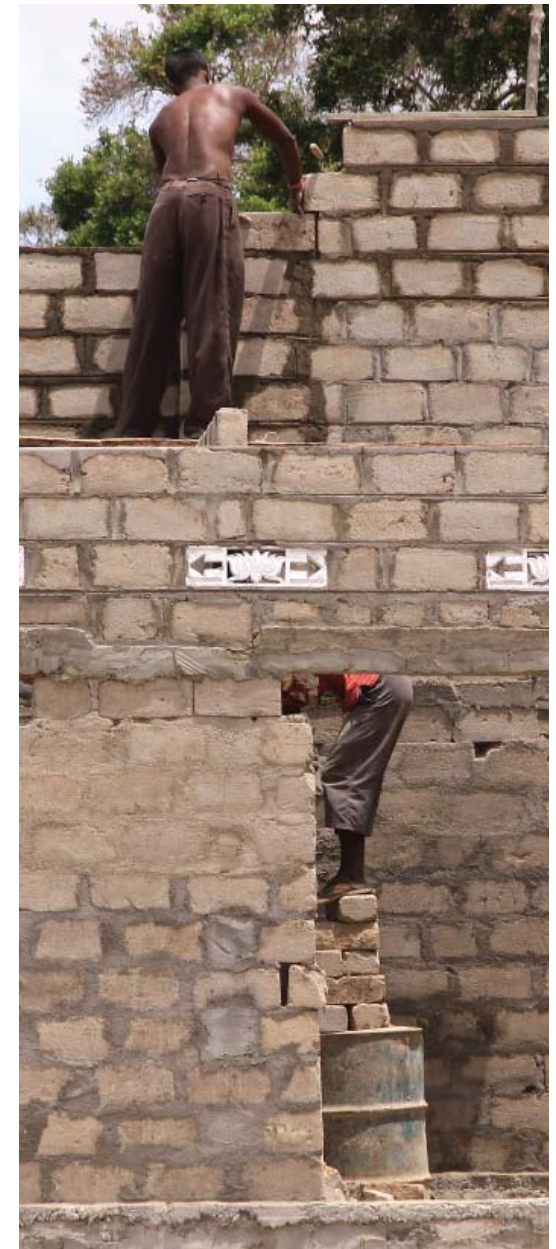


House construction in progress in  
the Northern Province.

Center: Concrete/cement slabs are  
being cast by masons.

Right & left: Masonry work in  
progress.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe /  
Laxman Perera







Disabled home owner Mr. G. Ponnampalam supervising house construction and discussing construction progress with the UN-Habitat team. The Community, through the village rehabilitation committee, provided assistance to vulnerable families to procure building materials and to hire skilled workers. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**REVIVING TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS:** Construction workers in the Northern Province were given the opportunity to revive their traditional livelihoods through this housing project. Left: carpenters prepare timber beams for roofing rafters; Top: a mason prepares mortar for wall construction.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**MONITORING  
PROGRESS:**  
UN-Habitat and AusAID  
closely monitored  
progress during house  
construction with  
regular field visits to  
the project locations  
and discussions with  
home owners.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee  
Jayasinghe





Families enjoyed better health and wellbeing through improved access to sanitation. The project ensured the construction of a sanitary toilet for each house built.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS:** In order to minimise the impact of construction on the environment and natural resources, the project provided tree saplings to families for planting in their home gardens.

© UN-Habitat /  
Mohammed Jezeer /  
Nadarajah Ravivarman

## Regaining Lives

Spanning a period of 18 months, this project assisted 3,785 vulnerable families to rebuild and repair their damaged homes. The repair component supported 2,675 families and 1,110 families were assisted to fully reconstruct their destroyed houses through the provision of grant payments and technical support. Vulnerable families, including female headed households and the disabled, were identified and given high priority in the beneficiary selection process.

This shelter initiative enhanced human security and protection for the affected families by reinforcing human dignity, opportunities for livelihoods, environmental safety and improved quality of life, particularly for women and children.

By moving into permanent homes, families gained shelter from the elements and were protected from seasonal extreme weather events such as flooding

during the monsoon rains. After years of hardship and insecurity, homeowners had a secure place for their possessions as they had lockable doors and windows. The new homes freed the family members to pursue their livelihoods away from their villages, secure in the knowledge that their families and possessions were safe.

As each house was provided with a sanitary toilet, the health and wellbeing of the families, particularly children, improved through better hygiene. Children of the returnees finally had adequate space to study and play in their new homes, significantly enhancing their quality of life.



© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



**PRETTY IN PINK:**  
many of the  
completed houses  
in the North are  
painted in vibrant  
colours and pink  
is popular. The  
homeowner's two  
children are featured  
in this photograph.

© UN-Habitat /  
Charmalee Jayasinghe





A permanent home  
provides security, safety  
and human dignity.

Top and below: Newly  
constructed houses in  
the Northern Province.

Right: Homeowner  
shows her new house in  
Killinochchi district.  
© UN-Habitat / Laxman  
Perera







Opportunity for new livelihoods: some enterprising home owners have started their own construction related livelihoods, such as cement block manufacture.

Left: A homeowner has commenced a cement block manufacturing venture.

Right: Another project beneficiary engaged in cement block making.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





Mr. Thomas Thieventhiran's wife, Kalairangitham with her children. As the project followed a "home owner driven" construction process, both husband and wife were actively involved in the reconstruction of their house. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



A group of home owners with traditional flower garlands lining up to welcome the Australian High Commissioner at the ceremonial hand over of houses in Kallaru Village. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe

The former Australian High Commissioner, H.E. Kathy Klugman, is welcomed by Mrs. Subas, a homeowner in the village of Kallaru and her daughter. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





A little girl walks along the footpath of her newly constructed house in Killinochchi on the day of the official hand over by the Australian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



Traditional Handover ceremony of completed houses to the community: H.E. Ms. Kathy Klugman, former Australian High Commissioner, and Mr. Laxman Perera, UN-Habitat Programme Manager, ceremonially hand over a house to the home owners in Kallaru village, Killinochchi in September 2011. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe







Top: Newly constructed home in Kanagaryankulam, Vavuniya North belonging to Mr. Joseph and Mrs. Kannaigyamah. Although disabled, Joseph provided the bulk of the labour towards the construction of his house.

Bottom: Mrs. Kannaigyamah in her garden.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



Mr. Joseph and Mrs. Kannaigyamah with their eldest daughter.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**BEFORE AND AFTER:** Mrs. Premakumar Saraswathi during the construction of her house, standing next to the temporary shelter. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



**The house after construction,** Umaiyalpuram, Killinochchi district.

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



**A family in Kallaru enter their new home, following the ceremonial hand over of houses by the Australian High Commissioner in September 2011.**

© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**A NEW LIFE IN A NEW HOME:**  
Mr. G. Ponnampalam and his wife Mrs. Gnanashakthi outside their newly constructed two bedroom house, Paranthan, Killinochchi district.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



The newly reconstructed home of the Thiyagarajah family in Puliyankulam North, Vavuniya. Mrs. Jeyrani Thiyagarajah and son Mr. Senthooran are pictured. The family has started building a front verandah using their own savings.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





A UN-Habitat technical officer, Ms. Krishnarany Sinnapalani, on an inspection visit to project beneficiary Mrs. Kokeeleswary's house.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





**RETURNING TO NORMALITY:** Single mother Mrs. Ganeshalingam Sri Rani with her two children in their newly constructed home in Vavuniya North.  
© UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe





The UN-Habitat team that assisted the families in their house reconstruction efforts. © UN-Habitat / Charmalee Jayasinghe



Following the end of three decades of conflict in May 2009, UN-Habitat supported returning internally displaced families to rebuild and repair their damaged houses in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Through funding assistance from the Government of Australia, UN-Habitat established one of the first and at that time largest, post-conflict housing programmes. With funding of AUD 10 million, the "Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka" project assisted a total of 3,785 vulnerable families in Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts. This book is a photographic journey of the Housing Recovery Programme spanning 18 months of project implementation. It documents the lives of the returning, conflict affected families who showed remarkable resilience and acted as catalysts for their own recovery.

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