

Engaging CBOs to Implement Relief Projects in Sri Lanka through a Participatory Process

In May 2017, heavy rains resulted in floods and landslides affecting over 630,000 people in Sri Lanka, with 203 people losing their lives. In response to this major national crisis, UN-Habitat provided relief assistance to over 6,500 families in the districts of Kalutara and Galle districts through the project “Emergency Shelter Relief for Flood and Landslide Affected Households in Kalutara and Galle Districts of Sri Lanka”. Funded by United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), a key feature of this project was the involvement of local Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to provide relief assistance to communities through a participatory process in the selected villages.



Mr. Gihan Nilanka and his family from Kalutara District outside their transitional shelter. Their flood damaged house is in the foreground.

Although 15 districts in Sri Lanka were affected by the floods, the Kalutara, Galle, Matara and Ratnapura Districts in the South Western quadrant of the island were severely affected due to both floods and landslides. Around 267,960 people were affected by floods and landslides in Kalutara and Galle districts which amounted to 42 percent of the total affected. In these two districts, 1,047 houses were fully damaged and 33,278 houses were partially damaged. UN-Habitat, through the CERF project, provided transitional shelter and essential Non Food Items (NFI) for the affected communities. Assistance was given through grants for shelter repairs and construction of transitional shelters in safe locations for landslide affected households or in their own properties for returnee flood affected

households. The project also provided 10 percent of the NFI needs of the total affected population in the two districts.

From the inception of the project in mid-2017, UN-Habitat partnered with a number of local CBOs - through community contracts, to implement the main project activities in the selected locations. Overall, 16 CBOs were selected, 10 organisations in Kalutara district and six in Galle. The selected CBOs are engaged in diverse development and social service activities in their respective villages. These include farmer organisations, welfare and funeral societies, self-help groups and Village Development Committees. All selected CBOs are registered with the Government of Sri Lanka.

The selected CBOs played a crucial role in project implementation. They undertook assessments in 20 GN divisions to assess the damage caused by floods and landslides to houses, as well as the affected families’ key requirements. A baseline survey conducted by the CBOs under UN-Habitat supervision, obtained household information, status of land ownership and present residence, vulnerability of the families, extent of damage to the former residence and NFI requirements. Priority assistance was given to vulnerable households such as female headed households, households with infants below one year and households with elderly and disabled persons.

Once the community contracts with the CBOs were finalised, UN-Habitat transferred cash grants to CBO bank accounts to start implementing the project activities. The CBOs disbursed cash grants to selected shelter beneficiaries through their bank accounts, which proved to be a fast and effective method of cash transfer. These households then commenced construction of their transitional shelters. The CBOs also engaged in repair and reconstruction of the shelters and mobilized collective community action through voluntary “shramadana” activities to assist vulnerable beneficiaries who lacked adequate capacity to manage their shelter construction. The CBOs procured building materials in large quantities for several households in order to reduce transportation costs and the overall material costs. The CBOs together with UN-Habitat staff provided technical support to the beneficiary families on the

construction of transitional shelters by helping them to select quality building materials and identify skilled construction workers. In consultation with UN-Habitat, the CBOs also organized the families to reuse building materials such as timber and roofing tiles from their damaged houses for shelter construction. This helped the families to construct the new shelters in a cost effective and environmentally friendly manner.

The president of the Sahana Welfare Society in Galle district discussing the construction of transitional shelters stated “As a result of the heavy rains, the ‘Gin ganga’ overflowed, and a number of houses near the river banks were flooded and damaged. Together with UN-Habitat, we were able to select the most vulnerable families for shelter assistance. We were able to obtain Government approvals and assist the affected families quickly.”



Community meeting organized by the Meththa Senior Citizens Organisation on NFI distribution.

The CBOs played an active role in the distribution of NFIs to affected families. The NFI kits were customized by UN-Habitat and the CBOs in consultation with community members in order to provide what the families needed most. The content of the NFI kit differed according to the location and consisted of a selection from a list which included a gas cylinder, gas stove, coconut scraper, kitchen knives, mosquito nets, mattress and bed sheets. CBOs selected local vendors through a transparent selection process, to purchase the goods for the NFIs. Thereafter, the NFI distribution was also undertaken by the CBOs with UN-Habitat’s guidance. Local procurement of labour and material provided temporary injection

of cash to the communities and acted as a catalyst to re-activate development of the local construction industry value chains.

Discussing the distribution of NFIs, the President of the Meththa Senior Citizens Organization stated “The NFI distribution was a great success. Our Society has a good understanding of community needs. So, with the support of UN-Habitat and the families, we selected the most appropriate NFI items. We covered 16 GN Divisions and distributed seven customised NFI items to 1,300 Families in Nagoda.”

Engaging CBOs in project implementation also resulted in lower operational costs and overheads when compared to engaging a larger civil society or Government institution. Accountability of the CBOs is high, as these organisations are accountable to the local communities and are also subject to annual audits by the Government. Mr.M.Aleem, the manager of the CERF project from UN-Habitat said “The selected CBOs had a good understanding and knowledge of the local context. The CBOs’ ownership of the project was one of the main reasons for its success”.



Special event to distribute NFIs, organised by the CBOs in Galle District.

The “Emergency Shelter Relief for Flood and Landslide Affected Households in Kalutara and Galle Districts of Sri Lanka” project provided durable life-saving transitional shelter assistance to 86 extremely vulnerable households whose houses have been fully damaged and shelter repair grants provided to 692 flood affected households whose homes have been partially damaged, to implement context specific basic emergency repairs, which made their damaged houses habitable, while 6,358 households were provided with life-saving NFI support.