

SRI LANKA



TURNING AROUND THE TSUNAMI

UN-HABITAT WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SRI LANKA



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United Nations Human Settlements Programme
Nairobi 2011

UN  **HABITAT**

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First published in Nairobi in 2011 by UN-HABITAT.
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United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)
UN-HABITAT Regional Office for Asia & the Pacific
(UN-HABITAT Fukuoka Office)
ACROS Bldg. 8F, 1-1-1 Tenjin, Chuo-ku,
Fukuoka 810-0001 Japan
Tel: (81-92) 724-7121; Fax: (81-92) 724-7124
Email: habitat.fukuoka@unhabitat.org
<http://www.fukuoka.unhabitat.org>

HS Number: HS/095/11E
ISBN Number(Volume): 978-92-1-132386-3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Principal Author: Sharni Jayawardena
Contributors: Laxman Perera, David Evans, I.A Hameed
Editors: Roman Rollnick, Jan Meeuwissen, Laxman Perera, David Evans, Nipuna Kumbalathara
Design and layout: Irene Juma, Nipuna Kumbalathara
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FOREWORD

When a giant killer wave created by an earthquake off the Indonesian coast swept into Sri Lanka the day after Christmas in December 2004, more than 35,000 people lost their lives, more than 100,000 homes along the coast were destroyed and for the hundreds of thousands of survivors, the word tsunami was etched into memory as a new horror never to be forgotten.

Indeed, the tsunami which claimed up to 430,000 lives in the neighbouring Indian Ocean rim countries, brought in its wake one of the largest and best funded humanitarian responses in recent history: the homeless received shelter, the hungry were fed, and the outbreak of diseases largely prevented.

And over and above this, the tsunami disaster served to change the way of thinking and the approaches to natural disasters of many in the international humanitarian community. This is where UN-HABITAT and Sri Lanka benefited from mobilizing a proven people centric and community driven methodology. While the agency, the Government and partner international and local stakeholders were versed in such, this peoples process and the owner driven approach has not been utilized in a recovery effort of vast magnitude. Consequently lessons learnt were many.

The tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka reaffirmed our view that the humanitarian assistance was not just a response to a tragic event, but also an opportunity to promote empowered, more disaster resilient communities.

First, that recovery must begin well before the end of the humanitarian response phase. The affected governments and international organizations such as UN system must always organize in such a way that the transition from relief to recovery and development is managed more seamlessly.

Second, that the process of recovery is led by those affected, that they are “empowered” to be in charge and make decisions and contribute actively towards rebuilding their lives rather than just brick and mortar. Thus far such an “owner driven” approach has proved successful in Sri Lanka for upgrading low

income shelter as well as rebuilding shelter in disaster and conflict recovery. The approach entails seizing all the moral, financial and political opportunities it can, and help communities onto a better path with the focus on equity, human rights and gender equality.

Third, that we champion a new kind of recovery which seeks to build back better, rather than simply restore what was there before. That the recovery process takes advantage of the opportunity to better plan settlements, as well as ensure technical soundness of housing, and community infrastructure being rebuilt.

Fourth, recovery over time must include disaster mitigation principles like early warning systems, public education and the construction of more resilient structures;

At the heart of the success of UN-HABITAT’s efforts in Sri Lanka was the participatory, consultative “Peoples Process”, where the people affected were ‘enabled in holistically rebuilding their communities. I am proud that this people’s process we came to call it, saw its inception in Sri Lanka in the 1980s as a result of a UN-HABITAT initiative.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka, the Ministries of Nation Building, Urban Development, Housing, Resettlement, Economic Development, and their predecessors, the international humanitarian community, the business sector and all our partners for enabling this recovery process. Especially, I wish to thank the local communities with whom we worked.

I hope that this publication will be a tribute to those forced so cruelly to “rebuild” their lives, and a reference for approaches contributing towards successful post disaster recovery.



Dr. Joan Clos

Undersecretary-General of the United Nations,
Executive Director UN-HABITAT

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1

WHEN THE TSUNAMI STRUCK

At 6.58 a.m. on December 26, 2004, an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale occurred off the Sumatran coast, triggering a tsunami of unprecedented proportions. Less than two hours later, huge waves struck two-thirds of the Sri Lankan coastline – an extent of more than one thousand kilometres.

The Asian Tsunami of December 2004 killed almost a quarter of a million people in India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Houses were severely damaged or reduced to rubble. Livelihoods were disrupted and livelihood assets destroyed. It was impossible to reduce the tsunami's impact or manage its outcome. Inevitably, the consequences were dire.

In Sri Lanka the tsunami killed about 35,000 people, injured 22,000 and displaced several hundred thousand. It damaged 30,000 homes and destroyed a further 70,000. It swept away belongings and equipment and wrecked infrastructure and trade. More than 150,000 people lost their livelihoods.

What's more, the tsunami worsened the problems of vulnerable people. A third of the people affected

by it lived below the poverty line. Thousands of people, particularly in the country's conflict-ridden North and East, were already experiencing years of displacement. And it was in the north-eastern coast that two-thirds of the deaths and almost 60 per cent of the displacement took place. Sri Lanka's emergency relief efforts were successful in meeting the immediate needs of people but the speed of recovery of different groups was varied.

Sri Lanka had not experienced a natural disaster of this scale in recorded history. Relief, recovery and reconstruction posed an enormous challenge. Rebuilding people's lives, particularly after a disaster as huge as the tsunami, was never going to be easy. Although the government was able to restore basic services quickly with generous local, national and international help, meeting the demands for shelter became a struggle. It was the most complex part of the tsunami recovery process.

The tsunami occurred the day after Christmas Day in 2004 and in many ways this timing proved to have enormous significance for what would follow. Sri Lanka is a popular tourist destination for tens of thousands of Europeans who are looking to



While emergency assistance was quick to arrive, sustainable recovery proved more challenging



People were forced to rebuild their ways of life: ruins of a Hindu shrine destroyed

avoid winter back home and relax around the magnificent Sri Lankan beaches. When the tsunami struck these tourists were instantly affected and a number were killed. This gave the tsunami an additional international profile and video footage was transmitted around the globe almost instantly.

For every tourist who was in Sri Lanka, probably a hundred friends and family watched on in horror back home. This, combined with the impact of this disaster striking at Christmas, resulted in the largest outpouring of support ever seen in post-disaster fundraising, with queues forming outside banks and institutions that had been designated as collection points for cash donations.

Foreign aid donated to Sri Lanka was estimated at more than US\$3 billion with more than US\$1 billion being given for housing alone. The implications of this are discussed in more detail under Resource Mobilization.

There was much that UN-HABITAT had learnt from the agency's previous post-conflict and post-disaster reconstruction and recovery programmes

in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines. Moreover, the agency had been working in Sri Lanka for almost three decades, supporting a series of innovative and ground-breaking housing and settlement development practices and policies, in partnership with the government, NGOs and community organizations. The combined experience and knowledge enabled UN-HABITAT to contribute effectively to the island's post-tsunami reconstruction efforts.

Since 1978, UN-HABITAT has helped influence housing and urban policy developments in Sri Lanka. The agency's programmes have included assistance to the:

- Master Plan for Colombo (1978-1983) which included the setting up of a Slum and Shanty Unit, one of the first successful slum upgrading programmes in a developing country. The Slum and Shanty Development Programme made it possible for low-income communities to gain individual lots with leasehold tenure, enabling them to improve their houses.
- International Year for Shelter of the Homeless Demonstration Project (1982-1987) on the development of low-income shelter initiatives and the integration of information and training activities.
- Million Houses Programme (1984-1988) through a training programme for community participation. This was an innovative programme, changing the government's role from a provider of shelter to that of an enabler and facilitator in the housing process.
- Million-and-a-Half Houses Programme (1989-1993) through the continuation of the UN-HABITAT Programme for Community Participation, institutionalizing participatory approaches such as community action planning.
- Sustainable Cities Programme that began in the late 1990s and improved environmental planning capacity and urban planning strategies. This programme is still operational and has covered many cities in the country. In 2004, it extended its support to the government's Urban Governance Programme.
- Urban Poverty Reduction through Community Empowerment Project (2001-2003).
- The Lunawa Lake Environment Improvement and Community Development Project, which started in 2001, covering two municipalities within the Colombo Metropolitan Area with a focus on the implementation of an involuntary-resettlement policy for people affected by development projects.

UN-HABITAT played a key role in mainstreaming participatory methodologies in settlement development in Sri Lanka, including Community Action Planning and Community Contracting. Today, these principles are also being incorporated in urban governance, through broad-based city consultations, to ensure the greater recognition of the voice of the poor in local government.

2 PUTTING LEARNING INTO PRACTICE



A settlement plan being discussed by the community

In December 2004, UN-HABITAT demonstrated its ability to respond quickly and effectively to a disaster recovery situation. The agency worked with the Sri Lankan government, donors and key stakeholders to assess the tsunami's impact and prioritize areas that were most in need. This was the beginning of UN-HABITAT's involvement in Sri Lanka's post-tsunami reconstruction programme.

Initially, the Japanese government funded UN-HABITAT projects covering five cities and 25 settlements – a concerted programme that would put into practice a people's process of recovery and

The Sri Lankan government's decision to introduce a coastal buffer zone had made it necessary to implement two distinct programmes. 'Donor-driven' housing, for families who had been living within the buffer zone, removed people from their localities with little consultation, making integration into their new neighbourhoods difficult. However, 'homeowner-driven' housing, for partially- and fully-damaged houses outside the buffer zone, ensured that people remain in their familiar neighbourhoods and would be responsible for rebuilding their homes. UN-HABITAT was one of the main advocates of

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