When can they really start to live?

By Leonie Solomons

The IDP camp in Poonthoddam is a maze of sloshy muddy pathways, tightly packed huts with palm-leaf roofs and corrugated-iron sheds. Jeyakumari has spent most of her life in this decrepit camp for thousands of ethnic Tamils displaced by Sri Lanka's two-decade civil war, and can see no way out.

Jeyakumari (23) moved here near the northern town of Vavuniya from the LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi 15 years ago. The basic living space in a long corrugated-roof hut housing 20 families is the only home she has ever known.

The two largest IDP camps, housing over 6000 people at Poonthoddam and Sithamparumpuram, are in the government-held half of the northern district of Vavuniya, which is cut in two by a border with territory controlled by the LTTE. Thousands of IDPs, mainly from the northern part of the country have crowded into this crammed patch in North western Sri Lanka since the early 1990s, waiting for a chance to go home.

“Life is extremely hard, mainly because there are very few job opportunities when can they really start to live?
A mason by profession, he makes about Rs. 500 a day, but he is lucky to get more than two days of work a week. He and thousands of displaced like him depend on state handouts of dry rations like rice and lentils.

The shelters were built a decade ago and no repairs have been done, and are in dilapidated state, looking more like cowsheds - fit for animals, not humans. Poonthtoddam camp, is now sorely in need of maintenance, which is most obvious in the rainy season. For around 2600 people, there are only 15 wells, and 112 toilets.

“We had tar sheets on our roof; during rains we get drenched, for the last ten years we could not afford to repair this shelter given by the government,” says Jeyakumari. Instead of peering at blue skies through the holes in the tin roofs, the rain leaked through and was caught in buckets or sat in puddles on the cemented floors.

Despite the stench from the neighbouring toilets and stagnating drains with piles of rubbish in the vicinity, Jeyakumari finds some comfort in her temporary home; at least the roof does not leak now.

In Poonthtottam camp 72 families got their roofs repaired by NRC’s ‘Capacity Building for Welfare Centres’ project. Holes in the roof were either patched or the zincalum sheets replaced where the rusted holes are too numerous or too large. “Having attended to many of the leaks in the halls housing the IDPs what remains is repairing the leaks in community centres, like the health centre and counselling room,” says Monique Goudreau, Project Coordinator.

It is in a neglected state, they have been living for over 15 years at a camp site in what was intended as semi-permanent shelters to last a year or two. But, there is more maintenance work to do in these densely packed IDP camp sites. For example, there are latrines that don’t work and have lost their corrugated zincalum entrance doors. “Consequently the usage of latrines is increasing. Furthermore, one wonders of the density the cesspits can handle,” adds Monique.

At the Sithamparumpuram camp too, a glimmer of hope appeared that such facilities were under somebody’s attention as a building was in progress for a short row of new cesspits and latrines. “Few of us think of such unseen, and sometimes unmentionable, matters. Yet such densely shared amenities present as warranting maintenance assessments and subsequent repairs,” adds Monique stressing the need for enhanced coordination between agencies. NRC also repaired a playground in this camp site.

“Going back to Kilinochchi is out, because the place I lived in did not belong to us. So there is nothing for me to go back to,” says Jayakumari.

“We have asked for a permanent house and are prepared to go to another place,” she adds, as young children born in the camp playing barefoot in the gutter in front of her. “Then we can really start to live.”
Life for P. Lalitha has been a struggle ever since she could remember. Every day, Lalitha fetches water from a well, at least 2 kilometres away from her home. To get there requires an ankle-twisting walk down a potholed road, past jungle terrain frequented by snakes and wild elephants. A resident of the Eppawala informal IDP settlement in the north central town of Anuradhapura, 52-year-old Lalitha has been living with her family in a half-finished house without water, electricity, or sanitation for the last ten years. “To go to the toilet, we must go in the bush, over there,” says Lalitha, pointing to land surrounded by bushes and scrubs.

Her husband is a seasonal labourer, and not every day he gets work. She makes string hoppers and sells them to a school canteen to eke out a living. “We used to do chena cultivation, but now the GS does not allow us to clear the jungle.” Lalitha has two children, a married daughter and 12 year old son. “My daughter’s husband left her and married another woman, we don’t know where he is, and my daughter went to Middle East for a job as a maid to provide for her four year old son.” Adding to her plight Lalitha has no information from her daughter for months now, when she last spoke to her she informed that she was not paid at all, for the 20 months she worked.

Lalitha and her husband have been working in a cashew plantation, belonging to the Cashew Corporation in Mannar for 12 years until 1990, when they were asked to leave by the LTTE as violent ethnic conflict engulfed the area.

She recalls that long journey between life and death, 15 years ago. “We were very scared, and used to sleep in the jungle, with our small children. One day LTTE asked us to leave; we left all our belongings and fled at the first notice given by the LTTE, in June 1990. We had less trouble with them.” Those who did not obey were not so lucky. “They suffered a lot, some were even killed.”

“There were about 190 families; the line of people was about a kilometre long. We had to leave all our belongings at one point and go through a very narrow trail, demarcated by ropes. It was only enough for one person to walk through; they told us to strictly follow the LTTE cadre, because either side of us was heavily mined. One person in the front veered off course and was caught up in a landmine. When others heard the explosion they got scared thinking that we were deceived and brought here to be killed, men and women tried to run back, some even ran to mine fields and either injured themselves or lost their limbs.”

They had to wait until the LTTE clear mines and broaden the road. "Under the scorching sun, small children started fainting, they (LTTE) gave us water, glucose, those who were injured were taken for treatment by the LTTE, we had to stay there until evening, and we walked till late evening all the way up to Anuradhapura.” Since then the
squalid, overcrowded welfare centres (camps) have been their ‘homes’. Tired of shifting from one welfare centre to another, the community started to say, ‘We want a place where we can stay’, because the local government is not doing anything about resettlement,” says Lalitha, one of the Eppawala settlement founders. According to their request each family was given a plot of land on the fringes of Anuradhapura’s sprawling jungles, and in a matter of weeks the community had cleared the bush and marked out 34 individual plots measuring ¼ acres, each. “For some time we had no means of setting up a makeshift hut at least, we lived under trees, in this jungle,” she says.

The tensions between IDPs and residents of Eppawala illustrate the typical difficulty displaced communities face in a hostile host community. “The villagers of the neighbouring village did not allow us to use the stream to get some water for drinking at least; they were angry and asked us to go back where we came from. They blocked all the entry points to the stream, however we spoke to the GS and he arranged us to use it for drinking purposes for few days, then we got some help from a NGO to build some tube wells,” says Lalitha. As means of bridging the gap and creating good will between the two communities, humanitarian agencies have included the local residents too in their programmes.

Lalitha’s squatting, concrete toilet in her home yard, at least relieves her of some of her burdens. She does not have to go in the bush, with an umbrella at the height of the rainy season and her home yard is free of reek of human waste. “Before the project, the pit latrines were always flooded and the filth just floated around in the rainy season,” recalls Lalitha. “Children don’t fall sick now as they used to,” she adds.

Answering a call from the community for proper sanitation, NRC, provided construction materials and tools to build 29 latrines in Eppawala benefitting more than 100 IDPs. The community was responsible to build the toilets, maintain them while NRC also provided training for the residents in the technical and maintenance aspects. “My husband knows masonry, so we made bricks and constructed it ourselves,” says Lalitha.

“We liked the way NRC carried out this project, they took our opinion, suggestions and concerns seriously, and in addition we received several useful trainings,” she appreciates. Each family was responsible for construction.

Eppawala is one of the six welfare centres among the total of 18 in Anuradhapura district to benefit from a sanitation programme started six months ago by NRC. With the assistance of European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), it is part of NRC initiative to support conflict affected IDPs, who have been living in scattered welfare centres in the Anuradhapura district more than a decade, to build their capacity to enhance self mobilization to find and implement durable solutions that will uphold their basic human rights and achieve increased quality of life for the families.

“We only recently started working in Eppawala, it had a serious sanitation problem,” explained A. R. Kumarasinghe, Programme Officer of the ‘Capacity Building for Welfare Centres’ project in Anuradhapura. “First we mobilised the community in Eppawala, through various capacity building and training programmes. We and the community have come a long way since we first began to discuss the problem of toilets in their settlement,” explains Kumarasinghe.

As more and more men and women co-operate they become more capable of refining the solution, adding new dimensions and adapting to different contexts. No doubt new sanitation facilities improve the material condition of people living in this settlement. But, more importantly, it is a process of empowerment and involvement. In Kumarasinghe’s words; ‘once people start talking about toilets other things will follow.’
Waste Management at Sithamparapuram Welfare Centre

By Monique Goudreau

Waste Management is not a very popular subject as it conjures smells and sights that we would rather not see or whiff up our nose... However the reality is that it is a very real problem as very little thought or money is allocated to the disposal of waste. This is especially true with the situation of IDPs where having a roof, food, clothing etc. are the most important and urgent... And then education, health and livelihoods are the next priorities... Somehow waste and its management never quite make it to the level where agencies, governments and residents allocate the necessary resources to make a change...

NRC decided to venture out a little from its usual programmes and as part of the support given to the long-term IDPs, it was decided that the garbage problem at the Sithamparapuram Welfare Centre in Vavuniya would be addressed. The WC established over 18 years ago has gone through phases with its waste management; initially there were municipal workers hired to whisk away the garbage on a regular basis and when resources dwindled the residents had no option but to throw the garbage in heaps outside of their yards.

The pilot project needed to start with educating NRC staff about waste management and the different options. Once completed, background information was gathered as to what materials were recycled in the Vavuniya area. Information sessions with community members were held and then work began. Shramadanas were held, household composters built and a recycling area set up. Supporting materials were distributed to each family including a garbage bin, 2 buckets, a mamothy, a rake, an outside and inside broom, a cloth bag and palmyrah basket to reduce the number of plastic bags used. As well, other tools were given to each of the Environmental Committee members such as a wheelbarrow, a shovel, a jungle knife, a grass cutter and for the whole project a small cart for the bigger jobs. The other big incentive for the residents was support in the form of home gardens... The beneficiaries would now use the clean open spaces for the planting of small and larger home gardens to help supplement their family's income. This concept was enlarged to include other livelihood materials as well.

Community members are proud of how their environment looks now. Waste is not just dumped on the other side of the fence, but each type of waste now has its own space. The new Environment Committee has defined some roles and responsibilities and will need to continue monitoring the residents’ behaviors. An information sign-board has been put up to inform residents of any news and encourage the new behaviors. Only time will tell how much behaviors have been affected and if the changes are long lasting.
Publication on Child Friendly Teaching Practices

NRC launched the publication ‘Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Classroom,’ a resource kit on child friendly teaching practices, on November 1 in Colombo. According to NRC Country Director in Sri Lanka, Mr. Joern Kristensen, the resource kit provides any group interested in working with the development and protection of children in emergency situations, with a comprehensive, holistic and practical guide to child-centred teaching methodologies.

‘Education in emergencies and transition phases’ has been a very important base for NRC; as a humanitarian organisation NRC goes beyond the call of construction of physical buildings and extends its services in ‘building the builders’ in difficult circumstances.

The resource kit co-authored by Mrs. Gethsie Shanmugam and Fr. Mervyn Fernando, who are both trainers with considerable experience of working with children and teachers living in difficult circumstances in Sri Lanka, aims to strengthen teachers’ involvement with their students in a positive way to support children’s development from both personal and social dimensions.

According to a MoU with the Ministry of Education, NRC rehabilitated 26 tsunami damaged state schools in the six districts of Matara, Hambantota, Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu, benefiting more than 10,000 children and teachers.

Around 80 teachers received training on teaching methodology to be better equipped to support the psychosocial recovery and wellbeing of students.

The resource kit draws its content from the mediated learning methodology, field-based follow-up activities and participatory trainings conducted by NRC during the eight month programme in 2005-2006. The book was published with support from the Canadian International Development Agency’s Child Rights Project.

According to a MoU with the Ministry of Education, NRC rehabilitated 26 tsunami damaged state schools in the six districts of Matara, Hambantota, Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu, benefiting more than 10,000 children and teachers.

Around 80 teachers received training on teaching methodology to be better equipped to support the psychosocial recovery and wellbeing of students.

The resource kit draws its content from the mediated learning methodology, field-based follow-up activities and participatory trainings conducted by NRC during the eight month programme in 2005-2006. The book was published with support from the Canadian International Development Agency’s Child Rights Project.
25 year old Ms. Ratnavasanthy Ratnanathan, Programme Engineer of Emergency Shelter project has been carrying the desire of caring for the less fortunate and the downtrodden. "I realised that I had to give something to someone else’s life except my own," she explains with a smile radiating her face.

For Vasanthy, as she is fondly known among her colleagues, working with people who have been forced to flee, multiple times and waiting long in the hope of going ‘home’ has been rewarding, "I love it," she says. "I have one foot in engineering and the other in social work and I think it’s a useful combination to meet the community’s needs," she smiles.

A resident of Trincomalee, Vasanthy completed her secondary education in her home town. She has always been interested in many different things and engineering is one of them. "I had a natural inclination towards the sciences. While growing up, I was involved in a variety of social activities, too. In 2000, she started on her BEng (Hons) degree in Civil Engineering at University of Peradeniya and completed it four years later. It was while studying for her degree that she realised how much she enjoyed working for people. Since graduation, she worked for a private company, but her passion for social work persuaded her to use of knowledge and skills to help the needy. "My brother is a doctor. His commitment to bring in change for poor people has been an inspiration for me," she says.

Vasanthy applied for a vacancy in NRC in response to a newspaper advertisement and was selected as a Junior Engineer in March 2005 to work in the NRC Shelter project. At the end of the project, she joined the NRC Camp Management Project as a trainer. She was then promoted as the Project Engineer for Care & Maintenance in January 2006. Upon the successful completion of the project in July 2007 she was asked to take up another assignment with NRC Emergency Shelter Project in Trincomalee as its Programme Engineer, where she manages a team of six construction supervisors and administration staff.

Engineering has traditionally been viewed as a male-dominated industry, does she naturally feel it is appropriate for females and how does she meet the numerous demands in her job, extensive travelling and long field work? I ask her, “Many people think that engineering should be reserved for males as it requires a lot of physical exertion, but that is a far cry from what the profession demands. Simply put, it requires more brains than brawn. Engineering
is a very versatile field because it affords useful skills such as analytical, methodical and problem-solving skills, and you need to be strong in mathematics. When at university, there were just 65 girls out of 320 students in my batch and statistics reveal that the number of females opting to do engineering is on the decline,” she elaborates.

Moreover, the number of engineers in the humanitarian filed is extremely low, probably due to the demands for extensive field work. She says that sometimes she feels the absence of another female colleague when working in the field when she sees no one to share her needs. She is quite appreciative of her staff, who have been extremely cooperative and supportive in carrying out the duties. “I can’t run a project alone, and it’s all team work. I really appreciate the support given by my colleagues.”

Though there isn’t much scope to sharpen her engineering skills by working in the NGO sector, she does not regret as she is happy that while working she can also do her social responsibility. “I am involved in a type of work that blends my interests in engineering and social work. It is an exciting combination covering all my areas of interest.”

Her parents have been strongly disapprove of her decision to work in the humanitarian field, “they were very concerned and worried about my travelling to security tensed areas, and vehemently opposed to my decision, but now they understand.” Vasanthy is grateful to her good and protective parents. She is immensely more aware of this as she meets many families that are dysfunctional due to displacement. “There are families falling apart because of displacement having had to stay in congested overcrowded camps for long time. I think it’s very sad that because of displacement, families are shattered and children, in particular are destroyed,” she utters her concern, saying that she herself has witnessed the woeful tales of broken families.

Vasanthy believes in planning everything out and the organization seems to play as a strong feature that has carried her through. “I plan everything before we leave office, set clear instructions to the staff because we have very little time in the field, sometime it is only 2-3 hours due to security constraints, and we do not want to miss that precious time. I am also courageous and determined when it comes to achieving something that I have to.” Working in a volatile and unpredictable environment is a challenge in itself. There are also limitations in terms of security - generally when the security situation worsens they have to stop work, sometimes for a few days in order to ensure the safety of staff. More often than not planned work gets cancelled. Material does not come on time. Scale of work needed is a challenge, with the limited resources.

Vasanthy says what makes her quite appreciative of NRC is its quickness in meeting the emergency needs of the people, “it is our strength, we are very quick in reaching the people with assistance,” she says while adding, “I like NRC because of its good work environment and good management style.”

She says the best part of her job is visiting beneficiaries; “I like to visit beneficiaries to see whether they get benefits up to NRC’s expectations and international standards. I also coordinate with other agencies and direct them to the needy. I meet the beneficiaries again and again. They are so happy to see me. It is their smiles and the change I see that keep me going.”

An Oasis for Learning

By T. Prathanan and S. Das

Like an oasis, Panichenkerny Thirumagal Vidyalayam, primary school in Vaharai, is a welcome sight amid the devastation still evident almost one year after the reignited conflict between the Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE.

Though it is a modest shelter, built with steel columns and roofing sheet, the Learning Centre is an oasis of sorts. It is an area of hope and opportunity for both children and adults in this remote fishing village in the eastern Sri Lanka.

While there are plans for a new school, the five Learning Centres have already opened their doors for 521 pupils between the ages of six and 15, many of whom are both tsunami and conflict affected.

At a cost of Rs. 2 million ($20,000), contributed by ECHO, NRC constructed the centre that includes 14 classrooms, an office, three tube wells and a kitchen. In addition, NRC also provided two more learning centres in Kathiraveli and Kottumurvikkulam. The school provided the only refuge from the advancing tsunami, and three years later the same school provides an oasis for learning.
Strengthening the response to displaced people

By T. Thusyanthan

In an endeavour to strengthen the capacity of national legal practitioners and to promote more effective linkages between NGO lawyers and private lawyers working in human rights and humanitarian law, Norwegian Refugee Council’s Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) project in Trincomalee partnered with the Bar Association in Trincomalee and the Department of Registry and Land Department to develop and implement a series of capacity building trainings for legal practitioners and local government officers.

The initial round of trainings for the Bar Association was held for around 35 lawyers on issues such as civil court appellate procedures, civil pleadings, effective interviewing techniques etc.

In collaboration with the Department of Registry and Land Department NRC Conducted trainings for local registrars and Additional District Registrars on relevant topics such as Civil Documentation and analyzing practical problems of the local registrars. The issues of late birth registration, registration of disappearances/missing persons, registration of adopted children and registration of children born in India due to the displacement of their parents were also discussed at the workshop.

Three workshops were conducted for Land Officers, Land Branch Officers, Grama Niladaries (village officers) and Samurdhi Officers on state land issues and procedures, under NRC’s ‘Land Officers Capacity Building’ initiative. Land commissioner for Trincomalee district participated as the resource person.

The awareness programmes are expected to strengthen the Legal services network, thus providing community legal services in a more effectively coordinated manner.
ICLA project in Vavuniya conducts awareness programmes

Like in many post-conflict contexts, SGBV is quite frequently occurred among the displaced populations in war-torn areas of Sri Lanka, although reported very rarely. Very few of the cases reported, are successfully brought to trial, and not many women are given redress for the crimes committed against them (largely due to inadequate victim support and prevailing patriarchal cultural biases). The situation of women is particularly precarious in isolated villages and camp settlements (welfare centres) where populations are especially vulnerable due to geographical isolation, history of violence and sexual abuse and lack of economic opportunities.

NRC in Vavuniya is active on making individual IDPs, the people who are at risk, aware of legal information on a host of social issues concerning their lives. Topics cover legal aspects of marriage which include factors such as age, relationship, incest, maintenance, divorce, bigamy, early marriage, domestic violence etc.

Participants were encouraged on using foster community protection and service components and informed about referral networks and other avenues to remedy for the crimes committed against them. A series of community discussions were held in the two IDP camps Poonthoddam and Sithamparumpuram and a relocated village in Chenkalady in Vavuniya district.

Apart from this, five half-day awareness programmes on civil documentation especially on Indian Birth Certificate and the procedure to get a Consular Division BC were conducted too. NRC’s ICLA project in Vavuniya will combine trainings with the distribution of information materials, including illustrated versions of leaflets, and quick reference materials.

ICLA project has been providing legal support for IDPs and conducting legal awareness campaigns since its inception in 2005. To date, ICLA has helped over 34,000 IDPs in need of legal aid particularly in the areas of domestic violence, sexual harassment, abuse and rape, marital and family problems, and inheritance and property rights. With financial support from ECHO, Norad and Unicef, ICLA project is grappling with such problems in five Sri Lankan districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara. Recognizing the urgent need to increase IDPs’ awareness of their legal rights and to provide legal aid for disadvantaged people in the current political and economic context, NRC is implementing a number of activities designed to raise IDPs’ legal awareness and protect their legal rights.
NRC Sri Lanka staff meet

A staff retreat day scheduled into the regular work life of an organization can be a source of great unity and inspiration. As we learn to be with each other in different ways, we develop deeper understandings of who we are as individuals and as a group. Spending time with coworkers in a way that is fun, relaxed, and reflective can be nourishing as well as productive.

“One NRC” was the theme for the 2nd Annual Staff Retreat in tranquil Amaya Lake hotel in Dambulla, on November 5th and 6th and the 152 employees out of 169, who attended will agree that this year’s retreat will long be remembered as the one that exceeded expectations; it was fun, enlightening and a great experience for all.

Employees came back energized, motivated, and proud to be part of the NRC family. We believe that the information presented at this year’s retreat will add value and contribute to the mandate of NRC. The success of this retreat was a result of many months of preparation and planning. Its success is directly attributed to the dedication, commitment and hard work of the facilitation team; Kamalini Kamalendran, Abira Varatharajah, Samurdha Thimbiripola, N. Jujin, Darshi Kuruvitaarachchi and Samantha Premachandra. The facilitation team took care of many duties. These tasks included, the retreat agenda, making arrangements for the event, coordinating all activities, including the programme and numerous logistic needs, preparing the gift bags, ensuring that all activities took place as planned, and, of course, facilitation of the event itself. Their hard work, creativity and resourcefulness are commendable.

Special thanks to Joern Kristensen, Country Director. Without his support and vision the annual staff retreat would not be possible.
A training film on Camp Management

Norwegian Refugee Council launched a documentary training film entitled “Camp Management Training in Sri Lanka: A Case Study”.

This 30-minute film illustrates how differently Camp Management as a discipline can be implemented, given dissimilar post-disaster contexts, within the same country. Conceived as a training tool for new Camp Management teams to convey the principles, approaches and tools of sound IDP and refugee Camp Management, the film juxtaposes the experience of the NRC teams in Galle District in providing support during the post-tsunami recovery scenario against the NRC teams in Trincomalee District delivering assistance during the recent displacements in the east following renewed conflict. “Such a methodology will hopefully support the proviso that Camp Management must always be non-prescriptive and context specific,” says Chris Bleers, Project Manager of Shelter and Camp Management.

As the only humanitarian aid agency in Sri Lanka with activities focusing specifically on Camp Management Training, NRC, from its field offices in Batticaloa, Trincomalee and formerly Galle has addressed many issues through learning workshops and post-training services such as on-site coaching, mentoring and localised mini-workshops. Local authorities, NGOs, the UN and other organisations have been received training in all conflict and tsunami-affected districts of the country.

The film was screened in Colombo on December 17th and it will travel to NRC’s working areas in Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Vavuniya etc. This documentary is supported by the European Union’s Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO).

OUR MANDATE

The Norwegian Refugee Council shall promote and protect the rights of all people who have been forced to flee their countries, or their homes within their countries, regardless of their race, religion, nationality or political convictions.

The Norwegian Refugee Council shall in all ways seek to provide viable, durable solutions with regard to both its spokesman activities and its emergency relief efforts.

The Norwegian Refugee Council
19/5 Horton Place
Colombo 07
Sri Lanka
Tel: +94 (0)11 2679 210
Fax: +94 (0)11 2679 211
Email: info@nrc.lk
Web: www.nrc.no

Major Donors

UNHCR
European Union
Norwegian Refugee Council