



Rebuilding Lives in Sri Lanka



Kathiresu Tharmalingam measures and bags his paddy harvest for sale in Killinochchi.

An ambitious and wide-ranging project helped return a sense of normalcy to an estimated 1.1 million conflict-affected people in Sri Lanka.

Several months after peace was declared in 2009, Kathiresu Tharmalingam left a displaced persons center with his wife and daughter and headed for the farm that they had been forced to flee more than a year earlier in Killinochchi, one of eight districts affected by 3 decades of civil war in northeast Sri Lanka. Already carrying the pain of two children lost to the conflict, they stood penniless outside of the ruins of their farmhouse with heavy hearts, their 2.4 hectares of land overrun by weeds, irrigation systems broken, tractor and other farming equipment gone. Like so many others returning to devastated homes and communities without basic services such as hospitals, schools, sanitation, water, or electricity, they despaired as to how they would ever rebuild their lives.

Today, the 67-year-old farmer, through hard work and perseverance, once again has a working farm and a new home. The family also received help to rebuild from the ADB-supported North East Community Restoration and Development Project II. Assistance included restoring crucial irrigation pumps, building a new dam, and refurbishing agrarian outreach centers to supply farmers with essentials such as seeds and fertilizer.

In close partnership with the government of Australia and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, ADB helped build and rehabilitate basic infrastructure and services needed for a fresh start. The local wisdom of provincial project coordination committees enabled the project to select the right activities to support diverse communities and avoid overlap with other development programs. From 2001 to 2012, the project and its predecessor supported government efforts to improve the wellbeing of tens of thousands of people by bringing health services, education facilities, shelter, water, sanitation, and electricity to conflict-affected areas. The reconstruction work provided much-needed employment for many residents. In 2005, ADB expanded the project to help the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Restoring health

More than 1.1 million people benefited from the improved health services, which included 62 rehabilitated hospitals and more than 800 newly trained health workers. The Killinochchi District General Hospital, left little more than an empty shell in the wake of the conflict, was reopened in December 2009. With a new intensive care unit, a dialysis unit, doctors' quarters, and a wastewater treatment plant, the 222-bed hospital now serves more than 600 outpatients a day. Says medical director P. Karthikeyan, "The hospital is considered a model regional hospital and is visited by health care professionals from around the world."

Better learning and teaching

The conflict caused the closure of many schools, resulting in overcrowding in those that remained, with shortages of 5,000 teachers and high student dropout rates. In response, the project funded the construction of 1,486 new classrooms. Students and teachers received almost 21,000 desks and chairs, as well as educational materials and textbooks. Support was provided to recruit 1,950 native Tamil-speaking teachers, who filled one-third of the vacancies in the rehabilitated schools.



The payoff for project efforts to help students and teachers return to their schoolwork is plain to see at the Vishwamadu Maha Vidyalayam School in Mullaitivu District, where a block of eight new classrooms and accommodation for teachers were built under the project in 2007. “We used to conduct classes under the shade of a tree or in a temporary structure of palm fronds and mud.” says school principal Mariyadass Nalliah Antonkuladas. “The roof leaked during the rainy season. Now, students have a proper place to study.”

Thanabalasingham Radakrishnan is a 37-year-old physical education teacher at the school, one of 14 living at the teachers’ quarters. Before the facility was built, he and the other teachers slept in their classrooms to avoid a 6-hour daily commute between the school and Jaffna. “We had no water or electricity and used a hurricane lantern for light. It was very difficult for us to prepare lessons. Each morning, we had to wake up early and rearrange the furniture in the classroom before the students arrived,” he says. Now, teachers have time to prepare and conduct extra classes after school. Radakrishnan’s extra coaching in athletics has also proved worthwhile: the girls’ athletics team won first prize at the 2015 provincial sports meet“



The impact of the new teachers’ quarters is evident in the pass rate of students in government examinations,” notes Principal Mariyadass. “The government’s General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examination pass rate increased from 23% in 2010 to 65% in 2013.” One 16-year-old student, Thushana Yogaratnam, dreams of becoming an engineer. She says, “If not for the extra classes, I would not have the confidence to sit the examination this year.”

Building communities

To normalize daily life in conflict-affected communities, almost every area needed support. The scope of the project was enormous: more than 400 km of roads were built, rural electricity connections to 70 villages delivered power to 17,300 households, and new wells and piped systems brought clean water to another 18,000.

A high priority was putting people back to work in better-paying jobs. Vocational training was carried out for occupations in high demand, such as tourism workers, mechanics, plumbers, carpenters, and electricians. Training programs were also conducted for 980 unemployed youths, and the skills of 2,000 government officers were upgraded.

To support women, 158 women’s rural development societies were reactivated in 2004. Membership had risen to 20,000 by 2012. Women received training in developing microenterprises to create self-employment opportunities. Community development activities, which covered a range of village-level activities to restore livelihoods, including livestock, home gardening, and fisheries, also focused on the poorest households, and more than half of those who benefited were women.

“Our income has increased drastically and we are able to provide more for our grandchildren. We send them for extra tutoring in mathematics and English, something we could not afford in the past. They will have a better life.”
- Kathiresu Tharmalingam, farmer and project beneficiary

These days, farmer Kathiresu Tharmalingam, like so many others caught up in the conflict, tries to put a painful past behind him and look to the future. He appreciates the help his family and community received from the project. Standing by his tractor he says, “Our income has increased drastically, and we are able to provide more for our grandchildren. We send them for extra tutoring in mathematics and English, something we could not afford in the past. They will have a better life.”

This article was originally published in [Together We Deliver](#), a publication highlighting successful ADB projects across Asia and the Pacific that demonstrated development impacts, best practice, and innovation.

Related

- [North East Community Restoration and Development Project II - Supplementary](#)