
Opportunities dawn for Puttalam IDPs

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The long displaced persons in the Puttalam settlements are gradually becoming very much a part of the socio-economic structure of the area, and the government is undertaking initiatives to empower them and provide opportunities for income generation. Over 112,000 people were displaced from Mannar, Mullativu and Jaffna, due to the ethnic cleansing practised by the LTTE against Muslims in 1990.

They were neglected for many years, and their grievances got little attention. Shockingly the world at large did not seem to worry about the fact that they were not permitted to return to their homes. However, the present government has taken significant measures to provide durable solutions to their situation. It is assisting in promoting sustainable income generation opportunities for them. These families, with a keen sense of hope and opportunity, have already begun engaging in gainful employment and entrepreneurship. But, given their limited access to land titles, their options are relatively limited. Whilst efforts to resolve the land issues continue apace, with due consultation, self-help schemes to boost their income generation opportunities provide at least a different form of relief and the development of self confidence. The Peace Secretariat, together with the South Asian Perspectives Network Association (SAPNA), recently embarked on an initiative to expose these groups to the benefits of self-help schemes. A video documentary on a village-led self-help scheme that was very successful in Ranna, in Southern Sri Lanka, was screened to around 300 Muslim IDPs in Puttalam. It was followed by a useful discussion held at Alankudah Muslim Maha Vidyalyam in Norchcholai, Puttalam on the 5th of April. A majority of those who attended were women, teachers and youth. Dr Ponna Vignarajah, a senior economic advisor to a previous government, who now heads SAPNA, together with Mr. C.S. Poolokasingham, Deputy Secretary General of SCOPP, chaired this program. Mr Daniel Fernando, one of the beneficiaries of the Ranna project, also participated, and was able to give some first-hand accounts of the benefits, as well as advice on the setting up, of such self-help schemes. The Ranna project strengthened capacity at the most local level – the village community. It helped them identify problems and find solutions in their local cultivation and small trading activities. The social-mobilisation and self-help scheme facilitated access to cheaper credit by cutting out the middle man and allowing them to approach banks as a credible group. It was also instrumental in improving the marketing of their produce and increasing their stake in the town market place. It helped them earn higher incomes overall. A follow-up visit a year or so later showed that nearly all of the villagers had built comfortable homes, leaving behind their small mud huts, and the children fared much better than before, both in nutritional and educational status. This would be a useful model to encourage among the Puttalam IDP communities, whether in relation to better cultivation, marketing, setting up small enterprises or even in gaining access to cheaper credit and other services. The participants at this session discussed some key difficulties that need to be ironed out if such a self-help scheme on the lines of the Ranna village project is to work well. One of them was that they do not have enough land, either owned or on lease, to involve themselves in agriculture individually or collectively. When they were initially resettled many years ago, the Puttalam IDPs were granted a 10 perch land which can accommodate a small hut, toilet and bathing facilities but is not sufficient even for home gardening. However, the present government is taking a keen interest in developing livelihoods and raising living standards of these Puttalam IDPs. This involves finding durable solutions to their land to resolve the cultivation problem. An innovative mechanism could be put in place to lease out available plots of land to an established group of IDPs, to collectively run a livelihood project, similar to the Ranna project in the South. At the end of the visit, Dr Vignarajah of SAPNA identified some graduates who were assembled in the crowd and advised them to form a 25 member committee, who can take the initiative in running a Ranna-type self-help project in Puttalam. It was arranged for this core group to then visit Anamaduwa, on the Puttalam-Kurunegala road, to demonstrate a similar project as Ranna, to gain more training on the running of such a project. Dr. Vignarajah stated that funding for this type of project could be sought out by SAPNA, on behalf of the IDPs. Mr. Sudath Rodrigo of the Puttalam District World Vision office also took part and showed keen interest in getting involved with the IDPs needs. World Vision has been involved in this district for a considerable period, investing mainly in community infrastructure like school buildings, halls, labs and health facilities. Around fifteen women interacted confidently with the officials and highlighted their grievances such as the need for small loans for poultry, tailoring, and commodity shops, etc. The women showed the most interest in this project, and hopefully they will take a strong initiative in driving it forward. Already the women in the IDP settlements have shown strong entrepreneurship and empowerment skills. They have formed six women's committees, through sheer initiative on their part. They have even begun giving community loans, using savings mobilised from within the group itself, with no external assistance. SCOPP is now working to bring together these different committees under one umbrella organisation so that they can become more effective. SCOPP also provided a revolving loan facility, through the People's Bank branch there, to provide small disbursements to women's groups to start a business. Some of them have used this, for example, to provide their husbands with bicycles to run a fish delivery business, while others have set up small corner shops in the community. A key outcome of the Ranna project was that it strengthened the community and made them aware of their own unique abilities and the opportunities for development. Providing support for a similar self-help and social mobilisation scheme in the Puttalam settlements would be a significant advancement for the IDPs, who are now beginning to rise up after years of difficult living. Economic and Social Affairs Units Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP