

Learning from empowerment of Sri Lankan refugees in India

by K C Saha

Some 65,000 Tamil refugees from conflict in Sri Lanka live in 133 camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. As peace talks generate hope for their repatriation, the work of a self-help group, the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), shows how refugees can equip themselves with skills to be used to rebuild their homeland.

Two thirds of the refugees are Hindu and the remainder Christian. Almost all are from the conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern provinces. Prior to fleeing to India in the 1980s or 1990s most refugee families were agricultural labourers or fishermen. Some came to India in their own fishing boats. The Tamil refugee population is young and many have spent most of their lives in exile. In addition to those living in government camps, an estimated 40,000 live outside them. Some of the refugee settlements in Tamil Nadu have fewer than ten people while others are home to thousands.

Although India has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, it has given shelter to refugees from many countries. The Sri Lankans comprise India's second largest refugee community. The dispersal of refugees around Tamil Nadu and their common language have eased their integration

into local communities and some have married and established local links. Refugees receive an assistance package provided by the central and the Tamil Nadu governments which includes a monthly cash grant, rice ration and free water and electricity.

OfERR was set up by the refugees in 1984 and has headquarters in the Tamil Nadu capital Chennai and four regional offices. Its activities are funded by the European Union, the Jesuit Refugee Service, other Christian organisations and individual Sri Lankan expatriates, including students in the USA.

Education has been a major priority for OfERR. Whereas on arrival most refugees were illiterate, the population is now well educated with an increasing number of qualified professionals. OfERR covers the salary costs of 200 nursery teachers. Due to the support of the Tamil Nadu education

authorities almost all refugee children attend school. There are currently 621 students from the refugee camps in universities in the state. In return for OfERR assistance with education expenses, the university students are obliged to provide tuition to other refugee students. A large number of refugee paramedics now serve fellow refugees in camps and also work in government primary health centres.

Other OfERR projects include:

- two agricultural research farms which train refugee youth while generating income from selling rice seeds to the state government and raising poultry
- a nutritional enhancement programme providing supplementary food prepared from local grains to pregnant women and lactating mothers - reducing expenditure on baby food
- an initiative to transfer fishing net manufacture skills from older refugees both to young refugees and to local fishermen
- youth labour cooperatives which have won contracts to help construct the Konkan railway on India's western coast
- three tailoring training centres: the trained refugees meet the needs of camp inhabitants and sell to local markets
- a gem-cutting teaching centre where a hundred refugee youth

have learnt to cut and polish semi-precious stones; some have set up their own businesses, while others have found private employment

- female income-generation projects making coir ropes and brushes
- enabling vulnerable widows and older people to supplement their income by raising poultry
- raising environmental awareness by improving camp sanitation facilities, encouraging energy efficiency and promotion of biogas
- supporting 176 women self-help groups (each of between 15 and 18 members) who receive credit to enable food manufacture and vending microenterprises
- credit provision to young male refugees to establish grocery, bakery, fish and vegetable marketing and cycle repair business
- loans to enable trained masons, carpenters and painters to purchase tools; 2,000 refugees now work in the construction industry

Lessons learned

OfERR has provided an empowerment model for self-help refugee organisations elsewhere. They have demonstrated that a refugee-run organisation can:

- base programmes on accurate knowledge of refugee needs
- put resources to optimum use for the benefit of maximum number of refugees
- ensure that the needs of vulnerable community members are not ignored
- integrate health, nutrition, income-generation, microcredit and skills training programmes
- devise ingenious methods to mobilise resources from expatriates both in the countries of resettlement and of origin
- provide practical training and technical assistance to build sustainable livelihoods
- establish credibility with donors and attract new funding sources

- create a pool of skilled refugees ready to provide long-term economic benefits and assist post-conflict reconstruction.

OfERR's empowerment programmes have not only helped the refugees to be gainfully occupied but also overcome the psychological trauma resulting from prolonged residence in camps and years of uncertainty regarding prospects for return to Sri Lanka. The dependency syndrome often accompanying prolonged stay in camps has been avoided.

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The website of the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) is www.oferr.org