

Dignified village life for the displaced

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In Sri Lanka, the ethnic conflict has continued for nearly 20 years with about 60,000 killed and nearly one million displaced within the island.

Some have been displaced repeatedly. Changes in the position of the forward defence lines continue to displace families in large numbers. Many thousands have left the island altogether.

About 200,000 IDPs live in government welfare centres; the rest have been accommodated by family and friends. The problems associated with long-term living in welfare centres include the development of dependence, learned helplessness, feelings of hopelessness, loss of self-esteem and breakdown of social norms. Alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide and crime increase. Women and children are particularly affected as they may also be subjected to physical and sexual ill-treatment. Attendance rates at school are lower than average. Lack of privacy, participation, income-generating activities, health care facilities, play space and cultural activities in any form exacerbates feelings of worthlessness and lack of dignity. Public health conditions, particularly in rainy seasons, cause health hazards and poor living standards.

UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations do what they can to help improve the lives of those who

are subjected to such indignities. Worldwide there are no international laws which make provision for IDPs. Although UNHCR's mandate relates to refugees, in Sri Lanka UNHCR has a special responsibility to provide protection and security for the internally displaced. Most government and non-government agents now agree that welfare centres do not provide durable solutions; resettlement or relocation are the only satisfactory alternatives.

The role of internationally agreed standards

The application of the Sphere Minimum Standards and the Guiding Principles is of great importance for IDPs.

The purpose of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards is:

"to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, and to make humanitarian agencies more accountable. It is based on two core beliefs: first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering that arises out of conflict and calamity, and second, that those affected by a disaster have a right to life with

dignity and therefore a right to assistance". [authors' emphasis]

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were set out in 1998 by the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on IDPs, Francis Deng. The 30 Principles are arranged in five sections which attempt to establish political and social rights for IDPs based on existing international humanitarian law and human rights instruments:

1. general principles (eg rights of protection)
2. protection from displacement (eg exploration of all feasible alternatives)
3. protection during displacement (eg freedom from rape, torture, etc)
4. humanitarian assistance (eg without discrimination)
5. return, resettlement and reintegration (eg voluntary return **with dignity**)

People have a right to life with dignity, both during and after displacement. Dignity means being **worthy of respect** and is often harder to safeguard than any other right.

Difficulties in safeguarding dignity

There are many factors that militate against the safeguarding of dignity during and after displacement. These include: the arrival of huge numbers of people at short notice, inadequate preparation on the part of concerned

agencies and governments, and a lack of awareness of humanitarian rights on the part of both beneficiaries and agencies. Flight in emergency circumstances is often accompanied by panic and shock. Material possessions, clothing or other indicators of worth or dignity may be left behind in the exodus. In the confusion of mass influx, dwellings may be constructed without proper regard to site planning. Lines and rows of identical homes may make registration, assessment of needs and distribution of relief items easier but this arrangement is a far cry from the 'soul' of the village or town left behind.

The same geometrical approach to site planning is also commonly used in resettlement as land can be distributed easily and fairly. However, at the same time, this can mean that the sense of community and the need for privacy are lost; and the distance to lifeline provision, especially water, may be inconvenient or even dangerous for the water carriers, particularly for women and children in the hours of darkness. Even during daylight children may not have convenient access to play areas within sight of elders, and adults may not have social areas for informal or formal meetings. These conditions contribute to the lack of soul in the displaced community and to the loss of dignity.



needs without regard for the provision of a psychologically suitable environment. Often displaced people remain in this situation for far longer than initially anticipated. In several centres, residents and host communities thought that the arrival of some thousands of people was a brief, temporary situation. In many cases, however, the people are still there after more than ten years.

Where consideration has not been given to the provision of a cultural environment in which a balance of traditional activities can continue, societal norms may crumble. The lack of employment opportunities, leisure

supporting the government in its responsibility to care for IDPs. Complex economic forces, security restrictions and other factors compound the difficulty of enforcing the Sphere Minimum Standards and applying the Guiding Principles. In few of the IDP camps are there any conditions conducive to life with dignity.

A solution

In November 1999, through escalation of hostilities, many families were displaced from their homes, moving to safer areas in Vavuniya District. They received emergency assistance, including shelter, water, sanitation and non-food items. In time many returned home but some 1,000 people were unable to do so. Permanent accommodation had to be provided. As the emergency had passed, there was time to give greater consideration to site plans. The main aim was to provide a sustainable solution, which allowed a comfortable access to assistance while emphasising a communal life quality that approximated to a dignified 'village' lifestyle.

Poor living conditions in IDP camps.

In discussion with those who were unable to return home, some compromises had to be reached in balancing cultural traditions, health, safety and protection. The following criteria were adopted during the planning and implementation stages:

- Allocation of space should conform to Sphere Minimum Standards.
- Each family should have a private and a common area. The common area should be kept clean and vehicle free; the private area could be used for domestic purposes and include a small vegetable garden.
- Front entrances should not face each other.
- Close proximity of private areas should give a feeling of family closeness and security.
- Wells should be situated in the centre of the 'village' so that they are near to and visible from the huts. This arrangement should be convenient and safe.
- The number of latrines should conform to Sphere Minimum Standards in location and distance from the wells while being near to the huts.
- Education should be accessible.

family and community facilities and conditions should be conducive to a dignified lifestyle

In the areas administered by the Ministry of the North in Sri Lanka, there are ongoing attempts to settle people back in their homes and to find permanent solutions for them. However, in many cases (eg where landmines remain uncleared or where adverse political pressures prevail), plans must instead focus on relocation. Many are forced to remain in welfare centres or camps. Currently in Sri Lanka there are about 400 such camps. In the Jaffna Peninsula alone, over 150,000 people (one in three of the population) are displaced. A small percentage are accommodated in about 150 camps while the rest have found space with friends and relatives in overcrowded conditions. The fact that many of the government welfare centres were set up quickly and, it was thought, only for a temporary period means that the focus is on supplying urgent physiological

provision or traditional cultural activities leads to altered behaviour patterns. Ten year old children consider their lifestyle to be 'normal' and for them 'habilitation' (it cannot be called 'rehabilitation' because they have known no other circumstances) becomes extremely difficult. Even adults may become 'institutionalised' and dependent on government hand-outs or international NGO provisions. Facilitating an appropriate environment is essential if some approximation to a balanced cultural and social life is to be achieved and maintained. Only then can reintegration of the displaced community into the stable wider community be easily arranged at a later date.

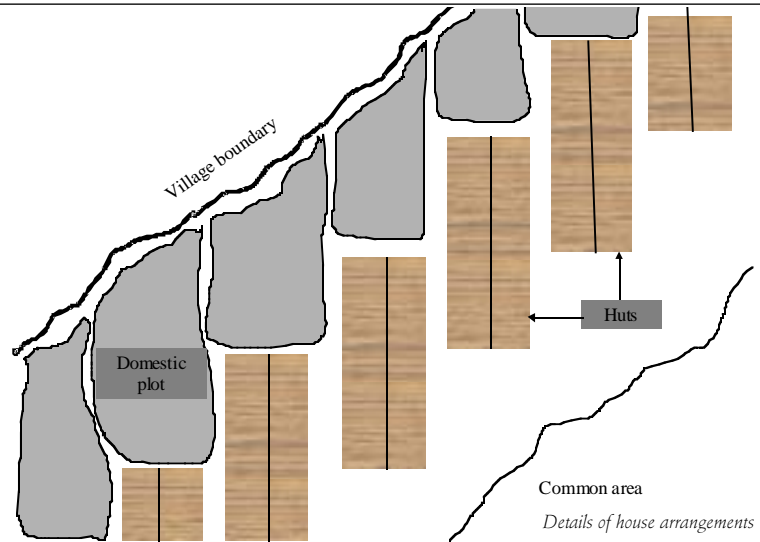
Displacement continues and UNHCR, with other UN agencies and NGOs, has responsibility for providing protection and assistance lifelines while

- All residents should be encouraged to participate in the design and implementation of the plan.
- Communication and movement, within and between groups in the community, should be easy.
- A drive-in area for aid workers' vehicles should be clearly visible from all the huts and provide a sense of security rather than intrusion.
- Wherever possible, adjoining land should be available for cultivation and income generation purposes.
- There should be generous tree planting for produce and shade to enhance and beautify the environment.
- As far as possible, family and community facilities and conditions should be conducive to a dignified lifestyle.

Several similar solutions have been implemented on different sites. These have all included the arrangement of huts in a herring-bone formation around a U-shape that encloses a large, safe communal area for recreational purposes. This layout ensures a level of privacy while allowing the development of a community spirit. The implementation of this programme has provided for the basic needs of IDPs and has helped create a dignified lifestyle comparable to that of a village community.

Practicalities

The relocation camp shown on page 22 is one of several which have been constructed with the collaboration of the residents. Their inclination initially was to construct barriers or fences between the dwellings in order to achieve some privacy. However, with encouragement, they could see that



the herring-bone formation of the huts ensures that people cannot see directly into another house when leaving their own. The absence of fences allows for interaction between families and the development of a community spirit. It also saves space. At the back of each house there is an area which is demarcated by the back of one house, the side of another and the perimeter fence. This gives some privacy for domestic functions. The arrangement also protects the vegetable garden from animal damage. The location of the site close to the road aids the access of children to local schools and adults to employment elsewhere.

In accordance with local tradition, diviners were used to confirm the presence of underground water but the actual position of the wells was determined with maximum protection and convenience in mind. Drain-off water from the wells can also be directed for irrigation purposes to minimise water waste. Keeping the

common area free of vehicles ensures the safety of children. Confining humanitarian vehicles to the front area allows each arrival to be seen by any or all of the residents and this adds to their feeling of security. This feeling is further enhanced by a sense of belonging through a large sign board facing the road which indicates the name of the village and the sponsorship of

UNHCR (for protection purposes).

The plan's design and implementation were not based on Western concepts of architecture and space but allowed scope for new ideas based on the wishes of the residents. The overall evaluation of the scheme is best reflected by the comments of the beneficiaries:

"Closest thing to home."

"We feel comfortable and looked after."

"A sense of belonging."

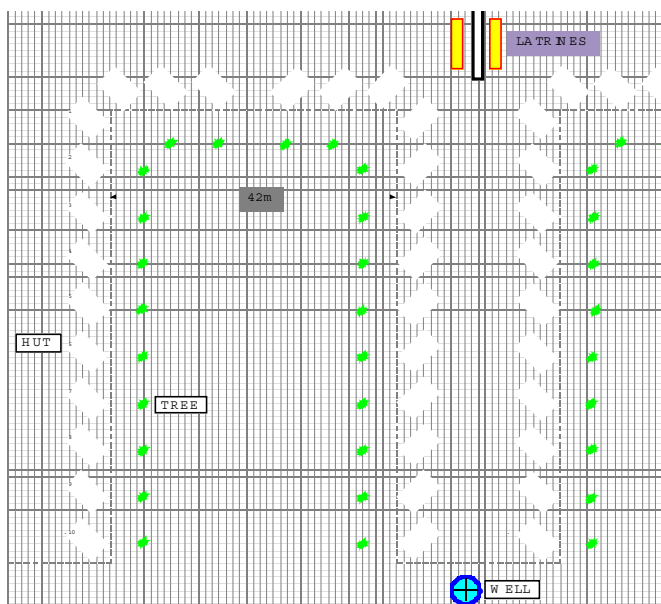
"We have open space and more resistance to disease."

"We are together but have our privacy as well."

"We can look at our children at play while at home."

One site is arranged to face the sunset. Everybody can enjoy the unobscured view. The children can play safely, supervised at a distance. Water and toilets are within safe and easy reach. The adults and the elderly are secure. In many respects the community is established and developing. It is beginning to feel like village life once again.

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Plan of hut arrangements