

Renewable energy in the camps of Tamil Nadu

Florina Benoit-Xavier

The Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation is promoting solar energy in all the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu with the aim of encouraging those returning to Sri Lanka to take the commitment and technology with them.

This is an important moment in the history of Sri Lanka. With most of the Sri Lankan refugees in the camps in Tamil Nadu in India wanting to return to their homeland, the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR¹) is working to prepare them for the return in ways that will benefit the community at large.

The state of Tamil Nadu used to be known as a power surplus state. However, over the last few years, increased industrial growth has led to an increased demand for power. As a result, the rural areas where most camps are located have regular power cuts. Refugees are mostly dependent on the free electricity provided in the camps and are not able to invest in expensive alternatives such as generators. Community life and educational activities are forever being interrupted – especially

in the evenings – by the power cuts and low voltage periods.

Solar energy is one of the main energy sources available in abundance in both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. OfERR's solar energy project aims to enable and encourage the refugees to cultivate a habit of renewable energy, which will be useful to them on their return to Sri Lanka as well. The project is working to:

- install solar lights in communal places
- provide hand-held lanterns for women and children
- build awareness of environmental issues and solar energy in particular
- create awareness among the refugees of eco-friendly

agricultural techniques and income-generation opportunities, both for the present and for their future in Sri Lanka

The project targeted all 20,358 households, comprising approximately 72,789 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees housed in 112 refugee camps spread over 25 administrative districts in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.² The population is almost entirely ethnic Tamils, with just a small group of some 400 Muslims. 79.75% are Hindus, while 19.5% are Christians. The refugees come from several areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka. This is a community of people who remain dependent on the Indian government's support for care, shelter, food and financial support in order to survive. Generally, those refugees who were able to support themselves left the camps after a short stay and continue to live independently outside the camps.

Some 75% of the refugee population are already beneficiaries of OfERR's on-going work. 95% of OfERR's



workers are themselves refugees from camps while the remaining 5% are refugees who live outside the camps.

Solar lighting

Following a needs assessment of the camps, solar lighting systems have been installed in 80 communal tutorial centres in order to provide a secure and suitable environment for students to continue their education. Solar lighting was also installed in the communal areas of some camps where there was either no electricity or a permanent problem of low voltage.

OfERR also provided about 100 solar lanterns for the women and children in the camps. Often women and girls are afraid to venture out in the dark to go to a dark toilet. This can result in a variety of illnesses including urinary tract infections. These lanterns can be carried by hand or hung from a hook, and so can also be used at home during the night and during power cuts.

OfERR bought an additional 40 solar lanterns, giving ten to each of four women's groups. These lanterns will then be sold by the women's groups to the people in the camps on an instalment basis. They will then purchase more lanterns with the income generated and continue the process. In this way the women's groups will become agents of

promoting solar appliances in the camps and it will also be a means of income generation. Camp residents currently use kerosene lanterns but these emit unhealthy fumes and also present a heightened risk of fire as camp huts – made of thatch and tar sheets – are highly flammable.

OfERR conducts camp-level and district-level training for both students and youth³ on environmental protection and alternative sources of energy. These programmes will be undertaken through the camp-level student forums and youth groups which are already active in the camps.

Training for the future

OfERR has a proven track record in establishing processes and practices which are cost-effective having been developed over a long period of working with limited financial resources. OfERR also makes best use of the most available resource – the refugees themselves. It takes into consideration the sensitivity of both the refugee population and the host local communities while maintaining good interaction with the government and its workers. Refugee workers and communities have worked with OfERR for several years to set up representative committees at camp level. These committees coordinate rehabilitation activities in the camp, and they include students' forums,

advocacy groups, self-help groups of women, sports groups, health teams and a body with representatives from each of these groups called the camp coordination committee. Through the committee, refugees are able to take part in deciding what activities are implemented in their camps as well as how they should be implemented.

For those wishing to return to Sri Lanka, OfERR taps into the refugees' culture of self-sufficiency, helping them to learn sustainable, low-energy technologies. Cleaner, renewable technologies are the only way forward in both developed and developing countries. In developing this renewable energy programme, OfERR is able to provide eco-friendly suggestions to the refugees who will use it in the camps and then take these concepts and know-how with them to the island to which most of them want to return. Not only is there light at the end of the tunnel for them but also light for the tunnel itself.

Florina Benoit-Xavier (florinabenoit@gmail.com) is the Operations Manager with OfERR. This project was made possible by the generous support of the Chelvanayagam Foundation.

1. <http://www.oferr.org>

2. Number of refugees and the camps is fluid, depending on the number of returns. This was the status as of December 2010.

3. School and college students plus those who have completed their education and are under 35.



All photos: OfERR