



MEDIA RELEASE

International Conference on Post Emergency Shelter Reconstruction held in Colombo, Sri Lanka

26 March 2014 Colombo, Sri Lanka. Senior Government officials, donors, implementing partners, policy makers, development practitioners, academics, community members and representatives of UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations participated in the international conference ‘Restoring Communities through Homeowner-Driven Reconstruction: from post-Emergency to Development’ held in Colombo from 24th – 25th March 2014.

Organised by UN-Habitat, the forum discussed good practices and lessons learned from different parts of the world on post emergency and post-crisis reconstruction and restoration of communities. The conference was funded by the European Union (EU), the Government of Australia and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Speaking at the inauguration, Mr Jean Gustave Foureze, Charge d'affaires of the European Union Delegation to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, highlighted the achievements of assistance to housing reconstruction as a symbol of successful international cooperation with Sri Lanka. H.E. Robyn Mudie, the High Commissioner of Australia stated that the owner-driven housing model showed how conflict-affected communities working in partnership with government and international agencies could achieve durable solutions.

Following the inaugural ceremony, a number of technical sessions were conducted, with contributions from experts and practitioners from several countries including Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Thailand, United Kingdom and Afghanistan. Focus was placed on the current wave of reconstruction efforts in Sri Lanka following the end of the conflict in 2009, while discussions were geared towards identifying practical approaches in addressing the prevailing housing needs. Speaking at the conference, Mr. M.S. Wickramarachchi of the Presidential Task force on Resettlement, Development and Security of the Northern Province highlighted the Government of Sri Lanka resettlement programme to assist families return to their villages of origin in the North and East following the end of the conflict.

The conference discussed both technical aspects of reconstruction and the underlying principles of the “People's Process”. Participants were supportive of the “homeowner driven” process of reconstruction as the preferred methodology for post emergency reconstruction due to its cost-effectiveness, participatory nature and the wide ranging benefits towards self-recovery and empowerment of communities. Emphasis was also placed on a holistic approach in building strong communities in order to encourage collective action and assist vulnerable families.

The forum highlighted the key challenges faced by families in rebuilding their homes following a disaster. Healing of psychological trauma, and an empathetic support system were recognised as vital components in re-establishing a sense of self-belief and motivation in affected families. Promoting better financial literacy and livelihoods amongst returnees, and special attention to the most vulnerable were identified as vital strategies towards alleviating indebtedness of returnee families. The participants also noted that economic stability and empowerment of women are essential to achieve a positive transformation.

Homeowners, implementing agencies and senior district administrative officers from the Northern Province shared practical experiences in rebuilding homes. The homeowners, who had rebuilt their homes with housing grants from donors, emphasised the importance of in-kind contributions, either financially or through labour contributions, towards the reconstruction process. The benefits of using environmentally friendly and sustainable technologies, local materials, labour and the importance of incorporating disaster risk reduction features in reconstruction were highlighted through case studies and discussions. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of women's participation and the need for construction skills training in reconstruction efforts.

The conference concluded on 25 March 2014, with the European Union announcing their desire to continue funding support for post-conflict housing in Sri Lanka.