

***Revised Report of the Evaluation
of
“Sri Lankan Refugee Return and Reintegration
Programme: Phase III”***

***Program implemented by:
OfERR, OfERR CEYLON and Act for Peace***



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**Report Prepared by:
ASK Training and Learning (ASK T&L)**

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The Evaluation Team of ASK T&L is grateful to get the opportunity to conduct the evaluation of the “Strengthening of Sustainability of Sri Lankan Refugee Return and Reintegration Programme (SLRRRP) Phase III” – implemented by OfERR and OfERR Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and supported by Act for Peace, Australia.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to both OfERR (India) and OfERR Ceylon Management and Field Team Members. The cooperation by the team members including the respective country offices and at the district / field level during the evaluation made the entire process an enriching experience.

Our special thanks to Ms. Sharni Boyall, International Program Coordinator, and Ms. Sharon Edington from Act for Peace for their continuous support extended during the evaluation: right from the designing stage that helped the evaluation team to undertake the assignment effectively.

We are extremely thankful to the community representatives and other stakeholders that we interacted with during the Evaluation in both the countries a broad section of Sri Lankan Refugees residing in different refugee camps in India and returnees in Sri Lanka and their communities/ different community group members, Beneficiaries of different programs / interventions of OfERR and OfERR Ceylon, and relevant government officers, both in India and Sri Lanka.

We hope that this evaluation will help OfERR, OfERR Ceylon and Act for Peace in developing a better understanding about the overall strengths and challenges of the program, draw learning from the same and integrate the learning in future interventions.

Thank you!

ASK T&L Evaluation Team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction: Act for Peace (AfP) is the International Aid and Development Agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia and works with local partners throughout the Pacific, Asia and Africa. OfERR in India is an organization of Ceylon Tamil refugees committed to the principles of human development and sustainable livelihoods. It is working across 107 camps of Sri Lankan Refugees in Tamil Nadu and currently has 58,677 beneficiaries. OfERR Ceylon is committed to the principles of human development, sustainable livelihoods and the realization of human rights. OfERR Ceylon, established in 2004, has provided humanitarian assistance to Tsunami affected people, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), returned IDPs and Refugees.

AfP has been working with OfERR and OfERR Ceylon on the Strengthening the Sustainability of “Sri Lankan Refugee Return and Reintegration (SLRRRP)” since 2015 to make voluntary repatriation a sustainable durable solution for refugees and a viable alternative to protracted encampment and irregular migration. The Program is funded by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) in Australia. ASK Training and Learning (ASK T&L) conducted an evaluation of the Phase III of the SLRRRP (that started on 1st September 2019, based on OECD-DAC evaluation parameters of Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency and Impacts).

The Evaluation was conducted both in India (Tamilnadu) and Sri Lanka. In India, the team visited a total of 7 Refugee Camps and refugees from a total 8 districts were met and in Sri Lanka 6 districts were visited. In Sri Lanka, around 250 respondents (program participants and stakeholders) were met during the evaluation process plus another 146 respondents were covered through structured household interviews. In India, a total of 453 people attended through 26 FGDs organized during the evaluation and another 8 respondents were met through semi-structured interviews.

Key Findings:

Impact: Overall, the Program has strengthened the preparedness of refugees in India for return and reintegration in Sri Lanka more than past iterations. In Sri Lanka, it has been able to strengthen the sustainability of reintegration through enhanced refugee protection, and through enhanced GoSL capacity and willingness to implement their responsibilities. It has also been able to increase the willingness and ability of government authorities and key stakeholders to support the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Sri Lankan refugees, both in India and Sri Lanka.

In India, there are increased hopes to “go back to their own motherland, their villages, roots, meet their relatives and country people and be settled there forever”: there is increased happiness to look into the possibilities of getting rid of the stigma surrounding refugees and compulsion to go through all the challenges within the camps. In Sri Lanka, the integrated support, guidance and inputs provided to returnees, local communities and are gradually and sustainably leading to increased access and control over: Tangible assets (land, house, household assets, income, savings), Intangible assets (self-esteem, self-respects, freedom from stigma, self-confidence, literacy and education levels and ability to raise their voices to appropriate authorities), Unrestricted mobility, Unrestricted access to education and job opportunities and Decision making ability without any fear / uncertainty. This evaluation demonstrated that a combination of the above will gradually lead to improved inclusion and empowerment in future.

Here are the details of the returnees from India during the program period, **till January 2022:**

RETURN DETAILS from India

RETURN DETAILS (Sep 2019 – January 2022)	FAMILY	INDIVIDUAL	PERSONS		
			Male	Female	Total
Return to Sri Lanka by UNHCR	305		310	326	636
Return to Sri Lanka by own		82	26	56	82
For those willing to return to the Sri Lanka by ship	1406		1876	1939	3815
Persons started to prepare for return during program period	461	11	858	551	1409

In India, based on the overall evaluation observations, program participants (camp population) are taking an informed decision about return, based on the information provided by the program. People in general feel confident that information they have is relevant. Program activities have increased their knowledge of risks, challenges, and opportunities related to return and reintegration. There is an increased interest in return within the communities as a result of awareness of the risks, challenges, and opportunities of return as compared to other options, namely staying in the camps or migrating irregularly. There is increased ability also within community to reduce protection risks and there is increase knowledge of the steps required to prepare for return, and to reintegrate on arrival.

Refugees who have decided to return from India believe they are well prepared for starting a new life in Sri Lanka. Refugees returning to Sri Lanka have all the civil documents required for obtaining citizenships. However, refugee returnees, who were born in India and have failed to register their birth at the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission and obtain Sri Lankan Citizenships, are well-assisted with appropriate support to obtain citizenship in Sri Lanka, though, the process is time-taking and involving many departments. Legal, administrative, and procedural barriers to return are identified and brought to the attention of relevant decision-makers. Government officials are more aware of and willing to fulfil their responsibilities to assist and protect returning refugees.

OfERR in India & Sri Lanka together have been able to help refugees make informed decisions about their future (to stay or return), strengthen the capacities to ensure smooth return while reducing vulnerabilities and threats, enhance their skills for a successful socio-economic reintegration, increasing the willingness and ability of government officials, to strengthen support for return preparedness in India and reintegration in Sri Lanka and engage government officials to develop a structured repatriation program to encourage refugee return.

Thus, there were a number of positive impacts of the program on the lives of the Sri Lankan Refugees in India and returnees in Sri Lanka. The target groups in general in India and Sri Lanka are enjoying greater safety, justice and dignity as a result of reduced protection risks within both the country, due to focused, specific and strategic interventions under SLRRRP-III.

Relevance: The prevailing contextual realities and challenges being faced by the Sri Lankan Refugee communities in India and the returnee communities in Sri Lanka, associated vulnerabilities and risks both in the process of legal & safe repatriation plus effective & sustainable rehabilitation & reintegration fully justifies the relevance and appropriateness of SLRRRP III both in India and Sri Lanka.

Their willingness to voluntarily return justifies the relevance of India based interventions: people want to return from India for a range of several reasons, including, uncertainty of a life with neither citizenship nor legal resident status in India, restrictions imposed on certain educational opportunities & job opportunities, the stigma attached with the “refugee” status, very limited livelihood opportunities, falling prey to people smugglers/ human

traffickers, efforts made to return irregularly on their own, and inability to transport belongings and livelihood assets as per requirements etc.

In Sri Lanka, **a plethora of relevant services, inputs & interventions were planned & implemented** including support for temporary & permanent shelters, access to land / land clearances, toilets, common dug well, livelihood opportunities including integrated farming, school reintegration & enrollment, stationary support, catch up class, Sinhala class, career guidance, awareness / sensitization/training on sexual & gender based violence/child protection/ health care & hygiene/protection, documentation support, facilitating linkages with available services, formation of welcome group etc.: **aligning with the actual, contextual, priority needs of the repatriated families**

In India, out of all the FGD participants in the 9 Refugee Camps, **98% of the beneficiaries who have made an informed decision about return, made the decision based on the information provided by the program. 100% of the FGD participants in India expressed that they feel confident that information they have is relevant and accurate. 89.72% of the returnee interviewed in Sri Lanka also confirmed that the information provided by OffFER in India to help them prepare to return were accurate.** Other factors that are influencing people's decisions about return is the expectation of getting relieved from their "refugee status", hope to get better jobs and livelihood opportunities, opportunities for unrestricted mobility including to other countries, access to own lands in the home countries, and getting reunited with the relatives and friends are the other factors that are influencing their motivation level. 100% of the FGD participants in India expressed that they feel confident that information they have is relevant and accurate. Plus, 89.72% of the returnee interviewed confirmed that the information provided by OffFER in India to help them prepare to return were accurate.

Effectiveness: There is no doubt that SLRRRP-III has been able to achieve/ progress towards all three stated objectives, in spite of several contextual challenges: The preparedness of refugees in India for return and reintegration in Sri Lanka has been strengthened, The sustainability of reintegration in Sri Lanka through enhanced refugee protection, and through enhanced GoSL capacity and willingness to implement their responsibilities has been strengthened and The willingness and ability of the government authorities and key stakeholders, both in India and Sri Lanka, to support the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Sri Lankan refugees has been increased.

The strategies adopted under the project remained both relevant and effective: Helping refugees for an informed decisions about their future (stay or return), strengthening capacities to ensure smooth return with reduction of vulnerabilities and threats, enhancing skills for a successful socio-economic reintegration, increasing the willingness and ability of government officials, to strengthen support for return preparedness in India and reintegration in Sri Lanka and Engaging government officials to develop a structured repatriation programme, to encourage refugee return.

Various interventions made in India remained highly effective. The Humanitarian Information Centers are extremely useful for the communities in each camp in India: a multipurpose common place, a hub addressing a whole set of purposes like community mobilization, educational activities, a place for IEC, mutual connection & support, and a lot more.

There were several factors that contributed positively in the effectiveness of the program approach, strategies or interventions: 1) better preparedness meant less exposure to risks and fewer people harmed or exploited (for example, exploitation by money lenders due to an awareness raising campaign that came out of the protection trainings). Such prevention activities in effect meant scarce resources weren't being used on helping people who got

themselves into trouble, due to poorly informed decisions like returning due to triggers like weddings, funerals etc. rather than on the basis of an informed decision about risks, challenges and opportunities and being prepared for them. 2) Advocacy with govt has led to greater govt ownership of their responsibility to reintegrate, and in turn generated sustained benefits in the form of better services and access to existing services, in the process saving valuable program resources. The program also didn't alleviate govt of their responsibility – as most forms of humanitarian programming would – but instead created empathy, understanding of needs and a sense of responsibility. 3) Having a refugee-led organisation, and returned Sri Lankans advocating for services, strengthen state-civil society relations and importantly rebuilt trust lost during the conflict/refugee flight, hence having a considerable peacebuilding and/or reconciliation dividend. 4) mobilising and empowering refugees – through the self-help groups – had a strong positive benefit for refugees in terms of dealing with residual trauma and fear, providing confidence and human connections that aided social integration. While some of these factors are not specifically measured as part of the program, there are strong anecdotal evidences with the program team. The program may consider to evaluate for wider impact in future evaluations. These factors not only contributed to make the program “effective” but also increased its ‘efficiency’ and make it ‘relevant’.

Efficiency: From the analysis of budget allocation, it is concluded that the allocation was / has been done efficiently and reasonably and there was sufficient focus on investing on different programs at the community level, which can be seen through appropriate resource bifurcation for different program (Objective, Outcome and Output wise) heads at the community and organization level. In Sri Lanka, while 84.47% of the budget has been allocated for program activities under objective 2 and Objective 3 (with major expenditure/budget focus on Objective 2, at the returned refugee and their communities level), only 15.53% have been allocated for the other support cost: Staff remuneration allocation (including program and admin) is only 9.80% of the overall budget and the running cost is also only 4.67%. Similar trend can be observed in India also. The overall budget allocation thus looks quite efficient in terms of alignment with the program focus. The expenditure pattern in both the countries also remained efficient when we compare the same with the outputs and outcomes achieved by the project.

Key Recommendations:

- The Project surely needs to be continued to support voluntary repatriation by the refugee communities from India and successful, effective and sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration in Sri Lanka. Efforts made so far both at the community and the government level already produced concrete results and this is the time to further strengthen the efforts in the coming years, looking into increased willingness & capacities of the communities and facilitative opportunities in the respective countries.
- As per the records maintained by OfERR, there are 519 PWDs in 107 camps within a total estimated population of around 60,000. However, based on the new definitions of the Govt. of India of the types of disabilities (and also the Washington Questions on Disability), it is strongly recommended to have a fresh identification of all PWDs in the camps for more inclusive and effective interventions for them. If OfERR themselves decides to carry out this identification, the team members need to be capacitated on the latest Indian act and the definitions/types prescribed by the Government and how to correctly and effectively identify these 21 types: or else, it can be done through hiring an external agency, expert on the technical aspects of disabilities.
- While there are significant changes in the government (of Tamilnadu) mechanisms in terms of their sensitivity, awareness and procedures, and improved mechanisms to support the refugee communities in India and returnees in Sri Lanka than past, continued and much more works / efforts / persuasions / follow ups and advocacy would be required in future in both the countries so that The GoSL, GoI and GoTN have stronger legal, policy and administrative arrangements to facilitate the return and reintegration of Sri Lankan refugees, including allowing people to safely return back by “ferry services”.

- At the preparation level both in India and immediately after returning to Sri Lanka, the returnees need to be reoriented about the importance and value attached to documents like BC (Birth Certificates), Citizenship Document etc.: for example, *how delay in applying for the BCs will further delay obtaining their National Identity Cards (NIC) which will preclude them from moving out of their traditional homelands and security.*
- The project in Sri Lanka also has the opportunities to further enhance the youth participation and engagement to create positive changes at individual, family and community levels by holding extracurricular activities to connect with youths from migrant and non-migrant population.
- There are opportunities to further strengthen the internal capacity within the team/organization to provide more effective psychosocial support post-return (related to family, business & livelihood, trauma etc.).

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. About Act for Peace and OfERR

Act for Peace: Act for Peace (AfP) is the International Aid and Development Agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia and works with local partners throughout the Pacific, Asia and Africa.

Act for Peace's work began in 1948 with the sending of food and other provisions to help refugees and internally displaced who had suffered during World War II. Over the past 73 years AfP has provided food, shelter, education, healthcare and trainings to help the world's most vulnerable prepare for, cope with and recover from conflict and disaster. As the international aid agency of the National Council for Churches in Australia and a member of the global ACT alliance, Act for Peace helps communities affected by poverty and conflict in more than 130 countries. Act for Peace supports partners to respond to emergencies and implement long-term humanitarian and development program and advocacy initiatives responding to the needs of communities in protracted conflicts or disaster-affected regions. Act for Peace is currently working with partners in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burma, Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Indonesia, as well as in the Pacific and with refugee communities in Australia.

OfERR: (INDIA)

OfERR in India is an organization of Ceylon Tamil refugees committed to the principles of human development and sustainable livelihoods. The Mission of the Organization is to "Build refugees' capacity, empowering them to make a significant contribution to their social and economic development and to prepare them for their eventual return to the Island". It is working across 107 camps of Sri Lankan Refugees in Tamil Nadu and currently has 58,677 beneficiaries. Their interventions with the Refugees include Protection and Documentation, Access to and Fulfilment of basic needs, women empowerment, education, health, nutrition, medical support, counselling, IGP and Human Resource capacity building.

OfERR was born in 1984 as a voice for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who were forced to flee their homeland and take refuge in India during the armed conflict that went on for over 25 years, displacing tens of thousands of families. Uncertainties caused by war forced Tamils from Sri Lanka seek asylum in Tamil Nadu. Since 1983, they started fleeing to India by boats and flights.

During 1983-1990, 134053 people fled from Sri Lanka and took refuge in India, 122,000 people came during 1991 to 1995, 54188 people came during 1995-2005 and 24,556 people came during 2006-2015. However, since 1988,

the Indian Government and UNHCR started sending the refugees back (voluntary) and during 1988-1990, 25,285 refugees went back to Sri Lanka, during 1992-1995, and 8831 went back from 2009 onwards. Depending on the situation in Sri Lanka they have moved back and forth. Gaining confidence over the situation in Sri Lanka, refugees have returned home at different times.

OfERR is a non-profit, non-political humanitarian organization comprised of Sri Lankan refugees whose mission is to speak up for the rights of other such refugees and to provide them peace, dignity and empowerment. These programs include education (both primary and higher learning), income generation training, child protection, health care, counselling, protection from gender-based violence, support for refugee return and peace building. From just seven initial members to a current strength of 400 staff in four regional offices in Chennai, Trichy, Erode and Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu), OfERR has come a long way in the past three decades and is now recognized worldwide by governments and charitable institutions alike as a champion for the most vulnerable people and communities. OfERR has grown from being an organization run by refugees and for refugees, to one that takes pride in also giving back to the Indian government and citizens who benevolently provided asylum to Sri Lankan Tamils over the years.

OfERR undertakes these initiatives with the generous support of Act for Peace (AfP), Primates World Relief Development Fund (PWRDF), Church of Sweden (CoS), Chelvanayakam Charitable Foundation (CCF), Ecumenical Scholarship Program (ESP), Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), Brahma Shanthi Kandiah (BSK) Program, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS), and Toms Shoes apart from the ten Indian universities who provide educational scholarships to refugee students. OfERR's vision is to empower every refugee through education and opportunities, and provide them the support needed to make an informed decision about voluntary return to Sri Lanka, so that they can return as ambassadors of peace, justice, equity and sustainable development. In the words of OfERR's Founder and Chief Functionary S.C. Chandrahasan, a lawyer, human rights activist and son of the highly regarded political leader Late S.J.V Chelvanayakam (also known as the Mahatma Gandhi of Sri Lanka), *"what motivates our refugee volunteers is the underlying hope that they will return to their homeland as resource people and help in rebuilding their motherland"*.

OfERR CEYLON:

OfERR Ceylon is committed to the principles of human development, sustainable livelihoods and the realization of human rights. It works at the grassroots level with community organizations and Self help Groups to empower them to realize their full potential and benefits from sustainable development. OfERR Ceylon, established in 2004, has provided humanitarian assistance to Tsunami affected people, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), returned IDPs and Refugees. OfERR Ceylon has experiences in implementing relief, rehabilitation, resettlement, reintegration and development programs / programmes. OfERR Ceylon works closely with communities, government, administration, civil society organizations, and international organizations to optimize these benefits.

OfERR Ceylon is involved into multiple interventions that includes community mobilization, civil and legal documentation, SGBV (Sexual and Gender based violence) and child protection, early childhood education, schools and school communities developments, advocacy, women empowerment, shelter construction, water and sanitation, return and reintegration, livelihood, etc to better the lives of the returned and resettled communities in Sri Lanka.

1.2. About the SLRRRP Phase III Programme

1.2.1. Program Background

AfP has been working with OfERR and OfERR Ceylon on the Strengthening the Sustainability of “Sri Lankan Refugee Return and Reintegration” (SLRRRP) Program Phase III since 2015 to make voluntary repatriation a sustainable durable solution for refugees and a viable alternative to protracted encampment and irregular migration. The Program is funded by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) in Australia.

SLRRRP, as a program, was conceived in 2014, during a time when the voluntary repatriation of refugees from the camps in India back to Sri Lanka was at an all-time low. Any discussion of return in India’s 107 refugee camps was quickly shut down by refugee leaders, people smugglers, refugees hoping to leave and claim asylum, and Indian Tamil political parties who had rallied against the persecution of Tamil Communities living in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan government and UN (United Nations) officials reasoned that if refugees are not returning they did not need to provide services, and the lack of services meant those who returned found it extremely challenging, which discouraged others and often ended in refugees returning to the camps. Consequently, most refugees saw their only option as ‘getting on a boat’. Moreover, any refugees who did choose to return to Sri Lanka were poorly prepared and lacked visibility, reintegration support, or access to services, causing them to become burdens on family and community, deplete absorption capacity, and without civil documents they were unable to access government services or build livelihoods. Many then returned back to the camps only to find they had been cut off from support.

In July 2015, the SLRRRP Program set out to transform this situation through implementing an innovative locally-owned and refugee-driven Program designed to resurrect ‘voluntary repatriation’ and make it a viable durable solution. The three key elements of the Program are preparedness for refugee returnee, strengthening the sustainability of refugee return and strengthening the support through strategic lobbying with GoI, GoTN and GoSL. By mobilising and empowering refugees in the return process, the Program builds confidence in returning and makes repatriation a viable option, not only discouraging refugees from pursuing irregular migration but also making voluntary repatriation more successful in practice. Furthermore, by engaging and supporting GoI, GoTN and GoSL officials to meet their obligations in providing assistance and protection to returning refugees, SLRRRP is working towards achieving a sustainable, government-supported voluntary repatriation programme that is able to extend over the long-term without the need for external funding.

SLRRRP is best placed to respond to the Program context due to OfERR’s strong working relationships with the Government of India (GoI), Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN), their access to all 107 camps, and their existing knowledge, expertise and programmatic infrastructure that enables them to support systemic change in Sri Lanka.

1.2.2. Program Title

Sustainability of Sri Lankan Refugee Return and Reintegration Programme (SLRRRP): Phase III

1.2.3. Program Goal:

- To strengthen the sustainability of Sri Lankan refugee, return and reintegration.

1.2.4. Program Objectives:

- To strengthen the preparedness of refugees in India for return and reintegration in Sri Lanka.
- To strengthen sustainability of reintegration of returnees in Sri Lanka through enhanced refugee protection and through enhanced GoSL capacity and willingness to implement their responsibilities
- To increase the willingness and ability of government authorities and key stakeholders to support the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Sri Lankan refugees.

1.2.5. Time Frame, Geographical Coverage and Target Population:

Timeframe: 1st September 2019 to 31st December 2021 (the original end date of 31st August 2021 was extended in late 2020 due to COVID-19 related delays)

Geographical Coverage and Target Population: Refugees in the 107 camps in Tamil Nadu India considering and/or preparing to return to Sri Lanka; Returned refugees reintegrating in six districts in Sri Lanka; Host communities in Sri Lanka - which include returned refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers and other conflict-affected communities. Priority was given to those with the greatest reintegration needs, the most significant protection risks and extremely vulnerable individuals (elderly, single women, female-headed households and children) and those at risk of exploitation by people smugglers.

Remainder of the evaluation has been removed as it contains sensitive program information