



WHY DO RESETTLEMENTS OFTEN FAIL IN SRI LANKA

Figure 1: An abandoned completed house in a resettlement housing scheme, Kaluvanchikkudi, Sri Lanka

Resettlement is often a necessary response to communities that have been displaced by disasters. Soon after a disaster induced displacement, temporary shelters will be made available to the displaced population collaboratively by governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other stakeholders. However, despite extensive planning and investment, resettlement efforts frequently fail. The reasons for these failures range from administrative inefficiencies to socio-economic miscalculations and a lack of long-term sustainability planning (Ganapati, 2016). In Sri Lanka, schools, public buildings, and temples often serve as immediate temporary shelters following disasters. However, these buildings cannot function as long-term solutions, as they must soon resume their usual purposes. This urgency pressures the government to make urgent resettlement decisions, adding further challenges to the process. In such cases, the government assumes responsibility for resettlement, setting up institutional frameworks to oversee decision-making and implementation.

Following decisions to resettle, a district level Steering Committee will be established for the

resettlement process under the leadership of District Secretary. Other relevant institutions function as the stakeholders in the process. Some key organisations play important roles, from land acquisition and housing design to infrastructure development. These include the Urban Development Authority (UDA), the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO), the Irrigation Department, and local authorities. However, despite this structured approach, resettlements often struggle due to weak coordination among agencies, leading to delays, inefficiencies, and policy inconsistencies. Resettlement is generally a nonlinear complex process. However, government institutions tend to approach all resettlement in the same linear way, irrespective of type of disaster and socio-economic characteristics of the affected community. Mughah (2008) refers to this approach as 'bureaucratic logic'. Unfortunately, the sense of urgency, following a disaster, compels a rush in decision-making, with resettlement viewed by officials merely as a process of providing just lands and houses. Governments often fail to consider economic opportunities, social integration, and infrastructure sustainability. Without these elements, communities struggle to rebuild their lives in new locations,

leading to dissatisfaction and, ultimately, the failure of resettlement schemes.

Another important factor that shapes resettlement arrangement is funding. Generally, funding arrangements for resettlement are decided by the government and the efficient execution of all procedures depends on the amount of funding available. Being a financially instable country, Sri Lanka tends to welcome disaster relief funding from local as well as international organisations. This sheer volume of financial resources can sometimes lead to mismanagement. For instance, following the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka, large sums of aid were distributed inefficiently, with allegations of corruption and inequitable allocation. This mismanagement often results in poorly built homes, inadequate infrastructure, and unsustainable living conditions, further eroding trust in the resettlement process.

Land selection is the key step in the resettlement process. Generally, the government offers state lands for resettlement in view of the cost and time involved in acquiring private lands. However, land constraints often force governments to use state-owned lands, which may not always be ideal for human habitation. Further, the political situation in a country too could have an impact on land selection. For example, Sri Lanka's civil war delayed the resettlement of tsunami victims in the north and east. Further, socio-economic conditions, unsuitable soil, wetlands, slope lands, and proximity to sea are among restrictions on land selection.

The selection of beneficiaries for resettlement often generates controversy and dissatisfaction. In many cases, the recipient should own a house to comply with the local authority regulations, leaving informal settlers and tenants without support. Additionally, a 'house-for-house' policy means only the house owners who lost their houses or whose houses had been severely damaged in a disaster get a new house irrespective of the number of families that lived in the lost or damaged houses. While the policy excludes informal residents and illegal squatters of the coastal region, who comprised a considerable section of tsunami victims. Government officials also struggle with fraudulent claims, inconsistent beneficiary lists, and lack of

up-to-date data, making it difficult to ensure fair allocation. This creates social imbalance and resentment among displaced communities, further diminishing trust in the process.

Resettlement houses are often built with speed rather than sustainability in mind. Standardised designs, rather than community-specific housing models, are often implemented without consulting the affected population (Karunasena & Rameezdeen, 2010). Many homes lack resilience to future disasters, and their materials and construction quality can be subpar due to corruption or budget constraints. In some cases, homes are built without considering future expansion, cultural preferences, or basic household needs, leading to dissatisfaction and modifications that violate planning regulations. Without proper post-construction evaluation, these deficiencies persist and contribute to the failure of resettlement projects.

Infrastructure, including water supply, electricity, roads, and public services, is often an afterthought in resettlement planning. While houses may be handed over to beneficiaries, essential services can take years to be fully established. Schools, healthcare facilities, markets, and places of worship play a crucial role in community well-being, yet they are frequently neglected in the resettlement timeline. Without these fundamental services, resettled communities struggle to adapt to their new environments. Perhaps the most expressive indicator of failed resettlement is the abandonment of resettlement housing. Many displaced individuals eventually return to their original locations, even if those areas remain unsafe. Others sell or rent out their resettlement homes and move elsewhere.

Additionally, deeds of ownership are not provided at the very outset to the resettled population. Initially, they are given a permit of residence to affirm their right to possession of the assigned houses. Deeds of ownership are issued after a considerably long time. This leads to dissatisfaction and many beneficiaries hesitate to invest in homes they do not legally own. The absence of long-term monitoring and support exacerbates these challenges, allowing resettlement failures to persist unnoticed until entire communities have vacated.



Figure 2 : An abandoned incomplete resettlement housing scheme, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

The failure of resettlement efforts can largely be attributed to a top-down approach that prioritises speed over sustainability. To improve outcomes, resettlement policies should incorporate long-term socio-economic planning, robust infrastructure development, and genuine community consultation. Governments must recognise that resettlement is not merely about providing housing but about rebuilding lives. Affected communities should be involved in decision-making processes, from site selection to housing design. Post-resettlement monitoring, social services, and livelihood

support must be integral components of the programme.

Without a shift towards a more holistic and participatory approach, resettlement efforts will continue to fall short, leaving displaced populations vulnerable and marginalised. Only by addressing the root causes of resettlement failures can governments and humanitarian agencies create sustainable, thriving communities that truly recover from disaster-induced displacement.

Summary

- Resettlement often fails due to poor coordination among institutions, rushed decision-making, and a top-down, linear bureaucratic approach that overlooks community-specific needs and long-term sustainability.
- Limited availability of suitable land, political constraints, and exclusionary policies (e.g. 'house-for-house') result in inequitable resettlement, excluding informal settlers and creating social resentment.
- Homes are frequently built quickly with standard designs and poor materials, ignoring cultural needs, future expansion, and basic services like water, healthcare, and education—leading to dissatisfaction and abandonment.
- Inefficient and sometimes corrupt use of funds, along with delays in granting ownership deeds, discourages investment in resettlement homes and erodes trust in the process.

References.

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