

Thangavel Nadesaseelan, aged 17, is from the remote village of Panchenai in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka. His mother died when he was two and his father re-married and left his young family behind to fend for themselves. Seelan, as he is called by his friends and his elder sister were left with their maternal grandparents and a widowed aunt.

As in many similar situations, Seelan attended the village school up to Grade 8 but dropped out at the age of 14 to work, because there was no other bread-winner in the family.

With his limited education, opportunities for work were rather restricted. During the agricultural season Seelan worked in the paddy fields and at other times in road construction or any other work that was available, to provide for his family's basic needs. With his grandmother's death, Seelan had to take on more responsibility as his grandfather was unable to work due to old age and his aunt was losing her sight.

Despite these difficulties, Seelan was able to give his sister away in marriage and to continue his life with his grandfather and aunt in the small hut that they built.

The year 2007 brought a difficult period in his life, as the war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government forces escalated in the east of Sri Lanka. Seelan and his family had to move out of their village to stay in a camp. They had to leave all their belongings behind and when they returned after the war, all that was left was the land they owned. So for Seelan the struggle for survival started again. Once they were resettled in their own village, he managed to put up a small hut, using the assistance provided to resettled families by the Government and other humanitarian agencies, and started to work again as an unskilled worker.

When the Recovery Coordination Initiative (RCI) – Phase II started in Batticaloa District in July 2009, Panchenai village was selected as one of the locations for the interventions. The Project was a joint United Nations effort, in which the ILO, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) took the lead role in implementing the project and World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) played a complementary role, assisting with the resettlement process and providing food for the resettled communities. The ILO was given responsibility for vocational training and enterprise development assistance for resettled families, and once again successfully used the Community-Based Training for Economic Empowerment (TREE) methodology to help initiate livelihood activities for these resettled communities.

A needs assessment was conducted in all six project locations to identify prospective employment areas. It became apparent that there was a demand for mechanics for agro-machinery and motorcycle repair, so training in these areas was offered to young people in all the locations, through the St. John's Vocational Training Centre and the Vocational Training Authority.

Seelan was one of seven young men selected from Panchenai. Initial group discussions were held on how they could attend the training and complete it successfully. Like Seelan, the main problem faced by most was leaving their families behind to attend the training, because they were the main bread-winners. The next problem was commuting daily to the training location. Taking these concerns into consideration, the ILO decided to enroll them in a three month residential training course at the St. John's Vocational Training Centre in Batticaloa. The ILO also arranged with WFP to include these trainees in their Food-for-Training (FFT) programme, clearing way for them to attend the training while their families were being taken care of by WFP. The WFP Batticaloa Field Office enthusiastically supported this arrangement and provided dry rations to the families of all trainees during the training period. In addition, all the logistical support was provided by UNDP Batticaloa. ILO provided the funding and moral support to the trainees by visiting them regularly to monitor their progress and give encouragement.

Today Seelan, together with other 15 boys, has graduated as an agro-machinery mechanic, after successfully completing three months of institutional training and two months on-the-job-training. He has now been offered employment at the workshop where he underwent training.

Under the RCI – Phase II, the ILO has offered vocational training to 170 young women and men in agro-machinery repair, motorcycle repair, heavy equipment operation, tailoring, carpentry, masonry, tractor driving and electrical wiring. They were all also supported by the ILO in finding either waged employment or forming group enterprises. In addition, another 140 women were supported by the ILO with skills training, equipment and tools, work space and other operational assistance, allowing them to start community-based micro-enterprises. Fourteen such group enterprises, including a group farm, have been established.

Today, Seelan wants to be a leading agro-machinery mechanic in Batticaloa District and to run his own workshop one day. He dreams of building a new house, making the lives of his grandfather and aunt

comfortable and supporting his sister's family. Above all, like all youngsters, he dreams of driving his own motorcycle. Armed with new skills and training he is confident that he can make all these dreams come true.