

# RESETTLED IN THE PATHS OF FLOODS

## PERENNIAL FLOODS EXPOSE THE FUNDAMENTAL FLAW OF THE EXISTING RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMMES IN CHENNAI



December 2023

### **Flooding exacerbates the existing vulnerabilities of the resettled families:**

Almost every year, November and December are months of struggle and ordeal for the families who are evicted and resettled to various sites located in the peripheral areas of the city. The torrential monsoon rains often flood the entire neighbourhoods where these resettlement sites are located. Such instances of flooding exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities of the resettlement families already facing challenges related to loss of livelihood and income in the post-resettlement phase.

As the livelihood of the resettled families is proximate to their previous habitation, resettlement (especially to sites more than 20 kilometres away from their previous habitation) results in loss of livelihood. In Chennai, 78.47% of people living in informal settlements walk to their workplace, 5.52% use cycles and 15.76% use buses or trains for commuting to their workplace, clearly indicating the integral linkage of habitation to livelihood and survival.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, resettlement to sites located in the peripheral areas of the city results in disrupting the livelihood opportunities of the resettled families that are location-centric. A study conducted by IRCUDC<sup>2</sup> in the resettlement site of Perumbakkam in February 2021 reveals that 48% of the resettled families (respondents in the study) lost employment after relocation and continued to remain unemployed for over two years.

For women, resettlement has forced them to forego their jobs because of the distance of the resettlement site from their previous habitation, lack of adequate transportation facilities connecting to their workplace, time taken to travel to work, and concern for the safety and well-being of children who are home alone till the women return from work, which is usually around late evening, as the time taken to commute to the workplace is over 2 hours and much longer during the peak hours. The availability of employment opportunities in the vicinity is a challenge. The 2021 study of IRCUDC reveals that of the 458 domestic workers identified for the study, 276 domestic workers lost their livelihood after resettlement and continued to remain unemployed for over two years.

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<sup>1</sup> Forced to the Fringes: Disasters of Resettlement in India, Kannagi Nagar; 2014, Housing and Land Rights Network, New Delhi. Available at: [https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/Kannagi\\_Nagar\\_Report\\_2.pdf](https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/Kannagi_Nagar_Report_2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Information and Resource Centre for the Deprived Urban Communities (IRCUDC) is a community-centric information hub for deprived urban communities. The Centre seeks to collect, collate, and disseminate information about various government laws, policies, and schemes that are instrumental in ensuring adequate housing for deprived urban communities: <https://ircduc.org/>

The study also highlights that after resettlement most of the domestic workers worked in houses near their previous homes. However, it was difficult for them to travel for over 20 to 30 kilometres (one way), for over two hours, to reach their places of work. As mentioned above, the lack of security in the settlement forced many of the women domestic workers to stay at home. Some women complained that households in the neighbourhood refused to employ women from Perumbakkam, on account of the stigma associated with the resettlement site.

While some families resettled under specific projects have received monthly subsistence allowance to mitigate the adverse impact of resettlement, the amount allotted is inadequate. Many families are not 'entitled' to the subsistence allowance or other resettlement packages because of the projects under which they are resettled. Therefore, they are forcing them to bear the burden of resettlement without any support facing loss of livelihood and indebtedness. With women forced to remain 'unemployed' in the post-resettlement period, the income of the family is affected. With reduced family income and increased expenses, including commuting costs to work, the families are pushed into poverty situations which are further intensified by the pandemic as well as the perennial floods when the income of the family is predominantly dependent on 'daily wages' are lost for days and loss of belongings further intensifies the situation.

The perennial floods that most of the resettlement sites face are primarily because of the location of these sites. Referring to resettlement sites of Semmencherry, Ezhil Nagar and Perumbakkam, experts point out that "the evicted slums are then resettled on other waterbodies in the south and west of the city...these resettlement colonies are sited on low-lying, flood-prone areas"<sup>3</sup>

Expert opinion about development of resettlement sites in low-lying, flood prone areas:<sup>4</sup>

*Since the early 2000s, over 43,000 resettlement tenements have been built in Kannagi Nagar and Ezhilnagar (on the Pallikaranai marsh), and in Perumbakkam. Kannagi Nagar and Ezhilnagar were developed on a large tract of marshland that served as a buffer for floodwaters moving eastward from the northwest and southwest. These area also has waterbodies such as the Thalambur and Perumbakkam lakes, which are part of historically established flood pathways. During heavy rains, these lakes will fill up and breach their banks, whether naturally or deliberately resulting in intense flooding in these sites.*

***The creation of mass ghettos of urban poverty in the middle of ecologically fragile lands exposes the fraudulence of both the environmental and the socio-legal rationale of resettlement.***

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<sup>3</sup> Coelho, Karen, Placing the poor in the Flood Path: Post-Disaster Slum Resettlement in Chennai, The Caravan, 4 January 2016, <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/placing-the-poor-in-the-flood-pathpost-disaster-slum-resettlement-in-chennai>

### **Resettlement sites in vulnerable locations:**

The recent floods in Chennai unleashed by Cyclone Michaung, have yet again exposed the vulnerability of the resettled families in and around Chennai. Similar to the 2015 floods, these sites suffered from official neglect. Their locality was flooded and they were stranded inside their houses losing their daily wages, those on the ground floors had to seek refuge from their neighbours on the other floors. Many families on the ground floor of Semmencherry lost their belongings.

***Post-disaster eviction in Chennai and resettlement to vulnerable locations:*** Since the 2004 Tsunami and the 2015 floods in Chennai, over 23,000 families were resettled in sites like Perumbakkam, Ezhil Nagar, Semmencherry and Kannagi Nagar. Since 2015, 83 settlements comprising nearly 19,817 families were evicted and 95% of the evictions were conducted for the 'restoration of waterbodies' in Chennai. These families evicted as part of 'flood mitigation measures' and 'restoration of waterbodies' were resettled in sites that are located in the paths of floods and ecologically sensitive areas.

*The government's seemingly benign offer of resettlement housing as flood relief is being seen by the urban poor and by housing activists in Chennai as a forced eviction by other means. The drowned buildings in Perumbakkam, Ezhilnagar and Semmencherry highlight the ironies, inconsistencies and failures of Tamil Nadu's environmental governance as much as of its housing and slum clearance policies. (Coelho, 2016)*

From 2015 to 2023, 12,045 families were resettled in the site of Perumbakkam for the restoration of waterbodies. Since 2015, Perumbakkam has faced flooding in the years 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2023. However, there were no efforts to stall the expansion of the settlement even though the settlement faced flooding almost every year.

***Impact of flooding:*** In Semmencherry, the water (contaminated with sewer water) enters the house on the ground floor forcing people living on the ground floor to request the families on the first floor to accommodate them during the rain. For those on the first floor, accommodating the families themselves is a challenge as the house is just 160 sq. ft. Therefore families living on the ground floor have no option to safeguard their belongings which were mostly their lifetime savings. As flood levels rise almost up to hip level in many parts of Semmencherry safeguarding their belongings was not even an option for these families. To make matters worse, the leaking roof and damp walls on the first floor made it difficult for the families residing there already and those who sought refuge during floods. The pre-existing leaky roofs were not rectified on time and the rains made it worse, especially in flood situations when people were confided in their houses, leaky roofs and damp walls made it impossible to reside in these houses.



*Image 1: Inner Roads of Semmencherry in 2023 Floods | Photo: Palani Kumar*



*Images 2&3: Floods in Semmencherry and Loss of Belongings 2023 | Photo: IRCDOC*



Inadequate maintenance in the sites posed a safety threat to the residents of Semmencherry. A junction box set up by (Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited) TANGEDCO was found to be lying in the flooded street of Semmencherry.



*Image 4: Junction box in Semmencherry | Photo: IRCDUC*

Even after the restoration of the electricity supply to the site, electric wires in some houses caught fire and people had to change the wiring of their houses to rectify the issue adding to the financial burden faced by the families.

In Perumbakkam, almost the entire settlement was engulfed with flood water and people were stuck inside the high-rise buildings without water supply and electricity connection. In almost all the floods people were stranded inside their houses without access to employment for three to five days, dependent on relief for food. Without electricity, the elevators were not functional and there was no possibility of providing drinking water in the overhead tanks because the motors were not functional. The water sumps were also contaminated with sewer water. During the floods, the people had to rely on the contaminated water for drinking and other purposes. After protests, though water was supplied in tanker lorries, women had to climb seven floors with water pots to access water. Even accessing packaged water becomes a challenge because of the floods. In Perumbakkam, discussion with the women with disabilities reveals that they were allotted ground floors as they are persons with disabilities, however, their houses were flooded and without the elevators, they found it difficult to climb the stairs and seek refuge in the houses on the first floor.



*Images 5&6: Women carrying pots of water in Perumbakkam that has 7 floors | Photo: IRCDUC*

Media Reports of Flooding in 2019 and 2020

[Vivek Narayanan, The Hindu, For residents in Chennai's Perumbakkam, rain bring a host of problems, 03 December 2019](#)

[Nirupama Vishwanathan, The New Indian Express, As water drains out, resettled Chennai slum-dwellers recall 'dark nights', 29 November 2020](#)

Flooding in Perumbakkam (2021 & 2023)



*Images 7&8: Flooding in 2021 | Photo: IRCDUC*





*Images 9&10: Flooding in 2023 | Photo: IRCDUC*

Despite several floodings, the site of Perumbakkam was expanded by the Government of Tamil Nadu. An additional 1,152 houses were constructed under the Light House



Project (LHP)<sup>5</sup> under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Ironically, these houses were considered to be “Eco-friendly construction fit for diverse climatic quality standards and disaster-proof houses”<sup>6</sup> However, the recent flooding has proven otherwise.



*Image 11: Flooding inside the Light House Project | Photo: Palani Kumar*

Likewise in Kannagi Nagar, situated in the banks of Buckingham Canal, flooding was not the only issue, poor quality of houses and leaking roofs added on to the problem.<sup>7</sup>

The flooding in the resettlement sites exposes the fundamental flaw of the resettlement programmes of the state. Placing people in the paths of floods and ecologically sensitive areas in the guise of restoring waterways has only multiplied the vulnerabilities of communities who were already struggling because of the resettlement. A closer look at the location of the various resettlement sites constructed by Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB)<sup>8</sup> confirms that many of these sites are located in or closer to ecologically sensitive areas.

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<sup>5</sup> Light House Project: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2022/may/27/light-house-project-pm-modi-opens-game-changer-housing-project-2458457.html>

<sup>6</sup> PM unveils housing project for city, The Hindu, 02 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/pm-unveils-housing-project-for-city/article33476885.ece>

<sup>7</sup> Media Report in Polimer TV: [https://www.instagram.com/reel/C060VR1JxrT/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/reel/C060VR1JxrT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>8</sup> Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board was renamed as Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB): <https://tnuhdb.tn.gov.in/>



| Resettlement              | Number of houses | Location                               | Waterbody                                |
|---------------------------|------------------|--|--|
| Kannagi Nagar/Ezhil Nagar | 23,704           | Thoraipakkam, Chennai District         | Okkiyam Maduvu (South); Bcanal (Eastern) |
| Perumbakkam/Ezhil Nagar   | 20,376+1152      | Shollinganallur, Chengalpattu District | Marshland (Nookampalayam Canal)          |
| Semmencherry              | 6,734            | Shollinganallur, Chennai District      | Marshland (Nokampalayam Canal)           |

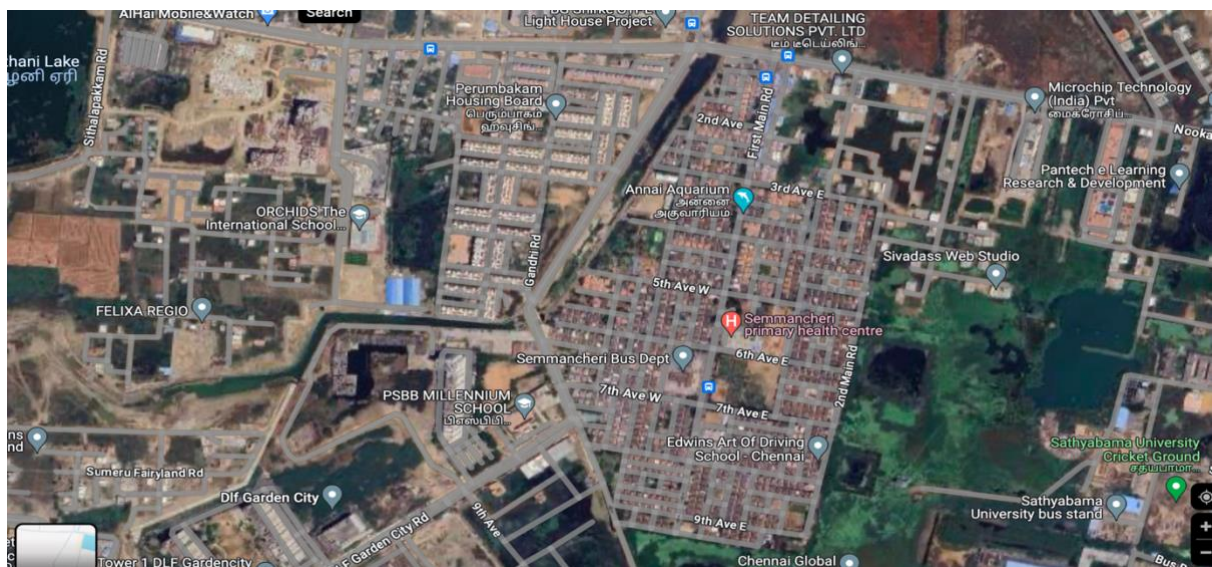
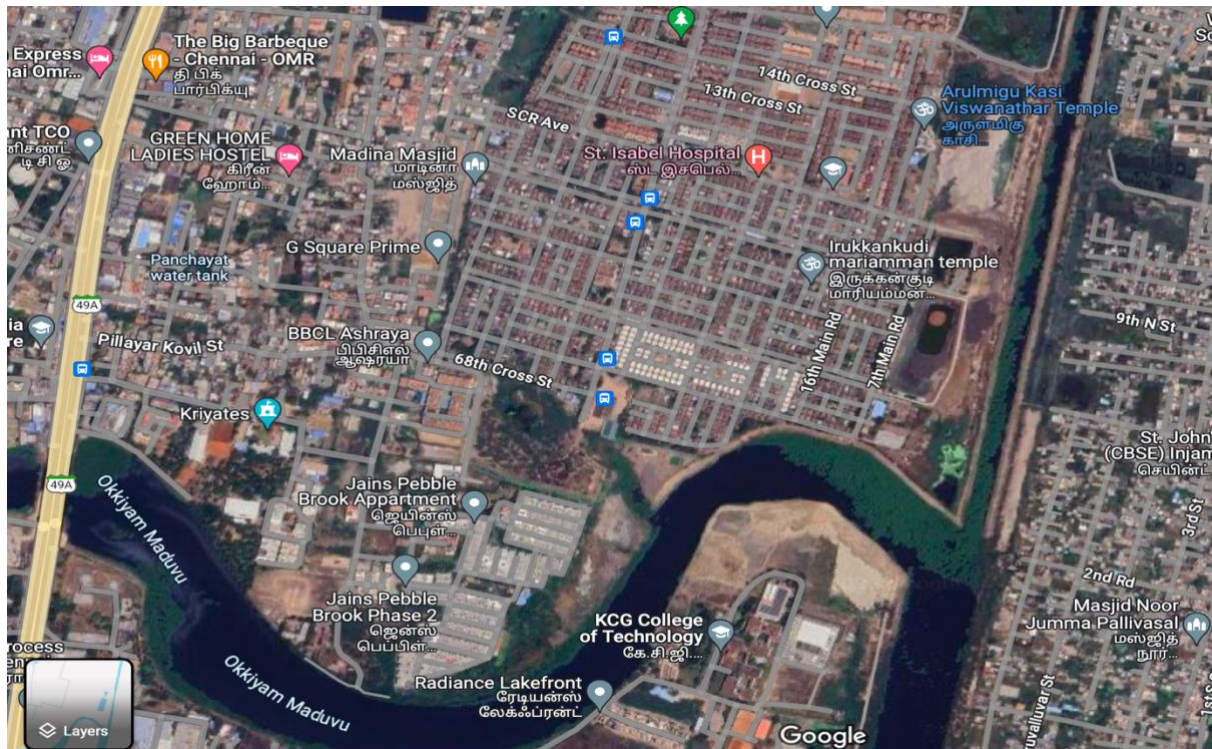


Image 12: Kannagi Nagar near Okkiyam Maduvu | Source: Google Maps

Image 13: Semmencherry near Nookampalayam Canal | Source: Google Maps



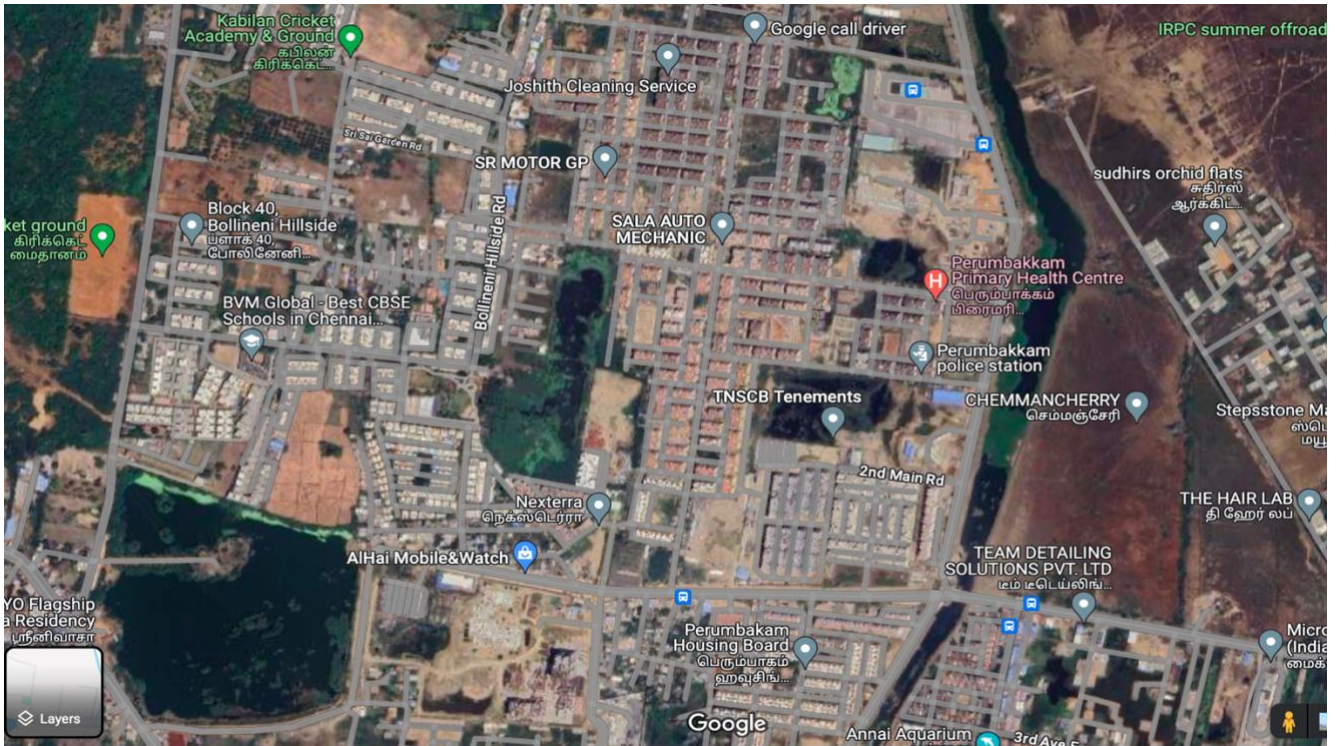


Image 12: Perumbakkam near Nookampalayam | Source: Google Maps

Apart from the sites mentioned above, settlements like Navlaur, Manali New Town also faced flooding as they are also situated closer to waterbodies.

Even though a draft policy on Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) was released in October 2021 by the Government of Tamil Nadu, the policy has not been finalised yet. One of the points mentioned in the policy is that resettlement sites should not be located in “lands which are located in the buffer areas of ecologically sensitive zones, protected areas, the forests, lands which are affected by industrial pollution, and environmental degradation.” Therefore there is a need to finalise the policy to prevent such resettlement housing programmes in ecologically sensitive areas.

The ‘[Resilient Urban Design Framework](#)’ of the TNUHDB is to be translated, relooked and strengthened by engaging in public consultation with technical and social experts, and to be implemented in all the housing projects. Unless the same is incorporated in the existing housing policy and the Draft R&R policy such resettlement sites and housing projects unmindful of the disaster risks and vulnerabilities will continue to be constructed.