The canoes gently touch the ground as the fishermen alight, dragging nets full of their daily catch with them. Crabs, prawns, shrimp: the daily catch on a good day can bring in up to 2000 LKR (Sri Lankan Rupees). A few years ago here on the Nayaru lagoon in Mullaitivu district of northern Sri Lanka, visitors would have been welcomed to a very different scene: a deserted and desolate landscape, laid waste by war. Now, however, houses are being rebuilt, and with the completion of good roads, the area is once again connected to outside markets.

And the old residents have returned. The fishermen had been gone for more than three years (one of them had been displaced for 14 years), but they have all come back home. Agencies including the Red Cross and FAO have stepped in to help rebuild communities. Under FAO’s ‘Northern Recovery Project’, a component funded by Australian Aid provided returning fishermen with canoes and basic fishing gear. In Nayaru, the local fishermen’s cooperative received 10 canoes, each worth 45,000 LKR in the market.
One of the fishermen reported that “The canoes are ‘No.1’ quality. Before, we had to walk half a km into the lagoon, running the risk of stepping on sharp rocks, coral pieces, and spiny fish. And standing in the muddy water for hours is not good for you.”

“No, we can catch plenty without risking our health. And sometimes the buyers line up on the shore of the lagoon as we are coming back, ready to buy the day’s catch!”

As a Monitoring and Evaluation intern with the FAO here in Sri Lanka, I was recently lucky enough to be able to travel to the post-conflict recovery zones of northern Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, a country of approximately 20 million people, was ravaged by a civil war for 26 long years between the Sinhalese-dominated national government and the Tamil separatist ‘Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’ (LTTE). The country has a Sinhalese-speaking Buddhist majority and a Tamil-speaking Hindu minority, with other minorities of Christians and Muslims. Fueled by ethnic tensions, the LTTE took up arms against the Sri Lankan Government in 1983, and this call to arms quickly devolved into an extremely violent ethnic conflict that ended in 2009 with the crushing defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan Army. Much of the Tamil dominated North and East of the country was severely affected by the war, and aid agencies have been actively working towards rehabilitating these former war zones since 2009.

Attached to the Monitoring and Evaluation Office, I have been tasked with various duties. One of my major projects here has been creating a database of general indicators that M&E office here can use to evaluate their projects in the future. For the first few weeks, I pored over monitoring and evaluation reports from UN agencies as well as other development agencies to try and figure out what indicators development organizations used for various projects, how they structured them, how the data was gathered and so on. Since the completion of the database, I have worked on outcome assessments and end-of-project evaluation for projects ranging from humanitarian aid in the North to agro-enterprise development in 8 districts of the country. For me, the most exciting task was one that included creating case studies and an informal evaluation report of the various projects being carried out under the umbrella ‘Northern Recovery Project’ in northern Sri Lanka. I visited various NRP field sites with this purpose for a week in July, and interviewed various beneficiaries.

The Northern Recovery Project is wide-ranging, and fisheries constitutes only one of its many impact sectors. On the fertile Jaffna Peninsula, NRP has started focusing on diversifying livelihoods. Jaffna has remained in Government hands since 1996, and hence even though many residents of the peninsula were internally displaced, the region was spared the worst of the fighting. As a result, farmers have quickly pieced together their past lives and are moving on from subsistence agriculture to commercial scale farming.

V. Somasundaram is a grape farmer in Mawathapuram, Jaffna. He was resettled in 2011, and with financial help provided by FAO was able to put in physical infrastructure for
grape vines like concrete columns and wiring. Using a loan he bought grape seedlings, and started farming. His 0.625 acres of land now produces 3000 kg of grapes three times a year. In nearby Vithagapuram, S. Srikanta’s story is similar. An experienced farmer, Mr. Srikanta was provided with 50 papaya seeds in addition to 4 goats by FAO. These papayas now provide him with around 200 kg of papayas every month, which he then sells at the nearest food departmental store.

Sri Lanka’s Northern Province is now leaving the times of emergency humanitarianism behind, and as communities look towards longer term investments in their livelihoods, FAO is responding with programs on value addition, food processing and offshore fishing. In the words of Dr. Siva, an experienced FAO veterinarian, “Earlier, they were hungry and so we gave them food. That was it. But that time is now over. Now, we are moving towards giving them the tools and skills with which to produce their own food and keep on doing so.”

FAO’s work in the North was an incredible learning experience for me. For someone coming straight out of college, it was eye-opening to visit a former war zone and talk to residents and agency workers who had lived and worked through the war. This exposure to FAO’s work has left me begging for more, and this field internship has defined my future goals; I am confident that I want to continue working in the international development sector, and focus on the intersection between agriculture, human development and the environment. It is clear that FAO’s work is creating a huge impact in Sri Lanka, and I hope that I can emulate this impact in all aspects in my own future life.