

## Tsunami reconstruction in Sri Lanka

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It was 9.30 am on December 26, 2004, when Mary Theresa Rajeswaran heard what she thought was an approaching military vehicle. Cooking in her kitchen, Mary became concerned only when shouts and screams followed the roaring noise outside. Taking her daughter Nanthani by the hand, they went out to see what was causing the commotion.

Outside, a crowd ran towards a hastily receding ocean. Moments later, Mary saw a fifteen-foot wave thundering towards her. Protected from the initial impact by a building in front of her house, Mary grabbed Nanthani and ran inland. Finding herself at a dead-end, Mary turned to escape but the first wave had already caught up with her, throwing her and two-year-old Nanthani onto a barbed wire fencing. Grabbing at the spikes with one hand and holding her daughter with the other, Mary was half-conscious, realizing only that the wave was quickly retreating.

Injured and tired, Mary took Nanthani to safety and began looking for her six-year-old son. However, as she started to walk over to the place where she had last seen him, the second wave threw her back onto the barbed wire fencing. "I felt not a single sensation in my body," she says. "I felt nothing but the pain of having lost my son." Dragged by the current for nearly an hour, Mary recalls the ashy hue and warmth of the enveloping sea. Above her she describes the sky as "dark and brooding", with rain persistently hurtling down.

Found by her family sometime later, Mary refused to go to the hospital for treatment. "My son's safety was the most important thing for me. I couldn't leave without knowing he was safe," she

explains. It was not until later that same afternoon that Mary's son returned home, having taken sanctuary in his school throughout the tsunami. A relieved Mary was then taken to Point Pedro Hospital. With heavy bruising, twisted limbs and cuts, Mary required seven stitches.

"My husband is not working at present as his boat is broken," Mary declares. "Since the tsunami, we have all been too scared to return to living by the sea. We are now 750 meters inland, safe from any future tsunamis." The dilemma for Mary's family and many others like them is whether or not they should return to the ocean on which their livelihoods have depended for generations or stay away from the shore, safe but without access to a reliable income and the place they used to call home.

Champa is a community assistant attached to a community based organization in Hikkaduwa. The organization had planned a big celebration on the 26<sup>th</sup> December to award scholarships to children from different districts in the South. She reached the office early to make the necessary arrangements. While she was working she heard the noise of the people and came out to see. The water surprised her and she hung on to the parapet wall. Before long the wall collapsed. Fortunately for her it fell on to the opposite side. She held on to a bush and it started floating. She then held on to a log that she found and remained there till the water receded. Before the second wave came she managed to run to the temple premises and take shelter there with all the other villagers. She did not know where her mother was for two days. Her grandmother and her pregnant sister-in-law were taken away by the waves. No trace of her house could be found except for a few floor tiles that remained. They lost everything and had to start from scratch.

For these and for the large majority of people, the tsunami was a hitherto unknown natural phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The absence of any public knowledge of its natural warnings has caused heavy human casualties. Although most of the coastline of Sri Lanka has been affected by the tsunami, its impacts vary considerably. The North East coastline has borne the brunt, with the affected areas reaching 2-3 km inland. In the Southern and Western coastlines, except in extremely

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small pockets, the tsunami has affected a much narrower strip, with the affected areas limited to approximately 500 meters or less and at elevations below about 2.5 to 3 meters.

Acknowledged as the largest and most devastating natural catastrophe in the history of the nation, it affected nearly 8 percent of the population killing approximately 40,000 and injuring 23,176 persons. The fact that the ravaged areas include some of the most urbanized and densely populated parts of the country has significantly increased the death and suffering, as well as destruction and damage to property. The property damage on the North East coastline is very significant, with virtually no area being spared.

Housing is by far the largest economic asset lost to the nation. It also represents the most valuable family asset lost by the 232,000 families affected by it. Nearly 78,000 houses have been destroyed and a further 41,600 partially destroyed, displacing 975,000 persons. In the North East of Sri Lanka where the destruction is observed to be most severe, it has displaced nearly 300,000 people adding over 40 percent to the nearly 700,000 persons already displaced by a protracted civil war.

Similarly, valuable social and economic infrastructure along the coast, including many health-related facilities, urban facilities and infrastructure such as markets and public transport terminals, and the national and provincial roads networks have suffered heavily. Water supply and sanitation has suffered disruptions from the distribution networks, with nearly 50,000 wells being abandoned and 12,000 made unusable due to salt-water intrusion. Since the area affected was not served with pipe-borne sewerage, large number of toilets and drainage networks were made unusable after being filled with mud, water and other debris.

The damage caused to livelihoods is also substantial with fishing activity being the worst hit. About 90,000 fishermen's families have been displaced with fishermen recording one of the highest numbers of persons who lost their lives. Tourism comes second in terms of loss of livelihoods and the contribution to national income resulting from the damage, since tourism generates around 100,000 direct and indirect occupations. A tourist visiting Sri Lanka spends around 40 percent of his

nights on the coast, thus, the loss of employment opportunities to those dependent on tourism on the coast was significant. Over 3,500 hectares of agricultural land, including paddy fields, vegetable and fruit crops, have also been made untillable due to induced high levels of soil salinity and are likely to remain so for several years until seasonal rains naturally reduce salinity. Livestock losses have also been reported. Damage to manufacture was insignificant since very few industrial facilities were located in the affected areas. However, a large number of home-based production and income-generating activities were destroyed. The social impact of this loss may be heavy, since many of these enterprises were owned and managed by women and significantly contributed to the increased of family incomes.

Women were more affected by the Tsunami than men. They were in the vicinity when the wave came and their clothing prevented them from running to safety. Eighty percent of the dead were children and women. Survivors were moved to camps and makeshift homes. The living conditions of women in welfare camps were not very safe due to crowded conditions. They were exposed to sexual violence and rape occurrences were confirmed in the camps.

The reconstruction process began right after the giant wave receded. People from different parts of the country collected food, clothing, and other basic items and distributed them to the stricken families. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the global media focus on the human suffering was unprecedented. There was a warm outpour of solidarity, both national and international, to help the affected. Pledges of support came from countries around the world.

Housing was by far the most valuable family asset lost by the affected families. For most of them it is also the asset they most expect to recover with the least possible delay. The majority of the lost houses were in traditionally settled land where people owned their houses and lived in neighborhoods with deep cultural roots. People longed to return to their lands and escape the dehumanizing conditions of the camps and welfare centers. This situation provided an opportunity for the authorities to promote a hous-

ing project. However, the lack of experience and vision as well as the failure to consult the affected people and the bureaucratic procedures resulted in a rebuilding process with heavy social costs and wastage of funds. A great opportunity for community participation and rebuilding was lost. Many countries participated in the construction of houses through INGOs and NGOs. Depending on the generosity of the donor the houses were either simple homes or luxury homes. Some communities were fortunate to receive better homes than the lost ones. The government paid a compensation for every lost house and this enabled some people to build their houses as they wanted.

Without reforms to ensure popular participation in the reconstruction process, there is widespread resistance to "reconstruction from above". Affected communities have already begun to protest against official and bureaucratic ineffectiveness in the provision of relief. Post-tsunami reconstruction is not just about constructing buildings, roads and economic infrastructure. It involves rebuilding communities, community lives and the livelihoods of nearly a million people who suddenly found themselves destitute. The authorities have failed to mobilize the active participation of the affected families. Therefore, in most areas, tsunami reconstruction has become a mere rebuilding of infrastructures and buildings and people remain distant observers of a future that is being built for them. The process has been thoroughly undemocratic.

The fishing community was one of the sectors worst affected by the tsunami. Although the government has promised to restore lost livelihoods for fisher folk, the lack of capacity within the state bureaucracy to cope with these claims has resulted in serious compensation delays. Humanitarian aid organizations have stepped in to try to plug this gap. However, due to the enormous amounts of funds mobilized by the local and international NGO community, this has become an extremely competitive environment. Aid organizations compete among themselves for a space in which to help by offering a diverse array of livelihood assets such as different types of boats and fishing nets etc. In the short term such practices are useful because the fisher folk can immediately restart their

trade. In the long term, however, providing such a variety of assets without community consultation and participation will have serious implications on the community's relationship structure and the sustainability of their livelihood. It is the fishing community that knows the market and the environment capacity such as the available fish stock in their area. Such *ad hoc* action by the aid organizations may be disastrous for the community as these measures could create inter-communal tensions and undermine livelihoods.

Humanitarian agencies have started loan schemes, business advice and training in job skills, to help develop new businesses and sources of income. The money for work programs generates family income.

With the heavy rains and floods, the salinity decreased in the farm lands and the farmers were given assistance to resume their farming activities.

The women in affected areas have shown remarkable resilience and they have made use of the opportunities provided to build up their small industries, small scale income-generating projects. The Women's Bank (WB), a national network of women's grassroots savings groups, has been undergoing a huge expansion of its women-run savings and credit groups in tsunami-hit areas over the past few years. WB is now operating in nine tsunami-hit districts, mostly along Sri Lanka's southern and eastern coasts. In these districts, the Women's Bank has expanded already-established savings groups and started new ones, to provide a people-controlled mechanism to extend badly-needed credit to tsunami survivors to meet all their immediate needs.

The main focus of this fast loan expansion in tsunami-hit areas has been to help people restart earning. But in addition to loans for income-generating activities, WB is also giving loans to purchase alternative land, build new houses or repair damaged ones, dig wells, lay water pipes, build toilets, pay school fees, cover health costs, and repay high-interest informal debts. Many of these new areas are fishing villages, so loans are also being extended to buy, build or repair boats, and to purchase fishing equipment. "A positive thing I see is that after the Tsunami we could bring many different groups together, which lead them to learn

from each other. Because of the WB's involvement in the tsunami recovery, we created a network and we are actually learning from the Women's Bank how community supports should be sustainable at the community level", says one of the women involved in spreading the Bank's activities.

The recovery from the Tsunami opened a window of opportunity for women to strengthen their decision-making roles within the community as well as their entrepreneurial capacities.

In Matara, a collaborative effort between a local women's group, a private bank and local governmental officials helped revive the local lace weaving industry.

In Trincomalee, a group made of collectivities of women formed a strong one-thousand-member network as a follow on to their mutual collaboration on the tsunami recovery initiatives, as well as INGOs, NGOs and government officials.

The tsunami reconstruction histories show how the tsunami recovery provided an opportunity to pay closer attention to environment protection. For example: in Batticaloa and Kalmunai, where the tsunami completely destroyed the natural vegetation in some places, community leaders collaborated with development agencies and the Forest Department, the College of Agricultural Sciences of Eastern University, the Urban Development Authority, and the Urban Council to develop "green belts" by replanting pine nut and coconut trees to mitigate erosion and boost the local economy.

In the end, the tsunami survivors can be either victims or agents of change. These successful stories that reflect a "can-do" spirit, inspire those who have suffered the devastation of the tsunami — and others — to uplift their lives and their communities.

The need to address the "trauma" of adults and children who lived terrifying experiences and tremendous personal loss was raised by international reporters who interviewed local mental health workers in the tsunami's immediate aftermath.

Opinions diverged as to the most appropriate psychosocial interventions. Local NGOs (mainly those with little prior involvement in psychosocial programs) and thoughtful groups from other areas of Sri Lanka were keen to provide counselling for

tsunami survivors. Aside from the few counsellors already working locally, these services were provided by volunteers trained for a few days only, or by teams from elsewhere on the island. There was a widely held assumption that speaking about their experiences and feelings with "counsellors" (even those with very limited training) would be emotionally beneficial for people who had faced the loss of families, houses and livelihoods and who found themselves in temporary camps.

This view resulted in small teams of "counsellors" being deployed to camps within two weeks of the disaster to speak with displaced persons. Given the unstable camp conditions (fluid populations, poor management and delivery of relief supplies, threats of closure and overcrowding) such 'counsellors' often reported that their work sessions were usually with large chaotic groups anxious to tell their stories. The sessions also presented few opportunities for in-depth support to individuals or for follow-up. These experiences often left the 'counsellors' feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.

Another approach was advocated by those organizations and individuals who had implemented psychosocial interventions within the context of the armed conflict that existed for many years before the tsunami. This perspective prioritised addressing the social and material needs of affected persons as the primary form of support provision in the acute phase following the disaster. Attempts to 'counsel' survivors were actively discouraged as an initial intervention, although supportive listening and 'befriending' of survivors were encouraged if they initiated conversations about their experiences or difficulties. This view was informed by prior experiences of service provision as well as by recognized national and international guidelines.

As the psychosocial sector of the humanitarian response expanded, donors pressed agencies to scale up their interventions and new players entered the field. Conflicts and disagreements emerged as various implementing organizations began to trip over each other in their desire to work with specific populations. Trainers and support workers making flying visits from Colombo or

abroad lacked adequate information about local conditions, capacities or requirements.

The variety of theoretical and practical approaches to psychosocial work both globally and in Sri Lanka presents a challenge for the development of an integrated psychosocial sector. The accommodation of diverse perspectives and methodologies within a single framework is difficult. At present efforts are being made to avoid emphasising a dichotomy between community development and mental health approaches to service provision.

Examples of psychosocial interventions available at present include the eliciting the narratives about the experience by volunteers, counselling sessions for individual clients, psychiatric interventions for the mentally ill, formation of tea groups for the elderly, discussions on tsunami fears, practical information provision and home visits to families of the missing. Children separated from their families are placed in temporary foster-care arrangements with kinsfolk of their choice and there are regular play activities for children in camps and efforts to ensure consultation of women and children as to the placement of water and sanitation facilities in order to alleviate the risks and fears of sexual harassment or violence.

A great deal of training has also been offered to teachers, health workers, community-based workers and volunteers, although very little of this has been systematic or sustained. Both the support services and training initiatives vary considerably in quality and effectiveness. The offer of appropriate and quality services in the psychosocial sector to tsunami-affected people is gradually being guided by an awareness of the need of agencies to plan and coordinate with one another in the interests of providing consistent and coherent interventions to those who may need support. Initiatives that have taken a long-term (and patient) approach to intervention are already reaping benefits in terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of their services.

The tsunami in Sri Lanka must not be seen as a mere natural disaster. Relief and reconstruction must necessarily consider the ethnic conflict that is causing havoc in Sri Lanka. All communities – Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese – were affected by

the tsunami, and in the reconstruction process, the participation of all these communities should be sought. Tsunami provided a golden opportunity to promote inter-communal harmony, but petty political party interests, and stubbornness on the part of some sectors of society prevented the opportunity from being used. Humanitarian aid agencies have organized cross community involvement to improve dialogue and understanding between Sinhalese and Tamils, to help mitigate political violence, and to improve relationships between citizens and local authorities. The international community is very much conscious of LTTE's<sup>1</sup> role in the reconstruction process, but the efforts made by donor countries do not seem to have reached the desired goal of promoting peace within the country. These words of Nilanthi, a woman who has shown great resilience and courage, summarizes for us the journey towards reconstruction: "The main lesson we have learned through the tsunami is that people should never be prevented from being the owners of their own lives. They should decide what they need and what they should do, even when they are in a very bad shape, after a crisis."

<sup>1</sup> Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.