

RESCUE AND RELIEF MEASURES TAKEN BY NGO'S IN TAMIL NADU AFTER TSUNAMI

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INTRODUCTION

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami had a significant impact on the Tamil Nadu coast in India. The tsunami that initiated in the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 and caused giant waves travelling at about 500 km/hour to hit the coastline of 15 countries¹ along the ocean, caused untold widespread devastation. In India over 16,000 people lost their lives, about half of whom were in Tamil Nadu. The Government of India has stated its interest in IFAD's involvement in the long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction of the livelihoods of the coastal communities of the tsunami affected areas. They wanted to provide immediate relief and long term rehabilitation; to convert the traumatic challenge into an opportunity and create-environment friendly and safe habitations. Tsunami severely affected in kanyakumari, Nagapattinam and Kancheepuram in Tamil Nadu.

The affected area in Tamil Nadu was divided into 11 zones, and 11 bureaucrats were chosen to head the relief effort in each of these zones. The bureaucrats chosen were ones who had a good record for delivering results and had experience in working with the state government's Department of Fisheries. Each of these zonal chiefs was supported by one officer from each of the concerned government departments such as public works, health and sanitation, and fire also; one minister of the state government was assigned to each of these 11 zones, to provide support at the political level. Each zonal chief met with the zonal minister every day for the first few days; later, the chiefs' representatives met with the zonal minister while the chiefs attended to the issues in the field. The second officer on special duty subdivided the large coordination groups according to key items such as food and shelter. One coordinator was identified for each village.

An interesting highlight of the relief work was the formation of an NGO coordination centre on 31 December 2004. It was formed because some affected areas were receiving more attention than others, and people from the less-affected areas protested. The Tamil Nadu government, however, did not have the wherewithal to handle this and needed help. So the state government sought help from the heads of three prominent NGOs that were experienced in disaster work, asking them to set up an NGO coordination centre on the premises of the collector's office in Nagapattinam. These prominent NGOs—the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies SIFFS from Trivandrum, The large number of volunteers working in these NGOs significantly helped in assessing needs, coordinating the solicitation of relief material including specific items and distributing the material. The other NGOs that participated in this centre included well-established national and international NGOs, youth groups, and religious groups.

Later, the NGO coordination centre became a part of the mainstream relief work, because of the large quantity and type of relief material to be handled and the large number of NGOs participating in the relief work

to be coordinated. A large quantity of earth-moving equipment was sent to Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari to remove obstacles and extricate dead bodies, and a helicopter was used to lift the dead bodies from Chinnavaikkal Island on the Cuddalore coast. Identification and disposal of dead bodies was given top priority. Almost 95% of the dead bodies were retrieved and disposed of either by cremation or burial. The number of deaths was well enumerated in the well-knit fishing community. However, in public places like the Velankanni Church, Nagapattinam Harbor, and Mandakadu pilgrim centre, there were problems because visitors from across the country had been at these locations and were among the dead. The 11 zonal chiefs had magisterial powers and declared the missing persons dead after seven days, although this was not placed on record. Thus the number of missing persons was very small in Tamil Nadu.

The affected western coast of India in Kolachal in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu and Allapad in the Kollam district of Kerala has a peculiarity there are shallow transportation canals between the coastal land area where fishermen live and the mainland inward from the coast. When the tsunami wave came in, women and children fled from the coast, but since the tsunami filled the entire land with water, it was not clear which part was tradable land and which was the canal. Kolachal and Allapad sustained high casualties because of this topography. After the wave receded, a number of bodies of women and children were recovered from these shallow canals. The area adjoining Nagapattinam has relatively flat topography. It is also the mouth of the Cauvery River, implying that there a number of waterways that discharge the river's water into the Bay of Bengal. There is thus little high ground in the area for people to escape to. This topography is also considered the prime cause of the huge loss of life in the Nagapattinam area.

The chief minister of Tamil Nadu announced a compensation of Rs. 100,000 to the family of every deceased person. The government also announced a relief package including items of general utility, temporary shelter, and permanent housing for affected families who lost their houses. The government distributed free notebooks, textbooks, and two sets of uniforms to children studying in government and government aided schools. The government also announced the opening of orphanages for children who had lost their parents. Adoptions were allowed, but under strict supervision. The relief package was announced and distributed rapidly by the government. The relief material was maintained in makeshift storage spaces in the affected districts, to coordinate with the NGOs in facilitating the redistribution of relief material, and the task of receipt and distribution was handled by the government teams. Some instances of pilferage from the storage areas were reported. In view of this difficulty, some donor organizations successfully distributed food supplies without storing them. When the distribution scaled up as the needs increased, the government invited NGOs to help in the management of the storage areas; the NGOs took over, maintained the storage spaces, and developed an inventory management system. Still, the relief was distributed by government teams. Volunteers from the NGOs involved in distribution came back with valuable information about the relief needs in the field.

Sometimes, material did not reach the intended location because the back-end system was not available to guide the relief material to the destination. This also caused frustration for the volunteers involved. The government could have attempted the distribution of relief by NGO teams, with a government representative on each team. An important point that emerged regarding relief was the fact that old clothes were typically not

acceptable, particularly because the affected were mostly fishermen, a reasonably well-to-do community. There were problems in disposing of the old clothes that had been received from across the country. The government gave away the material to groups of people who make quilts for a living.

The disaster caused by the tsunami along the coastline of Tamil Nadu was varied. The public perception of the disaster was based primarily on the images shown on TV. TV played an important role in communicating the level of disaster not only to the public, but also to the government. It was mentioned that the uplinking facility was better at Nagapattinam than at Kanyakumari, which may have led to more focus on Nagapattinam initially. Also, SIFFS coordinated and developed an NGO database system. A number of civil societies made donations in cash and in kind, and they put in volunteer time. The NGO coordination centre at Nagapattinam played the role of a buffer between the government and the civil societies.

In Kanyakumari district, Christians are in the majority. In the early days, the government response was weak, but the church communities played a critical role. The parish took control, and the immediate relief was offered by the local Christian community—they started camps, operated kitchens, and coordinated relief material. Kanyakumari is a relatively well-developed district, with a good number of marriage halls and churches that could house people as well as provide sanitation facilities for them. Initially, about 90 camps were started, but this total was later reduced to 60 camps—about 45 run by the diocese and 15 by SIFFS. The church community in Kanyakumari district had a good amount of infrastructure that was essential in managing camps. For example, the members of this community had megaphones for announcements during their usual church activities. These came in handy for organizing large groups of tsunami-affected people.

In the Kanyakumari district, many former fishermen, who now lived in cities, helped by providing immediate support to the fishing community, which was the most affected. Elsewhere, such a strong relation did not exist between the people inland and the fishermen. Two weeks after the tsunami, a new district collector was posted at Kanyakumari, and, as the government response improved, the churches withdrew from relief work. No major outbreak of any epidemic was reported from any of the affected areas. There were bottlenecks, though. First, the paramedic support was very weak. In the town of Velankanni, there were a couple of suicides by men, who were away fishing at the time of the tsunami and realized upon their return that they had lost their families. Trauma patients were handled by the paramedics, who did not have enough experience in treating mental conditions. As a consequence, the patients also did not take seriously the medical help that was administered. Second, prescription medicine was being dumped at camp sites. Furthermore, in the early aftermath, a number of quack doctors were giving intravenous injections. A separate coordination cell at the district collector's office in Nagapattinam was set up for coordinating medicine. Third, the lack of adequate exposure to the Kanyakumari district also meant less medical help for the region. In this district, a large number of the affected people sustained spinal cord injuries.

The government sends a donor to a village to attend to the needs of that village. The donor in turn is free to bring its own facilitators and technical support. This model is driven by the fact that governments are more comfortable in dealing with the corporate world. The latter is arguably the better model, as was convincingly

demonstrated by the smooth functioning of the NGO coordination centre. That centre has successfully demonstrated the concept and structure of a resource centre. Disaster mitigation efforts involve a number of specialties, and NGOs with backgrounds in these specialties are required to successfully complete the post disaster management effort. SIFFS specializes in matters pertaining to fishermen; hence, for the tsunami disaster, it was appropriate to have SIFFS as one of the NGOs offering coordination and thereby leadership to the resource centre. In general, the government attended meetings organized by the NGO coordination.

During times when there is no emergency, the centre could prepare checklists of critical items and issues to be addressed in the aftermath of different disasters, and it could develop linkages and coordination with the civil societies. It consisted of an NGO setup that was a slow negotiator of change between the people and the government. That system was effective and ideally suited for slow negotiations. But after the 2004 tsunami, a two-way link mechanism was required for undertaking relief work on a fast track and for doing so at the regional level, because the time available for response was shorter and there were many players—government officers, affected people, donors, NGOs, civil societies, and the corporate sector. Hence, the NGO coordination centre was put in place. It acted as a guard-cum-volunteer, scouting for shortfalls in meeting the needs of the affected people and matching their needs with the wishes of donors.

The affected coast of India has two fishing communities: the Pattinavars along the Bay of Bengal and the Mukkuvas along the Kanyakumari area, and fishing is the only livelihood of these communities. Thus they cannot easily abandon fishing. This is in contrast to the Indonesian fishermen, who have a parallel profession in agriculture. The loss of family and property caused trauma to the fishermen, and they did not resume fishing. Their livelihood was severely affected. The immediate need for food was fulfilled by the government's relief package. But the loss of the fishing equipment was a bottleneck. In cases where the equipment was in order, the families were concerned about other issues, and this prevented the fishermen from going back to the high seas. In general, the number of damaged boats was smaller than the number of damaged nets. This was because typically a fishing net needs to remain wet in the water, but after the tsunami the nets were washed ashore and remained dry for days. The government of Tamil Nadu gave livelihood restoration compensation to the fishermen. They initially announced compensation package, totalling Rs.20 crores million. However, the compensation was later enhanced and eventually totalled over Rs. 450 crores million. But there was one problem. The government had stopped the registration of fishermen about five years earlier, and of course there had been an increase in the number of fishermen since then. Thus the official list of people who were to receive compensation was not acceptable. Furthermore, in Tamil Nadu there is a shortage of people who can repair boats. Some of the needed repair people came from Kerala to help, because there was less repair work for them to do in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

The Kancheepuram district, which is north of the most-affected area along the eastern coast, was moderately affected by the tsunami. Fishermen from this district were concerned about a number of issues: The fishermen would like to keep a shorefront house, even if the government gives them land on high ground, because they need such a house for cleaning and preparing the fish and storing and clearing the net. They want the shorefront house to remain their personal property and not become public property, because women need a

personal room/house to rest in the afternoon on the shorefront. In addition, they believe that the net alone will occupy the whole house. The government decided to give one new boat to every group of three fishermen, but the fishermen must be registered. However, the registration of fishermen was discontinued about five years before the earthquake. The contradictory conditions of not registering new fishermen and paying compensation only to the older, registered ones seems to have caused discord. The government completed the assessment of fully damaged and partially damaged boats and provided uniform compensation across the whole affected area. Also, NGOs with a good track record and integrity were expected to come in, assess the actual situation, and provide information to the government about any inconsistencies. But it was found that the amount of compensation paid to the fishermen was less than the amount that was said to have been paid to them.

CONCLUSION

The Tsunami affected areas slowly recover by the repair work of NGO's and Government. The government of Tamil Nadu gave livelihood restoration compensation to the fishermen. Many people lost their lives in Tamil Nadu coastal areas. The NGO's and government of Tamil Nadu rapidly provided relief to the affected people. While many saw this as a political move, the promptness of the government machinery on many fronts was rather exceptional. Thus Public Works Department cleared the rubble within five days of the event, even in difficult areas such as Nagapattinam and Kolachel, Melmannakudi. The government and other agencies are providing support to re-build damaged houses, repair or replace fishing boats, reclaim salt-affected land and repair damaged infrastructure. Government wanted to take necessary action to a permanent relief for the affected areas.

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