

Building Capacities, Restoring Livelihoods

Empowering communities through disaster response

Reconstruction of Livelihood Project
September 2005 to October 2007

A Report

DATA, Madurai, 2007

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SHARING A LEARNING

It was an unknown phenomenon! In Tamil Nadu, and in India, the word tsunami was introduced in the media only after the devastating tidal wave struck on December 26, 2004 affecting many coastal villages and causing damage to lives and livelihoods of thousands of families.

In the midst of the shock and suffering, people responded in all possible and known ways. Help came from all quarters: individuals, volunteers, communities, NGOs, donor agencies, government agencies, hospitals, and doctors. Palmyrah Workers Development Society (PWDS) also responded by meeting some emergency needs of the affected people in Kanyakumari district along with other organisations and government agencies.

Soon the affected areas were flooded with NGOs, donor agencies, press people, photographers, documentary teams, and other professionals who wanted to help and study the disaster and its effects. Donor agencies with funds started looking for NGOs. There were display boards, of more than one NGO in almost all affected areas, informing or claiming that they work in those areas. Many international agencies opened their offices and many started working directly by appointing staff, mostly drawn from NGOs and other agencies, offering high salaries. The salary structure went up for these urgently recruited staff making it difficult for ongoing development NGOs to retain their staff or recruit new staff. Many NGOs from far away places started putting up their project offices. At this time, seeing too many players with varied activities, PWDS withdrew from all areas where it was involved.

After a few months, in April/May 2005, PWDS staff identified some non-fishing coastal communities affected by the tsunami, where PWDS works. These communities were not included in the ongoing rebuilding process. The issue was shared in the NEERA (Network for Education and Empowerment of Rural Artisans) committee and it was apparent that there are also some villages left out in Thoothukudi district where SEDCO, one of the NEERA partners, works. It was at this time, PWDS-NEERA decided to work with these affected families, who form part of the NEERA constituency.

NEERA then approached EED, the funding partner of NEERA, who willingly supported the proposal to rebuild the livelihood of these families affected by the tsunami and excluded from the ongoing rehabilitation process. This is how the Reconstruction of Livelihood (RL) project emerged in September 2005, which was completed by October 2007.

Here we share the story and the learnings.

RL, with its participatory process and visible impacts, also helped NEERA to demonstrate and learn that disaster responses, based on a development perspective could be an effective community empowerment process.

I appreciate and thank the members of the community for willingly sharing their stories, RL staff team of PWDS, SEDCO, and DATA- the coordination centre. The affected community fully participated in the process, in fact owned the intervention.

We thank EED for giving us this opportunity to work; and Nandini Murali who documented this response by capturing the process, impacts, and key learnings.

November, 2007
Madurai

Reji Chandra
Director, PWDS

DISRUPTED LIVES, DESTROYED LIVELIHOODS. *While this was a reality for fishing communities after the tsunami in 2004, the plight of non fishing communities who are nevertheless dependent on coastal resources was no better. These communities are involved in non fishing activities such as sea shell trade (as collectors and artisans), coir industry, and lime processing in the Kanyakumari Thoothukudi coastal belt.*

When the Tsunami struck, Prabha, like all others in her village in Alanthurai, in Thoothukudi district, was paralysed with fear and panic. Today, however, thanks to Disaster Preparedness Training at SEDCO, a NEERA partner, Prabha knows how to respond appropriately when natural disaster strikes. “We know what to do and what to take—ration card, ID card, certificates, and house patta which we keep within reach,” she says. An advance warning of two hours would also enable her to take some of her clothes, those of her family members, and a few belongings. “The training has given us courage (mana dhairiyam) and self confidence to face such situations,” says Prabha. Besides the community is equipped to respond to future natural disasters through the formation of Disaster Volunteer teams, paeridar thondar padai, who create awareness in the community through setting up information boards, training in first aid, and safety measures to be adopted.

Like several people traditionally involved in sea shell collection, sea shell collectors operated individually. They found it difficult to sell the shells for a reasonable price and were often exploited by intermediaries in the trade and delayed payments were the norm. The tsunami, however, brought even their precarious livelihoods to a standstill because of depletion of marine resources.

Today, however, sea shell collectors Indran and Tilakavathi are members of SHGs (Self-help Groups). Forming an SHG benefits the members

in several ways. As unwashed sea shells are cheaper, one of the SHG members offered to buy the sea shells, clean them and supply it to the members at a rate cheaper than the market price. The women attended value-added trainings in making ornamental sea shell artifacts. The SHG members identified traders, and market their products at the common facility centre in the village. Besides they maintain accounts of the business transactions, thanks to the training in accounts.

Such impacts are the result of a planned intervention—Reconstruction of Livelihood (RL) Project — initiated by PWDS NEERA to address the loss of livelihoods and rebuild the lives of non fishing communities that were bypassed in the post Tsunami relief and rehabilitation efforts.

A participatory approach, capacity building of the community and linkages with mainstream has enabled the affected communities to rebuild their lives with dignity and respect. Akhila, 15, who has had the opportunity to resume schooling, is confident that she and the other children would continue to motivate children to complete schooling. “We will teach what we have been taught and reenroll our peers in school,” she says. Clearly, for Akhila, and the community, the ripples of their restored livelihoods and rebuilt lives will continue to extend beyond project frames and stipulations.

THE TSUNAMI AND AFTER

DECEMBER 26, 2004. A tsunami that measured 9.0 on the Richter scale devastated most land masses bordering the Indian Ocean. The natural disaster killed thousands of people, rendered many homeless and inundated coastal communities across South and South East Asia, parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India. According to estimates, the natural disaster claimed more than 222,000 lives and 40,000 people were reported missing. The images of death and destruction beamed through the electronic and the print media made it a lived experience even for those not directly affected by the tsunami.

In India, nearly 2,260 kilometres of the mainland coastline—Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Pondicherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were devastated. Ten metre high tidal waves inundated coastlines and penetrated 3 kms inland. Fisheries, housing and infrastructure, and private asset damages related to coastal fisheries were worst hit. Besides there were considerable losses in agriculture, coastal resource based non fishing livelihoods, and micro enterprise livelihoods.

RESPONSE OF THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The magnitude of the disaster and enormity of suffering prompted a new wave—of sympathy and humanitarian responses for the affected people. Despite the unprecedented nature of the disaster, the state and district level swung into action almost immediately. Simultaneously the civil society in India and abroad, also responded to the humanitarian crisis. Communities, private individuals, bilateral donor agencies, international, national, and local NGOs, and the corporate sector mobilised support to respond to the immediate needs of the affected in the relief phase of the process.

IMPACT OF TSUNAMI ON COASTAL LIVELIHOODS

The tsunami affected a range of coastal livelihoods along the Tamil Nadu coast. As fishery based livelihoods such as fishing, fish drying, fish vending, and boat making were the most affected, they were accorded priority in the rehabilitation process by both the state and civil society. It soon became apparent, however, that a number of people engaged in non fishing coastal resource based livelihoods such as sea shell artisans, coir makers, salt pan workers, people involved in inland, shoreline and estuary fishing, landless agriculture labourers, petty traders, service providers like barbers and cobblers found themselves excluded in the rehabilitation process. Besides the property centric relief and rehabilitation policy ensured that only people who owned tangible assets like boats and shops could access and avail livelihood rehabilitation packages.

RECONSTRUCTION OF LIVELIHOOD (RL)

PROJECT AND STAKEHOLDERS

NEERA (Network for Education and Empowerment of Rural Artisans), a network of 12 development organisations promoted in 1996, works in nine districts in South Tamil Nadu. PWDS (Palmyrah Workers Development Society), a development NGO based in Knayakumari district, was instrumental in the formation of NEERA to reach out to communities in other districts.

From the outset, PWDS chose not to get involved in relief and rehabilitation in places where it had no presence in the community. Among the 12 NEERA partners, AIRD (Ramanathapuram), CSR (Tiruchendur), SEDCO (Thoothukudi), and PWDS (Kanyakumari) work in coastal districts. Of these, two districts—Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi—which fall in the NEERA constituency were badly affected by the Tsunami. Kanyakumari with its 43 coastal villages is the second most affected district in Tamil Nadu. In Kanyakumari, most non fishing communities were concentrated in a stretch of villages between Kottipadu of Kallukulam and Manakudi of Agastheeswaram taluks where PWDS has had a significant presence since several years.

In Thoothukudi, people along the 145 km coastal belt and members of the working class in the interior were also affected. The Tsunami resulted in livelihood crises among several non fishing communities such as petty traders, fish vendors, sea shell collectors, and dry fish processing workers. Of these, nine villages are situated in SEDCO's operational area where 39 SHGs operate

In both districts, the Tsunami disrupted the lives and livelihoods of the people. Several of them experienced significant psychological distress in the aftermath of the natural disaster. In these districts, fishing communities were covered by the relief and rehabilitation package of the state and civil society. However, the equally affected non-fishing communities who are nevertheless dependant on coastal resources for their livelihoods were sidelined or ignored in the rehabilitation process.

Hence PWDS focused on rehabilitation with a sustainable perspective for the affected communities in these two areas where it had a long standing relationship with the community.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

PWDS carried out a series of assessments in Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi districts. The assessment revealed that there were several non fishing coastal resource dependant communities such as coir rope makers, salt pan workers, sea shell artisans, fish vendors, petty traders, sea shell collectors, dry fish processing workers, people engaged in informal trading activities on beaches, and those providing support services to the fishing community such as boat repairers/ craftsmen and weavers of fishing nets.

The loss of livelihoods forced people to borrow from moneylenders that resulted widespread indebtedness. Children were most affected in the aftermath of the tsunami, with several of them experiencing post traumatic distress. Many of them were forced to discontinue education due to the economic hardship. The needs assessment indicated that people needed integrated support services to rebuild their livelihoods and get on with their lives.

In Kanyakumari district, PWDS identified 1250 families with a population of 6,500 members affected by the Tsunami. Before the tsunami, there were four mechanised coir units and over 125 small coir and seashell production units along the 22 km stretch from Colachel to Manakudi. Although there was no loss of life, there was extensive damage due to loss of property and disruption of livelihoods. The families were involved in coir rope making and sea shell collection and following the Tsunami, the inundation of the coir soak pits and depletion of marine resources endangered their livelihoods.

With its prior experience of working in a disaster context, following the floods in 1992 in Kanyakumari district, PWDS viewed rehabilitation in a post disaster context through a long term integrated perspective with an intervention plan beyond mere emergency relief aid. Hence a participatory approach, capacity building of the community, development of community structures through community mobilisation, and linkages with mainstream were central to enable the affected communities to rebuild their lives with dignity and respect.

The RECONSTRUCTION OF LIVELIHOOD (RL) PROJECT, based on a series of planned interventions, is an outcome of the efforts of NEERA to address the livelihood issues of non fishing communities who live in the operational areas of NEERA partners PWDS and SEDCO. The programme, jointly evolved with the affected communities, was initiated in September 2005 and came to an end in October 2007.

COIR ROPE MAKERS: The predominantly rural based coir industry is a traditional cottage industry in Kanyakumari district where coconut is a major plantation crop. Most of the work force consists of women. They attend to their household chores and use the available time in spinning fibre, defibring, or making mats/ropes with coconut husk, the major raw material.

The husk is soaked in semi salt or fresh water soak pits for three months before it is meshed in machines as coconut fibre. Of the three grades of coconut fibre, the first quality is treated and used to make brushes, foot bed cushions, and other industrial products. The second quality is used to make coir. Following the tsunami, several people faced a livelihood crisis as soak pits were inundated with brackish water that made it non functional and several mechanised coir units were destroyed. Even six months later, they were not provided relief assistance.

SEA SHELL AND LIME ARTISANS: In Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi districts, sea shell collection is another traditional job. This seasonal activity is done by women, children, and men. The peak season is usually January March after which the collectors engage in agricultural labour. Sea shell collectors usually wade into the sea around 6 am every day and remain there until 10 am. Usually entire families are involved in the activity. They take oval or round cane woven draining baskets with which they drain sea shells that accumulate in pockets when waves crash against the sea shore. High tides usually ensure a rich harvest. The collectors sort the shells according to shape and size to assess its quality. The better quality shells are used to make sea shell artifacts and the rest is used for lime production. Following the Tsunami, sea shell collectors face a livelihood threat due to depletion of marine creatures and consequently a significant decrease in sea shell collection.

INITIATIVE FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF LIVELIHOOD

The Reconstruction of Livelihood programme was implemented in Kanyakumari where PWDS operates and Thoothukudi district where SEDCO operates. In Kanyakumari the project was implemented in Rajakkamangalam and Agastheeswaram blocks which included 830 families involved in coir rope making and 420 families engaged in seashell and lime production. In Thoothukudi district, the project was implemented in Thiruchendur and Alwartirunagari blocks that covered nine coastal and interior villages.

The project aimed to ensure sustainable development of the affected communities by restoring their livelihoods and rebuilding their lives through:

- Improving their livelihood opportunities and enhancing their regular income
- Building community capacities to mitigate and cope with natural disasters
- Creating support structures for education of the affected children
- Improving health seeking behaviours and addressing the occupational hazards of the affected communities
- Ensuring social security for the affected families



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Palmyrah Workers Development Society (PWDS), founded in 1977, offers development services to sustain community initiatives. PWDS promotes and works with community based organisations aiming at 'self management and sustainability.' Its interventions aim at empowering the community by building people's organisations; equipping through awareness generation and skill training; and linking with mainstream for sustenance. The main approach MEALS, includes the following steps: Motivate, Equip, Accompany, Link, and Sustain..

In over three decades of development efforts, reaching out to thousands of villages and impacting on many communities with wider spheres of activities, PWDS has been instrumental and inspirational in initiating many innovative interventions as expressions of its social commitment.

Currently PWDS implements six field level community development projects and coordinates four network programmes in Tamil Nadu covering 29 districts with 54 partner NGOs. PWDS has promoted around 12 support service organisations in partnership with government agencies, mainstream institutions, and other NGOs to create sustained and formal access to resources and services for marginalised communities.

PWDS works with palmyrah workers, rural artisans, dalits, adivasis, rural women, children, and people living with HIV/AIDS.



SEDCO
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SEDCO (Scientific Educational Development for Community Organisation), was promoted by a group of socially committed people in 1986. SEDCO works towards a vision for a world in which the marginalised poor, especially women, participate freely in the development process for equality and justice. SEDCO believed in community mobilisation and sensitisation process with a rights based approach and worked with the marginalised communities in the district.

SEDCO believed that education is the only means to equip people for socioeconomic development and hence started non formal education, supplementary education for school children, pre schools, and condensed courses for women who could not complete SSLC. In response to people's felt needs, SEDCO initiated community health development activities. Currently SEDCO promotes and works with CBOs and focuses on issues related to water, income generation, PRI, Health and HIV/AIDS. SEDCO joined the NEERA network in 1996 to improve the socio economic conditions of the palmyrah tappers and other rural artisans in Thoothukudi district.



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EED, (Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst), formerly EZE, the funding partner of the RL project, is an organisation of the Protestant Churches in Germany.

By means of financial contributions, personnel involvement, scholarships, and consultancy services, EED supports development efforts all over the world. In this worldwide partnership, EED participates in establishing a fair society. It takes and promotes action to enhance people's willingness to stand up to overcome need, poverty, persecution, and violence. EED mobilises funds for development action from German churches, the German government, and other European Union sources.



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NEERA (Network for Education and Empowerment of Rural Artisans), a network of 12 development organisations initiated by PWDS, works in South Tamil Nadu, from 1996.

NEERA functions with a jointly developed common programme plan and also with components developed based on the individual strength of the partners and local needs of the community and the area concerned. NEERA aims to promote community organisations, equip the community with awareness generation and capability building, and enable the community to create access to resources by linking with the mainstream and influence policies.

NEERA is coordinated by a Programme Committee consisting of representatives from each partner organisation. The programme committee meets once in three months with a moderator elected from the partners for a specific period of three years.

NEERA completed ten years and an impact study was done and published during the decennium function on November 2006.

PROGRAMME INTERVENTIONS

The RL project is a community based disaster preparedness approach that maximises people's participation in disaster management and programme implementation. The participatory approach builds the capacity of the community, creates linkages with mainstream services, convergence of different stakeholders, and thereby creates structures towards sustainability beyond project frames and stipulations. The role of significant actors is to support and complement the community. The NGO performs a facilitative role that bridges the community and the various stakeholders.

The five major programme interventions include:

- Community Mobilisation and Capacity Building
- Rebuilding Livelihood Activities
- Psycho Social Support
- Health Care Services
- Educational Support for Affected Children

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING Community based disaster preparedness approaches are an important element in reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and in evolving sustainable disaster management strategies. Therefore to increase social and psychological resilience to natural disasters, the RL staff team created awareness among the community about natural disasters and enabled the community to evolve preventive and proactive strategies to mitigate or cope with possible natural disasters.

Community members in each block volunteered to form themselves into Disaster Volunteers Team (Paeridar Thondar Padai) who create awareness in the community through setting up information boards, training in first aid, and safety measures to be adopted. More importantly, the task force collaborates with government agencies to maximise effective disaster mitigation strategies.

REBUILDING LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

A preliminary survey by PWDS indicated that 2750 non fishing coastal resource dependant families in Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi districts were sidelined in the relief and rehabilitation efforts and faced a livelihood crisis. Hence the project staff team organised 11 convergence meetings between the affected people and the authorities concerned to highlight their needs as part of lobbying and advocacy efforts to enroll the families in the tsunami affected category.

Members of the affected communities successfully negotiated with formal agencies to access resources and schemes. They handed written memorandums

to the government that reinstated their right to access government welfare schemes. Such meetings also enabled the affected communities to access several government welfare scheme. Besides the print media effectively highlighted the issues discussed in the convergence meetings. It resulted in public sympathy and bureaucratic support for the marginalised communities.

As a result 1263 families in Kanyakumari and 1427 families in Thoothukudi were enrolled in the Tsunami affected category by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). Besides 47 members of the affected communities were encouraged to enroll themselves as rural artisans and received identity cards issued by the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India.

As a next step, several initiatives undertaken with people's participation underscored a move towards restoring the disrupted livelihoods of the affected people. In Kanyakumari district, as part of assistance to repair damaged infrastructure and equipment, 1034 soak pits of coir artisans were renovated that restored the livelihoods of 156 families. Additional activities to revitalise livelihoods included skill and skill up gradation training programmes for coir based articles, supply of motorised ratts to rural women coir artisans, training in making seashell articles, establishment of model upgraded choolas (brick kilns) for processing lime from sea shells, establishment of value added fish pickles unit, and establishment of common facility centre for marketing artisan products.

PSYCHO SOCIAL SUPPORT

In response to the widespread psychological distress experienced by tsunami survivors, the RL project initiated a comprehensive package of mental health interventions that provided psychological first aid to the affected people. These included:

- Establishing counselling sub centers
- Creating a cadre of trained counsellors at the grassroots level (barefoot counsellors) Family counselling to foster mental health of the family members
- Organising family get together
- Community counselling to counter the trauma of displacement

The range of mental health interventions included basic non clinical psychological support interventions, and referrals for clinical interventions that include medication and/psychotherapeutic support.

The Family Counselling Centre (FCC) initiated by PWDS, and supported by the Central Social Welfare Board played a key role in providing counselling services. Its team of professional counsellors were trained in post disaster trauma counselling by NIMHANS (National Institute of Mental Health and

Nero Sciences), Bangalore. In turn they identified potential counsellors from the community and trained them as barefoot counsellors who formed the first point of contact for the community member.

EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR AFFECTED CHILDREN

The livelihood crisis experienced by non fishing communities resulted in a significant percentage of children being unable to continue their schooling. In several instances, parents persuaded the children to discontinue schooling and contribute with their labour. In addition, many children also experienced considerable psychological distress after witnessing the traumatic natural disaster.

Hence a comprehensive set of child centered programme activities consisted of:

- Psycho social support services through barefoot counsellors and FCC
- Referral services
- School enrolment and reenrollment campaigns
- Formation of children's clubs
- Supply of educational material
- Exposure visits
- Supplementary coaching through tuition centres
- Interface between parents and teachers through Parent Teacher Association
- Health camps for children.

HEALTH CARE SERVICES

Initial surveys among the affected communities revealed that health seeking behaviour was almost non existent or very low. In order to raise standards of health awareness for preventive health care, and inculcate health seeking behaviours in the affected communities staff of the RL project organised 30 awareness meetings on preventive aspects of health care in which 1327 people participated.

The meetings highlighted the importance of clean safe drinking water, the health implications of environmental hygiene, and enrollment in social security schemes such as community health insurance. Besides 30 medical camps were conducted in three blocks that enabled several people access appropriate treatment for occupational hazards and also avail referral treatment services. It also emphasised the importance of observing occupational safety measures. In order to improve levels of health seeking behaviour in the community, SHG leaders received training in preventive health care.

PROGRAMME IMPACTS

Natural disasters erode resilience of the affected communities—psychologically, socially, economically, and spiritually. Hence community involvement through concrete, specific, and purposeful activities is vital for displaced communities to rebuild their lives with dignity and respect.

A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE

Members of the affected communities were unanimous about the several tangible changes in their lives over the last two years. The most obvious transformation is that the restoration of livelihoods has enabled them to rebuild their lives slowly but surely. Several forces have converged to bring about these changes. The most obvious is the shift in perception of disaster rehabilitation from a 'receiving' charity or welfare mode to people's participation through building the capacities of the vulnerable and marginalised communities. Such an approach empowers people to participate in economic, social, and political decisions in the process of rebuilding their lives.

A COLLECTIVE PREVENTION AND SAFETY CULTURE

Among the most significant impacts of the RL project is the heightened awareness in the community about disaster management. Following the tsunami, survivors experienced a pervasive sense of anxiety and fear about an impending tsunami. Hence they tended to catastrophise about their ability to cope in the event of another natural disaster.

Therefore community members participated in several sensitisation and training programmes on disaster management preparedness. Several appropriate risk reduction strategies which include emergency responses, preparatory and preventive focus were evolved with community participation. Such a community centric approach strengthened the people's capacity to prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

One such initiative is the formation of Disaster Volunteers Team (Paeridar Thondar padai) in each block. Volunteers of the task force are adequately trained in emergency relief, first aid, and evacuation procedures. Besides they coordinate with the state machinery through communication systems to expedite responses that would save lives in the event of a natural disaster.

David of Bhagyapuram was a helpless witness to the needless death and destruction when more than 300 people lost their lives in the Tsunami in the neighbouring village. The RL staff team motivated David and a few others in the village to form a Disaster Volunteers team. Currently the team consists of ten men and five women. The team meets on the third Monday of every month. The members received a one year training in several key aspects of disaster preparedness and management. These include area mapping for a clear picture of the topography of the surroundings, evacuation plans, first aid, and establishing communication systems. The team also created awareness about disaster preparedness and management through street theatre and poems. Besides they also mobilised and motivated the disaster survivors to improve the living conditions through better civic amenities like electricity, roads, and bus services.

What is apparent is that for many survivors of the Tsunami, the training in disaster preparedness strategies has increased their self confidence to cope with natural disasters. Eugene James, a member of the affected community, also reiterates Prabha's observation. According to her, before the disaster preparedness training they were ignorant about the need to safeguard important documents and keep it organised. "Often our patta would be lying in the paran (loft)", she says.

Overall, the community feels strengthened with its informed perspectives on disaster preparedness and management.

THE BRAVE BRIGADIERS

For over a year, C. Boothalingam, 36, and his brigade of dedicated volunteers who form the paeridar thondar padai (Disaster Volunteers Team) participated in mock drills. The experience was a preparation for rapid evacuation of people in the wake of a disaster. Thanks to the disaster preparedness training, the members are primed to act promptly and effectively. They have a thorough knowledge of the topography of the place including the low lying areas, canals, ponds, highlands, and important landmarks, are adequately trained in first aid, emergency rescue and relief operations, and have set up three prominent information boards that lists contact numbers of the police, hospitals, ambulance, the district collectorate, and taluk; such measures enable people to make an informed response in the event of a natural disaster.

The Disaster Task Force at Paramanvilai, Kanyakumari district, headed by C. Boothalingam, consists of 40 members, half of whom are women. The task force has created awareness in the community about adequate coping measures when faced with a disaster. The first rule is not to panic. Members have also made people understand their priorities in case of evacuation. Important documents like civil supplies card, and land title (patta) are kept in readiness in a paeridar petti or disaster box.

Boothalingam's lived experience of the tsunami when he saw 15 feet high monster waves destroy lives and property in his village motivated him to volunteer as a member of the Disaster Task force. "Some of us in the village managed to save ourselves. I was lucky to escape," he admits. His first hand experience of the Tsunami and an interest in social service was the right impetus for his involvement in the Disaster Task Force.

The task force's reputation extends beyond disaster preparedness. Earlier this year, a communal clash ensued between Paramanvilai and the neighboring village, Azhikkal. The police arrested a few men from Paramanvilai on charges of demolishing a newly built church in Azhikkal. The reputation of the disaster task force in Paramanvilai who had rendered timely assistance to the people in Azhikkal after the tsunami, played a vital role in defusing a potential communal conflict between the two villages.

"Even though I can't pinpoint the exact factor that restored normalcy, the disaster task force played an important role in defusing tension and the information boards we set up played an important role in the investigation," says C. Boothalingam.

In moving beyond its specific purpose and reaching out to the wider community by bridging divides and barriers, the Disaster Task Force is a model that several other neighbouring villages also want to emulate.

REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS

A major impact is the process of enabling affected communities to rebuild their lost or endangered livelihoods. According to several members, after the Tsunami, they are now willing to explore alternative income generating activities such as sea shell lime processing, value added fish pickle making, and ornamental sea shell artifacts that they were earlier either unaware of or even unwilling to consider.

Like sea shell collection, sea shell lime processing is another traditional activity in coastal villages. Traditionally, sea shell lime processing is done by members of the dalit community. In the absence of other sources of marketing, families usually sell the sea shells to exploitative middlemen for extremely low prices. A few families process the sea shells to lime powder using traditional practices such as the wind burner that involves considerable drudgery and long hours of painstaking labour. Hence several families discontinued the activity.

As part of its strategies to rebuild livelihoods, the RL project imparted training in value added sea shell processing to SHG women to generate additional income. The value addition is the scientific low cost choola (furnace) with an air pumping mechanism. This is an improvement over the traditional choola that relied on natural wind. Currently, sea shell lime processing artisans store, process, and directly sell the sea shells.

Fish pickles are usually sold in half kg or one kg at a cost of Rs.100 and Rs. 130 respectively.

The cost was not affordable for people from low income groups and besides the pickles were available only in bigger towns and cities. Traditionally fish pickles are made from high quality fleshy fish. The prevailing practice is that the smaller fish that are bony are rejected for pickle making and instead sold as dry fish. The training in fish pickle making, however, has enabled women to make pickles using the low cost fish.

Currently, the pickles are sold in sachets that cost Rs. 2 and Rs. 5 and available locally even in small shops. The use of low cost fish variety and economic packing has thus created a local market for fish pickles.

PWDS also enabled women coir artisans avail the benefits of the Mahila Coir Yojana Scheme of the Coir Board of India through which 20 women coir artisans availed motorised mechanical ratts. Unlike the traditional ratt, the motorised ratt enables the artisans to convert coir fibre into yarn. The women underwent a two month training in the use of the mechanised motor ratt, during which they also received a monthly stipend of Rs. 500. The introduction of the mechanised motor ratts in rural households has resulted in large scale employment, increase in production, quality, better working conditions, decreased drudgery, and higher income for the artisans. The Coir Board provided 75 percent of the cost of the motorised ratt as a one time subsidy and the rest of the money was raised by the artisans through PWDS, and own sources.

FROM WAGE EARNER TO ENTERPRISE OWNER

Tilakavathi, 56, a sea shell artisan in Samithope, Kanyakumari district, has every reason to be happy. Since December 2006, she and the 20 members of the Ayya Vaikuntar Mahalir Suya Udavi Kuzhu, (SHG) promoted by PWDS, are busy making a range of ornamental sea shell artifacts: door curtains, lamps, flower vases, and pen holders. Besides this SHG, there are five other SHGs in the district who are involved in this activity. “These are our articles,” says Tilakavathi, with pride and a sense of ownership.

Tilakavathi belongs to a family of sea shell artisans. Traditionally, sea shell handicrafts is a home based work done by women. According to Tilakavathi, they would buy sea shells from a woman vendor and make the sea shell products. Delayed payments were the norm. “We often had to wait as long as six months to one year for the payment. Even if we made products worth Rs. 100, we were fortunate if we got at least Rs. 55. We could not fight for our rights as we had no proof. Instead of no money, we thought this was better,” explains Tilakavathi.

The tsunami, however, destroyed their precarious livelihood. The RL project team motivated the women to participate in value added sea shell handicrafts training. Six SHGs (each with 20 members) in six neighbouring villages in Kanyakumari district came together and each group contributed Rs. 2000. The groups generated Rs. 12,000 and PWDS contributed Rs. 12,000. The groups utilised the amount to purchase sea shells, and other accessories like sewing thread, needles, beads, nails, plates, and compass.

A Common Facility Centre was established jointly. Each group brings its products once a month to the Common Facilities Centre. Besides the group members showed initiative and business sense in contacting sea shell traders in Kanyakumari to market their products. Tilakavathi goes to the Common Facilities Centre every Tuesday. She checks the group accounts and also the inventory of goods made and damages, if any. The group members also discuss effective marketing strategies. The members also get to know the performance of each group and this, Tilakavathi says, spurs them to better their group performance.

The profits are shared equally among the groups. The members have got artisan ID cards that enables them to access group loans. “Earlier we operated individually. Since we started functioning as a group, we are assured of timely, regular payment. Unlike earlier, when we were never sure if we would be paid, we now are motivated to produce more goods and also pay attention to quality. From being workers (thozhilali) we are now owners (mudalali) of the trade,” declares Tilakavathi.

COUNSELLING, PART OF COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Another notable impact is increased awareness of the role of counselling to enable displaced communities respond appropriately and evolve adaptive strategies in addressing psycho social trauma.

The most significant impact is the cadre of trained community counsellors at the grassroots -- 33 barefoot counselors who go from door to door and counsel people in distress. As members of the community, they have an intimate knowledge of the lives of the people and have an added advantage of being readily available. The barefoot counsellors provide individual counselling, family counselling to foster mental health of the family members, organise family get togethers, and provide community counselling to counter the trauma of displacement. The range of mental health interventions consist of basic non clinical psychological support interventions by the FCC and barefoot counsellors, and referrals for clinical interventions that include medication and/ psychotherapeutic support.

Immediately after the tsunami, it was common for people to resort to magico religious cures for psychological disturbances as they believed it to be the result of witchcraft or possession by evil spirits. The introduction of psychosocial support, however, influenced people's perceptions that resulted in shifts in mindsets.

What is obvious is people's acceptance of counselling as an intervention tool without

the stigma usually associated with seeking help for psychological problems. The trained counsellors recall that the training enables them to identify individuals in need of psychological intervention and initiate timely and appropriate interventions and often referrals to a qualified counsellor or psychiatrist, when necessary.

Another noticeable shift is that people are voluntarily opting for the services of the barefoot counsellors, thanks to word of mouth publicity and the counsellors' reputation for maintaining confidentiality. For the barefoot counsellors, their training in counselling has enabled them to be more self aware.

S. Premalatha (27), a barefoot counsellor, says that she notices a marked decrease in conflicts within her family after she attended the counselling training. "We are able to negotiate within the family. I listen to others and admit my mistakes," she says candidly. She also says that the training has enabled her to avoid the pit fall of magnifying her problems that pale in comparison with those experienced by others. "Earlier I thought that I was the only one with problems. Now I realise that those experienced by many others are worse than mine."

Alice (51) admits that before she attended the counselling training she was shy, had low self confidence and was fearful of talking to others. Today she not only counsels people in distress but also experiences a new found sense of self-confidence.

A SURVIVOR'S STORY

When 18 year old Deniker came from Bangalore to Thoothukudi on December 26, 2004, it seemed like any other quiet post Christmas day. He strolled in a holiday mood to the Thoothukudi beach to play beach side cricket with his gang of friends. The team beat a hasty retreat when they saw the sea recede and a few minutes later the beach was flooded. Strong waves swept away several catamarans and boats anchored on the shore.

Around 3.00 pm, a curious Deniker walked up to the seaside to find out the state of the sea. What he saw seemed straight out of a film on natural disaster. He saw waves as tall as palm trees rise from the ocean and advance threateningly towards the seashore with a deafening sound. A terrified Deniker lost consciousness and was swept inland by the turbulence of the waves. When he regained consciousness, he realised he was lucky to be alive. Several others whom he knew were either dead or missing.

For the next five months, Deniker retreated into a shell. He was non communicative, apathetic, sleepless, socially withdrawn, harboured suicidal ideas, and exhibited violent temper tantrums. He also attempted to kill himself several times.

Eugene James, his mother, took him to several doctors with little improvement in Deniker's condition. The desperate mother borrowed Rs. 35,000 from moneylenders at high rates of interest and resorted to magico religious treatment as she believed it was the result of witchcraft.

Amidst such distressing circumstances, Eugene met Devanesan Singari, RL Project staff, SEDCO. Singari had undergone four day training in counselling at the Thoothukudi Social Welfare Board. It enabled her to identify people like Deniker who manifested post traumatic psychological distress after witnessing the Tsunami. Having convinced Deniker's parents of her desire to help the boy, Singari began to visit Deniker several times a week at his residence. Deniker was either indifferent or openly hostile.

On finding Deniker resistant to counselling, Singari, decided to refer him for psychiatric treatment at Tirunelveli Medical College. She obtained the consent of his parents, involved them in the treatment process, and accompanied them for psychiatric treatment referral at the government hospital.

Today, Deniker has recovered completely and works as a supervisor in a coal mine in Andhra Pradesh. Amazed at her son's dramatic recover, Eugene too attended a two day training in counselling. "I'm able to help many people like Deniker who are psychologically affected by the tsunami. I now realise it is a psychological problem. Timely and appropriate treatment can result in complete recovery," says Eugene.

HEALTH AWARENESS

There has been a tangible difference in health seeking behavior, awareness of health issues, and the relationship between environmental sanitation and health, awareness of occupational hazards, and the importance of clean drinking water, among the community members. This is a distinct leap from ignorance and indifference towards health issues among the people who formerly attributed ill health to “fate” or destiny.

Women, especially, now are more concerned about their health and take initiatives to seek medical treatment. Their increased health awareness and membership in SHGs makes it easier for them to access treatment.

At Punnayakyal, Sujitha, an SHG member, attended a screening medical camp where she was diagnosed with a tumour in the uterus and referred for further treatment. Thanks to the support of the SHG members, she approached a minister in the state government who gave her referral letter to a medical specialist. Sujitha says that the solidarity of the SHG members and her new found health awareness made it possible for her to take such an initiative.

Several members of the community are now aware of social security schemes such as community health insurance. As a result they have enrolled in such schemes to counter out of pocket health care expenses that trap them in a vicious cycle of indebtedness.

For example, Chellathai (44) near Alankottai works in the coir industry for the past 28 years. She de fibres coconut husks. Like most people involved in de fibring, she developed an allergic reaction (contact dermatitis) that caused severe itching in her hands and legs. Treatment at private hospitals was too

expensive for her. Travelling to government hospitals takes a day and it deprives her of her day’s earnings. She, however, enrolled in the PWDS NEERA community health insurance scheme that enabled her to access medical treatment and acquire awareness about preventive measures. “These preventive measures help me to continue my work,” she says.

CREATIVE SPACES FOR CHILDREN

A noticeable feature in several post tsunami areas is the adverse impact on children—psychologically, socially, and educationally. In many instances, poverty due to endangered livelihoods forced children to discontinue schooling, with many of them being forced into wage earning. To help children recover from the trauma and regain a sense of normalcy in their lives, several initiatives were launched. These include counselling, creating awareness among parents about the need to reenroll children in schools, establishing tuition centres, and recreational facilities for children such as Children’s Clubs.

An interesting impact is that parents are now convinced about the importance of education for children. The attitudinal change has come through the interface created between parents and teachers through regular Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings.

Shanthi Emerald from Alankottai in Kanyakumari district recalls that her daughter studying in Class 4 refused to go to school. Ignorant of the importance of education, she let her daughter have her way. The PTA meetings, however, were an eye opener and it helped her build a rapport with her daughter’s teacher. She began to meet her daughter’s teacher regularly and discussed with her methods to motivate her daughter to resume schooling. Today her daughter is

back to school. A satisfied Shanthi shared her story with other parents in subsequent PTA meetings. “Such PTA meetings must be conducted regularly once in three months for it acts as a bridge between parents, teachers, and students,” she says.

For many parents, highlighting the importance of safe and healthy hygienic practices has enabled them to realise the interrelationship between hygiene and health, especially for children. Saritha, a parent, says that the emphasis on cost effective locally available food has made it possible for mothers to adopt such practices. The introduction of the Kitchen Herbal Garden (KHG) and the role of clean, safe drinking water and hygienic food preparation have all enabled them to raise the standards of health of the family. “We can’t afford apples and oranges. But appropriate food such as papayas, guavas and other simple practices is easy for us to follow,” says Saritha.

The establishment of supplementary coaching (tuition) centres for children and organising children into Children’s Clubs illustrate the importance of empowering children in ways that are meaningful to them. Rinsy, RL Project Staff, SEDCO, recalls that when they initially set up tuition centers, there were hardly seven children. Boys were noticeably absent. However, word of mouth publicity of satisfied parents and students and the role of SHG women in creating awareness about the importance of education soon saw their numbers swell.

A tangible impact of the tuition centres is that there is significant decrease in the number of school drop outs. Interestingly, even the first communion of boys—a religious ceremony that is seen as a passage for boys from fishing communities as it signifies that they are able

enough to fish with adult men—is now being postponed until they finish Class 8 or 9.

Several children who have attended the tuition centres testify that it made a lot of difference in their lives. For some, like Pradeep, it was a turning point. The son of a tapper, Pradeep is a school topper, having scored 436/500 in Class 10. He works as a mason to support his education. While in Class 12, he heard of the free coaching classes offered at the tuition centres and was motivated to join the centre by two teachers. Pradeep did well enough in Class 12 (1002/1200) to qualify for admission into engineering college.

Like Pradeep, attending tuition centres benefits the children in several ways. Navisha, a student of nursing, recalls being forced to discontinue her studies after Class 10. Thanks to the tuition centres, she resumed schooling. Akhila, student of Class 11, says that it enabled her to do well in the Class 10 exams. More importantly, it enabled her to acquire an effective method of studying. It also enabled her to realise the importance of education and says she “fought with her parents” to let her continue her studies. Sylvia (14) recalls that she overcame her “fear of maths” at the tuition centres and says she now scores 80 percent in the subject.

If the tuition centres foster academic skills and interest in education, the activities of the Children’s Clubs complement it with its emphasis on life skills. The clubs, which meet on every Sunday morning, create a space for children to engage in leisure activities such as games (both indoor and outdoor) and acquire skills such as public speaking, participate in debates, and life skills such as leadership, and time management. “Earlier we children would sell fish on Sundays. Nowadays we go to the Children’s Clubs,” says Sylvia.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND BENEFITS




Families enrolled as tsunami affected	2690
Coir and sea shell artisans	775
Common facility centers	4
Children delight clubs	57
Parents Teachers Associations	18
Friends of Children	27
Children re-enrolled	109
Counseling sub centers	4
Barefoot counselors	54
Families in health insurance	682
Task force on disaster preparedness	11
Community based resource centre for disaster	1

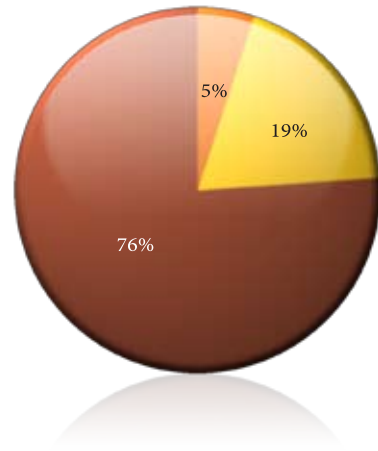
FINANCIAL RESOURCE FOR THE PROJECT (SEPTEMBER 2005 – OCTOBER 2007)

NO	DETAILS	EED	OWN MEANS	TOTAL
1	SEDCO – Thoothukudi	3,450,000	854,000	4,304,000
2	PWDS – Kanyakumari	8,388,300	3,044,700	11,433,000
3	DATA–Coordination Centre	—	—	560,000
TOTAL PROJECT COST		11,838,300	3,898,700	16,297,000




- Money spent per family per year: Rs. 2,963
- Grant spent per family per year: Rs. 2,152
- Community/NGO contribution per family per year: Rs. 708

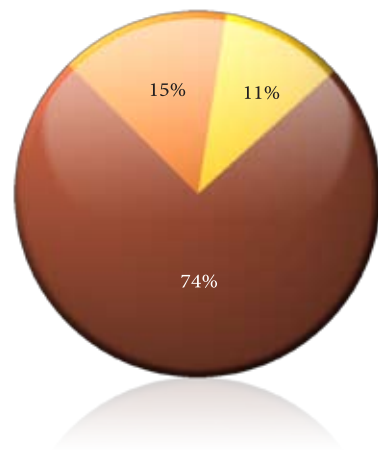
SOURCE OF FUNDS

	PWDS + Community	3,044,700
	SEDCO + Community	854,000
	EED	12,398,300



UTILISATION

	Administration + Coordination	1,767,000
	Staff Salary	2,406,400
	Programme Cost	12,123,600



BEST PRACTICES

The RL project has evolved a community based and integrated disaster management that ensures sustainability through community ownership, community capacity building, community support structures, and mainstream linkages. In the context of non fishing coastal communities who have been excluded in the recovery process, a community driven integrated approach that creates linkages between community based needs and mainstream resources and services assumes even greater significance in reconstruction efforts. This also demonstrates that the use of existing mainstream services and resources are central to sustain impacts.

The interventions in the project based on NEERA's MEALS (Motivate Equip Accompany Link and Sustain) approach, illustrate a blend of self help, alternatives, and mainstreaming strategies. The NGO plays a facilitative role in motivating and mobilising the community from the outside; equipping through skill transfer; accompanying by providing relevant back up; and finally enabling the community to link with mainstream to access resources and services and influence policies.

The thematic strand that blends rights and capacity, in which the latter is viewed as a route is woven throughout the project interventions. To start with, the affected community was mobilised as even six months after the tsunami, they were still sidelined and did not receive relief assistance from the Government.

A series of convergence meetings between the affected communities and various government departments succeeded in highlighting their

plight. The communities handed in written memoranda to the officials concerned to avail several benefit schemes. Besides the role of local media in highlighting the issues of the marginalised communities resulted in public sympathy and government support. The approach enlisted people's participation by directly involving them in efforts to link with mainstream resources to avail their rights as people displaced by the Tsunami.

Another instance of a best practice is that the project enabled a convergence of different stakeholders with different levels of linkages that helped to augment the services available to the affected communities. For instance, it brought together collaborating agencies like the PTA (Parent Teachers Association), FCC (Family Counselling Centre), TNVHA (Tamil Nadu Voluntary Health Association), religious organisations, CBOs (Community Based Organisations), agencies with strong linkages (Government hospitals, PHCs (Primary Health Centres), schools, education department, coir board, and agencies with linkages (District Rural Development Authority, the district education department, social welfare department, agriculture, and law enforcing agencies).

Not only is it important for displaced communities to avail rights, they must also have the capacity to use it productively. Value addition such as the introduction of sea shell choola lime making, sea shell handicrafts, and restoration of coir soak pits, and value added fish pickles strengthened artisanal occupations and revitalised livelihoods.

Use of Existing Support Structures Another instance of a best practice is the use of existing

support structures and expertise such as the Family Counselling Centre established by PWDS. Simultaneously the establishment of trained barefoot counsellors matched with their in depth knowledge of contextual realities also demonstrates a sustainable skill.

In another instance, partnership with resource organisations for mangrove revitalisation such as the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, and People's Action for Development (PAD), illustrate sustainable means of utilising existing expertise.

REGENERATION OF COASTAL MANGROVES

One of the lessons in the Tsunami was the role of mangroves as coastal bioshields. Coastal ecosystems such as mangrove forests, casuarina trees, and sand dunes provided an effective defence against the Tsunami by acting as natural barrier that absorbed and deflected much of the mechanical energy of the Tsunami. Mangroves, popularly known as 'Alaiyathi' or 'wind breaker' in Tamil, are self regenerating and its prop roots do not yield to tidal waves, thus making them ideal 'coastal watch dogs'. Mangroves thus are a natural, existent low tech solution that minimises the impact of natural disasters.

Punnakayal is a coastal village in Alwattirunagari Block in Thoothukudi district. Mangrove forests border the northern side of the Punnakayal estuaries. Ignorant of the role of mangroves as natural buffers, the community rampantly chopped the mangroves for fuel and fodder. The mangrove clusters were also used as grazing ground for cattle.

A study by the RL project indicated that the presence of mangrove forests in some pockets was one of the reasons for the low impact

of the Tsunami in the area. Inspired by the successful regeneration and conservation of mangroves and its role as a natural defence against the Tsunami in Pitchavaram in Cuddalore, SEDCO launched a scientific and people centered approach to mangrove regeneration and conservation programme in Punnakayal.

The RL project team explained to the local people the role of mangroves in protecting coastal eco systems against natural disasters. These were corroborated by senior citizens in the village who also narrated their experiences of mangroves as a natural protection. Besides several awareness programmes helped them realise the role of mangroves as a coastal protection measure against natural disasters.

An initiative for regeneration of mangroves in the area thus emerged with people's participation. A Village Development Committee (VDC) was formed in Punnakayal. The local parish priest and other well wishers supported the initiative. As part of an exposure visit, some of the community members visited Pitchavaram. The visit enabled them to have a better understanding of mangroves and implement plantation activities through interaction with the community at Pitchavaram.

In partnership with People's Action for Development (PAD), mangroves were planted in 150 acres along the Punnakayal estuaries. As mangroves were declared a forest reserve by the state, SEDCO, together with VDC representatives met officials of the forest department for permission to plant mangroves. The department reluctantly agreed to this unusual request.

With technical support provided by the Chennai based MS Swaminathan Research

Foundation (MSSRF), SHG members planted mangroves in 150 acres of coastal stretch. The VDC employed a watchman to take care of the mangroves.

Today dense clusters of mangroves border the Punnakayal estuaries. What is interesting is that the community, who even two years back, scarcely listened, now realise the importance of preserving coastal ecosystems. The initiative also highlights the attitudinal change in the community and policy makers with regard to coastal vegetation and the involvement of the community in environmental protection.

Building Community Support Structures The formation of a Disaster Task Force, and the establishment of Children's Clubs highlight the importance of equipping the community to evolve proactive strategies and build their capacity in ways that build their resilience to natural disasters.

Building Community Consciousness, not just Service Delivery Several interventions such as the widespread community acceptance of health insurance scheme, and disaster preparedness, and value added alternative sources of employment illustrate the importance of creating a shift in people's mindsets and not mere service delivery.

A Long Standing Relationship with the Community The decision of PWDS to only work in areas where it had a strong presence in the community, was a key factor in mobilising the community. Development NGOs who step into post disaster reconstruction efforts with a long term perspective based on their rapport with the community are perceived as more credible than those whose involvement in reconstruction efforts is despite not having worked with the community in that area.

CLEAN VILLAGE CAMPAIGN

Along with increased health awareness and health seeking behaviour, people are also aware of the link between environmental sanitation, personal hygiene, and health. The successful Clean Village Campaign in Punnakayal is an example. Until recently, the streets of Punnakayal were littered with fish waste, garbage, and human excreta. Uncovered drainage on either side of the streets was an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes and other vectors. Infectious diseases such as malaria and typhoid were widespread in the village.

As part of the RL project, SEDCO carried out a series of awareness programmes on cleanliness and personal hygiene. This aspect was also highlighted in SHG meetings. As a first step, waste collection tanks were installed in the village, five by SEDCO promoted SHGs and five by the local panchayat. The 46 SEDCO promoted SHGs were in charge of maintenance of these tanks. The SHG members motivated the people in the village to deposit waste only in these tanks. SHG representatives also met the Panchayat president and requested him to ensure cleanliness of the surroundings. Due to persistent efforts of the SHG members, the Panchayat undertook construction of fully covered drainages in the village. Besides, another SHG initiative was motivating people to deposit fish wastes not in the streets (as was the practice) but at designated spots along the coast where it would be collected once a month by waste collection lorries. Thanks to the involvement of the local community, Punnakayal is now a clean and a safe place for its residents.

Involvement of Women in Reconstruction Efforts An essential part of building

disaster resilient communities is to directly engage with groups most vulnerable to disasters. While women experience multiple disadvantages in a natural disaster, nevertheless it provides them several opportunities to challenge and change their gendered status in society.

In the context of the RL project, one finds several instances of visible participation of women. These include forming networks of social actors who are sensitive to the most pressing needs in the community. Examples include membership in disaster task forces, training as barefoot counsellors, and taking the lead in alternative employment opportunities.

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

Every natural disaster provides an opportunity to strengthen our capacity to respond appropriately. What has emerged clearly is that the focus of post disaster responses has to shift from providing relief aid towards capacitating the community and create linkages with mainstream to enable them rebuild their lives with dignity and respect.

Staff of the RL programme are unanimous that in the initial stages of the project, they found it frustrating to implement a disaster reconstruction initiative based on community mobilisation and capacity building. Most tsunami reconstruction efforts are based on service delivery on a 'giving' or charity mode that complicated the situation and added to their struggle. An RL Project staff recalls that initially the staff team had to create an attitudinal change in people's mindsets. "The first question they asked us was, 'Do you have free houses to give us?'"

Another pressing challenge was that unlike a service delivery project, community mobilisation and capacity building is a slow, long process approach. Besides both the project team and the community members expressed that the duration of the project is too short to sustain the impacts generated. "The community needs extensive support from the staff team to sustain the community structures established," adds R. Jeyakumar, Deputy Director, PWDS.

Perhaps the biggest challenge was enabling a shift in people's mindsets from a traditional service delivery mode to a community capacity building mode that ensures project sustainability through a long term development perspective. To draw a parallel with HIV/AIDS, just as current thinking views HIV/AIDS from a development perspective and not merely as a health issue, disaster reconstruction efforts too have to be viewed through a development lens. Such a perspective avoids the formulaic and easy solutions based on service delivery/ aid and instead builds on people's capacities and works for their rights.

"In the beginning SEDCO was unwilling to take up tsunami interventions as it conflicted with our development approach. The RL project was an opportunity as it responded to community needs. Our experience tells us that NGOs who implement reconstruction efforts in areas where they have a presence are more easily accepted by the community and are perceived as more credible," says FXR George, Director, SEDCO.

Indeed the involvement of development NGOs in disaster reconstruction efforts is both a challenge and a lesson learned; an opportunity to build people's capacities to avail their rights.









