

Comment

A holistic and coherent strategy

With at least 300,000 people from 11 countries in the Indian Ocean region dead, or still missing and presumed dead, the tsunami of 26 December 2004 counts as among the worst natural disasters in recent history. Apart from the loss of life, damages to houses, fishing vessels, agriculture lands, equipment and infrastructure, have been high, estimated to exceed us\$ 13.5 bn. Coastal fishing communities, among the most vulnerable sections of society, were particularly affected. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that a quarter of all fatalities were from fishing communities.

The local, national and international responses to the disaster have been tremendous. Particularly heartening has been the massive mobilization of local and in-country resources and volunteers in the post-tsunami period, especially in the relief phase. Aid and promises for further aid have also come from the international community. It is to be hoped that these promises are kept.

It is as important that the aid received be channeled in ways that actually improve the quality of life of the affected communities in the long term. Declarations and statements that have come out of regional and international processes involving peasant and fishworker organizations and NGOs in the post-tsunami phase, lay out key principles and strategies for rehabilitation of fisheries and agriculture-based livelihoods (see pages 54 and 70). At a very fundamental level, the participation of affected communities, particularly of vulnerable groups among them, in the design and implementation of rehabilitation initiatives, must be ensured.

From a fisheries perspective, it would be imperative to ensure that rehabilitation initiatives do not lead to an overall increase in fishing capacity. This continues to be a real danger, especially where co-ordination of aid is weak, and where there are no clear policy frameworks for delivery of aid. Well-intentioned aid may just end up increasing the vulnerability of livelihoods in the long term.

The matter of replacing damaged fishing units should also be approached with caution, particularly where their operations were leading to social conflicts and overfishing in the pre-tsunami period. In many cases, the operations of such vessels were economically unviable, to begin with. At a recent workshop (see page 82), trawler owners in Nagapattinam, India, said that, with adequate compensation, they would opt for alternative employment. Rehabilitation packages must provide such flexibility and move away from an emphasis on replacing like with like.

The proposed transfer of fishing vessels from the European Union (EU) to the tsunami-affected countries also needs to be critically considered in this light. Apart from the problems of overcapacity that such transfers could lead to, they would also hinder the utilization of local boatbuilding yards, denying local people an important source of employment. The transfer of vessels using public monies can, in theory at least, be monitored and controlled. But more disturbing are similarly well-intentioned, but equally misguided private transfer arrangements. Such is the case of the *Simon-Kghian*. This decommissioned 'semi-industrial' trawler, used to transport donated equipment and other gifts by the Lorient-based French NGO 'Les Amis de Ceylan', is to be donated to the Sri Lankan Navy, which will use it as a patrol vessel. An increase in private transfer arrangements of this sort can be highly problematic.

Rehabilitation of tsunami-affected fisheries is not meant to help the fishing industry limp back to the pre-tsunami days, especially in countries that have overcapacity and overfishing as recognized issues in their fisheries. Rehabilitation packages should attempt to revamp the fisheries of affected countries to best serve internationally accepted goals of sustainable and equitable development as well as conservation of fish habitats at the local, national and regional levels. This, however, cannot be achieved in tsunami-hit countries without simultaneously looking at fisheries issues in both tsunami-affected and non-affected areas. Attention should be paid to move away from a piecemeal rehabilitation approach to a holistic and coherent programme of action for fisheries development and management that contributes to the largest common good.