

Rehabilitation

A few houses here, boats there

This is an assessment of the post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation process in the fisheries sector of Sri Lanka

The single sector in Sri Lanka that was most seriously affected by the post-Christmas tsunami of 2004 was fisheries. The tsunami completely devastated life along the coastal belt of the eastern and southern regions of the country, while also causing significant damage to people and property in some of the northern and western regions. The damage to lives, property and economic activities was colossal.

About 7,222 lives were lost, 21,330 houses destroyed, 9,486 houses damaged and 233,843 persons displaced. Of the total fleet of 30,000 craft, 20,000 were destroyed and damaged, which were valued at LKR25,940 mn (US\$260,050,125). Damage to fisheries infrastructure, including harbours, cold rooms and other State institution was estimated as LKR4,808 mn (\$48,200,501). The total damage to the property in the fisheries sector has been valued at LKR39 billion (\$391 mn).

Post-tsunami reconstruction and re-building of the fisheries sector required: (a) provision of immediate relief aid to affected fishers and their families in the form of food and other subsistence goods; (b) development of a programme of relief until medium- and long-term solutions were found; (c) provision of psycho-social support to relieve victims of shock and trauma; (d) a census of people affected and property damaged; (e) provision of temporary houses; (f) provision of craft and gear so fishers could re-commence fishing; and (g) provision of permanent houses.

In the immediate post-tsunami relief phase, most of the aid—in the form of food, clothing, clean-up operations and so on—has come from the people in the surrounding unaffected areas. An enormous amount of aid was received by

the tsunami victims in fishing communities, most conspicuously in the form of food and clothing. Clearing of debris has been carried out by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government institutions, the Sri Lankan defence forces and various informal groups.

Apart from food and clothes, large quantities of bedding material, kitchen equipment and tents have been received from such a long list of donors that the people are unable to accurately recollect the various sources of help. In the distribution of non-food aid, temples, churches and mosques have played a leading role. No complains have been made about the quantity and type of immediate relief aid received.

Psycho-social support to seriously affected individuals, especially women and children, was felt to be a very important and urgent need. Such support and trauma care were provided in the immediate relief phase in many districts by doctors in government hospitals. At present, however, very little work is being done in this area.

In the medium-term phase of the relief operations, each tsunami victim was provided with weekly rations of rice, *dal*, sugar and coconut oil worth of LKR175 (US\$1.75) and LKR200 (\$2) in cash.

Besides, a monthly payment of LKR5,000 (\$50) per family was also made. This has helped the affected families subsist until permanent solutions are found for their problems.

Overestimation

Post-tsunami censuses of the fisheries sector in the affected areas were carried out four times. However, the investigators

appear to have made a significant overestimation of the damages to the fishing craft and gear.

The Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (MFAR) was, therefore, very cautious in estimating the number of craft and gear to be issued to the tsunami victims. A number of workshops were established by the government and NGOs, where repairs to craft were done free of charge. All repair work (except major engine repairs, which depend on the availability of spare parts) was completed by mid-May 2005.

Although the MFAR had prepared plans for issue of craft and gear, these could not be implemented for lack of funds. Apart from a few craft distributed by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Fisheries to the affected people at Hambantota, almost all the craft and gear issues were made by various NGOs.

The offshore and deep-sea subsector, which uses multiday operating craft (MDOC) and day boats with inboard engines or one-day operating craft (ODOC), has recovered least from the tsunami. The coastal fisheries sub-sector appears to have recovered substantially. In the Hambantota district as a whole, 87 per cent of the fleet of traditional craft and 55 per cent of the small mechanized craft (fibre reinforced plastic or FRP boats) have been replaced. However, regional

disparities and overcapacities have been noticed in the distribution of craft.

The State distributed fuel and nets free of cost to help fishers re-commence fishing early. The government also distributed vouchers for the purchase of nets (LKR40,000 or \$400 for FRP boatowners, and LKR20,000 or \$200 for owners of traditional craft), and fuel (LKR30,000 or \$300 for multiday craft, LKR7,000 or \$70 for ODOCs, LKR5,000 or \$50 for 17-23 ft. FRP boats and mechanized traditional craft). A total of 225 packed net kits—complete with ropes, floats and twine—were given to selected beneficiaries by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the MFAR in May 2005.

Thanks to the repairs to damaged craft and engines, and the issue of new craft and gear, the fishermen were able to commence their fishing activities, but at a very slow pace. For example, in May 2005, the Hambantota District was producing only about 14 per cent of the fish it produced in May 2004.

Serious burden

Getting temporary houses is no longer a problem for the tsunami victims, but the provision of permanent houses has become a serious burden on the government, mainly due to lack of land for alternative houses, in more urbanized areas. At present, a large number of NGOs have pledged help in this sphere. The

number of houses planned to be constructed appears to match the needs. However, apart from Hambantota, where a number of housing projects have commenced, the provision of permanent houses elsewhere is occurring at a very slow pace. There are also significant regional disparities, and housing projects in the eastern regions still remain in their infant stage.

In respect of fisheries infrastructure, the government has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China and a few other countries, including Japan, for the reconstruction and rebuilding of harbours, but so far no work has been commenced. In the south, the situation with regard to ice plants is the same. No repairs to any of the damaged ice plants have been carried out.

Too many craft have been issued to the affected fishermen. While the government requested the NGOs to work with the MFAR in identifying the type of help and the beneficiaries, this was hardly done. If the potential problem of the future overexploitation of fisheries resources is to be solved, the NGOs should co-ordinate their activities with the MFAR. Large boats with inboard engines should be provided to those who have lost such craft. Beach-seine fisheries can be considered one of the subsectors in Sri Lanka most seriously affected by the

tsunami. The repair of beach-seines has become a problem, for lack of raw material.

Many of the beach-seine *padu* (net-laying areas) cannot be used due to the presence of debris. Serious attention of the authorities should be paid to this issue. Granted the fact that coastal fisheries are already overexploited, some of these fishers could be given ODOCs or MDOCs to move into deeper waters. Immediately after the tsunami struck, the Sri Lanka government declared a no-build zone of 100 m from the high tide line in the coastal strip of the southern and western provinces (which was expanded to 200 m for the northern and eastern provinces). This will have more serious implications for beach-seine fishing, which needs co-operative labour effort and proper organization of activities within a short duration.

It is, therefore, important to settle the tsunami-affected seine fishers close to the shore. Only by providing these fisher families with elevated houses close to the net-laying areas in the coastal zone or by providing them with the required fishing assets to engage in alternative fishing activities (fishing with day craft, for instance) can they be rehabilitated.

Aid granted

Another serious problem is the decision of the MFAR to grant aid, in the first stage,

only to those fishermen who have registered their craft prior to the tsunami. While this appears to be quite rational, what is noteworthy is that a large number of craft remained unregistered for a long time and the MFAR had turned a blind eye to the issue. Therefore, it is not proper for the MFAR to highlight this issue now, when all fishers and their families have been seriously affected and need immediate help to re-start their lives. The most needy fisher may be one who has not registered his craft before the tsunami.

A large number of traditional craft have also been issued without outriggers. Each outrigger requires an additional investment of about LKR5,000 (US\$50), which the tsunami-hit fishers are unable to meet. Even the more resourceful fishers who can secure such funds still find it difficult to acquire the wood required for outriggers, which has now become a scarce resource.

The lack of engine spare parts is also a grave impediment to fishers commencing fishing operations. Although CeyNor, a quasi-government organization, has undertaken to repair a large number of engines, the repair work is being carried out at a very slow pace. CeyNor should think of obtaining the assistance of NGOs and other donors in providing the necessary funds for the import of spare parts and engines.

It is well known that the tsunami caused serious damage to Sri Lanka's natural environment, especially to the coral reefs, coastal vegetation, sand dunes and natural coastal formations like estuaries, sand bars, and so on. Two of the major fisheries-related problems are worth mentioning. The first is associated with the destruction of *padu*. The second is the damage to the coral reefs. Studies carried out in Weligama by the University of Ruhuna have revealed that a large extent of coral cover is covered with sand and debris, and that a fair extent of coral cover is dying. If this is the case in other areas as well, it would have serious negative impacts on coastal fishing, thereby threatening the livelihoods of coastal fishing communities.

The actual needs of the fishing communities are not properly known to

many because of insufficient assessment, although the needs in respect of houses, gear, craft, etc. have been assessed separately by different people. NGOs issue craft without consulting the MFAR, while individuals too donate craft and gear.

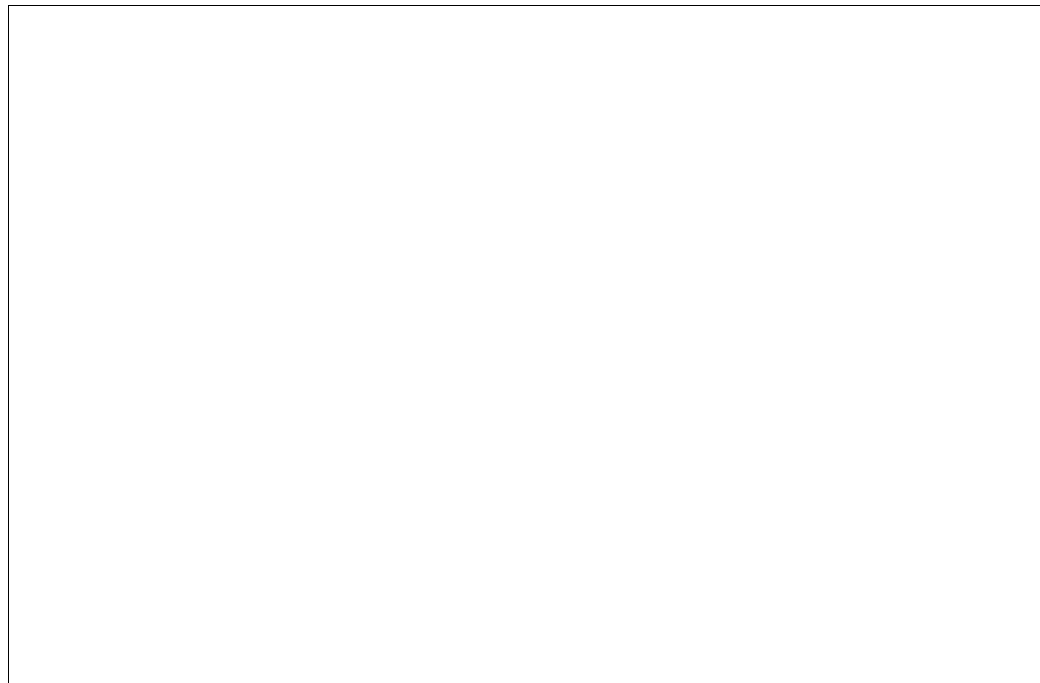
Some NGOs prefer to undertake the total development of a particular village. But the needs are varied: "a few houses here, a few boats there." It is quite clear that the MFAR and other committed individuals in the NGO sector should make an effort to understand the needs of the affected fisher populations in their entirety, and institute a mechanism to co-ordinate work in a manner that will facilitate the efficient and proper distribution of relief aid, making the reconstruction and rebuilding process much more need-oriented.

The problem of children losing their one or both parents is of grave concern. There are also children who are unable to attend school for lack of permanent shelter, uniforms, books, and so on. School textbooks and other writing material have been distributed by many NGOs. Yet, large numbers of families are unsettled in respect of housing and employment; they move to the homes of relatives in search of night-time shelter, but come back to their temporary houses in the morning to receive relief aid. This situation also prevents children from attending school. There have been no proper national or district-level programmes for the long-term needs of the children, although some NGOs have taken some initiatives towards this at the village level.

With the near-coastal fisheries being the most seriously affected subsector, the catch of small varieties of fish is quite low. Field studies in Tangalle revealed that the nutritional intake of small children has been adversely affected by this shortage; in the past, small fish species formed the main source of animal protein for the children of fishing families.

Women's programmes

Several programmes for the women of tsunami-affected areas have also been planned by some NGOs. In certain areas, women have received assistance in the form of coir rope-making machines. But none of these programmes has had any significant impact on the women,



especially in terms of providing them with sustainable income-generating activities. It is quite evident that future reconstruction and rebuilding activities should take into account not only the material and financial needs of the sector but also the needs of the fishing families, with special emphasis on what women and children require.

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