

Learning from experience

The following is excerpted from the Proceedings of the ICSF workshop on post-tsunami rehabilitation of fishing communities

The tsunami that struck countries in the Indian Ocean region on 26 December 2004 caused severe damage to life and livelihood. The impact on fishing communities in affected countries was particularly severe. Apart from loss of life and injury, many households dependent on fisheries lost their houses, craft, gear, equipment and other means of livelihoods. Estimates indicated that damages to the fishing and aquaculture industry were substantial, to the order of US\$568 mn in India, US\$511 mn in Indonesia, US\$335 mn in Sri Lanka, about US\$139 mn in Thailand and about US\$25 mn in Maldives.

It is well known that while natural disasters make no distinction, the ability to face them and recover from them differs substantially, depending on the social, economic, environmental and political reality.

Clearly, the damage from the Indian Ocean tsunami was much greater than it should have been, because of certain underlying realities facing fishing communities along the coast. If longer-term resilience to natural disasters has to be increased, rehabilitation interventions would need to take into account, and address, issues requiring interventions of a longer-term nature.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the interventions that have taken place to rehabilitate the fisheries sector and communities dependent on fisheries and to identify the emerging issues/challenges, ICSF commissioned studies in four countries, namely, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, in October 2005. In addition to these four studies, ICSF also commissioned a study in India on “The Role of

Traditional *Panchayats* in Coastal Fishing Communities in Tamil Nadu, with Special Reference to their Role in Mediating Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation.”

These studies were presented at the *Regional Workshop on Post-tsunami Rehabilitation of Fishing Communities and Fisheries-based Livelihoods* held in Chennai, India on 18 and 19 January 2006.

The workshop provided a constructive space for dialogue between fishworker organizations, NGOs, policymakers and representatives of multilateral agencies, from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and Maldives. It was aimed to:

- analyze the status of rehabilitation efforts in the fisheries sector and fishing communities; and
- identify issues that need to be addressed in ongoing rehabilitation projects vis-à-vis the fisheries sector for sustaining livelihoods in the longer term.

A one-day meeting of fishworker organizations and NGOs working with fishing communities in tsunami-affected countries was held on 17 January, prior to the regional workshop. The meeting was meant to:

- provide an opportunity for participants from various countries to share experiences and learn from one another; and
- enable participants to agree on basic issues that need to be addressed by ongoing rehabilitation interventions, some of which are likely to be country-specific.

The one-day NGO meeting was held at the YWCA Conference Hall, Chennai. A total of 50 delegates participated in the meeting. The meeting enabled organizations working with fishing communities to share experiences and to learn from one another. It also took stock of rehabilitation interventions and agreed on some basic issues that need to be addressed by ongoing rehabilitation interventions, keeping in mind the fact that rehabilitation initiatives by NGOs, multilateral agencies and governments are still underway. These recommendations were presented to the workshop on 19 January 2006.

The regional workshop was organized at the IMAGE Auditorium, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. A total of 90 persons, primarily from the tsunami-affected countries of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Thailand, participated in the workshop. They included representatives from fishworker organizations, NGOs and multilateral organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Government representatives from all the above countries also participated in the workshop.

The workshop programme included presentations of the country-level

studies, followed by discussions in the plenary. Multilateral agencies present provided an overview of their work and proposed future interventions. In a panel discussion, representatives of governments and NGOs highlighted their future priorities for tsunami rehabilitation work. The recommendations from the NGO meeting were also presented.

The field visit provided participants with an exposure to post-tsunami interventions as related to house construction, habitat restoration, appropriate technologies, alternative employment and co-ordination of aid, taking place in the districts of Nagapattinam and Villupuram in the State of Tamil Nadu, India, through interactions with government officials, women's self-help groups, NGOs and fishing communities. Initiating the inaugural session, Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary of ICSF welcomed the participants to the workshop and gave a short background about the organization. ICSF was formed in 1986 to defend the interests of the small-scale fisheries sector, particularly in the developing world, and to ensure their participation in important decision-making processes affecting their lives.

Sharing information

An important part of ICSF's work is to make available information for, and about, small-scale fishworkers, to bring

greater visibility to the sector, through its Documentation Centre. Towards this end, ICSF brings out various publications, such as *SAMUDRA Report*. A more recent initiative is the *SAMUDRA News Alerts* that go out free to subscribers all over the world on a daily basis.

The Documentation Centre also maintains active links with other such centres in the French and Spanish-speaking regions. ICSF has also been organizing workshops for small-scale fishworkers and NGOs, providing a constructive space for dialogue between fishworker organizations, NGOs, scientists, governments, researchers and others. The present workshop was in line with this, Chandrika Sharma said in conclusion.

R. Santhanam, Special Commissioner and Commissioner for Revenue Administration and State Relief Commissioner, Government of Tamil Nadu, India, in his inaugural address, said that the workshop was being organized at the right time, just over a year after the tsunami disaster struck the State. This is a good time to take stock of the situation, to review the state of rehabilitation efforts, to identify issues that need to be addressed, and to chalk out issues for the implementation of projects that are sustainable in the long run, said the State Relief Commissioner.

Santhanam congratulated ICSF on the reports brought out. He complimented, in particular, the author of the India study for covering the entire gamut of fisheries rehabilitation, and for the indepth analysis of significant issues in the rehabilitation process, namely, relief and compensation, livelihood restoration, relocation, role of institutions like fishermen's *panchayats* in India, the problem of surplus boats, the dilemma of workers-turned-owners, and the rights of fisherwomen in the changed structure and scenario.

Santhanam also referred to various other studies, including those brought out by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), the Fritz Institute, the South India Producers' Association (SIPA) and others, pointing out that such studies undertaken by independent organizations, made

useful and important contributions towards providing directions to the rehabilitation processes, and identifying corrective actions, wherever necessary.

He drew attention to the fact that the tsunami disaster was the worst in living memory with the largest proportion of the damage concentrated in fisheries, housing and infrastructure. He said that it was not surprising that there was a greater focus on fishers during the relief and rehabilitation process.

The Government of Tamil Nadu not only concentrated on fishers but also took into account the requirement of other affected sections like small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, businessmen, petty traders, orphaned children, adolescent girls, students and various other categories of people, and provided relief packages to every category.

Just as ICSF has commissioned studies for improving the lot of fishers, similar studies by others on other affected groups would be appreciated, as the common objective is to strive for a safe and secure future for all those who are affected by the tsunami in some way or the other.

Santhanam stressed that the Tamil Nadu government's response to the tsunami disaster has been characterized by a willingness to provide adequate space for civil society organizations (CSOs), to remove bottlenecks for their functioning, and be accessible and receptive to feedback and act upon it promptly. The State Relief Commissioner then proceeded to flag three main issues that are the main areas of concern:

(i) Proliferation of boats after the tsunami
In the post-tsunami period, the Coromandel coast saw the presence of a large number of NGOs and their desire to do something quick and visible in the tsunami-affected areas. This resulted in a large number of people who previously had no boats now getting boats.

This is likely to result in a chain of other events such as shortage of people working as crew; increased dropouts from schools due to fishers taking their children to sea; competition by more boats from the same village for finite fishery resources in the

same fishing area, causing tensions both at sea and on shore; and finally, an aggravation of tensions resulting from the changed social structure of workers-turned-owners.

Santhanam also pointed out that beneficiaries who have received boats have expressed concerns over the quality of boats built in a hurry and supplied by the NGOs. This, in turn, raises safety concerns.

The other issues include a surplus of boats, alongside a shortage of nets and other equipment required for fishing; the high cost of maintenance; the unsuitability of boats to local conditions or requirements; and variations from the preferred design and make of engine. These are very serious issues that have to be dealt with and for which solutions have to be found, said the Commissioner.

(ii) Relocation

The State Relief Commissioner said that the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu had announced a well-thought policy on housing in March 2005. The fishing communities in the tsunami-affected areas were faced with a difficult situation of deciding between safety and livelihoods. He said that while safety concerns required them to go inland, their livelihood interests forced them to be at the shoreline.

The governments' housing policy is in accordance with the coastal regulation zone (CRZ) notification, and gives the option to the fishers to relocate beyond 200 m from the high tide line (HTL) if they so wish, reiterated the Commissioner. There is no compulsory relocation. Those who are willing to relocate have been assured of a house worth Rs150,000 (US\$3,388), along with land. Those not willing to relocate would be allowed to repair, without government's assistance, if the structures are authorized and were in their current plots prior to 1991.

The Commissioner said that the government's policy is driven purely by safety considerations. There is a misconception among some people that the space vacated by fishermen who chose to relocate would be given to some other industries, which would totally destroy the fishers' livelihood.

The Chief Minister had already assured the State Legislative Assembly that the vacated land would be entered in the Prohibitory Order Book (POB) and would be maintained for public purposes, which include the occupational use of beach by the fishing community. The community would be allowed to keep their boats, nets, etc. in this area. Since new houses are to be built as per the technical specification of the government for safety and durability, it is in the interest of the community to

look at the relocation issue in the right perspective, he stressed.

(iii) Alternative livelihoods

Santhanam said that the issue of alternative livelihoods was important in the current situation where the tsunami has brought to the fore the risks involved in coastal lives. The limited nature of the aquatic resources has added another dimension. The government has addressed these needs in right earnest, and a dedicated programme of alternative livelihoods is being formulated in consultation with the affected communities.

Recognizing the advantages of group-based activities, special attention is being paid to ensure that these opportunities are delivered through self-help groups. Initiatives such as seaweed farming, crab and lobster fattening, etc. are being looked at as options. Generally, all these have got very good export markets, and can make a lot of difference to the fishers. The State Relief Commissioner emphasized the importance of establishing forward linkages if such activities are to be done in a sustainable manner.

He said that the coastal economy supply chain could be substantially altered through the identification and implementation of alternative livelihood opportunities. These will not only supplement the income gained but also provide for substantive risk diversification for the fishing communities. There is a provision of nearly US\$50 mn for livelihood promotion in the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Tsunami Emergency Assistance Project, which is now being implemented in Tamil Nadu.

Similarly, the post-tsunami sustainable livelihood programme funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) focuses mainly on community resources management, community institutions, micro- and rural financial institutions and micro-enterprise development. He hoped organizations working with fishing communities, such as those present at the workshop, would help in the identification and implementation of

projects, as that would go a long way in the restoration of the community that was the worst affected in the tsunami.

V. Vivekanandan Chief Executive, South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) and a Member of ICSF, provided the background to the workshop. He said that one year on, it was a good time to take stock and reflect on post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation processes. ICSF had been, from the very beginning, monitoring and trying to follow up on the tsunami relief and rehabilitation process. He pointed out that, even though coastal areas are disaster-prone, many present at the workshop did not have much previous disaster experience.

The experience that has been gained in the post-tsunami period will help us to be better prepared for future disasters. There have also been amazing opportunities for comparison due to the vast diversity of the affected areas/countries. Areas and countries seen as distinct geopolitical entities, which previously had rarely come together to think of common approaches and programmes, were united by the indiscriminating tsunami. This has also given an excellent opportunity to look at fisheries issues with a common perspective.

Vivekanandan pointed out that Southeast Asia, for example, is way ahead of south Asia in terms of community-based coastal resource management (CBCRM). It is with this kind of a regional perspective that ICSF decided to take stock of the situation one year after the tsunami by launching country-level studies in India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. It was decided to present these studies and organize a discussion and debate around them. The Fisheries Department of the Maldives had also expressed its interest in the workshop even though ICSF itself has not been able to commission a study in the Maldives. The workshop thus offers the opportunity to discuss the post-tsunami situation in five tsunami-affected countries in Asia.

Long-term interventions

Vivekanandan then proceeded to give the schedule of the workshop. He pointed out that this was the time that multilateral agencies, with large funds at their disposal, were starting their longer-term

interventions. It is important to know their plans for tsunami rehabilitation, with the aim of coming out with the best way to take the whole process of rehabilitation forward. Therefore, following the presentations of country studies and inputs by government officials present on the country situations, multilateral agencies would present their plans for the coming period.

And finally, the fishworker perspective would be presented in the form of a set of recommendations that had been drafted during the NGO meeting prior to the workshop. The recommendations, he said, were based on issues that emerged during country-level processes and consultations with affected communities.

The Regional Workshop on Post-tsunami Rehabilitation of Fishing Communities and Fisheries-based Livelihoods was held at Chennai on 18 and 19 January 2006