After the Tsunami

Hoping for a better future

The 26 December 2004 tsunami was an unprecedented global phenomenon that lasted for a few minutes but left a trail of destruction that would take years to restore the shattered lives and battered environment.

Fisherfolk communities in India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia bore the brunt of the tsunami disaster. Beaches became graveyards. Boats and cars, even a train in Sri Lanka, were lifted and tossed aside like matchsticks. Thousands lost their livelihoods. The Mother Sea, their lifelong provider, had turned destroyer. Fishers who survived were physically, financially and emotionally battered, and disoriented.

The face of the coastline of Southeast Asia was transformed forever. Indonesia and Sri Lanka suffered greater loss of life, but the area enveloped by the tsunami was the highest in India, because of its long coastline and the chain of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. There was a definite impact on flora and fauna; its magnitude will take time to determine.

Although the natural disasters have tormented the coastal communities from time to time, these have never been adequately factored into the planning process. The result: loss of thousands of lives and millions of dollars worth property. The larger approach has been that these events are transient in nature and, therefore, can be addressed as and when they occur. There is an urgent need for an emphatic shift in the strategy for disaster management. Such a strategy should include prevention, mitigation, preparedness and relief as essential elements to cope with such events.

Immediate succour for fisherfolk communities was by and large efficient in India. There may have been exceptions: relief took longer to reach remote areas like the Andamans. And the relief was at times skewed – a few areas were inundated with aid, others got far less. But given the scale of devastation and the suddenness of it all, relief effort was creditable. Sri Lanka was perhaps initially overcome by shock; but the immense aid that flowed in from everywhere gradually trickled down.

The relief work is over in most of the countries affected by the killer waves. The rehabilitation phase has begun throwing more challenges for both the government and the affected communities. It's the long-term issues that matter now – the quality of life of fisher communities, restoration of their homes, their livelihoods, their future and capacity to cope with such events, and the state of resources. Has the opportunity for building a brave new world been seized?

Here are some snapshots from many subject areas of tsunami rehabilitation. If the overall picture

is blurred, it reflects the fact that both in development and disaster management, problems are many but solutions few. And not all questions admit of easy answers.

- Considered synonymous with livelihoods, substantial amount of funds went in for boat building. The result - fisherfolk community has been showered with boats. They have come from all directions: Governments, NGOs and donors big and small. A serious over-capacity has resulted. For non-local NGOs, boats were the easiest way to spend money raised. Local NGOs accepted them to build up their standing among fisherfolk communities. Fishers accepted the boats even when they were not needed: this was an asset that could be sold. For all donors, the boat hulls were convenient to advertise their philanthropy. "Boats donated by" signs were bold and big. NGOs have often built FRP boats where kattumarams would have been appropriate, because "you can't paint your names on kattumarams" (to quote Vivekanandan of the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) from ***Outlook*** magazine).

Boat building has been indiscriminate. One FRP boat yard on Chennai's East Coast Road normally built 30 boats a year. But it has already built more than 360 boats after the tsunami. Some of the new boats built by boatyards have turned out to be defective. They have needed repairs early, some have even capsized. Cases of mismatch between boats and engines are many: a classic example of "too many boats for too many fishermen."

A standard vallam has a 6 hp or 8 hp engine. But 10 hp engines are being fitted on post-tsunami vallams, often at the request of fishers. Result: vibrations on boats and breakdowns. Noble motives don't always lead to the right field actions.

The BOBP-IGO and the Tsunami

The BOBP-IGO took up a few activities to help the cause of fisherfolk rehabilitation following the tsunami. Examples: Fish marketing implements for fisherwomen of Orur and Olcott kuppam near Besant Nagar (pages 11-12). The regional initiative CONSRN, in which BOBP-IGO is a participant (pages 8-10). A Consultation that gave fishers of Tamil Nadu a forum to voice their needs and their views (pages 5-7). Perhaps the most interesting initiative was the art contests for schoolchildren in Tamil Nadu and Maldives (pages 17-20) which gave evocative expression to the kids' creative energy. A similar contest is to be held in Sri Lanka. Damage and needs assessment studies were conducted in Chennai, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Kanniyakumari districts in India. Data collected is being analysed.

An analysis of four hamlets in Nagapattinam (by Mr K Thadeus) showed that while boats were being distributed indiscriminately, hardly any supplementary equipment such as nets and engines were being provided. Such is the over supply of boats that many trawler owners don't have enough crew – the former crew have their own motorized boats and are looking for crew themselves!

- The tsunami may have reduced the mechanized fleet, but the motorized sector has shown a phenomenal rise – a factor for strife on sea and land. The many FRP boats in some areas generate competition for the same fish variety, and a consequent drop in prices.
- One positive development was that some trawler owners accepted money to repair them but went in for vallams instead. Their trawlers were proving uneconomical, and the owners used this opportunity for a painless exit. Likewise, there was a reduction in shrimp-based mechanised operations, and an increase in intermediate craft using a wide range of nets, catching different fish and catering to domestic urban markets —this may help make fishing operations viable.
- Repair and renovation of damaged fisheries infrastructure is critical. But it is mainly fishing harbours that have received attention and help so far. Much

Fishermen weaving nets to resume fishing in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

needs to be done at the many beaches and fish landing centres used by traditional craft. This may tell on the quality of fish being landed.

- The tsunami instilled in fisherfolk communities a sudden and unaccustomed fear of the sea and its mysteries. They wanted their homes to be relatively far from the shore. But time eased this fear, and the communities now prefer the convenience of living close to the shore, despite the hazards. In fact some of them operate in two homes – the new one given by the government or some other source and the damaged one.
- The tsunami also saw one of the largest humanitarian operations ever. It triggered a global outpouring of money – billions of dollars in cash and kind. In India, some 650 NGOs in 13 coastal districts of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry are flush with funds. There's squandering, misuse and abuse and little regulation. A Tamil Nadu Government order encouraged a "public-private partnership"; NGOs and corporates were expected to shoulder the bulk of the rehabilitation burden. This concept is excellent in theory, even laudable. But there has been little regulation of NGO activity. Some of the temporary shelters

built for fisherfolk by NGOs have been unsatisfactory. Fishers were scorched this year by summer heat, later battered by rains. Water has invaded the shelters. Some temporary shelters caught fire during Diwali, perhaps because of fireworks. The Nagapattinam economy is booming, with all the cash-rich NGOs and their big spending.

- What of the future? A tsunami rehabilitation project in Tamil Nadu assisted by the World Bank and the ADB holds out strong hope. It will enable restoration and improvement of infrastructure including fishing harbours and landing sites, bar mouth dredging, and communication systems. The project also envisages diversification of the coastal economy, with emphasis on mariculture activities including lobster and crab fattening, and seaweed culture.
- Environmental studies are badly needed. Prof S Ramachandran of Anna University says the tsunami's churning of the ocean floor has affected sedimentation and the capacity of coastal wetlands to support marine life. He particularly mentions an impact on the demersal fishery.
- More inputs should be obtained from the scientific community in the task of rehabilitation, including permanent shelters for fisherfolk.
- Community preparedness to meet disasters like the tsunami has to be built up, through education, extension, research and training.
- Insurance schemes for fishing boats are essential. A motor vehicle can't go on the road without insurance; boats in the sea ought to face a similar imperative. Had such insurance schemes been in force, governments need not have spent millions of rupees on replacing fishermen's boats.
- Access to fisheries needs to be regulated, with caps on the number of boats in a particular area. Regulations are also needed on fishing gear, and these should be enforced.
- Fishers must be encouraged to take up other occupations. This is a gradual process, and requires training in other skills and vocations, and constant awareness-raising. Particular attention should be paid to the education of fisher children, so that they develop and pursue other interests – other than the joyous adventure of leaping into boats and setting out to sea.

The "brave new world" of fishers and fisher communities has yet to materialise, but there is no reason why it should not.

– Y S Yadava

Fisherman mending his net, Sri Lanka.

Photo: Agnar Erlingsson