

Good intentions alone won't help

The distribution of fishing assets in the post-tsunami rehabilitation phase in India exposes several flaws

The custom prevalent in south Indian fishing villages prevents civil society organizations (CSOs) from directly supplying fishing gear and other relief material to the beneficiaries of tsunami rehabilitation schemes. It is the *panchayat* (local village council) that decides on the distribution of aid. Thus, almost all CSOs hand over the assets to the *panchayats*, which, in turn, redistribute them to the fishermen. In most cases, the *panchayats* try to share the benefits among all the fishermen, without undue consideration to the issue of damage or ownership.

Fishermen are entitled to get their boats repaired if they were partly damaged or get new ones if they were fully damaged. To do so, they had to surrender the compensation amount they received from the government to the *panchayat*. The *panchayats* try to get as many new boats as possible for their hamlets. After compensating for the losses, the surplus boats are distributed among the crew on the basis of group ownership. Accordingly, a group of four or five receives a fibre-reinforced boat (FRP). The owners of *kattamarams* (traditional craft of logs) were also treated equally and a group of four *kattamaram* owners was given one FRP boat, besides their compensation amount. In Tharangambadi, Tamil Nadu, those who did not get boats were given Rs15,000 (about US\$333) each as compensation from the common fund of the *panchayat*. This amount was derived from the cost of a boat, which is around Rs75, 000. For a group of five, each share thus amounts to Rs15,000. Even trawler owners received FRP boats besides the compensation amounts. In one instance, an organization supplied nets to the fishermen as loans. However, the fishermen refused to repay the loan amounts and, finally, the

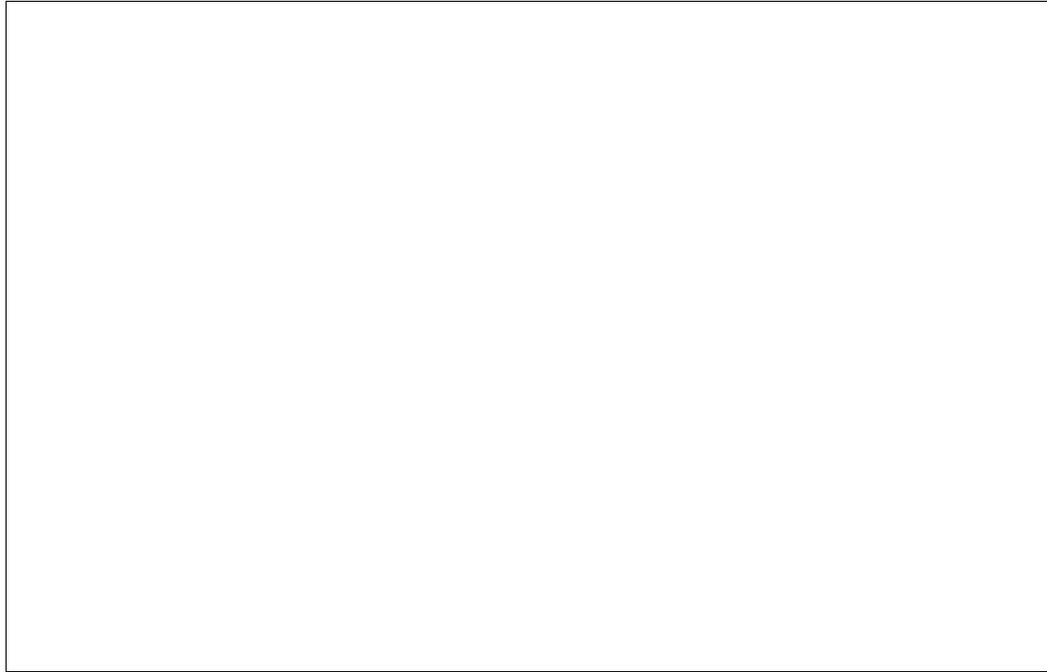
organization had to approach the *panchayat* to settle the issue.

The power structure in fishing hamlets dictates the key role of the *panchayats*. The December 2004 tsunami was a test case for the *panchayats* to prove their power over their communities. Simultaneously, it also revealed the real strength of the people over their *panchayats* as they could exercise their power to call back their representatives. The day after the tsunami, the people of Tharangambadi, for instance, asked the *panchayat* to step down for a new *panchayat* that would incorporate more eligible persons. Accordingly, a new *panchayat* comprising six members from each four wards of Tharangambadi came into power. In Arcottuthurai, another fishing hamlet, a split four years ago had resulted in two *panchayats* ruling two portions of the hamlet. After the tsunami, both *panchayat* heads tried to work together, but failed for political reasons. Both the *panchayats* are trying their best to get aid and are blaming CSOs for not distributing benefits in their area.

In Akkarapettai and Nambiar Nagar, tsunami-hit fishing villages in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, the CSO intervention has had a profound impact on the traditional power structure. The distribution of FRP boats by the CSOs led to a near-revolt by crew against their owners and *panchayats*. Hearing stories of the distribution of FRP boats in other fishing hamlets, these members believed that the *panchayat*, represented by the owners, had conspired to prevent the CSOs from distributing boats to all the crew.

New assets

They thought it unfair that while the owners could get new assets from the compensations they received for their old



boats, the crew themselves, who had worked for several years on these boats, did not get anything. Moreover, the owners were preventing boat distribution, fearing they would not get enough crew to run their own boats if all the crew received boats as well.

Such double-dealing was seen as quite unjustifiable, and made the crew members get together to form their own trade unions to fight for what they believed were their rights. So strong was their power of bargaining that the *panchayats* were forced to underplay their own power in order to avoid a division in the hamlets. Under a compromise formula, the old *panchayats* were dissolved, and foundations laid for new *panchayats* comprising equal representation from the two conflicting groups.

To pacify the crew workers, the new Akkarapettai *panchayat* also purchased and distributed 10 new FRP boats among the fishermen. Although the union constituted in Akkarapettai had dissolved as per the request of the new *panchayat*, the Nambiar Nagar workers union stood firm and refused to be dissolved. It registered itself with the help of the Construction Workers Union and opened an office in the village. Their members demanded that unless the boatowners shared with their crew a portion of the benefits they got as

compensation, they would refuse to go fishing on their boats. Through some NGOs, they also got some boats for the crew fishermen in the village.

Thus, while asset distribution has, on the one hand, helped in re-constituting the traditional *panchayats* through the incorporation of representatives from the fishing community rather than exclusively from the wealthy and traditional power holders, on the other hand, it has divided the community more than ever before.

While the CSOs were competing with one another to supply boats, they ignored the needs of the other sections of people in the fisheries sector, like the women fish vendors, fish merchants, ice-plant owners, and so on. The *panchayat*, which was more concerned with fishermen, also remained aloof from these sections. In short, the entire post-harvest area in the fisheries sector has been kept in the dark during the relief and rehabilitation phase.

Poor communities

The losses of the fish-vending women were far less than those incurred by the fishermen. Yet this does not imply that they need lesser attention. A sizeable number of fish vendor women are either widows or from the poorest families in the fishing community. During the tsunami, most of them lost the implements of their trade—aluminium baskets, scales and

knives—while some others lost the fish they had procured and the thatched sheds used to store the fish.

Such losses may seem insignificant to an outsider, but they are important since they deprive the women of their means of livelihood. Though they started vending once fishing had resumed in the village, they were forced to buy new tools of the trade, for which most had to borrow money from private financiers and moneylenders, also for working capital needs, at a monthly interest rate of five per cent. Some women could get credit for a day. The average loss of a women fish vendor was Rs1, 500 (US\$33). Thus, the cost of one FRP boat could have assisted a hundred women. Only after they had bought new tools did some NGOs come forward to distribute aluminium baskets, raincoats, scales, knives and tiffin boxes. Since these were not given to all the affected women fish vendors, they at first refused to accept the aid. However, they changed their minds later, perhaps realizing it was better to accept whatever little was given.

The reduction in fishing trips post-tsunami and the poor fishing season have also negatively affected the fish vending occupation. The number of working days for the fish vendor women has drastically decreased from a monthly average of 20 to eight. The income from vending also has gone down accordingly, from a monthly average of Rs1,000 (US\$22) to Rs400 (US\$9). This has affected their living standards. Moneylenders are reluctant to give credit to the new entrants to the vending trade (usually newly widowed women and others who need the money to maintain their families), preferring old clients from whom they are fairly confident of getting repayments. Thus several women are forced to pawn their jewellery for credit.

Clearly, there is enough space for meaningful interventions in the fish-vending segment, like ensuring quality, improving processing and marketing, and so on. These are areas where the CSOs can do a lot. Although the women fish vendors have demanded equipment like insulated fibreglass display trays and storage boxes, which will improve their marketing capacity and

ensure better prices, no one has been willing to give them such equipment.

Merchants and commission agents, who used to procure around 60-70 per cent of the total fish landings, are another major group that has suffered financially due to the tsunami. They lost ice-crushing machines, storage crates, generators, sheds and fish stocks. The amounts they had advanced the fishermen for their catches have also remained unproductive throughout the enforced fishing holiday. The money was locked up for an average of three to five months, in the case of the traditional fishing units, and seven to nine months, in the case of mechanized fishing units. Some amounts also remained stuck with other wholesale merchants, who are in no position to return them as regular transactions were affected for a long period. These merchants have lost around Rs50,000 (US\$ 1,096) to Rs500,000 (US\$10,965).

Such losses have not been taken into consideration by the government or the CSOs. They have been forced to depend on moneylenders, who charge 60 per cent annual interest. Another source for borrowing is the people who got government compensations for the deaths of their family members. Normally, the rate of interest of these borrowings is 24-36 per cent per annum. The merchants are not procuring fish at former levels, which implies that their business capacities have diminished after the tsunami. There are only a few new entrants into this business, mainly from those who received death compensations. However, their lack of professional skills prevents them from doing well in the business.

There are other people as well who had invested in the fishery and suffered financial losses consequent to the tsunami, including owners of ice plants and units dealing in fishing equipment. They too have borrowed from moneylenders and those who got compensation. Some have abandoned their occupations.

New homes

As part of the rehabilitation phase, a sizeable proportion of the fishermen from Tharangambadi, Nambiar Nagar, Arcottuthurai and Akkarapettai villages will be shifted to new places that are 750

m to 1.5 km from their original habitations. The fishermen feel that would certainly have a negative impact on their livelihoods in terms of increased effort and time needed to venture into the sea, a growing detachment towards the sea and the fishing way of life and the gradual alienation of the coming generations from the traditional fishing occupation. It is very important that fishermen be at sea at a particular time, if they wish to get good catches. Only if they are by the seashore can they decide whether to go fishing on a particular day, after observing the wind and current directions. Besides, they have to repair their nets and keep their boats safe throughout the day. The fishermen cannot frequent the beach as easily if they are relocated to places that are, on average, 1 km from the shore. The women fish vendors also feel that their misery will increase after their relocation as they will have to toil more.

From these experiences, we can conclude that the post-tsunami asset distribution strategy was not derived from any proper planning, which has, to a certain extent, defeated the good intentions of CSOs. Clearly, rehabilitation interventions should not be driven by donors or CSOs that are totally unfamiliar with the local situation. A proper understanding of the field reality is essential for any meaningful intervention. Any intervention should be guided by the principle of ensuring sustainability and diversity, rather than by charity.

Media publicity should not be the sole criterion for formulating rehabilitation plans. Proper care should be taken to ensure that there is no unevenness in the attention given to various groups in the areas of intervention. Instead of enhancing vulnerability, an intervention should strengthen the cohesiveness of the beneficiary community.

The delivery of rehabilitation services should not create divisions within the recipient communities. The principles followed by some CSOs—like abstaining from creating assets in the mechanized sector—contain enough value to be highlighted. Instead of individual organizational attention, joint efforts of CSOs are better, considering the different

complex dimensions of the rehabilitation issue.

The approach of CSOs should be centred around *people*, rather than their *wishes*, which are often driven by sheer desire and could prove non-sustainable in the long run. The principles of justice and equity may carry different meanings in different contexts, and understanding this is very important for a CSO.

In sum, the distribution of fishing assets in the post-tsunami phase, while demonstrating the increasing concern of CSOs and donors, exposes the flaws in deriving a consensus among them for a more sustainable approach. Undoubtedly, indiscriminate asset creation in the fishery will not help the target community, but will do more harm to their livelihoods, tradition and culture. This should be an eye-opener for all those who wish to be involved in the rehabilitation of fishing communities, especially when the community has an organic link with its sources of livelihood, and practices that go along with such links. It is not just good intentions, but a close understanding of the situation that makes any intervention meaningful. 3

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