

Evaluating Tsunami Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation

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INTRODUCTION:

The Indian Ocean tsunami that hit the coastal regions of Sri Lanka on the morning of 26th December 2004 left 31,000 people dead, 5,600 missing, over 15,000 injured and 500,000 internally displaced.

One million people, 5% of the total population of 19 million, were affected by the disaster. Over half of the areas affected were those already suffering from the effects of the country's ethnic conflict.

Over 380,000 jobs in the fisheries, tourism, small business and cottage industries were lost and around 150,000 homes, 200 schools and colleges, and 100 hospitals and clinics were damaged. In addition to this infrastructure including the coastal railway, power, telecommunications, water supply and the fishing ports were severely damaged.

Like most natural disasters, the tsunami was unexpected and caused sudden and extensive damage. The outpouring from the rest of the world was both heartfelt and immense, with many diverse groups, non-government organisations, government institutions, philanthropists as groups or as individuals, governments, religious institutions and so on contributing towards the relief efforts.

Looking back over the past ten months at the work of the various organisations and the government, one observable factor becomes evident. While professional institutions with experience in such projects and relief and rehabilitation programmes have an evaluation mechanism built into the project itself, others do not.

A majority of the relief organisations that mushroomed in the wake of the disaster look at their work as charitable rather than from a project perspective. The focus is on delivering the relief as soon as possible. Evaluation, which should be a major component of the project, is thus not considered. The actual impact of the project therefore becomes very difficult to measure.

Many organisations were flooded with funds from by donors from various countries, the public, wellwishers, and other members of civil society as soon as news of the devastation began to spread. While donating generously, these bodies needed to know how and where their contributions were being used. The government and other institutions who received the funding were therefore faced a difficult situation.

A continuous narrative and photographic assesment of the original situation and the progress at every stage of development has been found to help in accounting for funds received.

The monitoring and evaluation of any project is based on an available database which allows us to asses the impact and outcomes of the project undertaken.

In the case of natural disaster such as a tsunami the situation differs as immediate action is needed to provide immediate relief.

The tsunami relief involves two main areas; immediate relief and reconstruction and rehabilitation also known as the rapid reaction phase.

IMMEDIATE RELIEF PHASE:

Immediate relief includes the relocation of the population to safe areas, or evacuation, emergency medical assistance, basic needs such as drinking water, dry rations, cooking utensils and shelter, preventing the outbreak of epidemics, clearing and identification of the dead, care of the wounded and so on.

Despite the difficulties it has been possible to evaluate the success of post-tsunami relief carried out during the immediate relief phase. There are indicators that support the impact assesment process, these are as follows;

- Absence of epidemics,
- Accessibility of victims,
- Low incidence of abuse of women and children,
- Few injury related deaths following tsunami, and
- Low suicide rates.

Churches, temples, various institutions, schools, realtives and friends reached out to those affected to provide them with temporary accomodation. Thus, during the early days noone was left unattended.

There was a tremendous response from the medical community abroad with doctors and other health personnel flying in to assist within a few days of the disaster.

Infrastructure including bridges, roads and the railway were cleared and made operational by the government within a few weeks of the disaster allowing relief to be transported to where it was most needed and communication with the affected areas was restored within a few days of the disaster.

Using these indicators it is therefore possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the immediate post-tsunami relief activities despite the fact that there was no prior planning. The success of the relief effort during this period can be attributed to the humanitarian conditions rather than the coordination effort which was almost non-existent.

EVALUATION OF RAPID REACTION PHASE:

Rehabilitation and Reconstruction includes the reconstruction of houses and infrastructure that was destroyed, rehabilitation of the survivors such as resettlement, community development, income generation programmes, psychological counselling and so on in order to bring those affected back to normal, or pre-tsunami life or to a level as close to this as possible.

The main difference between normal and post-tsunami projects was the fact that in 90% of the programmes there was no participation by the people in the decisions, planning and implementation activities of the projects. This was due to the ad hoc manner in which the projects were carried out. In a majority of the projects planning and implementation was carried out without the active involvement of the affected community. There were no process in place by which the community could voice their needs and critiques during implementation.

Organisations failed to plan for awareness building or for mechanisms to deal with problems arising after project closure, nor was there any focus on leadership accountability.

In addition to this the appearance of international NGOs on the scene inadvertently caused problems for local, less well endowed NGOs who have to work long term under very difficult conditions. Local NGOs thus had to pay special attention to their staff and volunteer retention strategies.

With delivery as the main focus little attention was given to the impact of the relief work. The emphasis was on delivering as much as possible to as many as possible. The focus was on the extent of spend and the number of items constructed and not on the expected outcomes. This led to an even distribution in which some victims received more at the expense of others who were practically ignored.

Although their intentions were good, the efforts of the diverse relief groups were often an impediment to the professional organisations. There was duplication in some areas while others were left out of the system. One example is the incident in which a child of a family affected by the tsunami managed to collect ten new school bags as aid.

The environment in which the relief projects had to be implemented was not properly coordinated. Most relief efforts were carried out in an ad hoc manner due to the lack of information. Organisations did not know where to go, whom to select and how, or what to do. Projects therefore could not be planned in advance.

It was only nine months after the tsunami struck that the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) established the Development Assistance Database (DAD) allowing organisation involved in relief and rehabilitation work to see who was doing what where. While there was a database available at divisional secretariate level, this did not have the necessary authenticity. The data was collected by the government officials at local government level and in a hurry. The officials, the Grama Sevakas, were in a unique position to choose who they thought should benefit and who they thought should not leading in some cases to corruption and fraud.

In most cases the NGOs and funders have been forced to adhere to the government policy of building houses to a set design, and then handing these over to the government for distribution. The beneficiaries, who were selected by the government, had not been consulted in any way during the preparation of the plan. A Sarvodaya report quotes community leaders as saying they felt that the community had no voice or role on most matters relating to their own future.

There are therefore difficulties in evaluating the impact of the construction work. The total number of houses constructed would be just that, and not a measure of how the construction had had a long term impact on the lives of the people receiving them.

Whereas some organisations did insist on the participation of the beneficiaries in the selection, construction of the houses, and other project activities, this was not even 10%. Most organisations were forced to use contractors to build housing schemes.

In most projects the emphasis has been on reconstruction of houses rather than on rehabilitation which involves repairing people's lives by providing them with livelihood options. In many cases income generation and livelihood options have not been targets.

LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Due to the above reasons there will be problems, when in two to three years from now, we begin to evaluate the impact of the relief and rehabilitation programmes. At present the only possibility is to measure how many people or families have been re-housed.

Among the challenges in the context of evaluation is the lack of a clear policy for reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. Without a special policy or framework organisations implement their activities in an ad hoc manner making evaluation extremely difficult. Without proper attention to the outcomes and impacts of the projects participatory monitoring and evaluation becomes meaningless.

It is the experience of SAPSRI that many donor organisations and international government organisations monitor the progress of tsunami projects using narrative and photographic media, including film clips of people's actual comments and concerns. Such reports can be used as instruments upon which to base monitoring and evaluation of projects.

Governments should then take a more pro-active role in post-disaster management in the provision of a reliable database and information dissemination network in order to facilitate the eventual evaluation of the projects. This could also ensure a balanced and fair dispersment of assistance.

Mechanisms should be in place for both the government and relief organisations should involve the people affected, allowing the community to be heard and heeded especially since the decisions taken and the actions based on them

directly affect those people's lives. Civil Service Organisations should prepare themselves to work for community action to voice local concerns.

The success of the immediate relief phase in Sri Lanka can provide a learning experience to be utilized and duplicated during future tsunamis or other natural disasters wherever they happen to occur.

The Sri Lankan experience should be studied and disseminated allowing a framework to be developed by which post-disaster projects and programmes can be evaluated.

It is imperative therefore that special focus be placed on developing a policy framework for disaster management projects. One which will take into consideration the peculiarities and problems experienced in the evaluation of post-tsunami projects. This evaluation mechanism should be made available to governments, donors, I/NGOs and other bodies involved in disaster response activities.

Using the experience gained in the 2004 tsunami we should be prepared before the next disaster strikes. Interac whose goal is to improve civil society performance by strengthening management and organisational effectiveness is in the unique position to take over the responsibility of preparing such an evaluation process.

Monitoring is the in built mechanism to check that things are carried out as planned whilst evaluation is a periodic assessment of the relevance, performance, efficiency and impact of the project In the context in the context of its stated objectives.