

## E-NEWS ARTICLE: Aftermath of the Tsunami Crisis

Contributed by Priya Arvind, MSW

As a social work graduate from Madras School of Social work in Chennai, a metropolitan city in Tamil Nadu, I was not prone to the harsh realities of a community hit by a calamity. Fresh out of college, looking out for placements, it was at this point the tsunami took place. It did happen in the city of my residence, although through God's grace, my family had escaped the angry waves, in spite of the fact that our residence was just a few miles from the great Sea!

It was then that I was offered a placement in a reputable organization as a volunteer in the tsunami affected districts of the state. Once on board, I started visiting the tsunami affected villages of the district. It was disaster, calamity everywhere; I came across people in different forms of depression, in a state of shock, bound with heavy losses: life and property. They were clueless with most of their boats, nets (since most of those in the affected communities earned their living as fishermen), houses damaged, no place for shelter. Fear of the sea engulfed them, preventing them from going fishing, it being their main occupation. The government, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), CBOs (community based organizations), and the private sector did come forward, and help was provided to the communities. Let us focus on the attitude of the disaster hit community, a disaster's aftermath effects on the community, and the help and support provided, which to date can be represented as a success story. Below you will find the different stages the affected community had to undergo before overcoming the effects of the tsunami, and the steps undertaken by our team / government / NGOs / CBOs/ corporations for helping them to overcome the disaster.

- **COUNSELING:** People were stranded, engulfed with huge and heavy losses--loss of near and dear ones forever and loss of property. It takes time for them to realize and accept the fact, the bare truth in all its cruelty. As counselors and social workers, we gave them some time and space for accepting this, and we kept reinforcing the truth in a subtle manner. We showed them the truth in worst case scenarios, and helped them to realize that they were far better placed than most of the disaster-hit communities. This did instill a basic sense of confidence in them.

- **EVENTS ORGANISER:** We organized for some events / entertainment shows (by networking with the local NGOs / CBOs) that diverted their attention from the tsunami.

- **STRENGTHENING WOMEN SELF-HELP GROUPS:** With help coming in from various resources, lack of responsibility settled in. The community at one stage kept expecting more and more from the government, NGOs and CBOs, rather than focusing on renewing their occupational status. We encouraged them to focus on their occupation; it was not an easy task. We had to make them understand that help will not be provided to them always and that they had to pursue their occupation for their own good and need to help themselves. Men being the dominant group in the fishermen community, it was difficult to make them realize their responsibilities toward their families. They indulged themselves in excessive drinking from the cash provided for relief / rehabilitation. We then adopted a different approach by focusing on the dominant women self- help groups and counseled them about the need to reinstate their earlier situation, and this did indeed work out!

- **DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT:** We conducted and organized for disaster risk management trainings in coordination with the government, a success story being that of a village well adapted with the basics of disaster risk management techniques escaped without any loss of life by implementing the techniques at the time of tsunami. True to the saying: "Forearmed Forewarned."

- **SMALL ENTERPRISE:** We motivated and encouraged the women to work, by organizing for small enterprise programmes as part of the self-help group scheme.

- **VILLAGE KNOWLEDGE CENTRES /ICT4D (Information and Communication Technology for Development):** We campaigned for setting up of Village Knowledge Centres (computer centres providing computer training courses to the village people and also acting as a tool for disseminating information on specific to localized news to the people). At present, most of the villages have village knowledge centres that have a community radio / early warning system facility embedded within.

- **WATSAN (Water and Sanitation):** More of health awareness campaigns were undertaken, as polluted water and surroundings further contributed to the already worse situation of the disaster. We conducted basic health hygiene campaigns. Women's groups were specifically formed for the purpose of cleaning the common toilets constructed and for cleaning the village as per the fixed schedules.

- **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION:** The community was encouraged to participate in the re-construction of houses, thereby ensuring the quality of the work undertaken. They were motivated to support the government, as well as the non-governmental organizations in the relief, rehabilitation, and recovery phase. Exposure on the various government orders passed was given, such that the community would be clear on what can be delivered by the government, and what initiative they need to put in.

- **AIDS / HIV AWARENESS:** We did organize for HIV / AIDS awareness, although in India it is still considered as a taboo, and the subject cannot be easily broached upon. The aftermath of the tsunami had left most of the women vulnerable; there was a sudden increase in the levels of commercial sex workers, pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. Women and men were focused separately, and the awareness was given under the purview of general health.

All these measures did contribute toward the betterment of the affected communities and did not dispose them off to an even vulnerable state. The tsunami affected villages have been completely transformed with new houses, new boats, and nets. The villagers have been exposed to the deadliest nightmare and have come out of it successfully. They are now venturing into the sea with a new energy, and it is a new beginning for them. There are still some negative impacts prevailing, but as a social worker with a broad and complete knowledge of the community, the system of the government / NGOs/ CBOs, I can completely understand that it has been a joint and a difficult journey for all the parties

involved. In the end, most of the communities were completely transformed for the betterment and this does matter the most. Priya Arvind, MSW, has experience in the fields of information and communication technology for development and disaster risk management. Her interests include issues regarding community development, female infanticide, adoption, and child labor. Editor's Note: This article appears in Issue #82 of THE NEW SOCIAL WORKER's Social Work E-News. Use the form on this page to subscribe to this free e-newsletter.