

Dear friends,

Its three weeks from the terrible day when the Tsunami struck. Much has happened, things have improved in some ways and become worse in other ways.

We left for Nagapattinam on 6th Jan and our contact was the NGOs coordination cell at the District Collectorate where Sushma Iyengar from Kutch [with whom we had worked in the post earthquake rehabilitation], as well as ex colleagues from ACCORD, Gudalur, were already supporting local NGOs SIFFS and Sneha in the rehabilitation work.

AS soon as we reached, we were briefed of the developments so far in the coordination of relief work between the NGOs and the Govt. We were also told that the next phase was to design and construct temporary shelters where affected people can be housed. We were asked to work on this and to make recommendations. We decided to visit the affected villages and familiarize ourselves with the local materials and methods of building and talk to the affected people before coming up with suggestions.

On 7th Anu visited Velankanni, Cheridhur, Kameshwaram, Vanavanmadevi, Vellapallam and, Pushpavanam. People were still coming with relief material and dumping them. There was much throwing material in an insensitive way. For example in Kameshwaram, a group called Vishwas were standing on the Lorry and asking people to chant mantras and then handing out materials in an arrogant manner with much shouting. Two women here said that they had worked hard all their lives and were leading comfortable middle class lives and found it humiliating to put their hands out to receive relief. In Vellapallam, Pushpavanam and Vanavanmadevi the relief camps were closed without notice today and the people asked to go back to the villages. The reason given was that the schools [where the camps were] were to be reopened that coming Monday and so needed clearing out! This created a lot of unrest and even the community kitchen got closed [the people went hungry] and the people were in no condition to start cooking yet [not to mention many who don't have a house to cook in]. People had to transport all the relief materials that they got [a sack of 60kg of rice, stove, mats etc.] plus their children to the village where only a few houses remained standing. When all this was brought to the authorities notice their explanation was that the community sheds were getting ready where the people were supposed to be moved. Of course the sheds were nowhere near getting completed at this point in time.

On 7th I visited the fishing villages around Nagai town [akkaraipettai, ayanattutheru, nambiarnagar, nagore]. These were the really badly affected villages. It was already day 13 after the tsunami and slowly the people had started going back to their villages to salvage whatever is recoverable from the debris. During the day the relief camps had mainly children and the elderly who had lost family and were yet to recover psychologically. People who had lost their houses completely and didn't have a place to go to were sitting idle, lost and brooding over fate. There was fear of going back to their house sites and uncertainty as to what was going to happen next.

Looking at the kind of houses that are locally built, the following was obvious:

- The thatch houses have low roof levels [3 to 4 feet from ground] to withstand cyclonic winds
- The roofs have steep slopes to take care of heavy rains
- Thatch roofs structure is properly anchored to the ground [some of the roof rafters come all the way to the ground and are anchored by burying into the ground]
- Generally entrance and openings face the land-side [as the sea side would bring cyclones]
- Most people know how these are built. In some villages thatching is not done by the fisher folk and they employ the dalits from the area. But they are familiar with the construction of such structures.
- Many fisher folk are well to do and have a middle class lifestyle. Some of them even have 2 story buildings with concrete roofs.

From our previous experience in Kutch [post earthquake], we knew temporary shelters will need to be occupied for at least 6 to 9 months as permanent structures will take time to come up.

Based on our visits we suggested that

- Individual huts made of thatch, be built as temporary shelter.
- Thatch is easily available; familiar to the locals; will be comfortable in the coming summer months; people can be involved in their construction [which will have a therapeutic value of getting people back on their feet].

The Government also agreed to this and a GO that was passed reiterated the need to put up temporary shelters based on people's choice and using locally available materials. The Govt. also agreed not to use corrugated GI sheets as these can become very hot and also fly during high winds and become dangerous.

In the next couple of days the Govt went back completely on all that was agreed upon. In one village the local IAS officer in charge built a large shed as a community shed, citing lack of land to put up individual units, and the need to build quickly as the relief camps were closing. This idea caught on as a wild fire among the other officials in charge of the other areas of the district. No amount of arguing from our side seemed to have any effect. The result was that in village after village the Govt started putting up row after row of sheds divided into cubicles. These were being built of asphalt coated corrugated boards, which are lightweight. The manner in which these came up, there was no proper anchoring, and these are likely to fly away during high winds. Also being made of asphalt, these will get very hot during the day.

Simultaneously we were helping NGOs at the coordination Centre to put up individual thatch sheds. The Govt started a panic by stating that thatch sheds were a fire hazard and so inappropriate. We had foreseen this and in fact had emphasized that the units should have adequate open space between them, which is also required for putting up bathing

space, for outdoor cooking and also for storing nets and other equipment. The Govt did not show any willingness to make adequate space available for these temporary housing. SIFFS an NGO working in Thrangambadi put up these individual units of thatch and we spent a couple of days at the site helping in this process. We also designed a community toilet here as the usual place used for open defecation got cleared for temporary shelter and the people [especially women] had nowhere to go. The Govt now agrees that the temporary structures were a mess and slowly the NGOs have started putting up individual thatch huts.

While all this was happening, the Govt in Chennai was already moving fast on the permanent shelter policy. We were told about the need to talk to the officials to make our recommendations, lest the fiasco that was the temporary shelter construction turned out to be repeated.

Anu and I decided to make a quick survey of a couple of fishing villages to get some understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of the community, at least to bring out uniqueness of the situation to convince officials of the need to come up with a process based approach that would give the community a say in the rehabilitation.

Some interesting aspects that come out of this study:

- Fisher folk are fiercely independent...they don't like to work under another person.
- They are highly skilled and are proud of this skill. An interesting story is how when a meeting was being held on the beach, some of the elders just by looking at the sea could sense a catch in the distance, and within minutes the whole crowd dispersed and launched their boats.
- There is a vast range of employment...from individual catamaran owners to small boat owners to trawler owners. Even catamaran owners can strike rich with a good catch and conversely trawler owners could get into debt owing to the high input cost and poor catch.
- Even the well off fishermen [trawler owners etc.] like to live in the village with the poorer ones as they need the proximity to be able to persuade fishermen to come as crew on their boats.
- Women from poorer families are involved in selling of fish and also in petty trades [selling snacks etc.]

We went to Chennai to make recommendations to the Govt on the permanent shelter policy. These covered GO/NGO partnership, mechanisms for the partnership, owner driven housing process, the design brief for habitat design etc. Anu and I collaborated with the Auroville based shelter group and we came up with the recommendations. For full details refer to the website: [www.tsunami_2004.org]. This site also has updates on what's happening at Nagapattinam District.