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# Targeting Poor People

## Rebuilding lives after the tsunami

25 June 2005

### Introduction

In the six months since the tsunami hit, the relief and reconstruction effort has delivered real progress for the millions of people affected by the disaster. The relief effort helped to stop the outbreak of diseases such as cholera in affected communities, partly through the effective delivery of clean water and sanitation. A predicted massive increase in malnutrition was also prevented through the speedy delivery of food aid. Already in the initial phase of the reconstruction, we are beginning to see that for many people incomes are returning to previous levels, and many of the affected people are moving to permanent homes from temporary shelter. However, progress will take time and Oxfam, like many other aid agencies, is committed to working to rebuild the lives of those affected by the tsunami for at least five years in what is a very difficult and complex context. Many communities are still very traumatised, and the pace of reconstruction will have to go forward at different speeds in different areas.

Oxfam's experience in disasters has shown that, however 'natural' they might be, they are profoundly discriminatory in their impact on people. Wherever they hit, pre-existing social structures and inequalities such as gender and age and income levels will determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others

will pay a higher price. As the reconstruction effort gathers pace, all those involved need to ensure that the poorest and most marginalised people, those whose lives were devastated by the tsunami, are specifically targeted with aid so they are not left behind. Those involved in the aid effort must find ways to promote the participation of marginalised and vulnerable people to enable them to influence the reconstruction process rather than focussing on quick fix solutions that benefit those with the greatest access to government structures. The aid effort to date has been successful in providing people with the essentials of water, shelter and food but the next phase of the reconstruction effort is a far tougher challenge. The focus now is to deliver aid programmes that are based on need, rather than purely to compensate for lost assets.

There is no doubt that the scale and scope of the disaster has made the tsunami the biggest challenge the aid community has ever faced. Almost a quarter of a million people are confirmed dead or are still missing as a result of the devastation wrought by the tsunami in Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, the Maldives, the Seychelles, and even as far away as Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. A further 1.9 million people were forced to abandon their homes. Thousands of houses were damaged or destroyed, roads blocked, and agricultural land flooded with salty water.<sup>1</sup>

The incredibly generous response from the public, who gave Oxfam International some \$250 million has enabled Oxfam and its partners to help some 1.1 million people to date. As we enter the rehabilitation phase of the aid effort, there is now a historic opportunity to do far more than simply rebuild the poverty of the past. But to help those hit hardest by the tsunami - the small-scale farmers, fishermen, many women and casual labourers - and provide them with new opportunities and to use the resources most effectively will take time. The temptation to go for quick fix solutions must be avoided as poor communities need to be driving the decisions as to what their futures will look like. The danger is that unless this approach is taken, the divide between the better-off, and the dispossessed and vulnerable will widen.

## Before the tsunami struck

The Indonesian province of Aceh, Sumatra, was the hardest-hit by the tsunami. Years of insecurity and armed conflict had already cost lives, reduced prosperity, and left a deteriorating infrastructure. According to the government's own statistics, in 2002 (the latest date for which data is available), 48 per cent of the population had no access to clean water, 36 per cent of children under the age of five were undernourished, and 38 per cent of the population had no access to health facilities. Things were getting worse: the poverty rate had doubled from 14.7 per cent in 1999 to 29.8 per cent in 2002.

In India, it was the southern coastal states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu that were the worst affected. Both states are relatively wealthy; the \$3 per head per year that Kerala spends on health care is more than almost any other state in India. It also has the highest literacy rate and the lowest infant mortality rate in the country. Even so, only 19 per cent of houses have access to safe water. In Tamil Nadu, nearly half (46 per cent) of children under the age of five are underweight due to malnutrition. The people of the coastal communities, mainly fisherfolk, farmers, and labourers, are some of the poorest in the whole country. In each of the three most affected districts

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1 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/4126019.stm>

(Nagapattinam, Cuddalore, and Kannaykumari) the average person lives on less than \$1 per day.

The tsunami struck a relatively narrow but long (1000km) stretch of Sri Lanka's coastline from Jaffna in the north, affecting the entirety of the eastern and southern coasts and part of the west coast. Despite the boom in tourism in the south in recent years, one-quarter to one-third of the population in the areas affected by the tsunami live below the poverty line, 29 per cent of children under the age of five are underweight due to malnutrition, 23 per cent of the population have no sustainable access to improved water sources, and 45 per cent of the population receive wages of less than US\$2 per day. Information is not available for much of the north and east, but these areas are widely considered to be among the poorest in the country as a result of 20 years of conflict. Around 97,000 families are internally displaced, with around 27,000 living in welfare camps. There is little infrastructure; in one of the areas where Oxfam works, it is estimated that 43 per cent of the population does not have access to adequate sanitation, and an estimated 50,000 children are not in school.

## The immediate impact and relief effort

In the aftermath of the tsunami, an unprecedented relief effort reached millions of the affected people, supporting their efforts to survive a horrific situation. Huge efforts were made by many to distribute aid according to need, but often the obstacles of devastated transport and communications systems got in the way.

In some areas, the force of the tsunami was so strong that it destroyed everything in its path. In Leupung, one of the sub-districts of Aceh, all the houses were destroyed, and 80 per cent of the people living in some of the sub-villages were killed. Peneyoung, the central business district of Banda Aceh, was also badly hit.

In Sri Lanka in areas further from the shore or better protected from the sea, the wave destroyed fragile houses of the less well-off, made of wood, clay and thatch, or wattle and daub, leaving the more expensive brick-built houses standing, allowing people to take refuge on the upper floors. In Vaharai, the poorest area of Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka, almost 70 per cent of the houses were made of clay and thatch.

Even at this early stage, the impact on families differed according to their levels of income and the size of their personal assets, with the poorest suffering most from the disaster.

Before the international relief effort went into action, survivors began to move into makeshift accommodation; individuals, communities, and civil society organisations picked up and cared for the injured; the search for missing relatives began. In wealthier areas, people had more resources to feed and care for the survivors. When the international relief effort began, it took more time to reach more isolated, often poorer, areas.

One such example is Vaharai, in Sri Lanka, where people live in fishing villages strung out along the coast, at least two hours drive from Batticaloa town. Infrastructure is poor with bad roads and no electricity supply.

When the tsunami hit Batticaloa, medical staff were on hand to provide assistance to people close to the town. However, in Vaharai there were no local amenities; people had to be transported to hospital by boats and along the poor quality roads. A critical bridge was washed away, and in some places medical teams and emergency health units were not in place until mid January. A field hospital was only set up after the bridge was repaired one-and-a-half months later.

The number of options open to people often depended on wealth. Better-off families were more likely to stay with friends and relatives, whereas poorer families were forced to find shelter in camps.

Around Batticaloa town, when the tsunami hit, people moved back from the shore and stayed in public buildings or in the houses of friends or relatives. Only around 50 per cent of them ended up in camps. In Vaharai, there are few settlements beyond the coast, so many people had nowhere to go and slept outside. Eighty per cent of them ended up in camps, where most of them remain.

Wealth was also a factor in determining options for people on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The indigenous tribal people on the islands mainly lived off the forest, sea, and land and had a negligible cash economy. The tsunami swept away their palm and coconut trees, their boats and nets, and their houses.

The comparatively better-off government officers, army personnel, and businessmen who had settled in the islands were able to move to the capital, Port Blair, or to return to the mainland. The majority of the indigenous people had no resources to do so. They went to stay in camps, where they were completely dependent on government and NGO assistance.

The impact of the tsunami was also different according to gender. In terms of mortality rates, many more women than men lost their lives to the tsunami, because they stayed behind to look after children and other relatives; often more men than women are able to swim; often more men than women are able to climb trees. It is vital for the purposes of relief and reconstruction to understand the consequences of the demographic changes in the tsunami-affected area on women and men. Women survivors have faced problems of increased domestic violence, particularly in temporary camps. Women's groups in Sri Lanka have raised the concern that the relief efforts need to go much further to address the safety and well-being of women, and cases of domestic violence have been reported to Oxfam and other organisations. Women and men affected by the tsunami need to be consulted to ensure that what is provided is indeed what women and men need.

## The reconstruction process

There is a danger that the different impacts on richer and poorer people, and men and women will become accentuated as the reconstruction efforts gather pace. Despite the aspiration to leave people in a better situation than before the tsunami hit, income gaps could widen. Many families who had marginal livelihoods, few assets, or are unable to make themselves heard (as is the case for many of the remaining women) are in danger of being excluded from the reconstruction process altogether.

## Livelihoods

*'After the tsunami, everyone went to help the fishermen. But there were still fish in the sea. My rice crop was destroyed and my fields were covered in mud and salt.'*

**Smallholder farmer in Poompuhar (Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu, India)**

Much of the ongoing work to restore people's livelihoods has been directed at the fishing communities. Whether through repairing or replacing boats, or restoring harbours or improving refrigeration facilities to get fish to market, investment is pouring in to the fisheries. This support has been essential in getting the fishing

communities working again. But again, the people who are benefiting the most are frequently those who were better off before the tsunami.

In Sri Lanka it was estimated that 19,000 private fishing boats had been damaged or destroyed; by April, pledges had already been received to replace the vast majority of them.

The better-off fishermen have fishing licences that cover the ownership of the boat and the right to fish in a certain area. They often employ up to 30 poorer labourers to work on their boats, often on very low wages and with no job security. The Sri Lanka government programme and NGOs will not only replace the boats of licensed fishermen, but also the other equipment such as nets, floats and hooks. Major government donors are preparing to replace large fishing vessels.

It is less clear what will happen to small-scale fishermen who do not have a licence. These poorer fishermen may have fished on other people's boats or in lagoons with their own nets. As the focus of the aid effort is on the registered fishermen, they will find it harder to get assistance. The same applies to people involved in other – unregistered – small activities, such as the women who made a living from drying the fish.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka government assistance is being targeted at registered businesses. Registration costs a small fee and is used as a basis for taxation. Poorer people and informal businesses that were not registered will miss out on much assistance. The owners of the large coir (coconut fibre) mills are being compensated for damage. The poor coir workers who earn tiny amounts have not been registered, so they will not receive aid to help them replace lost equipment such as the machines they used to produce yarn (costing around \$25), nor to help repair the lagoons where they soak the coir fibres as part of the production process. Furthermore, in most cases, businesses were in the husband's name; if a woman's husband died, she will be unable to claim assistance.

Other craftsmen, petty traders, and casual labourers were also badly affected. In Indonesia, people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder – those relying on small prawn- and fish-ponds and self-employed craftsmen – had very few savings or assets. Without their land or tools, they have no way of making a living. Carefully planned interventions can address these issues, however. To achieve its aim, the reconstruction process has to be equitable and involve democratic participation. The onus is on national governments and their authorities, supported by the international donor community and international and national NGOs to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to make this happen.

#### **Restoring saltpans in Southern India and promoting equal wages**

In the saltpans of Vedaranyam, some 15,000 casual labourers, many of them from the *dalit* caste, found their work was no longer needed. After the tsunami hit, the saltpans became mud flats. With their source of income lost, workers had to look for work in areas affected by the tsunami, but opportunities were limited. In addition, since most of these labourers live at least fifteen kilometres from the sea, their houses were not damaged; in the first few months after the tsunami, they received no cash or food support from government.

Oxfam and local partner FACE (Federation of Associations for Community Empowerment) started a cash-for-work scheme so that the pans owned by small leaseholders could be rebuilt after the wave had swept through the intricate patterns of channels and bunds, or mini-dykes, where the salt water dries to produce the crystals. The pans are now in operation again, and a second cash-for-work scheme, starting in June, will improve the water storage basins.

Restarting this industry has had the effect of getting the local economy going again, according to the director of FACE, Dr Ravi Chandran, preventing a likely migration of the casual labourers away from their homes in search of work

Oxfam and FACE also introduced a new concept to the ancient salt-panning industry – equal wages. Both men and women received 72 rupees a day under the cash-for work system.

*'Because of Oxfam we have been given the chance to work and we are really happy about that. They are paying us 72 rupees. Before we used to get only 50 rupees, now both men and women are getting equal wages and this is something that is new to us and we're very happy about it.'*

**Shellam, a saltpan worker**

### **Self-help groups reaching the poorest people in India.**

Oxfam has worked with coastal communities around the coast of the Bay of Bengal for 24 years, mainly with artisan fisherfolk. Oxfam supported self-help groups in the area in 1984 to deliver assistance to the most affected communities. Working through a network of local NGOs and community-based organisations, the East Coast Development Forum (ECDF), these groups were scaled up in response to the tsunami, with 24,000 families destined to receive assistance through this programme in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Ninety-eight per cent of self-help group members are women.

#### **Selvi's story**

Selvi worked as a fish vendor for fifteen years in the district of Kancheepuram. Her husband Venkatesan went to the sea as a daily labourer, and they have two young children. The total household income was around Rs75 or \$1.80 per day. With the support of Venkatesan's father they were able to send their children to the nearby primary school. The tsunami changed the family's life forever; Venkatesan's father was killed and the family lost all they owned as well as their means to make a living.

Thanks to the intervention of the Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society, Selvi was provided with relief materials like rice, dhal, biscuits, and utensils for her livelihood for three months.

In the meantime, she gathered 16 other Irula women from her village to form the MGR Self Help Group and open a bank account. They selected a president, secretary, and treasurer and decided to have a compulsory deposit of Rs30 per month to establish an inter-lending process, which will mean they do not have to resort to money lenders. Oxfam has provided support in book keeping and monitoring, as well as providing fishing nets through the group.

Selvi and her husband have been able to return to their previous work, and are planning to send their children back to school next term. As well as the direct support, the self-help group has helped Selvi to develop the skill and courage to raise her voice against social discrimination, the first step in holding the government to account for its actions.

Most of the deaths in Sri Lanka were among fishing communities, and their villages were the most visibly devastated. These communities were in the 'front-line', losing their homes, assets, and incomes. People had no choice but to seek shelter in temporary camps. They continue to be the most vulnerable and a priority for targeting support in the reconstruction process.

To assess the impact of the tsunami on incomes after six months, one of Oxfam's partner organisations - Arvothayan - conducted a income survey in advance of work to help reconstruct livelihoods in the area of Vaharai. It included details of the income and employment levels of 112 families in a village in the area before and after the tsunami. The information came from people whose homes had been fully destroyed and who were living in camps as well as people whose houses had been damaged but had been able to stay in their homes.

According to the survey, the income of the head of the household averaged 64 cents per day before the tsunami. Such an income would classify all of these families as living in extreme poverty. That was before the tsunami struck. With these incomes it would have been almost impossible for the villagers to have built up any substantial assets, and thus when the tsunami hit they would have been highly vulnerable.

	Currently living in camps	Currently living in houses
Average head of household income per day before tsunami (US\$)	\$0.64	\$0.63
Average head of household income per day after tsunami (US\$)	\$0.04	\$0.56
Percentage drop in income	94%	11%
Percentage unemployed before tsunami	1.6%	8%
Percentage unemployed after the tsunami	79%	8%

The survey shows that both those whose houses were fully destroyed and those who suffered only partial damage saw their incomes drop significantly as a result of the tsunami from an average of 64 cents per day to 27 cents per day, a more than halving of already meagre incomes. The tsunami has thus helped push all these families deeper into poverty.

However, despite starting on similar incomes, those living in the camps who had lost their homes saw a much bigger fall in income than those in their own houses. Those living in the camps saw the income of the head of the household fall from an average of 64 cents per day to 4 cents per day, a cut of 94 per cent. Unemployment levels remain at 80% six months after the tsunami.

The much larger impact on people living in the camps is linked to their total loss of assets and also to their dislocation from their former lives and livelihoods by their relocation to camps. In many cases, aid will have temporarily compensated for this income loss, rebuilding sustainable livelihoods for the long term is essential. Current incomes are insufficient to survive, let alone rebuild lives. Unless poor people's needs

are addressed, particularly their need for a sustainable income, the area devastated by the tsunami could find itself further devastated by poverty.

The inhabitants of the so-called 'second-line' villages further back from the sea were also severely affected. They are mostly small-scale farmers and agricultural labourers, and are usually poorer than those who make a living from the sea. In India, the waves swept up to 3km inland, often flooding up the drainage canals. Vast areas of cultivated land were drenched in salt water; dykes, fences, and irrigation channels were destroyed or filled with silt. Livestock, chickens, goats, and thousands of cows – which provided some essential income to the smallholders – had drowned.

Casual labourers were also deprived of work on the harvest and the fields. However, as very few lives were lost in these agricultural villages and damage to their homes was less, the relief effort in comparison to work in the coastal zone was very limited, with material aid and financial compensation from the government coming much more slowly.

Oxfam and its partners have sought to fill these gaps with cash-for-work projects to help farmers clear the ruined rice crop from their fields and by supplying salt-tolerant seeds.

A central part of Oxfam's work has been promoting equal wages. In many places, the tradition has been to pay women less for the same work. This has meant that women are particularly prone to poverty. Promoting equal wages for equal work is a key mechanism for lifting families out of poverty.

## Land and Housing

The repair and provision of housing illustrates some of the socio-economic divisions that risk being entrenched by the reconstruction process. Before the tsunami, many of the most marginalised people were renting houses and land informally and were not landowners themselves.

In addition, even those who had land title now often find themselves unable to prove it. This is because of the loss of official documents or because land rights formerly rested with men, but where women are now the heads of households. Without a land title, these families risk being dispossessed of their land. One concern is that this land should be protected from corporate interests in developing the land for tourist enclaves, and safeguarded for communities to rebuild their livelihoods. It is the poorest people who are the most dependent on land title for their livelihoods. The only assets of fisherfolk are related to fishing, such as boats, nets, etc., which have value only as long as they have access to a near-by beach to keep their boats. Without title they cannot sell their property or show they have a rightful claim to it. Similarly, the only asset that many smallholder farmers have is the land they grow crops on, and without land title they can neither sell their property nor gain food or income from farming.

For many such people, the problems now surrounding land rights could eliminate their livelihoods if not resolved quickly and equitably. Without land rights, these families may be ineligible for the official grants available to return to their homes and land and rebuild. They may have no option other than to be resettled far away from their livelihoods or to return to the coast and live in informal slums.

For example, in Sri Lanka, the government has put in place a buffer zone clear of housing of 100–200m to protect people from future tsunamis. It is estimated that a total of 45,000 houses will need to be relocated outside this zone. The government's policy is



to provide people who lived in the buffer zone with a new, permanent house worth around \$4,500. Unfortunately, to claim a house people need to have a title or deeds for their old house and land. This means many of the poorest people – who rented, squatted on land, or shared land with others – will miss out. Some local authorities are showing more flexibility than others, waiving the requirement for a title deed for other proof that they were living in the area. In these better circumstances, an information campaign is needed to ensure that the poorest and the less educated people are aware of their rights and how claim them.

Outside the buffer zone, people whose houses have been destroyed can receive up to Rp250,000 (\$2,500) in cash grants to build their own houses through a government-funded World Bank self-build programme. This money is delivered in three installments: the first installment is for building the foundations, and people only receive the second installment when this work is completed. However, many families are finding the money is often insufficient to complete work on the foundations, and so poorer people, who are unable to pay to finish the work themselves, will not receive the rest of the payments.

#### **Borrowing money in India**

Lack of savings has meant that the very poor have had to borrow money. They could not usually go to banks to borrow, because they lacked land and other assets. Instead, they had to visit money-lenders, who charge 36 per cent per 100 days, the rate rising in case of default (a bank would usually charge 12 per cent per annum).

*'We cannot borrow from banks as we have no houses and cattle as surety. Half my 4000 rupees [\$ 50, a one-off grant from the government] had to go to the moneylender.'*

**A woman labourer in Nagapattinam**

Likewise, in Indonesia, poor people are also falling behind in the recovery process. The tsunami displaced up to 500,000 people. Many thousands moved in with relatives or host communities, or were housed in government-built Temporary Location Centres (also known as Barracks) or in camps. Better-off families, who may have had savings or wealthier relatives who were able to help have already been able to leave the camps, but thousands of poor people remain. They depend on food distribution and government cash handouts (the *Jadup*) to survive. The *Jadup* is rarely paid on time, and has been cut to levels they are unable to survive on. The cost of obtaining new land certification documents and identity cards – needed in order to access reconstruction programmes – despite being small, is prohibitive. Those who could not afford to own their land and thus rented prior to the tsunami cannot afford even the previous rent, let alone new rents, which have risen dramatically due to the housing shortage.

#### **Taking control in Indonesia**

In some areas of Aceh, the devastation was so complete it is almost impossible to tell where a house once stood, let alone where the land boundaries were. It is a huge task to redefine these boundaries, and one that is understandably taking time. Rather than wait for government agencies to do this eventually, the survivors of Lamjabat village in Banda Aceh have decided to take matters into their own hands. The community is demarcating land, led by the former village administrator, using nothing more than a 30m measuring tape. Landowners are present when measurements are taken, to avoid arguments. The village lost 1,500 out of its 1,700 pre-tsunami population, and so many plots are without owners. The community is also trying to track down the legal heir to each plot, in itself no easy task but one that is vital to avoid future disputes.

## A way forward

Poor and vulnerable people in many tsunami-hit regions need to be given a stronger voice in the reconstruction effort. There is an array of examples – like those cited in this report – of good practice where consultation with, and participation of poorer potential beneficiaries is promoted in the reconstruction process. However, governments and international agencies can still do more to seize the opportunity and use the funds provided through the tsunami to take steps to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in tsunami affected countries. With this approach, people living in poorer communities can find themselves in a better situation than before the tsunami struck.

To make this happen, Oxfam International recommends that:

- Governments and international agencies should proactively seeking to integrate the particular needs of the poorest beneficiaries. The most efficient mechanism to ensure effective and inclusive aid delivery is to establish 'real' bottom up accountability to the community. Poor people need to be included in decision-making mechanisms to ensure that the reconstruction programmes meet their needs. This requires their direct and equal participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of reconstruction programmes. Women, and widowers need in particular to be consulted and encouraged to participate.
- Reconstruction aid should be provided more on the basis of need, with less emphasis on what assets people had prior to the tsunami. This is the only way to use the generous donations of reconstruction money to move towards the Millennium Development Goals of halving the number of people living in poverty by 2015.
- Governments should reassess their reconstruction plans to ensure that they are focused on reducing poverty. Governments and international agencies should not be tempted to use quick fix solutions that benefit the most privileged and powerful interests of society or those with greatest access to existing structures and entitlements.
- Women's work and wages must be prioritised in reconstruction programmes. Often women's needs and their role in the economy are not accounted for. If this is not addressed, poor women will be the worst affected and fall deeper into poverty.

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