



John Cobb/Help the Aged

Perumal, 75, Relief camp, India.

75 year old, Perumal, quietly stood alone in the remains of his thatched hut, refusing to join the hungry crowds jostling for aid when relief material was being distributed in his area. When asked why he did not join in, Perumal shook his head and said, 'I have been pushed out on earlier occasions and have fallen on the ground. I know I will get nothing this time around too. The fastest gets the food, the strong one wins. Older people and the injured don't get anything.'

Executive summary

This report describes the impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami on older people in four severely affected countries – India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand – based on a rapid assessment survey carried out during the initial relief phase. It aims to inform agencies working on relief and rehabilitation plans and to assist future emergency response planning.

Older people, often neglected in normal circumstances are even more vulnerable in disasters. Despite international protocols such as the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Sphere guidelines the research confirms that in the tsunami they were not specifically targeted and in some cases, the relief effort discriminated against them. In many cases older men and women were unable to access health care, food and cash support due to discrimination, lack of information or support mechanisms.

Older people form nearly 10 per cent of the population in Asia and before the tsunami they actively supported their families through cash earnings, pensions or work in kind – looking after children or working in family businesses. Now they want to be consulted on the decisions that affect them and secure support for themselves and their families to rebuild their livelihoods.

Summary of key findings

Lack of data on older people affected

The lack of accurate data disaggregated by gender and age hindered assessment of the impact on older people, and concealed their vulnerability. As a result they were overlooked in the initial relief effort. The failure to record the number and location of older survivors also means that this section of the population is likely to be forgotten in plans for recovery and rehabilitation.

Age discrimination

Age discrimination caused older survivors to miss out on distribution of relief supplies, monetary compensation and access to services. Older people living with their children's families became almost invisible when the relief material was distributed to the younger adults. Relief workers interviewed generally identified children, particularly orphans, as the main group needing special provision and did not regard older people as a vulnerable group with particular needs.

Denial of rights

Most older people wanted to return to their previous living arrangements and felt living in camps further undermined their independence. Those who had lived with their families wanted to stay with them and those who had lived alone wanted their own accommodation. Policies that prevent communities from returning to coastal land will have a serious impact on older people, who are less likely to have documentation and more likely to be excluded from housing reconstruction assessments. The research shows that this insecurity is especially strong among the older women interviewed, who displayed the strongest ties to their homes.

Exclusion of older people

Relief interventions did not recognise older people's positive contribution in coping with emergencies and little effort was made to consult older people or to recognise the supportive roles they play in communities. Relief workers viewed older people as recipients of help and not as active contributors and made no effort to include them in camp activities.

Livelihood insecurity

Financial insecurity was the main concern of older survivors. Many had lost their livelihoods as well as family members who had provided them with support. Despite evidence of the complex reciprocal arrangements in families, with older people both providing support and being supported, livelihood assessments carried out by relief agencies ignored their roles and needs.

Social protection

Older survivors sought help in obtaining social pensions, where these already existed, or access to short-term relief payments. The possibility of a regular cash income, however small, provides critical support for older people, especially older women, who are among the poorest. The particular health problems that older frail people encounter in an emergency were not adequately addressed, for example, treatment for chronic diseases and psychosocial problems.



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Kupamma, 65, Relief Camp, India.

Kupamma, 65, lost her husband, only child, and home in the tsunami. She has no family and no means of support. 'I have lost everything. All I have now is the sari I am standing in.'

I have no option but to stay in the camp. I am getting food so what do I care if it is comfortable or not? Right now all I want is food three times a day and a place to sleep. If you give me a boat I will rent it out to get money.'

Family collecting fish for market, Nias Island.



HelpAge International

Summary of recommendations

HelpAge International is calling on governments and relief agencies to:

- Collect disaggregated data by age and gender
- Recognise older people as a vulnerable group and implement intergenerational approaches in emergency response programmes that support older peoples roles
- Establish mechanisms to support older people to access their entitlements
- Develop social protection schemes in the form of small regular cash payments to older people
- Support vulnerable older people who want to work to establish their livelihoods
- Create opportunities for older people to participate in decision making