

Tsunami Reconstruction Efforts in Tangalle, Sri Lanka

It's been almost 2 months since the Tsunami struck Sri Lanka and the focus of current aid efforts has shifted from medical relief towards the reconstruction of infrastructure and the rehabilitation of people's lives. Together with my sister I traveled to Tangalle on the southern coast of Sri Lanka to participate in a reconstruction effort supported by NICCO (Nippon International Cooperation for COMMUNITY development), a non-governmental organization registered with the United Nations. Prior to my trip I spoke with Sathis De Mel, founder of the Arthacharya foundation, a non-governmental poverty alleviation organization in Sri Lanka, about advice on how best to proceed.

“The foremost need is to provide psychological counseling to survivors. The anguish and pain resulting from the loss of loved ones, property and livelihoods is not easily overcome but if left unaddressed will lead to intractable mental trauma in the long term.”

“Avenues to continue the grieving process through opportunities to talk, document and acknowledge each individual's loss must be encouraged”

“Individuals must also be given incentives to begin work.”

“Programs that pay tsunami survivors to actively engage in reconstruction efforts need to be promoted as this helps create ownership of the rehabilitation process. Moreover, a work schedule allows one to keep occupied and remain active through the grieving period.”

“Rebuilding permanent housing is the next major task. While several organizations have already made pledges to the reconstruction effort it is important to realize that fishing communities are not going to welcome a shift to inland locations.”

“All available options need to be discussed openly with the local community as building houses is the easy half of the problem, encouraging individuals to move will be much harder. “

The 150km drive along the coast to Tangalle usually provides a scenic view of the ocean and beach but was now in addition juxtaposed with flattened buildings, uprooted trees, overturned fishing boats and multicolored tents of all shapes and sizes. This contrast highlighted the destruction further and kept playing on my mind long after. It was encouraging to see so many volunteer organizations helping with the clean-up effort but much work remained however. Some villages appeared to be frozen in time, there was no indication of any activity.

We stopped on our way at Galle to deliver 20 mattresses to the Galle Diocesan center for Social and Economic Development (SED). They were coordinating relief efforts in partnership with Caritas International a confederation of Catholic development and social service organizations. The staff we met brought to our attention the need to assist individuals who did not come under the standard classifications of Tsunami survivors. Rickshaw drivers who had lost their three-wheel taxis for example incurred approximately the same capital loss as fisherman who had lost boats but were not eligible for aid. In addition smaller villages not easily accessible along the main coastal road have gone unnoticed by many aid groups. SED complained to us that it is hard to justify to donors help for what is seemingly, low impact, but no less important.

We arrived in Tangalle late afternoon in time to attend a community meeting with 31 displaced families. The discussion was centered around communicating plans for building semi-permanent housing while land for permanent housing was still being sought. A vacated government building

was acquired and was in the process of being renovated. It would be constructed in a dormitory style with a common kitchen and common living spaces. The aim was to move people out of the cramped living conditions inside tents as soon as possible. My friend Bindu Urugodawatte was serving as a translator for the staff from NICCO and conveyed to the families that this project was a gift from the Japanese people to the Tsunami survivors.

The following morning I headed out to buy household items requested by the families. Their list included children's underwear, soap, toothpaste, clay fireplaces, plastic basins, books and fisherman's knives. Given the multitude of foreign aid organizations in town, prices for goods in Tangalle were marked up 5 to 10 times. To avoid the so called "Tsunami prices", I had to find stores further inland.

A mother of two children I spoke with said much of the clothes that were donated had gone to waste.

"The clothes did not fit properly and some were torn and unclean. I am poor, but I have some dignity not to wear used clothes"

She also stated she resented living in a relief camp with others who were from a lower economic class than she was. Her statement made me pause and I was not sure how to respond. It was very clear that issues underlying social structures and community relationships, if not properly taken into account, have the potential to make ineffective any kind of long term rehabilitation plan.

Later that morning I traveled 2km inland to visit a potential site for new housing construction. The land was offered by a Buddhist priest and was in the process of being surveyed by the local government authorities. There was adequate space to house upto 50 families and water/electricity services could be easily provided. In addition, the temple provided meeting spaces for community development and facilities for a preschool. It seemed a perfect location to rebuild on. Speaking with families afterwards however, the difficulties expressed by Sathis were all too evident.

"We want to return to the coast and go back to our previous livelihoods"

Most everyone I spoke to was adamant in this regard.

As I started packing to begin my return trip to Colombo, several families stopped me and invited me over for lunch! Their generosity and kindness caught me by surprise and I felt guilty to have imposed. They told me not to worry.

"Tsunami's can take away our lives and belongings but our values and culture can never be destroyed."

Sanith Wijesinghe

I recently spoke with Bindu and she said houses damaged within a 100m-300m zone along the coast have been identified for renovation. Plans are being made to provide these houses to the families in Tangalle