

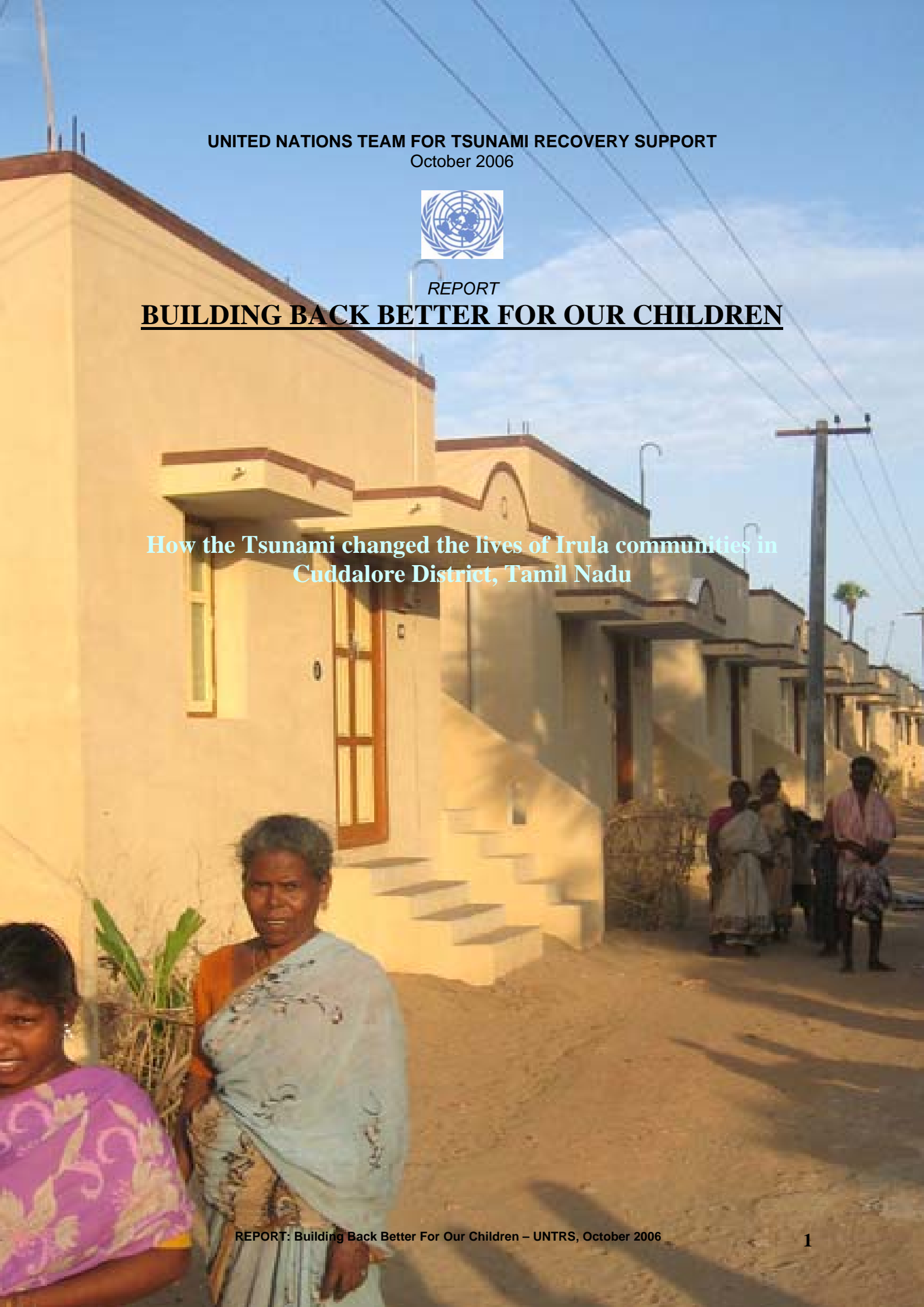
UNITED NATIONS TEAM FOR TSUNAMI RECOVERY SUPPORT
October 2006



REPORT

BUILDING BACK BETTER FOR OUR CHILDREN

How the Tsunami changed the lives of Irula communities in
Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu



PREFACE

This report on the Irula tribal community in the post Tsunami scenario was written for several purposes. First of all, it is to confirm that the phrase 'Build Back Better', which has been used extensively in the Tsunami recovery, was not just empty words. Building back in a better way is possible and what happened to the Irulas after the Tsunami is proof of that. But it did not happen automatically. The Irulas were overlooked in the first few weeks after the Tsunami wiped out 12000 lives on the Indian mainland and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Although affected, they were not regarded as such. It took an outcry for them to be heard and to be helped. There are many reasons for this and they will be highlighted in this report. This report also shows that with a sensitive district administration and with the help of NGOs, things can happen in spite of apparent blocks and difficulties. And things for the Irulas, especially in Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu in the South of India, have moved in such a way that their lives after the Tsunami have been changed for the better. However, with the development of this tribal community, questions are raised and they need to be answered. The report points out some of the concerns that come with the sudden development of a vulnerable community. "Building Back Better for Our Children" is by no means an exhaustive report. It is more of a case study of the Irulas in Cuddalore district. This document is intended for dissemination among a wider public and can be used for training and learning purposes too. Essentially it is meant to give an introduction to the changed life of the Irula tribe of Cuddalore after the Tsunami with a critical eye on what lies ahead..

Eva van Beek, United Nations Team for Tsunami Recovery Support, October 2006



Children singing at Child Care Centre in Shanmuga Nagar, July 2006

“Our Children may not realise our hardship now. But they will value it when they grow up. They will want to live up to it. They will be more responsible as adults. They will want to build better homes like their parents. They will want better lives for their children. That will encourage them to work hard”.

CHINNAPONNU, Shanmuga Nagar, Cuddalore, September 2006

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Irulas are a tribal community found mainly in the States of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They were a predominantly semi-nomadic tribe of hunter-gatherers. The origin of the word “Irula” is not clear. One understanding is that it could have derived from a Tamil word, either pointing to the dark complexion of the Irula or to their being spotted in the forests by villagers as distant dark silhouettes. They mainly caught snakes and rats and sold products such as honey, beeswax and firewood. They obtained their food from the forest vegetation and caught wild animals. They were mostly living in forests where they could freely live in their traditional lifestyle. The enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972 spelled a death blow to their lives in the forest. This law, intended to protect wildlife, prevented them from using forest resources and the Irulas were banished to the non-forest areas where they engaged in traditional occupations like catching of rats and snakes. In search for new occupations Irulas also migrated to the coast. More than half of the Irulas in Tamil Nadu today live in districts bordering the Bay of Bengal. According to statistics of the Government¹, there are around 26,000 Irulas living in Tamil Nadu, which is less than 0.5 percent of the entire State’s population². The Irulas, as a percentage of the total population, has been on a gradual decrease. Census reports show that in 1981, they were 1.5 % of the population of Tamil Nadu whereas in 2001, they constituted only 1 % of the population of the state³.

1.1 Irulas: Poorest of the poor

Displacement from forests forced the once independent semi-nomadic people to settle and become strongly dependant on others for survival. The Irula people as a small group of indigenous people have been existing in the margins of Indian society. The fact that they were declared as one of many “Scheduled Tribes”⁴, which indicates the very low socio-economic status that they occupy. A large number of Irulas, who were displaced from forests, settled in coastal areas where they could find work with the fishermen communities in helping them with their daily tasks, as well as do some backwater fishing on their own, mainly catching prawns, often with their bare hands. Here the mangroves also have been an income source for the Irulas, where they could find fish and prawns. They were also forced to resort to agriculture labour to ensure bare survival.

Although they were able to maintain a livelihood through several different income sources, the Irulas living in the coastal areas belong to one of the most economically disadvantaged groups. Approximately 90 percent live below the poverty line. The per capita income in India for 2006 is an expected 1750 Indian Rupees or 38 US\$ per month⁵. Most Irulas subsist with far less than that. This is due to several reasons:

- Irulas hardly own any assets and depend entirely on daily labour for survival. This puts them in a very vulnerable position. Any stoppage of daily income means that they are left stranded without anything to survive on. In an environment where natural hazards like cyclones and floods occur frequently, this may occur on a regular basis.

¹ Department of Tribal Welfare of Tamil Nadu, Statistic table, July 2006

² Total population of Tamil Nadu: 62,405,679, Census of India 2001

³ Census of India 1991 and 2001

⁴ Declared as such by the Government of India

⁵ Advance Estimates of National Income, 2005-06, Government of India, February 2006

- Being mostly dependant on others for their livelihood leaves them at the mercy of their employers who themselves often are fishermen struggling to survive. Lack of sufficient income encourages borrowing from private sources who charge too much interest and this leads to continuous indebtedness.
- The Irula communities in the coastal areas mostly used to live in small thatched huts before the Tsunami and this left little room for a healthy and safe environment. The huts made out of clay, wood and palm leaves are breeding places for sicknesses and were predestined to collapse or wash away if storms or heavy rainfalls occurred.
- Many Irulas living along the coast were, until recently, not certified as Scheduled Tribes (ST). In India, though STs are entitled to certain government benefits, it is available only to those who possess government issued certificates which declare them to be belonging to a ST community. Inability to get community certificates cut them off from government benefits.
- Lack of access to education puts them in an even more vulnerable position, since it excludes most of the Irulas from obtaining qualified, decently paid work.

The extremely poor economic condition and low social position, thus placed the Irulas amongst the most marginalised and vulnerable societies in coastal South India.

1.2 The Irulas in Cuddalore

Cuddalore is one of the northern districts of Tamil Nadu located on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, about 150 kilometres south of Chennai. According to statistics published in July 2006 by the Department for Tribal Welfare of Tamil Nadu, 779 Irula families live in Cuddalore district today. Most of them live in villages near the coast, namely, MGR Nagar, Kalaignar Nagar, Shanmuga Nagar and Ponnanthittu. They mainly subsist by labouring for fishermen and do backwater fishing for themselves. One alternative source of income is groping – using their hands beneath swamp backwaters for catching and collecting prawns. Some also work in the mangrove forests along the coast.

Cuddalore has been one of the districts that has been the worst affected by the Tsunami. In this district, the Tsunami killed 617 people, orphaned 21 children and caused complete or partial destruction to 4314 houses⁶.



Irula woman cooking food in Kalaignar Nagar, Cuddalore district

⁶ Cuddalore District: Village-wise Human Loss Details - <http://cuddalore.nic.in/tsunami/villagewise-affected-fmly.htm>

When the Tsunami struck, the world was shocked. But it soon recovered and rushed with relief materials and money to help the affected people. The Irulas of the coastal villages of Tamil Nadu were one of the worst affected communities. However, they did not receive any major help in the immediate aftermath of the giant tidal waves. The main reason for this was that help was concentrated on the first line of hamlets along the sea which invariably belonged to the traditional fishermen. A Public Hearing of the Commission appointed by the Supreme Court provided the much needed opportunity to the Irulas to voice their needs. Only after this hearing the relief and recovery for the Irulas started. A good example is Cuddalore district, where coordinated rehabilitation efforts by the district administration and NGOs have significantly touched the lives of the marginalised Irulas. This Report seeks to highlight the Cuddalore experience and at the same time, seeks to address a few concerns about the road ahead.

2. BEFORE THE TSUNAMI: SMALL IMPROVEMENTS ON THE WAY

Action to improve the lives of the Irulas residing in the coastal hamlets of Cuddalore goes back to the late nineties when the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSFR) in Chennai, and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, jointly started the Mangrove Management project. The project aimed to check further degradation of the mangrove ecosystem with the participation of the stakeholders in the degraded areas. MGR Nagar, one of the Irula villages, was identified to participate in this project. By working out a micro plan on how to work on a sustainable future in a participatory manner, some of the vanishing mangrove forests were restored and others were protected by this initiative. The district administration took care to commence the process of granting community certificates to the coastal Irulas. Those certificates are necessary to allow the members of the scheduled tribe to have access to certain welfare schemes. For the first time the community certificate was provided during the year 1998 in MGR Nagar, and just before Tsunami the activity of providing certificate was completed in the other Irula hamlets. A school was also built. A micro-credit programme was introduced through savings and bank linkage to bring them out from the debt burden. Legitimising their tribal identity, constructing and running an elementary school and restoring and managing the mangroves enhanced the self-confidence of women and men in the Irula community alike. A Microcredit programme was introduced through savings and bank linkage to bring them out from the debt burden. It gave them more control over income and mobility as well⁷. But the Tsunami, as hard as it hit the Irula community and others, in its aftermath, brought some unprecedented positive changes for them.



Traditional Irula house in Cuddalore district

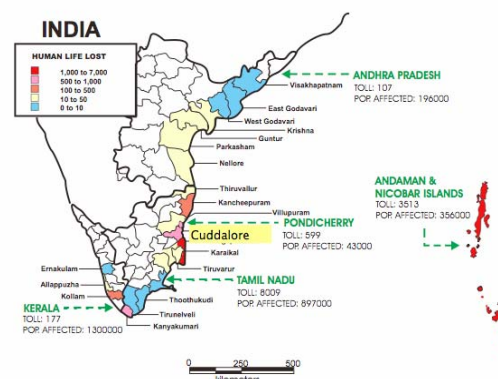
⁷ Integrating Gender concerns into Natural Management: the Case of the Pichavaram Mangroves, Tamil Nadu. (Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 2001)

3. THE TSUNAMI

A massive earthquake, of a magnitude of 9.0 on the Richter scale (USGS), hit Indonesia off the West Coast of Northern Sumatra on December 26, in the morning at 06:58 a.m. Another earthquake of a magnitude of 7.3 on the Richter scale also occurred 81 km West of Pulo Kunji (Great Nicobar, India) at 9:51 a.m. (IST). These earthquakes triggered the Tsunami wave in Southeast and South Asia. In India, the Tsunami caused extensive damage to life and property in the Union Territories (UT) of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Pondicherry, as well as in the coastal districts in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, affecting approximately 2260 km of the coastal area. The tidal waves that struck the mainland varied between 3 to 10 meters in height. The waves penetrated into the mainland to distances between 300 meters to 3 km in places like Nagapattinam, Cuddalore, Chennai and Machilipatnam, located in the direct line of the epicentre of the earthquake. According to reports of the Government of India, the Tsunami in December 2004 led to the loss of life of 12,405 people and caused injury to 6,913 people. A total of 647,599 people had to move to safer places. The disaster hit women and children in particular: 75 percent of the fatalities were women and children. 787 women became widows and 530 children were orphaned. The highest human losses were reported in the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the State of Tamil Nadu.

3.1 The Tsunami and the Irulas

When the Tsunami struck, a total of 57 Irula villages along the coast of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh were affected, displacing over 1800 families. 27 Irula persons died, 124 were injured and 300 houses were destroyed. 90 percent of their livelihood came to a standstill.⁸ In Tamil Nadu, there are 84 hamlets of Irulas in the four coastal districts of Thiruvallur, Kanchipuram, Villupuram and Cuddalore. In these hamlets, 70 percent of the families lost their livelihoods, mainly traditional crafts, and tools such as fishing nets, bags for collecting fish, fish vessels for selling the fish and other tools⁹.



Initially left out

However, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, only 12-13 Irula families had got compensation since their deaths were reported to a nearby police station. Most Irulas did not receive instant support for various reasons. The public and official eye was initially on the ones affected in the first line who were the traditional coastal communities, mainly the fishermen. The Irulas do not live directly on the coast and were not considered immediately affected by the Tsunami. Also, they, being classified a “scheduled tribe”, did not have a strong public presence nor a public voice to speak up for them. Many of them also did not have community certificates. Consequently, they were excluded from any welfare or relief support. It also happened that fish worker panchayats (communities) who were involved in the preparation of lists of affected persons, did not include the names of the Irula boat

⁸ *The State and Civil Society in Disaster Response – An Analysis of the Tamil Nadu Tsunami Experience*, Tata Institute of Social Science, 2005

⁹ *Tsunami and the Irula tribes: Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society*, 2006

labourers and backwater fishermen in the lists of affected people.¹⁰ All these factors summed up to them being overlooked. It caused a lot of distress, not only for the Irulas but for other non-fishermen communities as well, such as Dalits, who are another economically disadvantaged caste initially left out of relief operations.

A public hearing

Even four months after the Tsunami struck, most of these people had not received any substantial help, in spite of the immense outpour of support coming from all over the world to assist the victims of the Tsunami in all the affected countries. In March 2005, a public hearing of the Supreme Court Commission on Food Security in Chennai was held. 900 members of the Dalit and tribal communities attended the hearing and expressed their concern about not receiving any help and pointed out several issues such as their total loss of livelihood, unequal food distribution, water scarcity and their children dropping out of school, because all of the school gear had been lost in the waters.¹¹

Their outcry did not go unheard. In Cuddalore District, the civil societies already working with the Irulas, as well as the district authorities rose to up the challenge.

¹⁰ The State and Civil Society in Disaster Response – An Analysis of the Tamil Nadu Tsunami Experience, Tata Institute of Social Science, 2005

¹¹ "Dalits, Irulas were also badly affected by Tsunami" - The Hindu, March 20th, 2005



Sunset above the new houses built for the Irulas in Kalaingar Nagar

“Earlier, when a cyclone hit, we always had to rebuild everything. Now we have some security”.

BALU, Panchayat (community) leader, Kalaingar Nagar, Cuddalore, July 2006



Access to safe water, a new school and a community garden are signs of the change for the better for the Irulas

4. RELIEF AND RECOVERY

One of the most urgent actions that had to be undertaken was to provide the necessary certificate as Scheduled Tribes - a long overdue task. The District Collector of Cuddalore, Gagandeep Singh Bedi, arranged to issue such certificates to the affected Irula community members. In the long run, this entitles them to welfare schemes and access to education. An immediate step was to give them land rights. The Government donated them land free of cost in the areas where the Irulas lead their simple lives. Subsequently, a scheme was worked out to give them new permanent housing, which was quite a revolutionary plan for a community who has never owned land, neither lived within brick walls nor has had access to running water or electricity.

A housing scheme for the poorest

Thanks to the persistence of the District Collector and the civil societies involved, the plan materialised and NGOs took up the major task of realising the construction of the houses. Today, in the communities of MGR Nagar, Kalaignar Nagar, Ponnanthittu and Shanmuga Nagar, various NGOs have built, or are still in the process of building, a total of 303 houses worth Rs. 62,600,000 (approx. US\$ 1,337,159). In most of these projects the Irulas have been included from the very beginning. In certain areas they were able to make some changes to the original design of the houses according to their needs. In other projects, the Irulas were involved in the actual construction of their future homes and employed as daily labourers for a wage of 60 to 80 Rupees a day.

In some of the villages, the Irulas have already started living in their new houses and are getting adapted to their new lifestyle. Apart from support for new houses, the Irulas in Cuddalore also received new boats to restore their livelihood, some livestock, as well as economic assistance for alternative livelihood. Self-Help Groups were created and training in micro-financing was given. For example, women in Kalaignar Nagar have founded a self-help group to save money. Every month, each member pays 50 rupees. The accumulated money serves as a fund from where loans at the low interest rate of 1 percent are given for different needs within the community. This helps them to get out of the vicious circle of indebtedness. As to getting used to this completely new lifestyle, the Irulas have received or are about to receive training in modern living. Another innovative step taken by the District Collector, was to ask an NGO, Round Table India, to build school buildings for the elementary school meant for the Irula tribal children in M.G.R. Nagar so that they study in a better environment. A play-park was also put up in the school to make it child friendly. The district administration also sanctioned infrastructural facilities like streetlights, piped drinking water and roads to the Irula habitations.

4.1 Kalaignar Nagar Experience

In Kalaignar Nagar, a total of 165 families with 487 persons live. The literacy in this community is very low, which adds to their vulnerability. It is essentially a community that lives by engaging in backwater fishing or wage labour. Before the Tsunami, the Irulas lived in thatched huts of about 5 by 3 feet, with hardly any cement flooring anywhere. The NGO, Centre for Rural Education and Economic Development (CREED) with the support of another Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), Care India, took up the task to support this particular community.

Livelihood Assistance

Consequently temporary shelters were provided for 61 families and boats were supplied to restore their livelihood. The boats were given at the rate of one boat for two families. Women received livestock (50 chickens per family) thus providing them with some additional income that can wean them away from their vulnerability to indebtedness. In addition the Irulas were trained in mangrove restoration, as well as



raising and tending of mangrove seedlings, which helped them to generate alternate income. This allows them to earn up to a 100 Rupees a day.

Housing Assistance

Out of the 165 families, 60 families arrived in the village after the Tsunami. CREED had purchased 2 acres of land adjacent to Kalaignar Nagar where 60 new houses were constructed. Thus, CREED through CARE India constructed 165 in Kalaignar Nagar.

The houses have been completed and handed over to the recipient Irulas. The design is traditional - a community room, one bedroom, kitchen and a toilet accessible from the outside. A staircase outside the house leads up to the roof, which allows women to dry their clothes or fish, in the sun. For every ten houses, there is a water pump, which provides the households with clean water. Before the Tsunami, the women used to draw water from wells in the ground, which tended to get salty in the monsoon season or during storms. Furthermore, all houses have now been given electricity connection, which allows their further progress. For example, with electricity connection, the school children can now do their homework even after daylight fades. As for education, in June 2005, a temporary school was set up within the community. The new school building constructed by the Government has just been finished next to the temporary school structure and will be opened soon. 106 children from the 1st to 5th standard attend the school. Furthermore, a new playground was set up, which gives children an opportunity for recreation as well.¹²

The people of Kalaignar Nagar, who already have moved into their new homes, seem to have adapted easily to their new environment. Some combine the old with the new, still cook by firewood, under the open sky or build fences out of palm leaves around their new property in order to have some privacy - since most of the houses are closer to each other than the old dwellings used to be. Others have bought furniture, like a kitchen cupboard or a bed, for the first time in their lives.



Children in Kalaignar Nagar now attend school, can do their homework in new homes and have a playground too.

¹² Data taken from: Concept Paper on Irulas, Centre for Rural Education and Economic Development (Creed)

4.2 Shanmuga Nagar Experience

What happened in Shanmuga Nagar is quite different from what happened to other communities of the affected areas within Tamil Nadu. Shanmuga Nagar was founded 40 years ago and named after its founder Shanmugam. The creation of Shanmuga Nagar brought together Irula families who earlier were living scattered in tiny huts on land owned by farmers. Today, the community consists of 69 families. The majority of the working people in Shanmuga Nagar are involved in backwater fishing and non-agricultural labour. Although not considered as one of the villages affected in the first line, this community was badly affected by the Tsunami. The tidal waters entered the village and took the lives of 5 people. With no access to safe drinking water and healthcare, the community was left to fend for itself during the first phase of recovery.

Help on different levels

The NGO, Bless, has consequently taken up the task to enhance the quality of lives of the people of Shanmuga Nagar and has not only worked out a housing scheme but also has initiated other support activities.

With the support of the NGO Plan International, a Child Care Centre was immediately set up in a temporary construction. In August 2006, the centre was moved to a new permanent structure. 35 children, 15 boys and 20 girls, are enrolled in the centre. The children not only received new toys to play with, but are also provided with educational material and food. Two times a month, the mothers meet to discuss various child health and care issues. Additionally, the children are monitored medically on a regular basis.

For the older children, aged between 6 and 18, a child activity centre provides them with the opportunity to play sports such as tennis, cricket and football. Three clubs have been created, which take on topics such as child rights and promote hygiene practices. These clubs also organise games and cultural events. School material such as schoolbags, notebooks, pencils and geometry boxes were distributed.¹³ Story and songbooks were also given.



Playing and learning at the same time

Learning about money

For adults, Self-help Groups were formed and strengthened in collaboration with the NGO Care India. Training was conducted where the members learned how to organise their groups, how to deal with savings and loans and learned about money and record-keeping practices. One of the Self Help Groups (SHG) is in charge of the community gardens where vegetables are planted. Another SHG has set up a shop in the new community hall that also serves as a 'shopping centre'. Essentially, the shop is there to lend out material needed for functions, wedding and other events. In the second shop of the centre, fishing gear is sold. The members of the community of Shanmuga Nagar have also received boats and nets to support their economic independence.

¹³ Taken from: Shanmuga Nagar: A village profile, Bless

New design for houses

With the support of the NGO Solidarity, 62 new houses are under construction in Shanmuga Nagar. The design is revolutionary and was developed by architects from Auroville, an international community that lives not far from Cuddalore and is experienced in construction of disaster proof and specially designed buildings. The people of the village have been involved in the construction from the very beginning. One building consists of two attached houses with each consisting of one living room, one bedroom and a kitchen. They are built of bricks made in a disaster proof design. The bricks are produced at the site of construction itself. 600 bricks per day are produced. Special roof elements allow better circulation and keep the houses cool. The villagers themselves work as labourers on the construction site, not on their own future house, but on any of the houses. It pays them around 80 Rupees a day. Women and men alike participate under the guidance of professionals. The building process is not as fast as in other villages where affected communities already have been given houses; but while the people of Shanmuga Nagar were initially complaining about it, they now realise that building their houses with their own hands gives a whole new perspective on house ownership. The houses will be finished and handed over, at the latest, by the end of 2006.

To enable the Irulas to smoothly manage the transition from the thatched dwellings into the new houses, Bless has organised training in public health, hygiene and modern living.



Shanmuga Nagar: a different look and disaster proof techniques for the houses of Irulas

5. Case Study



Chinnaponnu lives in Shanmuga Nagar and is a widow who lost her husband due to an illness 20 years ago. She has three children - two sons and one daughter. The older son and the daughter are both married and have children of their own. Chinnaponnu lives with her youngest son in one of the thatched houses that serve as temporary shelters to date. Before the Tsunami she did not have a steady income, and was depending on finding work in either fishing or non-fishing labour such as construction work. Today, she helps build the new houses in Shanmuga Nagar, one of them to be hers and is a member of a women's Self-Help Group in Shanmuga Nagar, who works with micro-credits:

“At first we did not really like helping to build our new homes. Why could we not get houses just like other communities? But now I realise that even if it may take more time, we are building our own future. I have a lot of plans on how I want to manage the new house that I will be moving in to. I want to draw Rangolis (welcome drawings on the floor in front of the entrance) on the porch. I think in our old houses cleaning was difficult; it will be easier with the new house. We have received training about safe water, hygiene, how to clean the new toilet. The Tsunami has changed our lives. I am part of a Self-Help Group that manages a fund and gives micro-credits. We were already able to buy a mini-lorry. We give out loans at a very low interest rate - only 2 percent. Before the Tsunami, there were no groups like that. If we had to borrow money, it was at an interest rate of 25 percent. I was not able to buy jewellery back then. But now I can borrow money to buy some. The group has also helped me to be able to speak out. Before, I did not know how to speak in front of others. But now I know how to present myself.”

6. CONCERNS

The lives of the Irulas in the four communities supported by the district authorities and NGOs have obviously changed for the better since the Tsunami. Access to water, to electricity, alternate sources of livelihood and a safe roof over their head are major achievements for a community who owned virtually nothing and lost basically everything in the Tsunami.

But there are also reasons for concern. First and foremost, members of the community that have moved rapidly from owning almost no assets to being house owners have made a giant leap into modern living. The new lifestyle not only comes with commodities but also with new responsibilities unknown to the Irulas before. Taking care of a brick house, using and cleaning the attached stand-alone toilets, dealing with water safety and hygiene, as well as with electricity are some of the novelties, which the inhabitants of Shanmuga Nagar, Kalaignar Nagar, MGR Nagar and Ponnathittu encounter. Maintaining and cleaning a brick wall house is entirely different to what the women in these communities used to do before. Another legitimate concern is that, in these new houses, the Irulas live quite close to each other, without much space in between; whereas, in traditional housing, the individual houses left space for cattle to roam and a garden, as well as provided some privacy.

Issues to be addressed

Although training is given to them in hygiene, modern living, as well as public health and the access to education seems to have improved for the children of the Irulas, there are still many things that need to be addressed. Access to healthcare is especially important for the women and in most Irula communities today, it is not readily accessible. Education beyond primary school is still the exception. The problem of the Irulas being considered a 'scheduled tribe' still remains and does not help in a society where being advantaged or disadvantaged is not only defined by economic income, but also by birth.

These concerns are serious and need to be followed up by all stakeholders involved, whether it is the authorities, the civil societies or the multilateral agencies.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The help that has been given to the Irulas after the Tsunami, although delayed, brought positive changes for them. Overall, the recovery process has been a deserving experience for the tribe. People who used to live in thatched huts without any protection against natural hazards have received new solid houses and seem generally very happy to live in their new homes. The new housing not only reduces their vulnerability to natural disasters, but also helps to improve their hygiene and health standards, as they have access to safe drinking water. Although in terms of development, it has been a giant leap for the community, it seems that people settle in quite easily and find ways to integrate old lifestyles into their modern living. Some have built fences of palm leaves around their property in order to get privacy like they used to have in their old homes. Cooking is mostly still done outside, like it always has been. The new housing also gives them access to electricity, which makes living a lot easier. Being proud new house owners and having in some cases been involved in the construction of their new homes have given them new confidence. Especially, women have gained more confidence in the process by joining Self-Help Groups and learning how to stand up for themselves.



An entrance into a new life: decorated front door in Kalaingar Nagar

Only the future will tell

But the story does not end here. The concerns cited in the previous chapter are real and need to be addressed. The Irula tribe is passing through a transitional phase. They are losing their roots as a nomadic people and leaping forward into a modern living, which they are not necessarily prepared for.

This is as much an opportunity as it could be a trap. Just giving houses is not enough. Their progress should be assisted and monitored in the years to come, by civil societies who have a long standing experience with these communities and by the authorities and multilateral agencies as well. They should not be left behind anymore or left alone in the future.

Only in the coming years will we be able to tell if the changes that the Irulas are going through at the moment is a journey towards a better future not only for the current generation, but also for generations to come.

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