

## A Tsunami Update from Bhoomika Trust, Chennai

January 5, 2005

This Report is based on the latest field visits by Bhoomika volunteers to villages near Chennai, Pondicherry, Cuddalore, and Nagapattinam; their observations at the NGO Coordination Meeting of January 4<sup>th</sup> at the Nagai Collectorate; a visit to the Cuddalore Collectorate; and telephonic input from other sources on the ground. This updates some of the important issues that came up at the January 2<sup>nd</sup> Information Exchange Meeting in Chennai, as documented in our report, *Seven Days Later...in Tamlinadu*. If you do not have a copy of that report, please go to:

[www.tsunami-india.org/meeting.htm](http://www.tsunami-india.org/meeting.htm).

We are sharing this assessment of the latest situation in Tamilnadu Tsunami-affected areas with a wide audience, with the sincere hope that this may be of help in channeling the overwhelming support from all over India and other parts of the world into more productive avenues. (There have been numerous reports of unproductive efforts by well-meaning groups--inevitable, perhaps, when there are as many as 160 organizations of various kinds in the area--which may be placing undue pressure upon the affected communities, and upon NGOs and the district authorities on the ground, who are trying to prioritize and organize relief and rehab efforts under very difficult circumstances.)

Please keep in mind that this is only one group's perspective, and there are sure to be other points of view from the affected areas. For Questions or Comments, please contact Raju Rajagopal at [rajagop@pacbell.net](mailto:rajagop@pacbell.net) or call Bhoomika Trust at 044-5204-1505 or 094444-51267, or e-mail us at [bhoomikaindia@yahoo.co.in](mailto:bhoomikaindia@yahoo.co.in), especially if you wish to be added to our mailing list.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Our earlier e-mail forwarding the Interim Shelter Policy on behalf of the Nagapattinam NGO Coordination Group was inadvertently sent out with all the email addresses as CC (instead of BCC). PLEASE send your responses, if any, to either Bhoomika, or to only specific individuals. PLEASE DO NOT HIT 'REPLY ALL,' AS IT WILL NEEDLESSLY CLUTTER INBOXES, which no one can afford at this critical time.

### BHOOMIKA OBSERVATIONS:

1. The need for Emergency Relief has come to an end for the most part. Several unserved or underserved pockets have been identified, and relief and medical supplies have been delivered to them over the last 48 hours by several organizations.

In fact, there are examples of multiple groups coming to the aid of the same community—e.g. one question raised at the Nagai Coordination Meeting was the need for a mechanism to preclude the possibility of different medical teams giving shots to the same people! Our volunteers report some people completely unaffected by the disaster trying to garner or corner supplies.

2. NGOs are pushing the government to formally announce the end of the Relief Phase, so that donor organizations do not keep dumping supplies in villages. This is to ensure that communities begin to get into the 'rehabilitation' mind-set, and to ensure that donors get OUT of the 'relief and charity' mind-set. Also, one can't underestimate the possibility of resentment building among other poorer communities unaffected by the Tsunami, who are seeing the massive levels of aid going mainly to one community (we have already seen some signs of this). **We would urge prospective donors to be patient for a few days and evaluate how they can be of assistance in the massive rehabilitation phase yet to come:** starting with an interim shelter phase, which the NGOs are hoping will be clearly defined by the government in a way that the govt-NGO-community partnership roles are clearly delineated (e.g. who finances, who supplies material, who oversees, and who actually builds interim shelters). We refer you once again to the Interim Shelter Policy recommendation from NGOs in Nagapattinam, which has now been formally submitted to the T.N. Government. (Please see our website if you have not received it.)
3. In order to have some semblance of control over hundreds of relief trucks going into villages, some without any clear destinations, the local authorities have instituted some procedures. We are told that these procedures are not meant to stop supplies to the needy, but to reduce chaos and duplication: e.g. they are asking supply trucks to first register themselves with local authorities, with a copy of the inventory (e.g. at DRDA, District Rural Development Authority in Cuddalore), and to get a proper ID badge or token from them.
4. For those without a clear destination, dropping off supplies at the NGO Coordination Center at the Nagai and other Collectorates may be a better option than delivering them to places where the needs may have already been met, and face the risk of supplies falling into local politicians or power brokers' hands. Another alternative is to deliver supplies to regional centers being run by NGOs like AID and SIFFS, who can then systematically evaluate the needs of the community in their areas and deliver them to the neediest.
5. Some international relief workers are arriving unannounced, with skills entirely inappropriate for this disaster assistance. As community workers emphasized in the Sunday meeting in Chennai, the immediate needs are: Volunteers willing to roll up sleeves and clear debris and dead bodies (as the military is doing in some places, and Dalits, NGO volunteers, and even some corporate employees are doing in other places); Women volunteers with Tamil skills, who are willing to stay with communities for some time, acting as companions to bereaved women; and Organizational support to NGOs and the NGO Coordination Center--for e.g. to record and transcribe minutes (even here, knowledge of Tamil is preferred); and back office support to install IT systems in a hurry, to enter data (e.g. surveys being conducted by various groups), to maintain databases, and to communicate with other coordination points such as Chennai, Pondicherry, etc. Another need that has been expressed are Tamil speaking (preferably women) volunteers to serve as data gatherers in a possible NGO-lead comprehensive damage assessment survey
6. "You ask for bread and you get a bakery." was one observation heard today that aptly describes some of groups who, in their well-intentioned desire to help, are

offering anything from advanced power intensive water-making machines from the air, to advanced therapy techniques, to a planeload of milk, to disaster management training courses, and even scuba divers! As we heard in the Sunday meeting, **the need to help may already be overwhelming the need for help.** There are groups with loaded trucks and volunteers ready to go to the affected areas from various cities, but without a clue as to where they are headed, and what they are going to do to help. We are getting many calls that fall in this category, and our advice is: "Please do not go now, but wait for a few days until the shelter and rehab needs are better defined, which will surely require a lot of help. If you must go, please be ready to plunge into debris clearing work, or link up first with someone already on the scene who knows exactly how and where you can help, or with those who may need to be relieved after several days of hard work."

7. Some of the Needs coordinated by Bhoomika since the January 2nd meeting will give some idea of the latest needs:
  - a. More tippers and volunteers to clear debris (some groups were willing to clear debris, provided they did not come in contact with bodies.)
  - b. Water purification tablets and 2 tons of water for hospitals in the Andamans, which was coordinated with the Air Force at Tambaram
  - c. More preassembled rations kits and vessel kits for villages near Karaikal, Pulicat, Kalpakkam, and Pondy
  - d. We are CURRENTLY organizing:
    - i. 100 Cell phones and SIM cards for volunteers working in the relief efforts
    - ii. Financial, IT, and human resources for back office support, and damage and needs assessment surveys
    - iii. Large quantities of disinfectant for to use in post-cleanup of debris and bodies in villages (has already been sourced by TTK in the UK)
    - iv. Women's undergarments
8. **Rehabilitation of Villages:** NGOs are strongly advising the government against allowing the concept of 'adopting' villages, which carries certain patronizing implications that drive the approach towards rebuilding and rehabilitating the communities (based on experiences from other disasters, where there were even some attempts to change the names of 'adopted' villages to donor-friendly names!) They are urging that the government invite groups to take 'responsibility' for certain villages in an organized manner, and in consultation with the community--more as a long-term partnership. We hope that this and other similar issues will also be spelled out soon in a recommendation to the government.
9. **Rehabilitation of Livelihoods:** Continuing discussions with the fishing community indicates that the approach to restoration of lost crafts and nets is likely to be quite complicated. Any discussion of replacing lost or damaged catamarans could have huge supply and environmental implications (one fishing group reported that 35,000 out of 50,000 catamarans--cost of Rs. 15 to 20,000--may have been lost or damaged.) On the other hand, any plan to replace catamarans with motorized fiber glass boats (cost of Rs. 85,000 and are made in several parts of the South) could have huge financial and sourcing

supply implications (the same fishing source reported that there were 2,500 motorized boats before the Tsunami.) Also, we are told that there are ten different types of fishing nets used in Tamilnadu, based on the time of the year. We mention these notes, not unverified by Bhoomika, only to underscore that hurrying to donate boats or catamarans or nets, without a proper Needs Assessment, dove-tailed the policy and compensation plan by the government may be unproductive and disruptive. Also, given the enormous coverage that the plight of the affected fishing communities is getting in the press, we would like to note that there are a significant number of non-fishing villages which are also affected, and whose livelihood and rehab needs may be vastly different.

10. Desire to Seek Alternative Livelihoods: We have also heard instances of fishermen, already frustrated in recent years by what we are told is the diminishing catch in the seas, who may be looking at this disaster as an opportunity to seek alternative livelihoods. **This certainly adds another dimension to the rehab plans, turning the age old adage, "Don't give them fish; teach them how to fish" on its head. In this instance, relief agencies have not only NOT given them any fish (but lots of rice and dhal and sambar powder!) over the last ten days, but we may have to teach some of them not to fish!**

For Bhoomika Trust

Raju Rajagopal

rajagop@pacbell.net

098401-73650

**Subject:** Interim Shelter Policy Recommendations to TN Govt

**Attention of Donor Agencies, NGOs, Community Groups, and Business Groups  
Wishing to Assist in the Interim Rehabilitation Phase in Tamilnadu:**

The following policy recommendations have been worked out by the NGO Coordination Group in Nagapattinam, in consultation with local community leaders and with government representatives in Nagapattinam. It is going to be presented formally tonight at the NGO/Govt Coordination Meeting. In the mean time, it is extremely important that NGOs and Donors who are not in Nagapattinam also endorse the principles herein and communicate to their staff the need to follow some of the recommendations, which are not only based on lessons learnt from recent disasters, but has been tailored to meet the needs of the TN disaster-affected communities.

**Bhoomika Trust is sending this message on behalf of the NGO Coordination Group in Nagapattinam and we will take any responses and pass them onto the group as received. Please send your comments only to this e-mail and put in the subject Interim Shelter Policy so we can quickly sort the incoming e-mails. We also request that you forward these recommendations to your field personnel and any relevant NGO personnel who are not included in this list.**

Thank You,

Raju Rajagopal 098410-73650

on behalf of Bhoomika Trust, Chennai

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**Recommendations for Interim Shelter Policy from the NGO Coordination Centre**

**(Based on feedback from village communities in the south, north and central Nagapattinam, and discussions with local NGOs, and Donor partners)**

1. It is recommended that the Government, NGOs and Donors encourage, (through their interim policy, and implementation methodologies), the communities to put up their 'keeth' houses with casurina poles and thatch. We recommend this for the following reasons:
  - a) Groups discussions with SHG groups and a rapid assessment of community viewpoints has suggested that given a choice people would prefer to be supported for their traditional housing. (It was also observed that when any NGO or donor asks the people whether they would like tents etc, they tend to agree because they would like to get whatever they can, quickly, and this is not necessarily a reflection of what they would ideally prefer). However, given a choice and adequate support they would prefer the thatch structure (Keeth).
  - b) The thatch structure can be constructed very speedily and it takes less than 2 days for a unit to come up. It can sustain for the entire interim period which could

be upto 5-8 months before their permanent structures come up. On an average the thatch structures can cost upto 8-10,000. It is therefore quick, cost effective and more sustaining in an interim period, than other options such as tents, tarpaulins, tinsheets, etc.

*c) Most important, from experiences of other disasters, it has been observed that communities, who actively engage themselves in reconstructing their interim structures, psychologically rehabilitate faster. It is extremely important that communities are encouraged to rebuild their homes and lives immediately, and that they are not placed in a situation where they are watching while organizations put up tents, prefabricated houses, etc – material and technologies which they themselves are not familiar with.*

2. **It is suggested that the Government support the affected families with an ex-gratia amount of Rs. 5,000 for their interim shelters. And it is recommended that this amount is distributed through the SHGs, if this is administratively possible. In cases where a temporary relocation will have to be undertaken, the Government should allocate the land where the temporary housing can come up. Clear procedural guidelines for the communities and organizations as to how to access this land would be necessary.**
3. While providing the temporary land access, it would be important to state the time period for which that land is being allocated. To ensure that the temporary settlement does not become a permanent settlement, a notification to each of the affected families receiving the ex-gratia payment could be made, which specifies that they will be liable to receive compensation for the permanent housing, but will be able to do so when they move out of the temporary settlement, and move to the land allocated for the permanent settlement in the stipulated period.
4. **The implementing NGOs and their donor partners will take the responsibility in different villages, to invest upto Rs. 5000, in the thatch material, sanitation etc, and immediately provide support for the interim housing (thatch, poles, etc). Organizations have expressed their commitment to ensure that the communities utilize their ex-gratia payment (toward the hiring of labour,) for the construction of their houses. For instance, in Nagappatinam District, alone, different organizations will be allocated villages where they take the above responsibilities. And there is a clear assurance that every village would be covered between the different agencies. The NGO Coordination Centre, with the District Collector will ensure that the matching of villages with organizations will take place. A similar system could be followed in the other districts also.**

5. Thus through a combination of the Government's ex-gratia amount, and the organizations providing material, the communities will be supported through a public-private partnership to rebuild their houses within the next two-to three weeks.

**While this is recommended as the basic approach and methodology framework, it is possible that some organizations or donors would want to do something independent of the policy. This cannot be stopped, but the above approach will ensure that broadly, the interim rehabilitation phase, which is an extremely significant phase, remains owner-driven, discourages dependency approaches, and generates a more sustainable pattern for the overall rehabilitation.**