

Coping with the Tsunami

Useful Inputs from Fisherfolk at One-Day Consultation



What should be done to help fisher communities and restore fisheries in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry after the killer tsunami of December 26, 2004? The subject was discussed in depth at a one-day Consultation held on June 11, 2005 in Chennai. It was organised jointly by the BOBP-IGO, the Tamil Nadu Department of Fisheries and the FAO country office in India.

Seventy-four persons took part: representatives of fisher communities as well as NGOs, leading fisheries officials of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, of the BOBP-IGO and the FAO.

Dr S S Tabrez Nasar, Senior Programme Advisor, BOBP-IGO, welcomed the participants on behalf of the organisers. Mr S K Prabakar, Director of Fisheries, made introductory remarks.

Ms G Ramalakshmi, Director of Fisheries, Pondicherry, detailed the tsunami's destruction as well as relief measures launched by the Union Territory Government.

A Project Implementation Agency had been set up as an umbrella body to implement assistance given by the World Bank and to undertake related activities.

Dr Daniel Gustafson, FAO Representative for India and Bhutan, said the tsunami could mark a turning point for fisheries, and lead to new ways of managing the resources.

Mr V A Shegaonkar, Secretary, Department of Fisheries and Animal Husbandry, Tamil Nadu, said the State Government's steps to rehabilitate the fisher community included repair and replacement of fishing crafts and engines; release of ex-gratia payment to the injured and the dead; temporary and permanent shelters; opening of orphanages and deposit of funds in the name of orphan children; pension for all destitutes; mobilisation of medicare; dredging of silted fishing harbour basins; improvements in communication systems, etc. The Government has also negotiated with the

World Bank and Asian Development Bank, etc for reconstruction assistance.

Dr Y S Yadava, Director, BOBP-IGO, said the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry had done much by way of relief and rehabilitation following the tsunami's devastation, but lacked feedback from communities. This one-day Consultation brought different groups of stakeholders together to share experiences and learn from one another. The Consultation would help improve and advance the formidable tasks of rehabilitation.

Dr Yadava suggested that in the wake of the tsunami, a broad vision for fisheries development and management should be adopted. It would encompass exploitation of fish resources within sustainable limits; hygienic handling of fish at sea and on shore; a modern, efficiently managed onshore infrastructure to ensure high-quality fish standards; a programme of institutional and policy reform that

addressed the vulnerability of fisher communities and made fishing practices sustainable; a strategy to improve the ability to assess institutional capacity at all levels, efficiently deliver development inputs and ensure that recipients utilised them well; and a livelihood approach that ensured that natural systems provided a broad and sustainable range of livelihood strategies.

The fisher community representatives articulated their views with conviction and confidence. They demonstrated an impressive grasp of their problems and a determination to better their lot in co-operation with governments and development agencies. Here is a list of what-should-be-done suggestions by the fisher community, classified by subject area.

Government Schemes and Programmes:

Explain and make fishermen better aware of existing government schemes for their welfare. Help fishers to undertake deep-sea fishing, give them the equipment and training for sustainable fishing (equipment would include echo sounders, fish finders, two-way radio sets). Implement the Central Government's subsidy schemes for fishing boats. Provide more money for trawler repair, more diesel on subsidised rates. Increase the subsidy on engine cost. Reduce the taxes on iron (needed for boat construction) and on wood (needed to construct wooden boats). Help them pay their high insurance premiums on boats. Provide life jackets for FRP boats. On the other hand, discontinue loans provided by the National Cooperative Development Corporation, help settle conflicts in fishing grounds resulting from the surfeit of FRP boats provided by NGOs to fishermen.

Infrastructure: Establish mini harbours or fish landing centres on fishing sites, which do not have proper landing and berthing facilities. Repair and renovate damaged harbours and landing centres. Set up link roads to connect



Mr S K Prabakar delivering the introductory remarks (top) and participants at the Consultation (bottom).



harbours and markets, and improve basic facilities, such as clean water, at harbours. Fishermen should be given the opportunity to manage fishing harbours and landing centres. Reduce the congestion at Chinnamuttam fishing harbour (in Tamil Nadu), where some 300 boats now operate, against the designed capacity of 150 boats. Carry out dredging wherever necessary at harbour basins.

Institutional Finance: Reduce the heavy burden of taxes on poor fishermen. Implement the Government's Action Plan, particularly the announcement of no sales tax for one year announced by the Chief Minister. Give women's self-help groups and women fish vendors loans to set up processing facilities and do retail marketing.

Post-harvest: Start some innovative schemes for hygienic marketing of fish. Help women fish vendors with

transport assistance, so that they can carry the fish to markets (right now, buses are reluctant to let in women with their fish baskets). Improve and strengthen cold chain facilities to reduce post-harvest losses.

Community Development: Ensure that tsunami relief is extended everywhere (it has yet to reach certain places). Provide land and build proper houses for fishermen who lost their dwellings due to the tsunami. (They live right now in temporary shelters that get too hot during the day.) Further, make sure that these houses are not squeezed against one another in congested settlements, but distributed wider. Ensure that new houses are constructed 200 m away from the shore and five feet above the ground level. Implement a literacy programme targeted exclusively at fishers. Provide free education to fisher-children in English-medium schools.

In Kanniyakumari, where literacy levels are high, start a college to take care of higher education needs. Increase the quota for the fisher community in Tamil Nadu's only fisheries college from five seats to ten. Set up special banks for fishermen on the lines of banks for farmers. Provide special finance and bear the responsibility for bringing up children orphaned by the tsunami. Allot fishers quotas for both education and jobs, treating them on par with Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Assist fishermen in accessing and obtaining alternative livelihoods. Make electricity available to them at subsidized rates.

Help the rehabilitation of tsunami-hit fishermen through special counseling efforts. Help the families of fishermen who went missing after the tsunami, and have to wait for seven years before any compensation can be paid to them. Organise pensions for Tamil Nadu fishermen on the lines of pensions that Kerala fishermen enjoy. (It was suggested that fishermen avail of the pension schemes of insurance agencies.)

General Issues: Study the phenomenon of sea erosion, which has worsened after the tsunami. Construct sea walls or groynes in all

villages close to the sea. Encourage mangrove plantations to save coastal areas from erosion. Clear river mouths to facilitate movement of boats. Ensure that the Sethusamudram project does not damage fisheries in the area. Bring back boats washed away to the Sri Lankan shores. Stop the sand mining now being done in some low-lying areas of the coast.

At the concluding session of the Consultation, fisheries officials from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry replied to the queries of fisher groups. Ms Mary Chinna Rani, Deputy Director, Government of Pondicherry, said that so far Rs. 38 crores had been spent to repair 1 200 boats. A Fishery Cooperative Society is being planned, a shore-to-vessel communication tower has been installed and scholarships have been provided for senior school students — @ Rs 200 for boys and Rs 300 for girls. As regards the future, community halls and information centres would be set up, communication equipment, fish finders and echo sounders would be provided at subsidised rates, a cold chain programme would be implemented. Two fish markets with modern facilities would also be set up in Pondicherry.

Mr Mohanasundaram, Joint Director (Fisheries), Nagapattinam, said that more information was required about the after-effects of tsunami on the ecology of the coastal waters and fisheries resources. He said that the statistical database (number of fishing boats, horsepower of engines used in mechanised boats, the effort put in by such boats) should be strengthened. Trawling operations should be gradually stopped. Fishing harbours should be modernised to reduce post-harvest losses in fisheries.

Mr Md. Lingaraja, Joint Director (Fisheries), Tuticorin, suggested that sea ranching should be undertaken to replenish stocks. He suggested activities like cultivation of ornamental fishes to give fishers alternative livelihood options.

Fishers at the meeting felt that the Consultation was very useful and would lead to more effective rehabilitation programmes. They suggested that the beginning made through this Consultation should continue and more such Consultations should be organised.

Participants at the Consultation.

