



LISTENING EXERCISE REPORT FROM TAMIL NADU SOUTHERN INDIA

MARCH 2012



OXFAM



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BACKGROUND

OXFAM'S LONG-TERM TSUNAMI EVALUATION

As part of its commitment to ongoing learning, Oxfam International has made the decision to engage in learning on issues of long-term sustainability and impact within the response of Oxfam and the wider aid community to the Asian tsunami of 2004¹. In the period following the phase out of humanitarian programs from tsunami-affected regions, multiple program evaluations and reviews were commissioned and carried out by Oxfam affiliates. To complement the findings from these earlier evaluations and to specifically examine long-term effects of humanitarian assistance, Oxfam International initiated its long-term tsunami evaluation from 2011. Though a wider program of evaluations was initially planned for India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, including a technical review in Aceh, the India Listening Exercise has been the first longitudinal evaluation to take place. The Listening Exercise aims to improve Oxfam's understanding of long-term effects and sustainability issues associated with humanitarian aid by listening to the opinions and experiences of aid recipients and others in affected communities. This evidence-gathering approach is referred to as a 'listening exercise'.

Oxfam International has identified accountability to beneficiaries as an important area for improvement in overall strategy, program design, and operational aspects. The recent listening exercise hosted by Oxfam India in Tamil Nadu allowed a rare opportunity for Oxfam staff and local partners to return seven years after the initial response and to hear the beneficiaries' perspectives and feedback on the long-term effects of the aid efforts of Oxfam and other organizations. As part of Oxfam's commitment to learning, Oxfam International is sharing this report with all Oxfam affiliates and more widely with partners in order to draw attention to the voices of beneficiaries about humanitarian assistance.

LISTENING PROGRAM AT CDA

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), a non-profit agency based in Cambridge, MA (USA), supported Oxfam during the January 2012 field visit to Tamil Nadu with its listening methodology², which has been applied and tested during field visits in twenty countries around the world. CDA brings experience from a wide range of collaborative learning efforts focused on improving international assistance over the last 20 years. CDA established the Listening Program (LP) in 2005 in collaboration with a number of colleagues in international and local NGOs, donors, and other humanitarian and development agencies. The overall goal of LP is to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the experiences and insights of people who live in aid-recipient societies on the cumulative effects of international assistance efforts. In this process, CDA organized more than 20 collaborative listening exercises to gather feedback and reflections of experienced and thoughtful local people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies in order to assess the impacts of aid efforts by international actors. A forthcoming book expected towards the end of 2012 synthesizes the findings from this field research.

Aid providers can learn a great deal by listening to the experiences, analyses, and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts. To support this learning, CDA's Listening Program is committed to bringing the experiences and ideas of aid recipients to the attention of practitioners and policy makers in order to improve the quality, accountability, and effectiveness of international aid efforts. CDA is currently working with partners in humanitarian and development agencies to support the development and use of more rigorous systems for listening to and communicating with people affected by international aid efforts.

OXFAM'S TSUNAMI RESPONSE IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

Several Oxfam affiliates responded in the tsunami-affected areas of southern India between 2005 and 2008 (some programs continued until 2009 and 2010). The affiliates who worked in the areas visited by Listening Teams included Oxfam GB, Oxfam Novib, Oxfam Intermón, Oxfam Australia, and Oxfam America. Oxfam affiliates, directly and through local partners provided the following types of assistance:

- relief items and temporary shelters
- water, sanitation, and hygiene/public health promotion (WaSH)
- construction of permanent houses
- agricultural land restitution
- livelihoods assistance in the form of boats, nets, micro-credit loans to self-help groups skills training and new agricultural technologies
- capacity strengthening of local partners/institution building
- disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness
- advocacy on a number of issues including equity, access to land, etc.

Multiple past evaluation reports have already reviewed in detail these various forms of assistance and their short-term effects in the period immediately following termination of programs³. The listening exercise and report build on the lessons of the earlier assessments by capturing feedback directly from recipient communities on long-term effects of Oxfam aid. All references within this report are to Oxfam generally rather than to a specific Oxfam affiliate (e.g. Oxfam GB, Oxfam Australia) in order to preserve the exercise as a learning experience, without any attempt to 'evaluate' around quality issues or specific projects.

The listening exercise in Tamil Nadu took place from the 3rd – 13th January 2012, with the participation of Oxfam International, Oxfam India, CDA and BLESS - a local non-governmental organization based in Cuddalore that had partnered with several Oxfam affiliates during the response. Several BLESS team members are also directly involved with other local organizations and development initiatives and brought their expertise in areas of humanitarian response, long-term social development, women's development, and marine conservation. CDA sent one staff person to jointly facilitate the listening exercise and draft the final report. Oxfam International's Humanitarian Quality and Processes Officer also co-facilitated the listening exercise. In total, ten people were involved as 'listeners'. In addition, Listening Team members sometimes met and were accompanied by local community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGO partner staff members who helped locate former Oxfam project areas and introduce the Listening Team to community members.

JANUARY 2012 LISTENING EXERCISE IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

This listening exercise would not have been possible without the commitment and hard work of staff members from Oxfam India and BLESS who invested their time and contributed their invaluable insights throughout this effort. The Oxfam India Humanitarian Manager laid the groundwork for this successful field visit and the Executive Director of BLESS provided much needed logistical support on the ground and guidance throughout the visit.

The Listening Team visited coastal communities in the districts of Karaikal, Cuddalore, and Pondicherry (Tamil Nadu and Union Territory) – all of which were affected by the tsunami and had received many different forms of humanitarian assistance. Listening Teams spoke with people in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas and visited fishing and farming villages and salt pan workers. Many of these communities are officially designated by the national government as Scheduled Castes (also known as Dalits or ‘untouchables’) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). The communities were chosen in consultation with BLESS and other former Oxfam partners taking into consideration geographic spread, a range of social and economic conditions and contexts as well as communities’ experiences with different forms of assistance.

The teams spoke to people from different socio-economic and age groups, including adult men and women, the elderly, youth and children, recipients and non-recipients of assistance, with people who held leadership positions and those who felt marginalized, and with people who were directly or indirectly involved in international assistance efforts. The team visited Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities. Conversations were held with school teachers and principals, members of women’s associations, market vendors and local businessmen, farmers and animal raisers, daily wage laborers, local panchayat leaders (a unit of self-governance consisting of village leaders elected by the village residents), and religious leaders. Teams also met

with former Oxfam local partners and representatives of local CBOs (BLESS, SEVAI, CCD, CWS, HOPE, DHAN Foundation, FACE, and others). The teams spoke to approximately 350 people in total.

LIMITATIONS/CAVEATS

The listening visit coincided with Cyclone Thane which hit Cuddalore and Pondicherry on 30th December, just four days before the exercise was due to start. After weighing the pros and cons of asking people to reflect on the long-term effects of humanitarian assistance in an area that had just been affected by another disaster, it was decided to proceed with the schedule, however several changes to the itinerary were made on the ground. The team was acutely aware of the risk of raising expectations by visiting recently affected communities and remained vigilant about explaining their purpose and being clear that this listening exercise was not a needs assessment and will not translate into assistance. On the positive side, it was felt that this post-cyclone context offered an important opportunity to engage people in conversations about long-term impacts, particularly around disaster preparedness, resilience, and capacity. In the end, it was encouraging to see how well the Listening Team was received and how willing people were to share their thoughts and suggestions.

Another important limitation and a veritable weakness in the evidence-gathering process was the limited access to government officials due to a number of reasons: 1) many of the officials who helped coordinate the tsunami response have been reassigned to other posts or have since retired, and 2) arranging meetings with current officials proved challenging due to scheduling difficulties and meeting cancellations on both sides due to the post-cyclone rehabilitation phase and the ongoing unrest in local communities over perceived inadequacies in the government

response (i.e. several sit-ins and protests were going on while the team visited the areas). Last-minute changes in the schedule prompted by the cyclone resulted in fewer listening days and, with a major Tamil holiday right after the visit, it was not possible to extend into another week in order to reach more areas or speak to local officials.

LISTENING METHODOLOGY⁴

Many conversations were held with two or three people, but often larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. Most conversations were not pre-arranged and Listening Team members would strike up a conversation with whoever was available and willing to talk, including those who had and had not received Oxfam assistance. Appointments were made with representatives of local NGOs and CBOs and other local leaders. When explaining the purpose, team members emphasized that the primary focus is on local people's perceptions of aid efforts beyond project details and their assessment of long-term impacts. It was made clear that this was not an evaluation of any particular Oxfam affiliate, their local partners, or any specific project. Open-ended questions encouraged people to recall their experiences with Oxfam aid (or other assistance) and to reflect on long-term effects, as well as to offer ideas on how Oxfam's work can be improved. In many instances, listening conversations revolved around issues and concerns that were of utmost importance to the local people given the post-cyclone timing and/or other developments in their communities. The broad impact-focused questions served as framing points to guide the conversation along without pre-determining narrowly focused topics.

BROAD LINES OF INQUIRY

The broad lines of inquiry guiding the listening conversations with beneficiaries were informed by the areas of focus identified in Oxfam International's Strategic Plan (2007-13), with an additional focus on resilience.

Overall Impact: How has Oxfam's tsunami response contributed to making a difference in people's lives? If not possible to identify specifically for Oxfam, has international assistance contributed to making a difference in people's lives?

Gender and Social Equity: How has Oxfam/international assistance contributed to improved (or worsened) equity?

Policy and Practice Changes: Where and how has Oxfam/international assistance contributed to achieving changes in policies and practices, and ideas and beliefs? Where has this not been the case (or less so)?

Partnerships: Where, if at all, has Oxfam/international assistance contributed to strengthening its partners, governments, or other actors (including private sector actors) to promote more active citizenship and progressive

social change; in holding others – including Oxfam – to account; and in achieving the above? (and where is this less the case or may not have happened?)

Capacity and Resilience: How, if at all, has beneficiaries' capacity to respond to future emergencies/resilience improved since the tsunami (with or without the support of external actors?)

This report reflects only a small portion of the experiences and opinions of the people in tsunami-affected communities of Tamil Nadu. The report does not purport to present a comprehensive picture of all the range of effects from aid that was provided by Oxfam affiliates and their local partners. This report highlights the key themes that emerged during the conversations and draws broad lessons from this visit which will help prompt further reflection and analysis across Oxfam on these important issues. Finally, a listening exercise would not be successful without people's presence and willingness to provide feedback. The Listening Team wants to thank all the people in Cuddalore, Karaikal, and Pondicherry who generously gave their time and shared their experiences and thoughts.

WHAT LISTENING TEAMS HEARD

Listening Teams asked people to reflect on the overall effects of Oxfam's response and other tsunami relief efforts and to describe specific examples and experiences as evidence to support their judgments and conclusions. Because the scope of the questions was broad, some people talked about a range of issues related to both humanitarian and long-term development efforts and their effects⁵. As expected, a number of common themes emerged in the conversations and these key points are highlighted and summarized here. The concluding section provides a brief summary of the Listening Teams' reflections on the listening exercise process as well as on some of the issues raised that may merit further inquiry and learning by Oxfam affiliates.

HOW HAS OXFAM ASSISTANCE MADE A DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLE'S LIVES?

Immediate support from NGOs is like first aid when you have an injury. It is very helpful but it should always come together with other plans. Oxfam temporary shelters gave us a dignified living space in the immediate month after tsunami. Because of this, the government had time to prepare its own assessment and develop plans for long-term support.

A MAN IN PUDHUKUPPAM VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

Virtually everyone stressed that relief was critical and helped save lives and support survivors in their immediate post-disaster needs. People recalled that among the most important things in the first days and weeks after the tsunami were the ability to access medical care for injured family members, clean drinking water, appropriate and sufficient food for children and the rest of the family, hygiene kits, and temporary shelters. Among the least useful relief items that were mentioned were 'too many utensils' and 'used clothes'.

A number of people talked about participating in Oxfam-funded Public Health Promotion (PHP) activities and recalled them as very useful both in the short-term in light of particular hygiene needs in temporary shelters and in the long-term in regards to general increased awareness around health practices, hygiene, and nutrition. Many people, women in particular, reported that they are still using the knowledge that they acquired during the awareness raising and training sessions and from interactions with local partner staff. A number of people, women in particular, talked about improvements in the overall health of their children.

Socially there is marked difference in our life. We are much aware of our life. We have also grown considerably in health and hygiene awareness and made progress.

RESIDENT IN PILLAI COLONY IN KARAİKAL DISTRICT

When reflecting about long-term effects people linked decreased rates of waterborne diseases and overall improvements in health and nutrition in many coastal communities to the combined efforts of NGOs and the government in raising awareness about hygiene and nutrition and increasing access to safe drinking water. In people's experience, improved nutrition was also linked to improved livelihoods (i.e. higher yields for fishermen or stable income from wage labor) and higher incomes per household.

Some people recalled the process by which Oxfam and their partners engaged people in discussions about what was needed and they commended Oxfam for taking the right approach by consulting people about options such as housing, livelihoods, and other forms of assistance and engaging community members in quality control processes during construction.

The overall narrative that emerged by piecing together multiple and disparate examples, stories, and observations shared during the daily listening conversations was of notable improvements in the quality of life and standard of living for many people in coastal communities since the tsunami. For some people this meant living in better houses than they had before and for others it meant an increase in fish catch (and income) due to larger and technologically advanced boats that they received. Many women felt that aid agencies' decision to register newly constructed houses and

new boats in the name of both the husband and wife (and sometimes only the wife) has, over time, contributed to an enhanced social standing for them and has shifted dynamics within many households were property used to be registered only to men. Most importantly however, women highlighted their increased earning potential and mobility within and outside their communities as a significant development and a sign of progress. Dalit women in one village told the Oxfam listening team, 'Thank you for the support you gave during the tsunami. Through this we have become strong personalities in our community'.

These and other effects are described in more detail below. Not all comments about long-term effects were positive; some people pointed out a number of negative effects, criticisms, frustrations, and disappointments, which are also summarized below.

HOUSING

IMPROVED LIVING STANDARDS

For many *dalit* and fishermen communities the houses constructed for them after the tsunami meant a real improvement to their quality of life. These so called 'tsunami houses' were primarily constructed from concrete and were a welcomed departure from the traditional thatched huts that are typical in coastal communities. The feedback from those living in the newly constructed homes was mixed. People appreciated the concrete houses for their solid construction and ability to withstand natural disasters such as cyclones. A number of people suggested that the recent cyclone would have caused greater loss of human life and damage to property if people were still living in traditional huts. Indeed, Listening Teams passed numerous road side settlements along the Karaikal-Cuddalore road and observed many traditional huts damaged or completely destroyed by the cyclone. In this regard, people's voices were clear and straightforward; concrete construction meant less danger from weather elements, more security for residents and assets, and less need for regular maintenance.

Housing is a really important form of assistance. I have thirteen years of experience working in these villages. The improvement in the quality of living standards for people is real. Before tsunami our people lived in huts and had to rebuild each time there was strong wind or cyclone. The huts needed constant repair. Now they are in more stable housing.

Safety has improved and people appreciate a solid roof over their heads.

LOCAL RELIGIOUS LEADER IN CUDDALORE

Before tsunami we lived in government provided houses which were group homes. Now we have private houses. Oxfam aid helped to construct houses, good quality houses in comparison to other agency houses. All community members worked together and were paid for work. We are very happy with our houses. We are sure that if any disaster comes again, this house will withstand it.

MALE RESIDENT IN PILLAI COLONY, A DALIT COMMUNITY IN KARAIKAL

People are aware of the differences in quality of life between Dalit villages that were reconstructed after the tsunami and those that were further away from the coast and were left unchanged (thatched huts). Dalit people spoke about relatives still living in group houses in other villages and how they have to repair these each year. One woman's sister who lives away from the coast said to her, 'You are safe in your concrete constructed houses. We are always unsafe from the strong winds and cyclone'.

People made it clear that spending less on regular maintenance meant more money is available for other expenses such as school fees, better nutrition, and investments in livelihood and entrepreneurial activities. Conversely, a few women also pointed out that an increase in disposable income has led some men to gamble and drink more.

People appreciated the level of engagement that Oxfam and most of its partners were able to sustain throughout the planning and construction phase in permanent housing sites. A number of people felt that they were taken into confidence, their views were valued, and issues were discussed and heeded at multiple stages of project. Overall, the appreciation expressed about houses constructed by Oxfam and other NGOs was largely heard in villages where houses were indeed solid and of good quality.

ISSUES AROUND QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Conversely, people in several communities complained that some of the contractors hired by international NGOs (including in few instances by Oxfam) and their partner organizations did a poor engineering and construction job and did not follow quality standards. By visiting inside several homes, Listening Team members saw roofs that were leaking and indoor walls covered with mildew and heard from local residents that structural repairs and maintenance remain a significant part of their household expenditures each year.

In several communities, people compared houses built with NGO funds to those built by the government. A few people suggested that the government had spent more money and built better houses but only after waiting for the NGOs to expend their available budgets. In one village, in particular, where an Oxfam-funded local NGO oversaw house construction, people complained about the quality of the houses and said that now, seven years later, the houses were in a really bad state of disrepair. One woman voiced her frustration by saying ‘we are spending too much money on repairing these houses each year. After two or three years they are of no use – too much damage. We don’t have a lot to spend on repairs. We are still putting buckets to catch drain water like in our old huts. Sometimes we feel there is not much difference between these houses and our old huts’. People in this village have asked the Collector (local government official) to demolish these houses and build new ones or at least fix them. They recall that government officials had come to inspect the houses in the past but said ‘we didn’t build these houses. Why don’t you just fix them?’

Listening Team members noted that people’s experiences with Oxfam-funded construction projects which were implemented through local partners and multiple contractors and sub-contractors are important to hear and understand because they are linked to issues of accountability. We heard people describe several situations in which Oxfam worked through a local partner which in turn hired a construction company which then transferred the contract to another local company or sub-contractor. There were multiple actors involved in drawing up plans, deciding on location and design of houses, procuring construction materials, and building. In one particularly telling example, a local village leader and residents described their attempts to communicate their concerns about the quality and slow speed of construction; they spoke to the contractors working in their village first, but received a reply stating ‘you are not the ones paying for this construction project. We are not responsible to you. Go speak to the NGO’. They tried to contact Oxfam’s local partner in charge of implementing this housing project, but this particular NGO was not in fact local and had their headquarters located in a neighboring state. Village residents recall someone visiting from the headquarters but construction continued without modifications. Shortly after the initial phase, that NGO closed

its Tamil Nadu operations and is no longer working on the ground today. The village leader did not recall past visits by any Oxfam staff.

The teams asked people to explain why some experiences with housing were positive and others disappointing or negative. A number of factors were mentioned across the conversations in different villages which point to issues in planning, implementation, and oversight of residential construction projects. In cases where people’s experience was positive and houses were still perceived as solid and of high quality, people pointed out the following important steps taken by Oxfam and its local implementing partners:

- Community members were consulted on the design of the houses
- Village residents were engaged in construction
- People were trained in and engaged in quality control and monitoring of construction
- Contractors provided durable construction
- Staff from Oxfam local partner organizations conducted monitoring and follow-up visits
- Oxfam paid for ten years of house insurance upfront

In the few villages where people expressed disappointment and voiced criticism about the quality and durability of the houses, the following factors were typically mentioned as critical:

- People had little or no choice on the design of their future homes (e.g. location and size of kitchens, toilets and small worship areas inside the house)
- Local residents were not engaged in oversight or quality control during construction
- There was no third party quality control and/or Oxfam and local partner staff were not present during construction
- Contractors offered a poor quality architectural design and/or construction
- Construction process was outsourced to multiple contractors often with no redress mechanism available to village residents
- No insurance for the houses was made available, or limited protection from the state

LOCATION IS CRITICAL FOR LIVELIHOODS

When discussing long-term changes and improvements in their lives, most people linked these developments to the decisions made during reconstruction about the location of rebuilt settlements. There were differences in people’s experiences, where some villages were given a choice about whether to relocate or stay in the same location and others were resettled without a choice. Oxfam and its local

partners and local government officials worked together to find and allocate land in case of resettlement and many villages were resettled due to the new regulation stipulating that residences should be located a safe distance from the coast. As a result, many fishing villages which used to be directly on the beach are now set further inland. Staff of one former Oxfam partner organization explained that women fish vendors in the past could see the boats arriving with fresh catch from their homes. The relocation away from shore requires that they travel to the shore not knowing the exact time of arrival of the fishing boats and thus spending more time than before waiting and away from their household responsibilities.

“Whatever the shelter may be, it should be rebuilt where we are, we don’t want to be relocated.”

WOMAN IN VADDAKKUVANCHUR VILLAGE IN KARAİKAL DISTRICT

“They asked us where we want to live. Initially we preferred to stay in the same place where we always lived. Now, we are surrounded by fisher folk and no longer have access to farming land. We would have made a different choice if we knew this back then. We would have asked Oxfam to resettle us and build the houses closer to other dalit people and closer to town where jobs are - not to be isolated as we are now.”

A MAN IN PILLAI COLONY, KARAİKAL DISTRICT

The voices above illustrate the dissimilar and often contradictory experiences that people described especially when discussing long-term improvements or lack thereof in terms of livelihoods, employment, and access to opportunities. There was no consensus on the best approach. People whose livelihoods were unchanged (e.g. fishermen who continued to fish and farmers who still had access to land) were glad to either stay in the vicinity of their original settlement or be resettled where they could continue with their vocation. Those who lost access to their former livelihoods (e.g. farmers or dalits serving as farm laborers who no longer have access to farming land due to rampant privatization by commercial companies that followed after tsunami)⁶ emphasized the dilemma of appreciating the newly constructed houses but wanting to be closer to viable livelihood opportunities and accessible jobs.

“We have better houses than other dalit communities, but the other dalits have better employment opportunities.”

“I don’t know what more Oxfam could have done. At the time this location was fine, now we wish we were closer to the town for easier employment.”

RESIDENTS IN VANAGIRI VILLAGE, A DALIT COMMUNITY IN KARAİKAL DISTRICT

“Unemployment problem in this area also pushes us to new form of bonded labor practice now. The land lords give us advance and take us for work. We have to be satisfied with whatever they give us. They also discriminate women against men in wage structure. This is the new form of slavery we are slowly pushed into because of our poverty, unemployment, etc.”

MAN IN PILLAI COLONY, KARAİKAL DISTRICT

This dilemma is real given that livelihoods were negatively affected after the tsunami; in particular wage labor opportunities on farms have decreased due to loss of cultivable land to privatization. Goat-rearing and other animal husbandry has suffered too with few pasture lands available. In cases where settlements are far away from nearby towns, women’s livelihoods are disproportionately affected. Women are unable to travel long distances for wage labor and menial jobs because they have many household responsibilities. One woman echoed other voices we heard across the villages, when she said, ‘we are unable to have a stable income’.

Several rebuilt villages have now found themselves in close proximity to newly constructed power plants (for which the nearby farm lands have been appropriated). Some people strongly feel that even if they are offered employment at the coal plant, the impacts from company operations on the local environment and their health will bring more harm than good. As one former farm laborer said, ‘we are very fearful of the future. The coal power plant is going to move here. The area will be polluted and our health endangered. We don’t really want to live here anymore but we have no options’. Raising concerns about staying in the current location, people suggested that ‘NGOs like SEVAI (Oxfam’s local partner that oversaw the house reconstruction) should help

us negotiate with real estate buyers and help us relocate'. The challenge of selling 'tsunami houses' wholesale and buying an equally good housing elsewhere (a whole village) was recognized by the residents who genuinely appreciate the improved housing situation but feel trapped without viable employment.

LIVELIHOODS ASSISTANCE

The tsunami washed away houses, boats and fishing industry infrastructure and damaged cultivable land in the coastal area. Therefore, assistance aimed at rebuilding and strengthening livelihoods formed an important component of the overall tsunami response in the area, and this was also true for the interventions by several Oxfam affiliates. In the first-line affected villages livelihoods assistance naturally included boats, fishing nets, and some form of cash assistance to help people regain their livelihoods. Oxfam also focused on land reclamation and agriculture in the second-line villages where there was less damage to property and more harm done to the fields by the salt of the ocean water. Attention to the damaged fields was not an immediate priority and was spurred by the advocacy of Oxfam's local partner NGOs, such as Building and Enabling Disaster Resilience of Coastal Communities (BEDROC).

Many livelihoods initiatives aimed at supporting women were activated through village-based self-help groups, some of which had existed prior to the tsunami and were revitalized. Many new self-help groups were created with the assistance of Oxfam's local partners and other INGOs working in the area. Not surprisingly, we heard about a number of livelihoods projects initiated during the post-tsunami response which are still actively operating today and many others that have faltered and did not endure.

Multiple skills-building trainings and workshops (e.g. masonry, carpentry, wall painting, tailoring) were provided for local men and women in affected villages. Some people reported that these skills have helped them to gain short-term employment and some said that they now survive because of these skills. Below we focus on the long-term effects of three most prominent forms of livelihoods assistance as described by majority of local people: 1) boats, 2) agricultural assistance, and 3) entrepreneurial activities launched through self-help groups. The following are direct and indirect effects that were described by people whose lives were affected by the tsunami and by the assistance that was provided afterwards.

BOATS: THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF IMPROVED TECHNOLOGIES

Many people echoed the comment that assistance that arrived in the form of boats enabled fishermen to renew their livelihoods and quickly stand on their own feet. But people offered a number of different and often contradictory opinions about the effects of new and improved boats that were brought into the area as part of Oxfam's and other INGOs' humanitarian assistance. The new mechanized fishing boats are made of fiberglass and are significantly larger and faster than the traditional Tamil catamarans (wooden dug out boats). The new boats, equipped with powerful motors, are able to reach deeper waters and some are equipped with a Global Positioning System (GPS) allowing fishermen to travel much farther distances. People also described new types of fishing nets which were distributed which allowed them to catch more fish.

Traditional catamaran fishermen used to be restricted to the distance of one-to-two kilometers from the beach; now the area accessible to local fishermen has been significantly increased, resulting also in a higher boat traffic going out to open seas. Traditional Tamil catamarans did not venture out in rough sea conditions, but mechanized boats are capable of this, therefore increasing the number of boats in the sea at all times. New boats also require fewer laborers, a form of employment that many people depended on in coastal areas. The traditional fishing areas have shifted, and with them so have the types and amounts of fish that are caught.

People's comments and analysis point to these changes as double-edge swords.

Predictably, the improvements in fishing technology have translated into higher catch yields and increased income for many fishermen. As a result, people pointed to a number of important improvements in the economic welfare of local fishing villages where some people have been able to afford private schooling for their children, better food, better clothing, and have invested money into entrepreneurial activities. On the other hand, the same fishermen also raised serious concerns about the rising cost of fishing due to the spiking price of fuel and periodic motor repairs for the new boats. These are expenses they had not incurred before while using traditional wooden boats. When the price of fuel spikes, some fishermen reported being unable to take the boats out, therefore fishing less days. This also coincides with recent government policies that limit fishing during certain seasons due to a sudden increase in motorized boats and concerns about overfishing.

In addition, the technologically improved boats have prevented many elderly men from fishing. Several of them told us that they cannot operate new boats due to their size and motor maintenance. Furthermore, they can no longer successfully use traditional catamarans because the fish population closer to the coast has been depleted and venturing farther out effectively brings them into unfavorable competition with the motorized boats which are faster and

louder making fishing next to them futile. Due to this and other reasons, we heard that traditional boat making skills are being lost since very few catamarans are being produced for the local market.

BOATS: CHANGES IN FISHING PRACTICES

Local NGOs and fishermen described several important changes in the fishing practices, some of which are positive, though many are seen as having harmful impacts on the fish population and marine environment. A number of local NGOs, local community leaders, and fishermen themselves mentioned an important shift from traditional fishing practice to a new practice called 'purse-seine fishing', made possible by the new types of boats. This fishing method utilizes a large net which is kept vertically in place with weights placed at the bottom while keeping it afloat on the top with buoys. Typically, fishermen using new 'tsunami boats' go out with several boats at a time and one communal purse-seine net, catching all fish in the encircled area.

One Listening Team member whose organization specializes in marine conservation explained that the chain of effects from new motorized boats includes overfishing and a decline in fish population. Dolphins in the area can't get sufficient food. In addition, inter-state boundary disputes between Tamil Nadu state and Sri Lankan government have increased due to Tamil fishermen boats straying too far into the international seas. Incidentally, during our visit, the local papers carried several stories about local fishermen rescued by Sri Lankan coast guard after being swept away during Cyclone Thane. Conversely, in one community a local leader pointed out that a sizable group of fishermen from the surrounding area travel outside of India for labor sending remittances home to support their families. As a result of this out-migration for labor, there is in fact less fishing in some areas than before tsunami.

BOATS: QUALITY ISSUES

Overall the mechanized fiberglass boats are recognized as a major technological improvement. However, in a few villages fishermen described the quality of the new boats as very poor. They explained that good quality fiberglass boats require a specific number of layers to achieve the requisite thickness and ensure solid structure and durability. They insisted their boats were 'not the right kind' due to a poor manufacturing process and because contractor did not produce the boats with the requisite six layers. In the past seven years, several of these boats have been damaged or broken by strong waves and while being transported on shore. Fishermen explained that the problem was due to the fact that the manufacturing process was shortened from the usual 15 days to just eight days. As one of the fishermen argued, 'the boats were prepared by standards of NGOs, not fishermen. If we stood nearby, we would be able to monitor the manufacturing process. Fishermen should be involved in the process, not just receive the boat at the

end'. Due to the poor quality of the boats, fishermen spend more money now on frequent repairs. They were not aware of any existing grievance or redress mechanisms. They went to the manufacturing company to complain, but they recall that the contractor told them, 'you didn't pay for the boats; we are not responsible to you'. Several of them mentioned that in the past, a government program that provided boat assistance included a six-year warranty. According to fishermen, most NGO boats did not include a warranty, although they were convinced it was promised during the initial assessments.

BOATS: TOO MANY PROVIDED

A number of local NGOs and aid recipients themselves pointed out that the initial emphasis by NGOs and their donors on the provision of boats⁷ resulted in many more boats being distributed than were required. Several local NGOs mentioned weak coordination between the aid providers as an important factor contributing to the excess inputs in the form of boats. A director of one local NGO which partnered with Oxfam explained the complicated and often flawed assessment processes that were undertaken in a hurry after the tsunami. He recalled 'hundreds of INGOs flooding the area, giving too much. Often, there were no proper assessments'. In one example, where government records indicated that 464 catamarans were registered in Cuddalore District before the tsunami, the subsequent aid agency-led assessment processes incorrectly showed that 14,000 catamarans were reported as missing. He explained that the fishermen were well organized and very vocal in demanding that their boats and other assets be replaced and many 'fake assessments' were completed as a result.

In other districts and villages, local NGOs and heads of fishermen collectives described in similar terms the initial influx of too many 'NGO boats' and described the short-term effects of excess boats on the local market. These effects included price fluctuations linked to the fact that excess 'tsunami boats' were sold, bought, and traded along the Tamil Nadu coast farther north to Andhra Pradesh and as far up along the coast as Orissa. It appears that the boat market equalized itself after the initial saturation. In a few places, we heard that because of too many boats that were distributed, some fishermen sold the excess boats and became 'drunkards'. After the tsunami there was no suitable lumber nor were there skilled carpenters immediately available, therefore the supply of traditional catamaran boats was compromised. When fiberglass boats were brought in by NGOs, fishermen recognized that new boats were safer and more efficient. In many villages fishermen's collectives applied for and accepted as many boats as they could get in addition to 10,000 rupees cash assistance to each fisherman for losses and loans in addition to the boats.

People also discussed shifts in cultural norms and positive changes in caste relations in villages where dalits and fishermen are now fishing together, a practice that was unheard of in the past in most communities where long-standing caste barriers did not permit dalits to even touch

the boats and the nets. In our analysis, Listening Team members linked these changes to the overall tsunami rehabilitation efforts which affected the demand equation in the labor market. With too many mechanized boats distributed as part of the INGO and government rehabilitation package many former wage laborers from fishing castes became boat owners. This resulted in a shortage of laborers on boats and fishermen had no choice but to reach out and hire members of dalit communities to fish with them⁸. As a result, some dalits gained access to a more stable employment and an increase in their income in cases where they managed to develop good working relations with fishermen nearby. More importantly, however, dalit people spoke about how these new ties between neighboring villages helped to increase social acceptance of dalits, a development that has significant psychological effects and is linked to issues of dignity, respect, and social inclusion. Former Oxfam partners such as SEVAI and BLESS are particularly optimistic about these developments and currently seek ways to reinforce these social relations in their ongoing work focused on economic and social inter-dependency and inclusion.

LAND RECLAMATION, AGRICULTURAL CAPACITY BUILDING, AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Land reclamation work was an important step on the way to rehabilitating agriculture and other livelihoods, such as salt harvesting on the salt pans where 10,000 acres of land were cleared with the help of FACE, a local organization that partnered with Oxfam. One salt pan worker told the Listening Team, 'If [Oxfam] did not enter, many acres would not have been rehabilitated'. In the rehabilitation phase, more attention was given to agricultural improvement. New approaches and technologies such as System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and organic farming were introduced to achieve higher yields in several communities.

In the village of Poompopail, farmers said that trainings helped them gain confidence and knowledge about seed maintenance, fertilizers, and other skills. They are now producing, marketing, and storing seeds on their own and have shared their knowledge with other farmers. The new practice of purchasing crop insurance was introduced by aid agencies and it has helped raise people's confidence levels. As one person stated, 'even if something happens, we can deal with it'. People in this same community were glad to continue with farming after the rehabilitation phase and felt that they have rebuilt their lives. The formation of farming cooperatives and societies was mentioned by several people as an important factor that has helped people organize and engage in collective actions and access micro-enterprise loans and develop the habit of savings.

SELF-HELP GROUPS: MICRO-ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Many self-help groups (fishermen's, farmer's, and women's) existed before the tsunami but their numbers and capacities were boosted by the deliberate choice made by many local and international NGOs, including Oxfam affiliates, to strengthen self-help groups as platforms for engaging people in consultations, village-based decision making, and micro-enterprise development. Enough has already been written about the model of self-help groups in India therefore we concentrate on what we heard about long-term effects of these collectives, many of which were initially supported by Oxfam and its partners.

First, teams heard about many new self-help groups that were created during the post-tsunami response period that are still running. There is a broad range of activities that self-help groups engage in. Women in particular spoke about grain grinding, tailoring, shop-keeping, fish vending, vegetable vending, and milk production, among other activities. Where they have endured and thrived, people reported on greater economic security for the group members, through loans and cash infusions which are now available at critical moments such as weddings, funerals, school tuition payments, and business expansion.

■ ■ We used to borrow money with very high interest, daily, weekly interest. Now, self-help groups provide loans for our immediate needs. A woman in Sumanahili/ Oxfam supported village. Now, we have self-help groups and can apply for loans. We can share the benefits with elderly. Because of self-help groups, we are very informed about the status of everyone in the village, we can make better decisions. ■ ■

WOMEN IN SASY/OXFAM SUPPORTED VILLAGE

In one village, women explained that before the tsunami there were many money lenders operating in the village and causing high levels of indebtedness. Now women are able to receive loans through a self-help group at just 1% interest rate in this village. They also contribute 0.5 % to the revolving fund for the larger federation of self-help groups.

However, not all enterprises initiated by self-help groups have been successfully managed or sustained. In Anichankuppam village, most people still belong to one of the ten self-help groups in the village, but the groups are largely defunct. Each group received a onetime loan of 40,000 rupees to establish an enterprise and had initially

started by selling rice and other items. Encountering initial challenges with these commercial enterprises, the group members subsequently split up the funds equally amongst themselves and used the money to purchase nets and other household items. They admitted that the self-help group has become a mechanism for receiving cash which they may otherwise be ineligible to receive as a personal bank loan. The last loan they received was also split up, after which the group went into default and they are now ineligible for more funds.

Several stories about collective purpose and action by multiple self-help groups emerged in our conversations. In a village supported by Social Awareness Society for Youths (SASY), a former Oxfam partner, women described how they organized their self-help groups into a federation of fifty other self-help groups. One representative from each group attends monthly meetings during which they identify and discuss solutions to common issues, such as access to land, relations and tensions with neighboring villages, legal issues linked to divorce, and access to safe water. Federation members have organized demonstrations and agitated for change at local government offices. Several women spoke about their voices being increasingly more respected and heard due to their growing numbers and visibility. Initially, their group meetings were organized with the help of SASY and with support from Oxfam, often held at a SASY office. The federation members are now independently holding meetings and plan to organize revolving meetings in different villages in the future. One of the challenges mentioned by the members is that they are not accepted in upper-caste villages and so meeting in a neutral location such as a SASY office is a lot easier.

Below we present several brief vignettes to illustrate the variety of changes taking place as a result of increased number and activity of self-help groups.

HOPE

HOPE is a local NGO in Tamil Nadu with expertise in advocacy on gender and children's rights. They have partnered with Oxfam on both advocacy efforts and direct relief. According to HOPE staff, despite the post-tsunami influx of funds, 'HOPE managed to keep small and did not get too ambitious'. The organization supported women's self-help groups in several villages since the tsunami response. One of HOPE's conditions for a loan stipulates that if the group dissolves within three years then the loan is to be repaid to HOPE. If the group continues beyond the three-year period, the initial loan does not need to be repaid. After the first three years, six out of a total of around 35 groups dissolved splitting the money between the members. Members of self-help groups appreciated the transparency with which information about how much was spent by HOPE on programming was shared.

In one village, women reported that there are currently four-to-five million rupees revolving within their community. In one village, people explained to us that membership in self-help groups is open primarily to married women because single young women, when they marry and move away, are seen as a challenge to the goal of group sustainability. Membership conditions stipulate that if members quit within three years they have to repay the funds they borrowed. Village-based self-help groups belong to a federation and periodically, funds are donated from the groups to a common federation pot to support broader advocacy, organizing, and education efforts. We visited one village with 40 groups in the village, each consisting of 20 members. There are 700 self-help groups making up the Federation.

Self-help group members felt that the work of HOPE after the tsunami influenced people's attitudes not only because of the much needed relief that was given, but more importantly because of the subsequent awareness sessions and trainings on life skills, family planning, leadership, environment, and other issues. One woman said, 'Psychosocial change is the real change', and another added, 'Self-help groups is the power of women'. Listening Team members observed that self-help group members were very articulate and confident. They discussed ongoing challenges in their community without blaming others and they did not expect help from outside to solve all of their issues. Self-help group members seemed to be very confident discussing their communal vision for the future. Dissenting voices were also present, as people shared their perception that government assistance is benefitting mostly the fishermen (e.g. a new cold fish storage unit in the community was recently built). Someone added, 'there is little unity'. All members agreed however that increased pursuit of education is the key indicator for development in their village. Listening Team members found the higher level of self-esteem exhibited by the self-help group members remarkable and saw this as a positive illustration of a self-help group model - one that eventually leads to independence from continued NGO support.

DHAN

Oxfam partnered with a local NGO called DHAN to provide relief, livelihoods support, and other forms of assistance. Before the tsunami, DHAN had an established relationship with one Oxfam affiliate partnering around the promotion of self-help groups in a timeframe of three-to-five years. Typically, after the initial two-to-three year period of regular assistance and supervision, most groups become self-sustaining. During the tsunami period, new self-help groups in additional communities were created with the help of DHAN and Oxfam and many remain active today. DHAN now works with 73,000 households in 336 villages covering an area of 40 kilometers along the coast, engaging fishermen, farmers, and women's groups. The loans that have been disbursed to many of these groups have been used to support ongoing livelihood activities, start enterprises, and for essential household needs like repairing houses and paying school fees.

Current self-help group members told us about the important skills and knowledge acquired through their membership, such as developing saving habits. They described other benefits of being part of the self-help group, including access to more reasonable levels of credit compared to predatory money lending, better repayment rates, and better access and understanding of the bank loans and credit. One woman in particular said that because of her membership and access to credit she is able to educate her daughter who is completing her studies as an engineer. Another woman's daughter was training in computer science. These professional fields were unattainable in the recent past especially for young women from a low caste background and from rural villages.

SELF-HELP GROUPS: IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOW-UP

Not all stories about self-help groups were about sustainability and success. Listening Teams heard many stories of groups that were formed, initiated entrepreneurial activity, and then ran aground. Staff at several local NGOs that have the most direct experience with promoting and guiding the activities of self-help groups insisted that regular follow-up is critical. One local NGO director argued that the three-year project timeframe is too short. In his experience, when funding for follow-up visits and continued support decreased or dropped, many self-help groups and their enterprises also stopped. His staff had helped several self-help groups to start businesses and provided training around financial management skills. Afterwards, however, group members developed differences and with no external facilitation support and guidance they often could not resolve their disagreements and broke-up.

One person, citing his experience as a leader of a local community development organization, estimated that about 60% of self-help groups are perceived to be successful

and 40% are a failure. Among the many factors that lead to success or failure, follow-up by local NGOs and government and bank officials was mentioned as an important precondition for continued cash investments. When reflecting on the failed self-help groups, staff at one local NGO pointed to lack of follow-up after the initial project period, high levels of discord among members, and weak oversight and monitoring processes. One of the recommendations put forth to Oxfam and its local partners was to budget for sufficient follow-up activities even in short-term relief efforts. It was noted that partnership with local NGOs who are already engaged in long-term community development processes is critical but not all of these organizations are natural partners to Oxfam during relief efforts because they don't have humanitarian experience.

EDUCATION

Virtually in every community we visited, people spoke at length about significant and tangible improvements in access to education. They linked this development to a number of factors, among them important government policies⁹ and reforms in addition to the boost offered by a number of awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns by local and international NGOs during the post-tsunami response period. Oxfam's local partners and many community members were aware of the multiple and concerted initiatives and efforts that contributed to this important development. Some people were knowledgeable about government policies aimed at increasing access to education for members of the lower caste and disadvantaged children and others spoke about the continued work of local NGOs focused on promoting education and improved livelihoods.

When speaking about their values on education, the majority of the people mentioned increased awareness and a general shift in attitude toward sending children to school and motivating them to pursue higher degrees. People spoke about the changes brought about by modernity to their traditional livelihoods and described education as the only exit out of poverty and a path to better life.

■ ■ I am not educated, due to that I've experienced so many hardships. I want to educate my children. ■ ■

WOMAN, PILLAI COLONY, KARAIKAL

Before we were farm laborers, now we are still farm laborers. But our attitude toward education has changed. We are more willing to send kids to school. Before girls used to be maids in people's homes, and boys worked in workshops. Now they are all in school. Through SASY we attended so many awareness trainings about the role of education. I believe our community will uplift itself through education, and only through education.

WOMAN IN CUDDALORE DISTRICT

Specifically, many people recalled that before the tsunami, most school-age children who attended schools would only reach the 8th grade. Now, the number of children attending government schools has dramatically increased, with fewer dropouts. Some children, even from low-caste communities, are going to private schools. Parents described the compromises they make in their family budgets in order to keep their children in school.

Educating girls is important, the whole community is strengthened. Self-help group member in Cuddalore District

We pay tuition even if we can't eat, sometimes we pay late and our children are teased at school, but we still keep them in school. Education is now our important priority. Fisherman in Cuddalore district

People described the efforts of NGOs that worked in their communities after the tsunami and promoted these important messages, as well as the sustained efforts by the government to raise awareness about the importance of education for both girls and boys. This was particularly significant in communities where historically girls' rate of attendance was very low and where boys dropped out of school early to help their fathers on fishing boats and in the fields.

EQUITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION, AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

NGOs saw this disaster as an opportunity for social re-engineering. Why not give boats to dalits or women?! But you cannot do away with a caste system or gender inequity with a short term relief effort

STAFF AT BEDROC, LOCAL PARTNER TO OXFAM, NAGAPATTINAM DISTRICT

In their reflections on the tsunami response and its long-term effects, several local partners to Oxfam described the aid efforts by international and local NGOs as rooted in the principles of social equality, inclusion and gender equity. Local people described numerous examples of aid agencies intentionally designing and carrying out their efforts with the aim of empowering disadvantaged and marginalized groups, such as women and lower castes, and promoting them to new leadership and socio-economic roles, as owners of properties, boats, and enterprises. The results of these well-intentioned efforts seem to be mixed and their assessment is further complicated by the fact that a set of broader government-led policies have been introduced to increase social inclusion and opportunities for marginalized groups. When speaking about post-tsunami aid efforts in particular, one local NGO director felt that the well-intentioned NGO efforts to empower marginalized people were implemented 'too fast' and lacked a long-term plan. In some cases, these hasty efforts have inadvertently disrupted the social fabric within some communities. For example, some of the women who were rapidly advanced to communal leadership roles now do not feel supported by NGOs who have left their communities nor by the traditional *panchayats* (local community councils which are very powerful in fishing communities) and are unable to sustain the level of leadership and women's empowerment work that was encouraged of them during the response period.

A director of one local partner agency to Oxfam described the aid agencies' decision to distribute boats to *dalits*, Muslims, and women (all of whom traditionally did not engage in fishing), as an attempt to 'socially re-engineer' the inequities deeply embedded in the caste system and gender relations. She added that this 'super-imposition of development issues into the disaster related issues' was largely ill-conceived and its implementation within a very short time frame eventually led to many frustrations and failures. Because humanitarian response is by nature short-term, using assistance as a vehicle to change the caste system and to empower women was a very hurried effort that was not informed by a deep understanding of the local context. Besides causing imbalances in labor demand equations and

friction in communities about shifting roles, it also seemed to have resulted in some unintended negative effects on gender relations in some communities. BEDROC's director argued that a measured and long-term process embedded in sustainable development principles is required in order to nurture and reinforce these important social changes that were triggered by the tsunami and the subsequent aid programs.

ISSUES AROUND TARGETING OF DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

One prominent local NGO head and a former partner to Oxfam described how tsunami response work highlighted serious issues around discrimination and exclusion of dalit communities during the targeting and implementation of relief and rehabilitation efforts. Conversely, in one village designated as the Other Backwards Castes (OBC) people voiced their disappointment and frustration about being overlooked by the aid agencies and the government assistance schemes after the tsunami. They saw their OBC status as a liability and some of them speculated that their higher caste status in comparison to dalits had disadvantaged them in regards to their eligibility for assistance since they were not considered 'most marginalized'.

In one OBC village people explained that because they were a 'second-line affected' village and their shacks were not destroyed by the water, they were not offered permanent housing and therefore they missed out on the opportunity to improve their standard of living and the quality of their housing. A nearby dalit village, also second-line affected without damage to shacks, did receive permanent houses through one of the local Oxfam partners. OBC village residents felt that these sorts of targeting decisions were unfair and insisted that all lower-caste communities in the surrounding areas were issued either NGO-built or government-built permanent houses except for them. Residents explained that they feel economically disadvantaged with some stating that they are much worse off than nearby dalits and fishermen, living in abject poverty amidst them and having to depend on them for their survival. Not surprisingly, we heard about increased tensions between first- and second-line villages, as many people in the second-line villages felt that they didn't receive as much assistance as first-line affected communities.

The overall picture around changes in the realm of social inclusion is multi-faceted. People described an incremental improvement in social relations in some of the communities pointing out examples such as boat ownership, new labor and hiring patterns, etc. Local NGO staff have observed that the gradual shift in perceptions and attitudes towards dalits has been accompanied by changes in traditional roles occupied by these historically marginalized communities. For example in some places, we heard about dalits not only fishing but also bringing fish to sell on the market. While it is often very difficult to link the effects of specific types of

interventions to long-term social developments, we note that local people spoke about post-tsunami assistance as one of the aspects that enhanced some of these shifts, especially where the changes were already taking place.

JOINT OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY

Women now hold power because we own the property together. If my husband beats me, I will not sign any papers.

WOMAN IN KARAIKAL DISTRICT

Many people in both dalit and fishermen communities - where newly-built and assigned houses, and sometimes boats and land¹⁰, were titled to both spouses - spoke about this new development since the tsunami response. Joint property titles, a stark change in traditional practice, was actively promoted and instituted by several aid agencies, including Oxfam. During the height of post-tsunami housing construction, several NGOs were successful in lobbying the government to have the legal deeds to the houses be arranged in the name of the woman. We heard people refer to this development as a significant cultural change which has had effects on the nature of decision-making in the households. Our listening visits were too brief to explore this topic in depth but we nevertheless heard a recurring theme across many different villages where women are now owners of property.

Before women were looked down upon by their husbands. But today, because of our exposure we have grown in our leadership capacity; we have become partners in decision making process. It is because that the houses are in our names. As a result, our men respect us, take us in to confidence in the decision making process. Men stopped beating us; they use to abuse us, but not now.

WOMAN IN PILLAI COLONY, KARAIKAL DISTRICT

For the most part, we heard both women and men share their unequivocal approval for the joint ownership of houses. In villages where both husbands and wives own houses, women reported having more say in household decision-making due to the fact that their husbands cannot threaten to sell or pawn these vital assets. We were unable to investigate in depth how sustainable this change in practice has been in regards to local government policies applied

to new residential developments. However, several people were of the opinion that there have been great strides made on the issue of equitable property titling partly due to the advocacy by international aid agencies and partly due to complementary policies trickling down from the national government. People suggested that in the case of another emergency, local government may remain faithful to the same titling process during reconstruction process but that it also depends on the commitment of local officials. Overall, there is great hope that the gains achieved for women after the tsunami will not be reversed. Both the national and local government have been promoting a number of 'pro-women' policies focused on assuring property rights for both men and women, in residential and agricultural land acquisitions¹¹.

REDUCING THE GAP IN WAGES

The decreasing wage gap between men and women is another important advance backed by national and provincial government policies. The wage gap was another equity issue that Oxfam and other aid agencies highlighted in their own programming and in their advocacy efforts with local government offices. Local partners reflected on key decisions that were made by Oxfam affiliates when hiring local residents to clear debris, clear salt pans, take part in land reclamation, and participate in construction and rebuilding activities. Whether participating in a cash-for-work, food-for-work, or other payment program during the aid efforts, women and men were paid fairly and equally.

The team probed for information about the sustainability of these efforts and heard mixed responses. According to several local partners, the government now has a policy on equal wages and the efforts to equalize pay continue both at the national and local level. In general, wages have gone up since the tsunami period from 80 rupees (for men) per day for manual work to 300 rupees for men and 250 rupees for women. When asked why women still get paid less than men the response was that 'women cannot do some of the hard manual work'. Other examples of reduction in the pay gap were provided by several local NGOs. In another instance, men now receive 300 rupees per day and women 200 rupees per day. The rates used to be 20-30 rupees for women and 80 rupees for men. The director of FACE, a local partner to Oxfam, argued that these developments are ongoing and that 'they have been achieved over a long period of time and through the power of the community themselves'.

When describing the long-term effects of women earning more, many women and men emphasized that women are savvy and frugal when it comes to family budget and are able to allocate funds for better nutrition for the entire family, especially for children; for education, particularly for girls; and for other critical household expenses.

EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S SELF-HELP GROUPS AND GENDER ADVOCACY WORK

When women become economically empowered they get respect and increase their social standing. Self-help groups have helped to develop increased economic confidence and improvement in their social status. Women save more now and spend money they earned themselves. Government is giving priority to women. All these changes brought social respect to women. Women used to never be seen going to the bank and would not apply for loans on their own.

LOCAL NGO DIRECTOR IN PONDICHERRY

Now men depend on us instead of us depending on them. We are more aware of our rights and women's role.

WOMAN IN CUDDALORE DISTRICT

The majority of women's self-help group members we spoke with described both tangible and intangible benefits from their membership and participation in self-help groups. The economic benefits were undoubtedly an important topic of conversation as women described their increased ability to access loans, credit, jobs, and a broader range of opportunities to earn an income. With the rise in financial literacy and access to credit, a number of women spoke of increased economic security, the benefits of which extended to other members of the household, especially children whose schools fees and other educational and health expenses are often paid from the income generated through self-help groups. When probed to describe effects beyond the material benefits of self-help groups, one woman replied that she had gained in self-confidence and has more money in her hands and is able to spend it as she sees fit. A few people insisted that women in their village have become self-sufficient.

There has been an important shift in social norms regarding women's mobility and participation in social activities outside the immediate household and village. Several women described, rather emphatically, that before the tsunami they were unable to come out of their houses and did not take

part in many collective activities. This was typical in many coastal fishing communities which are traditionally male-dominated. Others spoke about limited level of interaction and limited understanding of resources and opportunities available outside their villages. In contrast, when describing the effects of their participation in self-help groups, women spoke about increased mobility and visibility of women as more and more women are traveling outside of their villages to visit local banks, fill out loan papers, attend federation meetings, and engage in entrepreneurial activities. A number of women said that they understand a lot better now what they can expect and ask from government officials and that they often go to the town panchayat to demand their rights. In one Pondicherry community we heard that women have occupied a key role on a local community radio show where they started off as interviewees, but have now become the interviewers. Some served as panel members in an international conference.

Some women spoke about increased sense of confidence and a greater role in household decision-making. Women described their previous dependence on their husbands and stated that they are now taking decisions for themselves which 'gives us dignity'. When describing these improvements in women's social and family standing, some people also mentioned that many more women speak out now and are more engaged, vocal and visible. We heard that in some communities women stood in local elections to the panchayat in the recent years for the first time. Two women were successfully elected as a counselor and a board member. As one head of a local Oxfam partner said, 'Some women are now talking like a politician'. In another community, women said that there are a few trouble makers in their village - young men who are preventing women's self-help groups from using the community training center. The women said that their groups can deal with these problems on their own and added, 'We women, together, are 700 members strong. Four young boys cannot do anything. We will go to them, stand in front of them and say "Is this battalion enough for you?"'.

Overall, we heard about a number of successful self-help groups which were boosted through the tsunami aid projects, many of which deliberately included training in leadership and decision-making in order to prepare women for joint management of self-help groups. Local NGO advocacy campaigns and gender training sessions also included awareness-raising around the right to information and rights around domestic abuse and violence.

The provision of micro-credit helped boost many of the existing groups and helped create new ones. However, in every district we also encountered many non-operational self-help groups and a high level of helplessness among women self-help group members in villages where the initial level of activity and participation was not sustained. Evidence of successful income-generating activities that were sustained, well managed, and growing, was scarce.

POLICY/PRACTICE CHANGE

Questions about long-term changes in policies and practices elicited a range of responses. Some people pointed to changes at the community level (i.e. fishing practices already described above), others mentioned changes in local government policies (i.e. payment of fair wages, or joint property titling). Given the timing of the listening exercise in the aftermath of the cyclone, many people discussed the evolution of disaster preparedness practices both at the community and local government level. Some people drew linkages between relief and advocacy efforts by aid agencies and how these contributed to initiating some of these changes and/or reinforcing them. Other people described these changes as part of long-term and on-going government policy efforts which were intensified after the tsunami. Below is a summary of the changes in practices and policies that people highlighted during our conversations.

ADHERENCE TO QUALITY STANDARDS IN PROVISION OF RELIEF AND IN HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

This is an area where we heard about some changes but were unable to gather more in-depth evidence due to limited access to government officials. At the time of the response, Oxfam followed the SPHERE standards and trained its local partners and government officials on quality standards in relief operations, humanitarian programming, and housing (both temporary shelter and permanent construction). Local partners were asked to raise awareness about quality standards in the communities where they worked so that local people are knowledgeable and able to demand quality from aid agencies, contractors and government offices. Some local partners have done a lot of sensitization on issues of quality and we spoke to people in these villages who proudly described how they were involved in monitoring construction and handover of the houses.

According to BEDROC, Oxfam's focus on SPHERE standards and sensitization efforts has made a difference in the mentality of some government officials. The government has continued using some of the standards introduced during the tsunami response and has also set new standards, on matters such as the balance of male and female toilets in temporary shelters, the spacing between housing, and gender disaggregated needs assessment. SPHERE standards are now better understood by many local NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance but at least two local partners raised concerns about the inconsistency of application during direct response.

GENDER-SENSITIVE HIRING PRACTICES

Such practices which were followed by Oxfam and other aid agencies were mirrored by many local development agencies and government offices in the immediate period after the tsunami. A commitment to gender-sensitive labor practices has also been reflected in the government policies aimed at providing equal job opportunities to women (reflecting larger

national level policy changes as well). A more in-depth set of interviews with government officials and local business owners would be required to assess the depth of this change in practice.

JOINT HOUSE TITLES AND OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY

Joint house titles were introduced at the insistence of aid agencies engaged in house reconstruction, as described in the earlier section of this report. There seems to be an uneven application of this policy by government offices after the immediate post-tsunami reconstruction period. We were unable to confirm the extent of this change at the government policy level.

SELF-HELP GROUPS

Self-help groups are now widely recognized as the entry point for all development interventions - a practice supported by both aid agencies and the government since the tsunami. This is particularly true when it comes to development interventions targeting women. As discussed above, all development actors recognize the role of self-help groups in raising women's profile within their communities.

RESILIENCE OF COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Community resilience has become a focus for more local NGOs as well as the local government. There is a lot more attention being paid to disaster preparedness and risk reduction programs. We highlight relevant findings on this topic in more depth below.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RISK REDUCTION

■■ Disaster preparedness has improved along the coast. I think NGOs left a lot of good knowledge behind by investing in this work. People learned from their personal experience from the crisis and from the knowledge and expertise of foreign and Indian NGO experts. ■■

A HEAD OF A LOCAL NGO, PARTNER TO OXFAM

■■ If there is another disaster and damages in the village, we will be able to remove the debris, clean-up, and will do some renovations on our own. ■■

PILLAI COLONY RESIDENT

In the months and years following the tsunami, international and local NGOs, together with UNDP and relevant government offices, engaged in awareness-raising and capacity-building in disaster preparedness across the affected coastal communities in Tamil Nadu. Some of these efforts were directed specifically at raising the capacity of the local government and others, often simultaneously, focused on raising community preparedness.

GOVERNMENT CAPACITY

Staff at local NGOs and local residents described the many different ways in which disaster preparedness has become an ordinary aspect of local government operations in the coastal areas. After the tsunami, the government created a post for a Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Officer who is now overseeing early warning and emergency preparedness work. We heard about the government early warning system and the training provided to disaster management teams. People pointed out that the capacity of the local government to provide timely warnings and prepare the population was demonstrated during the recent cyclone that had hit the area just days before our listening visit. People described how they were warned about the cyclone and its direction and strength through several forms of communication, including TV, radio, and loud speakers. People were advised to evacuate to safer locations away from the coast, to use cyclone shelters and school buildings in their villages and nearby areas, and to protect their assets and valuables.

In addition, people shared opinions on the capacity of the government to respond to disasters which many saw as greatly improved. The post-cyclone assessment visits and assistance efforts continued throughout our listening visit in the area and many people had high expectations from the government partially informed by their experience with the tsunami assistance.

COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS AND RESILIENCE

■■ Many areas were given early warning but those affected by the tsunami seemed to have applied what they learned from past DRR trainings. ■■

LOCAL NGO HEAD

Many coastal community residents spoke to us about feeling better prepared for various types of disasters due to their past experience and increased awareness raised through disaster preparedness training sessions. A number of people told us that because of the training they received and the early warning system put in place by the government since, they were better prepared for this recent cyclone. They insisted that there were fewer physical damages

and a lower death toll as a result. In many villages people described the tangible steps that they took in preparation for the cyclone, learned during the emergency preparedness sessions several years back: having their identification documents ready in a waterproof plastic bag, knowing where the evacuation routes and safe places are, calling others, and using SMS as part of information sharing systems. One person told us 'From each disaster we learn'. Fishermen described specific techniques they learned to protect their boats and nets prior to a large scale natural disaster as well as first aid skills and survival skills they practice in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. During recent cyclones in Nagapattinam, boat damages were minimal because fishermen raised their boats to higher ground.

Staff at one former Oxfam partner described that when they started working with Oxfam they received a disaster manual which they found very useful as it complemented the 'disaster management training' they were given. The training has increased the confidence level of both NGO staff and community members. We heard local NGO staff comment on people's preparedness if another disaster comes, 'They will face the situation, they will manage it. There is fear, but we know they can deal with it'. After the tsunami this same local NGO visited each village to hold planning meetings, engage in village mapping, and formed a village committee through which disaster preparedness work was also carried out. We heard about disaster relief committees established in villages across many coastal districts.

Overall, risk reduction and safety measures that have been put in place and reinforced through government policies have largely been appreciated by the population. For example, we visited a number of communities that have been resettled in housing that was constructed farther away from the coastline, a requirement put in place by the government. Most people appreciate the safety and peace of mind that comes with the distance but many also complained about the inconvenience of having to travel further distances for fishing and other income-generating activities and having to move boats further inland. Some people continue to resist the new rules and we also met fishing families that continue to live in their former homes within short walking distance from the beach. Many of them also own new 'tsunami' houses that were constructed for them inland and in many cases their children or other relatives live in these houses.

We also heard people raise concerns that the disaster risk reduction was primarily focused on awareness raising and disaster management training, with less attention paid to reinforcing the existing physical infrastructure and building new shelters, etc. People specifically asked that new permanent houses should be built with stronger columns and always accompanied by disaster insurance. The construction standards in new homes varied across the region as did residents' experiences with insurance. Oxfam paid for ten years of insurance in its permanent housing projects, but we also heard of cases where people had to

purchase it themselves. Farmers raised important questions about crop insurance and the need for investments in better drainage system, a critical aspect during flooding.

Our questions about resilience at the community level were almost always answered in reference to the recent cyclone or a potential future disaster. A number of people described strategies and coping mechanisms they have used in the past and that they plan to apply in the future if another disaster arrives. People distinguished between the different magnitudes of disasters and their ability to manage and cope with the aftermath. As one person said, 'For small disaster we can cope, we will do self-help. Our community is also able to help others now'. When discussing their ability to get back on their feet several people pointed out that their level of confidence is affected by several factors, including increased awareness, better and more solid housing which they hope will not be damaged, and access to loans and financial assets through self-help groups and other micro-credit schemes. Responses on this topic did not vary greatly between men and women.

In one community, as part of their advice to the government and to aid agencies on enhancing disaster preparedness and supporting communities' resilience, people suggested a number of actions that could be taken: 1) building capacity of local government and community members, 2) ensuring that contingency stocks are put in place in advance, specifically that grain stores are regularly stocked and are quickly available for relief distribution, and 3) establishing an information helpline. In another community, people felt that Oxfam should have invested more in construction of cyclone shelters and communal shelters.

PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN OXFAM AND LOCAL PARTNERS

“NGOs can't be here for a long time, and when they are here they don't always communicate directly. You have to work through local partners. But often it is hard to select the right partners. You go by what they report, but you need to spend time with us too.”

WOMAN IN A CUDDALORE DISTRICT

Listening Teams visited the offices of several key local partners who worked with Oxfam during the tsunami response. We held listening conversations with the executive heads of several partner NGOs and had numerous informal discussions with their staff. Some of them spent a few hours in the communities listening with us.

Local organizations spoke about enhanced organizational capacities as a result of partnerships with international donor agencies and humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam and the UN. Several prominent themes emerged in our conversations with local partners:

OXFAM'S FOCUS ON QUALITY

Partner staff mentioned the training they received on SPHERE standards which improved the quality of locally-led responses. As one person said, 'Oxfam influenced us by insisting on quality'. Many partners spoke about strengthened capacity of local NGOs to do better relief work. For example, SEVAI staff noted that they have gained critical expertise in planning and implementing an effective response with a particular emphasis on quality and timeliness. They appreciated that Oxfam staff gave consistent feedback and technical support during the partnership which allowed SEVAI, as an organization, to learn and grow. Similarly, staff at DHAN commented that 'Things have grown because of the support from Oxfam'.

SPECIFIC TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

Several agencies mentioned their enhanced capacities in specific areas of humanitarian response and organizational management. For HOPE, the most valuable assistance they received through partnering with Oxfam was the support around gender and DRR mainstreaming. Conversely, a training on market analysis linked to livelihoods and self-help groups work, while recognized as important, was seen as not meeting quality standards and deemed less useful. Several organizations also mentioned other organizational capacities that were strengthened through partnership including fiscal and overall organizational management skills which allowed some of these local organizations to expand their funding base and programs and to reach more communities. Included in these were report writing skills and project monitoring skills that were reinforced during Oxfam's field monitoring visits.

FLEXIBILITY

There was a sense that Oxfam staff took regular stock of the local context and the changing needs at the community level allowing for quick adjustments in their original plans and projected expenses. For example, when costs for locally sourced construction materials began to rise due to inflation, one Oxfam affiliate allowed its local partner to quickly revise its budgets and to shift budget lines to cover gaps. On several occasions partnerships with Oxfam were described as 'flexible and open' and 'equal' which was much appreciated.

INCREASED VISIBILITY

Overall, partnering with Oxfam also increased the visibility of some of the local partners. Some felt that they were recognized and respected by other international aid agencies and by government counterparts due to their relationship with Oxfam. Many continue the relationships they forged with donors and agencies during the tsunami response to this day.

Among the **critical reflections** that were shared the following issues were highlighted by several former partners as important to consider especially because Oxfam continues to rely on local organizations in provision of humanitarian assistance.

DIFFERENCES IN APPROACHES AMONG AFFILIATES

After initial needs assessments we had to tackle people's frustrations and complaints about reduced number of boats from what Oxfam promised. We calmed people down while Oxfam checked its policies and discussed with headquarters. After a long time, even local collector said 'I thought government was bureaucratic, but Oxfam seems to be more so'.

A LOCAL PARTNER TO OXFAM

People were frustrated seeing five cars driving in with just one person in each.

Too many separate tasks – one expert comes for shelter, another comes for water.

People saw extra cars, fuel, expenses as valuable resources wasted. Head of a local NGO that partnered with Oxfam

The team heard several telling examples and stories of uncoordinated and disparate decisions and approaches pursued by Oxfam affiliates emerged during our listening conversations. For example, one of the Oxfam affiliates funded repairs of traditional boats instead of promoting mechanized boats due to their concerns about the long-term impact on the environment. Simultaneously, another Oxfam affiliate supported a local partner organization which was the first to distribute new mechanized boats to nearby fishing communities in Cuddalore. At the community level, people could not understand why their village was selected for one or the other form of assistance, but they had much to say about their preferences.

In retrospect, local NGOs pointed out that at times there was not enough coordination between Oxfam affiliates and between affiliates and local partners. Some thought that challenges could have been avoided if joint systems were put into place. One example provided to illustrate weak coordination was the difference in per diem structures and hiring practices. One local partner described the effects of the decision taken by an Oxfam affiliate to hire temporary relief workers from other Indian states such as Kerala who were paid a lot more than the local Oxfam partners could offer to their local staff and volunteers. Often, the paid relief workers and local partner volunteers worked side by side. Their per diems were dramatically different and local partner volunteers could not afford to eat lunch at the same establishments frequented by the workers paid by the affiliate agencies. This had consequences on the quality of relationships and motivation of local volunteers to contribute their efforts to tsunami response and other projects since.

ISSUES AROUND 'HAND-OVER' BY OXFAM AFFILIATES

One of the national NGO organizations that Oxfam partnered with was located in another state and had no permanent presence in Tamil Nadu. Local community members recalled that at the hand-over ceremony, the NGO staff gave them a key to a building they constructed and explained that they are not from here so for future issues village residents should go to local NGOs. People in this community shared their frustration with poor quality houses that were constructed, inadequate communication channels, and lack of accountability and redress mechanisms. They explained these issues as arising from the fact that the NGO implementing Oxfam-funded projects in their village was not in fact local. Several people suggested that Oxfam should work with local NGOs because outsiders (including other Indian NGOs) may not understand the local culture and context. In addition, people would have liked to see Oxfam staff conduct more visits during the response period; several said that they did not know that Oxfam funded these local organizations constructing houses and implementing projects in their village.

ADVICE TO OXFAM AND OTHER HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES

Below we provide additional feedback and suggestions from people on ways that Oxfam and other aid agencies can improve their humanitarian response in the future.

ON WHAT TO GIVE

Most people were happy with the relief assistance provided by aid agencies. Some recalled in detail specific items and shared their opinion about what would be most useful in a post-emergency situation. There was considerable level of agreement about the following priority items and forms of assistance: 1) medical aid to offer immediate relief from fractures, diarrhea, vomiting, and stress; 2) safe drinking water; 3) temporary shelters; and 4) culturally appropriate food assistance. When discussing long-term recovery efforts, people felt that attention needs to be given to restoring and strengthening livelihoods and that alternative livelihoods should be introduced with appropriate training in order to ensure success and sustainability. Several people commented that they were not able to apply the new skills which were taught during the post-tsunami aid efforts because they were given only two or three training sessions and there was no follow-up to ensure that subsequent questions, issues, and problems were addressed and resolved.

Others echoed these concerns and insisted that livelihood skills training must always be accompanied by extended follow-up and support as well as strategic planning about market connections.

■■ Assistance after calamity is very important. It saved many lives right after the disaster. But livelihoods activities and

opportunities to upgrade skills should always be included in the plans of aid agencies too. More improvements are possible then. ■■

WOMAN IN VADDAKKUVANCHUR VILLAGE

■■ Short-term, immediate assistance is ok and we welcome it after disaster. Not just utensils, food, and shelter. Oxfam brought many important new practices and knowledge. Organizations that do short-term relief and those that stay longer to do long-term development should always think about community development process by activating self-help groups. Assistance should not be just about bringing resources and cash but also helping communities to determine needs, capacities, and priorities and use the valuable resources in the best way. ■■

LOCAL RELIGIOUS LEADER IN CUDDALORE DISTRICT

SEEK WAYS TO STRENGTHEN TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS NOT JUST CREATE NEW ONES.

Fishermen in several districts provided the following advice to Oxfam and other aid agencies. According to them, in future emergencies Oxfam should continue to provide critical relief such as food, water, and temporary shelter. After the immediate phase is over, Oxfam should focus on rehabilitating livelihoods and engage community members in selection and procurement of actual materials and equipment. One idea was to form a committee made of local residents and visit local markets to order or purchase proper nets and boats. Fishermen in particular felt that as much as possible boats should be manufactured locally so that warranties and future order on damages and repairs can be filled locally. They would like the quality inspection process to be open to them and to be able to contribute suggestions if they see that inappropriate or low-quality fishing equipment is being procured for them.

A number of farmers suggested that if aid agencies are genuinely interested in strengthening livelihoods and sustainability they should support farmers with latest technologies like hybrid seeds and drip irrigation.

ON HOW TO GIVE

People emphasized that relationships and communication are important and that how aid providers work is equally important as what they provide. Even in the urgency of humanitarian response, respectful relationships between aid providers and aid recipients should remain a priority.

Agencies should always consult local communities and go for quality. Woman in

Puddukupam Village in Cuddalore

Too many short-term external consultants can undermine local capacity. Take a

careful approach with your local partners.

They should have asked us about the type of houses we want, or give us

cash assistance.

MAN IN CUDDALORE

ON WHO TO ENGAGE/SELECT FOR ASSISTANCE

Do not miss the vulnerable.

Here, this means the widows, elderly, disabled, orphans.

Gender trainings are needed also for men. At the time of emergency, women are vulnerable [referring to abuse and exploitation]. Men need to be engaged.

Oxfam and local partners need to engage community leaders in discussions and decisions during the needs assessment process.

You have to give to those who deserve it.

Please make sure that whatever you give goes to the most affected people. You need to have clear and correct data and the right agency to partner with for distribution.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN A HOPE-SUPPORTED VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

REACTIONS TO OXFAM LISTENING VISIT AND PERCEPTIONS OF OXFAM

■■ What is the point of all these questions about before and after the tsunami: what are you going to do with this information? ■■

WOMEN IN A VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

■■ SASY always told us about Oxfam and Oxfam people had come to the village before. We are always happy to see you ■■

WOMEN IN A VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

■■ Before tsunami we felt excluded and shunned, after tsunami SASY and Oxfam came into village and helped us. We felt less invisible ■■

WOMEN IN A VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

■■ Oxfam is seen and known as rights-based organization. It does what it says. Local partner to Oxfam during tsunami response ■■

WOMEN IN A VILLAGE IN CUDDALORE

REFLECTIONS OF LISTENING TEAM MEMBERS

Listening Team members held several debriefing and reflection sessions during the listening exercise to discuss what we heard during our conversations. The following is a summary of key points that were raised during our group reflection sessions as well as in subsequent personal reflections shared by team members in their field notes.

Team members acknowledged that some of the significant and positive changes that we heard people talk about were already underway prior to the tsunami, initiated by national policies put in place long before the disaster, e.g. the focus on increasing girls' access to education, on women's development in general, and the promotion of self-help groups. The massive tsunami response offered an opportunity for many humanitarian agencies to respond in ways that would reinforce and advance these existing commitments and initiatives along with a concentrated effort and emphasis placed on issues such as equity, sustainable livelihoods, and disaster preparedness. Listening Team members pointed out that while the focus for most responding aid agencies remained the commitment to saving lives and rebuilding livelihoods, Oxfam and other agencies whose work was informed by rights-based approaches genuinely aimed to foster lasting positive changes through their interventions. The listening exercise was an important and rare opportunity to hear feedback from people whose lives were affected by these aid efforts.

One team member reflected that in retrospect it is clear that high expectations were created by the momentous tsunami event:

■■■ **It was like a revolution – because there were so many deaths and destruction, everyone was under pressure – the magnitude of the disaster created the opportunity for radical**

change to happen. The response was a classic example of linking relief, rehabilitation, and development and it allowed for important changes in local communities. ■■■

Team members noted that many local people often referred to significant changes and developments 'before and after tsunami' which included changes in communal life and relations between caste groups, shifts in people's social status, access to education, and economic opportunities. Listening Team members reflected on the important changes in attitudes and overall outlook of many dalit and fisher people who are now sending their children to school and valuing the effects these decisions have on their family's material and social well-being. Another theme noted by team members is the growing awareness of the need to save money and to work together as a saving community. Team members noted that people were quite articulate and thoughtful describing the reasons behind systematic saving (through self-help groups or individually) and noted that it is empowering to hear women educate others about the importance of saving for the education of their children, future emergencies, and entrepreneurial purposes.

One of the team members who has years of experience working in the coastal areas, particularly among the dalits and fishermen, noted a significant increase in confidence levels among the ordinary village residents compared to dalit communities in other parts of India he visited. He added, 'These people are very articulate, confident about themselves, their life and their future. They take initiative to speak up and converse with others'. Another team member, a former Oxfam partner, noted that particularly in fisher communities, the exposure to aid agencies and awareness-raising boosted confidence in an already politicized community. He added, 'Fisher community has always had its

own political elected bodies, but in the past they functioned in general as isolated independent communities. Tsunami brought them to deal with local political networks and made it feel that they are also part and parcel of political governance'. Fishermen communities are now more visible and vocal and they openly voice their demands with the local government.

A notable development raised in virtually all of our listening conversations was the improved status of women. Team members agreed that building on the broader national policies, Oxfam and other response efforts that emphasized gender equity have had an important and long-lasting effect. In addition to the tangible steps that were taken such as registering women as property owners and paying equal wages, local partner NGOs were supported in their ongoing efforts to include women in more decision-making processes through self-help groups and village committees. The comments about some of these developments in the context of humanitarian response being 'too rapid' and lacking proper long-term strategy are important to consider for Oxfam and its partners around the world. Oxfam needs to continue seeking out local partners who share its values and commitment to equity, who have in-depth understanding of local cultural context and the ability to continue this work forward after external partners are no longer on the ground.

Listening teams also noted that many people recognized and appreciated tangible changes and improvements in their community and in their private lives. In addition to the increase in private assets such as houses and boats which people often linked to increased incomes, we heard appreciation for the increase in public assets such as access to clean water points and better roads and schools, which in turn led to long-term opportunities for local residents and their children. Team members felt that a sense of physical space in the coastal villages has been broadened after the tsunami as there are now proper streets, water taps, drainages, and ample space between houses. In the past, there were many quarrels between families that lived in very cramped quarters and some of these tensions led to bigger conflicts in the villages. Team members, especially those who are local and have worked in these communities before, felt that planning and new construction after the tsunami has helped reduce these tensions quite substantially.

Finally, as many aid agencies around the world are trying to improve their understanding of resilience, this exercise raises more questions than we were able to pursue and fully answer in our brief listening visit at this time. A more focused listening effort and dialogue with local community members, local NGOs, and government officials would be needed to better understand what resilience means in this context. Particularly, team members noted that conversations about resilience need to be broad enough to capture the various ways people define resilience in their personal and communal lives. The latest disaster to hit coastal Tamil Nadu in the form of a cyclone presented an important moment for assessing preparedness and resilience. Team members noted that the response has

been markedly different; there was massive loss of property (especially crops such as cashew nut trees, coconut trees, and other agricultural produce) but due to a low death toll, very few aid agencies arrived in the immediate aftermath. Team members suggested that this development is also linked to the perceived capacity of the government to respond and to the past DRR initiatives. To better understand resilience in this context would require a study of how the affected communities have been able to recover from the cyclone once the initial government visiting missions and needs assessment visits subsided. One team member suggested that aid agencies need to be aware that even with the capable government response there may still be a need for particular types of interventions to ensure 'last mile connectivity' or to facilitate the social processes at the community level – experience that most government offices usually lack.

APPENDIX A: MORE ON CDA'S LISTENING METHODOLOGY

Listening Program approach is an action research process that gathers and analyzes the evidence that is offered by local people using an open-ended, unscripted conversation method. It is an inductive, evidence-based, and cumulative learning process. Findings from the Listening Project suggest that people know and appreciate when their voices are heard and taken into account. They also indicate that not all face-to-face interactions with assistance providers amount to a respectful and constructive listening conversation or dialogue.

In a typical listening exercise, staff from international and local aid agencies form listening teams and visit several regions and communities to engage a broad range of local people in conversations about the effects and impacts of aid efforts, inviting feedback and advice to the aid providers. Teams talk with and listen to people who have directly received assistance or been involved in international aid efforts, including local staff of international or local agencies, community leaders, government officials, civil society members, business people, etc. In addition, teams always spend time listening to the ideas and judgments of people who have not directly received or delivered aid, but who have observed its impacts. In all situations, teams listen to a wide range and a balanced representation of various sectors of society along lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, class, and other identities. The focus of conversations is rarely on the implementation of any particular project, and instead, teams ask people to reflect on the broader, cumulative, and long-term effects of the variety of efforts they have seen in their communities and societies. Conversations are held in such a way as to ensure that people bring up the issues that matter most to them. Team members use broad lines of inquiry to guide the conversations and to explore specific themes and issues of interest to their agencies. Some conversations are conducted informally on an individual or small group basis

while others require advance appointments (for example, with university professors, business people, government officials, etc.).

Listening exercises do not stop once the data has been gathered. Listening Team members engage in joint analysis of the evidence. CDA's experience shows that inclusion of a broad range of people in each attempt to learn from experience enriches the learning. The more experience that is gathered and the more minds that are involved in analyzing and learning from it, the better the lessons learned. Further, as a pragmatic reality, when people are directly involved in learning lessons about how to do better work, they are more able to apply the lessons than when someone else evaluates their work or tells them how to do it better.

Systematic listening starts with the recognition that there is an enormous amount of experience and knowledge in societies receiving international assistance. Effective organizational learning rests on the ability to tap into this experience and knowledge in a comprehensive and systematic manner. Many organizations struggle to listen to community perspectives during their design, implementation, monitoring, and other programmatic processes due to internal and external pressures. Yet, most people who work in the field agree that time spent listening and reflecting on practices, short-term outcomes, and long-term impacts, can improve decision-making.

NOTES

- 1 The commissioning manager for the long-term tsunami evaluation is the Humanitarian Consortium Governance Group. The learning process is overseen by Oxfam International's Humanitarian Team under the supervision of the Humanitarian Quality and Processes Officer at the OI Secretariat.
- 2 See Appendix A for more information on CDA's listening methodology.
- 3 See two reports by Oxfam International: Oxfam South India Tsunami Evaluation Final Report (2006) and In the wake of the Tsunami: An Evaluation of Oxfam International's response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami (2009).
- 4 More on the listening methodology can be found in Appendix A.
- 5 The findings from 20 listening exercises carried out by the Listening Program show that aid recipients do not always distinguish the boundaries between the two as rigidly as they are seen by practitioners.
- 6 The arrival of commercial companies and privatization of land has been negotiated through official government channels most often without engagement of local communities and local NGOs. Team members noted that aid agencies could not have predicted all the rapid changes in the privatization policies. Even with joint planning sessions with the government about new housing sites, it did not prevent the new villages being built next to future industrial sites or privatized company areas.
- 7 Oxfam's local partners, such as BEDROC, advocated for provision of fishing nets and other important fishing equipment, beyond just boats.
- 8 In a very few places we also heard that the shortage of laborers led fishermen to engage their children which led them to drop out from school.
- 9 For example, an ambitious campaign by the Indian government called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan or 'Education for All'.
- 10 We heard less about joint titles over boats and land with the exception of instances where people discussed group ownership within a village.
- 11 For example, housing for rural poor provided under government housing schemes such as Indira Awas Yojana or agricultural land under 'Forest Rights Act 2006'.

COVER PHOTO
Chandrakant Deokar / Oxfam

Oxfam, women self help group members supported by Oxfam and partner HOPE following the tsunami, Periyakalpet village, near Pondicherry, January 2012



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