

A process report on the work and activities that the Women's Development Bank Federation (WDBF) and Janarukula (NGO) have been involved in, since the Tsunami tragedy on the 26th December 2004

Present :

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“The reconstruction of the settlements that were damaged or swept away by the tsunami presents an important opportunity to organize and strengthen these communities, many of which were poor, marginalized and vulnerable even before the waves struck. If space and resources can be provided in the rehabilitation process for communities to be the key actors in planning their own reconstruction of housing, infrastructure and environment, in close collaboration with local authorities, NGO's, and support organizations, then the rehabilitation process will become a community-builder, a local-relationship builder and an important step forward in the poverty alleviation goals.”(ACHR, January 05)

1.) The Problem :

In her long history, stretching back to 2600 years, Sri Lanka has never experienced a tragedy and calamity as the one wreaked on her on the **26th December 2004**. The ravaging, destructive, swirling tsunami ferociously struck and devastated the lengthy coastal belt extending from the South to the North East.

'Tsunami' = a Japanese word meaning, '*ferociously forceful waves*.'

These massive high-rising waves mercilessly whipped almost two thirds of Sri Lanka's coast. The sudden destruction that was caused, was immense:

- Over 40 000 people were killed.
- Approximately 84 000 displaced families in temporary relief/ rehabilitation camps.
- 800 children were left the coastline was damaged.
- Vast damaged in the fishing trade.
- The majority people affected were the poor.

2.) Introduction to the Women's Development Bank Federation (WDBF) :

The WDBF emerged out of a pilot project of women's mutual help groups in 1991, based on the traditional system of saving and credit – 'seettu.' Under this group system they built up a small group fund by saving 5 rupees a week. The group fund became very useful in providing small loans for emergencies. The federation found this taught them the importance of how to mobilize the poor into support groups and could also be a measure of finding solutions of their poverty.

Groups started to meet once a week to discuss problems that they faced and looked at ways and means of addressing them. Through finding solutions, women realized that they could improve the quality of their lives. They were able to discuss issues around: land, housing, water and lack of toilet facilities. They also could promote income generating activities and agricultural productions of the poor. The federation used the concept of saving and loan to organize communities.

The WDBF produced positive results in poor rural settlements. Women felt that they could: pay for the construction of their own house, use the money for cultivation purposes, for income generating activities and even books for school, festivals, funerals and pay hospital bills.

In 1999 the first convention of the rural poor was held, ACHR and SDI were invited to attend. It was here that the federation became exposed to urban issues. It has taken a while to begin to understand the housing process and the capacities needed to work on negotiating for land and housing. However now, these women's groups have come to be a reinforcing mechanism in addressing issues of both the rural and urban poor.

The federation has reached national level and today works in 9 different districts in Sri Lanka with the support of a very small NGO, Janarukula, which means, "Bringing People Together." They have good experience in working with and mobilizing rural and urban communities, especially in the area of saving and loans. Today 30 000 members thought Save regularly.

3.) Why did the Federation become involved in this problem?

What was needed urgently for Sri Lanka was a well-structured rehabilitation programme to help those displaced people to recommence their normal way of life. The WDBF was able to help with this.

The area of Moratuwa was where the federation started to focus its work. Moratuwa was the most affected area in the district of Colombo. About 6 different settlements in Moratuwa were affected by the tsunami and as a result 2500-3000 families in the area were displaced. The federation had established savings and credit schemes in two of the 6 affected settlements, namely: Jyagathpura and Lnsiyawattha, so this is where they started to focus their support.

Much of the coastline that was damaged housed hundreds of poor settlements that were desperate for efforts to help them return to normal living. There was *need* and so the federation responded. The federation has dedicated its work to helping poor communities improve their living conditions by mobilizing their own resources. These poor communities needed a voice and the federation could provide one for them.

The federation member in the affected community were determined to get their lives back on track and start again but needed the assistance and representation of a people's organization that would listen to them.

Shelter is a basic and essential human right. The provision of this essential human right can be a catalyst for economic development and should be seen as an essential component to any poverty alleviation programme.

4.) Development Concepts and Methodology used to solve the problem :

- Social mobilization
- Bringing all community members together
- Organization of group action – maximizing group participation
- Participatory management – enhancing individual quality and collective role
- Encouraging full-hearted cooperation
- Interacting with the economy-listening to them and their needs
- *Enabling* community members to take ownership and control of their own future –a hugely empowering tool
- Build trust and confidence of the people
- Equal treatment to all
- Tap into the potential of the community and look for opportunities
- Important to listen to all the grievances, won't be able to solve them all, but at least people feel they're being heard.

It was important for the federation to consult all the affected people in planning out the rebuilding program. Their wishes and concerns were considered as far as possible. It was crucial for the federation leaders that *the people* be centrally involved in the planning and rehabilitation of their own communities.

The most prudent method was to consider the resettlement case, in consultation with the affected households. A bottom-up approach was used for the planning and management.

5.) Activities undertaken by the WDBF since 26th December 2004 :

The federation became immediately involved, after the tsunami tragedy, with the collection and distribution of relief aid. The expressed need by the communities was for: clothes, underwear and babies food. The federation leaders spread the word to other federation members in non-affected areas to collect as much food, clothing and supplies in order to provide some immediate relief. There were a very good response.

250 rupees were given to each of the federation members and gift bags were made up by the federation leaders and distributed to households They included: tea, rice, biscuits, sugar, soybeans, coconut, spices, mugs, plates, toothpaste, brushes, soap and matchboxes If the families had children then bdbby milk and bottles were also packed.

A federation meeting was held to discuss:

1. Supporting the rebuilding of houses and that the primary savings groups should make money available for those house repairs.
2. Handing the large amount of collections. There needed to be a method in place to control the flow of distribution.

The initial response of the federation was to only help the areas that had savings groups. However they soon realized the enormity of the situation and so decided to respond to the larger community of non-members too.

The federation leaders started discussions with the community members very early on. Families found it very difficult to cope emotionally with their ordeal and the federation made sure that they were there to support and listen to them in their time of immense sadness. Families had lost relatives, their houses were devastated and belongings damaged and washed away. Many people were left with nothing.

The community members were told to come back to their settlement everyday and together, as a community united in mutual grief, they could tell their stories of anguish, pain and suffering. The federation leaders were able to create a safe environment for the affected people to open up, tell their stories and start making plans to rebuild their community. People listened and supported each other.

The federation has also been doing work with the children affected by the tsunami. Emotionally, the children were wrought with grief and anxiety; many did not even understand the full significance or scale of the disaster. All they knew was that people they knew and loved were not with them anymore. Since the disaster, the federation has organized activities and groups, with the children, using mediums such as drawing pictures, playing games and dancing as an outlet for feelings and emotions. The children have responded well to this and it's been a useful tool for coping with the events that occurred.

Celin D’Cruz from SPARC and SDI in Mumbai arrival in Sri Lanka on the 5th January 2005 to offer support with the land and housing issues Somsook from ACHR in Bangkok arrival in Sri Lanka on the 6th January. Discussions about the future planning for these communities took place.

On the 7th January the “Shramadhana” Campaign was held This involved a large number of people volunteering their labour to help clear drain, roads and houses. Members of the federation brought food and cooking utensils and cooked a big meal for everyone to share. This event united people and intensified the strength of the community.

The federation needed to find out more information about the families that had been affected by the tsunami, so they started with a survey. Surveys were distributed amongst members and non-members of the community

The federation asked the community what their proposal was. What they wanted to happen to their land. It was a unanimous decision on behalf of all the community members that they wanted temporary houses to be built.

The federation wrote to Slum/Shark Dwellers International (SDI) and Asia Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and explained the situation in these settlements and what the community themselves had proposed. The federation asked for any kind of support. SDI and ACHR offered their support in the form of providing building and housing materials for the construction of temporary shelters.

By the 25th January, the federation received word that permission had been granted for temporary houses to be built The Deputy Mayor offered his support in the form of provision of toilet facilities for the temporary shelters and the government promised to provided electricity and water.

To summarize the process of organizing temporary shelter;

1. Federation helped the community by organizing them into groups to discuss what the real concerns were The group leaders then reported back to the federation
2. Survey were conducted as a means of obtaining information regarding the number of houses there were affected, how badly damaged they were, how many family members lived in the houses, etc.
3. Boards, with information of the family written on them, were then erected in the ground to show where their house used to stand.
4. Photos of the families next to their boards were taken.
5. The community decided that they wanted temporary houses constructed
6. A temporary housing program was then distributed to all community members. This form was then attached the photos and the survey.
7. Discussions and workshops were held around what materials were needed for the building, where to build the houses, and the size of the house.

This process was a great mobilization starter. As the communities gathered the relevant information and learnt how to process and use it, they became better equipped with the knowledge and the understanding

required for their resettlement. This was a crucial step for these affected communities. They moved away from being the victims, wanted to be involved and were becoming direct actors in change.

Hundreds of families were split up in different camps after the tsunami but the federation was able to get the communities together to plan their settlements and design their houses.

The community then elected a management committee and their job would be:

- Overseeing the building of the temporary structures.
- Working out some kind of safety and security system for all the houses being built and the materials being used.
- Organizing the labour to build the temporary houses.
- Organizing the preparation of meals for the labourers.
- Organizing the 5000 rupees from the government and distributing it to the families for income generation.

The federation leaders then started drawing up a map and numbering the houses in the areas where shelters used to be. A map of the area was given to the federation by the National Housing Development Authority, which clearly showed all the settlements that had been wiped out by the tsunami .

Drawing up settlements enables people to get a visual fix on the physical situation and helps them to plan the settlement and assess the development interventions that the community members propose. These maps are powerful planning tools and effective for bargaining when it when it comes to negotiations with the government for secure tenure. The numbers of the houses on the map corresponded to the numbers on the survey, together with the photo.

6.) What is the government's vision for the tsunami problem ?

- The government did not want temporary shelters built within 100 meters from the high tide line.
- 90% of the land that was affected by the tsunami is government owned. The problem: people have no legal ownership of the land.
- The government does not want families' resettling back in their original position.
- They want to move the affected people further inland, away from the ocean or out of the settlement altogether.
- Tourism officials have proposed a global campaign for the coming months to persuade tourists to return to tsunami-stricken Sri Lanka. There has been talk of building hotels along the coast to attract more tourism. As a result of this government does not want poor communities resettling along the coastline.
- The government made the suggestion that two temporary houses be built as a pilot project before the actual construction begins.

- The government also wanted a cultural ceremony of singing and dancing put on, by the community people, for the launch of the construction of temporary settlements.

“THE government says that it will not allow any construction within 100l of the shore on the more densely-populated west and south coasts dotted with hotels. On the east coast, the government wants to stipulate a bigger, 200l safety zone. Studies have shown that about 150 000 homes will have to be relocated inland due to the restrictions, adding to the existing shortfall of 400 000 houses. But it takes time to identify property, do the paperwork and transfer it. In some heavily populated areas the government will have to buy land from private owners, officials say,” (Bangkok Post: 2nd Feb 2005)

7.) What are the side effects/outcomes of the government introduction their vision?

What the government has failed to understand from the beginning is that these poor families have been living along the coast for many years. If they move further inland, they would not be able to fish therefore their livelihood would be destroyed and they would not be able to provide an income for their family. How will they secure their boats and fishing equipment if they’re not close to the sea?

The government wants people to settle further inland or elsewhere however they have given the community members no alternatives and land availability is scarce. As a result the community become more upset and adamant in wanting to settle back where they used to be.

People lose faith in government institutions. In their opinion, all they do is take forever to implement procedures. The reality is that thousands o people, still living in tents in relief camps after 6 weeks, are still waiting to be housed and to start a new life. Government seems to endlessly prolong processes when there is much needed work to be done.

The government needed to lay down more concrete principles that they stuck to. Their strategy needed to be more clear-cut for community in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding Alternatively, they needed to offer clear alternatives or consult more with the community members in order to come to some kind of agreed consensus.

There’s need for regional and international pressure to keep things on a practical and workable basis and to facilitate input from the survivors themselves as to what their needs and aspirations were The government needed to respond to the community on a cooperative basis rather than imposing there outside “solutions.” It is the people themselves that should indicate the direction and get assistance to achieve it.

8.) Some community members’ feelings/perceptions of the present situation:

- They're lost faith in government institutions.
- They want to be heard/listened to.
- There needs to be dialogue directly with the affected people.
- Some feel like there has been mismanagement of relief aid. money and assistance.
- Important to get the views of the people in the relief/rehab camps.
- They want more people's organizations represented by the people themselves.
- They want to make their own decisions about their future, they just need some assistance. They want the assistance given directly to them.
- The people want to contribute.
- There was mutual concern for their well-being and future livelihood.

9.) What has been the role of the federation in this situation?

To promote equality and justice for the tsunami-affected people.

The role of the federation from the beginning was to focus primary on the construction of temporary houses for the community members. That was a need that was emphasized again and again. So many people had been moved out to relief camps and just wanted to return but couldn't because they had no shelter. Constructing temporary shelters was the first step to rebuilding a new life for these affected settlements.

The government's top-down approach still seems to prevail and needs to be changed. The federation was able to take on a more democratic approach that took into account the local ground realities and sensitivities of the affected people. The federation was able to see that the people themselves needed to be involved in the decision-making process. They had to incorporate a people-centered approach.

Two main objectives of the federation:

- To rebuild communities
- Work to safeguard the tenure right of victimized people

The federation wanted to harness people's inner strength through building these temporary houses. This activity was not to be seen as welfare or charity work where the community members are reliant on handouts, but rather an integrated, development process where *people* are given the assistance to help themselves and take ownership of their future – a people driven process.

There is such a gap between the government and the urban and rural poor. The government can take long to implement decisions and promises made, and the poor, as a result, feel that their needs are not really understood. So this is where the federation intervenes, they offer immediate support. The federation supports and links the government to the community. They help to narrow the gap through 1.) Supporting the poor communities' ideas, needs and wishes and 2.) Negotiating with the government suitable and appropriate processes of change.

The federation has wanted to use this crisis as an opportunity to create new relationships between the urban poor settlements and the district/city officials. This seems to have been accomplished. They have been involved in actions to push the political authority for quick remedies to bring the people back to normal living.

The federation has realized the importance of joining hands and working in partnership with government and local authorities engaged in improving the living conditions of people in various spheres. Much negotiation has taken place between the WDBF and all the relevant government officials As a result the community's voice is being heard and their needs understood.

10.)The solution :

The communities' proposal to the government was the that they wanted to resettle where their houses used to be; many of them were fisherman and needed to be close to the ocean. Many of the houses that were destroyed still had their toilet, electricity and water facilities in tact so they didn't want to have to move from there.

After much negotiation of behalf of the federation and discussions between the various government officials, it was decided that these families *could* in fact start to build temporary shelters within the 100m-demaracation line. The government had realized that these people had been waiting so long for decisions to be made. They were able to acknowledge the urgency of the situation for these people to start their lives again, bring their families back together and move forward.

Which regard to those houses that had been partially damaged by the water, the government's response to those families was that a form be provided on which the extant of the damage to the house be recorded. The village officer will than collect he forms and give them to the Divisional secretary. A committee will be appointed consisting of the religious heads of the community and relevant political leaders who will decide on how much assistance should be offered.

The government made it clear that they would provide suitable temporary houses to those in need and that cost would not be an issue.

Moratuwa architectural students camp up with various models and designs for the temporary shelter construction. They felt they had a gift that they could share and wanted to help their fellow community members in some way valuable. They left the decision on what design to have, up to the community members themselves.

Members of the community would be responsible for building their own temporary houses – building of community strength and unity. The structures would be simple, suitable and inexpensive.

The federation was able to create a situation where free dialogue and open communication could occur – collective synergy and will of the people as a whole. The government, federation leaders and members of the community had to work in collaboration with each other. In order to keep moving forward, the community needed to be consulted in all aspects of the decision-making process. There needed to be consulted in all aspects of the decision-making process. There needed to be an opportunity for everyone to tell his/her story, and there was.

The federation's future work is to establish land tenure in these poor coastal communities. This involved a lot of negotiation with the government, but they are positive that they will eventually get there. The government has said that they are keen on supporting and working together with the WDBF and in partnership with the community. They can see that the federation, and all the work that it has done, has earned the trust and respect of many people living in the poor communities. their work in these settlements has been instrumental.

On the **7th February 2005**, the construction of the first 50 temporary shelters in the playground area of Jayagathpura began. 400 temporary houses will be built across the 6 coastal settlement in Moratuwa, giving priority to those houses that were closest to the ocean. These families were the poorest and suffered the most damage and loss. If all goes according to plan, the construction process should take as little as 3 weeks to complete.