

## Relief and rehabilitation of tsunami-affected persons in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry

- Revathi, Niruj, Deepu and Clifton

---

[For further information on the unorganized workers sector, Dalits, and other weaker sections of society affected by the Tsunami, please contact organizations such as PUCL, Alternate Law Forum, or the Unorganized Workers Federation, Chennai, at the following numbers:  
PUCL and Advisor to Supreme Court Commissioner on Food Security for Tamil Nadu:  
Dr. V. Suresh Ph.: 044-25392459 / 25392464; E-mail: [rights@vsnl.com](mailto:rights@vsnl.com)  
ALF: Revathy or Clifton at 098420-23389 or 094440-30032  
UWF: Geetha Ramakrishnan at 044-2645-0071 E-mail: [nmps@eth.net](mailto:nmps@eth.net)

---

With the government closing down relief and moving on to rehabilitation despite overflowing godowns, an upbeat media flashing pictures of fancy schemes by NGOs, as most volunteers to the disaster zone have packed their bags and left, one reality of the politics of rehabilitation has come out glaringly. Even as the Meenavar community is coping with its losses and trauma and getting on with the rehabilitation process the left outs, facing starvation, in the relief network are taking to streets demanding food relief. Mostly dalits, these marginalized agricultural labourers and unorganised labourers, have failed to attract any attention from the administration. Sadly this issue is yet to find media coverage, possibly because hunger is not on par with deaths. This may sound rather cynical but people in several villages are beginning to believe that their surviving the tsunami is going against them now. The governments have turned away from them while only a handful of NGOs consider this issue serious enough to intervene effectively.

The developments over the past two weeks where people affected by the tsunami in Nagapattinam (Tamil Nadu) and Karaikal (Pondicherry) districts have taken to the streets highlighting the need for food relief is indicative of the serious problem of food scarcity that is spreading in the affected coastal villages. This needs to be addressed immediately and measures preventing any kind of food insecurity need to be begun before it gets too late.

The discourse on Right to Food has progressed considerably owing of positive interventions by the Supreme Court that has forced the state governments to ensure that people have multiple ways of ensuring food. Yet every year there are reports of starvation deaths and suicides owing to lack of access to food grains. It is in this reality that one needs to locate the present debate on food security in the villages that have affected by the tsunami. Here we are faced with a situation where livelihoods have been entirely obliterated and people are forced to rely on the state for access to food grains and to some extent on NGOs and the goodness of civil society. This makes for a situation where things could easily get out of hand and the protests and dharnas confirm these doubts. The issue of food security in the times of a disaster needs to be looked at very critically in the context of the policies and practices of the TN and Pondicherry governments.

That relief is the sole access to food grains for the affected populations makes the delivery of relief a very important task. Yet it is this critical task that is fraught with serious problems that is leading to food scarcity.

- The major problem that can be identified is the limited scope of the “affected person” definition by the state. While the initial approach was based on the innumerable lives lost and property damaged it was later rectified to a certain extent with the recognition of petty traders, farmers, landless agricultural labourers, etc as livelihood affected persons. The

definition of the affected people still has not been given a rational approach and there is a lot of confusion of who is primarily affected and secondarily affected and not affected. Even with the identified categories this recognition, however, has not translated into an effective mitigation of the losses that have been suffered. It has also not meant that these communities have been targeted with adequate relief. In fact, presently, it is these communities, especially the landless agricultural labourers who are facing a serious food scarcity. In many villages people who have totally lost their livelihood told us that the government officials told them that they are not entitled for relief since they were not affected.

- There are various reasons that explain this. One is that the government has decided on a priority list where the fisherpeople are at the top and the landless somewhere at the bottom. Thus their interests are not taken care despite the fact that they are as vulnerable as the rest if not more. In Karaikal the fisherpeople have received 60 kgs of rice while the landless agricultural labourers have received only 5 kgs. This is inexplicable since both categories of people have lost their livelihoods to the tsunami, the fisherman having lost his boat / nets and thus the ability to fish while the landless agricultural labourer has lost his/her ability to get work on lands since these were salinated. This differential treatment has resulted in the landless, mostly dalits, facing serious food crisis.
- The distribution of relief by the non-government agencies also suffer from this problem of having sidelined the other categories, except for those whose mandate is to work with these groups. In Nagapattinam the distribution of relief was coordinated by the NGO Coordination Centre, which focused entirely on fishing villages and at that on the Meenavar community. There was no attempt made to assess the losses and needs in the villages where agricultural lands had been salinated.
- The distribution of relief has also been coloured by caste biases. In fishing villages relief has been prevented from reaching dalit groups and this is a well-documented fact. This has further rendered the dalits and adivasis more vulnerable than they already are. As already stated the media has highlighted this issue rather extensively yet the response of the government has been disappointing. One of the reasons for this happening is that the local administration has viewed the affected persons as a “community” without being sensitive to the fact that these are homogenous and there exist serious caste-cased divisions where the upper castes obviously dominate. The other reason is of the ineffective monitoring of the reach of relief. Where the local administration has recognized dalits as affected it has not effectively monitored the process to ensure that they receive relief.
- The inexplicable stoppage of relief at a preliminary stage and jumping into so-called rehabilitation process can also be blamed for this food scarcity. Even before all categories of affected people were properly “identified” relief was stopped and thus those “identified” or rather accepted as affected the relief was stopped. Rehabilitation has been jumped into without relief being done properly. One reason for this being the incorrect assessment of the impact of the tsunami. Unlike the Bhuj earthquake in Gujarat, the tsunami here has almost entirely obliterated the livelihoods of lakhs of people. Thus, unless the livelihoods are restored there is no way possible for the affected people to fend for themselves. This is a wrong decision since it views relief and rehabilitation at two mutually exclusive processes. Instead the government should view these as parallel processes where the relief part ends when rehabilitation is complete. Relief has to be continued till rehabilitation is complete not stopped when the process of restoring livelihoods has just begun. For the fisher-people

where there is some semblance of rehabilitation processes set in motion too this holds true and relief has to be ensured till they are back in the sea. In the case of farmers and landless labourers for whom there is no rehabilitation plan or process initiated, the stoppage of relief is inexplicable.

- State relief has been a one-off exercise where inadequate cash and food grains were given and people expected to fend for themselves thereafter even though they are not in a situation to do so. While livelihoods have not been restored even for the Meenavar community and the process looking much more distant for the farmers and agricultural labourers the fact that the state has not come up so far with any extension of relief or a second round of food grain supply indicates a lack of application of mind to the relief to rehabilitation transition.
- Added to this is the apathy of the district authorities who 'prioritize' and counterpose the interests of the affected people who have lost their kith and kin and people who had nothing to lose in the first place and who have lost their one source to live with dignity their livelihood and are taking to the roads out of sheer hunger.

The situation as such now is one where different sets of people are at various stages of food insecurity. Some do not have food for the next meal while others will run out of their food grain stock in a few days or weeks time. Post that there is no guarantee of access especially with livelihood restoration slated to take at least 3-6 months for fisherpeople and longer than that for the agrarian communities.

## Immediate and next steps...

### ***Enumeration and immediate compensation***

The immediate need is for several policy decisions on issues that have come to the fore yet have not been given adequate attention by the government.

- **Categories of affected people**  
The enumeration of the total populations affected by the tsunami is a necessary task without which it would be difficult to ensure their food security. The various categories of occupations that they are engaged in, also needs to be enumerated. This serves several purposes. Firstly towards understanding the impact on them and secondly aid in framing any kind of relief and rehabilitation policy for them
- **Compensation for loss of livelihood**  
It is imperative that the government works out a compensation package for those not catered to yet. This would necessarily imply compensation for loss of livestock as well. This could be worked out in such fashion so as to enable the families to purchase the livestock lost. It is also imperative that the government immediately announces a compensation package for the tillers where agricultural lands have been salinated. The point to note here is that the compensation must be announced in the names of the tillers i.e. to the owner where s/he is the tiller or to the sharecropper / tenant where s/he is the tiller.
- **Ex-gratia**  
The government must immediately announce and disburse an ex-gratia amount for the landless agricultural labourers working on lands that have been salinated.
- **Pensions**  
Pensions for destitute women, single mothers, elders, disabled, widows, etc must be immediately announced and disbursed.

### ***Relief***

Simultaneous with the above process must be the immediate disbursement of foodgrain relief to the affected populations. This must be for all the categories of affected people including those who have been ignored thus far.

- The first step in this process is the distribution of relief cards to all affected families. This must be done in consultations and with the active participation of the panchayats, CBOs and NGOs. Care must be taken to see that the caste biases do not mar this process, which would then result in the marginalization of the already marginalized sections of society.
- This must be followed by an immediate round of distribution of foodgrain relief. It must be ensured that the relief that is distributed consists not only of cereals, pulses and oil but also of vegetables and fruits. While the foodgrains should be distributed through the PDS infrastructure, the vegetables and fruits could be supplied through the village Self Help Groups (SHGs) at subsidized rates. The government could provide loans to the SHGs to facilitate this thereby also providing some alternate livelihood option to few of the affected people.

- The balwadis / anganwadis must be immediately restarted where they are yet to be so and this structure must be used for ensuring the nutrition of not only children but also of destitute women, pregnant women, disabled people, etc. The Mid-day meal scheme needs to be extended to provide nutritious meals three times a day to these vulnerable sections of society.

This form of relief must be continued until such time where the affected families obtain the capacity and the opportunity to resume normal livelihood activities.

### ***Interim livelihood rehabilitation***

Relief is only a temporary exercise but necessary until livelihood activities are resumed and to this extent the government must take several steps to ensure that the livelihood activities are resumed as soon as possible.

- **Announcement of special Food / Cash – for – work (FCW) scheme**  
The government must declare the entire Nagapattinam and Karaikal districts as tsunami affected since the economic ramifications of the tsunami is far beyond just the immediately affected coastal villages and announce for immediate FCW schemes wherever demanded. To this extent the government must pass immediate orders for the activation of FCW schemes in the affected villages and the neighbouring villages as well. The government must envisage, with the active participation of the people, schemes for dalit and adivasi families. For instance, the work could be establishment of cooperatives for brick kilns, milk diaries, etc. Thus low-rate loans for initial capital could be provided for establishment of such ventures. People could be trained in the initial phase receiving the food/cash as per the scheme until they are capable of running these ventures independently.
- As pointed above the SHGs could be innovatively used in relief distribution i.e. vegetables and fruits at subsidized rates.
- The ordinary FCW schemes must be run for a minimum period of 15 days a month.

### ***Permanent rehabilitation***

The government in its orders has till now adopted a property-owner centric policy in addressing livelihood issues through rehabilitation packages and only recognized those who own boats and go out to sea as well as those who own and operate small shops in the villages. In terms of the farming community that owns the agricultural lands that were inundated by sea waters, there are currently surveys being carried out by the revenue departments of various districts to assess the extent of inundation and the degree of salination. There have been indications from the government that a clear policy will be formulated once the situation is properly assessed.

Be that as it may, it is undeniable that in any formulation of rehabilitation packages for livelihoods the people of the fishing and farming communities that do not own boats, nets or lands generally remain ignored.

Does rehabilitation mean that one restores to the previous level all those who have lost resources and leave those who were socially and economically disadvantaged where they were, i.e. at the bottom of the hierarchy? Or does the policy try and address questions of socio-economic marginalization? The present approach being property-owner centric, the focus invariably has been towards restoring the communities to pre-tsunami status. This necessarily implies that the communities, especially Dalit, with no property ownership, will continue to be manual labourers

with no change in the economic status. Should one resign to saying that this is not the time for 'social change'? Or should the intention of the rehabilitation policy be to address the social and economic discrimination of Dalits and think of creating resources for those who never owned any property?

If one merely tried restoring the status quo, would there be a return to status quo or would the hierarchical relationship be more skewed with those who don't own resources being even more economically marginalized? How would this affect the relationship between those with resources and those without in a post-tsunami rehabilitation scenario?

These are all complex questions meriting a detailed analysis and a clear articulation of policy. What is of grave concern is that these questions of livelihoods of those who are also affected by the tsunami, and do also form a part of the fishing community, has not yet been mentioned in any governmental policy. What is clear is that those who own no property and are merely dependent on those who do own property merit no attention in rehabilitation efforts.

It is time for the government to shed its inertia and adopt a pro-poor policy in the tsunami-affected villages. This could include:

- Land – based rehabilitation of landless agricultural labourers  
The government must declare a policy of providing agricultural land to landless dalits and adivasi agricultural labourers. There already exists a scheme (TADHCO) whereby the government purchases 1 acre of land for dalit agricultural labourers. It is imperative that the scheme is made compulsory for all affected villages and a minimum acreage stipulated for purchase for such disbursal.
- Training and creation of employment opportunities for dalits and adivasis  
The government must also envisage and propose skill-training opportunities for dalits and adivasis. This has to be done in consultation with the communities.
- Creation of assets, which can be used to generate livelihood options such as livestock, etc.

### **Conclusion:**

In its order dated 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2003, in the matter of People's Union for Civil Liberties v Union of India (WP (Civil) No. 196 of 2001), the Supreme Court has clearly articulated the right to food and its importance in the case of poor families. The Court further added that, "...Their misfortune becomes further grave during times of famines and drought..." Now in the villages affected by the tsunami one is faced with tragedy that similarly increases the misfortune of the poor and marginalized sections of society. In fact the tsunami and the consequent relief and rehabilitation policies of the government has not only exposed the poor and marginalized sections of society to such food scarcity but also introduced the same to the fisherpeople. This situation demands that the government adopt an approach whereby the food security of the affected people is ensured.

The processes and suggestions elaborated above are just one small step in indicating a comprehensive approach that could be adopted by the government in dealing with this situation effectively.