

Post Tsunami Reconstruction and Rehabilitation: Household Views on Progress and Process*

The challenges of reconstruction and rehabilitation following the December 2004 tsunami were new to Sri Lanka, and perhaps more complex than providing immediate relief. Information on the processes involved in delivering aid to the tsunami affected and the perceptions of individuals on the aid received and the aid delivery mechanisms remain limited. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) carried out a survey in July 2006 of 600 households in 14 Grama Niladhari Divisions (GNDs) in 6 affected districts across the Southern and Eastern Provinces in an attempt to obtain views on a broad range of issues including housing, livelihoods recovery, aid distribution, community cohesiveness, and disaster management. The key findings are highlighted as follows:

(1) Housing

The progress in housing is fairly slow, with close to half of tsunami-affected households still residing in temporary housing. Progress in housing is best for those outside the 2005 buffer zone in the Southern Province. Less than 6 per cent of surveyed households in this region were in temporary housing. The progress in housing is worst for those in the Eastern Province – for households both within and outside the 2005 buffer zone. The progress is especially poor for households affected by the conflict

The “no-build” buffer zone was a key reason for the slow progress in housing, especially for households within the 2005 “no-build” zone. Policy changes, lack of land, delays in donor assistance have been main reasons for delays in the donor-driven housing programme. Change in buffer zone rules and delays in accessing housing material have affected the progress in the owner-driven programme.

Despite delays, assistance through the government has been the main source of funds for the rebuilding process. However, house completion was best when the funding was from private parties, such as the private sector, foreign individuals, etc., and it was worst where individuals relied on their own funding. However, only a small share of households has got funds

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from private donors. Most perceive that access to housing assistance through government sources was fairly easy.

Most rebuilt houses, despite being smaller than pre-tsunami houses, are built with better materials. This is especially the case when houses are funded by own funds, funds from government or NGOs. Households receiving funds from NGOs or other private sources were less able to participate in house design.

In addition to slow progress in the donor-driven housing programme, most relocated households are worse off now in terms of quality of housing and access to services and employment. Many relocated households do not have their own sources of water and are worse off in terms of access to roads, pre-schools and health clinics compared to their pre-tsunami levels of access. About 80 per cent of the relocated claim that access to employment opportunities has worsened as a result of moving to a new places. In addition, almost a half of the relocated households are not happy with the construction materials used to build houses in the new locations. However, almost all relocated households did not show an inclination to sell the new houses. The survey results indicated that life styles and socio-economic situations were not taken into consideration when designing houses. The delays in matching beneficiaries to houses have partly contributed to this mismatch.

The majority of relocated households have not been given ownership legally. Irrespective of the type of the donor, less than 6 per cent of the relocated households were assigned legal ownership of new houses.

The survey results signal problems of coordination across various donors, especially those who have provided houses without adhering to government plans. The results also suggest that available macro level information on housing requirements may be misleading. At the macro level, the difference between the numbers of households eligible for housing and the number of houses already provided is taken as the housing requirement. However, if people have received houses outside their eligibility, or if people who received houses were not those eligible for houses, the above assessment will be incorrect.

The general perceptions on the government's 2005 buffer zone are good, with only a few exceptions. There was a consensus on this view among the

key informants as well as households. Paradoxically, households and key informants were also happy with the relaxation of the buffer zone in May 2006. This is perhaps due to most households enjoying the prospect of better housing because of the policy.

A fair proportion (24 per cent) of the households was affected by the change in housing policy, although the majority was unaffected. The reasons for being affected by the housing policy imply that the coverage of the policy (i.e., eligibility) is more of a concern to people than the specificities of the policy.

(2) Livelihoods Recovery

All surveyed GNDs received livelihood support in terms of equipment and boats, livelihoods training and credit. The survey results show that 71 per cent have regained their old source of livelihood. About 8 per cent of heads of households have changed their livelihood, while 21 per cent are unemployed.

Overall, the household and the community level perceptions on income recovery are at variance. Household level data show that on average close to 60 per cent of households feel that their family incomes are worse compared to pre-tsunami levels in terms of their ability to cover basic needs such as food and health. On the other hand, according to key informants, almost all surveyed GNDs in the Southern Province and close to a half of the surveyed GNDs in the Eastern Province state that households are better off now because of aid, training, and more employment opportunities. It is possible that households under report income recovery, expecting further income assistance. This reveals the need to use more objective criteria to assess income recovery.

Income recovery patterns vary across regions, occupation groups and industry groups. Compared to the Southern Province, a higher per cent of households in the Eastern Province feel that their livelihoods have not recovered back to their pre-tsunami levels. The majority of technicians and machine operators have not recovered incomes at least to cover food needs. Additionally, more than 50 per cent of skilled agricultural and fishery workers and those involved in elementary occupations have not recovered incomes.

Major constraints faced by households in recovering their incomes include loss of equipment, loss of work places, lack of working capital and personal injuries. Only 4 per cent of the surveyed households indicate ethnic conflict as the main obstacle for income recovery.

Availability of more employment opportunities due to reconstruction has helped income recovery more than livelihood assistance. The provision of training, equipment, credit grants and transfers has mattered significantly in income recovery only to a very small share of the households (less than 1 per cent). This could partly be due to problems with access to markets and other infrastructure facilities.

The most common strategy for coping with income loss is reducing non-essential consumption followed by borrowing or dis-saving. However, of some concern is that a large percent of households have reduced food consumption as a coping strategy. A smaller percentage of households have also resorted to selling assets and sending more members of the household to work.

Although macro level information suggests that there have been numerous micro-credit programmes for the tsunami-affected, ground level evidence suggests that such programmes have not successfully penetrated the communities in need. In particular, only 15 per cent of households from the Southern and Eastern Provinces of the country have applied for loans and only 10 per cent has received loans. However, amongst lenders, rural banks Samurdhi and other development banks were more accessible to households. Close to 80 per cent of those who applied for loans through these banks have received loans, given at lower interest rates and requiring less guarantees.

(3) Health and Education

There is some evidence of mental and physical health problems related to the tsunami. A few households reported experiencing more sleeping difficulties, and more children having nightmares compared to pre-tsunami levels. In addition, a large number of households have stated that some member of the household had experienced deterioration of physical health after the tsunami.

About 11 per cent of the households knew of someone committing suicide because of the tsunami. A third of the households have been

offered or given counseling for distress. The percentage of households receiving counseling is comparably higher in the Eastern Province. It is possible that counseling was already being provided in these areas for victims of conflict related mental health problems.

Thirty per cent of households claimed to have children who are yet to restart schooling after the tsunami. This problem was only slightly more pronounced in the conflict affected Eastern Province, indicating that the main reason for school non-restart is not the conflict. Child labour is one reason for reduced school attendance. The school attendance does not seem to vary much across housing situations, although children from relocated households were slightly less likely to be attending school. Income recovery seems to have a bearing on restarting schooling after the tsunami.

(4) Aid distribution and Disaster Preparedness

On the positive side, the results show only low levels of corruption at the household level. Very few households claimed to have had paid bribes to government or NGO officials to receive aid, and only 14 households knew of instances where politicians have interfered with the tsunami recovery efforts.

Information provided by key informant shows conflicts with regard to allocation of new houses, distribution of funds, and allocation of livelihood related assets. On the positive side, however, most GNs were of the view that almost all conflicts were amicably resolved through discussions with relevant parties.

Local level capacity and increased workload has affected aid distribution. The multitude of institutions at the center has led to duplication of work that resulted in increasing the administrative workload of already under resourced local level players, reducing the efficiency of aid distribution.

A small number of cases have been reported where ineligible families received houses, but these cases are prominent only in some GNDs. Corruption in allocating government housing grants is observed in isolated places at low levels, but with regional variations. Corruption relating to allocation of housing sites is also low. Intervention of people unaffected by tsunami has affected aid distribution in some areas. Around 12 per cent of

households believe that political parties and local politicians have interfered in aid distribution to ensure that their supporters benefit more.

As a whole, nearly one-third of the surveyed find that community cohesiveness has decreased following the tsunami. However, this is at variance with the perception of key informants in the respective divisions. Also, there have been some problems at household level in aid utilization. This is mainly due to increased consumption of alcohol by some household heads.

Some households reported family conflicts due use of cash grants for consumption of alcohol by males. Around 11 per cent of households have noticed an increase in family conflicts following the tsunami.

Although there have been numerous disaster preparedness training programmes in the affected areas, only a few households have actually benefited from these.