

*Done and Undone*

*Assessing Tsunami Efforts -A Women's Perspective*

**Swayam Shikshan Prayog**  
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## *Foreword*

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*In the following stories of villages in Cuddalore district, one of the worst affected in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, Anna Williams captures insights from community members' experiences of relief and rehabilitation.*

*It is hoped that readers will realize that people do not see themselves as victims. On the contrary, these stories show that they display steel-like resilience. Many took on the task of immediate relief without outside help and continue to face everyday survival as they did as first responders. We hope these stories help to bust myths about people in tsunami hit areas as "victims". The grassroots initiatives highlighted show how women and community groups sought to bridge the gap between their needs and the mainstream interventions and services offered them.*

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## **Village Leaders Insist that NGOs Meet Community Needs**

### **Village: Sothikuppam**

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#### **Between the Deep Sea and the Ocean**

Due to its placement between the sea and a river that opens to the ocean, Sothikuppam, population 2,280, remains extremely vulnerable to the wrath of the sea. When the Tsunami hit, waves enveloped the village on both sides and there was nowhere to seek refuge. After the first wave created widespread panic, parents told their children to run to the rivers edge for safety. As the second larger wave approached, the river overflowed and 18 children were swept away. One man and 3 women died as well, but children suffered the largest loss of life. As a result, community members feel they face an insurmountable challenge when formulating plans to protect themselves from a future Tsunami. However, they demonstrate the importance they place on improving their lives and their knowledge of how to do so through working with the government and NGOs to ensure that their needs are being met.

#### **Breaking NGO Myths**

Many NGOs have tried to help Sothikuppam residents through offering livelihood training programs and health camps, but community members have not been satisfied with the results. People complain that the trainings they have received are not helping them get new jobs. They don't have the necessary follow-up support from NGOs to build their skills and establish contacts with employers. Health camps have been equally unsatisfactory. Check-ups are not thorough, doctors are not interested in interacting with patients, proper privacy is not available and the medicine supply is insufficient. Sometimes, doctors even prescribe medicines that beneficiaries must seek outside their village and pay for. Community members realized that many NGOs were providing services more for their own publicity than for the benefit of the people. In response, they complained to the local village leader governing body (panchayat). As servants of the people and the link between the community and the government, the panchayat decided to take action. It began meeting with NGO representatives to clearly outline community grievances and explain that, unless better quality services are provided, the panchayat will not accept further assistance. One NGO had plans to establish monthly health camps in Sothikuppam. Panchayat members told the NGO staff that camps would only be held if they provided quality check-ups and gave free medicines. The NGO staff agreed and



**A Health Camp for tsunami-affected communities**

made the necessary preparations to meet panchayat conditions. The first camp was a pilot camp. While medicines were provided for free, there was adequate privacy and doctors gave thorough check-ups, beneficiaries complained that there still were not enough doctors and they had to wait too long to be examined. Panchayat members conveyed these concerns to the NGO staff, who recruited more doctors for subsequent camps. Through sheer persistence by community members and village

leaders, the residents of Sothikuppam finally received the quality service they wanted.

### **Women's Involvement: Finding Their Feet**

SHG members in Sothikuppam have actively sought out and benefited from NGO health and income generation schemes. They have also learned the benefits of community-initiated action, without NGO support. All 20 of Sothikuppam's SHGs formed after the Tsunami with NGO seed money. However, women claim that some NGOs promised much more than they delivered. As a result, one SHG decided to separate from the NGO that formed it and obtain a loan from a local bank on its own. Then, group members modified their savings requirements in order to be able to save and pay back the loan without cutting too much into their disposable income. Most women are using the money to support their individual fish selling businesses.



**Women returning from the market**

Other SHGs have maintained their relationships with NGOs. By attending livelihood training programs offered by NGOs in neighboring villages, women took the opportunity to travel to areas around their village that they previously were restricted from doing. Seeing other villages and meeting new people has opened their eyes to the opportunities available to them through group activities and changing mobility restrictions. Ten years ago, educated women were not permitted to accept employment outside of the village. Now, they enjoy traveling freely.

Two women have also received trainings as health volunteers. They carry medical kits and can administer basic curative services. They are also interested in teaching other community members about HIV/AIDS and the benefits of the public health system. Other SHG members claim they have learned a lot from the health volunteers.

“We used to only go to private doctors. Now that we about the benefits it offers, we also go to the government hospital,”

**- Uthirambal, Marimejalai SHG member**

## Accessing Safe Shelter and Changing Women's Social Roles

### Village: Samiyarpettai

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#### Staying Afloat

The village of Samiyarpettai, population 1,729, lies on an incline, setting half the village a few meters above sea level. When the Tsunami hit the coast of Tamil Nadu, India on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, the waves destroyed nearly all in their path in the lower part of the village, and did not reach the upper part. Twenty-four people lost their lives and, like most other Tsunami affected communities, virtually all boats and nets, necessary to support the livelihoods of coastal villagers, were irreparably damaged. Additionally, immeasurable property damage occurred and half the water sources were contaminated due to saltwater intrusion. Since then, the community has joined together in the recovery process to strengthen its future coping abilities.

#### The Road to Recovery

Various community groups have advocated for NGO and government resources to be allocated according to how they see fit and responded to the new presence of relief aid with a combination of warmth and reservation. One NGO supplied water tanks in strategic locations throughout the village. However, they now sit empty and unused, as community members prefer utilizing bore well water from the sources that have not been contaminated. Another NGO built temporary shelters and is in the process of constructing permanent houses. However, housing construction was delayed due to community efforts to ensure safety. After construction started, people



**An abandoned UNICEF water tank**

noticed that the frames were being built with single rod pillars. As cyclones frequent the area and people wanted their houses to be able to withstand another Tsunami if it comes, they became concerned about the strength of the structures. Village leaders put forward a formal petition to

the NGO, with community backing, to demand that it provide stronger structures and that it include input from community members as to the safety measures that should be put in place. Finally, the construction plan changed from frames using single-rod pillars to frames using four-rod pillars. Additionally, as the houses would not be finished before the rainy season, the community demanded that the flimsy thatched-roof temporary shelters be renovated by reinforcing them with brick walls, separate kitchens and individual toilets.

Another community led initiative is the managing of two computer training centers, which will implement the government of Tamil Nadu's early warning system at the community level. The system, called Mission 2007, will connect all coastal villages in the state through computer centers in every 4-5 villages. Local volunteers give computer training courses, run the centers and coordinate village operations of the system.



**A house under construction with four-rod pillars**

“Messages will arrive by wireless signal to my computer and I will be in charge of announcing the danger over the radio. I have just completed a map of strategic locations for radio placement.”

- **P. Senthamil, MSSRF Computer Centre Volunteer**

### **Women’s Increasing Involvement**

Since the Tsunami, women are expanding their income generating potentials. They also have increased mobility and are gaining political clout. A number of NGOs have responded to women’s demands for support in organizing themselves, providing loans and giving them the skills to increase their incomes. There are 19 SHGs actively involved in lending, whose members participate in small business development trainings. Additionally, since women have become SHG members, they travel freely, which they used to be restricted from doing. They also meet with dignitaries who visit their village alongside men, a dramatic change from the previous situation. Traditional village leaders express support for women’s changing roles.



**Women and men demonstrating their skills after disaster preparedness training**

“Since the Tsunami, 9 more Self-Help Groups have formed. They are taking out loans and developing women’s capacities. These activities should be encouraged.”

- **Raja Kumar, Village President, Samiyarpettai**

Women have also taken the opportunity to learn disaster preparedness skills by participating in a disaster preparedness training program. Due to SHG members’ eagerness to seize every opportunity for education, skill development and breaking traditional social norms, they are leading the way in the rehabilitation process. NGOs and government representatives have only had to respond.

## **Women's Groups Demand Government Rehabilitation**

### **Village: Rasapettai**

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#### **Village Snapshot**

The village of Rasapettai is located along an isolated stretch of sand only reachable by boat. Public provision of basic services is scarce – there is 1 poor quality public school, no health center and the majority of houses do not have toilets. When community members need to visit the doctor, they either go to a private practitioner or the public hospital in the district capital of Cuddalore. The choice depends on the money available. Money is also a major determinant of the type of education young people receive. Most families send their children to private schools outside of the village; however, the cost of doing so takes a major toll on families. The December 26<sup>th</sup> Tsunami affected 1,508 people, 75% of the village population. While the loss of life was relatively minor, two girls were swept away by the giant waves. Only one house was destroyed, but 150 were damaged. Additionally, half the water supply, provided from a bore well through hand pumps, was contaminated due to saltwater intrusion. Immediately following the Tsunami, UNICEF provided tanked water on a temporary basis. Now the tanks sit unused and community members have returned to drinking bore well water without any major health issues resulting.

#### **Handing it to Them...Rebuilding on Their Own**

At the community level, Rasapettai residents took action to improve the shelter destruction they incurred after the Tsunami without outside support. The NGO that provided boats and nets to the fishermen in the village also rebuilt the 1 house that was destroyed. However, the shelter damage was deemed minor compared to the destruction in other areas and community members received no financial or physical support to repair their homes. Thus, they did so using their own money and their own labor. Materials were gathered locally or purchased with loan money from banks. The men in the village did the actual construction, but the women played roles of identifying necessary repairs, seeking support to fix them and overseeing the quality of the repairs being made. Work done on individual houses was shared between husband and wife, with specific tasks allotted by gender. For houses that suffered greater damage, neighbors partnered with each other to provide additional labor. Now all houses are repaired and community members have a great advantage over other affected communities in secure access to safe shelter. They also learned valuable lessons of how to utilize scarce resources, work collectively in a post-disaster situation and fend for themselves when nobody was there to help.

#### **When the Going Gets Tough, Women Get Rough**

Before the Tsunami, 3 women's SHGs existed in the village; however, they were not well organized and did not meet regularly. Now, 29 SHGs are functioning and women have received seed money to expand their small fish selling businesses and petty shops. However, fishing is slow currently, as the men hesitate to go out to sea at any sign of rough waters. Thus, not only have women's incomes from their husband's decreased, the quantity of fish they are able to sell at the market is also less. Despite such financial challenges, SHG members have found a new political space to advocate for government

support to meet their needs. Before the Tsunami, women obtained information about current events and important government programs from the television and from their local village leader. Now, they obtain information about relief and rehabilitation schemes directly from the District Collector. They either call his office or go in person to claim the entitlements they have been promised. While the response has been slow, they have found strength in their roles as group members and feel confident in exercising their rights. The security they feel as group members also attests to the value they place on their social network following the Tsunami.



**Self-help group members from Rasapettai  
after explaining their new methods for  
demanding entitlements**

“We feel stronger and safer now  
because we are united,”

- **Kumari, Sivasakthi SHG member**

## **Enabling Public Childcare**

### **Village: Pudhukuppam**

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#### **Village Profile**

The village of Pudhukuppam is home to 1,426 men, women and children. The men earn their livelihoods from fishing and the women from fish selling, cattle rearing, tailoring, running small shops and group businesses as well as homemaking and childcare. There is one Dalit family in the village, the male member of which is the town herald. The nearest water tank is located in the neighbouring village of Pudhupettai and the nearest Primary Health Centre is located 6 kilometres away in the town of Pudhuchattiram.

When the Tsunami hit, the village was transformed. About 100 people lost their lives, nearly 10% of the village population. Further, more than 200 houses were damaged or destroyed along with nearly all boats and nets, taking away the primary form of livelihood of the majority of Pudukuppam's residents. Since then, the village childcare worker (Anganwadi), part of the government's Integrated Child Development Services scheme, has faced the challenge of competition from another NGO and the newly expanding SHG movement is gaining a strong and positive foothold.

#### **Dedication Pays!**

The local Anganwadi worker, Rukmani, has run the government childcare centre in Pudhukuppam for 22 years. Without adequate financial support, she administers government education and nutrition programs for women and children through the labour



**Rukmani (purple sari) with her staff and students**

of love and the support of 1 paid assistant and 2 young volunteers. Since the Tsunami, an NGO opened a private childcare centre and many parents withdrew their children from the government centre and enrolled them in the new one. Immediate benefits included free tuition and clothing. However, the centre will begin charging next year and it intends to meantime, Rukmani risks

castigation for low

enrolment and feels she is not meeting her capacity or adequately supporting the community. So she took the initiative to appeal for support to strengthen her centre. She soon established a partnership with an NGO. The staff now regularly visit the centre to check its progress and play with the children. In response to Rukmani's request for more nutritious food to provide the children and newborn babies, the NGO obtained powdered cereal and milk packets and is now regularly supplying them to the centre. Rukmani

plans to continue seeking support from NGOs for her centre. She is driven by the philosophy that if NGOs really want to help, they should support existing infrastructure, not undermine it.

### **Filling the Void: Women's Support Mechanisms**

One SHG, Kadalpura, has demonstrated the power of women's collectives to expand their income generating potential and serve as psychosocial support mechanisms, filling a gap that service providers do not have the capacity to fill. Kadalpura formed in February of 2002. It began with 16 members, but expanded to 20 after the Tsunami. The group has obtained a number of substantial loans and started a group fish-selling business and a small restaurant. After the Tsunami, they lost all their savings and have temporarily stopped their fish-selling business. In spite of this, they pulled their efforts together to host a seafood festival in February 2005 to encourage fishing and fish consumption.

While the group admits it is facing a critical financial situation, members have not hesitated to support each other socially and emotionally. They insist on following the edict of respect for one another's words and advocate collectively instead of individually.

They say that talking to one another and to relatives has helped them relax and cope with the challenges of rebuilding their lives after the Tsunami. They participated in trauma counselling, but say that the majority of their emotional recovery has come from the support of other women in their village. The real bastion of psychosocial support comes from SHG members themselves. Even the local psychiatrist admits that SHGs are the best local support mechanism women have in their hands. SHG members agree.



**Kadalpura self-help group members  
(Vasugi in pink)**

“When the Tsunami hit, the water sounded like a cobra hissing. After the waves came I carried bodies, gave people clothes and tried to resuscitate others. This experience led to feelings of shock later and fear of a reoccurrence. We women feel comfortable talking to each other though. About 50% of the fear is gone now.”

- **Vasugi, Kadalpura SHG leader**

## **Women's Groups Lead an Innovative Recovery Strategy**

### **Village: Indira Nagar**

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#### **Rivals Clashed and a Village was Born**

The village of Indira Nagar formed due to caste conflict. Thirty years ago, Indira Nagar was part of the neighboring village of Pudhupettai. Due to caste issues, the people living in the area of the village that is now Indira Nagar did not intermarry with those living in the area that is now Pudhupettai. To mollify residents disturbed by the internal division, the District Collector divided the villages in two. Pudhupettai remained Pudhupettai and the hamlet of Indira Nagar came into being. However, its nascence was not thoroughly recorded on public records and, as a result, in the post-Tsunami relief and recovery effort, SHG members have utilized all the resources available to them to obtain relief and recovery support.

#### **No One to Help!**

There are 185 families in Indira Nagar and 10 lost all their property when the Tsunami hit. During the first 3 days following the Tsunami, nobody arrived to help. However, relief aid did arrive in Pudhupettai. When residents pleaded for help from passing vehicles, they were tossed a few small items, but none stopped to deliver supplies as they were doing in other villages.

#### **Helping Themselves**

One SHG leader, Janagi, decided it was time for Indira Nagar residents to help themselves. First, she joined the women together to cook for the entire village. Then she organized the entire community to clean the debris and rubble that the seawater had strewn throughout the village. When the influx of relief agencies bypassed Indira Nagar, community members formally complained to the military officer in charge of relief operations. It turned out that there were two problems blocking Indira Nagar from receiving relief aid. One was that some of the records supplied to relief agencies did not distinguish Indira Nagar as a separate village from Pudhupettai and another was that certain Pudhupetti residents were claiming Indira Nagar's aid. Finally, as a result of the formal complaint issued by the community, the village began receiving its own supply of goods.

The problem of identity did not end there. When the District Rural Development Agency invited residents of Tsunami affected villages to attend a presentation of the construction of a model house and discuss the opportunity for rolling funds for SHGs, the invitation did not name Indira Nagar. This meant that SHGs in Indira Nagar would not be allocated separate rolling funds, but would be linked to the funds allocated for Pudhupettai's SHGs. Community members again issued a formal complaint, this time to the district official in charge of coordinating the event. Again they met with success. The invitation was changed to include Indira Nagar and rolling funds for Indira Nagar SHGs were established.

### **Making Women's Voices Heard**

Women's SHGs have not only led the community effort to obtain its fair share of support, they have also taken the initiative to invest in community learning. When a team of women with experience rebuilding after the 2001 Gujarat earthquake visited Indira Nagar to share their experiences, SHG members decided they wanted to learn more. With the support of an NGO they traveled to Maharashtra to learn about how women are organizing to improve access to basic services. When they returned, they shared their



learnings with other community members. A plan soon formed to create sector committees to be in charge of ensuring their community has adequate access to public services. Committee members will be in charge of registering complaints of poor service provision to higher authorities. If talking to 1 or 2 people isn't enough, they will keep seeking out the ear of higher authorities until their voices are heard.

**Community exchange with Gujarati women**

## Appendix

<b>Village</b>	<b>Vulnerabilities</b>	<b>Looking Ahead</b>
<b>Sothikuppam</b>	Physical: Geographic location, no reply from district government to build bridge, no toilets in village	Community initiatives to utilize <i>available</i> resources have potential because of resilience of village leaders
<b>Samiyarpettai</b>	Physical: No boat or net insurance, temporary shelters and permanent houses are being built close to shore	Women's strength and culture of unity preclude economic inequalities and identities as victims
<b>Rasapettai</b>	Financial/Natural: Livelihoods are precarious	Women want livelihoods trainings linked to profitable markets
<b>Pudhukuppam</b>	Social: Rivalries and dependency on aid	Individuals will continue to rebuild their livelihood activities, but social divisions could impede success
<b>Indira Nagar</b>	Social/Financial: Rivalry with neighboring village, men spending more on diesel than earning in catch	Women taking lead in recovery and increasing their involvement in community issues

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Senthamil, MSSRF Computer Center Volunteer  
Raja Kumar, Village President, Samiyarpettai*

### *Rasapettai*

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Kumari, Sivasakthi SHG member*

### *Pudhukuppam*

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### *Indira Nagar*

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