EFFECTIVE USE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN RELIEF, REHABILITATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF ALAPPAD PANCHAYAT POST TSUNAMI

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The SAHAYI Initiative

AN OVERVIEW

Home to over one billion people - India ranks second in the world for Natural Disasters after China. Till date, India has witnessed around 16 natural disasters. Among the various types of natural disasters affecting different parts of the country, floods, cyclones, earthquakes and droughts cause maximum damage to life and property; and heat wave, cold wave, avalanches, landslides, fire, and pest attacks are also taking heavy tolls on life and property at regular intervals. The Tsunami of 26th December, 2004 was one such natural disaster that struck the Indian Ocean. Many people lost their lives and many more displaced. The areas hardest hit by the Tsunami were the south eastern coast, parts of South Western Coasts and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In Kerala, it claimed the lives of 196 people and over 17,000 houses were damaged.

The Alappad Panchayat in Kollam district suffered the maximum causality in the state (148 persons died and over 3000 houses destroyed). Alappad Panchayat, a narrow strip of land, approximately 16kms long and 33 metres wide is sandwiched between the Arabian Sea on the west side and the TS Canal on the east side. The village is connected to the mainland only by bridge at the southern part of the land strip.

During the Tsunami, the water had risen from the Arabian Sea, washed through Alappad and reached TS Canal which resulted in such huge destruction as the villagers had no place to escape.
Soon after the Tsunami hit, many villagers were moved to the camps set up by the government in nearby areas. Some of the schools in the Panchayat were also used as shelters. Tsunami not only destroyed lives, homes and possessions but also self-respect of the proud fisherman community. They were forced to depend on charity food, shelter and clothing. Many families soon moved out of the camps as it was becoming unsafe and there was no ventilation. Free cooked meals were given by many NGOs at a distance from the camp.

SAHAYI'S INTERVENTION

Sahayi was actively working in the Alappad Panchayat of Kollam District before the Tsunami. They were engaged in strengthening of the local governance and civil society initiatives in the area. A day after Tsunami, Sahayi team rushed to Alappad, accessed the situation and initiated relief activities in the Panchayat. During the process of intervention evolved the “Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Model” which was holistic and unique in its identity. It took around 5 years to complete the activities in restoring people’s lives back to where it was before Tsunami.

The Key Features of this model are:

a) Communities’ involvement in Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction programmes
b) Citizen Centric approach
c) Result oriented activities
d) Reducing communities’ dependency on third party.

PERIOD: 2004 -2006

Involvement of Community in first stage of relief work: Clearing Debris from the villages in Alappad Panchayat

Tsunami carried with it, a great amount of silt and other debris which accumulated in the houses and roads of Alappad panchayat. Sahayi mobilised around 150 volunteers from the nearby panchayats to support in removing the debris. Within three days, some of the community
members of Alappad panchayat, who were affected by the Tsunami, too joined the group in clearing the debris from the houses in the community. The first step towards community mobilization initiated with this step. It was here, that Sahayi realized the importance of participation, which will ultimately lead to sustainability of the programme.

**Consultation with the community members and formation of committees**

During the process of cleaning the houses of debris, there were consultation with the community members and they shared that many of them were separated from their families as the camp was unable to hold such a large population. Children were feeling isolated and there was very little ventilation and safe space to move around in the camp. Sahayi mooted the idea of starting a recreational centre, which could also be multi facility centre. Initially one recreational centre was opened. Here, not only the children came to relax and play, but it provided a safe space for other community members to come together, interact, ventilate, share issues etc.

In order to ensure active participation of local communities in planning, implementation and monitoring of the programmes related to rehabilitation, Sahayi team conducted a series of dialogues and discussions with the community members. These interactions and discussions motivated the members of the community to come together and form committees to plan, execute and monitor activities for rehabilitation.

**Cyclical Approach in participation: Community Kitchen and Nutrition Programme**

During one of the consultation, the community members shared that cooked food was served by some NGOs at a distance from the camps. For this, at least one member of each family had to walk a distance, stand in long queue with a plate and get food. There were days when the food would run out. This was very humiliating to the villagers and made them feel like beggars. Some of the villagers preferred to starve that let down their self-respect. Sensing the delicacy of the situation, Sahayi and some of the senior committee members came up with the concept of Community Kitchen. Interested families from the community got into groups and a constructed temporary shed to function as community centre and mess. Local committees were constituted which comprised of equal number of male and female members. Each committee had a convener to look after the day to day activities such as purchase of items, cooking, sharing and eating cooked food. Food items cooked were in consultation with the committees. Everyday meeting with the community mess volunteers took place to access the programme. The financial support was provided by Sahayi. Initially, one community
kitchen started, but seeing the success, community members from other wards of the Panchayats also discussed with Sahayi and further started 2 more community kitchens in different wards of the Panchayat.

The nutrition requirements for children were largely ignored by the relief camps. The food distributed in the camps was only meant for adults. Sahayi, in consultation with nutrition experts came up with a nutrition programme for children. Milk, Bananas and Biscuits were distributed to children in relief camps, community mess and in schools. The mothers in the relief camp and the parents’ teachers associations in schools were in charge of implementing this activity.

**Involvement of community members in constructing temporary shelters:**

During the daily dialogues with the community members in the mess and recreation centres, many members shared that the relief camp was a very unsafe place for children and women to be let alone. Cases of molestations were often heard. It was during this period that the government announced construction of temporary shelters for the survivors with the support of many NGOs. But this would take considerable amount of time. The community members shared that they would like to have *kacha* houses built in their own land. Sahayi team discussed amongst themselves and decided on constructing eco-friendly and cost effective houses. The community members agreed with it and post consultation with the Local Panchayat Representatives and state government, came out with the decision that houses will be made of bamboo and coconut leaves as they provide cool interiors in the hot weather. The planning of the house was also done by the committee constituted for this purpose. The community members mobilized construction workers within the community in the construction work with the view of providing wage employment to the local community. The construction work was personally supervised by individual beneficiaries. Sahayi provided the materials and wages in addition to general supervision.
Income Generation via community rehabilitation work:

School children were one of the most affected segments of Tsunami. They not only lost their books, clothing, but also their schools which were fully or partially washed away. Encouraging the children to attend school was one of the best ways to bring them back to normalcy. The discussions with the school teachers and parent teacher associations bought out the need for getting school uniforms for children as they all were washed away. Also, with Sahayi providing support by supplying sewing machines and cloth materials, members from the community can be mobilised to stitch uniform for the children within the school premises. Experienced tailors, including women and men who had been rendered jobless by the Tsunami were engaged for this purpose. The idea was also to generate wage employment for the people while meeting dress requirements for school. The wages were provided by Sahayi.

“I had no money in my pocket when community members came to me to help them stitch the uniforms. I will always be thankful that I earned some money during crises and also supported the society.”

Mr. Mahendran, tailor

Community Level Workers’ involvement in Psycho-social care and support:

Another major activity that ran parallel to all the above activities was the Psycho social care and support provided by the Sahayi members. At the initial visit to the relief camp, the Sahayi staff had identified twenty community women who were already part of Kudumbastree programme and who were good community mobilizers and leaders. Sahayi team along with these identified community level workers, were specially trained at the National institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore in basic psychological care, stress management and life skill education. The trained staff and workers interacted with the community members in the relief camps and in the villages. Since these workers were from the affected community itself, they were able to relate with the community members who had suffered losses. It was also easier for the community members to confide in them than in total strangers. These community level workers identified cases that needed special attention, provided counseling and made repeated visits to people who needed more care. Referral cases were directed to hospitals.
PERIOD: 2006 - 2008

Skill Development and Income Generation Programmes:

Once relief and rehabilitation work was half-way through, the community members shared the need to look into livelihoods of the community people. Many fishermen who now apprehensive to go back to the sea, many lost their boats and means of livelihood. Sahayi along with the community members identified immediate employment opportunities and gave training in making cement bricks, cement rings and tanks for rainwater storage was taught. Sahayi identified women who were interested in starting some forms of Micro Enterprises. Hence a two days Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) was organized for the women to enhance the skills and knowledge for identifying feasible and viable micro enterprises and to motivate them to resume their income generation activities. Thirty six women participated in the EDP training. They choose various enterprises such as sale of coconut oil, sale of firewood, catering units, stationary shops, food processing units and readymade garment shops etc. Initial monitory support was provided by Sahayi.

Support and Strengthening Society for Women Awakening and Social Transformation (SWAST):

SWAST is a community based organisation which came into existence in 2008. It was promoted by Sahayi AT Alappad Panchayat as a strategy for ensuring community ownership and sustainability of tsunami reconstruction activities and social change initiatives. The members of SWAST were the community level workers were involved in community mobilization. For strengthening the capacity of the members, a series of capacity building programmes were conducted for them which included training on counseling, project planning, implementation, financial management.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SAHAYI IN FACILITATING AND SUSTAINING THE PRACTICE

Sahayi team was at Alappad the very next day after Tsunami and started relief work. Here, though the initial activities were service oriented, Sahayi tried to inculcate the element of ‘Participation’ from the community level for sustaining the entire process. But during this process, certain hurdles came in the way of functioning.

- **Dealing with community:** Participation of the community in planning, implementing and monitoring meant involvement of many individuals in decision making. Though committees were formed for relief and rehabilitation activities, sometimes arriving at a
consensus for certain activity was a challenge as opinions deferred. Hence, Sahayi has to facilitate very sensitively.

- **Allotting temporary shelters:** During the Tsunami, around 3000 houses were destroyed. With the decision of making temporary shelters for the families, a major challenge faced here was finding the neediest among these families. The community level workers had to visit families, understand the existing condition of their family and their houses and pick the neediest. These workers had to work very carefully in choosing, as if there was any lapse in their part, community members would easily get agitated.

- **Rumours:** There was another NGO working for rehabilitation in Alappad Panchayat who had built temporary shelters made out of Tin sheets. However many families were reluctant to move into these tin sheets sheds as they were unsuitable for the hot and humid weather due to which many of these sheds were unoccupied. People preferred the Sahayi’s temporary shelter. Hence, some of the workers of the other NGO started a rumour that Sahayi was working for religious conversion. Since Sahayi was working in Alappad district even before Tsunami, there was a majority of population who did not believe in this rumour. Sahayi team directly met with the other NGO staff and cleared the issues.

- **Lack of involvement of LSGIs:** Though the LSGIs were working in full swing in Alappad district for the last ten years, disaster management was never an agenda of the local bodies. As per the protocols post Tsunami, it was the duty of the revenue department and district collector to look into budgetary allocations and relief work. Hence, the LSGIs were not involved at any level. This resulted in undue delay in identification of beneficiaries and implementation of rehabilitation activities. So when Sahayi started its relief work, it was a tedious task to take the LSGI representatives to confidence and get support from their side.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACH**

**For the Community -** Due to the participatory nature of the process, the community was able to share their immediate needs which in turn where addressing their immediate fears. e.g., a safe space for the women and children, food requirements with special focus on children, pregnant and lactating women etc. They were themselves able to come up with solutions. This approach also led to identification of Community Level Workers who have played an important role of being citizen leaders within the communities. Even during rehabilitation stage, the community was able to identify resources within themselves and be self-sustained. This is in reference with the employment generation activities which are part of the rehabilitation process.

**For Sahayi:** In the time of crisis, the organisation was able to evolve a participatory model with the involvement of the community, who were the beneficiaries too. This not only allowed Sahayi
to bring about relief in the community, but also the community ownership of this process assured Sahayi of sustainability of the project.

KEY LEARNINGS

Though Sahayi’s work at Alappad was a firsthand experience for the organisation in Disaster Management, the participatory RRR model became a success in itself. When an individual or an organisation is working in a community where there is already a prevailing sense of helplessness, loss of dignity and self-respect, the community will be critical of every step/activity undertaken for their benefit. Hence, instead of doing relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in an altered way, it is better to get the community involved in Planning, Monitoring and Implementing activities which they will appreciate and actively participate. Since Participation was the central aspect of the entire process, it gave the beneficiaries a sense of ownership which ultimately limited Sahayi’s role to being a facilitator. Since the ownership of the entire process at the initial stage was with the community members, it further created an enabling environment where there was focus on people development.

The community members identify the immediate needs of the community and came up with actions to address it. The activities planned were solely based on the result it would generate. Another major advantage seen here was the optimum utilization of time. Since this was a disaster situation, time was a major constraint. People had to be benefited at the earliest, hence, citizen centric planning and implementation process helped in speeding up the process. Participatory implementation also looked into maximum utilization of resources existing in the community and where timely monitored. This approach not only helped in rehabilitation of the community, but also gave an acknowledgement to their dignity and self-respect and a sense of pride of rebuilding their own lives rather than being dependent on a third party. This ultimately led to creation of active and empowered citizens.