



Listening to disaster-affected communities

Lessons from the Oxfam International tsunami research program

Oxfam and its research partners set out to improve the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami and contribute to the knowledge of the global humanitarian community. Embedded in their findings on nearly every topic was a common message: communities want a chance to guide the programs aimed at assisting them.

Between 2005 and 2008, Oxfam carried out a research program in tsunami-affected regions of India and Sri Lanka aimed at improving the policies and practices of Oxfam and other aid providers, as well as contributing to the effectiveness of the global humanitarian community in future emergencies.

The studies were designed and carried out by local and national academic institutes and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—partners who brought to the task an awareness of the local context, and perspectives and ideas that were fresh to Oxfam.

Nearly all the researchers employed participatory techniques, engaging directly with communities, and most incorporated an action component, such as advocacy or education, aimed at ensuring that the participants derived direct benefits from the studies.

The choice of topics grew out of discussions with community members, government officials, Oxfam staff on the ground, staff of other NGOs, local researchers, and stakeholders at the international level, and topics included issues related to disaster risk reduction (DRR), gender equity, physical and mental health, livelihoods, social conflict, and building on local capacity.

What follows is a sampling of impacts at the local level, a set of broader findings that aid providers might find useful in designing future programs, a brief discussion of underlying themes that the studies revealed, and a look at the implications of the research for improving aid effectiveness.

Above: "Once you know about your rights, you are not going back to the same position," says O. Sumanaseli de Silwa, who participated in research on how NGOs ending their tsunami programs can exit responsibly and ensure the gains they worked for are sustainable. "Once you get to know about equal rights and disparities, you are stronger." *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*



“If any aid organization comes to this village, we would like them to realize that even in the village, even in rural areas, we have our own traditional knowledge and methods of doing things. Before implementing aid agency plans here, we would rather they listen and understand the rural villagers’ traditional knowledge and methods.”

L.W. Sunil Edward, community member of Diviyagala, Sri Lanka

Local impacts of the research

This research program was developed primarily to influence policy and practice on the ground in the tsunami-affected region. Some of the impacts of the studies at the local level are listed below.

In Sri Lanka

- Research formed the basis for a program that helped coir (coconut fiber) workers—most of whom are poor, marginalized women—double and in some cases triple their incomes since before the tsunami.
- Awareness raised through research on disaster preparedness helped a community in Kalutara District respond quickly to flooding in neighboring villages in 2008.

In India

- A rapid survey of conditions in temporary shelters helped bring about the release of \$1.4 million in government funds for repairs.
- Twenty-four local NGOs prepared detailed disaster contingency plans, a number of which were put into action during flood and cyclone responses in 2007.
- The 30 communities that participated in research into HIV vulnerability have benefited from increased awareness about sexual health.
- Research on recent rainfall patterns, which have confounded traditional methods of weather prediction, enabled farmers in several villages to adapt their planting schedules to changing climate conditions.

Some findings of interest

The 17 studies produced a wide range of findings, which have been discussed and disseminated at more than 40 multi-stakeholder workshops. Below is a sampling of those that aid providers might find relevant to planning future humanitarian programs.

In India

- Vulnerability to HIV infection rose in 29 out of 30 tsunami-affected villages studied. The research points to the transition period between the emergency response and rehabilitation phases of a disaster as a particularly important time to ensure that condoms, confidential medical assistance, and information about the spread of HIV be made available to affected communities.
- International gender mainstreaming tools were not specific enough to be applied to local contexts; it is important to develop local toolkits to build the capacity of partners on the ground to promote women’s development and prevent gender discrimination in their disaster-related programs.

In Sri Lanka

- A lack of transparency and inclusiveness in aid delivery, as well as a lack of sensitivity to existing social tensions, inflamed existing ethnic, religious, political, and economic conflicts within and among communities.
- A DRR project developed using participatory methods and based on local knowledge maximized community ownership of a risk reduction plan.

Above left: When Oxfam researchers helped the community of Diviyagala, Sri Lanka, develop a disaster preparedness plan to manage cyclone risks, the centerpiece was the community’s own traditional knowledge. “This is the first time we have had a chance to contribute our thoughts and experiences on our own research,” says L.W. Sunil Edward (left). **Above span:** Participatory techniques include creating diagrams that illustrate community points of view. Here, women compare the size and quality of aid programs their village received. **Above right:** Sudha Selvam, the leader of a women’s self-help group in Kandakadu, India, in front of her village’s agricultural bore well. After the tsunami, villagers sought help to create the well, but they wouldn’t accept it for free. The community contributed 15 percent of the cost so that everyone would feel invested in the project. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*



- Community recovery can be measured and monitored by establishing a community's own criteria for well-being, such as dignified housing and harmony among neighbors, and then tracking changes over time in the community's sense of how well or poorly those criteria have been met.
- In a study involving a dozen communities, aid providers tended to rank their disaster preparedness programs as more effective than did community members. Communities noted repeatedly that their needs had not been properly assessed.

Central themes of the research

As noted earlier, the topics of individual pieces of research in this program were disparate, but unmistakable themes emerged from the findings and from the process of documenting this work.

First among them is the need for a more participatory, community-centered model of aid delivery—for community members to be given the chance to guide disaster-recovery efforts themselves. Too often, the studies revealed, community members were cast as consultants or passive recipients of aid rather than equal partners in the rehabilitation process. Their local knowledge, capacity, and priorities were often overlooked, which contributed to an attitude of dependency on outside aid and to a diminished sense of ownership of the programs aimed at assisting them. Humanitarian programs based more on the agendas and capacities of agencies than on the communities' actual development priorities has undoubtedly led to lost opportunities to help communities lift themselves out of poverty and build their resilience to future shocks.

A second theme relates to DRR sustainability: employing participatory approaches, building on local or traditional knowledge, and creating programs that have relevance to communities on a daily basis rather than solely during emergencies can contribute to community acceptance and

ownership of DRR interventions. Investing resources in these approaches may enable communities to remain at the center of the response, rehabilitation, and development phases of the recovery.

Another important theme that surfaced was the need for greater harmonization among aid providers in order to limit the disruptive effect the influx of aid can have on the daily lives of community members.

Moving forward: What's old, what's new

There is nothing new about calls to improve community ownership and participation, program sustainability, or aid agency harmonization in disaster-related programs. What's new is that the largest humanitarian response in history has produced all the evidence any agency or government could need to justify taking strong action to make these goals reality.

Likewise, the form this action could take has been discussed over the course of many years: improve ways of measuring community recovery, help funders understand the need for a deliberate process of community engagement, increase cooperation among agencies to maximize effectiveness and minimize negative impacts on communities, train ourselves to listen to communities and act on what we hear, and create sustainable DRR programs that are linked to the communities' own development priorities.

What's often missing from discussions about improving aid effectiveness are practical examples of how to get from here to there, but a few can be derived from the research in this program:

Community-generated indicators of success. The criteria used to assess and monitor community well-being in a study on mental health—and the participatory methods used to determine those criteria—demonstrate a method of creating meaningful and locally relevant indicators of aid effectiveness.



“There is something special about this project. Oxfam didn't go to the village with a blueprint for an [irrigation dam]. The need was coming from the people; the response was coming from Oxfam.”

Jayatissa Samaranayake, Executive Director of the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development, Sri Lanka

Sustainable DRR interventions. The research explored various community-based and community-managed DRR approaches. A community radio pilot program in India, for example, whose primary purpose was disaster response and risk reduction, gained local acceptance by including programs that addressed daily village needs, such as health. Community-based DRR research in Sri Lanka achieved a strong sense of community ownership by helping a village enhance its own contingency plans, which reflected local conditions, rather than introducing more generic DRR interventions.

Interagency alignment. A study that involved reviewing disaster preparedness programs could have served as a joint impact assessment for many agencies, thereby reducing the time community members were asked to spend evaluating programs.

Training ourselves to listen. The participatory techniques used in many of the studies can be transferred to staff and partners on the ground to improve the quality of needs assessments and to incorporate community participation into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs.

Conclusion

The findings and impacts of the tsunami studies reinforced Oxfam's understanding of the value of participatory research in helping aid providers understand local strengths, needs, contexts, and priorities. As important as the new ideas and insights that came to light through the studies was the message that reached us through a chorus of community voices: disaster-affected women and men want to play a central role in identifying priorities and designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the programs aimed at assisting them—and programs are likely to be more effective if they have a chance to do so. Few policy makers and practitioners would argue against deep community engagement in humanitarian programs; however, the research suggests that it is rarely put into practice. The next step, therefore, is to tackle the obstacles that stand in the way of the humanitarian community's own best intentions. Oxfam is inviting members of the aid community to workshops and meetings in India, Sri Lanka, the US, and Europe in order to advance this discussion and find practical ways to act on what we know.

Above: Before the tsunami, the villagers of Gonnoruwa, Sri Lanka, lost most of their crops each year to drought. After the disaster, the community requested help to build an irrigation system to end what had become a chronic emergency. Oxfam supported a women's self-help group (pictured above) to coordinate the project. Now, the villagers harvest twice a year and have emerged from debt and extreme poverty—and the women are respected community leaders. A participatory institute identified this project as a good example of an aid provider following the lead of a community. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*



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To read more about Oxfam's tsunami research program, including a summary report, briefs on individual studies, and stories from the field, go to www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.

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