

Response effectiveness: views of the affected population

by Anisya Thomas and Vimala Ramalingam

While relief organisations are now reviewing their post-tsunami operations, few evaluations include multiple organisations. Rarer still is an assessment of the views of those at the receiving end of rescue and relief services – the ‘beneficiaries’.

A recent survey by Fritz Institute in the tsunami-affected areas of India and Sri Lanka probed beneficiary perceptions of the effectiveness of aid. Preliminary results indicate that affected populations in India tend to have a more positive perception of the aid they have received than their Sri Lankan counterparts.

India and Sri Lanka had different aid scenarios. India ‘officially’ closed its doors to international humanitarian agencies which did not already have a presence or partners in the country. The provision of relief by the Government of India, state governments, NGOs, international organisations, private corporations and the military was coordinated by the state. In Sri Lanka, international, regional and local NGOs were given relatively free access to tsunami-affected people (except in the politically sensitive Northern and Eastern provinces). Despite the participation of many large and experienced NGOs, the perception was that the aid offered to people in Sri Lanka was less satisfactory. Probing the possible reasons behind such differing perceptions raises questions regarding differential effectiveness of aid in two different scenarios – one with a centrally coordinated system as in India, and the other with a more ‘informal’, loose one as in Sri Lanka.

Respondents in the survey were adult members of families affected by the tsunami who had lost family members and/or received post-tsunami assistance. They comprised a representative sample from the population affected by the disaster: in India, 800 people from 100

villages in 12 districts; in Sri Lanka, 600 people from 97 villages. The dominant occupation represented was fishing – 93% in India and 58% in Sri Lanka.

In each affected family, an adult member was the key respondent and others were encouraged to contribute. In both India and Sri Lanka the majority of key respondents were women. Data was collected via interviews in the local language by teams of trained interviewers using open-ended questions.

The first 48 hours

The interviewers first asked about recollections and perceptions during the first 48 hours after the tsunami. Only 48% of respondents in India said they received rescue assistance. The rate was still lower (31%) in Sri Lanka. “No one came to search for the people here... all of us were too shocked to react or even help each other,” said a fisherwoman in India. Efficacy of the rescue effort was questionable too. “Individuals came running from other villages but they could not do much,” said another respondent. Reports and field interviews suggest that it was neighbours and untrained local volunteers who contributed the most in rescue efforts and who provided immediate relief.

Responses with regard to the types of help received within the first 48 hours show a significant difference between India and Sri Lanka. For all of the 11 types of help mentioned in the survey – including rescue, identification/burial of dead, clearing debris, medical services and relocation – significantly higher numbers

of people in India said that they had received this help compared to those in Sri Lanka. 49% in India were helped to make some kind of arrangement for relocation within the first two days but in Sri Lanka – a worse affected country – the number was only about 3%. 85% in India benefited from help with provision of water supplies compared to only 15% in Sri Lanka. 66% of respondents in India had access to emergency medical services; in Sri Lanka the number was 33%.

There was discrepancy in speed of provision for different types of assistance. Only 15% of people in India



and 8% in Sri Lanka could say that clearing of debris was undertaken in the first 48 hours (to facilitate search operations). By contrast, food reached 90% of the people in India and 78% in Sri Lanka in those first 48 hours. In fact there was too much of it at times. “All kinds of cooked food reached us and it was in excess,” said an Indian respondent.

There was a dramatic difference in the profile of the initial providers. According to the respondents, in India the local government provided some form of assistance to approximately 86% of the respondents in the first 48 hours. In Sri Lanka, the equivalent number was 4%. In India, reports suggest, the local administration went into overdrive, especially in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. As one of the survivors commented: “We did not sleep, nor did the officials from the Collectorate [district administration].” About half the respondents in India said

they were assisted by NGOs and community organisations and 12% by the armed forces. In Sri Lanka, the armed forces provided assistance to 39% of respondents, with NGOs and international organisations being acknowledged by 37% of respondents. The Sri Lankan government was only acknowledged by 4% of the respondents. A typical comment of a survivor: “Where was the government when all this happened? Everything was chaotic.”

Longer-term assistance

We additionally asked questions to elicit impressions of the relief operations during the first 60 days. In both India and Sri Lanka more than half those interviewed felt that the food distribution was of above average quality but approximately 40% felt humiliated by the need to receive food and by the distribution methods used. “Sometimes we felt like beggars the way it was distrib-

uted and coordinated,” said one respondent. In India the government took the lead in almost all aspects of relief while in Sri Lanka it was international NGOs that led the way. In India the private sector seems to have played an unusually prominent role.

The preliminary results presented here raise more questions than they answer. They do, however, highlight the need to include affected populations in assessments of aid effectiveness and the development of lessons learned.

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The tsunami swept away all thatched houses and severely damaged those made of bricks or concrete. Inimthakarai, India

