

# Small fish trampled in post-tsunami stampede

by Irene Fraser

*In Sri Lanka, the values of participation and decentralisation were undermined by many international agencies in the post-tsunami rush.*

**F**rom the first day of the emergency, international and national agencies in Batticaloa pulled together. Short and effective meetings were held by people who already knew each other. Camaraderie between Sri Lankan and expatriate colleagues grew from the personal dangers we had all faced and our willingness to share resources – vehicles, relief items and staff – across agencies as dictated by immediate needs.

On 30 December, due to high water levels, Inginiyagala Dam in Ampara was opened and fast flowing water made its way to the coast causing yet another tide of affected people to

move into camps. I was distributing food aid to a school that had been turned into a camp for displaced families. As water turned against us for the second time in less than a week people climbed in panic onto tables. I watched as the flame that cooked the boiling rice went out and we were plunged into darkness. There was nowhere we could run to. We were thigh deep in water and fearful that the dam would burst and further water would carry us away. As the rain tumbled down that night my heart bled. We were fortunate in that our office was on the first floor of an NGO building; we had mats to lie on while countless others were out in the open, under trees or in

flooded and overcrowded camps. Staff joked that only a cyclone could make things worse than they were.

However, the next shock came not from nature but from our employer. Out of the blue I was told that our Sri Lankan emergency team co-ordinator was to be relieved of her duties and was required to pack up and proceed to Colombo immediately. Without consultation, management had condemned her for ‘inappropriate’ use of agency vehicles as she had allowed licensed staff who were not agency employees to ferry people to the safety of higher ground. We were also informed that we had violated human resource policy by allowing a volunteer (who had substantial international emergency experience) to join our team. We were informed that a team of emergency ‘experts’ was on its way.

*Outside a refugee camp near Palattadichchenai, Sri Lanka, people begin to return home.*



Five days into an unprecedented emergency operation and having put in 20-hour working days to provide food and medical aid to 30,000 people, we were told to suspend operations and await instructions from the incoming experts.

### **A question of trust**

NGOs talk of their work being shaped by a vision of participation and of the value of decentralisation but what clearer evidence could there be that a large humanitarian agency had no trust in local staff, local knowledge and local people's capacities? When the emergency experts arrived I wanted to ask them many questions. Are you aware there has been an armed conflict going on here for two decades? Have you ever been displaced, lost loved ones to conflict or been deprived of your land and possessions? It soon became clear they knew little of Sri Lanka and its people, their social structures, the background to the conflict and the resilience and coping strategies of those caught up in it. Their terms of reference made no mention of understanding what those affected by the tsunami had already been through.

As more and more emergency experts arrived, post-tsunami life seemed like a corporate take over. Small fish were being swallowed up

by big fish. Community and organisational structures were undermined as the new agencies poached staff to kick-start their own operations. Rents soared in the local housing market and wads of foreign cash distorted the employment market. Within days agencies talked as if they had worked in Sri Lanka for ages and assured us that after their rapid initial assessments they would soon know what needed to be done. Their confidence was breathtaking. One INGO claimed that it would rehabilitate everything in the district within three months.

Relief items were distributed fast and furiously and sometimes dumped in order to artificially raise the number of beneficiaries the agencies could boast about on their websites and press releases. Nobody cared whether the second-hand clothes were culturally inappropriate or of good enough quality. The presence of high-heeled shoes and female swimming costumes in some relief packs went unquestioned. While those IDPs sheltering with relatives were ignored, agencies fell over themselves to provide multiple assistance to those in camps. Nobody likes to say no to handouts and some families ended up with more non-food relief items than they had place to store. Conflict between families was heightened by the arbitrary distribution. Some children proudly

sported their new bags and books while others who had received nothing were sullen. Plentiful supplies of donated medicines, labelled in a variety of foreign languages, arrived. People overdosed as they met doctors from different teams prescribing different medicines.

In the rush to spend cash and distribute supplies there was no time to sit down with the local people, to console children and families in their time of need or to help them to confront and overcome their fear of the sea. Instead, people were continually assaulted by false alarms – whether of the risk of new tsunamis or government plans – that deepened fear and added to stress. It was unclear whether the coastal buffer zone – on which nobody was to be allowed to live – would be 100 or 300 metres wide. Fishermen who have always lived by the sea now face the prospect of commuting to work and having to hire security guards to watch over their boats and nets. The role of outsiders in cleaning up the debris from coastal areas, in tearing down the remains of peoples' houses without their presence or consent, has added to fears that developers are planning to build luxury hotels where people once lived and worked.

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