

Social and ecological consequences of intensive efforts in rebuilding coastal fishery-related livelihoods in Sri Lanka after the 2004 Asian Tsunami

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Tsunami attack in December 2004 affected the entire livelihood system of the coastal zone of Sri Lanka. Both natural and manmade resources were significantly destroyed creating serious impact on the entire livelihood systems. Different parties responded immediately to seek solutions to the affected people. General public, government institutions, civil societies, international and national NGOs and funding agencies and other UN organizations played different roles in the recovery process of tsunami impact. This paper describes the social and ecological consequences of these intensive efforts in rebuilding coastal fishery-related livelihoods. Different types of information, which were obtained from various source were reviewed and were synthesized for this study.

Focusing on the social impacts and consequences of the disaster, the study identified a number of issues, including loss of life and destruction of infrastructure, impact on livelihoods, a persistence sense of uncertainty, variation in community response and recovery efforts, inequities in relief distribution, gender and age vulnerability and capacities, and long-term relocation planning.

Similar to other sectors, the fisheries sector recovered within a considerable short-time period. While relief efforts enabled a rapid recovery of many areas recovery had been slow in certain key aspects. Further, the relief activities also inevitably created conflicts, overlaps and in some areas and cases, raised concern on the long-term sustainability of livelihoods of small-scale fishers. Therefore, impacts of interventions are discussed in different aspects such as fishing fleet, fish production, new infrastructure, capacity building, beneficiary selection, technical support and monitoring and evaluation of recovery and rehabilitation programs.

The fishing community, in particular, is known for their self-reliance who rarely sought assistance from outsiders. Post-tsunami, they were not interested in merely being passive recipients of relief and rehabilitation efforts, but instead wanted to get involved and take responsibility for relief and rehabilitation. Several months after the tsunami it was increasingly evident that in the coastal fisheries sector the total craft numbers would exceed pre-tsunami levels, which proved to be counterproductive, and fish catches had stagnated for the last few years, and would not result in increased catch or income. This situation and other interventions have actually led to ecological problems leading to resource depletion. Long-term trend of declining catches is evident and overfishing is recognized as a problem by communities.

Problems with relief delivery can be highlighted for not making the fishers better off as it was expected. Weak institutions and enforcement led to unenforceable management arrangements, conflicts among fishers and industry. There is a clear need for improved capacity and better fisheries information on which to base management. There is a need to diversify fisheries livelihoods and promote alternative livelihoods to derive better living conditions for coastal fishers. There is a dire need to develop sustainable livelihoods and increased earnings for such coastal communities.