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A place to stay, a place to live

Challenges in providing shelter in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka after the tsunami

14 December 2005

Introduction

On 26 December 2004, an earthquake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra triggered a tsunami that hit the coasts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Maldives, Malaysia, Burma, the Seychelles, and Somalia.

Within the space of a few hours, the giant waves devastated thousands of kilometres of coastline and the communities that lived there. While the final death toll will never be known, official estimates indicate that at least 181,516 people perished and 49,936 remain missing.¹ It was the world's most severe natural disaster since the East Pakistan hurricane of 1970.² A further 1.8 million people were displaced into temporary camps or took refuge with communities that were unaffected. In recent times, only war, famine, and epidemics have caused more destruction.

After 26 December, Oxfam International mounted the largest humanitarian effort in its 63-year history. In the 11 months since, we have helped some 1.8 million people,³ using the \$278m given to us. Once the emergency relief was done, we turned to recovery and reconstruction. This covered a range of issues: the provision of clean water and sanitation; the reviving of livelihoods; rehabilitating agricultural land; giving women and men a say in the rebuilding of their lives and communities. The watchwords have been 'reconstruction plus', i.e. seeking to help poor communities to escape the poverty that made them so vulnerable to natural disaster in the first place. However, perhaps one of the most important activities has been – and continues to be – the provision of shelter.

This issue has given governments and agencies involved in tsunami relief and rehabilitation their most difficult task, and we have to face up to the fact that the job has still only just begun. The Office of the UN's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery reported that, as of September 2005, it would be another 12–18 months before every displaced person in Aceh had adequate transitional shelter. It called this 'an unacceptable situation that needs to be urgently addressed'.⁴ By 26 December 2005, Oxfam estimates that around 20 per cent of the people made homeless a year earlier will be in satisfactory permanent accommodation.

There have been some serious obstacles to faster progress – for example, the fact that in Aceh, Indonesia, land that was home to an estimated 120,000 people is now submerged or permanently uninhabitable. Other delays have more to do with problems of bureaucracy and organisation, in governments and in the international humanitarian agencies. Proposals for buffer zones – land near the sea that would not be built on again – has significantly delayed rebuilding in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. Government institutions in Aceh were badly damaged by the tsunami, as was all the province's infrastructure, and the lack for some months of a fully functioning civil authority made coherent planning extremely difficult.

This paper hopes to examine what has been achieved so far and what has still to happen, and to suggest what should be done better.

Life before the tsunami

Even before the tsunami struck, many millions of people in the affected areas were living in conditions of poverty unimaginable to most people in Europe, Australia, and North America.

In Aceh province in Indonesia, the security of lives, possessions, and infrastructure had been threatened by several years of armed conflict. According to the government's own statistics,⁵ in 2002 (the latest date for which figures are available) nearly half (48.5 per cent) of the population had no access to clean water, one in three (36.2 per cent) children under the age of five were undernourished, and 38 per cent of the population had no access to health facilities. And things were getting worse: the poverty rate doubled from 14.7 per cent in 1999 to 29.8 per cent in 2002.

The southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala are among the wealthier parts of India. Tamil Nadu has the fourth highest per capita income of any state in the country. Yet poverty and deprivation exist in both these states: in Tamil Nadu nearly half (46.6 per cent) of children under five years old were underweight before the tsunami, due to malnutrition. Four out of every five households in Kerala had no access to safe water. The people of the coastal communities were, and still are, among the poorest in the whole country. In India as a whole, the livelihoods of 3.2 million people were directly or indirectly affected by the tsunami.⁶

Similarly, despite the boom in tourism in coastal Sri Lanka in recent years, 29 per cent of children under the age of five were underweight due to malnutrition, and 45.4 per cent of the population received wages of less than \$2 per day.⁷ Some of the poorest people include those who were displaced by the war that ended in 2002, and who have been living in refugee camps for many years.

The challenges

The chief problem with providing shelter after the tsunami lay first in the scale of the destruction of homes and, to a lesser extent, in the poverty of those who lived in them. In the three worst-hit countries – India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka – the majority of people who suffered lived on the margins, on the edge both of the sea and of society. Houses were often fragile and so the violence of the waves rendered extraordinary numbers of people homeless: in Aceh, for instance, no houses at all were left standing over many acres of land, and large amounts of land were permanently lost.

Along the coasts of southern India and Sri Lanka, virtually all homes were destroyed in a belt stretching up to half a kilometre inland, for hundreds of miles. And so the challenge is enormous. In Aceh alone, around 600,000 people – a population the size of Boston or Glasgow – have been made homeless.

Few humanitarian agencies had ever faced need on this scale, spread over such a wide area. The governments of the three worst-affected countries had capacities that differed widely. Building permanent housing is a slow business, even in stable, rich societies. In Florida, for example, thousands of families remain in temporary accommodation more than a year after Hurricane Ivan hit the state. The earthquake which struck Kobe, Japan in 1995 left 300,000 homeless, and it took seven years for the city to recover to the social and economic levels it had had prior to the earthquake.⁸ It is clear from the response to other earthquakes – in Bam in Iran, for example – that it can take two years before a programme for rebuilding permanent homes starts to reach its optimum production levels.

Despite this knowledge, an important error in the initial work done on shelter was that few of those in need of new homes were told just how long they might expect to wait.

Box 1: What the waves took away

Indonesia saw the greatest loss of life in the tsunami disaster, with between 169,000 and 221,000 people killed and missing.⁹ Male survivors outnumbered women by a ratio of almost 3:1.¹⁰ One thousand villages and towns, 127,000 homes and 1,488 schools were destroyed. Some 600,000 people, 25 per cent of the population, lost their livelihoods. In some areas, what had been heavily populated land was, after the tsunami, flat and featureless, every landmark and every structure swept away. This included 10,000 kilometres of roads. The damage to civil infrastructure, in terms of both personnel and property, was such that, in the view of many independent observers, local government was unable to operate satisfactorily until mid-2005. Estimates of the numbers made homeless range between 500,000 and over 600,000.

In Sri Lanka, 35,300 died and over 100,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, leaving over half a million people homeless. The destruction of the tourist industry and its infrastructure was one of the reasons why, after the tsunami, 275,000 people were unemployed. In some areas as much as 90 per cent of the workforce was without a job. In addition, 73 hospitals and 182 schools needed to be rebuilt from scratch.

In southern India and on the offshore islands of the Sea of Bengal, 18,000 people died. Three-quarters of them were women and children. In all, 1,089 villages were affected, 157,000 homes were destroyed, and over 640,000 people were displaced. Though the great majority of people who lost their livelihoods as a result of the devastation were fishermen, 39,000 hectares of farmland were also blighted when the waves destroyed dykes and canals and salinated the soil. An estimated 31,000 farm animals were lost. The great asset of survivors in India, however, was a functioning and efficient civil bureaucracy.¹¹

Though the waves wreaked their havoc in different ways in the three different countries, some crucial issues were common to all. Providing permanent shelter, NGOs knew, meant more than just starting to build houses. We had to:

- enable communities to express their wishes and design homes that met their needs;
- build a dialogue with governments over a range of political and legal issues;
- help solve complex issues of land ownership and good land use;
- cater to the requirements of different communities, with distinct means of earning livelihoods;
- ensure access to water and sanitation;
- ensure the needs and opinions of women and vulnerable groups were heeded;
- deal with frustration and disappointment, recognising that good rebuilding takes a long time.

A place to stay: transitional shelter

What has been done?

From the first days after the tsunami, providing temporary shelter for families was a key priority, either where their homes had once stood or in the places they had fled to. Where possible, people who could had taken refuge away from the sea shore, on higher ground. Some would remain there for weeks or months. Discovering why people were where they were, offering them options, and enabling them to make informed decisions about their future was a key part of the work.

Box 2: Azheekal, Kerala: the future was dark

'The coastal fishing community of Azheekal fled the tsunami. Two-and-a-half weeks later people returned, to find their homes had disappeared without trace. Several of them saw only big holes where their houses once stood. The silence there was frightening. They could not digest what had happened to their lives and life-long savings. The future was dark. When they returned, they stayed in camps put up by NGOs for more than three months.'

— Oxfam India researcher, November 2005

The international NGOs and UN agencies moved fast to provide emergency shelter, and at the time were congratulated on their efforts. It is certainly the case that the speedy provision of emergency shelter and other services, particularly in health care, helped to prevent thousands of people dying in a second disaster.

Oxfam is committed to coordinate effectively with other players in emergency relief by focusing on its core expertise, primarily in providing and restoring water and sanitation. Often — as in the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan — we also provide tents, blankets, and construction materials for shelters. By early January 2005, many of the disaster agencies realised that there was a pressing need for transitional shelter, accommodation that would cater for hundreds of thousands of people over many months.

'Do it quick, but do it with communities' was the motto when working on shelter throughout the tsunami zone. We acted with as much flexibility as possible, using local resources and structures. In Matara, Sri Lanka, for example, the local people agreed that the temple should become a temporary shelter, and a base for Oxfam and others' distribution of shelter materials and water and sanitation (wat-san) work. In southern

India and in Aceh, as temporary camps were set up, Oxfam teams of wat-san engineers moved where needed to install clean water and latrines, often in collaboration with other international agencies.

Consulting with displaced communities and providing them with information about their options was a key strategy from the beginning. Of necessity, consultation was carried out in different ways in the different countries. In Sri Lanka, the existence of civil structures made this easy. In Colombo, for example, Oxfam together with other aid agencies helped set up a forum to discuss information, to share good ideas, and to take them back to the districts. This helped influence policy makers, and may have helped to bring about a necessary change in the government's proposals for buffer zones (see below). It also enabled the setting up of awareness campaigns for survivors throughout the south of the country about their right to shelter.

An Oxfam transitional shelter programme that started in Tangalle, Sri Lanka, with 17 shelters in February 2005 was successfully closed at the end of July 2005, after the completion of 3,700 transitional shelters in the district. As part of its shelter programme, Oxfam imported 8,500 cubic meters of sustainably grown and harvested Australian plantation pine, following a request from the Sri Lankan government which recognised that there would be a shortage of local wood for reconstruction. The timber was received by a consortium of international and local NGOs for use in their transitional and permanent shelter programmes.

On 22 August 2005, the President of Sri Lanka decided to celebrate the fact that 50,000 transitional shelters had been put up across the country in six months, a huge collective effort. But as the monsoon season began, many of these temporary homes needed to be upgraded, posing a new challenge.

Improving temporary shelter

Work in providing shelter is perhaps more complex than any other kind in emergency relief work. Often the pressures of time and people's needs counteract the demands of quality and suitability. In all disasters, the aid that can be got to the needy first is not necessarily the best.

Six months after the tsunami, the monsoons hit Indonesia and South Asia. International and local NGOs became involved in work to strengthen and repair the temporary shelters. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Oxfam, the Red Cross/Red Crescent agencies, and others distributed tens of thousands of repair kits, as well as improving drainage and water and sanitation facilities. In Aceh, the IFRC (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) announced in September 2005 that it was erecting 27,000 family-size tents and 20,000 prefabricated structures, in part to house the estimated 67,000 people living in inadequate tents that were nine months old.¹²

In India, the government centralised much of the planning for the design and construction of transitional shelters. This made economic and logistical sense, and the shelters met some Sphere standards,¹³ at least in the amount of space they provided. However, the design suffered from a lack of consultation with users. One aid agency observer said:

They were corrugated roof and wall structures, without windows or ventilation. The main criteria used by the architects in developing their intermediate shelter design were limited to what could be built quickly, using common building materials such as corrugated zinc sheets. Thousands of these shelters were built, barrack-style, usually without consultation with communities and sometimes on inappropriate sites.

Having initially built some of these shelters ourselves, Oxfam found that the people living in them did not think they were dignified, even though they met the size standards specified in Sphere. The answer to the problem was advocacy: NGOs came together and helped advise the government on a change in design. Throughout the three countries Oxfam, its partners, and other NGOs began helping communities to improve their shelters, and began advising governments on the best ways to do this. This involved putting in concrete flooring, improving drainage, and dealing with other problems presented by low-lying, easily flooded land.

This all went to show that, after a disaster of this scale, 'temporary' can in fact mean a long time. Shelter has to be good enough to withstand the rigours of the changing seasons, and to provide a genuine home from which people can make a living. However, it should not replace what has been lost: the idea of all post-disaster relief efforts is to enable people, wherever possible, to return in dignity to their own homes or to a new location where they will feel safe and secure.

A place to live: permanent shelter

Box 3: Tangalle, Sri Lanka: the pressure lifted

'When we were given the keys to our new homes, there was a ceremony where we all got together. Families, Oxfam, some of the local authorities came too. I was so happy holding my key. Before then I was under a lot of pressure. My children were in different places and I needed to support them, but as soon as I held that key the pressure was lifted, I knew we'd be okay, and I could relax.'

— Kaluhandadige Lalitha, 40, a mother of three who took part in the building of her new home.

A year on from 26 December 2004, around one-fifth of the 1.8 million people who were displaced or made homeless by the tsunami will be in permanent homes. The total need in the three countries is for 308,000 homes — the equivalent, if you assume five people per house, of rehousing the entire population of Philadelphia, of Brisbane, or Glasgow and Birmingham combined.

In Indonesia, by the end of 2005, around one-quarter of the people in need will have been provided with permanent homes. In late October 2005, according to UN figures, there were still 436,820 displaced people in Aceh; 75,576 in organised 'barracks', 67,504 in tent camps, and 293,740 in host families. The government agency BRR (Aceh and Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency) predicted in November 2005 that 18,149 of the minimum 80,000 permanent shelters needed would be completed by the end of the year, and 57,000 by mid-2006.¹⁴

In Sri Lanka, government sources told Oxfam that approximately 5,000 permanent houses out of the 78,000 needed will have been built by the end of the year, addressing just 6.4 per cent of the need.¹⁵ Fifty per cent of the sites will have to be on 'new' land.

In India, the World Bank/ ADB (Asian Development Bank) estimate that over 150,000 houses were damaged or destroyed. In Tamil Nadu, the worst affected state, the

government has announced a programme to build 130,000 permanent homes.¹⁶ Plans have been drawn up for 31,700 houses, and work is underway on more than 8,000 of them. A further 1,000 have already been completed.¹⁷

The factors that keep people in temporary settlements after any disaster include:

- insecurity and uncertainty about livelihoods and availability of food;
- land availability and the establishing of legal title;
- reconstruction and safety plans – for example, the reserving of land as ‘buffer zones’;
- the lengthy process of rebuilding – consultation, design, and construction;
- materials – prices and supply;
- infrastructure – in a ‘reconstruction plus’-driven effort, no permanent shelter should be without sustainable water and sanitation, though these too take time;
- problems over NGOs’ resource allocation and availability of skilled personnel.

Most of these factors apply in the tsunami-hit countries. Oxfam is in a position to act on some of them by means of advocacy and through its own programmes.

Land

In India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, the respective governments decreed early on that a key part of reconstruction would involve the creation of ‘buffer zones’ – safety areas that would provide protection against any future wave. In India and Sri Lanka, no-building zones existed before the tsunami, as part of plans to protect coastal environments: thus some of the devastated communities were, technically, situated illegally. Though the idea of a buffer zone clearly makes some sense, especially in these cyclone-prone areas, the land involved – up to two kilometres from the tideline in the case of Aceh – was home to many hundreds of thousands of people, and the natural habitat of communities who make their living from the sea.

The Indian government has spoken of strictly implementing its existing Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ). Its rules state that there should be no new settlements within 500m of the coast. But, previously, the rules have not been rigidly enforced and have been interpreted differently in different states. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, no building is allowed within 500m of the shore, while in Kerala, if an existing road is less than 500m from the shore, people can build.

There is a real threat that thousands in the tsunami-hit countries may face either eviction or inadequate compensation because they do not have title to the land, or cannot prove entitlement. This particularly affects fishing communities, whose rights were often extremely fragile even before the tsunami. There is also widespread suspicion that the tsunami might be used as an excuse to move communities to make way for lucrative property deals linked to tourism. Many agencies, including Oxfam, argue strongly that if a buffer zone is to be created for safety reasons, then it must be implemented across the board.

After a debate that went on until October 2005, the Sri Lankan buffer zone now prevents people from living or building within 200m of the shore (in the northeast) or 100m (in southern districts), though some exceptions have been made. Critics argue that, although coastal protection in principle is sensible, it is unrealistic to apply the rule as proposed because it could destroy the livelihoods of fishing communities. Other deficiencies are that it ignores topographical realities (i.e. the coast is not a neat straight

line), and it gives political advantage in some areas while encouraging the interests of the tourism industry in others.

Oxfam and many other agencies have continually engaged the Sri Lankan government in dialogue to try to ensure that people's voices are considered seriously in deciding where they are relocated. Elsewhere in the country, some NGOs have found that local officials interpret the buffer zone more flexibly, especially if a family is keen to return to the site of their original home. Overall in Sri Lanka, however, it is estimated that 50 per cent of the people needing homes will have to be found new land on which they can be built. This may be the country's most pressing problem around the reconstruction.

In Indonesia debate over a possible two kilometre buffer zone went on until late March 2005, when the Government's Master Plan on Rehabilitation and Reconstruction was finally announced. The plan now offers a number of spatial planning guidelines, such as greenbelts, escape routes, and restricted development zones, which will be elaborated on in the district-level plans. These plans allow for the return of fishing communities and the required infrastructure, as well as agricultural cultivation in the coastal area. However, the slow development of the plan delayed the beginning of construction to mid-2005.

Box 4: Ampari, Sri Lanka: it is their place, their livelihood

'The first wave wasn't that much. The water came and fell into the lagoon but, even without the water touching them, the walls around my house fell down. The second wave was like a black giant. It came, and on top of it were people floating and tumbling and things in the wave. I got caught in it but grabbed a tree and escaped. When I came home, I found that my father had been washed away.

'Nearly all the houses that were in the first 200 metres belonged to fishermen and they have gone, but the ones after that can be repaired in some way, maybe. Only two rooms of our house have been washed away, so I will help rebuild it and we will go back. People living the closest to the sea, even in the first 50 metres, still want to return. It is their place and their livelihood. They want to rebuild and go back.'

— Ravi, plumber working for Oxfam in Sakalakali Camp

Establishing rights to a piece of land is far from easy, even in the most settled of societies. In the marginal communities of the south Asian sea coasts, people may not have paperwork to prove their ownership or, as in many cases, their documents got lost in the disaster. In some areas of Aceh, all landmarks were washed away, so even if a landholder has his/her paperwork, boundary marks such as fences no longer exist. The business of identifying who owns what may in some areas involve complex legal processes lasting months or years.

An added problem in Aceh is the fact that a large amount of land is now submerged or uninhabitable. Authorities believe that 80,000 hectares are lost, with estimates of the number of land parcels (plots of land supporting one family) affected ranging between 15,000 and 50,000. At least 120,000 people need new land to be found for their homes and lives. In Sri Lanka, similarly, it is estimated that 50 per cent of the land needed, enough for 39,000 homes, will have to be new.

In terms of shelter, Aceh's need is by far the greatest: the overall reconstruction budget there is estimated by the World Bank at \$5.1bn. It is important that governments and the international community are clear and open with beneficiaries about the timescales involved. It is better to be realistic now than to risk more disappointment for people who have already suffered so much.

Working with government

There are unique strains on civil authorities in the tsunami-hit areas. In some places where local government was strongly established (Tamil Nadu, for instance) NGOs have slotted into plans for relief and reconstruction that are led by the civil authorities. Here, Oxfam and its partners have found a role in advocacy, advising on best practice from previous experience, and ensuring that the voices of tsunami-affected people are heard.

Elsewhere, civil government may be less effective, notably in Aceh and areas of eastern Sri Lanka, where military control is stronger because of the civil conflicts that have affected both areas. Here, interacting with an inexperienced civil administration may be difficult. In Aceh hundreds of government officials were killed (as were soldiers) and most buildings destroyed, taking vital records with them. The rebuilt or new civil structures may be less than wholly efficient.

NGOs found the Indonesian government inflexible in the early stages. Initially it was said that foreign agencies could only operate in Aceh until 26 March 2005: this hindered planning. But the establishment of the BRR reconstruction agency at the end of March improved matters, though there remain problems over coordination and leadership.

Oxfam has an ongoing dialogue in Aceh with government bodies such as the BRR and the National Land Agency (BPN), with its RALAS (Rehabilitation of Aceh Land Administration) project.

In Aceh Oxfam has been:

- 1 Working on a public information and advocacy programme to help explain to affected communities the RALAS project. Oxfam is also supporting a network of local NGOs in monitoring and advocacy, with a particular focus on women and vulnerable groups.
- 2 Training Oxfam field staff as facilitators and monitors in the community adjudication process, so that we can assist our beneficiaries in the confirmation of land and property rights and eventual registration and titling.
- 3 Lobbying local and national government authorities to assume responsibility for acquiring land or to compensate landowners who donate land. We are asking donors such as the European Union and international financial institutions to allocate funds specifically to assist the government in this purpose. (We will not intervene to buy land: this is an area of responsibility that is properly the government's, and there is a risk of inflating an already active land market.)
- 4 Helping people who used to rent their houses prior to the tsunami (estimated at 30 per cent of households). Currently this vulnerable group is not entitled to government assistance in obtaining new land. Oxfam has begun a pilot project to build 18 houses for this group.
- 5 Working to ensure that all NGOs and humanitarian agencies involved in shelter comply with the internationally agreed Sphere standards.

Oxfam will have completed 714 earthquake-resistant houses by the end of December 2005, and is committed to build 2,100 earthquake-resistant houses by the end of 2006.

Box 5: Aceh: We need houses

'After removing the tsunami debris, recovering bodies, and helping with burials, when asked "What next?", people replied "We need homes; we need our houses again." We said that's not something that Oxfam has done before, to which the response was, "If you're not doing houses, you're not doing anything." This kept coming up the whole time; it was clearly a need which had to be met, and people were not interested in temporary shelter.'

— Oxfam staff member, Aceh

Long-running civil wars are a fact in both the northeastern part of Sri Lanka and in Aceh. In both places, both sides in the conflicts played active parts in the relief efforts, leaving NGOs in potentially difficult positions between the two. Thankfully, in both countries matters have improved (crucially in Aceh, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on 15 August 2005 between military forces and the separatist rebels, cementing a ceasefire). However, should the conflict in either country flare up again, the rehabilitation effort could be gravely threatened.

Materials, labour, and quality

Concerns have been raised about the availability of legally procured timber, and demand for rebuilding in Aceh has seen the price of wood triple. Oxfam has changed its building designs to use brick in walls in order to reduce timber requirements. Indonesia has a particularly severe problem with the illegal destruction of forests and, after discussions with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), we have revised our house design to use less timber, and we are trying to source sustainable supplies from abroad to reduce environmental impact.

The road network in some locations is in a very poor state, and in Sri Lanka and Aceh in particular delivery costs for essential construction materials are exorbitant. In Aceh there is no port where container ships can dock to offload material in bulk. Overall, the price of Sphere standards-compliant houses erected by international NGOs has been estimated at between \$3,000 and \$7,000 per unit.

Wherever possible, Oxfam attempts to use locally available materials, and encourages the re-use of parts of houses that have been damaged. Similarly, we have tried to ensure that the hiring of labour contributes to local economic recovery. We have trained carpenters and masons, and enabled construction management to be carried out through community-run shelter committees. Under cash-for-work schemes, people are being paid to build the houses they themselves will occupy. Where contractors are needed, local firms are used wherever possible.

Standards are crucial. Some 60 agencies have been involved in shelter provision in Aceh, some of them without any previous experience. Pressure to put houses up as quickly as possible has resulted in big differences in quality; in some cases, houses have been built without a water supply or latrines. Communities have, rightly, rejected some houses as inadequate, and this is to be encouraged. Agencies must be transparent with the communities they are claiming to help about their plans, and overall the NGO network on shelter must do more to ensure quality control.

Getting around the obstacles

The UN and NGOs are not complacent about the progress of the shelter operation. Eric Morris, the UN recovery co-ordinator for Aceh, said in September 2005 that it was 'unacceptable' that people were still living in tents. Morris promised that by the end of 2005 there would be, at an absolute minimum, 15,000 new houses, but that '25-30,000 is

more likely'. The BRR estimates that 18,149 houses will have been built. In Aceh, Oxfam expects to complete 710 permanent houses before the end of the year and 2,109 by the end of 2006.

In Aceh, as elsewhere, Oxfam and its local partners have worked with local communities to design a suitable house, one whose plan could be changed by its owners to suit their needs. It has since become a model for other organisations. An Oxfam staff member tells the story:

We started by asking the communities who were the most vulnerable and needy, as we could not cover the entire needs of the villages alone. This community-based targeting worked very well. We initially piloted 10 houses to see how it would work, what training might be required, whether the houses would be accepted, etc. We wanted other communities to see it being built. We piloted the 'core' shelter in March 2005 in one village to see how well the community was able to build and be involved, and its levels of acceptance. We integrated the houses with wat-san facilities (bathing unit, well, latrine) and the beneficiaries were able to make changes, such as a door here, a window there, latrine separate or attached with entrance inside or outside — all sorts of combinations and involvement.'

Box 6: Addressing women's concerns on shelter

In Calang, Aceh, women were actively included in community consultations on water connections (from a waterfall) to tsunami-affected villages. This ensured that water points were located within easy reach. Other creative technical solutions related to shelter and adopted by Oxfam in Aceh are of direct consequence to women. In Meulaboh torch batteries are charged through solar power in the daytime, so that women and children may move around the camps at night in greater security.

— Oxfam internal report. March 2005

In India, Oxfam and its partners have taken a similarly flexible approach. There are basic government designs for a permanent shelter: we help beneficiaries change it to fit their needs, provided this does not increase costs hugely or compromise structural integrity. The process starts with consultation among the beneficiaries, looking first at the land and its suitability for people's lives and livelihoods. We work to minimise the impact on the environment, for example by felling as few coconut palms as possible.

Flexibility overcomes the obstacles. It has proved key to good work on shelter after the tsunami, where fixed strategies and models, drawn up far away, have been shown not to work. Creative and flexible thinking is the answer: in dealing with governments, in solving the problems of sourcing materials and labour, and accommodating the needs and hopes of different communities with different ways of earning a living.

Conclusion

We call it, simply, 'shelter' but it means much more. A home encloses a family, it provides safety, security, a sense of place and of history. In working with survivors to restore these things, Oxfam also hopes to help restore dignity.

The problems that have slowed the provision of permanent shelter vary between the three worst-hit countries, but there are some common factors. Clearly, humanitarian agencies lacked the know-how and expertise to lead a mass building exercise, a task normally carried out by governments. Some international agencies could have worked

better with civil authorities, acknowledging local expertise and experience, and supporting the primacy of sovereign authorities.

On the part of civil administrations, there were gaps in their understanding of their duties to the victims of the tsunami: to provide adequate shelter first, but then to properly consult communities on their opinions and needs. Better leadership and co-ordination is still needed from civil bureaucracies, especially in Indonesia, and sharper, cleverer thinking from NGOs. Both governments and agencies need to be more open and transparent with the 1.4 million people who are still displaced.

The rebuilding process is a difficult one to get right. In some cases the rebuilding of permanent houses has been less of a priority than providing temporary accommodation of an adequate standard, as in Sri Lanka. While this has meant that in the short term living conditions are better, it also means that it will take longer for displaced people to get permanent houses.

In Aceh, the rebuilding of permanent housing has been the priority and progress here has been much more rapid, with nearly one-quarter of the planned permanent houses built. However, this has meant less attention being given to temporary accommodation, and standards in some cases are not good enough. Rebuilding at speed involves a balancing act: people want houses quickly but they also want to be consulted and to be involved, and the houses to be of top quality. In some cases the rebuilding process may actually have been too fast. Trying to establish a compromise between the two different requirements is a hard call for agencies on the ground.

At this point in the recovery process, we should also applaud what has been achieved – for example, the lives saved in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami and the fact that there were no major outbreaks of disease. Day by day, more schools are opening and more families are moving into new homes, often far better than those that were destroyed. This work will speed up enormously in the second year after the tsunami. By the end of 2006 the end of the task should be in sight.

Box 7: Tangalle, Sri Lanka: proud of our work

‘On handing-over day, I drew the number for choosing our house. Now we live at number 4. I was just so happy our family can live together again.

‘I am very proud of myself and everything I have done. I don’t work under a boss, I am a free woman, and I have earned money for my family when we needed it. My husband also worked with me and was very proud as he saw me work so hard, doing new things. We worked together as husband and wife, and with Oxfam and neighbours. There was no difference between men and women and it was good fun. I enjoyed it very much.

‘My son is 6 years old and has so much energy he is hard to contain. Since the tsunami happened, really I’ve been ready to run away! We had to keep moving to different people’s houses, as he tries their patience. Now we have a house, I can stay put and stop travelling.’

— Shamali Kodikara, mother, 36.

Looking forward

- Governments and NGOs need to be more realistic about how long it takes to construct good, permanent shelter.
- There must be greater transparency with beneficiaries: people must understand why they have to wait for new homes, and for how long.
- Enabling people who will live in the houses to be part of their design and construction means, quite simply, more satisfactory houses.

- The governments of each of the three worst-hit countries need to address delays caused by bureaucratic and political debates over the use and allocation of land for permanent shelter. In deciding such issues, tsunami-hit communities must also have their say.
- Governments must ensure that minority or vulnerable groups – such as women, members of socially excluded castes, those previously renting property – are fairly treated and consulted in the granting of land and land titles.
- NGOs must properly allocate resources and key personnel where they are most needed. Where their capacities are inadequate, they must step aside.
- All involved must recognise that livelihoods and shelter are inextricably interlinked. In many places, displaced people do not want to return to where they once lived, because they cannot be certain that there will be the means for them to live and prosper there.

Notes

¹ All information for fatalities is taken from the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery. This gives a combined figure for missing and dead of 231,452.
www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/default.aspx

² Now Bangladesh. At least 500,000 people died as a result of the hurricane that hit the Ganges Delta on 13 November 1970. There are no reliable figures for the death toll in the 1976 earthquake in Tangshan, China – 250,000 is most often used.

³ While we are proud of the number of people we have been able to assist, the beneficiary numbers quoted provide only the roughest indicator of our effectiveness. In the rush to reach people in need during the early phase of the response, it was impossible to ensure that no doublecounting occurred. In addition, the meaning of even the most accurate numbers is diminished by the fact that a beneficiary might have received something as small as a bucket of relief items, or as large as a permanent home. As is standard in beneficiary reporting, we calculate the total number of people we assist by assuming five people per family.

⁴ Source: <http://www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/briefs/shelter.asp>

⁵ 'Indonesia Human Development Report 2004. The Economics of Democracy: Financing Human Development in Indonesia', BPS-Statistics Indonesia, BAPPENAS and UNDP.

⁶ Asian Development Bank, United Nations, and World Bank, 'India Post-Tsunami Recovery Program. Preliminary Damage and Needs Assessment', New Delhi, India, 8 March 2005.

⁷ http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/cty/cty_f_LKA.html

⁸ Florida figures from *USA Today*, 24 November 2005, others from UN briefing, Aceh.

⁹ The range is between the figure estimated by the Indonesia Red Crescent/UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery and that of the Government of Indonesia. Numbers in this range and above it are used by a variety of organisations. Some local NGOs in Indonesia believe the death toll has been understated, and so they work on the basis of over 260,000 people killed or missing. Throughout this paper 'dead' means the combined figures for confirmed dead and missing.

¹⁰ Oxfam International Briefing Note, March 2005, 'The tsunami's impact on women', available at: www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/conflict_disasters/bn_tsunami_women.htm.

¹¹ Statistics on tsunami damage vary enormously: a range is given where there seems to be reason to doubt a particular figure. Statistics in this document are primarily those accepted by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery (www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org), which in turn are gathered from government sources and international institutions, notably the World Bank.

¹² www.ifrc.org/what/disasters/response/tsunamis/factsheet.asp.

¹³ The Sphere Minimum Standards for Disaster Response are a set of internationally agreed guidelines that delineate best practice and minimum standards in the management of camps and other relief activities. www.sphereproject.org.

¹⁴ BRR has stated that the ultimate need for new homes may push the figure as high as 123,000.

¹⁵ Official figures quoted by the UN Special Envoy are more optimistic — over 6,000 houses completed and nearly 13,000 under construction. These are sourced to the governmental Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation of Sri Lanka (TAFREN).

¹⁶ www.tn.gov.in/tsunami/relief_rehabilitation.htm, accessed 23 November 2005.

¹⁷ www.tn.gov.in/tsunami/housing.xls, accessed 18 November 2005.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper, please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org.

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Oxfam International Advocacy Offices:

Washington: 1112 16th St., NW, Ste. 600, Washington, DC 20036, USA

Tel: +1.202.496.1170. E-mail: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

Brussels: 22 rue de Commerce, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +322.502.0391. E-mail: luis.morago@oxfaminternational.org

Geneva: 15 rue des Savoises, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41.22.321.2371. E-mail: celine.charveriat@oxfaminternational.org

New York: 355 Lexington Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10017, USA

Tel: +1.212.687.2091. E-mail: nicola.reindorp@oxfaminternational.org

Tokyo: Oxfam Japan, Maruko-Bldg. 2F, 1-20-6, Higashi-Ueno, Taito-ku, Tokyo 110-0015, Japan

Tel/Fax: +81.3.3834.1556. E-mail: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

<p>Oxfam America 26 West St. Boston, MA 02111-1206 USA Tel: +1.617.482.1211 E-mail: info@oxfamamerica.org www.oxfamamerica.org</p>	<p>Oxfam Hong Kong 17/fl., China United Centre 28 Marble Road, North Point Hong Kong Tel: +852.2520.2525 E-mail: info@oxfam.org.hk www.oxfam.org.hk</p>
<p>Oxfam Australia 156 George St. Fitzroy, Victoria 3065 Australia Tel: +61.3.9289.9444 E-mail: enquire@caa.org.au www.oxfam.org.au</p>	<p>Intermón Oxfam (Spain) Roger de Llúria 15 08010, Barcelona Spain Tel: +34.902.330.331 E-mail: info@intermonoxfam.org www.intermonoxfam.org</p>
<p>Oxfam-in-Belgium Rue des Quatre Vents 60 1080 Brussels Belgium Tel: +32.2.501.6700 E-mail: oxfamsol@oxfamsol.be www.oxfam.be</p>	<p>Oxfam Ireland <u>Dublin Office</u>, 9 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2 Ireland, Tel: +353.1.672.7662 <u>Belfast Office</u>, 115 North St, Belfast BT1 1ND, UK, Tel: +44.28.9023.0220 E-mail: communications@oxfam.ie www.oxfamireland.org</p>
<p>Oxfam Canada 250 City Centre Ave, Suite 400 Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 6K7 Canada Tel: +1.613.237.5236 E-mail: info@oxfam.ca www.oxfam.ca</p>	<p>Oxfam New Zealand PO Box 68357 Auckland 1032 New Zealand Tel: +64.9.355.6500 (Toll-free 0800 400 666) E-mail: oxfam@oxfam.org.nz www.oxfam.org.nz</p>
<p>Oxfam Germany Greifswalder Str. 33a 10405 Berlin Germany Tel: +49.30.428.50621 E-mail: info@oxfam.de www.oxfam.de</p>	<p>Novib Oxfam Netherlands Mauritskade 9, Postbus 30919 2500 GX, The Hague The Netherlands Tel: +31.70.342.1621 E-mail: info@novib.nl www.novib.nl</p>
<p>Oxfam Great Britain Oxfam House, John Smith Drive Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK Tel: +44.(0)1865.473727 E-mail: enquiries@oxfam.org.uk www.oxfam.org.uk</p>	<p>Oxfam Québec 2330 rue Notre Dame Ouest, bureau 200 Montréal, Quebec, H3J 2Y2, Canada Tel: +1.514.937.1614 E-mail: info@oxfam.qc.ca www.oxfam.qc.ca</p>