

## Disasters and Security

Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) Forum  
Sep 15-16, 2006, Chennai

### Session III - Gender and Disaster

10.15 am – 12.30 pm

**Bharti Patel, Director, Svaraj**



#### **Empowering of women of Akkaraikori village (Cuddalore district) through computer training**

When the Tsunami of December 26, 2004, struck the villages of coastal India, as relief efforts continued to provide essentials to millions who lost their loved ones, their homes and their livelihoods, training local women on Information Technology would not have featured in anyone's mind.

As relief efforts moved into the rehabilitation and development phase, Svaraj (formerly Oxfam India Society) worked with the local community and began constructing Village Information Centers. Recognizing the power of information and the role of women as key actors of change, the objectives of the centers are to provide **a self help desk and women and child space** to help the community retrieve essential lost documents.

**The Village Information Centres** - equipped with a Laptop, an Internet connection, printer and UPS, will be run by local women trained in IT and managed by self-help groups. The purpose of the centre is to collect and provide vital information to the community - daily news and weather reports; commodity prices; government schemes and other programmes including activities of other NGOs; important contact details; other information such as local population, landmarks, ancestral history, festivals, local culture and celebrations, school results. The website will be bilingual (English and Tamil)

**Svaraj (formerly Oxfam India Society)** is a national voluntary organization. Our response to humanitarian emergencies during natural disasters (earthquakes, floods) and human made disasters (war, violence, conflicts, and riots) go beyond the provision of relief. The process of rehabilitation and helping communities to cope with disasters, go on to rebuild their lives and strengthen their capacities to respond and cope with disasters is central to our objectives.

#### **Background**

Our response to the Tsunami that struck the coastal districts in South India on December 26, 2004, has followed this principle. We began with providing immediate

relief to the affected individuals and communities along with the support and assistance of Chennai police, volunteers (including a team of doctors and corporate employees) - all working together to provide food, water and medical aid to the affected communities. Later a four-member team visited 73 hamlets and villages along the coastal road from Chennai to Kanyakumari assessing and responding to the needs of the people. Following this, a proposal was drawn up for a development programme to work in Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu focusing on women and children of the fishing community.

Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu was the second-most affected district in India with over 500 people killed - almost three times more women having lost their lives than men. Our efforts in 2005 focused on key areas of the rehabilitation programme. Working with local community groups, Svaraj is involved in enabling revitalizing of communities' economic, cultural, social and environmental needs in six villages - Thazanguda, Singarathoppu, Akkaraikori, Sothikuppam; Rasapettai and Naicherpettai. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were conducted in all these villages prior to the design of the intervention.

In these villages, a total of 83 lives were lost of which 54 were female and 29 male, of which 40 were children. In Sothikuppam alone 22 children died on 26 December. It was a tragedy that could not have been foreseen for as the sea level rose before the wave, mothers ushered all their infants on to a pier on the mainland side of the island, the furthest possible place from the nearing wave. However, the water rushed around the island and swept them off the pier killing the children.

### *Phase I*

Working in six villages with local women and communities, the Svaraj team is involved in:

- **Constructing Village Information Centers with a self help desk and women and child space**
- **Training women in IT** – increasing their future employment prospects while at the same time changing attitudes on the traditional role of women in the family,
- **Village Fisherwomen Sangha - Organising women in Self Help Groups** – strengthening women's economic assets through group savings to be used for medical purposes, child education, and everyday expenses.
- **Engaging fishermen in Solidarity Fishing** - building the confidence of fisher folk to confidently return to their livelihood of fishing in the seas,
- **Providing psycho-social support** from lay councilors – counseling children, women and men; helping individuals to regain their desire to live, reuniting families; preventing suicide attempts; re-establishing hope in people

The approach is one of empowerment (rather than an act of charity and welfare) of people with commitment to uphold the rights and dignity of those affected by disaster.

## Key Focus & Learnings

Accepting that disasters affect women and men differently and recognising that women (a) are key actors for change; (b) are an important resource in delivering assistance and rebuilding societies and (c) acknowledging the cultural sensitivity of the different roles of men and women in the fishing community, our key focus is to strengthen the community in the aftermath of the disaster. This is being done through knowledge and information which includes:

- **Information Management and Communication** - using grassroots process to build information and mobilize skills and capacities as a social force which could be channeled to enhance efforts in rehabilitation of the community
  - *A clear example of the emerging confidence of women affected by the Tsunami in Cuddalore is that women of the self-help groups are now bargaining for prices of materials and making purchases, as well as monitoring the construction of the Centers while gaining new skills*
- **Education and Training - putting ICT in the hands of women** by providing young women training on ICT to access information from the Internet to share with women and other community members in the village and between villages as well as to ensure women benefit from any new employment opportunities. This will enable women to get the opportunity to build a better life for themselves, their families and their communities.
  - *It is encouraging to note that women have asked for further training in English speaking and writing skills. There has also been a gradual extension of support from the men in the community.*
- **Public awareness** on the wider economic, social and environmental issues affecting local livelihoods.
  - *Communities that have hitherto been mostly unconcerned about these concerns now realize the larger impact on their livelihood and future*

## Challenges

With an unprecedented influx of funds and NGOs operating in Tsunami-hit regions, there was a lot of duplication and very little effort amongst NGOs to collaborate with each other and this lack of co-ordination caused confusion as well as opportunism amongst the people who were so-inclined.

- One well-known international NGO was distributing in the 6<sup>th</sup> month tooth brushes, sanitary towels and bathroom slippers – items never used by the community.
- The SHG women were harassed by officials who failed to acknowledge their new standing in the communities' efforts to rehabilitation.
- The reaction from some local men was often that of ridiculing efforts made by women

## Disaster Preparedness

The importance of disaster preparedness is becoming increasingly the need of the hour as NGO share and reflect on their experiences.

End