

Press Release: Not too late to get it right on housing in Andaman and Nicobar say NGOs and tsunami survivors

New Delhi, December 22, 2006: Government agencies must do more to involve survivors of the 2004 tsunami in decisions over the planning and building of new homes, if the reconstruction process is to be a success, said anti-poverty agency ActionAid at a report launch in Delhi today.

Two years on from the disaster, more than 9,700 families in the Islands are living in inadequate temporary shelters, and serious questions are being raised over the location, design and cost of housing planned by government.

The report – Assessing Post-Tsunami Housing Reconstruction in Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A People Perspective – from Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology, TriNet, Housing and Land Rights Network and ActionAid, highlights survivors concerns and offers a way forward.

“We hear that on average Rs 10 lakh is being spent on each of our houses. Give us half that money, we can build our own houses,” says one family in Campbell Bay, quoted in the report.

“We are farmers. We cannot live away from our farmlands. Why do they ask us when they have already decided everything?” says tsunami survivor, Loknath Pahar from South Andaman.

The report stresses that it is not too late to return to good practice in disaster response and calls for action to involve tsunami survivors in housing reconstruction at every stage.

Across tsunami affected areas of India, just 28% of the total 98,477 houses required have been built (UN, WB, ADB report December 2006). In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where 9714 homes are needed, reconstruction so far is less than 1%.

“Governments of all tsunami affected countries are legally bound by international human rights treaties that they have ratified, to promote people’s human right to adequate housing and involve them in decisions that affect their lives,” says Shivani Chaudhry of HLRN who has completed a series of fact-finding missions in tsunami affected areas.

Forgetting this in the midst of disaster response not only results in abuse and violation of survivors’ human rights but also spells failure for post-tsunami housing projects,” she adds.

Based on in-depth consultations with communities on three islands and close scrutiny of government plans, the report reveals serious implications for livelihoods, culture, economy, environment and human rights.

“Over 80% of the houses are to be constructed in the Nicobar Islands, home to generations of tribal communities. Sadly, government reconstruction plans fail to recognise the diverse way of life of the Nicobarese, or the unique ecology of the islands with thin layer of tropical soil prone to erosion,” says Samir Acharya, head of the Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology.

“There are many highly skilled carpenters on the islands whose traditional architecture has withstood countless earthquakes,” adds Vivek Rawal, co-author of the report and an architect with over 12 years experience in disaster reconstruction.

The report findings – from Great Nicobar, Little and South Andaman Islands – point to the need for far greater involvement of survivors in the reconstruction process.

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"The key is for construction to be owner – not donor-driven, involving people at all stages in the process, from choosing where they want to live, to developing designs, selecting materials, monitoring the construction and even building themselves," says Harjeet Singh, head of ActionAid's tsunami response team for Andaman and Nicobar.

"With the bulk of tsunami reconstruction set to take place in 2007, it is not too late to learn lessons. Government and NGOs must do more to involve survivors in decisions over the planning and building of new homes, and to make sure that women have joint or full ownership," he adds.

Vivekanandan of TRINet, an information network on tsunami rehabilitation initiated by fishing groups in Tamil Nadu, says that putting survivors in the driving seat can also help ensure that quality standards are met.

"We've seen how 'vigilance committees' – women and men who have been trained to spot shoddy construction and poor quality building materials – can make all the difference," he says.

ActionAid is currently helping survivors to construct 149 permanent houses in South and Little Andaman. Newly trained women masons are taking a lead in building their own homes, developing their skills alongside seasoned professionals.

The houses were designed taking into consideration cultural preferences, natural hazards and the needs of women, children and person with disabilities. The experience shows that community-driven housing is possible, with the right support.

"For the first time, I am able to help in the construction of my house. I even know how to inspect the quality of material used," says Shanti R a resident of Lal Bijan village, South Andaman.

"I am extremely happy... My thoughts were taken into consideration when the house was designed. I am getting my house the way I would like. Now, even my son has a separate room for himself," says Rajmani Toppo, a resident of Shaitan Khadi village, South Andaman.

In the report foreword, Miloon Kothari, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing recognises inadequacies of government response so far, but says it is not too late to get it right.

"Clearly the opportunities that the post tsunami phase offered have been squandered by the authorities," says Kothari. "Even now, at the two year stage it is not too late to return to the path indicated by the diligent application of principles of human rights, including the cardinal principles of participation and respect for cultural rights of people."

Housing reconstruction in Andaman and Nicobar: Recommendations

Specific recommendations from the report *Assessing Post-Tsunami Housing Reconstruction in Anadaman & Nicobar Islands: A People's Perspective* by SANE, TriNet, HLRN and ActionAid.

1. Policy framework: A comprehensive policy framework is needed that clearly articulates objectives, eligibility criteria and entitlements of the affected families and lays guidelines for processes for selection of construction sites and execution of construction. It should also define the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies and stakeholders involved and outline the principles of community participation, the time frame and the grievance redressal mechanisms.
2. Transparency on entitlements: The list of families entitled to new homes should be shared, along with the eligibility criteria. A mechanism should be put in place to ensure inclusion of all families that qualify, irrespective of where they are staying temporarily.
3. Suitable location: The site should be finalised only after informed community consultations and agreement. Plot allotment should be immediately taken up to facilitate community inputs to their own houses. Knowing one's own plot is an essential prerequisite for participation.

4. Information: All relevant information – house design, construction materials, cost, and the responsibilities of the administration and other agencies such as CPWD, APWD or contractors – must be communicated to the people, along with periodic reports on progress and decisions. An information dissemination mechanism should be established and it should ensure that information reaches to people in their temporary settlements or other locations where they are staying. It should be in a format that people can understand.
5. Women's property rights: The ownership title to homestead plot must be given to the family in the joint names of wife and husband and in particular cases, to the woman only.
6. Housing modifications: One design cannot fit all. Permits for extensions and modifications of the house should be given to the titleholder/s. House owner(s) should be empowered to make those changes at the time of design and construction.
7. Monitoring construction: Community must be empowered with specifications of materials and construction details so that they can monitor these. A formal mechanism must be established for monitoring quality and progress of construction which can provide periodic feedback to implementing authorities and convey the subsequent actions to the community.
8. Promoting local building practices: People should be given an option to build on their own as per their needs at appropriate locations of their preference. The process should be facilitated by providing financial and material assistance. The traditional materials and technologies that communities have expressed a preference for should be promoted in the reconstruction plan. Note that traditional structures that people have been building performed well during earthquakes.
9. Environmental protection: Assessment should be made to understand the environmental impact of large construction contracts. There needs to be constant watch on various construction processes, particularly sand mining from the beaches, etc.
10. Decentralised basic services: The post-tsunami reconstruction plan envisages construction of 'centralised drinking water and sewage disposal schemes'. Such systems should not be implemented, particularly as current dependence on external agencies to run such services is expensive and unreliable. Instead, a decentralised system should be promoted that engages communities, is eco-friendly and encourages responsible behaviour of service users.