Collaboration in crises:
Lessons in community participation from the Oxfam International tsunami research program

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Executive summary

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 was a disaster of epic proportions, and the humanitarian response that followed was extraordinary in its speed and magnitude. Aid providers and communities on the ground achieved enormous successes, averting disease epidemics, ensuring that the people affected quickly received essential relief, and rebuilding communities with improved housing and infrastructure, as well as helping expand the roles and opportunities for women and girls. The scale of the disaster also magnified weaknesses in humanitarian practice—shortcomings that get to the heart of the relationship between aid providers and those they aim to assist. Looking back over the past four years, there is cause to celebrate successes in the tsunami response, and cause for serious reflection on how to improve the way we do our work.

Between 2005 and 2008, Oxfam International and its partners developed a research program in the tsunami-affected regions of India and Sri Lanka aimed at improving the policies and practices of Oxfam and other aid agencies in the tsunami response, as well as contributing to humanitarian aid effectiveness in future emergencies. The program involved roughly 40 individual studies—around 20 large and 20 small—on topics including disaster risk reduction (DRR), gender equity, climate change, physical and mental health, livelihoods, conflict, and local capacity. Each was designed and implemented by researchers from academic institutes and nongovernmental organizations in the region—partners who brought to the task an awareness of local context and perspectives, as well as ideas that were fresh to Oxfam. Nearly all of the studies employed elements of participatory action research (PAR), a methodology in which participants are engaged as partners rather than subjects, where researchers work to create space for diverse groups within communities—not simply designated leaders—to speak freely and openly, and where the end result of the study directly benefits the participants.

This report shares the key findings of several of the studies and reflects on the lessons we drew from the program.

Research as a tool for learning and action. Taking the time to understand the local context of a disaster can make the difference between a humanitarian response that is clumsy or deft; short-term or sustainable; divisive or inclusive; and, from a community perspective, dignified or disempowering. PAR provides a means of learning about local conditions; the studies in this program also helped bring about significant local impacts, such as increased incomes for self-employed women, successful advocacy for improvements in shelter conditions, and help for vulnerable farming communities in adapting to a changing climate.

A message from the communities. The studies covered a range of topics, yet converged to deliver a key message: disaster-affected communities want a chance to guide their own relief and rehabilitation. Too often, the research revealed, the knowledge, capacity, and priorities of communities were overlooked, and their members were cast as consultants or passive recipients of aid rather than as equal partners in the process. A key area for improvement in humanitarian programming, the studies indicate, is in ensuring that our programming centers on communities' true needs and aspirations—not our preconceived notions of what those needs and aspirations are—and that community members feel ownership of the programs aimed at their recovery.

DRR as a prelude to community-guided disaster response. The goal of community ownership of disaster response programs provides an additional lens through which to view DRR programs: how do they contribute to a community's ability to engage with aid providers as active and equal partners and guide those providers to address the community's needs and aspirations at times of emergency?

Relearning what we know about humanitarian practice. Humanitarian agencies have understood the need for more community-centered programming for years—decades, even. Yet as the research revealed, we continue to struggle with a set of obstacles to achieving it, including competition among aid providers, which undermines the kind of coordination that would work best for communities; the pressure to push aid quickly

into disaster-affected areas, which crowds out significant community participation; the difficulty in finding meaningful criteria for and measures of what is working and what isn't, which interferes with our accountability; lack of training in and commitment to participatory approaches in humanitarian programming; and the challenge of creating DRR programs that reflect the vision and priorities of communities, not just those of aid providers.

Getting from here to where we want to be. Often missing from discussions about putting community needs, aspirations, and leadership more firmly at the center of our work are not so much ideas and observations (we have those in abundance) as illustrations of how, realistically, we can move forward.

The tsunami research produced several examples:

- **Employ community-generated indicators of success.** Lists of how many training sessions, aid packets, or shelters provided to a community are poor indicators of the value of humanitarian programs, as they don't reflect community satisfaction with what's been given. One study involves helping communities develop their own criteria for well-being—which includes social, economic, and material considerations—and then tracking their sense over time about whether and how their recovery has been progressing. A process like this, carried out jointly by aid providers, could produce community-centered measures of the success of our programs and give meaning to the more quantitative indicators we are accustomed to using.

- **Improve interagency alignment.** One study demonstrated how aid providers could carry out a joint impact assessment that would reduce the burden on community members to evaluate large numbers of individual agency programs. The same principle applies to needs assessments.

- **Train ourselves to listen.** The participatory techniques demonstrated in the studies are learnable, and they have the potential to help staff and partners on the ground improve their ability to engage communities more fully in needs assessments and the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs—thereby deepening community engagement and ownership of humanitarian programs.

- **Create sustainable DRR interventions.** Tsunami research pilot projects developed with full community participation achieved a sense of community ownership and sustainability. In the case of community radio, the program that resulted weaves DRR messages into daily life and ensures that community members have full creative control over the program activities. Enabling community members to play a key role in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating DRR programs could build the capacity of both aid providers and communities to engage in full partnerships both before and after a disaster.

Other research suggested that facilitating links between communities and governmental and nongovernmental aid providers and helping vulnerable communities clarify and articulate their development priorities before disaster strikes can help communities proactively pursue the kind of assistance they most require.

The tsunami research program and the studies highlighted in this report point to the need for greater local ownership of humanitarian programs and suggest that participatory processes—including PAR—are a means of meeting that need. Listening to communities—fairly, deliberately, and methodically—is an investment in the sustainability and effectiveness of aid programs, and in the well-being and empowerment of the disaster-affected communities at the center of our mission.

Foreword

By Hugo Slim, director, Corporates for Crisis and member,
the Oxfam International Tsunami Fund board of directors

Helping people can be surprisingly difficult. For centuries we have been encouraged to think of help as giving. But good help is a much more subtle business than just replacing things that people have lost or handing out things that they have never had. All too often, simply giving people things runs a double risk. First, we may give them the wrong things. Second, we may focus too much on the things we give and not enough on the relationship around the gift. The things we give then become the central fetish of our work, and we come to treat the people who receive them as secondary objects. We call them "recipients" or "beneficiaries"—people who have needs but not much else.

I remember rushing into a crowded tent full of Kurdish refugees on a mountainside in Turkey way back in 1991 and urgently asking what people needed. An old man sat me down. He was cold, exhausted from a two-week trek, and obviously worried about the young family all around him. He stopped me talking, offered me a cup of tea, and slowed me down. After all, I was inside what was, for the moment, his house. I was his guest. Snow was melted, a kettle was boiled, and we shared the one cup they had. He turned the tables of our aid relationship and gave me something of the little he had. As I shared it with him, we discussed what we could do together. This old man stopped me thinking simply about things and began to make me mindful of the people around me. I emerged with a better understanding of their situation and a rather different grammar of humanitarian relationships.

It is tempting in our extreme concern for others, and with donors and deadlines on our backs, to get the grammar of our relationships wrong in disasters. As aid workers, we can mistakenly think that we are the subjects of things, that we should control the active verbs (assess, decide, design, distribute, monitor, recover), and that people suffering the consequences of a disaster are the objects of what we do. This is a humanitarian grammar exemplified by the phrase "we help people."

As aid professionals, however, we know that the best help often arises from self-help or active collaboration and equal partnership between agency and community. Rather clumsily, we bundle this kind of help into a discourse of participation. Our role in this grammar of participatory relief is essentially prepositional—we work alongside people who are recovering or we do things with them. As the subjects of their own recovery, people hurt by disasters are more autonomous and active than we are in this kind of help.

The exciting thing about Oxfam's tsunami research, summarized in this report, is that it proves that a truly collaborative approach between agency and community is what people want. It is also what works best. Even more than this, the fact that Oxfam did not shy away from using participatory action research as an emergency methodology has proved its place in the humanitarian toolkit.

Participatory action research has been around for a long time. This report and its many supporting studies show that it serves a double purpose for the emergency worker. First, it establishes an equal working partnership between agency and community, creating the right grammar for the aid relationship at the start. Second, by researching solutions together, community members and aid agencies produce appropriate programming and good results. And of course, all this can and must be done in advance of disaster, too. Participatory action research needs to play a key role in disaster risk reduction as well as relief.

So, as this report says: "there is nothing new about calls to improve community ownership and participation. … What's new is that the largest humanitarian response in history has produced all the evidence any agency or government could ever need to justify taking strong action to make this goal a reality." In other words, no NGO should feel uneasy or inhibited about working carefully together with communities in disaster response and preparedness. They should expect their emergency teams to work like this, and people should demand it.

But a good collaborative relationship takes two. Responsibility for good participatory work does not just lie with aid agencies. Disaster-affected people also have responsibilities to make it work. And they do not always rise to meet these responsibilities. If we aid workers know that community ownership and participation is a good thing, we also know that most communities are not the happy, smiling, and cooperative groups that we pretend they are in our NGO publicity. Like all communities, they can be plagued by bias, feuds, competition, class, and greed. In an emergency, unpleasant and unrepresentative individuals or cliques can "capture" a community and the resources it receives. Governments in many disaster-affected countries are also appalling—deeply corrupt, incompetent, and keen to politicize aid. Some local NGOs and community-based organizations can be decidedly dodgy, too. Aid agencies can be the victims of bad relationships and not just the perpetrators.
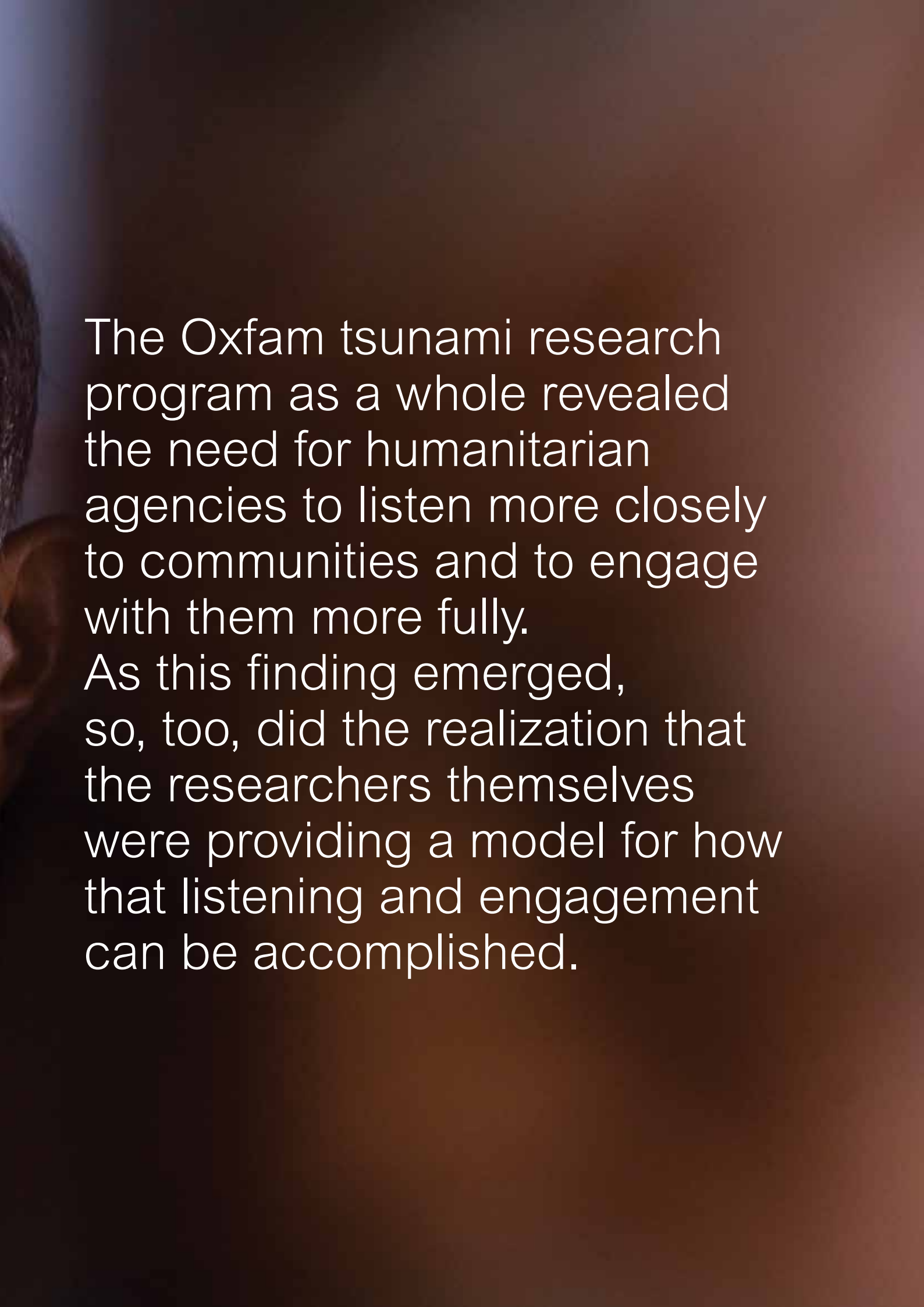
This research done by Oxfam after the tsunami makes it clear that the best way to help people is by encouraging community ownership and participation in relief and recovery. It confirms that aid work is as much about creative working relationships as about commodities and project management. This is now obvious, but both parties in the aid relationship—agencies and those who have survived emergencies—have to make it work anew around every disaster.

Hugo Slim, director, Corporates for Crisis

The Oxfam tsunami research program as a whole revealed the need for humanitarian agencies to listen more closely to communities and to engage with them more fully.
As this finding emerged, so, too, did the realization that the researchers themselves were providing a model for how that listening and engagement can be accomplished.

Introduction

When the tsunami of December 2004 surged across the shores of the Indian Ocean, aid providers launched a response that was extraordinary in its speed, scope, and magnitude. Responding to catastrophes simultaneously in countries as diverse as India and Somalia, they stretched themselves to the limit and, in the early months, achieved a stunning success: despite a massive displacement of communities into crowded temporary camps, there were no outbreaks of disease epidemics.

The rehabilitation period of the disaster also brought significant improvements to the region, with many communities now enjoying better water supplies, sanitation, housing, education and communications infrastructure, nutrition, and incomes than before the tsunami. Many survivors who once lived in mud huts now live in concrete houses that are light, airy, cool, and spacious. The gains were not only material: training sessions in reducing disaster risks have left many communities feeling better equipped to face future emergencies; parents, in many cases, have greater aspirations for their children now; and women, the focus of much attention by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have emerged from their homes in force to become respected breadwinners and confident leaders in their communities.

Yet, for some who survived the disaster, the tsunami response has been a bruising experience. There are those who were left out, who go home to mud huts and bitter thoughts. And there are those who live in fine-looking homes that are fatally flawed as a result of errors in design or location. There are communities where competition for aid has left neighbors feuding. And stories abound of waste, duplication, and lack of coordination—the widow who received multiple boats, all without engines; the man who collected 97 bedsheets.

There is cause, in other words, for the humanitarian community to celebrate big successes in the tsunami response, as well as cause for serious reflection on how to improve the way we do our work.

The Oxfam International tsunami research program

Between 2005 and 2008, Oxfam carried out research in the tsunami-affected communities of India and Sri Lanka,[1] laying the groundwork for programs; capturing observations and experiences of community members, aid providers, and policy makers; and exploring new approaches to disaster response and risk reduction. The program was aimed at improving the policies and practices of Oxfam and other aid providers, as well as contributing to the effectiveness of the global humanitarian community in future emergencies.

The studies—around 20 large and 20 small—were designed and implemented by researchers from local and national academic institutes and NGO partners who brought to the task an awareness of the local context, and perspectives and ideas that were fresh to Oxfam.[2]

Left: "After the tsunami, women got a chance to come out from their houses," says W. H. Priyanka Krishanthi of Tangalle, Sri Lanka (shown here with her daughter, Marsha). With the help of aid agency programs, she transformed herself from a shy housewife into a successful businesswoman and community organizer. Krishanthi participated in the Oxfam research on sustainable exit strategies, cautioning aid providers against closing programs before resolving any negative effects they have created.

A COMMUNITY IS NOT AN ISLAND

The logic is simple: disasters, by definition, occur when a crisis overwhelms local capacities to cope with a hazard; therefore, building on local capacity to withstand or avert hazards can reduce disaster risks.

It is reasoning that Oxfam finds compelling, and so we aim not simply to provide material aid in an emergency but to invest in communities in ways that will leave them stronger—less vulnerable to future disasters and to the ravages of poverty.

But the question of how to do this most effectively is not so simple. It's one that the humanitarian community has been asking itself for at least 20 years, and the researchers in this program explored it from many angles. Some illustrated ways to strengthen local capacity by, for example, working with communities to create disaster contingency plans, studying ways to help women improve their incomes, or building local knowledge about gender-sensitive disaster response.

One study was focused not so much on building on local capacity as on expanding our knowledge of what that might entail. A key message that emerged from the research is that a community is not an island.

"To understand the capacity of a community, you need to look not only at what a community knows how to do but at the actors and networks that surround it, and at how effectively that community can interact with them," says Annie George, CEO of BEDROC (Building and Enabling Disaster Resilience of Coastal Communities), an Oxfam research partner.

A community that can communicate easily with a responsive government and effective local NGOs, for example, has much greater capacity than one that is for any reason reluctant to engage with government or civil society organizations.

The BEDROC study points to an important capacity-building role for NGOs: linking communities to public providers of goods and services. For example, village information centers established by an NGO after the tsunami helped bring the government closer to the people by disseminating information on programs and services while also providing a platform from which community members could voice their needs and concerns.

"A key capacity that has been built during the tsunami response has been the communities' ability to engage with external people," says George. "Now they have confidence."

Nearly all the researchers employed participatory techniques, engaging directly with communities, and most incorporated an action component, such as advocacy or education, aimed at ensuring that the participants derived direct benefits from the studies.

The choice of topics grew out of discussions with community members, government officials, Oxfam staff on the ground, staff of other NGOs, local researchers, and stakeholders at the international level, and topics included issues related to disaster risk reduction (DRR), gender equity, physical and mental health, livelihoods, social conflict, and building on local capacity.

"At the heart of the program was a desire to learn from the communities how to improve our tsunami response," says Russell Miles, director of the tsunami research program. "But we knew from the start that the research would have implications for our work on future disasters as well."

In this report, we will share highlights of what we learned, beginning in Section I with a sampling of studies that proved useful to Oxfam's programs and advocacy on the ground, a set of findings that aid providers might find helpful in designing future programs, and short descriptions of several

successful pilot programs carried out by researchers. Section II describes participatory action research (PAR) and explains the choice to work through local research partners rather than consultants from outside the region. The studies as a whole yielded an underlying theme: communities want a chance to play a more central role in the choice, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs aimed at assisting them, and the programs will likely benefit from their deeper involvement—an issue that is discussed in Section III. Section IV looks at the possibility that DRR programs have a role to play not only in reducing the physical and economic risks of disasters but also in enabling communities to become strong partners in the relief and rehabilitation programs designed to assist them. The conclusion offers practical suggestions for increasing community ownership and participation in humanitarian programming.

At the heart of the program was a desire to learn from the communities how to improve our tsunami response.

An important question remains only partially answered: aid providers around the world understand that community engagement and ownership are hallmarks of effective and sustainable programming, so why are we unable to achieve them more consistently? Workshops with humanitarian practitioners and policy makers held in Sri Lanka, India, the UK, and the US in late 2008 focused on this question.

Above: Research into how to help coconut fiber (coir) spinners earn a larger share of coir industry profits laid the groundwork for a successful Oxfam program to help more than 2,000 women in southern Sri Lanka improve their incomes. Thanks to mechanized equipment, new products and markets, and a newly formed federation of self-help groups, many are now making double and in some cases triple what they earned before the tsunami. The gains are not only financial: "We used to stay in our houses and not … get involved in [community] work," says M. M. Somalatha from the village of Lunukalapuwa. "Now … we discuss issues in this community and try to solve them in our role as women leaders."

I. Research as a tool for thinking locally

When a sudden-onset emergency strikes, aid providers can parachute into practically any region of the world and mount a response that will save lives, but when it comes to creating longer term interventions, general knowledge about emergency response is insufficient. History, culture, politics, physical environment, and even personalities play major roles in what will work and what won't, and these vary country to country, region to region, and village to village. Taking the time to understand the local context can make the difference between a response that is clumsy or deft; short-term or sustainable; divisive or inclusive; and, from a community perspective, dignified or disempowering.

PAR, which is based on in-depth discussions with community members, provides—at a minimum—a means of learning about local context, but it also has the potential to become a precise and powerful tool for advocacy, education, and program development. And skilled participatory action researchers can elicit frank community evaluations of existing programs. Based as it is on the observations of community members who've been on the receiving end of aid programs, PAR can also provide insight into the overall impact of a disaster response.

Left: "If you want to know if the meal is tasty, ask the diners, not the cooks," says Mallika R. Samaranayake (center), founder of the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID), whose study showed that aid providers ranked the quality of their programs higher than did communities.

Research in action: Local impacts of the studies

The primary purpose of Oxfam's tsunami research program was to improve the policies and practices of aid providers—including Oxfam—in India and Sri Lanka. Each study, therefore, had a practical application. The following are examples of some that resulted in significant impacts over time:

- **The shelter research led to repairs.** An assessment of conditions in temporary shelters in Tamil Nadu, India, was the basis for a video and report that contributed to the release of $1.4 million in government funds for shelter repairs.

- **The coir study helped women increase their incomes.** A study of the coir (coconut fiber) industry and the ways in which the Sri Lankan women at the bottom of the market chain could improve their earnings provided the basis for a successful program that has helped the participants double and in some cases triple their pre-tsunami incomes.

- **HIV researchers disseminated health information.** A study of the impact of the tsunami and the tsunami response on vulnerability to HIV in Tamil Nadu raised the awareness of all the participating communities on sexual health issues.

- **Contingency plans were activated in floods.** The focus of a study in Andhra Pradesh, India, helped 24 local NGOs prepare detailed disaster contingency plans for their communities; a number of the communities have since used the plans to improve their responses to floods and cyclones.

- **Farmers adjusted to a new rainfall pattern.** Farmers in several villages in Tamil Nadu, whose traditional methods of predicting rainfall have been confounded by climate change, altered their cropping plans, based on research into current rainfall trends, and were able to increase their yields.

COMMUNITIES WITHIN COMMUNITIES

Listening to communities involves providing space for a chorus of voices. A village in coastal India or Sri Lanka, while it may appear to be a cohesive whole, is likely to contain a diversity of groups defined by class, livelihood, gender, age, caste, and ethnicity. Some are more powerful than others, and their representatives will tend to speak for the village. A key element of PAR and participatory approaches to aid delivery, therefore, is to find ways to make room for the quieter voices to be heard to ensure that the needs, aspirations, capacities, and perspectives of marginalized groups within each community are not overlooked.

Through a community lens: Learning what happened

Listening carefully to disaster survivors describe their experiences with aid provision—and doing it methodically so that a range of community voices were heard—provided a window on the effectiveness of programs that had already been implemented. Aid providers might find the following observations relevant to future planning:

- **HIV vulnerability spiked during the transition period.** In the aftermath of the tsunami, vulnerability to HIV rose in 29 of the 30 Indian coastal villages studied.[3] A key finding was that the transition period between the emergency and rehabilitation phases of a disaster appears to be a crucial time to ensure that condoms, confidential medical assistance, and information about the spread of HIV be made available to affected communities.

- **A gap was identified between gender policy and practice.** The needs and voices of women and girls were frequently neglected in the emergency response, despite a commitment on the part of many NGOs to keep them front and center. Chaman Pincha, a researcher with Oxfam partners Anawim Trust and Naban Trust, found there was a widespread lack of understanding of the theory and practice of gender mainstreaming at the local level in India; she went on to develop a gender toolkit for local use.

- **Aid distribution fueled social tensions.** Divisions within Sri Lankan communities along lines of ethnicity, politics, class, gender, religion, and caste were in many cases aggravated by competition for aid. The issue that emerged most consistently was disagreement about beneficiary selection; the key to nearly every conflict-free aid distribution noted in the study was community participation in the process of beneficiary selection and aid distribution.

- **Communities and aid providers have different perceptions.** In a review of disaster preparedness programs in tsunami-affected areas of Sri Lanka, lack of harmonization among aid providers, lack of participation by community members, and lack of needs assessments prior to launching programs were among the problems identified. Though most projects were considered useful, aid providers tended to rank the quality of their programs higher than did community members.

Testing new approaches: Researching innovation

The research program also provided an avenue for investigating and piloting new approaches to humanitarian programming.

- **DRR researchers built on traditional knowledge.** A study in Sri Lanka that focused on local knowledge about reducing risks helped villagers build on their own unorthodox methods of sheltering from cyclones rather than introducing plans developed by the researchers themselves. Together, the researchers and community members expanded on the existing emergency plans, an approach that led to a strong sense of community ownership of both the research and the plan that emerged.

- **Community radio incorporates DRR into daily life.** A pilot project to bring community radio to villages in Tamil Nadu is enabling community members to create shows of their own choosing. Participants have embraced the project enthusiastically and are sending a combination of DRR and development messages over the airwaves.

- **Community well-being and recovery can be measured.** Research on well-being demonstrated how individual communities can track their recovery over time using criteria they find meaningful, such as security, dignified housing, and harmony among neighbors. Aid providers seeking a way to measure the overall impact of their programs may find these methods useful.

PAR can help aid providers understand social and economic conditions at the local level, assess community needs, gather data to advocate for change, develop programs that are tailored to community priorities, and evaluate ongoing work.

"Aid providers who engage in a careful listening process can home in on the needs, aspirations, and capacities of the communities they are presently assisting," says Nanditha Hettitantri, Oxfam's research program manager in Sri Lanka. "Without it, they may find themselves creating programs better suited to another place and time."

Above: Creating separate discussion spaces for women and men, children and youth, and other groups within communities can help ensure that research is truly participatory.

II. Methods and partners

Participatory action research: A methodology of social change

In nearly all the studies referred to in this report, Oxfam's partners have based their work on the principles of PAR.

PAR is a means of helping participants and researchers simultaneously learn and bring about policy and practice changes in areas they have identified as important. It is "participatory" in that it engages entire communities in the process; the "action" element of PAR refers to its goal of creating not only knowledge but also concrete steps that will improve the lives of the participants. The process is designed to build the confidence, knowledge, and analytical skills of community members along the way, and to create an equal partnership between researchers and participants.

By employing focus group discussions, visual techniques, and role-plays, participatory action researchers are able to engage people with varying levels of education and literacy in analysis of their situation. In an example from Sri Lanka, where researchers reviewed the quality of disaster prepared- ness programs received by a dozen communities, participants cut out paper circles of various sizes to indicate the magnitude of each agency's program; by placing the circles at varying distances from the center of the diagram, they were able to express how psychologically close they felt to each aid provider — revealing that there was only a tenuous correlation between size and closeness, and pointing to the need for aid providers to consider not only what they deliver but how they do it.

And while a research report is typically the focus of conventional research, participatory action researchers, whose top priority is social change rather than capturing knowledge for its own sake, often begin to translate their findings into action long before the project and report are complete.

"Conventional researchers extract information from people. They think it's their right to do that, and they don't provide anything in return," says Indira Aryarathne, who led a study on women and DRR. "There may be indirect pol- icy impacts on the communities, but that may be long-term, and the communi- ties won't see [that the policy impacts] are the result of their contribution."

A PAR study, on the other hand, should result in recognizable material or social benefits to the communities. The HIV researchers in India, for example, disseminated information about safe sex and testing during and after focus group discussions; the end result of the community-based DRR research in Ampara, Sri Lanka, was a community plan to reduce disaster risks; and the study of rainfall patterns in Tamil Nadu, India, resulted in increased crop yields and incomes.

At the core of PAR is a commitment to rights and to elevating the voices of people whose concerns are often overlooked. PAR researchers, therefore, are trained to create an environment for discussion that draws out the insights and observations of women, young people, and others who might otherwise not have a chance to share their thoughts.

Left: Community members create a diagram as part of a review of disaster preparedness programs. The Oxfam tsunami research pro- gram as a whole revealed the need to listen more closely to communities and to engage with them more fully. As this finding emerged, so, too, did the realization that the research- ers themselves were providing a model for how that listening and engagement can be accomplished.

The researchers: Keeping it local

The other key element of the Oxfam tsunami research program is the choice of local and national NGOs and academic institutes to design and implement the studies. Their cultural familiarity with the communities made it possible to carry out research on sensitive topics like HIV, and their local perspectives generated ideas that might not have occurred to researchers who didn't grow up in the region. The process of reporting the findings and products of the studies has also been influenced by the commitment of the researchers to

The studies we're supporting aren't destined for a dusty shelf somewhere, and they're not carried out by consultants from faraway places.

improving conditions in their own countries. Pincha, for example, has disseminated her gender research and toolkit throughout India using workshops, Web sites, and other forums. In some cases, state and national governments in India and Sri Lanka have engaged with the study findings in ways that might not have happened had the researchers been seen as foreigners. And we have every reason to believe that our research partners will continue to spread the knowledge and insights from their studies long after Oxfam's tsunami program is complete.

"The studies we're supporting aren't destined for a dusty shelf somewhere, and they're not carried out by consultants from faraway places," says Miles, director of the tsunami research program. "We're partnering with local researchers who are dedicated to solving problems in their own countries."

MEASURING RECOVERY, COMMUNITY BY COMMUNITY

In the wake of a disaster, food plus water plus shelter plus incomes may not add up to recovery. Communities are affected not only by the simple facts of aid delivery but also its nuances: Did it fit the local context? Was it distributed fairly? Are the long-term programs sustainable?

Aid providers have recognized that easily quantifiable outputs like numbers of houses built fail to capture important aspects of recovery, such as whether or not residents are satisfied with their new houses and feel empowered or frustrated by the building process. But it has been difficult to formulate indicators of success that are both meaningful and measurable and that satisfy the need to be accountable to donors.

Chamindra Weerackody, who carried out a study on community mental health and well-being in Sri Lanka, took a community-centered rather than a donor-driven approach to the issue of recovery: what do groups within each community consider to be their criteria for well-being, and how do they feel the community is progressing or regressing over time in relation to those criteria?

For the children of Nawadivipura, Sri Lanka, unity in the village, a good education, and good houses with enough land were the top priorities. The women's key choices

were having a religious life, a stable income, and peaceful relations with neighbors. For the men of the village, it was living religiously, living with courage and determination, and having a stable income. Yet in nearby Mawella, a religious life never appeared as a condition of community well-being—perhaps because they have a temple. Nawadivipura no longer does, and it's sorely missed. Likewise, land is never mentioned in Mawella, but in Nawadivipura, whose residents were displaced by the tsunami and now live in a crowded new settlement, lack of space is a daily source of irritation and conflict among neighbors. However, in Mawella, safe shelter is a top priority. Here, the villagers are still living in the path of tsunamis, and their vulnerability is never far from their minds.

"This study helped me to understand that well-being is context-specific.

It changes from time to time and place to place," says Weerackody. "We think that well-being is only economic. Now, you can see the broader vision of what people think. It includes material well-being like a stable income or better housing. It includes social aspects like good education for children or living without using alcohol, or living in harmony with the family, with the neighbors."

"Success in aid provision cannot be measured in numbers of items delivered," says Hettitantri. "Success is how far the communities feel they are able to rebuild their lives."

Above: "Silly, ridiculous, and inappropriate" is how E.T. Sarath (above) of Mawella, Sri Lanka, described the post-tsunami mental health programs provided by agencies that were unfamiliar with local customs and perspectives. Researcher Weerackody introduced a more participatory approach: help communities identify their own criteria for well-being and track their recovery over time.

III. The central finding: Communities want more ownership

From study after study, a theme emerged. It was like a drumbeat, faint and barely recognizable at first, and then louder and louder as the findings rolled in. It didn't seem to matter what the topic of the research was. Its underlying message was nearly always the same: disaster-affected communities want a chance to guide their own recovery—and humanitarian programs will probably work better if they do so.
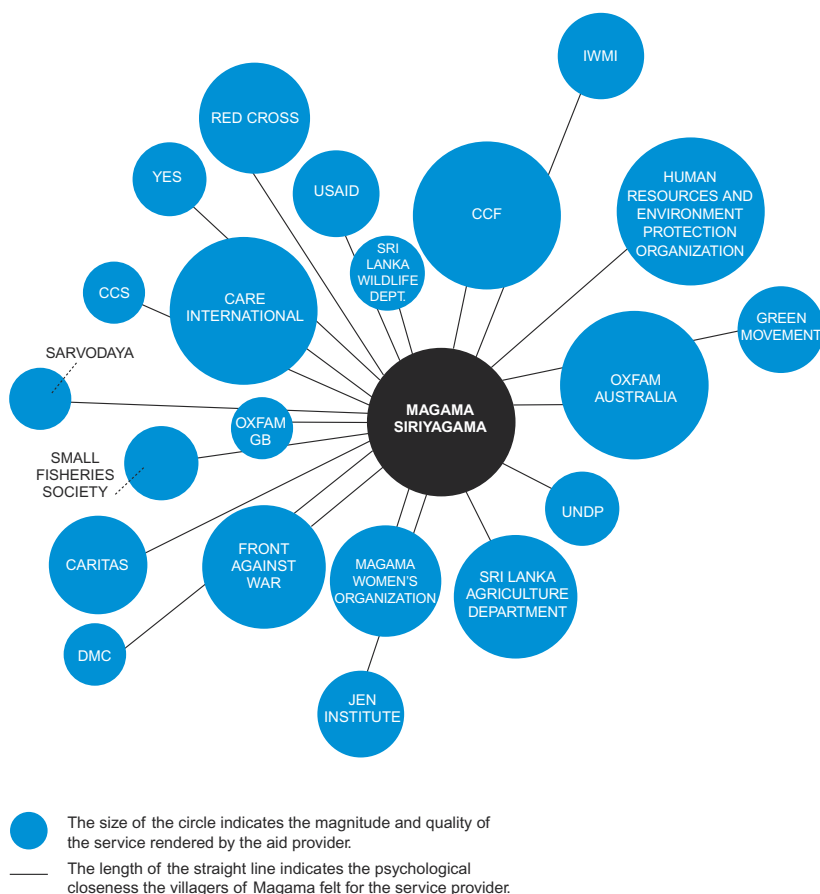
Too often, the research revealed, community members were cast as consultants or passive recipients of aid rather than equal partners in the recovery process. Their local knowledge, capacity, and priorities were overlooked, which contributed to an attitude of dependency on outside aid and to a diminished sense of ownership of the programs aimed at assisting them.

Left: K. R. Thanajayan, a village leader in Kandakadu, India, sits near a bore well provided by an NGO to help desalinate and irrigate their agricultural fields after the tsunami. Rather than accept the well as a gift, the villagers chose to pay 15 percent of the cost to ensure that everyone had a sense of ownership and an investment in maintaining it. "We wanted to give benefit to future generations," says Thanajayan, who participated in the research on strenghtening local capacity. "After an emergency, give support immediately to recover livelihoods, and then a man is capable of carrying it on from there. He has fallen down; just help him to stand up, and he will walk."

WE DON'T HAVE TIME EVEN TO COOK

The diagrams produced by community members in the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IDIP) study of capacity building for disaster preparedness are eloquent. As villagers mapped out which agencies had offered them programs of varying size and quality, they inadvertently presented a strong visual case for harmonizing aid efforts. If each of the aid providers represented by a circle in the diagram called a series of meetings to discuss its programs, it could be extremely disruptive to a small community. As, indeed, it was.

"Whenever an NGO comes to the village, they want to form a committee," says Mariah Meraya Swaris, a research participant from a village in the Kalutara District of Sri Lanka. "Now our village has so many committees, if we go to them all, we don't have time even to cook."

The size of the circle indicates the magnitude and quality of the service rendered by the aid provider.

The length of the straight line indicates the psychological closeness the villagers of Magama felt for the service provider.

Above: The Advanced Center for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) community radio program helped place DRR in the hands of the community members themselves. "If we get information about rain upstream, we will take some precautions," says Sethurajan, a farmer whose community has a reservoir for irrigation purposes and now has the means to alert residents by radio about impending floods. "We'll open the sluices to divert the flood; we'll cut off the big bunds to divert the route so excess water can be drained off."

Given the amount of time and effort aid providers spend discussing programs with community members, how can this be? It comes down to a crucial distinction between engaging communities as full partners and merely consulting them on programs developed by the aid providers themselves. Whose idea was the program? Who designed and planned it? Who implemented, monitored, and evaluated it? If community members were not deeply engaged in these activities, chances are slim that they feel a sense of ownership and that the program turned out to be a good, sustainable fit.

Despite desire and effort on the part of aid providers to incorporate community input into humanitarian programming, tsunami survivors found that their own knowledge, concerns, and priorities were frequently relegated to the sidelines. The results paint a picture of disempowerment: neighbors fighting neighbors about distributions of aid over which they had little control, and an attitude of dependency permeating villages that once prided themselves on their self-sufficiency.

"Now people have come to a situation worse than the tsunami. That is dependency," says E. T. Sarath, who participated in a study on community well-being in Mawella, Sri Lanka, and who feels his neighbors are not ready to support themselves independently of aid providers. "Most of the NGOs are responsible for this situation."

In the tsunami response, it was not community consultation that was lacking so much as community ownership of programs.

Aid providers who want to follow the lead of communities are hampered by concerns that they may be asked to stray from their core competencies;

by the difficulty in measuring the outputs and impacts of a mishmash of community-led projects, which in turn challenges accountability to supporters; by lack of training in participatory techniques and in engaging in equal partnerships with community members; and, perhaps most of all, by pressure to quickly complete a set of programs they have committed themselves to in the early days of the emergency.

"Even with the best intentions," says Annie George, CEO of BEDROC (Building and Enabling Disaster Resilience of Coastal Communities), an Oxfam research partner, "time and targets hang over them."

From study after study, a theme emerged: disaster-affected communities want a chance to guide their own recovery.

A report on the Listening Project[4] echoes her words: "Organizations almost everywhere … say that, especially in the aftermath of disasters, the pressure to spend money and show results quickly can be enormous. Yet, if participation is indeed 'a real exchange of ideas,' … time is exactly what is required."[5]

Like PAR, aid delivery that builds community ownership requires vision, time, skills, and resources. It doesn't move at an impressive pace, yet the alternative—building programs that are not fully embraced by communities—risks wasting funds and frustrating everyone involved.

IV. Owning disaster risk reduction: A prelude to community-guided disaster response

We are accustomed to thinking about DRR programs in terms of their potential to reduce risks. The goal of community ownership of disaster response programs provides an additional lens through which to view DRR programs: how do they contribute to a community's ability to engage with aid providers as active and equal partners and guide those providers to address the community's needs and aspirations at times of emergency?

Researchers in the tsunami program approached DRR from several angles, and their experiences and findings provide some answers to that question.

Linking vulnerable communities with aid providers

The study in India on building on local capacity carried out by BEDROC put significant focus on the relationships between the communities and the actors and networks around them. Researchers found that a community that is unaware of the services available through governmental organizations and NGOs is at a disadvantage during emergencies; likewise, a community that has some awareness of what's available but hasn't the confidence to seek it out may find itself adopting a more passive role than necessary during emergencies. The BEDROC researchers recommend that NGOs take on a role of establishing and maintaining the links between aid providers and disaster-affected communities. They offer as a model the NGO Coordination and Resource Center, which established information centers in villages throughout Nagapattinam District for disseminating information on programs and services and also helping community members voice their needs and concerns to the providers. The centers were originally established as part of the tsunami response, but over time they took on the DRR role of ensuring that vulnerable communities could quickly and proactively engage with governmental and nongovernmental aid providers in a future emergency.

Assisting communities in setting their priorities

Helping a community articulate its development priorities in advance of an emergency as a DRR measure is another way that aid providers can help a community stay in the driver's seat once the response is underway. After the tsunami, aid providers offered a dizzying array of programs, each requiring an investment of time on the part of residents.

"Whenever an NGO comes to the village, they want to form a committee," says Mariah Meraya Swaris, a research participant from a village in the Kalutara District of Sri Lanka. "Now our village has so many committees, if we go to them all, we don't have time even to cook."

A community with a clear picture of its short- and long-term needs, however, can make excellent use of the influx of aid that accompanies a disaster, sifting through the offers and choosing only what is best suited to its situation. The story of the irrigation system put in place by a group of women in the Sri Lankan village of Gonnoruwa that appears on page 44 was not part of the

Left: A research pilot program carried out by an Oxfam partner in India helped communities develop their own radio stations to communicate messages about DRR. A key to the success of the program is that creative control of the programming rests with community members like Raji (left), who produce shows on a wide array of topics of local interest, including—but not limited to—DRR.

research program, but it was cited by a research partner as a good example of a community taking charge after the tsunami and an agency following its lead. Key to the success of the program was the community's clarity about its priorities: rather than passively accept whatever aid came its way, the villagers refused one kind of assistance (food) and requested another (an irrigation system to help them grow food).

Although the villagers of Gonnoruwa were able to give strong guidance immediately after a disaster, that might not have been possible had the community been hit harder by the tsunami. It is more realistic to think a community could map out its development priorities prior to rather than immediately after a disaster. Governments and humanitarian and development NGOs could facilitate this process as part of DRR or development programming.

Deepening community engagement

It seems logical that achieving a high level of community ownership in DRR programs will lay the groundwork for community ownership of future disaster response activities. Taking part in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of a DRR program is likely to develop not only a community's skills but also its confidence and its expectations for deep engagement in future projects. Likewise, involving communities in every phase of a program can build the capacity of aid providers to engage communities as full partners in their activities. The DRR program in Sri Lanka described on page 40, in which researchers helped a village develop a cyclone contingency plan, involved community participation at every level. One result was a strong sense of community ownership of the plan they developed; another was a heightened awareness on the part of residents of the many ways that previous, more donor-driven programs had excluded them from the process.

In previous programs, "we received houses, but the people who came from NGOs were the ones who designed them. Just because we are poor and helpless, we had to accept those houses, but we don't have the ownership. We are not the ones who designed them or planned them," says L. W. Sunil Edward of Diviyagala, Sri Lanka,[6] who participated in the study. "This is the first time we have had a chance to contribute our thoughts and experiences on our own research. We have the ownership of this research."

Respecting local context, local input

Creating DRR programs that are owned and embraced by communities and that have good prospects for sustainability is a constant challenge to aid providers, but several of the research projects appear to have achieved those goals. A community radio pilot program in India, for example, whose primary purpose was to assist in disaster response and risk reduction, gained local acceptance by ensuring that the community itself was in charge of the programming and that the shows could address not only DRR but a wide

range of topics of interest to the village. In the Sri Lankan example involving a cyclone contigency plan, one of the keys to the high level of community ownership was that the researchers focused on enhancing the village's own traditional methods rather than introducing generic DRR interventions that wouldn't have reflected the community's individual needs and experience. What all the successful DRR research programs had in common was an investment in understanding the local context and a commitment to community participation and input.

Listening well

Whether an agency sets out to help a community identify its priorities or participate in program development, participatory methods are a powerful means of enabling communities to take their place at the center of their own recovery.

LINKAGES, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, AND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

The tsunami research program ended in 2008, but it left behind two new centers in Sri Lanka and India—institutes that will continue the work of bringing local perspectives to disaster response and risk reduction initiatives.

Sri Lanka: Sharing knowledge

One institute is the Disaster Risk Reduction Resource Center in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which is aimed at helping members of the humanitarian and development communities strengthen their networks and pool their knowledge.

"Earlier research by one of our partners determined that the members of both communities in Sri Lanka were working in relative isolation from one another," says Hettitantri. "We wanted to help strengthen the links."

The center, which is a joint venture by Oxfam and its research partners,[7] aims to build networks and share knowledge among government agencies, NGOs, communities, and the private sector.

It also serves as a repository of indigenous knowledge, such as how to store seeds to protect them from the elements and how to read animal behavior to predict sudden-onset emergencies.

"Ten minutes before a landslide, dogs bark," says Dr. P. B. Dharmasena of the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI). "The top-down approach to disaster management does not really recognize the importance of traditional knowledge," but this traditional knowledge can save lives. The center will help capture and share local wisdom from around the country.

India: Linking disasters and development

"In the past, the DHAN Foundation was looking at everything through the lens of development," says Sangeetha Rajadurai, coordinator of the Advanced Center for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR). "But hazards like floods, drought, and the tsunami affected all the communities we were working with. Over time, we realized there was a disaster angle to every development program we were engaged in."

Since 2007, Oxfam has worked with the DHAN (Development of Humane Action) Foundation, an Indian development agency, to create a center devoted to research on disaster risk reduction. ACEDRR is carrying out risk reduction studies that are closely linked to DHAN's long-term development programs.

For example, a DHAN program to help farmers improve their incomes and security brought in ACEDRR to study changing rainfall patterns in order to help farmers avert disastrous crop losses (see story on page 42).

"Integrating risk reduction into development programs can help prevent disaster-related setbacks," says Hari Krishna, Oxfam's research program manager in India. "And disaster survivors benefit from long-term development programs that address the poverty that may have put them at risk in the first place. ACEDRR will provide a link between the two."

Conclusion

PAR can help aid providers understand the social, economic, and cultural environment in which they are working, while simultaneously offering benefits to participants. It can generate the evidence needed to create thoughtful programs, advocacy, and evaluations, and it can help agencies explore new approaches to their work.

The Oxfam tsunami research program produced a wide range of findings and impacts related to shelters, HIV, mental health, gender mainstreaming, livelihoods, DRR, building on local capacity, and more.

An unmistakable theme emerged as well: communities want a chance to play a more decisive role in the humanitarian programs that affect them. Moreover, the quality and sustainability of programs are likely to improve if community members have a greater sense of ownership of the process and the results.

Moving forward: What's old, what's new?

There is nothing new about calls to improve community ownership and participation in disaster-related programming. What's new is that the largest humanitarian response in history has produced all the evidence any agency or government could ever need to justify taking strong action to make this goal a reality.

Likewise, the forms this action could take have been discussed for years:

- Improve ways of measuring community recovery so that aid providers aren't pressured into producing easily quantifiable outputs at the expense of those that may be more relevant to community recovery;

- Ease the time pressure on humanitarian programming in the rehabilitation phase by helping funders and the media understand the need for a deliberate process of community engagement;

- Increase cooperation among agencies to maximize effectiveness and minimize negative impacts on communities;

- Train ourselves to listen to communities and act on what we hear;

- Create DRR programs that communities can embrace and carry forward as their own.

Often missing from discussions about improving aid effectiveness and community ownership are not so much ideas as practical examples of how to get from here to there. The research studies have produced several:

- **Employ community-generated indicators of success.** The mental health study illustrated a way to gauge disaster recovery by having groups within each community identify their own criteria for well-being—such as unity, stable incomes, and health—and their own assessments of how each is improving or deteriorating over time. If NGOs joined forces to carry out

Left: A family strings garlands of jasmine flowers as community members gather to see a film by Oxfam partner K. P. Sasi, whose video based on Oxfam-supported research about deteriorating temporary shelters helped bring about the release of $1.4 million in government funds for repairs. The video was shown to communities up and down the coast of Tamil Nadu to prepare coastal residents to advocate for safe and dignified shelter in the event of future emergencies.

EMERGENCY PRIORITIES

In the aftermath of a sudden-onset emergency, how can aid providers balance the need to meet urgent requirements for food, water, shelter, clothing, and medical assistance with the need for deep community engagement? The one requires speed and the other, deliberation. The tsunami research drove home the importance of participatory approaches, including research, but how realistic are they for humanitarian aid providers?

"At the outset of an emergency, our top priority is to help people meet their basic needs for survival, and speed is essential for that," says Mike Delaney, Oxfam America's director of humanitarian response. "In that first, acute phase of the response, it is likely to be a burden to communities to engage in any more discussions than are strictly necessary. But that period is usually very short. Long before the 'emergency phase' of a disaster is over, there

is time to carry out in-depth discussions and research with communities to learn about their priorities and preferences."

And, says Oxfam DRR manager Jacobo Ocharan, "if community-based risk reduction programs have been implemented in advance of an emergency, the urgency of the initial phase should be reduced and the capacity of communities to clearly articulate their needs should be greater."

similar studies in disaster-affected regions, it would improve our understanding of the impact of our work and shed light on whether communities felt in charge or sidelined in the recovery process.

- **Improve interagency alignment.** Community members have repeatedly complained that in the aftermath of the tsunami, they had to attend too many meetings with aid providers. Community ownership of disaster response would almost certainly require more coordination among agencies and government organizations in order to minimize disruptions. One of the Oxfam-supported studies involved reviewing multiple disaster preparedness programs that were carried out in a dozen communities. A version of this research could have served as a joint impact assessment for all the aid providers who participated, thereby reducing the time community members were asked to spend evaluating programs. The same could hold true of needs assessments.

- **Train ourselves to listen.** Although aid providers routinely consult with communities about their programs, true PAR involves careful attention to ensuring that diverse groups within each community—not just designated leaders and those who are most articulate—feel safe to speak their minds. The participatory techniques used in many of the studies can be transferred to staff and partners on the ground to improve their ability to engage communities more fully in needs assessments and the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs.

- **Create sustainable DRR interventions.** While technical solutions and skills trainings can make important contributions to risk reduction, approaching DRR from a community-empowerment perspective can produce programs that are embraced enthusiastically by participants. A community radio pilot program in India, for example, whose primary focus was disaster response and risk reduction, gained local acceptance by ensuring that villagers could initiate and produce their own radio shows on whatever topics interested them.

Ownership of the response begins with disaster risk reduction

If disaster-affected communities want a chance to guide their own recovery, what are the implications for DRR? How can a DRR approach help prepare communities to take a strong and active role in post-disaster activities?

- Facilitating links between communities and governmental and nongovernmental aid providers before disaster strikes can help communities proactively pursue the kind of assistance they most require.

The largest humanitarian response in history has produced all the evidence any agency or government could ever need to justify taking strong action to improve community ownership of disaster response.

- Helping vulnerable communities clarify and articulate their development priorities before an emergency occurs could enable them to provide clear guidance to aid providers about which kinds of programs would have the greatest long-term impact.

- Enabling community members to play a key role in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating DRR programs could build the capacity of both aid providers and communities to engage in full partnerships in the aftermath of a disaster. Participatory approaches, which include demonstrating respect for local knowledge, are a powerful tool for accomplishing community ownership of DRR.

Coming full circle: The medium is the message

By listening closely to tsunami-affected community members, we learned that aid providers hadn't been listening to them very closely. By making space for everyone to speak, we learned of errors in the aid process that wouldn't have happened had everyone at the time been encouraged to speak. Through the research program, we discovered the need for greater community ownership of programs, and we found that a means of meeting that need was embedded in the PAR process itself. And by illustrating the importance of understanding the local context of disasters—a context that is different in every community in every emergency—the research pointed to the need for more research.

"Listening to communities through participatory action research is an investment in the sustainability and effectiveness of aid programs, and in the well-being and empowerment of the disaster-affected communities at the center of our mission," says Miles. "The humanitarian community has a key role to play in emergencies, but as the research confirmed, it is the disaster-affected people who need to guide the response. At the end of the day this is their home, their disaster, their rights, their future. As humanitarian agencies, we need to take care that the ownership of the recovery process is theirs as well."

Stories from the field

There is nothing that cannot be changed
THE GENDER STUDY

Oxfam has a key focus on empowering women, which is reflected in the tsunami research program. Many of the researchers who led the studies were women, and the participatory methodology employed in most of the research was chosen in part to ensure that women's voices were heard on every topic. Some studies focused on issues of particular concern to women, such as the research described below, which explored how humanitarian programs can be a force for gender equity in the tsunami response and beyond.

What is the difference between sex and gender? Between the practical needs of women and girls after a disaster and their strategic needs? What are gender-blind, gender-sensitive, and gender-transformative interventions?

These are not questions to be asking yourself in the midst of an emergency, yet everyone involved in emergency response should know the answers.

In June of 2006, researcher Pincha set out to learn about how well women's needs were met in India after the tsunami, and to document the most successful work of several local NGOs. What she learned is that, while many international NGOs had issued guidelines about promoting the well-being and advancement of women and girls, in the midst of a major emergency their staff and partners didn't necessarily have the training or commitment needed to make the goals reality.

"Local NGOs working in partnership with international NGOs can prove to be either the strongest or the weakest links in delivering gender-sensitive programs," says Pincha. "Those with a high awareness and commitment to gender equity can translate abstract ideals into effective and culturally appropriate programming on the ground, while those that have never successfully challenged the biases within their organizations or communities might deliver programs in a way that perpetuates inequities."

That realization suggested Pincha's next step: develop a toolkit—translated into local languages—to help NGOs of all stripes focus on the issue of gender equality and the needs and opportunities that present themselves at times of emergency. The document that emerged introduces concepts related to gender; the different ways that the tsunami disaster affected women, men, and

marginalized groups; ways of determining the practical and strategic needs of women and other marginalized groups in disaster situations; case studies about programs that worked well after the tsunami; and

Local NGOs working in partnership with international NGOs can prove to be either the strongest or the weakest links in delivering gender-sensitive programs.

recommendations for making future programs more thoughtful and fair.

Kasthura Chandrasekar, the leader of a women's federation of self-help groups, was introduced to the Tamil version of the toolkit in May at a workshop for local NGOs in Nanadavanam. "The idea of practical gender needs is very important. It hits us like anything," she says. She explains that she wouldn't get much out of a longer document because she is semi-literate, but, she says, "the toolkit is very simple and crisp."

The two-day workshop on the toolkit that she attended involved discussions, role-playing, and lively games for 22 NGO leaders, designed to bring to light the ways that gender

stereotyping and discrimination are social constructs, not decreed by nature and not to anyone's real advantage.

"Unless gender sensitivity is internalized, it won't be consistently applied," says Pincha. "If you are consistently aware of the gender issues in any context, then your spontaneous response to disaster will be sensitive."

As the workshop drew to a close, the participants wrote down on slips of paper the things they wanted to hold onto from their two days together, and some old notions they'd like to throw away—a collection of wishes and vows that shows internalization of Pincha's messages was swift and deep.

"In my life, I will not differentiate between men and women; I will take up gender in all my work."

"I had an expectation that men should behave in a certain way. I am throwing this notion away."

"I used to think about Aravanis [transgendered people] in society as disgusting. I'm throwing [away] my ignorance here."

"My wife, my daughter, my female relatives—I used to dominate. I'm throwing it out."

"There is nothing that cannot be changed. It is possible to change. I take an oath to bring about gender justice in me, in my family, and then out in the world."

Left: "Unless gender sensitivity is internalized, it won't be consistently applied. If you are consistently aware of the gender issues in any context, then your spontaneous response to disaster will be sensitive," says researcher Pincha, (pictured at center).

Above: Aneestha is a Dalit girl from Tamil Nadu whose mother's self-help group now owns several fishing boats. Oxfam-supported research points to the positive and potentially long-term impacts of placing high-value assets into the hands of women's groups.

Research that could save lives
THE HIV STUDY

The Swasti Health Resource Center undertook a study of whether and why vulnerability to HIV increased on the tsunami-stricken coasts of India. Using inventive participatory methods, the researchers were able to elicit frank and confidential answers to sensitive questions. The results provide important—possibly life-saving—insights for the humanitarian aid community.

It began as a rumor early in 2005. A report here, a quiet word there. Enough to suggest that in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, the coastal villages of southern India might be in harm's way once more—this time from the deadly HIV virus.

Many experts thought these tight-knit communities were relatively safe from the AIDS epidemic, but with the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands, the social landscape—like the coastline itself—was recreated in a moment.

The rumors reached Michael Jose, coordinator of Oxfam's HIV program in India, that people living in crowded temporary houses and communities were experiencing new pressures that could increase their risk of HIV infection.

"There were many possible triggers, but we had no evidence," says Jose, so while he continued the Oxfam HIV/AIDS awareness program, he and Hari Krishna, Oxfam's research program manager in India, engaged a well-known Indian health research organization to determine whether and how the tsunami disaster and its aftermath were increasing the vulnerability of the coastal communities to HIV infection.

"We did not set out to determine actual rates of HIV infection in the villages," says Hari Krishna. "That would have revealed very little about the changes precipitated by the disaster and even less about how and why they took place." Instead, the research focused on how people felt their own HIV-related behavior had changed since the tsunami and what brought about those changes.

The central difficulty in carrying out the research is obvious: who wants to talk about your own behavior if it's something dangerous or strongly condemned in your community? But the inventive staff of Swasti, Oxfam's research partner for this study, came up with a plan and a new research tool, which they call the polling booth.

Do you use condoms?

Eight women sit in a circle, each with a cardboard box in front of her to conceal the choice of cards she places in a jar. In the center of the circle stands a facilitator who asks a set of questions aimed at determining how vulnerable these women are to contracting HIV.

This is a demonstration of the polling booth technique. The equipment involved is simple: a jar, a cardboard box, and a stack of numbered cards—green to indicate yes and red for no—are all it takes to build a "booth." But with willing participants—and researchers who have earned their trust—it can be used to carry out the very delicate task of eliciting honest answers to tough questions.

After the polling booth survey, the facilitator and participants tabulate and discuss the results. In a real-life situation, the facilitator might begin by saying: "Two people answered that they use condoms and six said they don't. Why do you suppose people in this village might choose not to use condoms?" Such a question could launch a valuable discussion of community perceptions of condom use and the spread of HIV—with no one having to reveal his or her own personal decision.

"What we share in a polling booth is fact," says S. K. Shashikala, who participated in the Swasti research and later helped demonstrate the technique to observers. "In this process, there is no inhibition."

Researcher Manoj T. J. led groups of men in these polling booth sessions. "The participants had a chance to talk about issues that they might otherwise be silent about," he says. "The discussion often revealed realities on the ground. When you know those realities, you can plan accordingly."

A research participant named Vasanthamma added a gender dimension: "This is good for women where we come from a culture of silence."

A wake-up call

Although the researchers were successful in their mission, they had bad news to report. After interviewing around 1,000 people in 30 tsunami-affected communities, they determined that in 10 out of the 11 temporary shelter settlements studied, HIV vulnerability rose in the aftermath of the tsunami.

The lingering trauma of the tsunami disaster, combined with life in the crowded temporary shelter settlements and disruptions in employment, triggered changes in sexual behavior that, in the absence of strong knowledge about safe sex practices, put men and women at risk. Strict community standards of behavior were unenforceable when villages were scattered into temporary camps, and many survivors were drawn to alcohol and extramarital relations—including commercial sex—as a means of coping with stress, boredom, and overwhelming grief.

By now, many of the conditions that caused HIV vulnerability to spike have been resolved. The need for AIDS education and services remains acute, but most people can report that they've moved out of temporary shelters and are back to work, and that the trauma of the tsunami has subsided. But for emergency aid providers, the research has implications far beyond the coast of India.

"If aid providers don't supply enough water or food or shelter after an emergency, it's clear to everyone what's wrong, but a rise in HIV risk after a disaster can go undetected until it's too late," says Mike Delaney, Oxfam America's director of humanitarian response.

"Now we know much more about how responders in future emergencies can help communities reduce their vulnerability. This is research that could save lives."

Above, top: The Swasti researchers developed a tool they call the polling booth that allows focus group members to give confidential answers to sensitive questions. "What we share in a polling booth is fact," says Shashikala, who participated in the research. "In this process, there is no inhibition."

Above, bottom: The Swasti study underscored the importance of raising awareness about HIV before disaster strikes. Street theater is one of the ways Oxfam and its local partners communicate messages about preventing the spread of the virus.

A process that can't be rushed[8]
THE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM REVIEW

The Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID), an Oxfam partner, recently released a study about the efforts of aid providers to help Sri Lankan communities prepare for future disasters. The participatory techniques they employed, which were aimed at creating safety for women and men, including people with varied levels of literacy, are valuable tools for humanitarian practitioners who understand the importance of listening carefully to community voices.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. It's a fine old proverb, but if you're a humanitarian aid provider, it's time to move on.

That's the gist of a recent study carried out by an Oxfam partner in Sri Lanka. After the tsunami, many aid providers were so intent on teaching a man and a woman to fish that they neglected to ask them whether fishing was what they actually wanted or needed to learn—or even whether they already knew how to do it.

In June 2007, IPID, in partnership with Oxfam, set out to review post-tsunami programs that were focused on building local capacity for disaster preparedness in a dozen Sri Lankan communities.

Among the findings were that communities wanted more input into program plans, more transparency about program spending, more respect shown for their traditional knowledge, a better match between community needs and the programs being offered, and better coordination among aid providers

to avoid duplication of effort and excess meetings.

Jayatissa Samaranayake, executive director of IPID, adds a sobering observation: "In all the communities, one thing we heard was 'Nobody asked us what we needed. They gave us things they thought we needed.' "

The upshot of the research: Community members thought most of the programs they received were useful, but changes—deep changes—are called for. It's not just that aid providers need to find new ways to carry out their programs; they need to find new ways to conceive their mission.

At the heart of the issues, says Mallika R. Samaranayake, founder of IPID and lead researcher for the study, is community participation.

"There's a difference between consulting with communities about a program, which most aid providers already do, and really engaging them as full partners," she says. "Without a full and active partnership, there's a big risk that the program will turn out not to be suitable or sustainable."

In other words, says Hettitantri, "prefabricated programs—conceived

and designed by people in faraway places—are a gamble." Aid providers would do better to spend less time teaching men to fish and more time listening to communities and helping them pursue the goals that they themselves have conceived.

The art of listening

The participatory methods of the IPID study were as interesting as its findings.

Every step of the research process was designed to create a safe environment for the participants.

"Participatory approaches depend on facilitators acting as conveners and catalysts, but without dominating the process," write the researchers in their final report. "Many find it as difficult as it is time-consuming. Facilitators need to show respect to the participants, be open and self-critical, and learn not to interrupt the process. They need to have confidence in the community. …"

The IPID facilitators initiated activities but then stood back as the

participants took over the work of coming to consensus and conveying their thoughts and experiences through diagrams and prioritized lists.

"We tried to create a setting in which they could share their perceptions freely and honestly," says Mallika.

"People really wanted to talk," says Jayatissa, "and some of them told us it was a novel experience for them because in this kind of gathering their role has always been that of listeners. From the pulpit someone was preaching, and their role was to listen."

Beyond the short-term results of the research, which included frank appraisals of disaster preparedness programs, the opportunity for these community members to think through and articulate key issues around their needs and vulnerabilities may turn out to have long-term significance as well. That, at least, is the hope of the researchers, who write, "By using participatory

techniques, the community can gain confidence and legitimacy, and start to speak out in ways that were previously impossible."

The pace of success

To watch the IPID research in progress is to look simultaneously at a key problem and its solution: careful, respectful listening revealed that what was lacking in much of the tsunami response was careful, respectful listening.

In humanitarian response, aid providers are rewarded for moving resources quickly to those in need. But as the IPID research suggests, ensuring that those resources are used to meet the needs and aspirations of disaster-affected communities requires deliberation.

"Helping a community express what it wants and needs most," says Hettitantri, "is a process that can't be rushed."

Left: Community members in Payagala North, Sri Lanka, discuss the results of the IPID research. "There's a difference between consulting with communities about a program, which most aid providers already do, and really engaging them as full partners," says lead researcher Mallika.

Above: An underlying purpose of PAR is to give community members the skills to analyze their situations and the confidence to articulate their thinking.

The perfect knowledge for survival
THE COMMUNITY-BASED DISASTER RISK REDUCTION STUDY

Researchers from the Institute of Human Development and Training (IHDT) and the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI), two Oxfam partners in Sri Lanka, undertook a study aimed at helping communities create effective disaster contingency plans. The researchers focused first and foremost on the villagers' own traditional knowledge. In Diviyagala, this approach was key to the community's sense of ownership of the plan that resulted.

Standing on Leopard Rock at the mountain temple of Aranya Senasanaya, it is hard to think about mayhem. The great slab slopes gently down toward the village of Diviyagala below, where the houses are barely visible under a canopy of coconut palms, and the valley stretches out toward the jagged Wadinagala mountain range. Flowering trees scent the air, and the low whistle of the *koha* bird accentuates the quiet.

But from time to time, the villagers hear a whistle of a different sort, and this one warns of terrible danger. "It's like whistling on electric wires," says one. "It's a strange

noise, like shouting from a long distance," says another. And when they hear it, they run for cover.

The Sri Lankan village of Diviyagala lies in the path of cyclones. The violent storms, which originate in the Bay of Bengal, make landfall 50 kilometers (30 miles) to the northeast. Their course runs south along the range, but suddenly, at the mountain that marks the boundary of the village, the storms veer west and churn their way through Diviyagala and beyond. They don't come often—the big ones only every 30 years—but the worst of them destroy every house and paddy field in their path.

Sri Lankans face a wide range of risks, from landslides and floods to armed conflict to tsunamis and marauding elephants. Some hazards have been created or exacerbated by humans and could eventually be solved; others are the result of unstoppable natural forces. Regardless of the source of trouble, Oxfam's Hettitantri points out, "communities can reduce the impact of any hazard if they have the knowledge and resources to do it."

When it comes to knowledge, though, aid providers tend to waltz in with the latest thinking on risk reduction and ignore what the communities already know. Oxfam's research partners use another model: encourage each hazard-affected community to draw on its own knowledge and thinking to develop a plan of action, adding in expertise from the outside only as it's required and requested along the way.

In one of the early meetings in this community, researcher Prabath Patabendi of IHDT asked the villagers what they do to protect themselves from an approaching cyclone. They answered that they head for the mountain.

"My first thought was that going to the mountain was a stupid idea, because a grade-three cyclone pro-

ceeds 50 meters [around 55 yards] above ground level," says Patabendi, who is a hazards expert. "I thought that moving to the mountain would diminish their survival rate." But as a researcher with an eye to the value of traditional knowledge, he had to consider that they knew something he didn't. He found the answer under a rock. A very big rock by the name of *Guhawa.*

Hidden in the forest on the mountain is a gigantic boulder, 100 yards long, at least. If you were a child, you would find this the biggest, best playground ever. You would hide in its caves, swing from the branches of the fabulous climbing trees that press in around it, and scale the great rock to command a view for miles around. If you were a Buddhist monk, you would meditate in the shadow of its awe-inspiring mass—which, as an ancient inscription suggests, is what monks have done here for more than 2,000 years.

But if you were a villager with a cyclone at your back, you would find it a refuge from wind and rain: as many as 150 people can take shelter in the caves and shadows of this rock.

"I thought to myself, they have the perfect knowledge for survival," says Patabendi.

So, instead of suggesting more conventional approaches to reducing cyclone risks, the researchers helped the community build on its own experience.

"The main problem we've identified is water," said the head monk at a recent community meeting.

While there's space for everyone to take shelter, there's no source of drinking water nearby; the community now aims to restore an ancient cistern for collecting rainwater.

"We have not had any experience like this in our lives," says R. M. Rathnayaka Jayaweera, a village resident. "Before, other researchers

came and used their own information and methods. They didn't consult the communities for our ideas and experiences. So, the ownership of the research was theirs."

"In this study, the information and ideas are those of the community," says U. Wijayantha Ukwatta, a researcher for SLFI. "We respect their knowledge and their attitudes. They identified how to prevent loss of life and property by using traditional knowledge. And they have made the research their own."

Left: Researchers Patabendi (left) and Ukwatta on a beach in Sri Lanka where cyclones from the Bay of Bengal make landfall. Their project in Diviyagala, which resulted in a cyclone contingency plan, built on the community's own traditional knowledge.

Above: "Before implementing aid agency plans here, we would rather they listen and understand the rural villagers' traditional knowledge and methods," says Edward (left), a community member from Diviyagala, Sri Lanka.

Forecasting a better future
LINKING DEVELOPMENT AND DISASTER RISK REDUCTION PROGRAMS

The onset of climate change is endangering a way of life in rural India. The Development of Humane Action (DHAN) Foundation's Advanced Center for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) is helping small farmers adjust to the new uncertainties, while DHAN development programs are helping them take steps out of poverty.

The farmers of the village of Sengapadai, India, make it their business to know what's coming. They are fortune-tellers of sorts, who look deep into history in order to forecast the future. Using methods that have evolved over thousands of years, they watch the movement of the stars, notice the feel of the wind on a given day of the month or year, and carefully observe the behavior of plants and animals. At the heart of the mysteries they set out to unravel each year is this: When will the rains come?

If they miscalculate, the consequences can be grave. In years past, it has meant families have postponed not only weddings but also medical care. Sons and daughters have dropped out of school,

Rains are coming when they shouldn't and not coming when they should, and the traditional forecasting methods, unable to adapt to the speed of change, are losing their power to predict.

"There's been a vast difference in rainfall patterns in the last 10 years," says Jeeva Rathinam, another farmer. "Before that, we used to plan properly and plant one kind of seed in the fields. Now we have to mix them together and see what comes up."

"The rainfall variations these farmers are seeing now are defeating their knowledge of the way nature functions," says Hari Krishna, Oxfam's research program manager in India.

day in May 2008, the farmers of Sengapadai came together to learn the results.

Rains that once fell here predictably in July, she told them, can now be expected to arrive in late August. Then she made a proposal: delay sowing peanuts until between Aug. 10 and 16.

A heated discussion followed. Shifting to accommodate the rains could make some crops more vulnerable to infestations of weeds and pests, and the farmers argued pros and cons of various plans. But an hour later, everyone had come to agreement: the best way to balance all the factors would probably be to plant corn in September.

This is not research as it's conducted at universities, where academics carry out studies at a comfortable distance from actual farmers, and where recommendations are conveyed to the villagers in top-down fashion. That day's discussion, which began with Arthirani's educated guess about what to sow when, ended with a practical plan that drew on knowledge from both inside and outside the community. The ACEDRR study, says Arthirani, "is not a one-way process."

Community members are not simply considered beneficiaries of the study, explains Hari Krishna. "Here, they are partners in the research.

"In the month of July, if the wind blows vibrantly, there will be good rainfall. If softly, no." —Padmanaban, farmer of Sengapadai

ending their formal education. They've pawned their jewelry, which represents their savings—even the necklaces that symbolize their marriages. And, says 51-year-old Jakkammal, "in a bad year, there's only one meal a day."

We are not getting proper rain

The specter of bad harvests looms larger than ever these days because, as one farmer puts it, "We are not getting proper rain."

Climate change, in other words, has come to Sengapadai.

Researchers and farmers collaborate

The DHAN Foundation's ACEDRR, an Oxfam partner, has set out to help communities adjust to the changing climate landscape. Researcher B. Arthirani, herself the daughter of farmers, gathered and analyzed 40 years' worth of local rainfall data, and on a sweltering

We are able to have three meals

DHAN is tackling that vulnerability on two fronts: the disaster-oriented research of ACEDRR is helping ensure that changing rainfall patterns don't lead to catastrophic crop losses, while DHAN's development programs are building resilience in other ways—helping those same farmers organize themselves into self-help groups that enable savings and investment; create federations that have clout in the marketplace; and gain access to high-quality seed, affordable insurance, and lenders that charge two percent interest instead of ten.

It is an approach that is working. By November it was clear that the shift from peanuts to corn was a big success. But there are signs everywhere of the growing security of this community—most convincingly in the confident smile of Jakkammal. The days of one bad harvest plunging the community into debt and hunger, it seems, are over. "After joining DHAN," she says, "we are able to have three meals."

Above, top: Researcher Arthirani (center) discusses her findings about changing rainfall patterns with farmers in Sengapadai. The ACEDRR study, she says, "is not a one-way process."

Above, bottom: "There's been a vast difference in rainfall patterns in the last 10 years. Before that, we used to plan properly and plant one kind of seed in the fields. Now we have to mix them together and see what comes up," says Rathinam, a farmer of Sengapadai.

They know best about their soil, their sky, their water, and what crops suit their needs."

A painful irony

Outside the meeting place, a heifer nosed along the roadside looking for something to graze on, and a bullock cart passed by with a load of fodder. Women headloading firewood and water walked along the dusty main street in the fierce midday sun, and in the distance, a man stood knee-deep in a pond, splashing water on his team of bullocks after what had probably been a morning of hard labor in the fields.

Fossil fuels and all their labor-saving pleasures seem to have bypassed this village entirely. There were no cars or tractors in sight, and despite the scorching temperature, no one was heading home to air conditioning or refrigerated drinks. It is a painful irony that many of those who have done least to bring about climate change are the most vulnerable to its effects.

Drawing water to a thirsty village
FOLLOWING THE LEAD OF A COMMUNITY

In the aftermath of the tsunami, Oxfam helped an impoverished farming community in Sri Lanka find a solution to its most devastating chronic emergency: drought. Highlighted by a participatory institute as an example of an aid provider following the lead of a community, the *anicut* (irrigation dam) project illustrates how honoring community priorities can lead to results that are high-impact, sustainable, and community-owned.

The pool above the Gonnoruwa anicut is peaceful, cool, and long-awaited. Here, at a bend in the Malarara River, water that pauses above the irrigation dam nudges up against the sluice gate of a hand-dug channel.

"In my grandparents' time, my parents' time, and even my time, we had this idea to take water from the river for our crops," says D. A. Ekanayaka, who lives in the village. "All of these people for generations knew they could take water, but they didn't know how."

This is the dry region of Sri Lanka, where irrigation is the lifeblood of agriculture. Although the Malarara River is only a few kilometers from the village of Gonnoruwa, Ekanayaka's parents and grandparents had no way to transport enough water for crops from A to B. The result: crop failures, sometimes four seasons out of five. The villagers were nearly destitute, forced to depend on moneylenders to make up the endless shortfalls.

Then came the tsunami, which took the lives of 60 people in Gonnoruwa and a neighboring community. If the wave had struck on another day of the week, the village would have been spared: Gonnoruwa is 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) inland. But Dec. 26 was market day in the coastal town of Hambantota, and many of those who went to buy and sell never returned.

But when, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the villagers were offered food handouts by aid agencies, they took the long view: what they needed wasn't food; it was the means to grow it. If you

really want to assist us, villagers told aid agencies, help us get water to our crops. Oxfam took them up on it.

A small group of village women took charge of the anicut project. It was they who negotiated with Oxfam, government irrigation authorities, masons, and vendors. And they organized the community to provide labor for jobs like transporting materials and mixing concrete.

But as women stepping into a leadership role normally occupied by men, they were put to the test from day one.

"At the start, the men tried to do some things just to see whether the women would give up. To see whether we had the courage to continue the work," says Mallika Abayakoon.

At home, there were complaints from husbands that the cooking, cleaning, and child care were being neglected; at the construction site, there were refusals to carry out the tasks assigned. But the women were a force to be reckoned with. When men balked at the labor asked of them or the wages offered, the women simply stepped in and did the work themselves—even when it involved heavy jobs like mixing cement.

But they always had the support of a handful of village men, Ekanayaka among them. "They didn't care about food, time, or anything," says Abayakoon. "They were like our fathers, our brothers, our very good friends. They treated us really well."

The anicut was completed in March of 2007, and the village that once

struggled to produce a single crop can now grow two a year. What does this mean to the women of Gonnoruwa and their community? They are eating three meals a day; they have pulled themselves out of debt; they can grow rice and home gardens, too; they are building better houses for themselves; they are sending their children to school for extra classes and helping them continue with higher education.

But the gains don't stop there. The women's husbands—now proud of their wives' huge contribution to the community—support them in new ways.

"Most of the men changed their behavior because of the anicut project," says one of the women. "Now half of the household work is done by my husband, even if I'm at home."

And instead of a handful of men supporting women's leadership in Gonnoruwa, there are now scores.

K. Somawathi is a member of the women's group. She is shy and has a serious look about her, but when asked how it feels to be a respected community leader, she smiles and says, after a pause, "It's unbearable happiness."

Left: The women of Gonnoruwa who led the anicut project. "There's something special about this project. Oxfam didn't go to the village with a blueprint for an anicut. The need was coming from the people; the response was coming from Oxfam," says Jayatissa Samaranayake, executive director of the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development.

Appendix I
About the research and our partners

1. "A Rapid Assessment of the Shelters in Five Tsunami-Affected Districts" (India)

Partner: Department of Social Work, Loyola College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, www.loyolacollege.edu

Partner mission: To help students better understand rural and urban social issues, as well as build on their conceptual and practical skills.

Key finding: Temporary shelters deteriorated long before many displaced people were able to move into permanent houses, leaving shelter residents living in conditions that were unhealthy and unsafe.

Completed: October 2006

Key impact: A video ("If It Rains Again") about the findings was used in successful advocacy for government funding of shelter repairs.

Contact for more information: Rector of the college, Father K. Amal, S.J., kamalsj@gmail.com; lead researcher, Ashok Xavier Gladstone, gladstonexavier@gmail.com; Oxfam America contact: Hari Krishna, hari_2068@yahoo.com

2. "Public Awareness and Policy Research and Advocacy for Appropriate Shelters: Building on Lessons From Tsunami Response in South India" (India)

Partner: Visual Search, www.visualsearch.org

Partner mission: To foster communication and create spaces for social action in India through production and distribution of documentaries and feature films on social issues.

Key outcome: The video documents deteriorating conditions in temporary shelter communities and highlights lessons for the future.

Completed: November 2008

Contact for more information: Lead researcher, K. P. Sasi, kpsasi36@gmail.com

3. "Study on the Impact of Humanitarian Aid on Conflict" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: Colombo University Community Extension Center (CUCEC), Sri Lanka, www.cmb.ac.lk

Partner mission: To undertake research on social and economic development issues and to create an environment for professionals from government, NGOs, and universities to collaborate and participate in training and action-oriented community development research.

Key finding: Discrepancies in distribution criteria and poor coordination among responders have caused or inflamed underlying tensions in some Sri Lankan communities.

Completed: October 2006

Contact for more information: Lead researcher/CUCEC director, Professor Lakshman Dissanayake, uc-jica@eureka.lk

4. "The Coir Industry in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: National Institute of Business Management (NIBM), Sri Lanka, www.nibm.lk

Partner mission: To train students to take advantage of business opportunities in management and industrial technologies.

Key recommendations: Mechanized equipment and manufacture of value-added products like doormats, brooms, and planters could increase the incomes of coir workers; creation of a federation of self-help groups and a people's company could increase their leverage in the marketplace.

Completed: August 2006

Contact for more information: NIBM director general, Dr. E. A. Weerasinghe, weerasjp@yahoo.com; lead researcher, S. C. Kaluarachchi, kalu_sck@yahoo.com

5. "Research on Reviewing Existing Disaster Preparedness Policy and Practice" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Sri Lanka, www.ips.lk

Partner mission: To contribute to the economic development of Sri Lanka and enhance the quality of life of its people through research-based analysis of national policy issues.

Key finding: Increased community input and closer coordination among government, civil society, and the private sector would improve national disaster management policy.

Completed: October 2006

Contact for more information: IPS executive director, Dr. Saman Kelegama, kelegama@ips.org; lead researcher, Paul Steele, steele@sltnet.lk

6. "Understanding Vulnerability of Coastal Communities to HIV/AIDS" (India)

Partner: Swasti Health Resource Center, www.swasti.org

Partner mission: To enhance the health and well-being of communities through innovating, improving the effectiveness of organizations in the health sector, and helping communities to better address their health care priorities.

Key finding: Trauma, crowded living conditions, lack of employment, and lack of HIV education contributed to a spike in vulnerability to HIV infection in the aftermath of the tsunami.

Completed: May 2007

Key outcome: A toolkit titled "Toolkit for Mainstreaming HIV Prevention and AIDS Care in (Natural) Humanitarian Emergencies" was completed in December 2008 to inform and guide aid providers of HIV risk issues in future disaster response.

Contact for more information: Lead researcher/Swasti CEO, N. Shiv Kumar, shiv@swasti.org

7. "Understanding Gender Mainstreaming Strategies by NGOs in Tsunami Rehabilitation" (India)

Partner: Anawim Trust, www.anawimtrust.org

Partner mission: To empower rural communities to exercise their rights and access to natural resources in order to increase control over their lives, livelihoods, and environment.

Key finding: The needs of women and girls were often neglected in the tsunami response, but local NGOs had some successes in creating gender-sensitive interventions.

Completed: April 2007

Contact for more information: Lead researcher, Chaman Pincha, pincha.chaman@gmail.com

8. "Strengthen Gender Mainstreaming in Tsunami Response: Through Research Dissemination, Toolkit Development, and Capacity Building" (India)

Partner: Nanban Trust, www.nanbanindia.org

Partner mission: To combat exploitation and oppression of children through the protection and promotion of their basic human rights.

Key outcome: Toolkit on gender mainstreaming

Completed: November 2008

Contact for more information: Lead researcher, Chaman Pincha, pincha.chaman@gmail.com

9. "Contingency Plans for Rapid Emergency Response" (India)

Partner: Registered Engineers for Disaster Relief (RedR), www.redrindia.org

Partner mission: To provide frontline relief agencies with technical help in restoring the everyday lives of disaster-affected communities.

Key impact: The study helped Oxfam's partner organizations develop resource-based contingency plans, which provide comprehensive information about physical and human resources for disaster response.

Completed: July 2008

Contact for more information: RedR India director, Sarbjit Singh Sahota, sarbjit@redrindia.org; lead researchers, Victor Moses, moses_victor04@yahoo.co.in, and Mandar Vaidya, mandarcv@yahoo.com

10. "Learning From the Tsunami: Insights From Future Leaders" (India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia)

Partner: Center for Environment Education (CEE), www.ceeindia.org

Partner mission: To improve public understanding of environmentally sustainable development through education.

Key impact: The research compiled lessons learned from the tsunami while preparing youth researchers for careers in humanitarian research and response.

Completed: June 2008

Contact for more information: Project manager, Madhavi Joshi, madhavi.joshi@ceeindia.org; lead researcher, Gopal Kumar Jain, gopal.jain@ceeindia.org

11. "Field Study on Previous Community Capacity Building for Disaster Preparedness" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID), www.ipidlk.org

Partner mission: To transform the processes of governance and community development by promoting participatory methodologies among governmental, nongovernmental, and community-based organizations.

Key finding: When aid providers did not align their capacity building work with community priorities or other aid agencies, projects failed to achieve full community acceptance and engagement.

Completed: September 2008

Contact for more information: Lead researcher/IPID chairperson, Mallika R. Samaranayake, ipidc@panlanka.net; IPID executive director, Jayatissa Samaranayake, ipidc@panlanka.net

12. "Study on Paddy/Rice Sector in Tsunami- and Conflict-Affected Districts in Sri Lanka" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: Eastern University of Sri Lanka in Batticaloa, www.esn.ac.lk

Partner mission: To pursue teaching, research, and scholarship for the enhancement of public welfare, prosperity, and culture.

Key finding: Three years after the tsunami, the high cost of rice seed and the long-term damage to their fields made it difficult for farmers to recover financially from the tsunami; diversifying livelihoods and marketing options for farmers is essential to long-term recovery and development.

Completed: June 2008

Contact for more information: Eastern University vice chancellor, Dr. N. Pathmanathan, tel. +94 65 2240531; lead researcher, Professor K. Thredenamoorthi, dcensus@lanka.com.lk

13. "Participatory Action Research on Community-Based, Hazard-Specific Disaster Risk Reduction" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: Institute of Human Development and Training (IHDT), www.ihdt.org

IHDT mission: To develop the capacity of communities in Sri Lanka to face the challenges of the 21st century by creating people-oriented approaches to human development.

Partner: Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI)

SLFI mission: To develop training, education, awareness, and research around human rights, gender, and labor relations.

Advisory support by the Disaster Management Center (DMC), www.dmc.gov.lk

Key finding: Local communities have unique and specific ways to keep members safe in emergencies; DRR programs benefit from building on local knowledge.

Completed: September 2008

Contact for more information: IHDT lead researcher, Prabath Patabendi, prabhthp@yahoo.com; SLFI chairman, Dr. C. P. Udawatta, slf_chairman@padanama.org; SLFI lead researcher, Dr. P. B. Dharmasena, dharma.fcrdi@yahoo.com

14. "Improving Disaster Risk Reduction in India Through Research Capacity" (India)

Partner: DHAN (Development of Humane Action) Foundation, www.dhan.org

Partner mission: To improve the livelihoods of poor people by fostering innovation, helping local development institutions reach scale, and bringing young professionals into the development sector.

Key outcome: The study led to the founding of the Advanced Center for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR), www.dhan.org, a DRR research center within the development-focused Tata-Dhan Academy; in its first year, ACEDRR conducted 20 research and pilot projects on topics related to DRR.

ACEDRR mission: To enable the integration of DRR into mainstream development by building and sharing knowledge gained from practice and by pioneering research, networking, and advocacy.

Completed: December 2008

Contact for more information: DHAN Foundation executive director, M. P. Vasimalai, tatadhanacademy@satyam.net.in; ACEDRR coordinator, Sangeetha Rajadurai, sangeethatda@gmail.com

15. "Study on Mental Health Interventions in Emergencies" (Sri Lanka)

Partner: People's Rural Development Association (PRDA), www.prdasrilanka.org

Partner mission: To enhance the economic and social well-being of rural poor people, and in particular women, in Sri Lanka by building the capacity of community-based organizations.

Key finding: Local communities have their own criteria and indicators of well-being, which can be measured over time to understand how recovery is progressing.

Completed: November 2008

Contact for more information: Lead researcher, Chamindra Weerackody, chamindra@wow.lk

16. **"Research on Gender and Women's Empowerment in Disaster Risk Reduction" (Sri Lanka)**

   Partner: IPID, www.ipidlk.org

   Partner mission: To transform the processes of governance and community development by promoting participatory methodologies among governmental, nongovernmental, and community-based organizations.

   Key finding: While women were involved in DRR programs at the community level, there was a lack of women's participation at decision-making levels.

   Completed: November 2008

   Contact for more information: IPID chairperson, Mallika R. Samaranayake, ipidc@panlanka.net; lead researcher, Indira Aryarathne, mika345@yahoo.com

17. **"Study on Strengthening Local Capacity for Disaster Management and Risk Reduction" (India)**

   Partner: BEDROC (Building and Enabling Disaster Resilience of Coastal Communities), www.bedroc.in

   Partner mission: To build disaster-resilient and sustainable coastal communities by working with local, state, and national public and private stakeholders to develop appropriate interventions for local problems.

   Key finding: Local governance is an essential component of disaster management; humanitarian agencies have an important role to play in helping disaster-affected communities build better relationships with local governments and create the conditions in which they can respond to disasters themselves.

   Completed: December 2008

   Contact for more information: Lead researcher/BEDROC CEO, Annie George, annie.anniegeorge@gmail.com

18. **"Pilot Study on Review of International Finance to Tsunami-Affected States" (India)**

   Partner: Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), India

   Partner mission: To transform human settlements in India and South Asia into productive, equitable, safe, and sustainable living environments through interventions in mainstream urban planning, development, and management policies and practices.

   Key finding: Funds given by international donors to the government of Tamil Nadu for tsunami relief and rehabilitation exceeded the amount of money spent by the state government on such projects.

   Completed: June 2006

   Contact for more information: Former EPC director, Dr. B. R. Balachandran, bala@alchemyurbansystems.com; lead researcher, Darshan Parikh, dparikh@crisil.com

19. **"Participatory Action Study on Sustainable Exit Strategies for Tsunami-Related Programs" (Sri Lanka)**

   Partner: International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES), www.icescolombo.org

   Partner mission: To deepen the understanding of identity politics and conflict, and to foster conditions for a peaceful society through research, publication, dialogue, creative expression, and knowledge transfer.

   To be completed: December 2008

   Contact for more information: Lead researcher, Sanayi Marcelline, smarcelline.ices@gmail.com

20. **"Impact Assessment" (India and Sri Lanka)**

   India partner: Alchemy Urban Systems, www.alchemyurban.com

   Sri Lanka partner: Dr. Buddhadasa Weerasinghe, consultant, formerly with the DMC, Sri Lanka

   Partner mission: To provide professional services in development research, development planning, urban environmental planning, and management.

   To be completed: December 2008

   Contact for more information: India lead researcher, Mr. B. R. Balachandran, bala@alchemyurbansystems.com; Sri Lanka lead researcher, Dr. Buddhadasa Weerasinghe, buddhi4@hotmail.com

Appendix II

Publications of the Oxfam International Tsunami Disaster Risk Reduction and Participatory Action Research program

Program summary reports

"Collaboration in Crises: Lessons From the Oxfam International Tsunami Research Program." A summary of some of the findings and impacts of the research program, and a discussion of their implications.

"Listening to Disaster-Affected Communities: Lessons From the Oxfam International Tsunami Research Program." A four-page abstract of "Collaboration in Crises."

Humanitarian field studies briefs

Four-page summaries and discussion of the individual studies:

"Reducing Vulnerability to HIV After Disasters" (India)

"Gender Justice in Disaster Response" (India)

"Deepening Community Engagement" (Sri Lanka)

"Lessons in Disaster Management" (Sri Lanka)

"Sheltering People After Disasters: Lessons From the Tsunami" (India)

"Improving Livelihoods After Disasters" (Sri Lanka)

"Building Local Capacity Through Research" (India/Sri Lanka)

Additional briefs to be published at www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.

Feature stories

More than 17 narratives from the field, available online at www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.

Journal articles

"Understanding the Effect of the Tsunami and Its Aftermath on Vulnerability to HIV in Coastal Communities," Journal of Humanitarian Assistance (December 2008). Article composed by Mercy Mutonyi, based on original research by N. Shiv Kumar, N. Raghunathan, and Benoy Peter.

"Gender Mainstreaming During Disasters: The Case of the Tsunami in India," Journal of Humanitarian Assistance (December 2008). Article composed by Emily Bruno, based on original research by Chaman Pincha, Joseph Regis, Mareeswari, and Maheswari.

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"The Coir Industry in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka," Oxfam Humanitarian Field Studies (October 2006). Article composed by Zivai Murira, based on original research by S. C. Kaluarachchi, D. P. Nanayakkara, and Upali Wickramasinghe. Available online at www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.

Magazine article

Elizabeth Stevens, "The Priorities That Count," Monday Developments, April 2008, 20–21. Based on research findings from "Field Study on Previous Community Capacity Building for Disaster Preparedness, Sri Lanka," by IPID.

Videos

"Community Capacity Building," based on the research project "Field Study on Previous Community Capacity Building for Disaster Preparedness, Sri Lanka," created by IPID.

"If It Rains Again," based on the research project "A Rapid Assessment of Shelters in Five Tsunami-Affected Districts" (India). This video documents living conditions in the temporary shelters and asks the government and NGOs to respond quickly to repair them before the 2006 monsoon season. Available online at www.cultureunplugged.com.

"Resisting Coastal Invasion," based on the research project "A Rapid Assessment of Shelters in Five Tsunami-Affected Districts" (India). This video addresses the overcrowding of India's coastlines, which leaves poor coastal people more vulnerable to storm surges. Available online at www.cultureunplugged.com.

Toolkits

"Gender-Sensitive Disaster Management," created by Chaman Pincha and Nanban Trust with participating local NGO staff in South India to make international gender theory applicable to specific local contexts.

"Mainstreaming HIV prevention and AIDS Care in (Natural) Humanitarian Emergencies" (working title), created by SWASTI in South India to help local NGOs minimize HIV vulnerability in their disaster response.

On the Web site: www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies

Program summary reports

Feature stories about the research projects

Slideshows

Journal articles

Humanitarian field studies briefs

Program documents: the building blocks of a research program

Appendix III

Oxfam's humanitarian research in Aceh, Indonesia

The Oxfam International Tsunami Disaster Risk Reduction and Participatory Action Research program that is the subject of this report was conducted in India and Sri Lanka. But research was also carried out in Indonesia, the country worst affected by the tsunami. The Aceh research was more typical of traditional Oxfam analysis, with the aim of providing substantive evidence to underpin our advocacy work to support or influence the policies of the national and provincial authorities or other humanitarian agencies. While some of the research involved participatory techniques and some involved local research partners, these were not central or unifying principles of the Aceh research program.

Among the subjects of the Aceh research were land rights, gender equality and women's economic empowerment, and pro-poor economic development. For example, having advocated successfully for the Indonesian government's rehabilitation and reconstruction agency, the BRR, to change its policy toward people who rented and squatted on land before the tsunami—from offering only a cash handout to promising them land and a house—Oxfam conducted research on how this could be achieved, in particular with regard to the supply of suitable land and the provision of adequate infrastructure and services to new homes built on that land. Oxfam's research into women's right to land was also instrumental in influencing the BRR's policy of introducing joint land titling for land and houses donated by the BRR.

More recently, Oxfam has conducted participatory poverty assessments to ensure that provincial authorities, local NGOs, and civil society organizations understand the root causes of poverty in Aceh, and that they have the necessary training and information to implement effective regional development plans that take into account different community needs.

Much of the research carried out in Aceh was aimed at addressing longer term poverty reduction. Working with the SMERU Research Institute, we have undertaken poverty assessments that are intended to help the local government prioritize development needs and target funding more effectively. Our research has also looked at how climate change and deforestation might affect poverty levels and economic development in Aceh and Nias.

The Aceh research projects

Land rights

"Restoring and Confirming Rights to Land in Tsunami-Affected Aceh: A UNDP/Oxfam Report," *July 2005*

"Access to Housing for Renters and Squatters in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia," *May 2007*

"Housing for the Landless: Resettlement in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia," *July 2007*

"Women's Rights to Land and Housing in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia," *July 2007*

"Managing Conflict and Sustaining Recovery: Land Administration Reform in Tsunami-Affected Aceh," *May 2007*

"Avoiding Deforestation in Aceh, Indonesia: Land, Resource Rights, and Local Communities," *ongoing*

Pro-poor economic development

"Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), South Nias and East Aceh," *2007–present*

"Poverty Context Analysis for Aceh Province and Nias, Indonesia," *July 2008–present*

"Avoiding Deforestation in Aceh, Indonesia: Land, Resource Rights, and Local Communities," *ongoing*

"Aceh Green Tree Crops: Pro-Poor Economic Development and Rural Women," *November 2008*

"Market Access for Nias Cocoa," *October 2007*

Other

"Climate Change Fund Feasibility Study," *December 2008*

"Oxfam and Access to Water: The Aceh Case," *February 2008*

"The Acehnese Gampong Three Years On: Assessing Local Capacity and Reconstruction Assistance in Post-Tsunami Aceh," Report of the Aceh Community Assistance Research Project, *December 2007*

Notes

1. Oxfam carried out research in Aceh, Indonesia, as well, which also contributed to program planning and advocacy. The Aceh studies are not discussed in this report, as they were part of a separate body of research, but the topics are listed in Appendix III.

2. See Appendixes I and II for listings of our partners and research-related publications.

3. The researchers did not test participants for HIV infection; rather, they identified changes in behavior after the tsunami that left people at increased risk of infection. More information about the study can be found in "Research that could save lives" on page 36.

4. For information about the Listening Project, visit www.cdainc.com.

5. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, "Discuss Together, Decide Together, Work Together," Listening Project Issue Paper (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2008), 10.

6. Diviyagala was not tsunami-affected, so Edward's comments don't refer to tsunami housing; however, there are many examples of housing created for tsunami survivors that did not incorporate sufficient community input.

7. The Institute of Human Development and Training (IHDT), the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI), and the Disaster Management Center (DMC).

8. A portion of this article appeared in "The Priorities That Count" (Monday Developments, April 2008, 20–21).

Acknowledgments

About Oxfam International

Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 organizations working together in more than 100 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice: Oxfam America, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam-in-Belgium, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam France - Agir ici, Oxfam Germany, Oxfam GB, Oxfam Hong Kong, Intermón Oxfam (Spain), Oxfam Ireland, Oxfam New Zealand, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands), and Oxfam Québec. Please call or write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org.

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Between 2005 and 2008, Oxfam and its partners carried out a research program in the tsunami-affected regions of India and Sri Lanka aimed at improving the policies and practices of Oxfam and other aid agencies in the tsunami response, as well as contributing to humanitarian aid effectiveness in future emergencies. This report shares the key findings and impacts of the studies and the program overall, and reflects on their implications.

"The exciting thing about Oxfam's tsunami research, summarized in this report, is that it proves that a truly collaborative approach between [aid] agency and community is what people want. It is also what works best. Even more than this, the fact that Oxfam did not shy away from using participatory action research as an emergency methodology has proved its place in the humanitarian toolkit."

—Hugo Slim, director, Corporates for Crisis

"Oxfam's innovative funding of participatory research in the immediate aftermath of disaster … dispels the myth that there is no time to think and innovate in crises or to consult with the affected population or to involve them in program design and management. Good participatory research, seeking to solve the problems identified by the affected community, generates better programming."

—Peter Walker, director, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University

" 'Slow down and get to know us!' say many recipients of disaster assistance. Still, many humanitarians cite speed as their primary goal—and achievement. This Oxfam report demonstrates, again, that humanitarianism is more than a delivery system. It reiterates that to be effective in both the physical and moral support of people who survive disasters, emergency assistance must begin from the strengths of receiving societies and, with them, build appropriate strategies for reducing disaster vulnerability."

—Mary B. Anderson, executive director, Collaborative Learning Projects

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