

Deepening community engagement

As any experienced aid provider knows, community input and participation are crucial to the success of disaster response and development programs. Consulting with community members is intended to ensure that programs are aligned with their needs, but does it go far enough?

In 2007, Oxfam collaborated with the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPIID) in Sri Lanka to carry out a review of post-tsunami capacity-building programs for disaster preparedness. The research served as a joint impact assessment of community capacity-building efforts in disaster preparedness by the participating governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); it also provided an opportunity for community members to articulate their observations and needs and to develop their confidence as analysts. Both the findings and the participatory process of the IPIID study point the way to a fuller and more equal partnership between aid providers and affected communities.

A methodology of empowerment

Alert to the way communication can be distorted by discrepancies in money, power, education, and other resources, the researchers adopted a set of methods and tools designed to ensure that community members were empowered rather than intimidated by the research process. For example, within communities, women and men were in many cases given opportunities to work in separate groups to ensure that women felt free to speak their minds. The researchers employed diagrams and focus groups, which enabled people with limited literacy skills to participate fully. And they adopted the role of facilitators rather than formal group leaders, which meant that they stepped back to let community participants discuss and record their conclusions without interference.

“We tried to create a setting in which [community members] could share their perceptions freely and honestly,” says lead researcher Mallika R. Samaranayake.



“There’s a difference between consulting with communities about a program, which most aid providers already do, and really engaging them as full partners. Without a full and active partnership, there’s a big risk that the program will turn out not to be suitable or sustainable.” —Mallika Samaranayake
Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America

The methods employed in this study are those of participatory action research, one of several participatory approaches to development. Participatory approaches, which IPIID has helped introduce and develop in Sri Lanka, are aimed at ensuring that communities at the receiving end of aid and development projects are full collaborators in those projects—that they are not relegated to the role of consultant or passive recipient, and to the greatest extent possible, they have ownership of the projects aimed at improving their lives.

Throughout the study, participants were given a chance to discuss a range of issues, including the strengths and weaknesses of past and present community capacity-building programs for disaster preparedness, and what they thought were the key elements of effective future programs.

Key finding

❖ Aid providers in Sri Lanka did not always align their work on capacity building for disaster preparedness with community priorities or with one another, nor did they engage fully with communities in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation processes. If aid providers align better under a community-led plan, they will reduce demands on villagers’ time; build on local capacity; and implement stronger, community-owned, and sustainable response programs.

The findings: A top-down process

Although programs discussed by the aid agencies were not in every case identical to those reviewed by the community groups, important themes emerged from the study. For example, community members wanted more input into project planning and more transparency about the funds being spent on their programs. They felt that aid providers should learn about and utilize communities' local knowledge about disaster preparedness. They wanted meetings to be held at more convenient times. A key observation from communities was that agencies were delivering programs without having conducted community-based needs assessments, which sometimes resulted in programs for which there was little demand. Another important concern was that aid providers failed to coordinate their work properly among themselves, which led to duplication of effort and too many meetings.

“If you want to know whether the meal is tasty, you ask the diners, not the cook.”

—Mallika Samaranayake, lead researcher for the IPID study

Aid providers cited lack of sufficient time and funding to accomplish their work well, and they often gave their own programs poor grades for not having achieved sufficient community participation. Both aid providers and community members frequently pointed to a lack of properly trained resource people for capacity-building and disaster preparedness programming.

There was also a sense that, when it came to planning for their own disaster preparedness and recovery, the communities were not sitting in the driver's seat. The lack of needs assessments referred to by community

members, for example, revealed a tendency by aid providers to impose their own solutions rather than to follow the communities' lead. The agenda, it appears, was being set by aid providers, and community members were being treated more as targets of aid programs than as guides and essential partners in the design, implementation, monitoring, or evaluation of those programs.

“What we now have is a top-down process,” says Jayatissa Samaranayake, executive director of IPID. “What participatory practitioners say is reverse the process, find out what the [communities'] problems and needs are, what their aspirations and priorities are, and try to adjust our programs to meet them.”

A new kind of partnership

Community members from the village of Magama Siriyagama created the diagram shown on page 3. Magama village sits at the center of the diagram, and each circle connected to it represents a governmental or nongovernmental aid organization that worked there after the tsunami. The size of each circle represents the size and quality of the programs offered by the agency it represents; each circle's proximity to the community shows how close community members feel to the organization.

But the diagram inadvertently illustrates something else as well: the potential for aid providers to overwhelm a community. If each of the organizations depicted here

Women take the lead in averting disaster



The women of Gonnoruwa ensure water and food security for their village. Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America

IPID identified an Oxfam Australia project as an example of good practice from the perspective of community leadership and participation in a disaster-related project.

Gonnoruwa, Hambantota District, is a village in the dry region of Sri Lanka that once suffered repeated crop failures as a result of chronic drought and lack of irrigation. In the aftermath of the tsunami, aid providers offered the community food handouts, but the villagers declined. If you want to assist us, they told aid agencies, help us get water for our crops. Oxfam took them up on it.

A group of village women took charge of the project, negotiating with Oxfam, government irrigation authorities, masons, and vendors, and organizing jobs like transporting materials and mixing concrete. Six months later, the irrigation project was complete. Villagers who once struggled to produce a single paddy crop are now growing two a year. They are eating three meals a day; they have pulled themselves out of debt; they are building better houses for themselves; they are educating their children. And the women who directed the process have become respected leaders in their community.

independently consulted with villagers, engaged members in training and other programs, and solicited feedback from participants, the number of meetings would likely have interfered with villagers' ability to earn an income and care for their families. Community members went on to highlight this problem.

It is not hard to imagine an alternative system in which communities were first assisted in clarifying their own preparedness, recovery, and development priorities and then were given a chance to guide aid providers to meet their needs. Aid providers could align their programs under each community's own plan, conducting joint activities whenever possible to conserve resources—resources that include the valuable time of those they aim to assist.



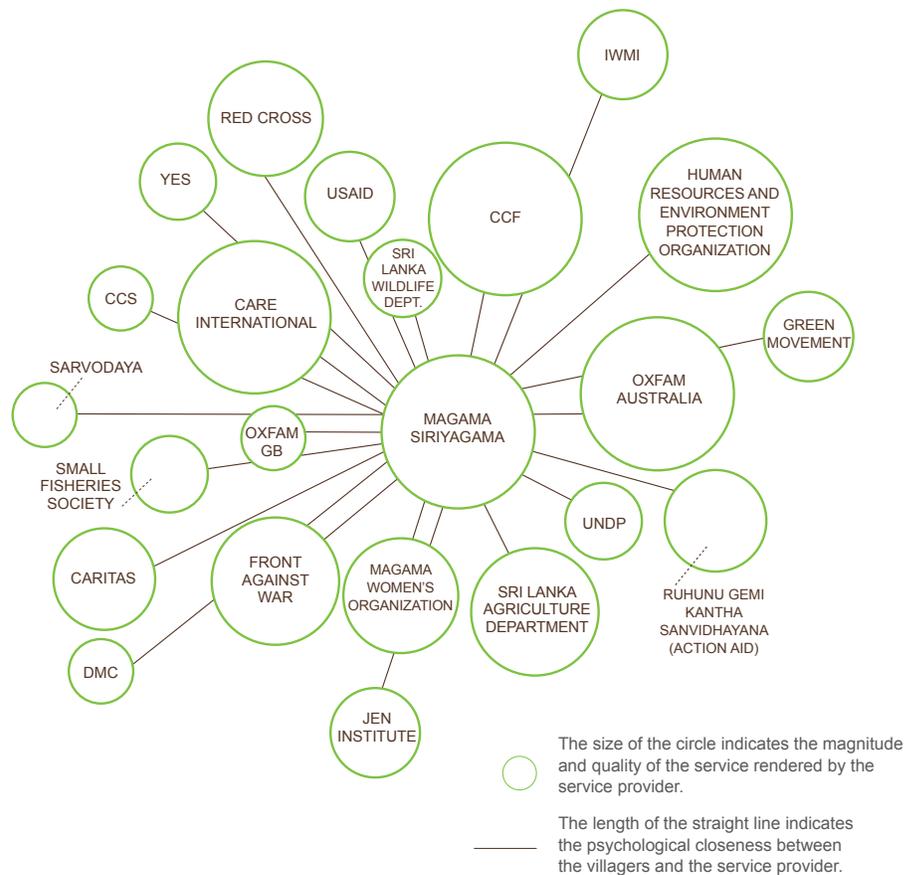
Research tools like Venn diagrams help community members with limited literacy skills express themselves. Here, women in the village of Magama Siriyagama depict the size and quality of aid programs delivered in their community. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*

Urgency and thoughtful engagement

If the communities that participated in this study could have made one suggestion to aid providers, perhaps it would have been this: "Listen more closely to what we have to say, and act on what you learn." But communicating across cultural, linguistic, and economic boundaries is never simple, and the difficulties are compounded greatly by the pressure agencies feel from donors to initiate and complete their programs quickly. Urgency is the watchword in the world of humanitarian response, but it can also undermine thoughtful listening and engagement.

M. P. Vasimalai, director of India's DHAN (Development of Humane Action) Foundation, another Oxfam research partner, points to the need for "intensive, rigorous education" of donors to counter the misperception that the only disaster programs worth supporting are those that are completed quickly. In the aftermath of a major, sudden-onset disaster, he says, humanitarian aid providers need at least five years to help communities recover and make sustainable improvements. Donors need to invest in this long-term support before and after a disaster.

"The study suggests that disaster preparedness programs need to go far beyond training in evacuation and first aid," says Nanditha Hettitantri, Oxfam's disaster risk reduction and research specialist in Sri Lanka. "Communities need to map out long-term plans for improving their resilience to disasters, and aid providers need to lay the groundwork for a new kind of partnership that supports communities to do this."



Institutional analysis created by community members in Magama Siriyagama:

Diagrams made by community members clearly highlight the potential challenges for communities when there is a lack of alignment and coordination between agencies. "Whenever an NGO comes to the village, they want to form a committee. Now our village has so many committees, if we go to them all, we don't have any other time, even to cook." —Mariah M. Swaris, 63

YES: Youth Employment Summit; CCF: Christian Children's Fund; CCS: Community Concerns Society; DMC: Disaster Management Center; USAID: US Agency for International Development; IWMI: Integrated Water Management Institute; UNDP: UN Development Program

Diagram source: IPID participatory research study on community capacity-building efforts in disaster preparedness, February 2008.

Points of interest for aid providers

- > **Consultation versus ownership:** When aid providers refer to “community participation,” they often mean simply consulting with communities about programs that the agencies themselves have already developed. IPID’s research points to the benefits of community members taking the lead roles in conceiving, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating aid programs.
- > **Harboring illusions:** In the IPID study, aid providers appeared to have a higher opinion of their programs than did the people they were trying to help. This points to a need for stronger partnerships and communication between providers and disaster-affected groups. Participatory impact assessments like this one can help ensure that community members are able to share their perceptions freely and honestly, ultimately helping to improve the effectiveness of aid.
- > **Investing time and money:** Building strong, trusting partnerships requires investment of time and resources. It was a delicate job for researchers to create a safe space for community members to speak openly, but they appeared to achieve it. Aid providers would benefit from training in the participatory techniques.
- > **Participation fatigue:** Engaging in aid programs takes time out of people’s lives, and if many aid agencies are working in a community, the time requirements can be burdensome. Careful coordination among aid providers could help minimize the cost of participation and improve outcomes.
- > **Committing to alignment:** Disaster preparedness programs can have a more positive impact when aligned with the long-term development priorities of the community and with one another. Competing policies, practices, and interests won’t make this easy for aid providers, but both government and NGOs need to take up this challenge in order to respond most effectively to future disasters.

Oxfam’s humanitarian field studies

This brief is one in a series of reports that summarize research Oxfam began with its partners in India and Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to study the impact of the disaster and the response. The goals of Oxfam’s humanitarian field studies program are to help strengthen the disaster response and risk reduction programs of Oxfam and other humanitarian aid providers and to improve accountability to those we aim to help.

To read more about Oxfam’s humanitarian field studies program, please visit www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.



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Speed has its place, of course, especially during the critical relief phase in the first 24 to 48 hours. “Getting people to safe locations and providing food, water, and shelter are crucial to saving lives in an emergency,” says Russell Miles, tsunami program manager for Oxfam America, “yet this, too, deserves some rethinking for future emergencies. To what extent should aid providers continue to improve our own ability to respond in the first hours and days of an emergency, and to what extent should we also acknowledge existing capacity at the local level and invest in increasing the skills and resources of people living in disaster-prone areas to better respond themselves?”

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Conclusion

At the time of this writing, IPID teams were in the process of returning to the villages where they had carried out the community research to show participants their findings and help them strategize about what to do with what they’ve learned. Sharing the findings is one last step in a study that offers a challenge to the top-down system of aid delivery in which providers, though they consult extensively with communities, tend to stop short of sharing ownership of the disaster preparedness and recovery process with the affected communities. Each element of the IPID research, by demonstrating ways of reversing long-established roles and assumptions, offers a glimpse of how aid providers and communities can begin to reshape their partnership in ways that could have far-reaching effects on disaster response and risk reduction.