

Sheltering people after disasters: Lessons from the tsunami

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the government of India, with the help of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), began the process of sheltering tsunami-affected people, often in temporary shelters intended for short-term use. Twenty months after the tsunami, over 120,000 households in Tamil Nadu alone continued to live in these temporary shelters in poor and deteriorating conditions, while the construction of permanent houses was plagued by delays.

In response, Oxfam partnered with the department of social work at Loyola College in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, to conduct a rapid assessment of the state of temporary shelters. The findings indicated that living conditions fell far short of internationally recognized standards, particularly because responders failed to move people into permanent homes within a reasonable time. Examining the challenges that aid providers faced in providing shelter after the tsunami could help agencies respond better after the next disaster.

Not built to last

The temporary shelters built in India were an improvement on the emergency shelters offered immediately following the tsunami. But they were only designed to last six months, despite experiences from other disasters that showed that permanent housing can take more than two years to build.

The shelters quickly fell into disrepair. Walls made of corrugated tin and tar paper ripped easily. The resulting holes compromised already limited personal space and increased tension between families. Structures made of flimsy material quickly degraded in the sun, wind, and rain. In addition, many shelters were built on low-lying land that was prone to flooding.

The 2005 monsoon season caused further damage to shelters, many of which had leaking roofs and walls. Eighty percent of shelters had no provisions for stormwater drains, and



People wait at the bus stop near a temporary shelter at Colachel. While temporary shelters got people out of emergency shelters, they were only intended to last for three to six months. Many people were living in temporary shelters for years longer than expected. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*

respondents said that water stagnated in and around the houses, breeding mosquitoes and disease. Thirty percent of families reported that they did not have dry places to sleep that season.

When this action research was initiated in October 2006, people in temporary shelters were facing their second monsoon season without a permanent or appropriate shelter. The researchers seeking to find out why this was the case found a complex web of reasons involving factors as varied as government policies, unrealistic time frames, lack of skills and experience on the part of agencies delivering shelters, and inadequate community ownership of reconstruction programs.

Government policies and coordination

Certain government policies inhibited the building of permanent houses, the researchers found. In one example, the government prohibited construction within a wide buffer zone from the sea. While the zone was ostensibly part of a disaster risk reduction strategy, many residents saw it as a land grab by powerful developers who hoped to build their own

Key findings

- ❖ After the tsunami, people were in temporary shelters for years longer than expected.
- ❖ Lack of planning and resources devoted to shelter by NGOs and the government led to temporary shelters that could not withstand environmental conditions, and the construction of permanent shelters was long delayed.
- ❖ Because many agencies did not foster real community participation and ownership in the shelter construction process, transitional villages disrupted social networks, further increasing the vulnerability of displaced families.

“Many of the people in temporary shelters had been the most poor and marginalized of society. There was no real political will to improve their lot.”

—Kenny Rae,
humanitarian response specialist,
Oxfam America

projects along the shore. Many fishing families refused to live in the permanent houses built for them farther inland, citing their desire to live near the sea, which improved their ability to make a living.

In addition, insufficient coordination between government and NGOs meant that budgets, timelines, and accountability were not always clear and that projects were not properly monitored, especially after people had moved into the shelters.

Skills, experience, and realistic time frames

The study also shows that while some NGOs and government agencies became involved out of necessity in building temporary shelters and rebuilding permanent ones, many of these groups, including Oxfam, had little experience managing construction projects and building permanent houses on such a large scale.

After disasters, governments and humanitarian aid organizations typically focus on delivering emergency shelters—like plastic sheeting, blankets, family tents, or accommodation in public buildings—along with food, water, and cash-for-work programs. Speed is crucial, as people’s health and even survival may depend

on timely access to such help. And while the subsequent construction of temporary and permanent shelters is often best left to the communities themselves and to commercial builders, the sheer number of people affected by the tsunami quickly overwhelmed the capacities of those groups, making it necessary for the government and NGOs to work in a sector where they had little experience.

Some of these setbacks could have been avoided if responders had been more realistic about the time it would take to build permanent houses and the level of skills and resources required. Then they might have planned and allocated resources for better transitional shelters that would have lasted two years or more. Some of these problems may also have been avoided if community residents had been more engaged in the planning process.

The importance of community ownership

The creation of effective transitional shelters requires consultation with various stakeholders and, most importantly, ownership of the project by those left homeless, the researchers found. It also has to be part of a larger strategy focused on rebuilding communities and settlements, not just individual shelters,

Listening to communities



Parvathy, 50, helps to build an Oxfam temporary shelter in her own community (Vinayagapuram village, Thirukkivil, near Ampara, Sri Lanka). In addition to the technical skills necessary to rebuild, residents should be given decision-making power about how best to reconstruct their communities after a disaster. *Jerry Galea / Oxfam*

After one year, people there received permanent houses from another donor, but many still kept their temporary houses to help meet other needs. One such person, Mr. Kunjumon, now lives in a permanent home but uses his temporary shelter as a small store, where he sells coconuts, buttermilk, and cigarettes.

“I cannot break this down,” says Kunjumon about that shelter. “It is a reminder of how lucky I was on that fateful day, and it was home for a year.”

From “*Learnings From the Tsunami, Insight for Future Leaders*,” a report by Oxfam and the Center for Environmental Education.

Though those affected by the tsunami have many justified complaints against the quality and promptness of the shelter response, some organizations did it right. Sahayi, a local NGO, is one of them.

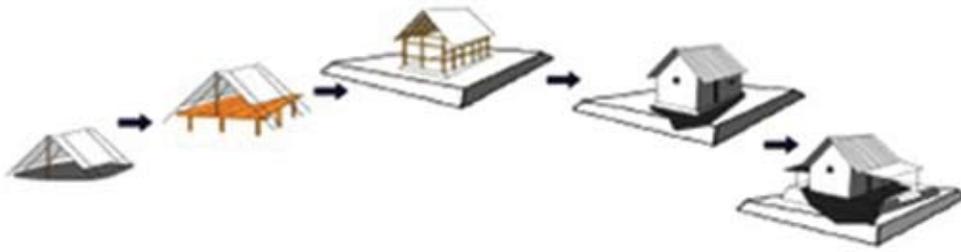
In Kerala, the government set up a large temporary shelter in the village of Valiyazheekki. People who were resettled there quickly tired of conditions and the lack of privacy.

At a community kitchen set up by Sahayi, community members determined that with some assistance they could set up temporary shelters on their own land and live there until the permanent houses were ready. Sahayi agreed.

By July 2005, Sahayi started building temporary shelters on each family’s property. In all, they built 576 temporary thatched houses to accommodate families in need. The structures were environmentally friendly, made from local resources, and built by local people to provide wage employment. Work was supervised by individual beneficiaries, as suggested by the community.

Shelter is a process, not a product.

Agencies should design shelter contributions to be part of a family's transition from emergency shelter to permanent housing. From "Living With Hope: People Wait for Homes Even Three Years After Tsunami" (Oxford, UK: Oxfam International, 2008), Oxfam Briefing Paper, 4.



and it has to be coordinated with the provision of water, sanitation, and livelihoods. Because the government and many aid agencies lacked expertise in building temporary and permanent shelters, they did not have those longer term strategies in place after the tsunami.

The result: Social problems of various kinds also arose because community networks were disrupted and housing needs went unmet.

For example, in Pondicherry, one organization consulted the community on home building design but ignored community requests to have relatives and friends as their neighbors. The organization felt that requiring people to live next to strangers would foster a sense of unity and minimize discriminatory behavior. Ultimately, however, this was not the view of the community and no one lived in those houses. In a separate study on vulnerability to HIV following the tsunami, researchers found that the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS increased when shelter policies did not seek to preserve community networks.

The problems did not end there. Researchers found that most shelters offered little privacy to girls and women, thereby jeopardizing their safety. Only a few of the temporary communities had TV halls, an important source of information and recreation. In a number of communities, some homes were built far away from schools, increasing student drop-out rates. And most temporary villages lacked public health clinics. The study concluded that closer consultation with shelter residents might have averted many of these problems.

Committing to shelter

The tsunami proved that it can take years after disasters before people move into permanent homes. For this reason, it is important that aid agencies stay invested in the process after temporary shelters are built, monitoring the living conditions and looking for cost-

effective, high-impact ways to maintain temporary shelters until permanent shelters can be constructed. This would require committing to initiatives such as ensuring true community ownership in decision making on the construction, maintenance, and management of the shelter, and using local resources and local workers, as well as materials that could eventually be incorporated into permanent homes or reused by beneficiaries.

Providing shelter is a complex undertaking that requires a long-term commitment on the part of aid providers. For these reasons, many try to avoid it. Yet dignified housing is crucial to the well-being and recovery of disaster survivors. The humanitarian community as a whole needs to develop its capacity to provide the whole continuum of shelter, from emergency shelter to temporary and transitional housing to permanent homes.

The diagram above shows a sample strategy designed by shelter expert Tom Corsellis. It demonstrates the long-term commitment that is required to deliver shelter effectively to disaster survivors.



Dilapidated one-room temporary shelters like this one in Tamil Nadu, India, offer practically no privacy from neighbors or other family members. Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America

Points of interest for aid providers

- **Community ownership is crucial:** Though many aid providers involved communities in some aspect of shelter construction, their participation was usually limited. Residents know best what they need to restore their livelihoods, rebuild their lives, maintain their community networks, and stay out of harm's way. They should be brought into genuine partnerships with aid agencies at every step of the way.
- **Shelter is a process, not a product:** An effective shelter response strategy would link short-, medium- and long-term shelter to the priorities of the affected population. This includes making buildings hazard-resistant and making people less vulnerable to the next disaster. Such a plan would include steps for monitoring the success of shelters after their delivery and would allocate resources to maintain the shelters if necessary.
- **Committing to shelter:** Many governments and NGOs hesitate to provide temporary and permanent shelter after disasters because shelter delivery is complicated and there is a high risk of failure. Yet the need for shelter after major disasters compels many of these same agencies to get involved. Making a stronger commitment to shelter and being prepared before a disaster would help responders have the resources and expertise ready when the next disaster strikes.
- **Research for advocacy:** The rapid assessment and video played a critical role in convincing the government of Tamil Nadu to release funds for temporary shelter repairs. Having more evidence to support advocacy work could help overcome institutional hurdles and ensure quicker solutions for affected people. To increase effectiveness, aid organizations with the same goals could share resources and better harmonize their efforts to gather field-based analysis.

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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Putting research and advocacy into action

Oxfam used the findings of this research to influence the government of Tamil Nadu to release more of World Bank funding for temporary shelters.

A video based on the research findings, "If It Rains Again," shows people wading through stagnant water, having only dirty water to drink, and holding their children day and night when the water becomes too deep. It also shows people who lost everything a second time when their temporary shelter caught fire. But most importantly, it shows their frustration at being forced to live for so long under inadequate conditions.

Acknowledgments

This brief is based on research conducted by the department of social work at Loyola College, an Oxfam partner based in Tamil Nadu, India. We would like to thank N. Hari Krishna of Oxfam, who provided technical and advisory support throughout. We would also like to thank the hundreds of NGO staff, government officers, and community members who participated in the study and volunteered their time and insights. For more information about the department of social work at Loyola College, please visit www.loyolacollege.edu/socialwork.html. For more information about the research, please send an email to hkrishna@oxfamamerica.org.

Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 organizations working together in more than 120 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice.

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