

Social transformation of the tsunami affected fishing community: The concept and the need

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The Social Transformation” framework combines both psychological and social support methodologies to bring about a social change, recognizing that the individual must also be supported and integrated within social support structures. Social transformation empowers the community to actively engage in supporting each other by giving them the knowledge and resources they need. It helps the community:

- *To understand processes that influence the receipt or mobilization of post-disaster psychosocial support services*
- *To identify methods of applying such influence*
- *To implement a long term plan to arrest decline in psycho-social resources*
- *To build fresh resources that substitute for those lost*
- *To re-establish psycho-social patterns*

Social Transformation combines psychological, social support, communication and educational methodologies to re-establish social support structures and processes. It recognizes that the individual must be supported and integrated within emerging post-disaster social support structures, and empowers the community to actively engage in supporting each other by giving them the knowledge and resources they need.

In order for the effects of Social Transformation on the individual, the family, and the community to be effective, and long lasting, it must tie into local religious beliefs, community lifestyle and cultural traditions.

Social Transformation, is a recovery process that overcomes psychological and social resource deterioration and re-establishes socio-cultural patterns.

This paper discusses the application of the Social Transformation framework in Tsunami affected villages in Cuddalore district in Tamilnadu.

Introduction:

The “Super Tsunami” of December 2004 caused tremendous loss to human life, property, livelihoods, and physical infrastructure in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Thailand. The devastation wreaked by the Tsunami, left coastal lands flattened and billions of dollars worth of infrastructure, economic assets and materials shattered. It had a severe impact on coastal fishing communities in Tamil Nadu, destroying houses, boats, fishing gear, agricultural land and saltpans and wiping out the livelihoods of millions of people. Though many reports have been shared by national and international agencies, the full dimension of the disaster and its varied impacts on different social categories are yet to be comprehended in the right perspectives.

While the tsunami itself is a naturally-occurring phenomenon, its intense impacts were exacerbated by human actions. The purpose of this paper is to use a psycho-social¹ lens to

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¹ Psychosocial intervention - “external support seeking to enhance the community's ability to deploy resources to 'transform' itself in response to its changing circumstances for enhanced psychological and social well-being of its members “ - The Psychosocial Working Group

examine the importance of factors that operated in the aftermath of the “super tsunami”. Such an examination will enable humanitarian agencies to contribute to the growing understanding of the links between disasters and development, by identifying important considerations for social transformation in the context of disaster mitigation.

According to Delaney et al (2000), “Perhaps, the most significant opportunity for transformation has to do with the scale of the disaster and the tremendous need for monumental investment and assistance”. However, the post disaster response to the tsunami exceeded all expectations, locally as well as internationally. As a result, there have been dramatic changes in the traditional social relationships and power structures that had remained unchanged for several generations, particularly in the fishing communities. The fishing communities in Cuddalore district have been facing the direct aftermath of the effects of these forces.

Of the 51 villages directly affected by the Tsunami in Cuddalore district, two villages were totally wiped out and forty-nine were partially affected. In total 99,704 people were affected, 617 died, 198 people sustained injuries and 15,200 households were displaced. A needs analysis showed that there was extensive loss of neighbourhood relations and in community living and cohesion, and disintegration of social infrastructure such as self help groups (SHG), anganwadis, mahila mandals, youth organizations etc. with a high degree of social discontent. There was a differential psychosocial impact of the “super tsunami” on the men and women from the fishing communities in Cuddalore District with serious and long-term implications for the rehabilitation process.

It is well known that certain communities bear the brunt of disasters much more than others. This has been strongly brought out in the wake of the Gujarat earthquake by Jigyasu (2004) when he stated that, “The rural communities in South Asia have traditionally been coherententities with distinct social hierarchy but well-defined roles and relationships. However these communities are transforming in many respects, one of which relates to inherent structural changes in traditional patterns and relationships within communities, which determine their mutual support systems. These contribute to lessening their vulnerability, although one must admit that some of these patterns and relationships are exploitative in some respects and lead to increasing vulnerabilities of certain groups.”

In the context of international aid, attention is usually focused on a community as a result of some ‘event’ or ‘events’ that have impacted it, such as conflict, natural disaster and so on. These event / events may be viewed as integral parts of the system that become a formidable test of societal adaptation and sustainability. As early as 1979, Torry pointed out that it must be recognised that social systems undergo major changes during disaster recovery (Torry 1979). Thus a disaster may be defined as a process / event involving the combination of potentially destructive agents and communities in a socially and technologically produced condition of vulnerability (Oliver-Smith 1996).

Natural disasters impoverish the communities they strike. Therefore, the material, information, and manpower influx into a disaster disabled system create the paradox of abundance within privation. Reconciling scarcity of the customary with a surplus of the unfamiliar creates a challenge that opens up the affected community to transformation. Although post disaster relief and aid can alleviate the problems in the immediate aftermath of any natural or man-made

calamity, it is apparent that the issues of bolstering the psychosocial resources both within individuals and communities have been largely neglected.

The alleviation of trauma needs to be addressed both in the short term and long term psychosocial context, before communities can be strengthened to muster their own resources. The killer wave devastated the coastal community and traumatized the fisher folk for whom Mother Sea was a source of livelihood and sustenance. While the Academy for Disaster Management Education Planning & Training (ADEPT) launched immediately into the “community counsellor” program to deal with the psychological trauma of the affected community (Gauthamadas 2005) simultaneously a needs assessment was carried out to develop a framework for future action². ADEPT aimed at going beyond just counselling to improve overall social well being by providing accessible and professional psychosocial services. However, there was a need to define psychosocial intervention before an effective program could be drawn up.

Components of psychosocial intervention:

During the past two to three decades there has been an increasing awareness of the psychological and social needs of refugees and displaced populations, in addition to their physical needs. The Psychosocial Working Group has identified the factors considered by those working in the field to influence the psychosocial 'well-being' of a community. The group points out that the nature of these events that impact the communities can be very diverse; they can be catastrophic or cumulative, often continuing to impact the community over many years. Their common feature, however, is that they challenge the community by disrupting or diminishing the resources of that community in some manner. The group has identified three major domains with respect to which such community resources can be mapped. (Strang 2005)

Human capacity. Events can lead to a loss of ‘human capacity’ within the community. This domain is taken to constitute such resources as the health and well-being (both mental and physical) of community members, the skills and knowledge of people, their household livelihoods etc. (All of which may be referred to as the ‘human capital’ of the community)

Social ecology³. Events also frequently lead to a disruption of the ‘social ecology’ of a community, involving social relations within families, peer groups, religious and cultural institutions, links with civic and political authorities etc. (All of which may be referred to as the ‘social capital’ of the community)

Culture and values. Events may also disrupt the ‘culture and values’ of a community, leading to a sense of violation; challenging human rights; and undermining cultural values, beliefs and practices. (All of which may be referred to as the ‘cultural capital’)

² See reports on ADEPT’s website: <http://www.adeptasia.org/publications.aspx>

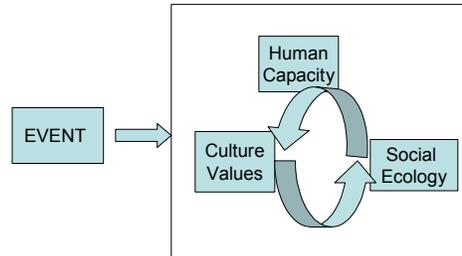
³ “**Social ecology** is, in the words of its leading exponents, "a coherent radical critique of current social, political, and anti-ecological trends" as well as "a reconstructive, ecological, communitarian, and ethical approach to society" (Wikipedia)

Basic Definition of Social Ecology: “The application of multiple levels and methods of analysis and theoretical perspectives to social problems, recognizing the dynamic and active nature of human-environment interactions and the social, historical, cultural and institutional contexts of people's lives” - Whitley, John M., (1999) *Conceptual Social Ecology*, (School of Social Ecology, University of California Irvine)

This can be depicted as follows:

The Domains of community resource

(Strang 2005)



In addition, the process has to take into account the factors that are peculiar to the ethnocentric communities such as the fishing communities. As aptly stated by Kaplan “The “traditional” societies (characterized by dependence on particular social forms and cultures, as well as on the whims and dictates of nature) are transformed towards “modern” society (characterized by control over nature, by individual free choice, and by independence as freedom from given social and natural reality). This paradigm assumes that ‘development can be created and engineered’. It is something, which is brought, to and for some, by others who presumably are more developed. Moreover, it is assumed that development is linear and predictable. Put, another way, there is a direct line between cause and effect, between input and output (Kaplan, 1999). The existing customs and traditions in fishing communities have several old world overtones for social control and a blend of new ones in livelihood practices.

A blueprint was drawn up for setting up a network of community support centres with trained community workers all along the Tsunami affected Cuddalore coast to implement long term psychosocial interventions and programs were developed to address the various domains. But soon it became apparent that “aid dependency” was a barrier to successful long term field interventions.

Programmatic intervention by external agencies is essentially predicated upon the judgment that there are insufficient resources within an affected community to sustain appropriate engagement with the challenges created by experienced events. This prompts the external community of humanitarian agencies to consider replacement of resources perceived as lacking. This, in turn, can create a dependence of the community on external aid. The aid dependency created in the aftermath of the “super tsunami” has been the cause of much debate in various national and international workshops and forums.

The enormous amounts of funding mobilised by the local and international NGO community, created an extremely competitive environment. Aid organisations competed for a space in which to help by offering a diverse array of appealing assets. In the short term such practices may have benefited the fisher-folk. However, the long term implications of this for sustainable development of the affected communities were disastrous. Providing *ad hoc* assets without community consultation and participation in analysing the potential impact on local relationships, market capacity and the environment resulted in new social and power dynamics

that threatened to undermine the social ecology and culture, increasing the likelihood of inter-communal tensions in an already ethnically charged environment.

In the post tsunami situation the international perception of local communities and coping mechanisms also changed. Fishing communities are largely organized communities and power structures tend to stabilize within fairly inequitable conditions and lead to perpetuating the cycle of rural poverty. This in turn led to large scale migrations not only from the region but also from the industry itself particularly among the youth where the opportunities for alternate livelihoods were unlikely to fetch them the equivalent economic self sufficiency enjoyed by previous generations.

“Disaster situations need to be looked at in a continuum, as actions taken during various phases have an impact on each other” (Kaplan, 1999). This highlights the importance and interdependence of both actions and intervention both before and after disasters especially in the stages immediately after and in the long term strategies adopted. There was, therefore, a strong need for convergence in services to the community.

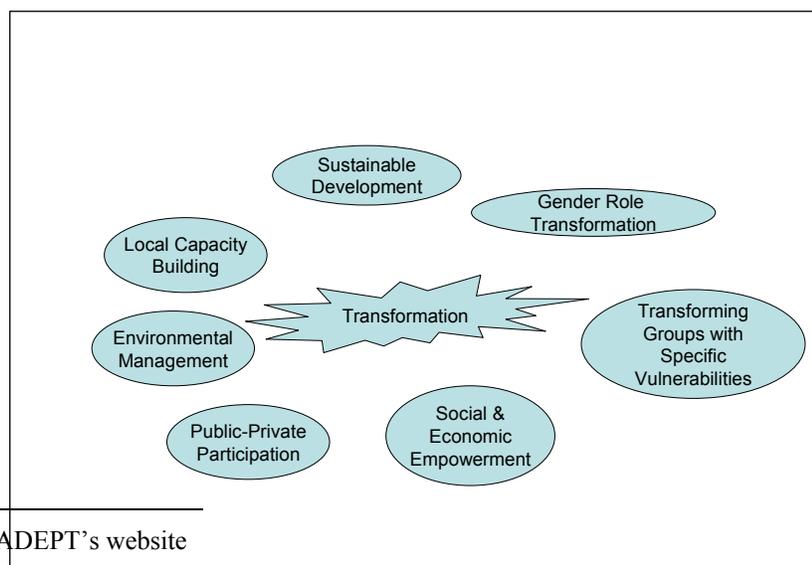
Along with the understanding the social and economic changes in any transformative process is the need for understanding the psyche of the individual and the community to comprehend the adaptability for potential changes in the individual and within the family and the community.

Therefore there was then a need to modify ADEPT’s program, taking these factors onto account. In-house discussions based on experiences and outputs of the international workshops organised by ADEPT⁴, made it apparent that an approach needed to be developed for bringing about a transformation in attitudes and expectations of the community.

The transformational process:

Delaney et al (2000) have developed some recommendations for transformative action. The following schematic depiction is modified and adapted for clarity on the process followed by the Academy for Disaster Management Education Planning & Training (ADEPT) in achieving grassroots’ level transformation.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS *Adapted from Delaney et al (Figure: Recommendations for Transformation)*



⁴ See reports on ADEPT’s website

The Transformational process, includes building human, cultural, and social capital through strategies devolving around the elements of transformation viz., gender role transformation, transformation of groups with specific vulnerabilities, social and economic empowerment, environmental management, and local capacity building. With this approach development will be sustainable especially when all players (including the state, private enterprise, non-governmental organisations, and community based organisations) come together for a public-private participation.

Accordingly ADEPT modified its programmatic approach to incorporate the various components of the transformational process into its program making use of personnel from the destabilised communities. These community support workers were anticipated to be highly effective as they represent the groups they are serving, and can readily gain access. These individuals are “natural helpers” who effectively work alongside the survivors providing the required special skills and training and both community and individual level services to the affected families, bringing about a change at the grassroots level.

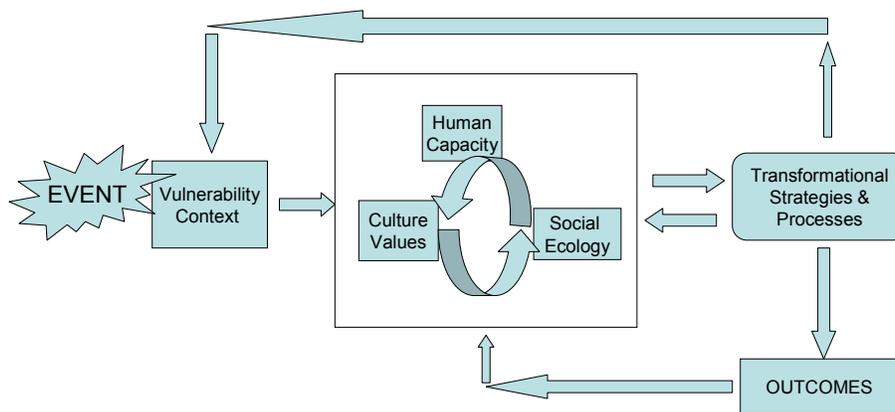
ADEPT’s programmatic interventions which emerged empirically were found to include components of both the psychosocial and transformational approaches. In house discussions revealed the close linkages between the two approaches and the merits of integrating them in practice. Thus there was a need to incorporate the best of both into a working model for “shaping development” (Kaplan 1999) and to create a “window of opportunity for long term change” (Delaney et al, 2000). Such a framework would be the basis for future change effected at the community level irrespective of the processes or methodologies being adopted.

A framework for change:

“The Social Transformation” framework combines psychosocial and transformational strategies to bring about a social change, recognizing that the individual must also be supported and integrated within social support structures.

The Social Transformation Framework :

(Adapted from Mak (2004) The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework)



The constituent elements of the framework, viz., vulnerability context, psycho-social domains and transformational processes, are interdependent, constituting different ways of describing interrelated phenomena. As expressed by Jigyasu, the disastrous event and the mode of aid delivery, has an impact (positive or negative) on the vulnerability context, and this shapes the way the affected community perceives any psychosocial intervention in the aftermath of the disaster. This in turn has a bearing on the response of the community to psychosocial intervention, which must necessarily precede (but not exclude) transformational processes. Both the psychosocial and transformational processes influence each other requiring constant programmatic modification. The outcomes in turn have a bearing on the ongoing psychosocial intervention as they modify the resource pool.

“Social Transformation” recognizes that the individual must be supported and integrated within emerging post-disaster social support structures, and empowers the community to actively engage in supporting each other by giving them the knowledge and resources they need.

It helps the community to

- understand the processes that influence the receipt or mobilization of post-disaster support
- identify methods of applying such influence
- Implementing a long term plan to arrest decline in psycho-social and transformational resources
- Build fresh resources that substitute for those lost
- Re-establish psycho-social and transformational patterns

This framework should be equally applicable to any community under similar circumstances. All communities are constantly affected by events and circumstances, and are continually adjusting to them. The understanding that communities are dynamic, always adjusting and changing is fundamental to this concept. It can be seen as a process of engagement leading to transformation involving new relationships between the capacities, linkages and processes of that community.

The impact of events on a community can, therefore, be understood in terms of the effect on resources as elaborated by the various constituent elements. Resources can be disrupted and depleted, but may also be strengthened, by events. Social bonding may for example, have been strengthened as the community unites against the common enemy. In some circumstances however, the threat may bring fear and mistrust within the community, weakening its social bonds. This was especially evident in the aftermath of the “super-tsunami” wherein the fishing community viewed the sea, which they had considered as “their mother”, having turned on her own children. Therefore, it is not the events themselves, but the way a community has experienced those events which is the true indicator of social impact.

This framework also suggests a way of evaluating the impact of events by looking directly at the effect on the constituent elements. Generally impact assessment takes into consideration depletion of physical resources, and largely ignores impact on vulnerability or ongoing psycho-social and transformational processes. At this point it should be recognized that just as events can

have a positive or negative effect on the resources available to a community; the resources themselves can be deployed positively or negatively in the aftermath of a disaster. For example, social linkage can be used to exclude other groups, whilst cultural beliefs can lead to abuse of sectors of the population.

The process by which a community responds to and engages with the disruption caused by the events experienced involves interaction between the constituent elements highlighted. Each of these elements is potentially negatively impacted by events. Importantly, however, each element also represents a pool of resources that can be mobilized to respond to the demands made by those events. The effectiveness of this engagement and the utilization of resources within the community may be seen to be a measure of the resilience of that community.

The Social Transformation framework recognizes that the community possesses both psycho-social and physical resources, but that while physical resources may be obliterated, psycho-social resources have only been temporarily weakened by the event / disaster and need to be strengthened. Thus, this can be indicative of “community resilience”. While the community may be capable of transforming itself without external intervention, programmatic interventions based on this framework can accelerate the process through the interaction between the affected community and the external community.

Sustaining the “social transformation” processes, however, is more difficult than mobilizing resources. The effects on the individual, the family, the community will be long lasting only if alternate strategies are developed to deal with the constant changes in human, cultural, and social capital.

This framework presents the community as dynamic, and constantly adjusting to events and circumstances, and implies that there is no 'normal' state for a community to return to, in the aftermath of a disaster / event. Thus the goal of any external intervention should not be to 'restore' the community to its former state. Instead the external support should seek to enhance the community's ability to deploy resources to 'transform' itself in response to its changing circumstances. The long-term goal would be that the community would be able to continue to meet these challenges independently without the need for external support.

ADEPT's program now is predicated upon the social transformation framework. Experiences in the field have shown that field level interventions based on the framework have been found to be effective to not only to meet the needs of the community for sustainability but also to deal with the ever emerging challenges of social and community dynamics.

Conclusion:

In the aftermath of the “super tsunami” ADEPT was confronted with the challenge of mustering local response and building local resources in the wake of massive material, information, and, manpower influx that had rendered the community dependant on aid. Exploring strategies for bringing about an enduring “developmental” psyche within the community and its members, in the absence of a tried and tested framework, ADEPT was forced to improvise. Drawing on available literature, and experiential learning, ADEPT evolved an adaptive framework for “social transformation” that gives scope for replication in similar situations, both at the micro as well as the macro level. While the framework emerged empirically as early as April 2005 (Gauthamadas 2005) later field level experiences have reaffirmed theoretical frameworks on which the

framework is currently based. Since it taps into existing community resources, the “social transformation” framework minimizes dependence on external resources and has the advantage of not needing the continued presence of the external agent of change.

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