

Uniting to Reclaim Traditional Land and Livelihoods

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In the decade since the 2004 tsunami, the affected fishing communities have battled dislocation, sea erosion and a fast depleting marine life. However, as one example from a fishing hamlet in Thiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu shows, collective efforts can lead to finding solutions. The fishing community of NTO Kuppam has withstood the government's efforts to relocate them far from the source of their livelihood – the sea – in the name of rehabilitation.

Just across Nalla Thaneer Odai (NTO) Kuppam, a fishing hamlet in the Thiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu, is the sea. It has slowly edged closer to the village over the last decade. But it is not the sea erosion but the spectre of eviction that has haunted the fishing community here for the past 10 years ever since the tsunami struck in 2004. The state government wants to construct tenements under its tsunami housing scheme along this stretch and NTO Kuppam lies in the way. The government's offer of houses in a relocation site to compensate them for moving out was found to be several kilometres away from their present location and they refused to give up their traditional rights. Even today, the fishing hamlet continues to resist the relocation moves of the government. However, very few fishermen thought they would be able to stand up to the government for so long since many families accepted the offer and relocated. For the majority that remained and resisted, it was largely the efforts of the Coastal Community Protection Movement (CCPM), comprising tsunami affected men and women and the Forum for Securing Land and Livelihood Rights of the Coastal Communities (FLLRC), a network of four non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that helped.

In fact, the FLLRC was formed to help communities claim their rights after ActionAid, one of the first voluntary organisations to start tsunami relief, found that the government's rehabilitation programme was pushing the marginalised

community out of their traditional lands. Since these NGOs – Arunodhaya Centre for Street and Working Children, Udavi, Community Development Organization Trust (C-DOT) and National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) – were also working in the tsunami affected districts, they were able to reach out to the communities. Udavi's Johnson Kennedy pointed out that with the demand for land along the coast in the urban and semi-urban areas for large-scale infrastructure or tourism projects, the livelihoods of the traditional fishing communities in Chennai and Thiruvallur districts were further jeopardised.

Community Smart Solution

In NTO Kuppam, it is Desingu, the 47-year-old community leader, who is in the forefront of the movement against eviction. The villagers learnt how to map their village resources and then decide whether or not moving out would be beneficial. The next step was to visit the alternative houses proposed for them. Not only were these tenements small with inadequate space to keep their boats and nets, it also lacked basic amenities. More importantly, the tenement location was very far from NTO Kuppam and the sea. This was enough for the community to turn down the government offer. "I can gauge the quantity and variety of fish by the colour of the sea and the movement of the waves. I go into the sea accordingly, even if it is at odd hours. But if my house is far away from the sea, how can I see the water? If I cannot see the water, how can I fish and how will I survive?" asked Desingu. The community knew that NTO Kuppam was facing sea erosion and that they needed to find a solution. They also realised that they would have to move out before it became life threatening. At the same time, they did not want to

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relocate to the government site. One of the solutions that came up during the community discussions was to find a site that was not too far from the sea and yet safe from sea erosion.

They found one such site adjacent to their village which was within 300 metres from the high tide line. Since it housed only an unused factory, it was ideal for relocating their entire village. Not only would this site be just 50 metres away from their village, but they would also be able to keep their boats safely.

Armed with this ideal solution, the community took the help of an architect to prepare a blueprint of their housing plan. The community feels empowered by the manner in which it went about seeking a solution. Instead of merely shouting slogans and holding demonstrations, the interactions with the FLLRC helped them actively look for and present an alternate plan to the government. Now they hope that the district collector who seemed impressed with it will help implement it.

Non-Fishing Communities

While residents of NTO Kuppam were able to withstand pressures to relocate, many of the devastated communities living along the Chennai coast living in relief camps and temporary shelters

following the tsunami were not so lucky. In February 2005, within two months of the tsunami, the state government's Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) managed to move out about 3,347 families, mostly dalits, from the coastal villages along the Marina stretch in Chennai district on grounds that their relocation to the suburban ghettos of Semmanancheri and Kannagi Nagar 20 to 25 km away, was for their own safety. They were also told that new houses would soon be built for them at least 500 metres away from the high tide line to protect them from any future calamity.

At that time, there was no reason for the community to disbelieve them. It was only after they had moved out that some NGO working on tsunami relief found the relocated families had been persuaded to put their signatures on documents agreeing to leave their traditional lands. The signatures of consent were reportedly taken by officials under the pretext of determining their "eligibility" for housing. No mention was made of relocation.

The marginalised and poor communities faced discrimination even during the government relief operations. When ActionAid began working with the urban coastal communities in Chennai following the tsunami in 2004, it found government efforts at relief and rehabilitation

were not reaching all the communities. In particular, dalits and tribals living along the coast faced prejudice since they did not belong to the fishing community although many of them were engaged in allied work.

The coastal communities comprise fishing and non-fishing families. The latter are not engaged in fishing as their main occupation. They live in the settlements (called nagar) along with the fishing community hamlets (known as Kuppam), and are involved in selling fish, dry fish processing, working at the ice plant and related business, boat and engine repair, and net making.

Just like the fishing community, the livelihood of the non-fishing communities, primarily dalits, is also dependent entirely on their access to the coast. They were among the first targets of the TNSCB's larger plan to relocate 29,909 families living in the urban coastal districts of Chennai and Thiruvallur to rehabilitation sites constructed about 25 km away from the original place of habitation.

Many of the traumatised families succumbed, moving into the tiny 160 x 212 sq ft TNSCB resettlement flats. But their living conditions were terrible. These families, comprising at least six members, were forced to live in these cramped one room quarters without adequate

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sanitation, water and electricity. Although these basic amenities were improved much later following the upsurge of community protests, two families still have to share one bathroom.

RTI to the Rescue

The deplorable living conditions of the relocated families helped others to thwart government attempts to evict them. When the government rolled out its Marina beach beautification plan, it was through a series of applications filed by the community under the Right to Information (RTI) Act that it became known that residents of more than 3,000 hutments in Srinivasapuram would be evicted from their homes to make way for parks, theatres, commercial hubs, convention centres and luxury hotels. This information proved key to the community's campaign to halt the implementation of the project. Armed with this data, the community refused to give up their traditional land and demanded the government renovate all their houses damaged by the tsunami. The government agreed to give up its eviction plans and repair the existing houses. Plans of a proposed express highway across the Chennai and Thiruvallur districts were similarly revealed through RTI petitions filed by the coastal community. For the highway to be constructed, 14 villages along the Marina stretch would have to be demolished, thus adversely affecting the lives and livelihoods of 50,000 people.

The community used innovative ways to foil these plans and their actions got the support of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). The political support was perhaps the tipping point. Within 24 hours, the then Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government announced that work on the expressway had been halted. In 2012, when AIADMK returned to power, Jayalalithaa, as chief minister issued a government order stating the expressway project had been cancelled. "This was an example of people power", said V Sasikumar, CCPM secretary.

Declining Income

Income from fishing has been declining over the years and the already fragile situation became more vulnerable after

the tsunami causing a depletion or extinction of many varieties of fish and fauna. When some coastal communities were relocated to areas as far as 30 km away from the sea, it added to their woes. Although some have continued fishing, many others, including those engaged in fish allied work, have given up and turned to other occupations. Those who fish have to now spend money on transportation to reach the coast. Not only has this reduced their earnings, but also made life harder, as they stay out on the sea longer to catch more fish to compensate the loss in income. The FLLRC also supported their demand for an increase in the monetary compensation given by the government during the lean season. The compensation has been increased from the existing Rs 4,000 to Rs 6,700 by a recent government order.

Women Claim Rights

However, women who suffered loss of fishing baskets and weighing scales during the tsunami were not considered worthy of compensation by the government as these were not seen as assets. The FLLRC partners identified articulate community women and built their capacity to inform and inspire action. This gave them the chance to turn the disaster into an opportunity. Coastal women have played a pivotal role in the community campaign to reclaim their land and livelihoods. It was their collective effort which ensured that the Nochi Nagar residents finally shifted into in situ flats built on the same land where they resided and earned their livelihood before the tsunami struck, after a long nine year struggle. Not only does every flat in the Nochi Nagar tenements have an attached toilet, it is also in the joint name of the husband and wife. Being co-owner has emboldened women to raise their voice against domestic violence. Women broke another barrier by demanding they be treated on par with men in all government entitlements for the fishing community. In 2011, more than 500 women from 16 federations from Chennai, Thiruvallur, Kanchipuram, Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram along with FLLRC partners sat outside

the office of the Chennai collectorate to demand they be given compensation equal to that given to men during the off season for fishing.

Although the women could not convince the government to pay them separate compensation, they managed to get the payment made jointly to the husband and wife. FLLRC partner, Arunodhaya facilitated the formation of the Coastal Women's Federation, enabling them to articulate their concerns at the district, state and national level. The election of 70 women to the male dominated Fisheries Cooperative Society in November 2012 was another big shot in the arm for the coastal women's empowerment. "This would not have been possible five years ago. We would never have had the courage to contest or to even to think we also had the right to speak before the men", said Selvi, a former president of the Coastal Women's Federation.

The growing confidence of women fish workers has translated into their trade union, a first in the state. The popular all-women fish market in Thiruvottiyur is run by the union members. They negotiate their own terms and drive a hard bargain when customers haggle, all with a winsome smile. Here, too, they have ensured a separate toilet for women and better sanitary and drainage facilities.

Next on their agenda is to get the government to recognise the labour put of women fish workers and categorise them as workers. This will make them eligible for similar benefits given to men fish workers including medical and accident insurance, compensations, etc.

Confidence and Challenges

The power of collectivisation and awareness of their rights has helped to assuage many of the fears of the tsunami affected coastal community. But challenges still exist. There is no telling when political capriciousness will overturn their lives. The danger of development-induced displacement still looms large. But now, as the NTO Kuppam fishing community has shown, they have learnt how to navigate the development bait thrown by the government.