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Supporting the forgotten people

Nalini Kasynathan, Oxfam Australia South Asia Program Coordinator writes about her recent trip to tsunami affected areas in South India.

On Thursday we visited Chengalpet, three hours south of Chennai, to visit the Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society (ITWWS), an organisation working with Irula tribes for more than 15 years. Irula tribes make up less than 1% of the Tamil Nadu population.

On arrival, we met the staff and the director of the program, many of them Irulas themselves. The director said, "We are an organisation that focuses on women, children and the environment and uses indigenous knowledge as a tool for enriching our community." I have heard many organisations describing themselves as having a gender focus, but this organisation was very different to many of them in their approach to community development work. ITWWS:

- is a tribal community which has as its central focus gender empowerment;
- focuses on the poorest of the poor having an awareness and an ability to differentiate and respond to those among themselves who are extremely poor and discriminated against by the community;
- is gender focused which, unlike other organisations, is translated into action and has a demonstrable impact; and
- use their knowledge of the environment to their advantage by preparing herbal medicines and marketing them in shops set up for this purpose.

The Wildlife Protection Law, formed in 1972 to protect endangered species in the region, has pushed the tribes out of their natural habitat, in search of employment. In many instances many men and women have become bonded labour to rich landlords and boat owners

Irulas are labourers who work closely with the fisherman on their boats. Due to the nature of their occupation, they are not concentrated in any one place, but are spread thinly along the



Photo: Martin Wurt/OxfamAUS.

coast. As such, the government and many non-government organisations (NGOs) did not perceive the Irulas to be affected by tsunami and hence they were largely forgotten in the terms of tsunami relief.

In India's social hierarchy, Irulas are considered to be very low in the community. The tsunami affected 1,800 Irula families, both directly and indirectly, who were living in 48 villages. Eighteen villages were completely destroyed and 16 people died, four of whom were children. When the tsunami hit, they moved into relief camps, but were not allowed to sit, eat or sleep with the others.

In the ITWWS office, we met Muneema, one of the Irula women from Kanjeevaram, and her small child. Muneema said she and her child were chased out the camp. A fisherman in the camp shouted at her, "why are you coming here and claiming food and cash from this camp which has been given to only those who have been affected. What did you lose? Almost nothing. We will not share anything with you". He then pushed her away, hurting her and causing her mouth to bleed.



Photo: Martin Wurt/OxfamAUS.

Muneema and others also reported that the tribal people were used as labour to bury the dead and all the bodies of the fishermen were buried in the tribal villages. Ironically those who came to supervise the burial were wearing gloves and facemasks, while the tribal people who were actually burying the dead were using their bare hands.

ITWWS was not quite sure at the beginning whether it should be involved in tsunami work as they did not know how many Irulas were affected by tsunami. When it became apparent, via an ITWWS survey, that the numbers were significant, they moved in. They set up relief camps and accommodated large numbers of families in their large office campus. They received generous public donations from the other high caste community members as well. But ITWWS set up their own camps for Irulas in which other community members, such as the Muslims, were also admitted. Since Irulas are usually dependent on these communities, ITWWS did not separate them in any artificial way.

ITWWS told us that Oxfam Australia was one of the first organisations that contacted them and agreed to give them relief items during the first week of January. It was because of Oxfam Australia's commitment to support the Irulas that the organisation was able to begin distributing food to large number of families living in many camps and villages from the first week.

All up, Oxfam Australia supported 1,600 families living in seven camps that were predominantly Irulas. Each family received 100kg of rice, 6kg of dhal, 20 biscuit packets and cooking utensils.

The Government was distributing 4,000 rupees (AUD \$120) to all affected families, but many Irula families did not get the government rations or cash. With some lobbying from ITWWS, some of the families received 2,000 rupees (AUD \$60). Their lobbying has also placed the plight of the affected Irulas in the media and government spotlight, with many consultations now taking place between the government and the Irula community leaders. ITWWS is now being offered support from many non-government organisations, but ITWWS has chosen to work with just two — one being Oxfam Australia.



*Oxfam Australia helped Irula woman Devi and her family by providing food relief.
Photo: Martin Wurt/OxfamAUS*

ITWWS took me to a model village which has been set up by another international NGO — ActionAid for 55 families in 2000 square metres land. Oxfam Australia has provided kitchen utensils and food relief to each family in the village.

In the village, we met Devi, aged 23, mother of two boys, age five and three, in her new home, surrounded by all the utensils and food that Oxfam Australia had given her.

“We lost our hut and all our belongings. We then walked 20km to a nearby town to stay with our relatives. A week later, we returned to a camp run by ITWWS because the relatives could not feed our family for more than a week,” Devi said. I asked her why they walked and did not take public transport. “For one thing I had no money and also the buses were crowded. In any case we will be the last to be taken in,” she replied.

“How do you like your new house?” I asked. Devi replied, “We were living in the past near a rubbish dump which was infested with flies and mosquitoes. We are having a peaceful sleep for the first time.” I pointed to the food rations and asked her if this was going to be adequate for her. “Oxfam Australia gave us rice, dhal and biscuits. They were of good quality and has lasted for a long time. We have not starved because of that. When this finishes we will be able to fish and earn adequate to feed ourselves.”

“I have received 5,000 rupees (AUD \$150) as a grant to purchase a fishing net. We have formed a self- help group. Through this we will save and also increase our incomes. See the utensils they have given us. We would never have purchased them in our life time. We are fortunate. We have a house to live, food to feed our children, and funds to kick start a

livelihood that we are familiar with. It may be possible for us to become independent fisher men and women with a small boat and a net through the society we have established and not be exploited by the boat owners whom we were depending on to provide a living.”

We met many such women in the new Irula settlement.

It has been a refreshing experience to meet with the group and see that the funds that were donated to Oxfam Australia are really being put to good use. These funds will help to renegotiate livelihoods, aimed not merely at reproducing the pre-tsunami status quo, but at creating a more equal society.

If things work out as planned, Devi will continue to live in a better house and will have an independent source of income, free from the exploitative relationship the family had with the fisherman who was their employer.

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