

## The strength of community

*By Oxfam Australia South Asia Program Coordinator Nalini Kasynathan, as told to Oxfam Australia tsunami response volunteer Richard Doyle.*

Sunday 26 December 2004. It was a holiday — Boxing Day. I was at home in Melbourne when our Sri Lanka Country Representative Gowthaman called me from his home in Badulla and said he had 'bad news' — that's when he told me about the tsunami. Though he didn't know many details, he was getting in his car, he said, to go immediately to the affected areas and may not be contactable. He said he would report in from the different locations.



*Nalini Kasnathan talks to a boy, orphaned by the tsunami, in an internally displaced persons camp in Sri Lanka. Photo: OxfamAUS.*

Soon after, Kavitha, my daughter, who lives in Polanaruwa, Sri Lanka, rang me and she also said she had 'bad news.' and had decided to go. So both Gowthaman and my daughter were off driving around in their cars. For the rest of the day, there were many calls coming in from different locations — from Oxfam staff, from Gowthaman and from my daughter.

That night, or it could have been early the next morning, Oxfam Australia' acting Emergencies Manager summoned a special meeting at the Melbourne office. We decided that we needed to release funds immediately to the field office and learnt that Gowthaman was already releasing funds that were under his authority from the Sri Lanka office. We released \$10,000 immediately from the CAT fund, which can be accessed without going through the usual approval process — something which I saw as being very useful.

Within two hours, one of our Oxfam field officers was at the disaster scene and our Sri Lankan Country Representative was there within six hours. We were kept informed by our field officers with updates every 2–3 hours. They knew what to do; they didn't wait for instructions or approval from us, they felt confident they could respond without having to refer to head office. This again was something I saw as being significant and it certainly

demonstrated just how much trust there is between the field staff and head office. If they needed a lorry to move people, they just went ahead and got one — the first priority being to move people out of the disaster area and to safety. Local community groups also acted on their own instinct and initiative, acting quickly to be on hand, and helping to move people and bury their dead.

The message here is that the field staff and local community groups felt empowered enough by the situation to make their own decisions and assess how best to respond. It was decision-making from the bottom up, not the top down. They were convinced any money they spent would later be approved and they certainly had many stories to back this up. I thought it was a brilliant response.

Two days after the tsunami I flew to the disaster area and my first impression was one of overwhelming devastation at the losses suffered. I was in tears. Having worked with the people and amongst these communities for more than 10 years, I felt and shared in their losses and was very depressed by it. Everyone I spoke to told a story of having lost someone close to them. But it wasn't just the loss of life that was so devastating, it was the destruction to community, and farms, crops, the loss of produce, cattle, goats and other animals so important to their subsistence. And I also found very saddening, the loss of smaller things like savings put aside in little boxes. I was taken to a farm by one woman and it was completely bare — wiped out. Again, this was very depressing.

My impression of the people and the way in which the communities handled themselves was one of respect and admiration, and in terms of the work we have done there over the years, very satisfying. They were able to set up camp committees and restart their communities — they wanted to stay and they were determined to do so. The local people were so strong, very determined; they were able to talk to the government representatives and agencies and communicate their needs, and if needed, debate and argue their needs.

Whatever Oxfam has invested in these communities was far from lost. The work we have done has helped these communities to bring about their own recovery. They were able to empower themselves with the attitude, thinking, and understanding that we have helped to foster or develop — not teach. So while there was devastating loss in a human and physical sense, the response and actions of the communities showed me, and reassured me, that we have in fact succeeded in empowering them to take control of and improve their own lives. In many ways, I believe the experience of the tsunami has strengthened and empowered these people even further. Certainly, our investment in strengthening people's understanding and awareness, rather than the physical, material-based approach of other NGOs, has I believe, paid off.

When I went there again in June, I thought it very telling that many of the people affected by the tsunami were in fact better off than they were before it. People were excited to tell me that they now had basics, like pots and pans to cook with, secure housing, concrete flooring

for their children to sleep on, toilets and better water. For a developing country that has had to endure 20 years of bitter conflict, to say that many of the people in the areas in which we work feel their lives are now “better than before”, is again, I think, very significant.

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