

EMERGING COMMUNITY LEADERS

Success Stories from Tsunami, Tamil Nadu, India

Initiatives that changed the villages

Chitra, Keelamoovarkkarai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, India

Before the tsunami, to the village of Keelamoovarkkarai had few facilities. There were no adequate sources of clean drinking water, no health care services offered by primary health centres (PHCs) and no hope for better living. After the tsunami, the formation of Arogya Sakhis for Health Awareness and Action (ASHAA) groups and the intervention of Health Guides changed the way the community began addressing issues and solving problems.

Health Access

Chitra is an example of how far an initiative can take an individual and a community. She has emerged as a community leader working not only for her fellow villagers, but also for those in neighbouring communities through visits to motivate, help and guide villagers to render PHC services, apply for various schemes, obtain bank loans, make sure that Village Nurses (VNs) visit regularly and supply medicines from PHCs to villagers.

Because of her commitment, approximately fifty widows have received pensions in the village of Keelamoovarkkarai. She has visited government offices, relayed information to vulnerable groups and even taken them back to offices to apply for benefits.

Before the tsunami, there were no village visits by PHC nurses charged with taking care of village health and providing medicines every week. After Chitra developed a good relationship with PHC, nurses have visited the villages and provided medicines regularly. PHCs have also developed good relationships and a strong network with ASHAA groups. They help PHCs provide medicines to patients and help them conduct awareness camp, meetings and other events.

Chitra had also attended PHC-provided training sessions on polio. During vaccination time, she takes care of the children who receive vaccination.

The Process is Very Simple

Chitra organizes meetings at various levels with self-help groups (SHGs). These include informal gatherings, discussions about ASHAA and individual and house-to-house visits where necessary.

"Due to my constant involvement with the community, the attitude of my family is also changing. My family is like my village. There is no difference; there is no individual. Now I am working for other villages as well. Many good things are happening!!

She also convenes awareness meetings with the help of ASHAA groups, which are very active in the village addressing environmental and personal sanitation, PHC linkage, etc.

Chitra has developed good relationships with government officials through her visits and briefs about community problems.

Water Supply

After the tsunami, water supplies to the village were salty and not safe for drinking. Even the amount of water was not sufficient to villagers for their daily chores. To solve this problem, Chitra escorted SHG members to raise the issue with the Block Development Office (BDO) and later approached the District Collector, as well. After a lot of visits and discussions, their voices were finally being heard.

Earlier, water was coming from Perumthottam, a close-by village. After their frequent visits they began receiving water from Kollidam. Now the people of Melamoovarkkarai want to extend the supply to their village.

Accessing Government Schemes

Chitra was not aware of the Government Toilet construction scheme before. After joining as a Health Guide with SSP, she had access to all

government schemes and programs that would benefit villagers. Now she is trying to get a toilet scheme worth Rs. 1500/- from the government to construct toilets for all households in the village.

Another significant achievement for Chitra involved receiving financial remuneration. She had she approached the Collector and Chief Minister to write off the loans of those who had died in the tsunami. The effort was a success, and Chitra also won compensation from the government for livestock damage.

Chikunguniya Awareness

During the time when the mosquito-borne disease called chikunguniya spread to coastal villages in Tamil Nadu, Chitra and ASHAA groups made sure that all the ponds and bodies of water were free from mosquitoes, providing awareness to children, women and the community to maintain cleanliness and avoid the dreadful disease. All these programmes were in partnership with the PHC located 5 kilometer away from her village.

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Problem Solver

Bhusnavaty, Swamiyarpettai, Cuddalore Dt., Tamil Nadu, India

Bhusnavaty is a lady who speaks very calmly and politely. Her husband goes to the sea to fish, and she runs a childcare center called Balvadi in her village. She has one boy and one girl who are studying at school.

In Swamiyarpettai, there are twenty-three SHGs. Their total savings are more than Rs. 700,000.

They provide loans to members, and the return is good. They currently have 367 members.

This was the first village where a government-initiated disaster preparedness programme took place before the tsunami. They were trained in October 2004, and the tsunami hit in the month of December. The training helped them rescue senior citizens, children and savings assets, as well. Due to their timely action, casualties and livelihood loss was lesser than the neighbouring villages.

After the tsunami, Bhusnavaty initiated psychosocial counseling for villagers based on the training she received from a Kerala NGO who visited during the time. She was behind the initiative to help

neighbouring villages during the 2005 flood that washed away agricultural lands, as well. With her leadership, the SHGs prepared, packed and distributed food for one week to two villages. As she was the teacher of Anganwadi, she took the biscuits and milk items from the *anganwadi* and distributed them to the children of the flood-affected villages. Each SHG contributed money for preparing the food. She felt that children were the same everywhere and it was their duty to help in time.

Now everybody in the village is trained on disaster preparedness, with the help of one NGO who that is updating education frequently. They have different groups to look after specific issues, like monitoring, first aid, rescue and relief, hospitalisation, warning etc. She wants to expand her experience to other villages. She is happy to exchange the knowledge and learn from others.

After her *anganwadi* care, she visits every afternoon one or two houses in her village and counsels them on problems. This gives her strength and understanding about the issues and how to tackle them - a necessary quality need to be a good community leader.

Problem Solving Committee:

Her elected Panchayat comprises of 5 villages, and the Panchayat has different committee groups to solve issues inside the village. They have groups that focus on health, monitoring, education, problem-solving and livelihood promotion with five members in each group. As she is very mild talking to women, she handles issues patiently and naturally, helping her become the leader of the elected Panchayat Problem Solving Group.

Even the newly appointed Collector at Cuddalore tells people to meet Bhusnavaty and see her work. "Don't come to me every time; ask Bhusnavaty how to do it," says the Collector.

According to Bhusnavaty, one has to hear both sides very patiently to solve problems and cannot lose his/her cool in the conversation. "This is like eating rice without salt. You have to eat it, and only then

can you survive."

She helped village women apply for loans and schemes, advise them where they go, discusses whom to meet, etc. She also groomed Sasikala, a community leader who helped flood-affected villages in 2005.

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SHG INITIATIVE FOR APPOINTING TEACHERS

Chinnur Puduppettai, Cuddalore District,
Tamil Nadu, India

The collective actions of SHGs in C. Puduppettai to appoint two teachers in their school show that the community could do a lot if its members unite and address issues together .

The primary school in the village has five teachers and more than five hundred students, making for a very poor teacher-student ratio. To address the issue, SHGs decided to do something for this cause. With a force of seventeen groups after the tsunami, the SHGs organised meetings and chose to contribute Rs. 100 per month to appoint new teachers. They also met the school authorities and village leadership to assist in this initiative.

After hearing that SHGs were contributing money for appointing teachers, school staff also decided to contribute some amount every month.

Out of 17 SHGs, they contributed Rs. 1,700 every month. School authorities appointed two new teachers, and their contribution continued for one year. Recently, SHGs decided that they could not continue the contribution over the long term since income from fishing-related activity is low. So they are approaching the government to help them to appoint new teachers.

**Moving Force**

Parvathamma, Savadikuppam,
Nagapattinam Dt, Tamil Nadu, India

Paravathamma, a pleasant elderly lady of the village of Savadikkuppam, is a moving force behind her community. After the tsunami, she managed to obtain a loan from the bank for fish-vending women who are members of SHGs. She also met the District Collector, BDOs and other government offices to raise issues related to problems in her village .

Paravathamma is very good at organising women and adolescents to obtain health care services for their village. For example, previously, the Village Health Nurse was not visiting the village regularly. After formation of the ASHAA groups by SSP, the community is working closely with the PHC, and the VHN also visits the village regularly.

Paravathamma attended a 20 day-long health training course organised by Christian Medical College in Vellore, where she gained some basic knowledge on

health care services. She visits PHCs frequently and gets medicine for the villagers. She also keeps basic medicine that she collected from the PHCs for ailments like cough, cold, fever, dysentery, etc.

Now, she and ASHAA are very active on chikungunya disease awareness. Distributing medicines, cleaning streets and ponds and killing mosquitoes in partnership with PHCs and government departments are just some of the activities taking place in the village now.

Paravathamma takes initiative in cleaning the village, growing herbal plants, addressing environmental and personal hygiene and other activities. She also visits government offices to bring benefits from various programmes and schemes to vulnerable groups she interacts with in the community.

A very good communicator, confident and committed, she wants to share her education and experiences to other communities.

