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Report gives poor marks for tsunami rehabilitation

CHENNAI Three years on from the tsunami, the story of relief and rehabilitation in Tamil Nadu is one of widespread exclusion, poor quality construction, lack of consultation with communities, insensitivity to women, and lack of urgency on the part of the State, according to a report by Vilimbunilai Makkal Kural (Voices from the Margins), a forum set up in the wake of the disaster.

The report of the forum that includes fish workers' unions, community leaders, non-governmental organisations and activists is to be used as the basis for a two-day people's tribunal on the status of tsunami rehabilitation, to be held in Chennai from Friday. The tribunal, whose panelists include Justice H Suresh (retired judge, Mumbai High Court), Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, Dr. K.N. Panikkar and Dr. Yasodha Shanmugasundaram, will conduct an independent enquiry into tsunami rehabilitation. A policy report based on the testimonies of tsunami-affected people and the observations of experts and community leaders will be submitted to the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry and donors.

The report reviews work undertaken in 84 coastal villages in four regions in Tamil Nadu. It documents cases of exclusion from new housing because of the challenges of identification in the absence of documents that have been swept away and seasonal migration. It finds that life in relocated villages in Nagapattinam, Kanyakumari, Cuddalore and the Karai-

kal region of Puducherry Union Territory is considerably worse than in previous settlements. Long and expensive commutes to the sea and security for the boats cut into wages. Roads sanctioned with the support of the Asian Development Bank have not been laid in 75 per cent of the villages in which the assessment was conducted and 70 per cent of villages have no planning for storm water drainage.

Yardstick of success

On the eve of the tribunal, Justice Suresh said that the panel will look into the facts found by activists and hear the depositions of the affected. The yardstick of success, he said, would not be whether one lakh rupees or one boat or several nets had been given but how far rehabilitation had upheld the dignity of those affected.

Mapping the progress on tsunami projects not only helps to ensure delivery of promises made to victims and account for donations made by the public in good faith, but is vital in terms of lessons learned in a future affected by climate change, according to Dr Unnikrishan, an expert in Emergencies and Human Security at Action Aid. "In the past 10 years, there has been a 60 per cent increase in the number of people affected by disasters... We can't control the disaster but we can stop the disaster from becoming a crisis," he said.

"What tsunami rehabilitation is teaching us is to put people at the centre. If we have better engagement by the people we can better hold NGOs and governments accountable.