B.23 Sri Lanka - 2004 - Tsunami

Overview

Summary

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 hit Sri Lanka two hours after the initial earthquake and killed over 35,000 people along the eastern and southern coasts. It destroyed approximately 100,000 houses and damaged or destroyed much of the infrastructure and public buildings in the affected areas.

The shelter strategy developed for much of Sri Lanka focussed on the construction of transitional shelters to bridge the gap until permanent shelters could be built. This case study is one of such transitional shelter project, where an international organisation provided metal-framed shelters that people could erect on their own plots of land.

Shelter strategy

In the areas of Sri Lanka controlled by the national government, a national 'transitional shelter' strategy was adopted.

The general principles of the shelter strategy were founded on Sphere standards, but were expanded to describe a transitional process, looking beyond emergency needs, and taking into account the need to support livelihoods.

The international scale of the disaster, and the intense media attention it had received, meant that there were large amounts of funding available, and a great number of organisations wishing to become involved. This was recognised when the strategy was formed.

The technical design aspects of the strategy would give a per-shelter budget, and a series of spatial guidelines (minimum indoor space, minimum height, etc.). Within those guidelines, humanitarian organisations and communities were free to make their own specific shelter designs. In most cases, the shelters were single-family huts, built with varying levels of input from beneficiary groups, using a mixture of wood, metal-frame, roofing sheet and concrete-block materials.

Coastal Buffer zone

The national government insisted upon a coastal buffer zone. Construction was excluded 100m from the high-tide mark in the south and west, and 200m in other areas. This created major challenges in finding land on which to rebuild, causing many families to move far from their livelihoods, and forcing many camps to be created

Coordination

Within the shelter sector, coordination was generally good, with full participation from government at both national and local level. However, in many areas, up to 60% of the shelter support was provided by small organisations. Many of these had little previous disaster experience, and were often involved for only short periods of time.

Levels of support

Different levels of support were given to those who had been affected by the tsunami, and those who had been affected by the armed conflict in the north and east. This led to tensions and difficulties for many ongoing development projects.

Emergency shelter needs

Many family found temporary shelter Immediately after the tsunami in public buildings such as temples or with host families. In the weeks that followed, many were able to make some basic repairs to houses, whilst others lived in tents until the transitional shelters were constructed.

After the first year

Government numbers showed that all affected families had been provided with transitional shelter by mid-2005. However, permanent housing would take significantly longer.

Many humanitarian organisations were only funded for the initial 6-9 month emergency and transitional periods, and there were often gaps in the handover to other organisations who could support permanent reconstruction.

Despite the incentives of government grants, many families rebuilt houses which were not resistant to the common hazards of cyclones and floods. Remittances from relatives living abroad and grants from smaller charities made it more difficult to ensure quality in construction.

Due to the length of time required to build permanent shelters, the UN and other organisations advocated for the upgrading and maintenance of the large number of the transitional shelters. They were aware that some families would be living in them for some years to come.